



"A realistic journey into drug addiction and bad decision-making. Grosso's *Ferocity Summer* is a riveting read."

—**A.S. King**, author of the Printz Honor book *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*

FEROCITY SUMMER

ALISSA GROSSO

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May

I climbed into the back seat beside a smelly old army blanket and half a bag of corn chips. Willow made a face at me in the rear-view mirror as Andrea sat down beside her in the passenger seat. I offered up a half-hearted shrug in response. Willow had invited me to go to the mall with her. She hadn't said I couldn't bring a friend.

Willow rooted around the floor of the car for a few seconds, came up with a CD, and stuck it in the stereo.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Davies Pauliny," Willow answered. She tromped too hard on the gas, and the tires spun for a moment on the loose gravel of the street before catching.

"Never heard of them," Andrea said. It came out sounding like a complaint.

"Boss awesome," Willow said. "Trust me."

We hadn't even reached the end of the street and Andrea had the visor down, examining her face in the mirror. She touched up her already well-coated lips with a tube from her purse. Andrea was socialite beautiful, all makeup and fluff. She had that phony cheerleader look going on. Not that she had ever come close to being a cheerleader—she was a sort of double poseur, an imitator of phonies. You couldn't get much more pathetic than that. There was something about her blondish-reddish hair and the foundation plastered on her round face that gave her a look that skated a thin line between high-school-beautiful and movie-monster-ugly. I was madly in lust with her.

Looks weren't her only asset. She was a slut of the highest order. I had heard all sorts of rumors, most of them about popular guys who had managed to have Andrea in the back seat of their cars or in the girls' room during lunch period or out in the woods behind the tennis courts. There were enough of these stories floating around that I had to believe at least half of them had some basis in truth,

and Andrea never bothered to deny any of them. Then there was that way she walked, throwing her ass around like so many bags of unbleached flour. Yum. I couldn't help but stare.

I wasn't really a lesbian. I just wished I was, or maybe I was a lesbian stuck in a heterosexual girl's body. To tell you the truth, I didn't know what the hell I was. I envied Andrea, who was so well defined that there never could be room for doubt. Andrea knew what she wanted, and she got it rather frequently if the rumors could be believed.

Diluted sunlight poured down through the atrium skylights as Willow and I leaned against the cool marble, waiting for Andrea. She'd gone into Abercrombie & Fitch five minutes ago on the alleged errand of saying hi to some guy she knew. Willow had groaned and refused to go into the store.

"What the hell did you bring her along for?" she asked. She raked her fingers through her hair. It was a streaky sort of dirty-blond that looked completely natural but was actually the work of her mother's overpriced hairdresser. That tousled, messy look, the casual style of her clothes—it took Willow just as long to make herself look natural as it took Andrea to make herself look like a second-rate prostitute.

"I didn't ask her to come. She sort of invited herself," I said defensively. It didn't matter. Willow could read me like a book.

"Forget it, Scill, she's completely guy-centric. I don't know what the hell you see in her anyway." Willow lit a cigarette, blatantly disregarding the little red no-smoking signs that were all over the place, strange reminders of how utopian America was supposed to be.

"Randy's home from school. He was asking about you," she added.

"Oh."

Randy is Willow's older brother. I'd made the mistake of getting involved with him the summer before. Awkward is spelled with a capital A when one is involved in a sexual relationship with one's best friend's older brother.

Secretly, I'd fantasized about having an older brother and having wild, sordid, forbidden sex with him. Of course, this could be nothing more than an impossible fantasy. Randy had sort of been like a stand-in for this fantasized

brother, but the reality was that our relationship was nothing more than a clumsy teenage romance. Willow had coped with it all remarkably well, with the understood assumption that there would never be any girlish gossip upon the subject. Randy's name hung in the space between us, like a piece of dirty toilet paper that had missed the pot. Neither of us wanted to claim responsibility for it. Neither of us wanted to touch it, but at the same time, it was just a little too much to ignore.

"Did he say anything about ... ?" I asked.

"No." Willow answered, too quickly. "Midge has got me going through college shit this weekend. Can you picture me at Vassar?" She laughed, one of those deep throaty Willow laughs. "Maybe I'll bob my hair and take up field hockey."

I'd read some book about girls who had gone to Vassar, or maybe it was Smith; one of those schools. I remembered it because there were a few interesting sex parts, things that seemed out of place in a novel written in the 1920s or 1940s or whenever the hell it'd been written. I remembered a scene where one of the characters hid a diaphragm under a bench in Washington Square Park, and I was going to say something about this to Willow when Joe Bullock—high school football star/saint/all-around asshole—walked past and both of us quickly looked at the ground. He walked like he had a load in his pants, the jock swagger. He didn't say anything until he was a few feet past us. Coward. And then all he could think of to say was, "Nice face."

