

"Dark and daring, this memorable debut should appeal to teens with a black sense of humor." —*Booklist on The Lonely*

Ainslie Hogarth

*eats?*  
↓  
THE BOY  
MEETS GIRL  
MASSACRE

(Anotated)

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*Dear Detective Umbridge,*

I first met Trevor Donald at a coffee shop a few months ago. He was one of those men who looked just thoroughly exhausted. Like a rag used too long to wipe tables at a diner, loose and greasy and frayed at the edges so the only solution is to throw it out and get a new one. We got our coffees to go and sat outside while he smoked cigarettes and told me a little about himself.

I often find myself in situations like this, occupying sticky tables in dim bars or too-bright coffee shops with eager storytellers, mostly full of shit. I do this to feel superior to other creative execs, even though these meetings rarely result in an actual movie. But Trevor was different. He didn't try to sell it to me. Instead he was just very upfront about needing the money and wanting me to read it for myself. Of course this non-pitch intrigued me more than any pitch I'd ever heard in my life.

Sorry, what he had wasn't actually a script. Rather, a diary. What we call "source material." This diary was a piece of evidence he'd found at a grisly crime scene back in the '90s. A piece of evidence that he'd become more or less obsessed with. His words. He admitted the diary was part of the reason he lost his job as a detective. Part of the reason he didn't leave the house much these days and his ex-wife hadn't spoken to him in over a decade.

Since I was looking at this project to cut my teeth as a director, I asked if getting so involved with the diary would ruin me too, and he laughed and shrugged and said he couldn't make any guarantees, then handed me a large yellow envelope.

What the envelope contained wasn't the *actual* diary, of course. He didn't have it. What he gave me was a copy. A printout, transcribed and

annotated by Trevor himself for expert analysis back in 1999; child psychologists, handwriting specialists, even a paranormal investigator looked at it. He told me the original diary was probably still sitting in a plastic bag, isolated, tucked away in some cold evidence room in King City. That's exactly how he put it. Like it was a shame or something, that it was sitting all alone in that small room.

Anyway, I read the diary and loved it. My boss read the diary and loved it. In fact, he loved it so much he immediately approved a generous finder's fee for Trevor and agreed to give him an associate producer credit if he wanted it. He was that sure this thing would be a success. I wrote Trevor a few production notes on the printout, mailed it back to him, and called him right away to tell him we wanted it, pending the notes he'd find in the manuscript, of course—things we wanted to change, you know, things we had to nail down to guarantee it'd be a moneymaker. I didn't know who else he'd shown it to, if there was some other company in the loop that had a vision more in sync with Trevor's, though I don't think he really had a vision at all. I asked him to look at my notes and let me know what he thought. Call me or write me if he had any ideas of his own, that kind of thing. Anyway, he was thrilled, I was thrilled.

He called me a few days later and left a message that said, "I found the kid." And that was all. You'll see what that means in the diary.

Then I guess after that he disappeared.

I was sad, you know? I'd only met him once, of course, and we'd spoken just a few times on the phone, but he seemed like a good man. And a good detective, based on his old annotations in the diary. I liked the guy. I really did. Is a detective always a detective, even after they retire? Like a doctor is always a doctor, or a judge is always a judge? If not, I think they should be.

Anyway, I'm ashamed to admit that we were moving on to development without him when you contacted our office. We've selected a screenwriter, acquired financing, my boss has approved me to direct. We even have a few Noelles in mind.

I'm happy to cooperate and put a hold on production for the time being. I am. Trevor brought us this idea, so it's the least we can do. However, I want to make it very clear that we're not legally bound to do this and therefore can only justify it for a short period of time. We'll stop, effective immediately, out of respect for Trevor and your department, but you've got to understand, and I hope you don't find this insensitive, we couldn't even *invent* better publicity at this stage—the lead detective on the case has gone missing, for god's sake—so we'll be moving forward into pre-production in a month's time.

That's pretty much all the information I have on Trevor, but feel free to contact me again if you've got any more questions. Like I said, we're happy to cooperate. And as per your request, I've mailed you a recording of that last message Trevor left on my machine, a photocopy of the annotated source material he originally gave me, including my notes (sorry, it was the cleanest copy we had), and also a cover letter Trevor had enclosed in that yellow envelope way back when. This letter will be the first thing you see when you open the package.

I hope you find what you're looking for in there.

*The very best of luck,*

*Roger Dalrymple*

*Hello Mr. Dalrymple,*

The author of the following diary never willed it to anyone, nor did she have any close relatives interested in collecting her personal items, so it effectively became "public" as soon as it was admitted to evidence at the trial. Of course the actual "public" has to jump through about a dozen hoops to see these kinds of "public" documents, complete a mountain of forms, gather endless signatures, that kind of thing. But that's a different conversation altogether.

