

How to Write a Love Story

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Begin, at fourteen, by shipping off to a Seventh-day Adventist boarding school in the sweltering foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Endure three years of dorm life: wedgies and wrestling matches and random room searches and, thanks to whatever dickhole slathered your boxer briefs—every last one—with handfuls of Icy Hot, a scorched scrotal sac. Walk, every morning, through the dark, to the chapel. Sing praise songs. Make selections from a heartbreakingly dismal cafeteria menu, which, thanks to the health-conscious nineteenth-century prophetess who co-founded your denomination, is unabashedly vegetarian, and serves an endless variety of meat-shaped, gravy-drenched soy products. Shower beneath the prickling rays of nozzles protruding from a single chrome column in a tiled room—with as many as five other dudes. On the rare occasion that you find an empty bathroom, beat off in a locked stall; spend the rest of the day worrying about the fact that you did that thing you promised God you'd never do again—*again*. Wonder if this time you'll have finally reached your forgiveness quota, and that, at the End of Time, God will play a movie of you pulling your pud on a giant screen suspended in space, to help explain to your loved ones—and the rest of the Redeemed—why you didn't make it to heaven. Hope it's not too late to change course. Remind yourself about the time Jesus refused to condemn that adulterous woman and then told her to "go and sin no more." Rededicate yourself. Promise to love your neighbors. Sing songs about meeting them all in heaven, while secretly hoping Jesus might delay His coming a little longer, so that before you're ferried away to a sexless eternal paradise, you'll get a chance to kiss a girl, put your hand up her shirt, date her, get engaged, and fuck your brains out in the blissful confines of holy matrimony. Finally bust a move on a girl—the granddaughter, as it turns

out, of a famous Adventist televangelist—only to discover that, from what you can tell, she shaves—but apparently without the requisite care—her upper lip. Two weeks later, dump her for a girl who lives off campus, a girl who wears Liz Claiborne pantsuits and drives a gold Fiero and whose hot blond mom signs you out of the dorm on Saturday afternoons so that—liberated from the oppressive rules of your school, which maintains a strict “hands-off” policy—you and your new squeeze can enjoy make out sessions in the privacy of her Ralph-Lauren-themed bedroom. Spend Sunday afternoons listening to a contraband Walkman and teaching yourself to play the epic solo from that one super long song on Jane’s Addiction’s *Ritual de lo Habitual*. Wonder if any—if not all—of the musicians you love are secret Satan worshippers; console yourself with the notion that their pentagrams and eye shadow and black lipstick are best understood as a series of ironically-employed theatrics, deployed to unsettle those who cherish the safe but utterly banal rituals of society’s conventions, or whatever. Grow out your hair—long enough for your dean to demand that you cut it. Ignore him. Haze some freshmen, because your friends, as Resident Assistants, have master keys, and because that Jamie kid had it coming, had practically earned, by running his big fat mouth, the trash bag full of water you threw onto his sleeping body, and because shit, you got hazed ten times as hard when you were his age.

Six months after Fiero girl gives you the boot, set your sights on the unattainable: the hot Korean girl who’s never had a boyfriend. The one whose wardrobe includes a mustard-colored blouse, a pair of billowing purple pantaloons, and a gold, chain-link belt: an ensemble that embellishes whatever mystique she’s already cultivated, what with that long black hair licking the curve of her ass, the mischievous gleam in her eyes, and her inexplicable flexibility, which allows her, during gymnastic exhibitions, to hook her feet behind her head and roll her body—now a circle—across blue padded mats. The one who flirts relentlessly with any boy who gives her a hard time, as if she were playing a game she was desperate to win, who practically lives in order to be pestered or argued with, and appears to love nothing more than being challenged by the opposite sex, if only so that she could prove, in the end, that she’s superior, simply because she’s a girl. The one we’ll call—and why not?—Eve.

You're no stranger to Eve's gleeful aggression. During Pony Express—the Sunday night ritual where boys and girls exchange handwritten letters—she'd send you a scrap of notebook paper, upon which she'd scrawl the last word in a heated dispute about how Koreans were a superior race, or how guys were pigs, or how Dominique Wilkins would—given the chance—annihilate Michael Jordan in a game of one-on-one, closing the dispatch with “Your friend,” then her name, followed by ellipses, then “The Bitch.” On the basketball court—the one place where boys could feel like champions (even though competition outside of intramurals was not allowed, since the prophetess had decreed, more or less, that a competitive nature could poison one's spiritual life by emphasizing earthly—rather than heavenly—rewards), she often sat cross-legged on the stage of the gym, cupping her hands over her mouth, to better direct her insults, which only made you play harder, and wrinkle your nose and point at her on the rare occasions you drained a three.

But seriously: why *not* go for gold? It's your senior year. Time to make your mark, accomplish something significant. And anyway: haven't you've always sort of liked her? Haven't you always admired how pretty and smart and intimidating she is? How there's something extra hot about a fine girl with a ruthless sense of humor, one who specializes in quick-witted mockery? You just haven't had the chance to really get to know her—much less the guts to make a move. Not that she'd ever let you. Which somehow deepens her mystique. She may be smarter than you, but you have a sense that that underneath the layers of complicated defense mechanisms, she's got a regular human heart, vulnerable as any other, maybe more so. Which explains the tough outer shell: it's terrified of getting broken.

In the beginning, keep it simple. Sit at Eve's table in the cafeteria. Make her laugh by doing impersonations of faculty: the Industrial Arts teacher who purses his lips when describing the “gnurling” of pistons; the Chemistry teacher who resembles one of those fat, bespectacled nerds in “The Far Side.” Convince her to partner with you for that stupid project Pastor Cook assigns every year to seniors in his Bible class, the one where everyone has to plan a fake wedding—followed by the creation of a fake family budget and a fake search for a fake home—in order to demonstrate just how time-consuming and

expensive and complicated these future events will be, as if imagining the attendant fiscal challenges of a church-sanctioned union will prevent young people from rushing into marriage.