"I hate that prick," Willow said when he was out of earshot. She ripped her unfinished cigarette from her mouth and crushed it beneath her foot.

Willow could have been popular in school. She had grace and affability and all that, but she lacked the patience to deal with the brain-dead morons who passed for royalty in the halls of Lenape Valley Regional High School. I always felt honored, blessed even, that Willow preferred to hang out with a social misfit like me.

I looked over the railing at the first floor of the mall and watched the tops of people's heads as they walked past. A bald head walked beneath me and it was all I could do not to hit the target with a glob of spit. So I tried to think about something else, and suddenly I was thinking about Randy.

“So, um, Tigue must be getting home from school soon too,” I said.

“Probably. I don’t really know.”

“Has Randy talked to him?” I asked, but Willow never had the chance to answer. Andrea emerged from the store all bubbly and red-faced, and I’m sure I wasn’t alone in wondering if there had been some extracurricular activity going on in one of the fitting booths.

“You missed it,” Willow said. “Joe Bullock just walked by.”

Then some interesting things happened with Andrea’s face. Her eyebrows jumped up to the top of her forehead and her eyes widened to the size of silver-dollar pancakes. Then her mouth involuntarily opened and shut, real quick. After this, her whole face pinched together tight and returned to normal.

“Who cares about Joe Bullock anyway?” she said with forced nonchalance. Nice try.

I glared at Willow, but my heart wasn’t in it. I was thinking about Randy. I was thinking about Tigue. I was thinking about that weird clammy feeling that seemed to spring up between me and Willow whenever we got anywhere near that subject. I tried not to think about August, and most of all, I tried not to think about last summer.

May

Willow was the one with the car, and she cut out early. I would have gone too, but I had a chemistry test and was still optimistic enough to think there might be a good reason not to flunk out of high school. At two thirty, this left me with two options. The first was to take the bus. The second was to call Willow and demand she pick me up.

I scrounged in my pockets for change while mentally cursing my mother for being too cheap to let me have a cell phone. I dialed Willow's cell from the one available pay phone and got her voicemail. Crap. I had just enough change for a second call. I called her family's landline and stood there counting rings. I knew voicemail picked up on six, so as long as I hung up before then, I would get my money back. At four and a half, someone picked up.

"Hello?" The voice, with its disaffected college-boy tone, stunned me into silence. "Hello?"

"Randy, um, hi. Is Willow there?"

"I don't know where the fuck she is."

"Right. Okay, it was no big deal. I was just hoping she could give me a ride, but—"

"Where are you going?"

"Just home, but—"

"Where are you? I'll come get you."

It's hard to explain how I feel about Randy Jenkins. It's not that I hate him. I just never really liked him. You watch movies, and you get the impression that people date each other and get into relationships because they are in love, but I think that most of the time that isn't the way it is at all. I think mostly it's a matter of convenience. I mean there I was, a horny sixteen-year-old girl, and

there was Randy, a young man in the prime of his life. Boom. Kismet.

This isn't some sad commentary on the state of the modern world. It's the way it's always been. Long before the Civil War and the whole marching-through-Georgia thing, William Tecumseh Sherman went and married his sister (which was all on the up-and-up since Sherman was adopted). Anyway, you've got to figure that part of that, a big part of that, was just the convenience of the whole thing. I mean, how did one even meet people back then? But there those two were, and they at least knew each other, so why not, right?

I'd made a silent promise to myself to stay clear of Randy this summer. Somehow, I just figured it would make things easier. I felt this deep dread in the pit of my stomach at the thought of having to refer to Randy as my boyfriend. The last thing I needed was a boyfriend. Plus there were complications that went way beyond those usually found in teenage relationships. It was supposed to be a *No Randy Summer*. I pictured it in my head like those blue and white *Drug Free School Zone* signs, but we all know how well those work.

When Randy's old BMW pulled up to the curb at the side of the school, my heart began to beat in a staccato rhythm and my underwear grew damp. Oh well, so much for vows.

"Hey, Scilla," he said when I got in. "You look good."

"Thanks," I said, then added, "for the ride. Willow ditched early today."

"Willow's turning into a full-time juvenile delinquent," Randy said.

He took the back roads home, racing around curves, ignoring the speed limit. I didn't know where to put my hands. I held onto my knees. My jeans absorbed the sweat from my palms.

"So, what've you been up to?" Randy asked.

"Not much. School and stuff. The usual."

"Yeah, me too. I've missed you."