As the lead detective, I worked very closely with this document. This diary. In fact, since I first pulled it blood-soaked from an evidence bag and began reading, not a day goes by that I don't think about the girl who wrote it. Noelle Dixon. Maybe a murderer. Maybe not. Even after all these years I still don't know.

As you see, the diary you've got here isn't the original, or even a photocopy of the original. I typed up this copy back in 1999, and added a bunch of footnotes—information I'd picked up from locals, handwriting experts, etc. The footnotes were intended to aid the child psychologists who lent their expertise to our department. I've left them in for you, in case you get confused or have questions. Or you can just ignore them if you want.

I don't want to come off as desperate or unhinged—I assure you I'm no more desperate or unhinged than the next retired cop—but I *need* you to take this project. I *need* this diary to be out of my hands. I need it gone. Dead. Killed by a movie. So please, no offence, but feel free to butcher it any way you want to. And I'll do anything I can to help.

I'd moved with my wife to King City just three months before the murders occurred. Promoted to detective if I could relocate, so I did. Then on September 1st, 1999, at 8:48 a.m., an employee from The Boy Meets Girl Inn phoned the King City Police Department and reported a scene so ghoulish that Linda, our dispatcher, initially took it for a prank. Some kid putting on a voice and calling on a dare. I'd been warned about the day after the Anniversary. Linda told me there'd be calls like that all day. You'll see why when you read.

So anyway, as per procedure, she sent an officer over anyway, warning him that there was a good chance he'd be mooned. She told us she'd chuckled at her own joke as his car pulled out of the lot.

When the officer arrived, Jessica West, our caller, sat on the front steps. Eyes wide, fingers twisted together tight as rope. She'd phoned inn manager Olivia Grieves too, who sat next to her, rubbing her back, her head dropped into a sun-shielding hand, the first two fingers occupied with a cigarette steadily burning, the smoke catching the light, dancing to some slow, strange tune. That was exactly how the

officer put it to me, about her cigarette smoke. He didn't last too long on the force.

Anyway, he said he knew right away that it wasn't a prank; both women looked too pale for such a warm, sunny day, sitting before the inn's gaping double-doors. It was a mansion really. Over a hundred and fifty years old, with big, flat, rectangular expanses of red brick and what seemed like hundreds of white-shuttered windows. For your movie, though, it probably doesn't matter how it really looked.

But it's important to know it was warm out. A sunny day. The wrong kind of day to find what he found just inside those double doors.

In the lobby, twin girls lay side-by-side on a blood-soaked carpet, face up, arms tucked in, torsos resembling salsa: piles of coarsely chopped flesh and fat and blood and bone.

The officer said he'd initially thought they'd been killed with, he shuddered as he recounted, "a chain saw."

A bloody trail led up the stairs, but, he recalled noticing, "no footprints."

Two more bodies were found in a bed. A boy and a girl. Fewer perforations than the bodies downstairs. Less concentrated. The officer could see distinct though irregularly shaped holes in the bodies; wide, unclean gouges. "An axe," he now theorized.

But not quite.

More blood, leading to another room where one of the nightshift kids, Alfred Gustafson, had been impaled with the same instrument, so many times in the throat that he'd been nearly decapitated, his jaw torn from his head in the process, blended into the mess separating his body from his still face.

The officer, coming back down to call the station, noticed a door beneath the stairs, a closet, from which swelled a pool of blood that reached all the way to other side of the hall.

Bracing himself, he opened it and found the other nightshift kid, Noelle Dixon. Sitting on a stool. A pickaxe lodged into her skull and propping her body up like a picture frame.

A pickaxe.

What had made those wide, unclean gouges, those irregularly shaped holes in the five other bodies: this pickaxe.

At her feet lay a diary, splayed open on its front, the covers protecting its pages from the blood that glazed half of Noelle's head and dripped heavy from her chin. The diary almost appeared to be in its own little pool of blood, as though it too had been killed in the night.

That diary's contents are what follow.

*Yours sincerely,  
Detective Trevor Donald*

# First Entry <sup>1</sup>

You're new to me, diary. I've never had anything like you before.

Alf and I both went out and bought something like you before starting our nightshift jobs at the inn, to document all the weird stuff that might happen. Like, you know, doors slamming, cupboards creaking open all slow and creepy, the piano playing itself, all the usual haunted house stuff.

We didn't buy them together either, since we didn't even know each other yet. Not really, anyway. Just each other's names from going to the same school. The diary thing came up on our first day. Except Alf called his a JOURNAL, because boys don't have DIARIES, and sometimes Alf could be lame like that. But not often.

Anyway, it feels weird to just pick up and start doing something like this when you've never ever done it before.

