

You Will Never Be Happy Again, 1986

1. TOUGH SLEDDING

It is a school night. You are the only one climbing the snowy hill. Your boyfriend already waits for you at the very top. From the sky you are a squirm of ink on a plain of Iowa white.

The others stand at the bottom and watch.

You had said yes to sledding because you say yes to all he asks of you. And all that he does not.

Can I hump you as we make out on the couch in my basement, fully clothed, until I come, and then leave you in your own unfulfilled wet while I wipe myself up in the bathroom?

Sure!

Can you wait for me in my Trans Am in the school parking lot while I shower in the locker room after a home football game, so I can speedily drive us to my house and hump you in exactly the same way?

Sure!

In your mind, being Martin's girlfriend exalts you to a paradise of popularity. He is tall, wide, full of muscles. A varsity football player. A blond. But when he doesn't call, you stare at your slimline phone and curl into a fetal position on the carpet of your bedroom floor and cry.

You have abandonment issues, your therapist said that afternoon, because your mother left for a few years when you were little.

Your therapist crossed her legs, her ankles thicker than ever.

This is why you're bulimic, she said.

You had just binged and purged Rocky Rococo's pizza, McDonald's apple pies, a bag of Laffy Taffy, and two cylinders of Pringles, each chip a tenuous curve into the next. You're sure your therapist can hear your stomach, the roils and gurgles of shock that all the food left behind, an angry bog of noise. You felt sweat drip into your bra and your face burn from the heat, the thermostat up high, a *whoosh* through the vent in the floor behind you.

I'm scared of you, you said finally.

Of me? She laughed. No, you're not. You're codependent.

Your mother said the same thing. Whenever Martin didn't call, you eventually stood from the fetal position and went downstairs and sat on the edge of her bed to let her rock you until you caught your breath. Warm against her collarbone.

So sick, your mother said. She smoothed your hair in the back, where there was less hairspray.

So codependent, she said.

The phone rang. You sprinted from her arms to answer it, a creamy rectangle on the kitchen wall, the dial hazy plastic.

Want to come sledding? Martin asked.

You were inept and artless in snow and cold—always wet, always freezing. A Midwestern failure.

Sure!

You ran to your room to change and then down the side stairs to leave. Your mother cupped her hands around her mouth and called, Please wear a hat and a parka!

But parkas looked stupid. And a hat would mess up your hair! God! Leave me alone!

You slammed the door.

Martin was waiting at the curb. You opened the door to the Trans Am; the ceiling light blinked on. Dashboard vents roared with heat.

He smiled. I didn't wear snow pants, either. He kissed you. We will get wet.

He pointed to the wine coolers, their shadow darkening your foot.

Have one, he said. Or three.

His friends, all seniors, were waiting in the empty parking lot, the streetlamps soft amber as snowflakes started to fall, the hill a giant slant behind them.

They wore parkas and winter hats. Heather's was fuzzy-white with a bobble.

Is she drunk? Heather asked.

When you reach the top, you don't tell Martin that you think the hill is way too steep.

You sure you want to go by yourself? he asks.

You sit in the metal saucer and pretzel your legs and grab the frayed rope handles on each side. Your mittens are thin and old, your fingers numb; the saucer gains speed in seconds and before you wipe out, you hear yourself scream like a dipshit and then your face slams into the ground. You sit up. Martin sleds by on his father's Flexible Flyer and veers to the right, pulling the rope for a gentle stop. He is an Iowa winter model. He goes to you and asks if you're all right, holds your arm to help you stand up. You lick the puff in your upper lip and the gash on the inside of your cheek. Icy water sops through your jeans to your thighs. You remove your worthless mitten and touch your bloody chin, your forehead.

She's drunk all right, Heather says.

You sway. You reach for Martin but miss; you try again and a snowflake plops in your eye; you try again and your fingers swipe his coat. You fall forward and your chin tilts up toward the amber, toward the cushion of lights above you that block the sky.

You go down and fail to brace yourself.