How can I explain the way Randy talked? It was like nothing he said ever meant anything. It was like he was reading a script, but not getting the inflection right. It was like he was saying things because he knew they were the right things to say, but there was no real meaning behind them. I knew all this, and still I could feel myself getting hotter than seemed appropriate for the cool spring afternoon.

I had been conditioned to see Randy in a certain way, a way that usually involved scant amounts of clothing and small, cramped, secluded places. So I suddenly didn't feel much like going home.

Randy pulled off somewhere, a wooded little parking spot in the middle of nowhere. We tore into each other. I can't call it making out. It was too depraved, too violent. We were like hungry wild animals. A castaway on a desert island would act like this at an all-you-can-eat buffet. We were monsters, but it felt good.

Twenty minutes later, I sat with my cheek pressed against the velour of the seat while Randy traced some sort of design in the damp flesh of my stomach. I felt empty.

"Death is chasing me," Randy said. I stared out the window at a chipmunk sitting on a rock. I concentrated on its sharp, fast, quick little movements, trying to absorb whatever the hell Randy was talking about. "This girl died on campus a couple weeks ago. That's why I'm home early. Didn't take my finals, got some sort of deferment."

I turned away from the chipmunk to look at Randy. His pants were still unzipped. I caught a glimpse of pubic hair, and it made me feel nauseous.

"You knew her?" I asked. "You must have been close to her." I felt almost jealous. It was a very weird feeling.

"Not like that," he said. His eyes twitched. I knew he was lying.

"I don't really care," I said.

"Fuck," he mumbled. He opened his door and got out of the car. He went to the edge of the woods to pee. I looked back out my window, but the chipmunk was gone. Maybe Randy had scared him away. When he climbed back into the car, he reached for the keys but suddenly stopped. He laid his head back against his seat and began to run his hands through his hair.

"I just keep thinking that if I could get my hands on enough money, I could buy myself a new life and just make all the bad shit go away."

"That's easy for you to say," I said. "You were born rich."

"Not rich enough. Oh, fuck you, Scilla. Upper middle class is something short of wealthy."

"Is Tigie rich enough?" I was still facing the window and my voice had grown

very quiet. Randy didn't say anything at first. I thought maybe he hadn't heard me.

"Maybe," Randy said. "Maybe. So, what do you guys think about August?"

I turned back toward Randy. "Willow and I have an unspoken agreement not to talk about the matter."

"Well, that's very fucking mature."

"Fuck *you*, Randy."

"I'll take you home."

As we sped toward home in silence, it occurred to me that I should ask Randy more about that girl at his school, the one who died, but I never did. Maybe it wouldn't have made a difference if I had. Maybe life just plays itself out however it wants to. I've kind of got this obsession with analyzing my past mistakes to see what I could have done differently to change things, but sometimes I feel like fate is just too powerful a force, that it would make everything the way it wanted it anyway, no matter what I did. Then again, maybe I'm just trying to make myself feel better so that I don't have to take any responsibility.

Later in May

Willow and I lived on Cherry Blossom Lake, in a town filled with lakes in a part of New Jersey filled with lakes and trees and cows and not much else. There'd been a time when Cherry Blossom Lake was a swank resort area, but that time was long gone. On one end of the lake were folks like me, poor slob who lived in tiny, castoff vacation homes. On the other end of the lake lived the Jenkinses and their ilk, in their newer mini-mansions with their wall-to-wall carpeting and garage-door openers.

"You're not even dressed," I said. I walked through the back door of Willow's house only to find my ride looking like she'd just stumbled out of bed.

"This is high school," she said. "What the hell do you need to get dressed for? I think a dirty T-shirt and old cut-offs are perfect attire."

"When was the last time you washed your hair?"

"Weeks ago. Months. Who cares?"

That, perhaps in a nutshell, was Willow. Or not a nutshell, because who could imagine Willow cooped up in a little nutshell? She would never last a second in a nutshell. She would break out immediately.

"You have breakfast?" she asked.

"We'll be late."

"Like I said, it's high school."

Willow began to rummage through the refrigerator, a fancy stainless steel model with the side-by-side doors. She grabbed a carton of Tropicana Pure Premium. I thought of my own fridge, seventies harvest-gold. The few items on its bare shelves were all of the caca-brand persuasion. "It all tastes the same," my mother insisted.

Willow opened several different cabinets before coming up with a bottle of Grey Goose vodka. "Screwdrivers?"

“Why not? Like you said, it’s high school.”

“That’s the spirit.”

She took out two tall glasses and filled them nearly half full with vodka.

“We’ll be drunk before we even get there,” I said.

“That’s the point.”