That's why I avoided using you for the first month or so of working here.

You're green and very smooth and embossed in gold on your spine is the word "DIARY," I guess just in case someone tried to use you for any other reason. And you're not hard, either. You're bendy and you're small so I can fit you in my hoodie pocket all the time.

You're very beautiful actually.

Anyway, I had to pick you up today because last night, for the first time, something seriously, actually crazy happened.

I mean, there's been a few sort of weird things already. One spot in the hallway is freezing cold for no reason,

Alf thought he lost his favorite hat and then it reappeared, sitting on top of his bag one morning. There was this weird smell coming out of one of the kitchen cupboards, Alf swore up and down it smelled like rotting flesh even though he has no idea what that would smell like. The smell went away after a few hours and hasn't been back since.

But last night was different. I was lying in bed, kind of drifting off to sleep, when suddenly my room got very cold. Too cold. It kind of takes a while to realize that a room is just way, way too cold, a lot of feet kicking and hoisting up the blankets and curling up in a ball, thinking that's all it's gonna take to be warm. But then I could see my breath, full clouds at first, then scared, shallow puffs, because I knew something was about to happen. And suddenly my bathroom light turned on. And it stayed on. And it was aggressive. Almost daring me to go turn it off.

From my bed the open bathroom door shows the whole sink and part of the toilet. Hidden behind the open door is the shower. After a few seconds of what felt like a staring contest with the lit-up bathroom, the door slowly began to move, creaking loud to a close, all the way, so I heard the latch catch. As though something standing in the shower had pushed it all the way shut.

I yanked my blanket up over my nose and stared at the closed door without blinking until my eyes just about dried up and I had to shut them. I kept them shut, more wide awake than I'd ever been beneath, and I thought I could hear whispering. But it was so faint, too faint, I couldn't be sure. Probably I was just terrified. Probably I was hearing things.

Somehow I eventually fell asleep because there was nothing else to do under those blankets and those closed

eyelids.

The next morning I told Alf about the bathroom door and he was jealous and he said, “Write it down, write it down!”

I said, “You write stuff down too. You write about your hat.”

But he said that he feels “like a girl” writing in his diary. I said, “I thought yours was a JOURNAL,” and then we laughed because usually Alf is pretty good at laughing at himself and I’m pretty good at making fun of him.

It kind of sucks that something like that happened right in my room, though, because actually I spend a lot of time in there. More time than Olivia, our boss, realizes. I shouldn’t have written that down. Now if she ever finds this diary she’ll know how much I slack off. But actually Olivia would never read this. She’s an honorable old bat. I just called her an old bat. There’s another reason I really hope she doesn’t open this thing up.

See, I have to spend a lot of time in my room because I’ve got this sore spot in my brain.<sup>2</sup> And sometimes it hurts so bad I can barely stand it. Not like a headache really. More like the way a canker sore hurts and can hijack your whole mouth. Every other part of my brain won’t stop tonguing and probing and prodding it. And it can kind of feel good, the way tonguing a canker sore can sometimes feel good, white hot pain almost savory. But also terrible like a canker sore. And distracting like a canker sore.

And when my brain’s canker sore flares up like that it helps to lie on a bed on my stomach with my face turned to the side, my cheek all squished up into my eye so it doesn’t really work right and everything gets fuzzy. I



We’ll use voiceover narration for some of this early stuff.

leave a light on somewhere, something weak so everything in the room is just warm, and I look sort of down into the bedspread so that the pattern on it begins to melt and stretch open. My squished cheek goes numb, my lips pushed up and plugging my nostrils so I've gotta breathe loud cold air through my teeth.

It's not like regular daydreaming.

I'm not thinking of any one particular thing, like, you know, I'm not thinking of a particular kind of life I'll have when I grow up, when I leave the house, when I'm so pretty that nothing else matters.

It's more that I'm just thinking about *feeling* good. Good feelings. That blissful blip between starting to piss the bed, letting it out and loving it, and realizing you're pissing the bed, cold and wet and having to get up now and deal with it.

Slowly I begin to seep through the cracks in the bedspread's pattern, then emerge whole on the other side, inside the pattern, floating through patterned space as though on an inner tube.

Patterned space is the perfect temperature, moist-warm insides of a just-done cake; patterned space enters my body and fills it up and spills back out again, scary at first but just for a split second, and then you let it happen, filling up and spilling out and filling and spilling over and over and it's just so wonderful you never wanna breathe real air again. You wanna die. Because maybe if you die in patterned space you get to stay there forever and it'd be worth the risk.

And the best part of all is, amidst all the filling and spilling of patterned space, my sore brain just kind of vaporizes. And it hisses out of my ears like really a satisfying fart. The kind of fart that may as well be a dump, it feels so good. Then there's nothing at all left in

my head. Once filled with sore brain, now cool and empty.