But whatever you do—whether you're copying answers from her German workbook or applauding her ability to eat a burrito that's been drowned in twenty packets of hot sauce—don't come on too strong. Don't spook Eve with declarations or romantic overtures. Be patient. Imagine each interaction as a deposit on an investment, one whose maturation will result in nothing less than taking full possession of that oh-so-vulnerable heart.

Like all students at Georgia-Cumberland Academy, you have to work—but that doesn't mean your job has to suck. Avoid employment that requires you to stir stainless steel vats of veggie-meat casserole. Avoid lawn mowing and flowerbed weeding and toilet scrubbing. And, for the love of all that's holy, don't sew cushions for lawn chairs at the small factory at the edge of campus. Instead, land the cushiest job possible: night monitor for the boy's dorm front desk. This way, you can do what every other student does between the hours of seven to ten P.M.—study, stare into space, talk about girls—and get paid for it. Sure, occasionally you'll need to vacuum the lobby or Windex the windows or retrieve the person for whom one of the dorm's three pay phones rings, but mostly you eavesdrop on those phone conversations or shoot the shit with the Assistant Boy's Dean—a lanky, laid back Californian named Ken—or the Assistant Chaplain—a self-proclaimed surfer dude who once engineered the Auto Reverse feature of a confiscated Walkman so that it could play "Stairway to Heaven" backwards, so as to provide irrefutable evidence that Robert Plant does indeed call the devil "my sweet Satan."

As an R.A. for the girls' dorm's freshman hall, Eve also works at night. This, friend, is *key*. Since you both finish classes by noon, your afternoons are wide open. Relax while your fellow students wolf down their platters of spaghetti or lentil loaf: you don't have anywhere for like six hours, until after rec period. Sculpt leftover mashed potatoes into a pyramid, and think of ways to keep Eve occupied. Propose a round of muk-jji-ppa (a faster, frantic, Korean version of "Rock, Paper, Scissors"). Ask her to teach you how to curse in her native tongue, or practice dialogues for German class. And when the kitchen staff finally boots you out, plop down outside in the sun-singed grass of central campus. Build tiny sailboats out of stray magnolia leaves.

Compete for who can pluck the most four leaf clovers. But most importantly? *Talk*. Discuss everything you can think of: God, love, death, college, parents, and what it'll be like to escape this epic shithole where your every move is being constantly monitored. Congratulate yourself when Eve admits that she doesn't think—although she once did—that you're a total space case. But don't get your hopes up. She knows boys only want one thing—a body—whereas she's interested in the opposite—a *mind*. Argue with her about this. Lie if you have to. Wear her down. Compliment her. Inch closer. Help her look for split ends. Rest an arm on her shoulder. Hug her tight and hard during the single goodnight hug that boys and girls are allowed to exchange. Relish every millisecond of physical contact, but for the love of God keep your mouth shut about it. The last thing you want to do is to remind her that she has an anti-boyfriend force field, and that you're working—ever so diligently—on the deactivation code.

Recognize this: Georgia-Cumberland Academy has a shit ton of rules. For one thing, it's got an insurance agency breathing down its neck, something your dean reminds you every time you complain about being confined to campus. Furthermore, as a Christian institution, the school has a responsibility to train students in the ways they should go. This means no rock music. No radios. No TV. No Dungeons & Dragons. No role-playing games, period. No jewelry (not even so-called "friendship bracelets"). No cussing. No alcohol or tobacco. Not even any caffeine (though if you're desperate, there's a guy on sophomore hall who sells warm, black market Coca-Colas for a buck, out of a suitcase in his closet). No prolonged physical contact with the opposite sex. And no dancing. Bodies gyrating to drumbeats? Too pagan. Too primal. And too overtly sexual. It's like your math teacher—a guy with gray hair and an unshaven philtrum and plaid button-ups and an honest-to-God pocket protector, a guy who, to get a laugh while he's standing in the cafeteria line, will flip his dentures in and out with his tongue—says, "You can't dance until you're married, and then you can dance with your hands in your wife's pants," a garish little rhyme that you find odd, partly because his partner—a dainty little witch of a woman with a mane of unkempt hair—only wears ankle-length dresses.

Bottom line: Georgia-Cumberland Academy students aren't allowed to dance, so they don't go to dances, balls, or proms. They

go to *banquets*. And banquets, as it turns out, are a huge fucking deal. Sometimes guys ask girls. Sometimes girls ask guys. Sometimes there's drama—like that time, during freshman year, you asked out the scorching hot junior who worked in the chaplain's office and wore boots with Guess jeans and red lipstick and had a sultry face with hooded eyes, and she said yes to you and no to Sean, a pompous sophomore with a shark fin nose he seemed to keep—at all times—slightly raised, and the next day all your friends congratulated you. Sometimes the banquets have themes, like “safari” or “county fair.” Sometimes they're fancy—guys with boutonnières pinned to the lapels of rented tuxedos, girls with corsages pinned to the shoulder straps of frilly-skirted dresses, the hemlines of which must be dean-approved. Sometimes you board buses and head to local hotel conference rooms and eat vegetarian lasagna and salad and cheesecake from segmented Styrofoam platters. If you're lucky, there'll be a movie, something benign and lame like *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, which means the lights will be dimmed and you'll get to surreptitiously grip the hand of your date, rubbing your thumb over hers with purpose and urgency. And if you're *really* super lucky—if it's dark outside by the time you head back to campus and your faculty chaperone lets you sit with your date and the driver doesn't drive with the interior bus lights on—you just might get to suck some face.