2. PIZZA IN THE BACK SEAT

Bonnie Brinkley in the passenger seat of the Mustang, front windows down, hair glossy and razor-straight to her shoulders, loose strands artful, even in the wind. You in the middle of the back seat, cupping your hand around your Marlboro to keep the ember from blowing off, hair whipping in your face. The driver a recent graduate, a beefcakey man who parties on weekends with the teenagers, his mustache finally full. He goes too fast, but you can't see the speedometer in the dark, the dial a deep hole in the dashboard. Your Lee baggie jeans go way up your butt and the waist cinches your poor floating ribs, unguarded by cartilage—you know this because you pay attention in Anatomy—but your fat is hidden by your bulbous Esprit sweatshirt, which you bought with your own money from your job at Wendy's where that very afternoon, in the walk-in cooler, from white plastic containers, you poured preserved chopped egg and yellowed broccoli florets into tan plastic crocks and then carried them into the dining room to replace them on the salad bar and there, at a table right in front of you, was Martin, now your ex, with his best friend, a tight end. The dining room was otherwise empty, and as they pretended you weren't there, you felt not so much the stained polyester uniform against your skin but that stupid newsboy cap, a puff of blue and white stripes on top of your head. They had not started eating, Big Classic burgers unopened in their boxes, their fries still in perfect bouquets. And you decided to keep your poor head up high and, holding those crocks with smears of ranch on the rims and flecks of yolk on your hands, you stood at their table.

Hello, you said to him. How are you?

Good, he said. Looked up at you and then quick like a blink at the tight end. A grin.

Great! you said and added, even more weirdly, *It's so nice to see you*, then raced to the kitchen like a cockroach. All the employees were out back. No one at the front counter, no car at the drive-thru. You set the dirty crocks in the dish pit and walked to the french fry station and scooped up a lukewarm sleeveful with the new dual-handled french fry scoop, then ladled cheese sauce up to the top edge of a chili cup. Returned to the walk-in cooler and gobbled it down as you stood before a shelf full of chicken breasts.

In the back seat now, beside you, sits a large pepperoni pizza. You slip your hand beneath the box and the cardboard burns your knuckles. Beefcake and Bonnie talk over Def Leppard. The roads roll past. Are you drunk? How did you get here with Bonnie Brinkley?

A friend of her best friend who couldn't go out after all got sick, and you're...filling in? Those beers had left you hungry, even though you'd eaten earlier in the evening with your mother, her baked chicken rubbery and unbrowned, all tendon strips and cartilage knobs. The two of you at your scratched kitchen table while she made conversation and you pretended.

"I'll take a piece," says Bonnie. Palm up, over her shoulder.

You put one in her hand and take another for yourself. You close the lid to the Pizza Hut box, red roof and black letters half in shadow.

Beefcake guns the gas and you feel his turbo in your chest. Down the hill along City Park toward Coralville, where Beefcake has a trailer somewhere, which allegedly has a giant stereo, a case of beer. You open the box, eat another piece. Bonnie yells her best friend's name and they both laugh and laugh. You worry, because Bonnie's best friend thinks you're a fucking dork and tells people so, and are they going to start talking about how, after Martin had dumped you, you went to a party and got too drunk to stand, so a senior who everyone called "Cabbage Ass" went up your shirt in the basement? You woke up at 7 a.m. on the sofa, your throat dry, your bra gone. Walked up to the living room, where Bonnie Brinkley was watching *Muppet Babies*. She said hi, and you watched cartoons with her, even though you knew she would tell everyone, lay you out like a raw strip of meat.

Had she? You didn't know. You hadn't walked into the lunchroom since.

Driving through Coralville past modest shopping centers, restaurants, gas stations, empty lots in between. Another piece. Traffic is thin. A tiny white ball of solid deodorant hangs in the darkness of Beefcake's armpit hair.

Red light.

"I'll take another piece," Bonnie turns around, holds out her palm.

Your mouth is still full.

"I said I'll take another piece."

You smile with closed lips as if to say, *I cannot help you.*

"Can I have some pizza, please?"

You swallow and shake your head.

"You ate the whole thing?"

The last of it. Down your gullet. What was a gullet, anyway? A fish part?

"Oh my God."

"She ate it all?" Beefcake looks at you in the rearview.