It's the best feeling in the world.

But then it always happens that like, in the distance I'll hear something, like a drop of water fall into a puddle, and it echoes. And I know the good feelings are over. I'm suddenly extracted from patterned space; I'm a dark swirl sucked into a needle then spat back out on the bed. Because that sound, a drop of water in a puddle sound, it MEANS EMPTY. Instead of BEING EMPTY.

Because BEING EMPTY means there's no puddle of water to hear at all.

The bedspreads at home are old and soft and pilled and peach-colored with big turquoise paisley. Bald spots in the stuffing and weird fishing wire poking out everywhere. Because we're poor and we don't have money to buy better blankets, but whatever.

That's not me. I'm not a poor person.

I like the bedspreads at the hotel but they're not great either. They're actually not as soft as the bedspreads at home, even though they're definitely more expensive. Stuffing quilted tightly put; dense patterns of busy greens and pinks and yellows.

Anyway, like I said, I take a lot of breaks and I go and lie on them and try to do the same thing with them, like, let my ears fart.

Sorry, diary, that was pretty weird.

Actually wait, did I just apologize to a diary? Why would I make my diary so easy to offend? We're gonna have to thicken that skin of yours. Otherwise you won't be able to handle this job.<sup>3</sup>

Alf, who you'll be hearing a lot about, I'm sure, his name is short for Alfred. Alfred Gustafson. Because I guess his parents hated him as soon as they saw him and

This is great.  
People love  
poor kids.

wanted to ruin his life with the worst name in the world. It's the kind of name that's so powerfully terrible it could make a good-looking person seem ugly. Not that Alf really has to worry about that. He's just as ugly as his name.

He's not actually. I'm kidding. Don't tell his JOURNAL, diary, if you guys, you know, swap stories, but actually Alf is a perfectly good-looking person beneath his bad haircut and his weird mannerisms and nerdy clothes. Real nerdy, like sweatpants and turtlenecks and asthma. Not the way that some people wear, like, expensive vintage horror movie T-shirts or whatever and say like, "Oh I'm such a nerd for liking this super cool thing to like."

I make a lot of mean jokes like that, like, about his parents hating him and about him being ugly. I make fun of his walk too. He sort of has this way of walking on his toes that makes him look like an idiot. Between the tippy-toe walk and his name being Alfred, it's almost a crime not to make him fetch things for you like a butler.

And yeah okay I know I shouldn't be mean to him, and I swear, in the beginning I wasn't this bad. If I'm being honest for a minute he's probably actually my best friend, which seems crazy because we've only really known each other for a month, but I don't know, it's just what happened. And it's why, right now, I really can't help myself being extra mean to him, because right now he really does deserve it.

See, over the past couple weeks Alf has developed this idiotic crush on me. He hasn't said anything about it, but I can tell and it's not fair.

It's not fair because we were getting along fine as just friends. Better than fine. It's been great. But as usual, as soon as a boy can even have the slightest bit of



Love interests do not wear turtlenecks and sweatpants. Even if they do.

conversation with a girl he would also have sex with he just ruins everything with a crush. Like friendships with girls aren't worth preserving somehow, they can be picked off and flicked away like flecks of skin, never safe, always worth ruining with a goddamn irresponsible crush.

And doesn't that make him kind of deserve it? Deserve my meanness? For only really looking at me like I'm some kind of sex hole? So much so that he'd risk our whole friendship just to be able to have sex with the sex hole. So much so that he hasn't even noticed what a terrible bitch I've been to him since his crush started showing. Or what a ridiculous couple we'd make. Like I could be anything at all around this hole and it really wouldn't matter. I could have six-inch serrated claws. I could have a mouth full of rotting, maggoty teeth.

I think it makes Alf worse than me. Even though maybe to other people, I'm the one who looks like the asshole.

And I'm sure I'm just sensitive because I don't make friends that easily. In fact I don't make friends like Alf at all. Or maybe I like Alf too but don't wanna admit it because I don't wanna lose the realest friend I've ever had. And, this sounds terrible, but like, I'm a lot better-looking than he is. There. I said it. And I don't wanna hear it from you, diary, you know you'd feel the same way.

And like, obviously I'm not gonna marry a person that I date now, when I'm goddamn sixteen years old, so why ruin it? Why not just be friends forever? Doesn't he know how special we are? To be friends the way that we are?

And it makes me mad that I think that way because it means that I like Alf probably way more than he likes me. If I'm worried like this, about not being able to be friends forever, and he's not. He just gets to have his crush and be happy. He should just never have had the crush in the first place. Even now, just from writing that out, I'm angry with him. And I'm definitely going to be mean to him the next time I see him, whether I want to or not, goddammit.