This year's first banquet, the one where you ask Eve and she says yes, writing her response on the inside of a folded piece of foil from a Hershey bar wrapper, is sorta—but not totally—lame. The student association, of which Eve had been elected president at the end of the previous year—an odd move for a person who was so antagonistic that she seemed to relish the fact that people thought she was a bitch—hasn't raised enough money to fund an off-campus excursion. So they hold a fifties themed banquet in the cafeteria, a drab place whose carpet is stained and whose ceiling preserves squiggles of dried spaghetti noodles, flung there by mischievous dorks of yore.

To prepare: slick your hair back, roll a box of candy cigarettes you bought at Walmart during last week's town trip inside a T-shirt sleeve. Admire Eve in her poodle skirt, her hair ponytailed with a scarf. Play guitar while your roommate, a spiky haired blond with fat arms and tiny protrusions on his T-shirt thanks to his permanently erect nips, croons the lyrics for “Earth Angel,” a song that's quaint enough to meet faculty approval. Take pictures with your arm around Eve—a

totally sanctioned boy-touching-girl situation because it's quick and casual. Tack these photos to the corkboard above the desk in your dorm room. Stare at her smiling face for long periods of time. Feel your pulse quicken. Let yourself think: *She could be it. Like, the one.*

Stop caring—as if you ever really did—about academics. Roll your eyes when anybody mentions college applications, since it's common knowledge that the only thing an Adventist kid has to do to get into a denomination-sponsored college is to produce fog on the surface of a mirror. Give zero shits about chemistry: a C- means, "Dude, you passed." Choose—randomly and without a second thought—the stocks you'll pretend to invest in during Economics class. Refuse to join the students who are protesting the principal's decision to ban Shakespeare from Senior English, after three students—not the brightest, but certainly the most "outwardly religious"—refused to read *Macbeth* because of its depiction of witchcraft, and after your teacher—a white haired old woman who'd sunbathed herself into a mass of animated wrinkles—assigned them *Paradise Lost*, which they also snubbed, because by imagining Satan's point of view, they might be tempted to sympathize with his plight.

Spending less time on schoolwork means more time to think about Eve, more opportunities to scribble notes, draw pictures, and write poems. Do anything for her; in fact, do everything *because* of her. If she gets jealous of your other friends who are girls—and she will—pledge to ignore them forever. The Chinese girl who plays tennis and piano who's been your friend for three years? Eve knows that you guys had a thing once, even though it never really was a thing. So stop writing her letters. The blonde with braces, the one who enthusiastically leads song service, the one who taught the student body a bunch of songs from the anti-drug conference she attended? Eve knows she likes you, or used to like you, or once said you were cute, so smile or wave at your peril.

Oh, and this is important: overanalyze *everything*. When you enter the cafeteria, and Eve, sliding her tray toward the juice machine, doesn't immediately see you and smile, panic. Is she ignoring you on purpose? Or is she only pretending to ignore you so that you won't think she's too into you? Is this a pride thing? Has she overcommitted to the urge to produce that impression? There's no way to know. In chapel, glance over your shoulder, see her holding a clipboard,

placing checks next to the girl's names on her hall. Is that feigned or real absorption, from which she emerges—but for only a second—to give you a brief smile and wave before returning to what seems to be, by the look of her furrowed brow, a serious enterprise that involves nothing less than her total and complete concentration? You have no idea. And you worry you never will.

Though pursuing Eve isn't always fun, it does involve games. Just when you think you're making progress, she'll claim that this whole thing between you guys—your friendship, your "relationship," whatever name you want to give to it—has been one big joke, and that she only wanted to see if she could actually get you to fall for her, and that she was only interested in teaching you that girls couldn't be trusted, and that she could never really love you, because really, are you that arrogant? Did you think you had that kind of power? Tell yourself, when she laughs in your face then whips around and runs back to her dorm, that you know she doesn't mean it, but worry that maybe she wanted to. Return to your own dorm, eyes stinging, faint with nausea, as if her words—like a series of well-handled knives—had penetrated your body, had hollowed it out.

Catch up to her after supper—macaroni with peas, wedges of mushy casserole, whole-wheat buns clutching veggie wieners—and say things like, "You can't do this" or "This isn't fair." Reinvigorate your nausea when you hear the sound of your plaintive voice. Brace yourself against the cafeteria's brick exterior. Warn her that you're going to be sick. This, as it turns out, is an effective method. She grabs you by the arm, whispers, "Don't you dare, don't you *dare* throw up."

How, she wants to know, could you ever have doubted her? You are, she reminds you, the only person in whom she's ever truly confided. You have pages of evidence to prove this—letters that say things like *please don't have a stomachache ever again and someday you will find a girl who can love you better than me and forget about me and don't forget about me!* and *the only way to get rid of me is to tell me to leave and never talk to you again and I guess I just like trouble and want to avoid the sickening feeling of true love and to always be happy is not a sign of a strong relationship and no one's ever happy unless they're dead, I learned that in Bible class and hold me and make my demons leave.*

And Eve does have demons. As far as you can tell, they were gifted to her by her parents, who want the fruit of her womb to be pure, and whose heads, when they imagine freckled grandchildren, go absolutely fucking bananas. Not that your own family is thrilled by the idea of you dating a person of another race, which is why, you suppose, that when you tell your dad about Eve, he says that Asian women “don’t age well,” and that your grandmother, upon seeing Eve’s school pictures, says, without skipping a single beat, “Koreans . . . Now aren’t they supposed to be the ugliest of the Asians?” The thing is, even if Eve’s parents could conceive of “American boyfriend” as a temporary concept, they’ve promised swift retribution if she should ever marry a white boy: they will straight up *disown* her. So, with these future obstacles to consider, come up with plans: four years for college, four more to become totally financially independent, and bam, in eight years you’ll both be free.