Willow dumped in some orange juice for good measure. She handed one glass to me and picked up one herself.

“To summer,” Willow proposed. “Which is less than a month away.”

“To summer,” I agreed.

We drank. I coughed, momentarily stunned by the high percentage of alcohol, then drank down the rest of the drink much too quickly. I remembered reading somewhere that screwdrivers got their name because it was mechanics or oil-rig workers or something who had invented it, stirring their drinks not with traditional stirrers but with screwdrivers. That’s history for you, and how much of that is bullshit I don’t know, and besides, what the hell does that have to do with two high school girls drinking the legendary concoction at seven thirty on a Wednesday morning in the middle of May?

“Let me piss first, then we’ll go,” Willow said.

It was a long piss, and I understood that that’s not what it was at all. There were some regular bathroom sounds thrown in for good measure—toilet flushing, sink running—but I knew that Willow’s true mission was the imbibing of some narcotic substance slightly more potent than the orange juice and vodka concoction. *Well, whatever it takes*, I thought, but didn’t quite feel. It wasn’t even eight o’clock in the morning, for chrissakes.

Willow came out of the bathroom with a flushed face and damp skin. She looked like shit, but who was I to say? This was, after all, high school, and who was there to impress?

Willow didn’t so much drive to school as slightly guide the car on a route more or less destined to get us to school, or at least, school’s general vicinity. She swerved back and forth on the road, and came close to hitting too many stationary objects to count. I felt a little woozy myself and was in no shape to complain.

I was thinking about the subject of our toast, of summer. As a kid I had always

looked forward to summer—and the temporary escape from the hell that was the education system—with unmitigated joy. Times had changed. Now, the very thought of summer made my stomach knot. Okay, maybe the liquid breakfast was partly responsible for that. But there were plenty of other reasons for my stomach and my entire body to be completely uncomfortable that morning. My best friend was having a love affair with mind-altering substances, my future looked bleaker than bleak, and, oh yeah, there was August—when the fates of the universe disguised as a jury of my peers (a completely misinterpreted law, by the way) was set to decide my future in the world. Amen. Hallelujah.

Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer.

The principal of my school was not a witch but she played one on TV. At least she looked the part, with her pale, pockmarked skin and her jet black hair with its white streak down the middle. In heels, she was over six feet tall. She could glare down at you with eyes that seemed to have been borrowed from the devil himself.

We showed up fifteen minutes into first period and had to go to the office for our late pass. It was just our luck that Dr. Smarelli was talking with the secretary when we walked in.

“Willow Jenkins, Priscilla Davis,” she said. “Let me guess, you’re here for another late pass. I believe you’ve hit your limit this month. You can join your old pals in detention tomorrow afternoon. You know, girls, it’s way too early in your academic careers to be so apathetic.”

“It’s way too early to be awake,” Willow said. “And at school.”

When she talked, I flinched. Maybe witch Smarelli noticed this, or maybe she just noticed Willow’s somewhat slurred speech. She came up to the desk to write out our passes herself. Willow, never one for inhibitions, was even further loosened up by her morning indulgences. She leaned across the desk and whispered loudly in Smarelli’s ear.

“Let’s the three of us go into your office right now. We’ll munch your rug for the courtesy of a suspended sentence.”

The secretary turned ghostly pale and knocked over a mug of coffee. I watched the brown stain engulf a stack of attendance sheets while the knot in my

stomach got tighter. Smarelli sniffed at the air like the world's ugliest bloodhound.

“You’ve been drinking! It’s not even nine in the morning, and you’ve been drinking!”

I watched the secretary mop up the brown puddle with a wad of tissues. It was a hopeless task. Most of the coffee had already been absorbed by the paper. For some reason, this made me think of Randy and his goal to make enough money to buy a new life. I think that’s why I started laughing.

It’s a weakness of mine, laughing when I shouldn’t. Normally I can stop it. I was, however, mildly drunk, and my laughter got away from me. I couldn’t even stop laughing when Smarelli told us to get into her office, not even when she threatened to suspend us. That actually made me laugh harder.

Approximately One Hour Later

Okay, so we weren't Girl Scouts. We had our share of shortcomings and vices. To be fair, it wasn't entirely our fault—we had circumstances working against us. I was one of those single-parent statistics, a fatherless, futureless fuck-up living on the edge of poverty. I was slightly better off than Civil War badass General Sherman, in that my mother hadn't given me up to some random family at the age of nine for financial reasons. But that might only be because such an opportunity never presented itself to my mother.