ANYWAY.

The hotel we work at is called The Boy Meets Girl Inn.<sup>4</sup> The sign is this fluorescent honeymoon red, one of those signs that buzz all the time. And the M buzzes loudest because it's on the fritz, and every few seconds it burns out for an instant and so for a thousand and one instances throughout the day this place is called The Boy eets Girl Inn. The Boy Eats Girl Inn.

Which is actually a more fitting name when you think about it.<sup>5</sup>

But I don't really wanna think about it right now. I'll explain later, diary. I promise. I'll explain everything about the hotel so that you're good and ready for the rest of our summer on the nightshift.

◀ The Boy Meets Girl Inn.  
Potential title?

◀ So, I know she might have killed everyone, but for the movie Noelle's our protagonist, not our slasher.

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1. Numbered entries indicate where Noelle seems to have started a new section. Because none of the entries are dated it's difficult to determine how much time elapsed between each, or whether or not entries were made on the same day.
  2. A postmortem CT scan revealed no irregularities.
  3. Likely referring to her own job at the inn requiring a certain level of fortitude. The Boy Meets Girl Inn's grim history is well known throughout town. Over 150 years old and plagued with unusual tragedies, or in some cases the rumor of them; murder, suicide, torture, hundreds of sightings of "ghosts" and other strange phenomena. Most people in the area don't even like passing by it on the street, let alone spending long stretches inside or sleeping in it. I'll admit to feeling a certain level of

unease when I first stepped inside the inn, however that could be due to the fact that the interior was still covered in bloodstains.

4. This name was part of an ill-conceived effort to rebrand the property as it transitioned from an apartment building into a “romantic getaway location” in 1986.
5. Reference to Margaret Grimley.

## Second Entry

I'm not a virgin. There you go. Let's just get this out of the way now.

I'm sixteen and I'm not a virgin.

I lost it young but I can't really remember any details because I made myself EMPTY and stared into a bedspread.

I do remember that his name was Tucker and he was in grade eight and I talked him into it because I just wanted to do it and have it done with.

I wanted to get it done with because I guess I thought in some weird way it might feel good on my sore spot. A balm for it, sort of. Like, with Tucker, or anyone like him really (like, any boy), I could make myself more EMPTY than ever before. WHOLLY TOTALLY ENTIRELY EMPTY for as long as it lasted.

So I guess I had weird expectations for my first time the way that other girls do, but not at all the WAY that other girls do.

I hate expectations. Any kind of expectation. They make it so you can't ever really experience anything in any real way; everything gets so muddled up. They're just not helpful, you know? They either make not great things seem better than they are, which isn't always good, or they create disappointment. Which is the worst feeling in the world.

I hope Tucker didn't have any big expectations.

I think even if he did have big expectations, he still would have done it with me because it would have been more important to him to tell all his friends about it, to be the first one out of anyone to have sex, than to

Noelle's gotta be hot but with something weird about her; a severe dye job or big bags under her eyes maybe.

We're going to have to scrap all this touchy feely teenage stuff. That's

actually have a good experience that met whatever EXPECTATIONS he might have had.

I know usually it's the other way around, some pervy older boy talking some younger girl into it, but not this time. This time I did the traumatizing. And I can tell I traumatized him too. Because these days that guy's stutter could move a sailboat and I don't think he's ever had a girlfriend.

SORRY TUCKER.

There. I feel better now actually. That's weird. Diary, you're like a priest and this is my confessional. How do I have to punish myself to make it right?

Waiting. Waiting.

Oh I see, your silence tells me that my life is punishment enough? Alright then. Fuck you, diary. You good for nothing bitch.

Oh god, here we go. Falling into the trap of the diary. What a goddam terrible idea, writing all of your most embarrassing and deepest and most terrible thoughts and feelings down in a book. Just begging to fall into the wrong hands. Why does anyone do this?

I mean, I guess it's kinda dangerous. That's sort of fun.

You're like a stick of dynamite, diary, just waiting to GO OFF in the wrong hands. Anyone could find you and you could potentially blow them away. Like if Alf could see all that stuff I wrote about him being a nerd and his parents hating him and stuff.

Anyway, my EXPECTATIONS of my FIRST TIME were met in that, it did feel good on that sore spot. I did go EMPTY like never before.

And in fact something even better than I could have EXPECTED happened.

After it was done and I kinda like, came back from the best EMPTY ever, I could feel the sore spot in my brain,

what books  
are for.

right on my scalp. Migrated through my skull and all the way to the surface. I know that sounds fucking crazy, but it's true. This weird spot on my scalp that was kind of warmer and squishier, like a bruise on an apple, just appeared. Almost as though the tip of the sore spot in my brain were now peeking out, the way only a small part of an iceberg sticks out of the water. An access point. That I could press and feel kinda good. Not patterned space good, but pretty good.

