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THE SCIENCE COLLEGE

NEITHER OF US CHOOSES the other the way people here usually do: clubs, classes, sororities, shared interests, proximity most of all. But we have the same unshaven legs and forty-day-old undercuts and hair-lines we edge up with Venus razor blades meant to smooth an armpit away until it is no longer pit, just a further extension of an arm. Never mind that she is fat and I am not; that she has perfect vision while I've worn glasses since the second grade; that she wears ripped denim vests while I prefer OBEY, RVCA, and other Urban Outfitters knockoffs. There is something essentially similar about us, a category our peers agree that we and no one else belong to.

We circle around one another during orientation as we participate in field day events. She is already so close with the other girls, smuggling water balloons beneath their collars, tying her leg to theirs to race while I watch my team struggle to finish from the sidelines. But when I am walking to my dorm, she approaches me. She reaches out to touch my shoulder, and I flinch. She draws her hand back.

Hi girlie, she says. You look cool. She smiles, twisting her key ring through her fingers.

Thanks. So do you.

Where'd you get that shirt?

Online, at PacSun. I cough. It's not a very nice shirt. An old graphic tee with the Billabong wave, and it fits me poorly because it's too hot to bind. *What's your name?*

Jennifer. (So, she's the sort of butch who insists on being called by her full name.) *Yours?*

Emily. Or Em. Whatever's fine.

Cool. You going to the party at FIJI tonight, Em?

No one invited me, but I will the conversation to continue. *Maybe.*

Yeah, whatever, cool girl. She makes a motion with her hand that indicates the conversation is over.

At night, when the freshmen girls go off in their packs in search of jungle juice and stimulants, we follow a little farther behind in our collared shirts. I can see the outline of Jennifer's sports bra straining against her back, even through the aloha print. I'm wearing my Underworks 997, and

the mesh itches like hell but it makes me flat, really flat. One of my Tumblr mutuals mailed it to me back in high school after he'd gotten surgery. He sent it to the post office, because my parents opened my mail. I walked three miles to pick it up, hid it in the waistband of my jeans. When I wore it to gym the next day, I nearly passed out. But I was finally flat.

The frat boy guarding the house waves the girls in front of us in, barely looking at them. He tries to charge us, until we show him our IDs and that familiar sheepish, annoyed look sweeps over his face. I allow it to mean nothing to me.

Jennifer enters first. I follow closely behind, putting my feet where hers had just been. But it's dark, and then I'm alone, and sweaty, sloppy girls in ass-length dresses are pushing themselves against me as I measure my breath, make myself as small as I can. The house throbs as I struggle toward the door when Jennifer reappears, pushing a beer toward me.

I don't like to drink, don't like the flush on my face to be mistaken for interest. But I have no friends in this school or this city for that matter; I had, after all, designed it to be that way. So I soak my lips in the Narragansett and watch her little butch shuffle-dance for a while before I slip out the back door.

I don't expect to see Jennifer again. But when we take the class picture, all fourteen hundred of us pulling together our smiles on the over-watered lawn, there she is, weaving through students in her flannel top. And during freshman convocation, there she is again at my left, wearing a jacquard shirt and green velvet shorts, drunk off of the tiny bottles of vodka she'd snuck into her loafers. And asking me to join her.

Jennifer's the sort of girl who chooses her friends. I'm the kind who lets them come to me, and it staggers me every time they do. So finally, I give in.

OURS IS WHAT THEY CALL in science a symbiotic relationship. Though I am only a freshman, the school hires me as a TA for the intro-level biochemistry course. It is a requirement for anyone who hopes to transfer into the genetics major, and Jennifer enrolls in my section.

The genetics major is the crown jewel of the university, a direct-admissions program that serves as an almost sure pathway to an MD or a Ph.D. at any institution you might desire. As for me: I intend to shrink tumors, to grow organs, to discover some small but vital governing pattern within the inordinate and inexplicable information locked inside my body.

This is a type to which I more readily belong. The science monk: usually male, usually celibate, though not always. They are a supermajority at the science college, rummaging through departmental recycling for GPUs, sitting alone in the indoor cafeteria with their build-your-own noodle bowls packed with ground beef and diced carrots, their faces centimeters away from their computers, their spoons tapping against their screens. People listen to them. They have a certain power that someone like me might yet be able to have.