Willow had the benefit of money and two complete parental units, but they were both nut-jobs. Her father took a totalitarian sort of approach to child-rearing. He was strict to the point of alienation. With repression that bad, it was physically impossible to be good. Then there was Midge, who insisted on spoiling her daughter without restraint. That, and, well, Midge's grasp on reality was somewhat tenuous. Between these two poles, Willow was pulled completely out of shape.

I'm not trying to blame anyone for our problems, but sometimes when I really think about things, I wonder if we ever stood a chance in this world.

Is this an appropriate time to bring up the fact that Sherman, himself, was something of a hellraiser during his West Point days? There are legends that persist to this day about his midnight potato-smashing raids on the cafeteria.

"What I'm saying," Smarelli said, "is that this is a very serious offense. Suspension would be going lightly. I could expel both girls if I wanted to."

Willow and I sat in the office, flanked by our mothers. My mother was still dressed in her supermarket smock. She kept playing with the *Always for Less* button she was wearing. Midge had been pulled away from the tanning salon.

She had on a lavender warm-up outfit.

“Don’t you think that’s a little harsh?” Midge said. “I mean, all they did was have a little drink. They’re teenagers; of course they are going to drink. All teenagers drink.”

“I didn’t,” Smarelli said. If Midge was a little closer, I think Smarelli might have bitten off one of her pretty little manicured fingernails. “There is absolutely no excuse for showing up at school in an inebriated state.”

“But at least they went to school,” Midge said. “I mean, I think we should be proud of them for that.”

Next to me, my mother sighed through her teeth. Smarelli’s face changed colors.

Midge would take Willow’s side in any argument, but this time she had a very good reason to try to extricate her daughter from any disciplinary measure. Mr. Jenkins would come down much harder than the school on Willow, if he found out about this, and if Willow did get suspended, then he would most certainly find out.

“Drugs and alcohol are some of the biggest demons plaguing our youngsters,” Smarelli said. “It’s our job as educators and parents to take a firm stance against the use of such substances. Especially in light of the events of last year, I cannot stress enough how important it is that Willow and Priscilla be made aware that this behavior cannot be tolerated.”

“Punish them,” my mom said, “but for this incident and nothing else.” She locked eyes with Smarelli. The temperature in the room went up a few degrees, but I felt chilled to the bone. My mom made a far better bitch than Midge. I could almost see Smarelli shrink. Although she didn’t move, she appeared to be cowering.

“I wouldn’t think of punishing them for anything but what happened today,” Smarelli said, in a tone so weak and quavering there could be no doubt she was full of shit. “I think a week-long suspension is appropriate.”

“Two days should do it,” my mom said.

“Right,” Smarelli said. “Two days will be fine, uh, starting tomorrow. Today the girls go home sick.”

The sentence was fairly light. I think I might have felt something akin to relief.

It could have been a lot worse. The problem, I guess, was that I hadn't really cared what the outcome was. It didn't make a difference to me. Detention, suspension, expulsion—it was all the same to me somehow. I think my mom and Midge cared more about what happened to us than we did.

First Day of Our Suspension

I chased a few last soggy pieces of cereal around the bowl with my spoon. Mom reached for the remote and turned up the volume on the kitchen TV.

“... Easily one of the most dangerous illegal drugs, so-called Ferocity is quickly spreading across the nation, with over one hundred known cases of overdoses reported so far ...” recounted a too-perky, bleached-blond newscaster.

“Listen to this shit,” my mother said. She slammed cabinets as she looked for something that could not be found. “You know who’s using this sort of crap. It’s rich kids with more money than they know what to do with.”

“Mom,” I said, trying to head her off because I could tell exactly where she was going.

“Oh, what? Does Little Miss Alcoholic have something profound to contribute? It’s people like Willow Jenkins who have got the money to blow on this Ferocity shit just because their rich little lives are so dreadful they need to escape—”

“Mom,” I said again. I’d heard so many versions of this speech over the past year that I could almost predict exactly what she would say.

“Don’t defend her, Scilla. She’s trash. Just because she’s got a little money doesn’t mean she isn’t trash. You want to wind up another overdose patient, just keep hanging around with her. You could be the next vegetable to wind up in a state hospital. Look at where she’s gotten you so far.”

“You can’t blame Willow for everything.”

“I don’t. I blame my daughter for being such a moron. What the hell were you thinking, showing up for school drunk? What if they’d kicked you out, huh?”

I shrugged. I got up to dump the leftover milk down the drain.

“Don’t walk away from me,” Mom said even though I was only a couple feet away in our cramped kitchen. “Why can’t you find some less scummy friends, Scilla? What about that girl down the block, what’s her name, lives in the brown and white house?”

“Sarah Perillo.”

“Yeah, why can’t you hang out with her?”