In January, Eve delivers a troubling confession: she doesn’t like kissing. She hadn’t kissed anybody before New Year’s Eve, when, during winter break, you obtained permission from your parents to drive to Atlanta to hang at your friend Ed’s house, which you did, for a couple of hours, before switching venues to a cheap downtown hotel room where some of your more enterprising friends had pooled their resources to obtain a bottle of vodka, a dime bag of weed, and a pack of Benson & Hedges. Ignore the vodka and weed and cigarettes—you and Eve are still pretending, mostly for the benefit of the other, that your bodies, as temples of God, shouldn’t be sullied by the poisons of drugs. And anyway, you didn’t come here to get fucked up. You came to be alone with Eve. So persuade her, at some point, to take a walk. Once, you’re out of sight of everybody else, plant one on her.

Poor technique? Too much tongue? Bad breath? You don’t know, and Eve won’t explain what, if anything, you did wrong. Instead, she claims your past history ’s the problem: in other words, the fact that you’ve kissed girls who weren’t her. Eve refers to these girls, who were both white and blond, as “your dumb blonds.” It doesn’t matter that neither of them no longer attend your school. The thought of your mouth on theirs makes Eve want to barf. You might even still have their germs! Wonder if she’s joking—or simply insane. Entertain what feels like a very real possibility: Eve will never kiss you again.

Considering that you have a pretty strong fondness for kissing, this is highly problematic, especially if it turns out that she's the one you want to be with until the end of time.

Let your heart be not troubled. What you don't know—not yet—is that Eve is just as horny as you, and as soon as she learns how to shut off her brain and swallow her pride, you'll be better than fine. See exhibit 1: the night the seniors beat the juniors at the annual junior/senior basketball game. To celebrate, board, with the rest of your class, a bus headed for Pizza Hut. Sit next to Eve—she's so proud of you! You scored the most points! You juked so many players! You looked really hot doing it! Say thank you. Give her a hug. And, because it's dark in the bus, and the bus driver can't see you, don't let go. Your fellow classmates are singing the chorus of "Patience" by Guns n' Roses. Some are standing in the seats. Eve moves closer. Then, surprise: her mouth is on yours. Kiss her back. Don't mind that she tastes like garlic and kim-chee—a pungency that will forevermore strike you as supremely erotic. Because right now, a new door is opening, and it's time to walk through it, together.

When it's time for your class to decide where to go for the senior class trip, don't vote for the option where you visit a third world country to help indigenous people build churches out of cinder-blocks. Vote instead for the trip where you sail to the Bahamas, for *fun*. Waves? Beaches? Sun? It's a no-brainer. Especially when you remind yourself about the stories of previous senior class trips, and what other students have gotten away with. Imagine you might finally get some much needed alone time with Eve. You can hope, at least. But not pray. This is not the kind of request you can bring to the Lord. Unless you include stuff like: *keep me strong and pure*. Which you don't.

The bus ride to Miami takes an entire day. Wonder why—but don't question the fact that—boys and girls get to sit beside each other. Maybe it's because this is senior trip and you're big boys and girls. Maybe your sponsors are taking their own little vacation from their usual supervisory micromanagements. Whatever. Slump far enough in your seats so that the principal—who's driving the bus—can't see you in the rear view mirror. Spread a blanket over your laps. Slide your hands covertly—and for the very first time—into each other's jeans. Marvel at the warmth. The melty softness. "Oh my goodness," she

whispers, “it’s so *hard*.” Hear footsteps. Retract hands. There, standing above you: your English teacher, on her way to the bathroom. “You guys *can’t* be cold!” she exclaims, eying your blanket. Assure her that you are. Exchange knowing glances after she passes. Relish the resultant adrenaline blast. Acknowledge that what you just did was pretty crazy, that maybe a line needs to be drawn. Latch pinkies. Promise to return from this trip with virginity intact. Consciences assuaged, continue your furtive groping. As your hands fulfill their exploratory missions, pretend like you’re interested in the plains of Florida as they sweep by outside. Note the egrets unfolding wings and, rising from swampland, flapping their angular bodies away.

Climb aboard a boat captained by a sun-dried, bandana-and-braids-wearing Willie Nelson lookalike, a man who delivers a warning: “the ocean’s rough today, kiddos.” It’s true. Once you hit the open sea, the waves are spectacular: smacking the hull, breaking into spray. Eve avoids getting seasick by swallowing a Dramamine and passing out in the sun. Meanwhile, you feel the swells down in the boat’s kitchen as you chomp into a snack cake, and then take your place with the others alongside the railing, waiting to puke into the sea. Storms loom. Change course; instead of sailing to Grand Bahama, drop anchor at Bimini, a smaller island. Settle in. You’re gonna be here awhile.

Don’t ask why, after nearly four years of being monitored as closely and often as possible—there are stories that the Industrial Arts teacher skulks about after dark, hoping to catch students who’ve managed to escape the dorms without setting off the alarms—you’re allowed to wander a Caribbean island completely unsupervised. Just do it. Stroll the length of the main street. Peek into dark bars where reggae music blasts from blown-out jukebox speakers. Buy T-shirts emblazoned with puffy sailboats from dreadlocked street vendors. Women with colored string plaited between their fingers will reach for Eve’s hair—what beautiful braids they could make! Eve bashfully shakes her head. At a counter of a dingy restaurant, eat French-fries and ice cream. In a hotel courtyard, find a doe-eyed toddler wandering around parentless. Take turns picking him up, holding him, and kissing him on the lips, pretending that he is your own.