The summer before I apply to the science college, I intern at a lab at the local university. I do the grunt work for an exhausted postdoc from Korea who smokes between autoclave runs and spends his weekends drinking alone in his efficiency apartment. We work marvelously together. The essay I write on that summer wins me a spot in the science college's genetics program.

Jennifer is at the science college because she'd gotten a 2400 on the SAT, which I know because I'd googled her and found the write-up in her local *Post-Gazette*. She isn't at MIT or Caltech because she didn't do much else. For her application, she wrote some sob story about cross-dressing, which the committee evidently adored. She tells me she wants to transfer into the genetics program.

In science, I find I am authoritative. I can silence a room by speaking my major into it; meet a gaze that harbors more than pity and gnarled curiosity. I can reach beyond my useless face and make other people listen to me. In the classroom, the lecture hall, the auditorium, I am funny and articulate and magnanimous. And Jennifer—she needs my help. So I agree. Of course I agree.

WE SPEND MOST OF OUR TIME together studying in Jennifer's room with her roommate. Alyssa is also in the genetics program, a straight Asian girl who discovers quite early in the year that she likes sleeping with white men. After I teach my section, we sprawl on Jennifer's mattress in our outside clothes. I always arrange for Alyssa to be in the center, so Jennifer and I do not have to touch. And there is a certain symmetry to it: Alyssa in the middle, each of her two butches hanging off an arm. We quickly realize Jennifer is the only one in a relationship, and we beg her to tell us what it is like.

Jennifer and Laura were each other's first everything. They started by holding hands under the cafeteria tables at their all-girls Catholic school in a suburb a few hours south of Chicago. Laura was closeted,

and Jennifer was the only girl with short hair—long on the top, half on the sides, revealing a rectangle of skin flecked with eczema. (Sometimes when I go to the girls bathroom, I see her touching it up, cheek nearly pressed into the mirror, her hair pooling in the basin.)

So anyway, it was inevitable. In a school with a hundred and thirty girls, all of whom had God-fearing parents, you took what you could get. On the day of prom, they'd decided to ditch their dates. Jennifer's parents were away at a church retreat so they went to the basement of her house. That was when they did it.

Jennifer dragged all her blankets to the couch downstairs, played music on her phone to help Laura relax. She put two fingers into her, and then three, and it bled onto her hand just a bit. But her girlfriend said it was all right, leaned forward and told Jennifer not to stop, that she wanted it, so much, that she loved her (I make her tell us that part of the story over and over again, marvel at how quickly these white girls forgive one other), the duvet draped over them in the basement, their skirts discarded on the floor as they opened the window to let the heat from the radiator out.

And so, yes, she knows what the inside of her girlfriend feels like, they're horny teenagers whose periods have synced up as if even nature were conspiring with them. She tells us she likes to insert a finger in dry and feel it moisten for her as she works it around, and that's too much for us; we slap her on the arms, hard, compelled by our horror and admiration.

Whenever Jennifer writes letters to Laura back at home, she asks me to drop them off for her when I go to class. In the mailroom, I hold the envelopes to the light, but she's used the kind with the cross-hatch pattern printed inside, as if she knew I would try.

And anyway, it's not for long. Three weeks into the school year, Jennifer breaks up with Laura via a tearful FaceTime call. She doesn't love her anymore. She doesn't even ask me to leave the room when she does it.

At night I look up Laura's Facebook profile and scroll through the pictures. Laura is taller than Jennifer and brown-haired and clearly adept at using makeup that does nothing for her tooth gap, which is so large you might easily fit another tooth into the space. That sounds unkind but they were young and white; it followed that they were desirable and beautiful. They were engaging in premarital gay sex before the age of seventeen. There wasn't even a word for what they were doing to one another in my language.

IN EXCHANGE FOR the tutoring, Jennifer cuts my hair. She steals a nubuck chair from the student lounge and drags it into the girls bathroom late at night, her laughter warming the tile room. She seats me in front of the mirror and knots a garbage bag around my neck to catch the stray hairs. As she does, her hand brushes against the back of my neck. She ties the bag too tight, but I don't mind.