“Probably because she wouldn’t want anything to do with me. She’s some goody two-shoes. Gets straight A’s, can recite pi to the thirtieth digit.”

“Maybe some of her intelligence would rub off on you. You don’t have enough brain cells to afford killing them off.”

I tried to escape to the security of my bedroom, but Mom blocked my path. “Leigh at work has a daughter that goes to school with you. Carrie. She seems like a good kid. Why don’t you guys hang out some time?”

“She’s a jock.”

“A little exercise would do you some good, and I’m not talking about that stuff you do in the back seat of Randy Jenkins’ car.”

“Mom!”

“Just calling ’em as I see ’em. You want to wind up in the gutter with the rest of the trash, just keep this shit up, okay?”

Here’s the whole problem with my mother giving me this lecture. She was saying it like she knew something about not winding up in the gutter, but I knew she didn’t have a clue. She’s a grocery store checkout manager. She lives in somebody’s discarded vacation home in some piece-of-crap town, and she had the nerve to tell me what I should and should not do, who I should and should not associate with, to avoid taking up residence in the gutter of life?

“Okay, fine. Whatever,” I said. “Can I leave the kitchen now? I’d like to go take a shower.”

“First let me give you the list of everything you need to get done today.”

“What?”

“Don’t act so surprised. Or were you and your rich bitch little friend planning on living it up for two days?” She pulled a piece of paper off the top of the refrigerator and handed it to me. There were about twenty different tasks on

there, stuff like *clean the bathroom* and *wash all the windows*. “That’s for today. I’ll give you another list for tomorrow.”

“I don’t see what there could possibly be left to do.”

“I’m serious,” she said waving a finger at me. “I want this all done. No goofing off.”

I want to tell you something about my childhood, what things were like when I was growing up, but so many of my memories are hazy and indistinct. It’s as if everything sucked so bad that I’ve completely blocked it out. What I have are glimpses of things. I remember my grandparents dying within a month of each other, both from lung cancer as a result of their lifelong two-pack-a-day habit. I think I was about seven. I went to the hospital, but not the funeral. I don’t really remember being that upset. Maybe I was too young to understand.

I remember getting in trouble a lot. That’s never really changed. Mom always had some reason to be unhappy with me. It wasn’t really that I was a complete screw-up, but she hasn’t had the best of lives. She was unhappy a lot, and I was always around so it was just easier to be angry at me than to be mad at her bad decisions or her failures or whatever.

She dated this one guy for a while. His name was Earl, and I was so excited because I thought I was finally going to have a father. That was something I’d wanted for a long time. He wouldn’t be a real father, of course, but I didn’t care. Any kind of father was better than nothing. I remember the three of us going out a few times like a real family. We went out for ice cream. We went out to the movies. Once, we even went out to play miniature golf. It was like being in heaven, and Mom was really happy too. Then something happened. I don’t know what. They stopped dating, and there went my dreams of having a real live dad.

As I got older, it occurred to me that maybe Earl wasn’t so crazy about a committed relationship with a woman with baggage. It’s nothing I know for certain. After the break-up, Mom stayed in bed and cried for a week. It felt like the world was going to end, but somehow it didn’t.

What kind of childhood is this? It seems so utterly bleak, but there was good stuff, too, I’m sure. I won some kind of art contest at school once. Mom hung the painting on the living room wall, but eventually it started to fade from the

sunlight and had to be taken down.

I think when I was younger, I had a better imagination. I was able to see the future, and it was always this bright and happy place. Now I couldn't see anything. I felt like my life was almost over.

I was supposed to be cleaning the bathroom. I was, sort of, but at the pace I was going I wouldn't finish by the end of the day, let alone have time to get to all my other chores. I couldn't help it. I kept thinking about Mom, about how she wanted me to be something she could be proud of. It felt like she wanted to control my life, like she didn't want me to be my own person. Maybe she didn't even like who I was, whoever I was. I knew she hated Willow. She thought she knew everything about Willow, but she didn't know her at all. She didn't like her because Willow had more money than us, and she thought the only reason I liked Willow was because she had the money that I craved.

I threw the sponge I'd been scrubbing the tub with at the wall. My mother thought she knew everything, but she didn't know shit.

General Sherman's adoptive father was the one who arranged for his acquisition of a Christian first name. He was also the one who pulled the necessary strings to get young Willy T. into West Point. Basically, he was the one who mapped out Sherman's life. Hell, maybe he was even the one to suggest that Sherman marry his daughter, keep everything neat and tidy or whatever. On the one hand, I felt bad for Sherman, whose whole future was pretty much preordained. On the other hand, I thought maybe what I needed was a stepfather of my own, someone who could grease the wheels, come up with some plan that would put me on the fast track to lifelong success. My mother was woefully underqualified for the position.