Discover a soft footpath winding through grassy dunes to an empty beach. Palms sway in the wind, their leaves applauding. Find

a shelf of sea-rock to sit under. Unroll a towel. Prepare a clean, dry place. The sand—not the fine sugar of travel brochures—is coarse and sticky, laced with ribbons of seaweed and crumbly driftwood.

Suck lips and tongue and ears and neck. Pause, every few minutes, to make sure nobody's watching. Return, with vigor, to your dry humping. When Eve asks if you want to come in, just for a second, don't ask if she's sure. Just nod. In your head, think: *just for a second*. You'll pop in—and out. And then you'll know. That's all you really want at this point: to know. To see. Eve mashes her bathing suit to one side. Position yourself. Slide in. Think: *whoa*. A second passes. Then two. And more. More seconds are on their way. Does this count? You don't know. There's a song in your head: *It doesn't count if nothing comes out*. Eve clutches your arm. "Did you hear something?" she says. Stop breathing. Imagine the helmeted policeman you saw earlier. Imagine your principal—the man who, before you were officially together, once sent you both a letter, to say that even though he was led to believe you both were not engaged in "a relationship," that he had seen you both engaged in hand-holding, resting one's arms upon another, etc., and that if you failed to comply with the school's "hands off" policy, he would have no choice but to "take action." Eve jumps up, scraping her face on the rock, ripping open her cheek. Offer your T-shirt—a tank top emblazoned with the letters R and E and M. Mop up the blood; assure her that she won't be scarred for life, but worry that maybe she will be. A bird flies away.

Lead Eve back to the boats, where the food and medicine kits are stored in cardboard boxes. Tell everyone it happened as she was retrieving a sand dollar. Watch Eve snap open her compact mirror. Watch her run a finger—the one that's specked with brown scars, from when she was accidentally splashed by boiling water as a baby—over the scabs, as if reading a kind of alien Braille. Don't argue when she says that this is punishment, sent special delivery by God for what you've done.

Upon returning to campus: act normal. Eat breakfast in the café. Pretend to sing during chapel. After lunch, meet Eve in the school library, which, as usual, is empty. Spread *USA Today* out on a table and check your horoscopes. Normally, when nobody's around, or when Mrs. Fox, the librarian, carries her little pot to the water fountain to retrieve water for her plants, you make out furiously for ten seconds.

Today, though, Eve's not in the mood. She has a question: Do you regret what you've done? Squint. Pretend to think hard. Remember your first post-orgasm thought: *this must've been how our first parents felt, in Eden, after they ate the forbidden fruit*. Remind yourself about what you heard about cultures where all a couple has to do to be considered married is to pledge their mutual love. Wonder if God honors those unions. If so, might He honor yours? And really, who's to say what God approves? Sure, there's the bible, and it says what it says, but God could veto any part of it that He wanted, right? Tell Eve that you don't regret anything; tell yourself that it's assurance she wants. Don't imagine her engulfed in guilt. Promise her that you don't regret anything. You know what you did was wrong. You know—or hope—you'll be forgiven. You know an angel in heaven recorded every moment, but that Jesus' blood will blot out the bad parts. All you have to do is ask.

When Eve gives you watercolor paintings she's done of her invisible friend, Eun-Jin, it's okay to be confused: Eun-Jin is Eve's Korean name and the subject of the portrait is a sad circus clown with a long, Confucius mustache. Wonder if she's losing it. Turns out she has a legit reason to freak out: her period's late. Remind her that everything's gonna be okay, that nothing came out inside her, remember? Avoid thinking: *but what if something did?* You could be a father. At 17. What the hell would you do? Get a job? You have zero skills and—aside from making out with Eve—few passions. When you took the "What Color Is Your Parachute?" quiz in English class, you got "bus driver." When your faculty sponsor made predictions about future occupations for each member of your senior class, he predicted you'd be an attorney for the Los Angeles Lakers. You don't even like the Lakers, and the only attorney you know is an Audi-driving guy with hair plugs. You hate to even entertain the thought, but if it's true, if there's a tiny baby growing inside Eve right now, should she, like, *get rid of it?* According to Eve, the answer is yes: alone in her room, she punches herself in the stomach. Hard. You know because when nobody's looking she shows you how she does it. Then she does it again. And again. You have to physically stop her, which isn't easy. She's strong.

On graduation weekend, pack up your shit: your guitar, your flannel shirts, your tank tops, your photos tacked to the corkboard

above your desk, your secret porn stash you harvested from other boy's supposedly secret porn stashes. Wonder how you're going to live without Eve, who broke up with you five times in the last week, if only because she thought that might be a workaround for the looming pain of missing you. After graduation, try to kiss her in front of her parents. When she moves her head at the last minute, get a mouthful of hair.

Move back to the mountains of southwestern North Carolina, to your parents' new house, the one they built on property that borders National Forest. Get a job cashiering at McDonald's, where, because they ran out of hats, you're the only male employee who wears a visor. Learn the names and preferences of regulars; punch their orders in as soon as they walk in the door. At home, write letters to Eve. Reduce yourself to a quivering, incoherent wad of desire. Tell her how much you miss and love her. Turn up the Cure's *Disintegration*. Cue it to "Pictures of You." Tell her you're dying. Feel like you are.

Pick up the phone when it rings. "It started," Eve says. What she means: "I'm not pregnant." Say: "Thank God." She already has. For a long time, she hadn't prayed, hadn't thought she was worthy. Kept hitting herself in the stomach. But nothing worked—until she got down on her knees and asked for forgiveness. And that, in the end, was what unleashed the flow.

On Friday nights, drive south, through the mountains. Blast Nirvana and Alice in Chains for two and a half hours. Merge into traffic on I-75, get off on the exit for Duluth. Enter Eve's neighborhood—winding streets of conservatively regal brick homes—and park the car outside Eve's house. Don't get out. Instead, honk the horn, per her instructions. She's inside, lying to her parents, telling them she's going with a girl named Christy to the movies. Wait for her to come out—she sprints down the brick stairs bisecting her lawn. Drive away. Master the art of making out while piloting a car. Visit nearby parks. Look for foliage—thick enough so that when you enter it, you disappear. Glow. Ache.