Bonnie reaches back, lifts the lid. "Oh my God!" Her nose, straight and petite. Her unobtrusive chin.

Green light.

You lean back into the leather as the car moves forward.

There is nothing to drink.

Bonnie shrugs at you a little. “I’ve eaten a whole pizza before.” She turns to Beefcake. “Get us another one.”

“Hell yeah,” he says. He turbos forward and looks in the rearview but this time at his hairline, pressing it into place with his fingers.

“Sorry,” you lie, and you know they can’t hear you. You love the weight of food inside you, settling in. The lid flaps open and hits your thigh, so you fold in the sides, cardboard still warm, and tuck it all back down.

3. NO-MERCY HOSPITAL

The graham cracker is small and pale tan—you picture it in the center of a child’s palm. Two to a package, stacked and waiting in the cabinet behind the counter of the nurse’s station. You sit on the edge of your bed and stare at the TV.

Don’t.

You’d left half of your dinner on the plate and ignored the cookie as it lay like a mine in its compartment. When the nurse came for your tray you watched, triumphant, as she carried it out of the room.

Don’t ruin it.

But you do. You are a ruiner, a binger and a boozer, a teen-hetero-girl catastrophe. You walk down the polished hallway in your hospital footies, fill the pockets of your robe with graham crackers, take a pint of milk from the fridge. The nurse smiles at you from her chair and continues charting. The sun is nearly down. Rooms on this floor are mostly empty, the second bed in your room always made. You’ve been here six days.

Tomorrow, your mother will drive you to inpatient treatment. Martin is coming to say goodbye. You’d called him and begged. Your mother was such a bitch, you said, you wanted to die, could he please come see you? Please? You held the transmitter cup close to your mouth and filled the pinprick holes with tears, snot, saliva, all three.

He dates another sophomore now, a skinny soccer player with huge boobs.

Your eyes hurt from crying—empty wells in the middle of a desert. You return to your room and sit in the chair at the window and study the flat gravelly rooftop, the front yard lawns dim in the sunset. Your cassette radio is by your ankles on the floor, tapes scattered. Put in *Under a Blood Red Sky* and fast-forward to the start of “40.” Misunderstand some of the words and misinterpret the entire song. Hear Bono sing about how rocks are falling on him inadvertently from a cliff, how his footsteps burn. Because God makes you suffer and He always will. REWIND. PLAY. Look out your window. Force tears out. REWIND. PLAY. Clutch your knees. Rock yourself.

You hear Martin and turn around but remain seated. The only light in your room is *Murder, She Wrote* from the television, the volume all the way down. He has brought his friend, the tight end. They're white, clean-cut, caps on backwards, always half-smiles and swagger—but not now. They stare at you with mouths agape and arms stunned at their sides, their bodies in mild shadow from the hallway light behind them.

“Whoa,” says his friend.

You reach out to Martin with wide, open fingers and say his name. Your sleeve slips toward your elbow; the white gauze around your wrist peeks out.

“I don't want to come in,” he says. His friend looks at the floor.

“OK, OK. I'm so glad you came at all.” You wipe your face. “I leave tomorrow.”

“Yeah, you told me that.”

Don't say, *I'll miss you*.

“I'll miss you.” You start to cry. “I'm sorry about everything.”

His friend stifles a laugh and walks out.

“I'm going to go now,” Martin says.

“OK, that's fine.”

Don't say, *I love you*.

“I love you,” you call.

Stare at the space in the doorway where he stood. Hear more laughter but let it mean nothing, allow it to carry no weight. The elevator dings.

Resume your lookout of despair. Bono rolls one consonant into another and “how long” becomes “how I long.” You tear open another package of graham crackers and put both in your mouth at once as you sip a wash of milk through the teeny straw and chew it into a sweet mush. Bono says goodnight but the audience keeps singing.

Bite a pinch of skin inside your cheek until it bleeds. Hear their voices. Picture thousands of lighter flames in the dark. Feel a swelling, a rising, a spilling over into comfort and peace, a tiny galaxy of elation.

Realize it is not for you.

Put your feet on the edge of the chair. Rest your cheek on one knee. Let your hair flop over your eyes and pretend not to see the colors in the sky as the sun descends.