The phone rang. I ran into the kitchen and grabbed it on the third ring. I was still wearing the rubber dish gloves to protect myself from cleaner powerful enough to melt mildew on contact.

"How's tricks?" Willow asked.

"I've got a list of chores to do today. Want to help me wash the windows?"

"Blow it off. Let's go out."

"I can't," I said.

“Wash the goddamn windows tomorrow.”
It was about all the persuasion I needed.

Later That Day

When I was in seventh grade, we were subjected to a series of propaganda films cautioning us against the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse. Perhaps the most bizarre trait common to all those films was how much they seemed to glorify the very things they were supposed to be denigrating. In all of them, the cool kids were shown having the times of their lives with the aid of controlled substances while the geeky losers attempted to exemplify the moral of the story. Lesson learned: partying is cool. If you don't drink or do drugs, then you'll go through life with a bad haircut feeling miserable.

I remembered one of those films distinctly. It was called *Bad Influences*. It was meant to illustrate the dangers of peer pressure. In it, a mousy girl with an ugly green sweater is lured into the naughty world of booze by one of her more well-rounded classmates. Green sweater gets drunk, trades her sweater for a stylish tank top, finds social acceptance, and wakes up the following morning with a hangover. Naturally, the hangover convinces her that drinking is really, really bad. She puts her green sweater back on and lives miserably ever after, or so we are led to believe.

I've been that girl with the ugly green sweater. I've been the social-outcast misfit. I've also been lured, through the persuasive efforts of my peers, into behavior that is not condoned by parents and guidance counselors. I've discovered a world that can't be experienced by those who stick to the straight and narrow, and I like this world immensely at times. I would like to say that my own personal equivalent of green sweater's hangover scared me back into miserable teetotaling behavior, but that would not be entirely true. Peer pressure is a difficult thing to resist, mostly because in all of us, there is a part that has no desire to resist.

Sherman learned to look the other way when his own soldiers committed acts

of atrocity in retaliation for guerrilla violence against them. It's not the same thing, I know, but a part of me thinks that Sherman, who was always before that such a stickler for order, finally said what the hell. Maybe he wanted his soldiers to like him, or maybe he was just so sick to death of the whole war that he didn't care anymore. Whatever the case, it seems that after just one little taste of raising hell, Sherman was hooked. He was the mighty potato smasher once again.

I sat in the dark and shabby waiting room of Pointless Pursuits, our town's only tattoo parlor, watching rain splatter on the porch outside. There was only so much money to be made in tattoos. The shop doubled as a drug dealing operation. That's what we were doing there.

Willow had sped into my driveway and whisked me away from my Cinderella day, but she was no fairy godmother. Her promise of mayhem, magic, and adventure had led us only as far as the shabby little roadside tattoo parlor with its purple neon sign and its creepy, grimy waiting area. Willow had left me to the companionship of the tattered couch with its stained afghan and the coffee table piled high with tattoo magazines.

"Wait here. I'll be right out," she promised, disappearing through a beaded curtain into the shadowy depths of Pointless Pursuits.

A couple minutes later, I looked up at the sound of rustling beads. There, standing in the doorway, was the woman of my dreams. The pinkishy amber light that made its way through the beads did an adequate job of highlighting her not-quite-hourglass figure. At first, I thought I must be trapped in a very realistic fantasy and wondered if it wasn't some sort of secondhand high.

"Heard you guys got suspended," Andrea said, stepping out into the waiting room.

"Yeah," I said.

"That sucks, but hey, at least you get a day off. I called in sick. Had to have this minor surgery. I would show you, but I'm supposed to leave the bandage on until it heals."

I imagined a butterfly tattooed on one of her round ass cheeks, but no such luck. Andrea offered me a peek at her bandaged shoulder.

"A rose," she explained. "I know, not very original, but I figure it's timeless."

"It will look pretty with a dress," I said. Flirtation is not my strong suit.

“I heard Meg Ambrosio got a Davies Pauliny tattoo last week. That’s just way too trendy. I mean, how do you even know they’ll be around next year?”

I shrugged. I wanted to point out that Davies Pauliny, who had sprung from the ether only a month ago, might not be around in another four weeks, let alone another year, but I was having trouble making ordinary conversation. I couldn’t concentrate. Every sexual fantasy I had dreamed up involving Andrea was spinning through my mind simultaneously.

“Call me some time,” Andrea said. “We can hang out.”

I felt dizzy.