So I started pressing on it all the time. When I felt weird or anxious or even just bored I pressed. Just pressing, pressing, making sure it was still there, still soft, as close to touching the soreness on my brain as possible.<sup>6</sup>

Anyway, it's not like I have sex all the time now or anything.

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6. According to Jessica West and Olivia Grieves, this pressing on her head was a sort of twitch of Noelle's; something she did all the time almost unconsciously. We're still waiting on reports from the psychiatrists to confirm, but it seems to me to be, potentially, a kind of stereotypy or stim: "a repetitive movement, behavior, posture, action, or utterance; a kind of ritualistic self-stimulation that calms, or in some cases excites."

# Third Entry

Alf and I learned a lot about each other pretty quickly. On the very first night we learned that the reason we'd both applied for the nightshift job was because neither of us likes being home much. Alf's parents actually do hate him. Which means I should probably NOT make fun of him for it. Like how you'd never make fun of an actual fat person for being fat.

I also learned that when he was five years old he watched his sister drown in the pool in their backyard. He sat on the highest accessible branch in their oak tree, paralyzed with laughter. A therapist would later tell him over and over again that paralyzing laughter is actually a very common reaction to extreme fear. But Alf told me that he wasn't afraid; that he knew deep down that he was laughing because it was hilarious, because she was such an idiot, jumping in the deep end when she knew she couldn't swim, thrashing around like a fool, gasping for breath, spitting water, coughing. Of course he didn't realize then that she could die from drowning, that her body was doing anything and everything it could to preserve itself, not caring how hilarious it might look to basically imitate an inflatable advertising tube man catching the greatest wind of his life.

He says if he'd known that, that drowning would kill her, he would have done something to stop it. And because he knows that for sure, he's mostly okay about it. Which makes sense to me.

And his parents, they can't help hating him. And he gets that too, and appreciates how nice they are about it.

“I watched her walk up to the deep end,” he said, “and I knew what she was going to do. And I wanted her to do it too. Because I knew it would be funny. I just, I hope she didn’t see me laughing. I just hope that’s not the last thing she remembers.”

It was three o’clock in the morning on one of our first nights here when he told me that story. He said he’d never told anyone about the laughing before. He said usually when he told people that story, he was trying to get sympathy, or like, one-up someone who was trying to tell him that they had a fucked-up life. So he’d never mentioned the laughing, just that he watched her drown.

The good thing about Alfred is that it didn’t seem to have ruined him in any obvious way.

Except for that he just wants to work at the inn for the rest of his life. I guess that’s not normal.

The therapist also told his parents that often, Alfred’s particular variety of trauma manifests itself as perfectionism, overachieving, being the best possible kid to make up for the fact that the other kid is dead. But Alf was the exact opposite. Too fundamentally lazy to have been broken that other, more common way.

The reason we were talking at three o’clock in the morning is because we’d both woken up from the noises. That was then, though, early in the summer. We’re used to them now. The bumps in the night.<sup>7</sup>

I didn’t want to be at home because of my dad. Herman.

Herman has relentless bowel problems,<sup>8</sup> an unglamorous blood disease,<sup>9</sup> and heaps of credit card debt<sup>10</sup> that pester him almost as much as his physical ailments. We’re totally poor because of him. Our house is small and kind of dirty and shitty. I told you about our thin bedspreads already. We eat a lot of fast food and

ramen noodles and saltine crackers with peanut butter, and that kind of stuff keeps Herman's bowels irritable but it's all we can afford. I've had a job in one way or another since I was nine and Herman has been collecting disability and using it to keep giant packages containing utterly useless shit arriving on our doorstep since before I could remember.

At one point in his miserable life he'd actually been in line to inherit a car dealership from his father. He'd worked there since he graduated from college. But when my mother left he bungled it and then he got sick and started seeing specialists and naturopaths and chiropractors and anyone at all who would promise to fix his blood and his bowels.

He told me before that he'd wished over and over again for a daughter. For me. For a little girl he could pour all of his love into without having to worry. Someone he could love as much as his wonderful wife. Ex-wife. That's why I'm here, because he wished for me. He didn't want to give any credit to my mother because she'd left us.

He always said, "I'm your mother and your father."

He was constantly calling the hotel, asking when I'd be home, telling me about his symptoms: "Noelle, it's liquid right now, absolute liquid. Like water. And it burns. My god how it burns. I don't know if it's connected to the blood but I'll tell you what, I'm wondering if it's made my sphincter as weak as the rest of my body. It affects the muscles, you know. And that's a muscle, just like any other muscle. And it takes the right muscles to keep it from just being liquid. You need the muscles to get the nutrients out and, you know, work it into a solid. Oh, Noelle. Oh god, Noelle. It's just so hard with you working nights. I wish you didn't have to.