If you arrive at Duluth early enough, you can hang at Eve's house before her mom gets back from the dental lab where she works, before her father returns home from the shop where he repairs and sells high-end wristwatches. Observe her house: the pale beige walls, the wooden cross hanging above the television, the family photo where

nobody's smiling. Say yes to fried rice and kimchee. If her grandmother shows up—the one, when she found the pictures of you and Eve from the Bahamas, faces smashed against each other, windblown hair lashing your faces, shredded them into little pieces—hide behind the living room couch while Eve distracts her. Then bolt for your car.

At the end of summer, move to a Seventh-day Adventist College in Massachusetts, forty-five minutes from Boston, where Eve's studying engineering at a school you couldn't get into. Spend your first semester of undergrad in a quaint town that has rock walls and birch trees and historical markers every quarter mile. Note that it's not unlike living in a Robert Frost poem. Attend classes in an old white house, once home to a long-dead philanthropist and financier, a building whose bedrooms, chock full of desks bearing amusingly non-vulgar graffiti, have been converted into classrooms. Hang out in the house's living room, now a lounge, which resembles a cozy nineteenth century library, what with its fireplace and lantern-style light fixtures and engraved tables where lamps cast yellow circles onto stacks of old *New Yorkers* and back issues of the school's literary journal. Take a seminar—"Intro to the Renaissance"—in the dining room, which has a long wooden table and arched, vine-enshrouded windows that reach nearly to the ceiling, allowing for stunning views of autumn foliage. It's like everything you know about what it means to love literature and high-mindedness and has become manifest in a single building, which is also home to the offices of teachers who've been studying books for decades. Read Kant and Kierkegaard and Kafka and Keats. Write stunningly poor but passionately energetic imitations of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell. Walk around with the phrase "season of mist and mellow fruitfulness" playing on a loop in your head.

Smoke your first cigarette. Drink your first drink—Southern Comfort and lemonade—followed by your first second and first third drink in a row. Grip the sleeve of a leather jacket worn by a guy who you just met as you puke into a toilet. Befriend guys like this leather jacket guy, guys who like to laugh and write poetry and play guitar, who show you aquifers and lakes and orchards and a haunted forest where a trail leads, inexplicably, to a Maharishi temple surrounded by lush lawns. Eat psychedelic mushrooms at somebody's parents' cabin in Maine and watch a gravel road transform into a ribbon of

miniature skulls. Convince yourself that you're a living character in the book of your life. Wake up to being alive. Understand consciousness as a miracle. Get high at the local reservoir. Imagine that you have entered paradise. Joke that the distant geezer in a purple jogging suit is God, paying Earth a visit.

Stop going to church. Tell yourself it's no big deal, you're just taking a break. And you deserve one: for the first time in your life, nobody's making you go. Nobody's telling you to hurry up. Nobody's standing at the back of a sanctuary, searching for the back of your head, placing a checkmark by your name. It's weird; at boarding school, you never once skipped church or vespers, not once. It wasn't just that you didn't want to get in trouble—you'd be roombound for the rest of the weekend, forced to watch kids hang out at the center of campus from your window. You didn't want to miss anything. Most notably? The perfumed body of the girl you loved, dressed in her Sabbath finest.

That first winter in Massachusetts is the worst in 100 years, or so they say. All you know is that whenever you step outside, the mucous in your nose instantly freezes. On Friday nights, pick up the T at Alewife, ride into downtown Boston, to meet Eve. Hang your heads out of windows high above the ground to escape Eve's overheated dorm room and to blow plumes of smoke from hand-rolled cigarettes into falling snow. Visit all-ages clubs and dance under cascades of lasers. Eat squares of steaming pizza while walking through a blizzard. Visit a Laundromat, write messages in Korean with your fingers in the steam of window glass. Have sex, but not frequently or well, in Eve's dorm room. Don't bother with prophylactics—neither of you are willing to admit that it's okay to fornicate, much less *make plans* to; it's just something that kinda happens. Suspect that what Eve needs is a detached lover, lounging coolly in perpetual satisfaction, someone she could rub herself on but who'd never give in. Problem is: you're neither cool nor satisfied. You're needy and impatient and gluttonous. Eve often swats you. "I'm full," she says. "Don't touch me." Try to leave her alone. Fail.

On Valentine's Day weekend, bring Eve a four-pack of miniature wine bottles and a heart-shaped box of chocolate. When she's lying on her bed studying Calculus in a T-shirt and a pair of your boxer shorts, decide to draw on her legs. A mural. A temporary tattoo. A

blue face with a snake tongue. A monstrous mouth on her kneecap. Swirls. Dancing Matisse-like figures. When she asks you, out of the blue, if you'd ever do it with two women, feign thoughtfulness. Clear your throat. Cap a blue marker. Uncap a green. Then tell her than unless she had the power to clone herself . . . no.

Watch Eve roll over, raise her behind into the air, and slide her panties to one side. Circled a mole on her ass-cheek.

"Come on," Eve says, flexing her cheeks. "Every guy wants to, right?"

Say you're not every guy.

"What makes you so different?"

Tell her that you love her.

"What if I told you that I knew a girl who was interested? No. I'm serious."

Ask her who.

"This girl. Jane. She's really pretty. Blonde."

Say, for Eve's benefit, that you're not into blondes.

"You'd like this one, though. She's got big boobs."

Shrug.

"Guys like big ones."

Say, "Whatever." Return to the devil on Eve's calf. Add flames.