She turns on the clippers. *Like a vibrator*, she chuckles, pressing it against her crotch. I laugh, though I don't understand what she means.

Then she drags the clippers underneath my neck, the blade digging into my scalp as she bends down, her mouth tightened in concentration. Her breath fogs the inside of my ear. She is always touching other girls—napping on them, putting her arms around their waists, calling them bitches, which perplexingly makes them reach for her all the more. But even now, cutting my hair, she doesn't touch me.

It's not a good haircut. Jennifer doesn't know how to cut Asian hair. The bangs are uneven; a cowlick juts from my skull. But I'm on scholarship, and the haircut is free.

Afterward, we go to the park to smoke. At the corner store, she asks for the Camels behind the counter, never breaks eye contact with the employee, though she is young for a freshman, seventeen, and her boyishness makes her even younger.

When we walk to the park, it is lit only by the glow of a half-dozen scattered cigarettes. Her hands shake as she uses the pocketknife on her key ring to make a lengthwise incision on the cigarette. I hold my phone over the tableau, a pillow of her breath hovering over my hand. I move my hand lower, to shroud myself in its warmth.

She mixes the cigarette dust in with the weed and rolls them into a loose spliff. We pass it between ourselves though I don't suck any of it in, only wet the tip with my saliva.

When she takes other girls to the park, real girls worthy of her desire, they breathe in each other's smoke, mouths forming a seal against one another. But when it's just us, she shares.

The other girls call Jennifer beautiful. They don't call me anything. But as for Jennifer, they whisper the word even when she isn't in the room, as if they know they aren't supposed to use it but can't help it. And they're right. It's all there—in the dime-shaped pouches of fat at the center of her cheeks. In the women's jorts she wears, because she can't fit her ass into men's cutoffs like I can. And there's the other thing. Beneath the denim vest and the shoelace tied around her waist, she still sounds like such a fucking girl.

JENNIFER ALWAYS SAYS she likes feminine girls. It takes me a while to realize she's telling me she doesn't like me. As if I would have liked her. As if I would have ever even considered her.

Jennifer plays on the rugby team because she says that's how you find gay people, and she's always asking me to join her. But I already have other friends. I meet them the way I'm supposed to: cheating off one another in class; bent over our beakers in pharmacodynamics lab; in line for the physics talk given by one of the science college's six Nobel laureates. There's horny, flat-faced Brian; quiet David who makes the cruelest jokes; Kevin with the oily, nail-bitten hands that leave grease stains on his papers. The science boys are drawn to one another as if tiny magnets pulse from their dicks and drag them into shared apartments with shredded mattresses and Brita filters slowly turning into aquariums. I am excluded from their attraction. But Kevin invites me anyway because I am useful, though he never adds me to their group chat, because I am not, and will never be, one of them.

With the boys, I am comfortable, certain that they desire nothing of me except for what my mind can offer. I may be a girl, but I am performant and ambitious, and soon they become dependent on me. Their GPAs rise half a point after we begin studying together. With them, I am the brain in a vat quivering over a PV diagram; they are my mere facsimiles.

While I toil, Jennifer makes her way through the rugby team. She lies in her bed while I study at her desk. She tells me about the weekend games, the long charter bus trips to Raleigh, Needham, New Haven, where girls collect bruises during games and grope at each other afterward, pressing their lips and mumbling into the sorest parts.

Some girls give in to her after practice. Others, during away trips, hands fumbling at waistbands as they sneak into each other's beds, their nails still crunched with dirt and loose turf. Still others after a night on frat row. With them, Jennifer sits on the floor of the girls' bathroom, not even hovering over the tile on the balls of her feet, but pants fully against the ground, wiping up whatever the last person dribbled off. She hums to the girl in her arms, plucks out the vomit strung through her hair like pearls. She cradles her face and ties her hair with the rubber band she keeps around her wrist for that purpose. And then, one week later, the girl comes back sober, and she beds her.

Jennifer is content with the science queers, even though they don't know their moon and rising and in fact disdain astrology, have good

relationships with their bodies and uncomplicated pronouns and are, in short, mere shadows of the people you might find in the gender studies department of even a mediocre liberal arts college.