I miss you so much. I need you. I need you, Noelle. I ordered something that might help. It's this four-way massager that stimulates muscle development. Should be arriving tomorrow morning. When you get home we can target some of my weaker muscles, maybe you can help with the places I can't reach ... ”

And then the sore spot in my brain would flare up. I imagined it, pink to red and swollen and spewing something slimy. And I pressed and pressed and pressed harder, again and again, tided myself over until I could find some nice pattern to seep into.

God, it's so embarrassing.

So horribly, terribly, disgustingly embarrassing.

Diary, you dickhead, stop making me write these embarrassing things in you. How are you doing this? It feels good though, to write it down like this. Because when I write it down it seems like it can't be real. Like I'm a character in a movie, one of those princesses whose mother died when she was young and left her with a terrible ogre of a father. Dead mother, ogre father, that's enough to make a person kind of special right? Though usually it's a stepfather, because the princess couldn't be the spawn of someone as absolutely terrible and disgusting as Herman.

Anyway, it still feels good in a way. I like it when you validate me, diary, when you confirm that my father is a terrible weirdo beast and that I'm special. I'm a princess. Keep that up and we'll be friends forever.

Man. I shouldn't have said that though. Any of that. About my dad. My poor, poor dad. He's got these watery eyes, all red-rimmed like the lids are turning inside out. I'm always sorry to see them open. That means he's awake. He's alive. Another day to endure. They're all yellow where they should be white and

Ha!

Depending how we play up the dad (sympathetic vs. monster), we could even

really they're sort of sickening but they make me depressed instead of nauseous.

It's not his fault he has the worst body in the world.

And I hate myself for hating him for it.

The other night he said, "Noelle, if I wasn't this way I could find someone to love. A wife to take care of me. Because, you know, this is a wife's job. A wife's job. This isn't your job. And I'm sorry for that, Noelle, you know I'm sorry, right? I'm not out of love yet, am I? I could find someone else. I could. I know it. And I know I'm a burden on you, sweetie. I have no right to do this to you. But who would want me this way? Who would want to take this on? I have no one else."

"Dad, it's okay. You're gonna be okay eventually, alright? And you're gonna find someone new."

"There's no one like your mother, kiddo."

"I know."

"She was too good for us."

"I know."

"So we can't hate her for leaving."

"I don't hate her, Dad."

"Aw Noelle. We're all each other has kiddo."

"I know, Dad."

That was a common sort of conversation. He repeated himself a lot. Because all he did was sit in the living room, scribbled in the TV's artificial light, getting fatter and fatter and fatter and fatter so if you fast-forwarded his life it would almost look as though he were melting into his armchair.

Sometimes instead of getting fatter in front of the TV, he'd get fatter on the phone. Sit in a creaking wooden chair in the kitchen, chatting with one of Dr. Schiller's <sup>11</sup> other chronically ill patients, because that's all they had to talk about, all they had to identify themselves.

get some  
critical  
attention.

HERMAN DIXON, Co., Bl. (that's colon and blood). He and the other patients would make a game of out-repulsing each other with gooey, stinky symptoms of their illnesses. Every minute growing less and less attractive to some potential new wife who might come and save me from hell.

Since I was little it's been all desperate clinging hugs, loud weeping into my shoulder, and stuff like:

"It's just you and me, Noelle."

"You're the only thing that keeps me going, Noelle."

"You're all I need in this world, Noelle."

In fact I can't think of a single day in which he hasn't said something like that. Or like:

"I'm sorry, Noelle."

"You don't deserve this, Noelle."

"I'm ruining your life, Noelle."

"You're my wish come true, Noelle."

He'd say that god wouldn't have given me a father like him if I couldn't handle it; that we were blessings for each other because he was making it so one day I'd be the best wife and mother in the world, teaching me to care for another person the way that I have for him. We were each other's precious gifts. He said, "Daughters end up marrying men just like their fathers, sweetie, and you're gonna make a man like me very happy one day."

It's weird to love someone for so long, really believe them that they're your whole world, and then suddenly hate them. A lot. And I know this is going to make me sound like an even bigger asshole, but like, it's hard to hate someone for something they can't help. It makes you feel really awful.

Like, it's really fucking hard to hate someone for their spastic colon. It really is.

It took a lot for me to finally admit it. Because it meant I basically had to admit that I'm a bad daughter. And a bad person.

I really wish he could have abused me in some more traditional way. Like if he beat me up or had sex with me or something. Because then I'd have a name to put on it, and years and years worth of Lifetime movies telling me that IT'S NOT MY FAULT and that HE'S WRONG. But this way of being treated, this was uncharted mental torture, it felt like a crime but it wasn't a crime because if it was a crime some nice-smelling social worker could legally take me away and I wouldn't have to feel so goddamn guilty.