Andrea left, and I returned to passing the time. I watched the rain fall. I flipped through a couple of tattoo magazines without seeing anything. I wished I’d brought a book. There was a drip somewhere in the building. The persistent drip, drip, drip echoed in my head until it was completely impossible to ignore. There was no sign of Willow.

For some time, Willow had cultivated the image of being a relatively straight arrow, a person who kept her vices in check. Most people assumed she was a decent girl who drank a respectable amount of alcohol and smoked the occasional pot. Even her own drug dealer couldn’t entirely see through Willow’s well-crafted exterior. Only I knew that for the past ten months Willow had been hitting the drugs in a big-time way, that every penny she had was invested solely in digestible substances that would leave her in an altered state, that lately this insatiable passion seemed to be growing at a frenetic rate. My own experience with drugs was practically nonexistent, but I knew that Willow’s present flight pattern could be stopped only by serious clinical help or death. We had been best friends off and on since second grade, a fact that left me in the awkward position of playing the useless enabler to Willow’s downward-spiral-spinning dope fiend. We were quite a pair.

The bead curtains clinked again. I looked up quickly, but unless Willow had suddenly grown a three-day shadow and a beer belly, this was not her.

“You want a beer or something while you’re waiting for your friend?” the man asked.

“No thanks,” I said.

He took this as an invitation to sit down and chat with me. “Crappy weather,

huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“My name’s Craig. I’m the artist.”

I think I giggled. The way he said it, it was like he was the only artist in the entire world.

He winked at me. “You got a name?”

“Scilla.”

He was giving me the look. Apparently he thought he had quite a lot to offer me, and that for some insane reason I would be very much enticed.

“I should go look for her,” I said to Craig the artist, and quickly got up and passed through the curtain to the other side. I found a hallway with a bunch of closed doors. “Damn it,” I said. She had to be behind one of them. I flung open the doors one by one. Tattoo room. Office. Closet. The fourth door, a bathroom, was locked. I knocked once, quietly. Nothing. I pounded a few more times.

“Just a minute.” It was Willow’s voice from the other side of the door, but it was weak and faint and sounded impossibly far away.

“It’s me.”

I heard movement inside. The lock clicked open and the door opened a crack. I pushed it the rest of the way and went in, closing it behind me. Willow was holding a tissue up to her nose, her head tilted back. I saw her face reflected in the mirror. There was blood smeared under her nose, and more on the tissue.

“It’s nothing,” she assured me.

Her streaky hair was stringy and damp. It hung limply, and in the light of the bathroom looked faded and discolored. Her face looked weird, all ghastly pale and almost gray. Only her eyes had color, but they were that too-bright blue, glassy like junkie eyes. She sat down on the closed lid of the toilet, and for a moment I thought she was going to pass out.

A few small puddles of blood dotted the powder blue tiles of the bathroom floor. I wrapped a wad of toilet paper around my hand, tore it off, and began mopping up the little red puddles. Willow watched me. She made a strange noise and shook her head as if to tell me not to, but I didn’t pay any attention to her. Looking at the red stains on the floor and, out of the corner of my eye, at Willow’s gaunt form on the toilet, I had a vision of her with bobbed hair and a

pleated skirt hiding a diaphragm under a bench in Washington Square Park. I couldn't suppress the giggle that found its way into my mouth.

That night we made our way to a small beach party where our classmates were gathered to toast the coming summer with beer, wine, and any other alcoholic substances they could get their underaged hands on. It was probably more difficult to get ahold of than the narcotic substances Willow had purchased that afternoon.

As luck would have it, tomorrow was Baccigalupi Day, the not quite officially sanctioned day when upperclassmen skipped school. It made our suspension seem almost ironic.

Willow had taken it upon herself to play the role of life of the party. She had surrounded herself with a group of guys and girls, all of them drunk/stoned/high enough to find her amazingly entertaining.

I wasn't in much of a celebratory mood. There had been the incident of Willow's bleeding nose, of course, and then there was the wrath of my mother that I would need to face sooner or later. Finally, there was my life stretching out before me, an endless blank canvas. The only colors I had to paint with were gray and brown and black.

I lay on the sand watching a boy and two girls risk death by hypothermia by swimming in the too-cold spring water out to the dock. They hadn't bothered to bring bathing suits, and the one girl had ditched both her shirt and her bra before getting in the water. I watched her run around on the dock, her pale breasts glowing in the moonlight. She looked cold, carefree, and completely drunk, and I wished I could be her instead of me.

Somewhere behind me, I heard a couple of boys talking about something. I heard the word "ferocity" mentioned a few times and tried to listen harder. I couldn't make any sense of the conversation.

I think that's about when I knew it was going to be my shittiest summer ever, as impossible as that seemed.

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