And there's one more girl, the last girl she wants. Elise is a half-Asian history of science major with shoulder-length hair and an accent of indistinct origin. She writes essays about her angst at not knowing her mother's language and paeans to kimchi in a column for the school paper. She is always walking around with a sweet dishrag of a boy, patchy-haired, sleepy, and deferential; a chaste boy who, without intervention, she might easily marry. None of the girls in the rugby team save Jennifer are clocky, but Elise—Elise looks particularly straight.

But one night, I come home at two in the morning from the reading room after working on a pset with the science boys. They never walk me back to my dorm, not that I'm an exception to how they behave toward other girls, because there are no other girls.

I don't want it. I certainly don't need it. No one will mistake me for a girl, hurl an errant catcall at me. I just don't want to be expected to be okay alone, though that is right to expect. I am okay. I don't drink, don't breathe the smoke in. I always make sure that I'm okay.

On the way in, when the motion detector senses my entrance and the lights flicker on, Jennifer stumbles out of her room with Elise, their necks coiled with bruises, their arms streaked with welts, their fingers interlocking in that way that leaves no room for ignorance. It's as if Jennifer invited Elise in to teach her how to perform some sort of magic trick where girls appear as friends and reappear with mouths that do the strangest things, make the strangest noises, and they force me in, too, because all the evidence is there. For that I resent her—the way she parades it in front of me, refuses to share how she walks up to someone alone and dares them to choose her.

I ignore their sloppy waves hello, tiptoe into my room with the lights off. My roommate is sleeping, so I find my way to my bed using only the tin light of my phone. I feel so dirty, my body hot and slick despite how hard I've tried to keep myself clean.

When I entered the science college, I allowed myself to buy only a single pillow. In truth, when I had more than that, I did things it took me years to infer were sin. How should I have known. I hadn't even used my hands.

I pull up the blanket from the foot of my bed, clamp my thighs against one another, tears beading at my eyes. My roommate shifts

across the room, the glow of the streetlights bathing her careful, serene face. I struggle to keep my breath still.

My body feels like a coal unable to be quenched, whose heat must be endured until the hour fades. So I do what I always do. I control it. What I really want is not Elise, not Jennifer, not any other girl or boy. It has been denied to me for so long that I no longer have the words for it.

THE NEXT TIME Jennifer asks me for help with biochemistry, it's just the two of us. Alyssa is off sleeping with the next boy that's caught her interest. In their room, I pick out the lecture notes from my backpack that I spent last night writing with Kevin at the library. I seat myself at Alyssa's desk.

Em, can I tell you something? Jennifer says.

Of course. I stop writing and turn toward her.

Don't judge.

I won't. I wonder what there is left to confess, if confession is even a word that applies to her. Hard drugs? Murder? Academic dishonesty? It feels like there is nothing more she can do to surprise me.

Em, I don't want to be a man. But I don't want to have my chest anymore. Is there something wrong with me?

I arrange my face into something approximating neutral. *I don't think I know what you mean.*

I was googling the other day, and I found this—this thing. She moves the mouse around her laptop, pulls up the incognito browser, types into the search bar.

It's scary, she adds.

I know what she'll show me. I've already seen the video, back in high school. I watched it early in the morning, after I finished studying and knew my parents were long asleep, my mind hovering a little over my body. But I let her show it to me anyway. Because this is the last thing I can offer her—the gift of being beholden to her knowledge.

So I walk to her, lay next to her in bed as she clicks play on the video of the surgery. I make certain we don't touch. Same as always.

First, the doctor marks the flesh with a sharpie, lifting the testosterone-shrunken boob to show the skin underneath. Off screen, a woman's voice. *Honey,* she says. *You're doing so good.* Scene cut. The patient supine on the table, his mouth drooped open, undressed and febrile, the team working efficiently around him. We shift closer to the screen.

Her jaw clenches as the light sprays across her, projecting the op-

erating theater in reverse across her face. Her hands are bundled into fists, my own matching hers, as she presses her arm against mine, our eyes tracking the scalpel against the body, tracing its first incision. She touches my leg with hers, our eyes still fixed on the screen.