I won't work at the inn forever and ever like Alf because I want to make enough money to run away and leave him. I'm okay that everyone in this town will think I'm an asshole because after I leave I'll never come back. I'll be LEGENDARY as an asshole. NOELLE DIXON LEFT HER POOR SICK FATHER AT HOME, SAD, LONELY MAN, HIS ONLY DAUGHTER THE BIGGEST ASSHOLE OF ALL TIME.

And I'm never going to get married. I'm never going to have kids. I want everything about my life to end with me because I should have never been born. Never should have been wished for.

I'd initially thought that taking the nightshift at the inn would make it better, if we were on totally different schedules things might not be so bad. Maybe I'd miss him and start remembering things that I'd once loved about him. Slowly the absence would chisel away my hatred and I could see him as just a sad, sick man again.

But it was really only getting worse. His usual neediness laced with resentment that I was never

 The Nightshift.  
Another

around. I was getting less sleep and feeling more stressed so every time he said my name I wanted to feel his teeth crack beneath my sturdiest boot. The nightshift just made me hate him more.

Do you wanna know what he did last night? Okay listen to this. He called the inn to tell me that he'd fallen and hurt his back and couldn't get up and if I didn't come home right away to help him he'd be stuck on the floor, cold and alone all night long, nowhere near a TV. He literally shrieked into the phone.

So I rushed home, leaving Alf all alone at the inn, which is honestly the worst even though he was really nice about it, just to help stupid Herman into bed, prepare a hot water bottle or something, prop him in front of a TV. Anyway, as soon as I opened the door, I caught him walking out of the bathroom. The sound of the flushing toilet seemed to go on forever, fuelling my fury.

"Um, hi," I said. "What the fuck?"

"Oh, I ah, wow, Noelle, you left right away for me?"

"You said it was an emergency, Herman."

"Honey, that's so sweet.

"Herman, I left work, Alf's there all alone, I—"

"I just, I feel better now. I just kind of turned and my back cracked and now it feels better. So, I'm sorry, I would have called but I had to use the bathroom."

"You're lying."

"I'm not, Noelle, now don't you call me a liar."

"You needy, pathetic liar."

"Noelle!"

"You called me home from work, Herman."

"I swear I fell, my back was aching! It was!"

"Stop lying!"

potential title?

“Here,” and he rushed over to his bag and pulled out his wallet and produced fourteen dollars. “Here, why don’t you run across the street and grab us a pizza, Noelle. The People’s Court is starting in five minutes. We can have a nice night in now that you’re home, okay? I’m sorry.”

“I’m going back to work.”

“No! Noelle, just stay home! You’re already here. Just come watch The People’s Court and eat pizza. It’ll be really fun!”

And I turned around and slammed the door shut so hard the sound made my ears ring.

So furious. Bright red flashes, fuzzy Christmas lights, swelled in and out of focus, blurring my vision. And before I knew it I was back at the inn and I didn’t remember anything about walking, like my body took over while my brain boiled in some kind of rage trance.

I didn’t even say hello to Alf when I walked in, just went straight up to my room and slammed the door again because I wanted my ears to keep ringing.

And in there, I pressed and pressed and pressed so hard on the sore spot I thought I could feel grease and blood and sweat seep from my pores like a wet sponge.

And then I started doing something I’d never done before.

I pressed my nail into my scalp and made a half-moon slice, the way you would break into an orange. And I worked at the slice, pulling it up, picking picking picking at it.

I picked and I picked and I picked until under my nail was all crammed up with blood and a glob of it drew a slow, heavy line down my face.

Close-up of blood glob falling over her lip. This is a horror movie, so some of this blood has to be sexy blood. Like this sexy glob.

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7. Olivia Grieves suggested that these “bumps in the night” might be caused by a rat infestation, though empty traps in the attic and basement

fail to prove such a theory and Olivia herself seemed skeptical of that explanation.

8. A spastic colon.
9. The blood tests are inconclusive at this point.
10. Herman Dixon was on a fixed government income due to his disabilities and also appeared to suffer from an addiction to buying infomercial products.
11. The Dixons' family doctor. He'd been seeing Herman for the past 30 years and Noelle since she was a baby. He said Herman and Noelle had always been a "troubling pair," disclosing that Noelle came for physicals very sporadically, her father far too often, and that the last time he'd seen her was just a few days before the Anniversary. When asked if anything unusual happened during their appointment, he said that Noelle had seemed quite on edge, touching her scalp more often than usual. He also said that he'd spoken with her more candidly than ever before about her father's condition. He admitted that this only seemed to "agitate her more," and he regretted bringing it up.

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