"We were just talking. She was telling me about her ex. He goes to MIT. Sounded like a real jerk. Anyway, we were just talking and drinking some beer and playing around. I don't even know how it happened. But we kissed."

Repress a shiver when Eve shuts her eyes, lips parted slightly.

Say, "Uh-huh.

"Then my hand was up her shirt." Laugh. Leap off the bed. Tell her that this is stupid. That you refuse to believe it.

"Does it make you hot? We were *making out*."

Inquire, after she blows into your ear, only to quickly retreat, as to what happened next.

"Nothing. That was it."

Say, "Oh."

"So? Do you want to?"

Lie.

"Imagine it. Two women on top of you. Do you want it?"

Gaze out the window, to see snow falling. Again. Shrug. Then nod.

“Are you sure? Because I can call her right now if you want me to.”

“Sure.”

“Are you really really sure? Because you can’t back out once we start.”

“Yes! Yes, okay? Call her!”

Eve glares, shoves you with her foot. “Asshole.”

Her eyes gleam with *I-knew-it!* dominance. She beat you again. Imagine, for a second, that she might spit on you. Watch your vision grow blurry, while ink bleeds into sheets.

Don’t end it now. And don’t end it later. In fact, don’t *ever* end it, because you can’t imagine a world without Eve, and because you don’t want to. Don’t end it when Eve suggests that you’re no fun because you’re sick of going to clubs, because you won’t just loosen up and dance and you don’t like watching Eve grind on other guys. Don’t end it when she belittles you in front of your friends, who, after she’s gone, say, “Dude, why do you put up with that bullshit?” What they don’t get: nobody knows Eve like you do. Even when she’s being a defiant bitch, or when she says hurtful shit to prove that you’re too soft and that you need to learn how to stand up for yourself, you know that down deep she really loves you. It would be easy to prove. You have it in writing.

Reconnect, over the phone, with a kid from grade school, one who you remember having to sleep in vacant hospital beds because his mother—a nurse—worked nights. He’s going to apply to the University of North Carolina, where he plans to major in biology. He wants you to apply, wants to room together, promises that it’ll be awesome, you’ll go to basketball games, school’s one of the best public institutions in the nation, it’s way cheaper than what you’re paying to attend an Adventist institution. Admit it: it sounds intriguing. You could graduate from a school nobody outside of the Adventist church had ever heard of, taught by teachers who, as good as they were, hadn’t published much, if anything, outside of left-leaning Adventist publications, or you could transfer to a university that was world-renown, seeking instruction from teachers who’d published actual books with real presses, and whose stories had been featured in top literary magazines and, at least in the case of a teacher who’d written a story titled “Bobby Rex’s Greatest Hit,” turned into a T.V. movie.

Tell Eve a revised version of this story. Begin it by saying, “Hey guess who called the other day trying to get me to transfer to UNC?” Deliver it in a kind of mocking way, and then say, “I told him it was a great idea, but I’d never leave Massachusetts.” When Eve asks why, tell her that what you meant was: you’d never leave *her*. She laughs in your face. Act like you don’t understand what’s funny. Listen when she gives you a speech about how stupid it would be not to take this opportunity, and that you have to promise her that you’ll make all future decisions without using her as a road block on your journey to being what you actually want to be, and what you know, in your heart, you already are: a writer.

Relocate to Carrboro, just outside of Chapel Hill, in an apartment that seems—at first—to be fine. So its color scheme is dingy. Beige walls, carpet. So the only overhead lights are in kitchen and bathrooms. That’s before your roommate starts decorating. Granted, it’s only his room, but even having to glance inside—it doesn’t exactly help the vibe. Dude cut out magazine photos of AIDS-ravaged patients and starving Ethiopian babies and dead bodies shot execution style in the ditches of remote countries and taped them to his walls, as if by surrounding himself with images of the destitute and terrorized, he might never forget how good he had it or how shitty others did, and thus spirits—if that’s what you can say he had—would be lifted. Also on his wall: as a strip of paper upon which he’d written the number of days he estimated were remaining in his life. Don’t bother trying to remember any of those numbers—it’s a different sequence every time you look because he changes them daily—only that it’s long enough to resist comprehension.

Go to the library. Search *New Yorker* archives for old, uncollected J. D. Salinger stories. Smoke weed. Listen to space rock and alt country. Try to keep up with the reading in Milton and Romantic Lit. Live off of cereal and stuff that’s microwavable. Presume that, aside from your Shakespeare prof—a ruinous old jackass who claims that all you and your classmates care about is Mickey Mouse and Superman, and who gives you brutal fill-in-the-blank quizzes for each play—all your teachers are geniuses. Learn about the anthropological process of “strange-making” in your Southern Lit class, attend an African American funeral that becomes an occasion for the pastor to engage in a rousing rap-song-sermon calling out all the non-church-going

folk—*that means you*—to return to the fold. Listen to your philosophy professor—an Israeli woman—speculate about whether or not human beings can survive their deaths. Take notes while a grubby, white-haired, wildly-bearded, sage-like Taoism prof illuminates, but not without a touch of sarcasm, the inherent paradoxes of the lives of sixth century Taoist monks.

And, when you're not marveling, wallow in misery.

Your main problem, aside from the fact that you miss Eve—a problem that is compounded, probably, by the fact that you smoke way too much weed—is that you have very few friends: your roommate, a few people you meet in creative writing workshops, primarily a guy with a pompadour who writes every one of his stories on a typewriter he found at a dumpster, and another kid who smokes unfiltered Pall Malls, drinks straight Jack Daniels, and gets pissed when everyone says that his stories remind them of Faulkner, even though Faulkner is his, like, his personal hero.