From the corner of my eye, I watch her, small and huddled beside me. Her ashen sweating face with the arms tied across her chest, her breath ragged and shallow, all the wanting just laid out there.

I'm not what you want, I want to tell her. One day, when you leave this place, you'll replace me with someone better. Someone less useless.

But instead, she turns to me. I want to cry from the softness of the gesture, and from how afraid it makes me; how little I can stand to be watched.

The gentle drone of the aspirator, the snap of the gloves secured around the surgeon's wrists. Her leg upon mine. And she's pressing against me, her arms at my elbows, knowing the parts that should and shouldn't be touched, and I cannot understand what is happening the way I cannot understand what it's like not to grow up next to a body of water.

And then my knee tingles in between her legs, almost lost of all of its sensation, as if there are sparklers embedded within the cartilage. The panting, the faint tang of false lavender from beneath her arms, the skin of our cheeks nearly touching. And then, there she is, too close for watching anymore.

An incision. One layer, and then another. One girl, and then another. How alone she still is, in that little bed, in that little room. How pathetic. On screen, the surgeon pulls out the unwanted flesh as if birthing a newborn. He raises the excised breast to the light, cradling it within the center of his palm.

Years later, Jennifer and I will heave ourselves to opposite sides of the country with our suitcases and books, their spines pulverized by Media Mail. We will find single rooms in sharehouses on Facebook Marketplace. We will acquire jobs in liberal states with private health insurance plans, make the appropriate calls from our childhood bedrooms, shield our mouths from our parents on the other sides of the door. We will call Ubers to the hospital, pee into cups for pregnancy tests, pull on gowns that make us at the motion of a string. We will realize what for now exists only as incipient thought.

This will be done alone. You will call Fairview Diagnostics when they do not process your blood work. You will mail the papers to your insur-

ance when the doctor's office forgets. This is what protects you: yourself. I'm a smart girl. I already know. In time, she will too.

The video finishes. She won't look at me, and I will spare her what I think. I climb out of her bed, close the laptop gently. I gather my notes off their piles on the ground and go home.

THE NEXT DAY, Jennifer texts me.

*hey em, wanna work tomorrow
maybe u can go over the biochem qs w me
and we can get food after . . . ? my treat obvi :)*

A few days later:

*em, u free?
need help with the hw
lolll
its kicking my ass*

And the next day:

*emily, are you angry?
can we talk?
please?*

please don't tell anyone

She doesn't show up to my section that Thursday, or the week after that. I decide: When she texts again, that's when I'll answer. We'll be friends again, forget whatever it was she'd tried to teach me.

When she doesn't show up the next week, I steal the attendance sheet from the trash bin after class. Her name isn't on the list. Alyssa doesn't know anything; she's too busy with her new boyfriend. And when I knock at their door the next day, no one answers, though I can hear voices rising from the seam.

ONCE, DURING FRESHMAN SPRING, when Kevin and I are walking home from the library, I see Jennifer. She is waiting for the bus, the express line that takes you to the liberal arts colleges across town. They are the kinds of college campuses reflected in books and movies, where people give one another cartilage piercings and stick & pokes with needles they heat to blue over the stove. The kinds of places one

might explore and then summarily renounce their gender, the kinds of places with long and storied traditions of their attendees doing so. The kinds of places she belongs.

Her hair is slicked back, its ends fringed green. She is white and thus she does not need any bleach to make it that color, just the dye. She has done it all herself, is learning to not be pathetic. Her gaze is fixed in front of her. She looks so tired sitting on the curb, finishing her homework on the back of her backpack before the bus comes to ferry her away to her people.

At home, I text Kevin my answers to the thermo assignment. When I open Facebook, Jennifer has posted a picture of her and her new girlfriend. From the timestamp, it's clear she made the post from the bus, her legs probably propped on the seat next to her in the way she always took up so much space. In the picture she's wearing a jacket and tie, and the other girl is folded into her, and no matter how hard I try I can't see either of their faces.

I SEE JENNIFER one last time. I am on campus to watch Brown Space, a roving poetry duo who have made a tidy fortune performing on college campuses. Their slam poetry consists mostly of sonnets critical of what they term the "queer industrial complex." They did not make up the phrase but are responsible for popularizing it.