Smoke pot. Like, a lot. Smoke at night to go to sleep. Smoke before you write. Smoke before class, sometimes, before you don your Rage Against the Machine T-shirt and your flared jeans and your Converse All-Stars and walk to class blasting the Beastie Boys "Ill Communication" on your Walkman. Tell yourself there's nothing wrong with getting high. You think better. You're more creative. When you're high, you feel connected to the universe. But you miss Eve. A lot. Call her. Leave messages. Wonder what she's doing, why she's not calling you back. Spend hours in the computer lab of the English Department, writing her long emails cataloguing your various miseries. Return to the apartment. Check your messages. It's Eve, she's calling to say she can't talk, she's going out, to a club, to a movie. She loves Boston so much! She can't imagine ever leaving.

If you possessed even the tiniest bit of foreknowledge, you'd be able to predict how this is going to end. Eve knows, because she's smart and because she thinks about shit way more than you. She'll blame herself for transforming you from happy improvisational teenage comedian into sullen and clingy pothead. She'll know when it's time to take one for the team. She'll know it's for the best. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she knew she would forever be the source of your sorrow.

Which is why she'll do what she does: call you up to tell you that

she fucked somebody else. Listen, here, to your own voice, when you say stuff like, “It’s okay” and “I understand” and “you made a mistake” and “we can work through this.” You’ve lost your sense of who you are, your identity is too tied up with being her boyfriend, which is not who you used to be, back when you were oh-so-confidently wooing her, back when you were the popular kid who played guitar and got up in front of chapel during a talent show because somebody said, “Hey, Vollmer should do some impersonations” and everyone got on that bandwagon and so you stood up and made fun of all the faculty in front of the whole godddam school. And everybody ate that shit up.

Now? Feel ashamed. Stupid. And—after walking downtown and downing three Long Island Ice Teas in a row—liberated.

After the breakup? Keep in touch. Transform yourself from “boyfriend” to “ex” to “friend she can now confide in about things that you would rather not know”: that you weren’t good at sex, that she had stopped being physically attracted to you, that the last guy she slept with had a dick the size of an extra large banana.

Hear, as time passes, about her boyfriends. About dark nights. About blackouts. About passing out drunk in a snowdrift, only to be rescued by a tall, blond Swede who led her back to her room and tucked her into her bed and disappeared forever. “An angel,” Eve insisted. “God still loves you.”

Say, “So do I.”

Keep saying this, for much longer than you need to—and longer than she does.

Fall, eventually, out of touch.

Try to write stories. Try to write *this* story. Fail, every time.

Go to grad school. Meet the hot, super-smart, blond woman in your Shakespeare class who laughs uncontrollably at the same stuff as you—the word “bung-hole,” for instance. Fall in love. Get married. Follow her to the Midwest, where she enters a PhD program and you fail to teach kids who grew up surrounded by cornfields how to make logical appeals. Procreate, without meaning to. Change diapers. Carry a toddler around in a backpack when you go to the grocery store. Argue about whether paint chips in your bathroom contain lead. Fight and make up. Keep working. Land jobs at a university in the southern Appalachians. Buy a house. Live, more or less, the exact life you once

fantasized about, as a kid, growing up in the woods, wishing you lived with a woman you loved in a real town. A real neighborhood.

Think about Eve, from time to time. See her, occasionally, in your dreams, where the sight of her always fills you with a kind of giddy, teenage euphoria. Even after you think, *Oh shit, I'm already married*, you can't help but embrace her. Wake up hugging a pillow.

One day, when cleaning out a closet, find one of Eve's letters. Frown, because you thought you'd gotten rid of them all. This one's date bears the year of your college graduation, the summer you ran away to Wyoming to work at a National Park, bussed tables at an inn whose lobby resembled something the Swiss Family Robinson would make out of varnished lodgepole pine. The letter's not long, one page, bears her signature scrawl, and doesn't say much except to note that *it's been one whole year since I did what I did and I remember that day and I know I hurt you and I lost a part of me and I look back and think how crazy things were and I'm not haunted and I have to be proud that I made the best of such a bad situation and I thought I should tell you, you're one of the best and you promised to be my friend and I hope things are better*. And then it ends the only way it could: *Love, Eve*.

Fold up the letter. Return it to the envelope. Slide the envelope into the first book you pull from the shelf, the bible your parents gave you on your 11th birthday, the day you were baptized, the one whose cover is emblazoned at the bottom with your full name in gold. Open your laptop. Log onto a popular social media web site. Type Eve's name in the search box. Scroll down. Note that she likes Mighty Mighty Bosstones and Mitt Romney and follows Fox News and something called "Tea Party Patriots." Note how unsurprising this is; she did tend to insist, no matter what, that she was always right. Click on "Photos." Check out the pumpkins she carved with her kids. The tunnels they dug through snow. The house they made out of gingerbread and colored frosting. Note that her husband—ghost white, with a ginger goatee—bears a strong resemblance to a famous comedian. Click "New Message." Start typing: *Hey, it's been a long time*. Pause. Delete the sentence. Start typing again: *Dear Eve, This is going to sound weird, maybe, but I just wanted*. Delete. Repeat this process enough times to figure out that you won't be sending anything. Realize it's not a letter you need to write. You're done writing to Eve. Isn't that part of the reason why, last fall, you finally took the box of her letters you'd been carrying around your whole life and set them

aflame, in the backyard of your new house, in what you assumed was a fire pit? Six months later, you looked out the back window to see green stems had shot up from those ashes, and at their tips, little buds blooming bright yellow. This, you realize now, is nice to think about: a flower bed where a fire once burned. It's an image you could end with, if you ever decided to wanted to write this story, if you told yourself to just fucking do it, work backwards if you have to, then rearrange it all so that the starting point is where it ends: those blazing flowers, rising from a bed of the ashes of words you'll never read again.