No one from the science college is in attendance, though the room is packed; everyone has bused in from the assortment of liberal arts and women's colleges in the city that do not have the budget to afford Brown Space, which primarily performs at elite institutions. The attendees sit on the floor, their denim jackets jangling in their laps as they wave their middle fingers and mouth foul asides at one another.

Kevin is with me. I had to invite him when he asked what I was doing tonight. I told him he wouldn't like it, but he insisted. When he leans his arm against my chair I edge away from his greasy hands, though I laugh hard when he mumbles something into my ear, because people are watching.

And then, there she is: Jennifer, sitting on a table to the very left of the room's overflow seating. She's holding hands with her girlfriend from the Facebook photo, an older student at one of the liberal arts colleges. She's a femme with a metal stud between her eyes and tattoos on her calves. Uglier than me. And Jennifer—she's wearing a binder. It's obvious; she looks almost flat now. From further away you might have

even mistaken her for a man. So, she'd figured it out. She didn't need me after all.

She turns in my direction, just briefly, before whispering into her girlfriend's ear. Both of them laugh, their green fringes bobbing in unison.

Kevin taps my shoulder, and I do everything I can not to recoil from his grimy hand, from the way that hand placed onto me gives proof to our association. He mutters something about how the performers need to chill out, nice dresses though l-m-a-o, and that's one of our secret things, saying every letter of an acronym, and usually it's funny but now he just sounds so stupid. I nod, willing Jennifer to turn again toward me.

Emily, Kevin says. *Emily*.

He always calls me that. *Emily*. Really it's not his fault. I've stopped correcting him.

I haven't cut my hair since that time with Jennifer. I look like what I say I am; everything is in harmony. After the event, Kevin will walk me back to my dorm. He will not ask for anything; he is patient, though not reluctant. He is accumulating favors, after which it will become very hard not to say yes to him. And there will be no reason not to—he will become anything I need him to be. Isn't that what I had wanted all along?

JENNIFER AND HER GIRLFRIEND leave before the show ends. Anyway, I am too afraid to approach her. To use what she'd tried to teach me all those times before.

I can think of only one way she might see me again. It relies on only a few principles of biochemistry. A redox reaction, the kind they teach in high school, so simple that even Jennifer and her friends would understand it.

On a weekend night, when the girls in the dorms are making their tour of the frat houses, I tell Kevin I'm feeling sick. Then I take the bus downtown and buy the materials. The girls bathroom is empty, the windows black, the floors slick and freshly mopped.

I bend my knees in front of the mirrors to look at myself properly. Then I mix the dry bleach with the developer using my pointer finger, massage it into my scalp all the way down to the roots, froth my eyebrows. It burns.

I let it sit for half an hour, then run my fingers through my scalp and rub the developer off of my neck. It washes out in the shower, the white foam circling the drain, even the hair stuck in it ringed white.

An hour later, I feel the burning in my hands, first at the fingertips, then all the way to the base of my palms. The gloves! I'd forgotten to wear the gloves. I hadn't cared to look up the protocol. It was supposed to be so simple.

Of course the bleach was a strong base and would oxidize anything it touched, of course the saponification would continue for days, of course of course of course. It was all in the biochemistry, but this wasn't biochemistry, this was unregulated, non-peer-reviewed fuckery that even middle schoolers whose accepting parents bought them Manic Panic from CVS knew how to do better than me.

I spend days in the girls bathroom hunched over the sink, running cold water over my hands, clapping them to beat sensation back into them. My palms ache at their centers, and the tips of my fingers feel like they are glowing, a flame scorching the pigment off. I still go to lab and teach my section, write on the chalkboard with gloves to cover my swollen hands.

But none of that matters, because it works. She will have to notice me. She hasn't dropped out of the genetics program. She hasn't left her dorm to live with a girl across town. No, she will walk to her room and look to her left and I will be there. I will reach toward her. I will choose her. Here I am: the black hair fading away, falling out. The prints blistered off my fingertips. The old skin flayed away, the new skin glowing white at my wrists. The uncleanness finding its way out of me, making my body slick and able, finally readying me for entry into someone else.