

Bonding

“Come onnnnn!” Birdie was wheedling.

“No, B. It’s late. And we’re not freshmen.”

“*Carolina*. We never do anything fun anymore!” She collapsed on her back at the foot of my bed, drawing out the last word in a whine.

“Yeah, maybe,” I allowed. “But, seriously-- the grave? Been there, done that. And--” I cut her off as she opened her mouth again. “--you and I both know it wasn’t even that fun when we did it freshman year.”

“Okay, well... You suck.” She pouted, rolling onto her stomach without taking her eyes from her phone. “Also, sorry, but I already texted the guys, and they’re in, soooo. You kind of don’t have a choice.” She flashed her screen at me triumphantly, Stratton’s name over a bubble that read “aight i’m down” and Knox’s over one reading “hell ya.” I groaned, complained, but it was too late. Her response had already popped up on my phone, directing the boys to be ready for pickup in 10.

At my University, a Southern institution with a sordid history, one of the many ways freshmen made a rite out of vacant Friday nights was through the traditions of the “freshman bucket list.” Less of an itinerary than an oral tradition, the freshman bucket list was an under-the-table, word-of-mouth affair which satiated new students’ voracious desire to make memories in increasingly clandestine and dangerous ways. One of the most popular items on this backstairs agenda was the mandate to drive to the local cemetery at midnight, locate the grave of our small college town’s only celebrity, and toast his legacy by downing shots of

whiskey. Birdie and I had already toasted on the grave, twice, our first year at school. It was something uniquely suited to the freshman class, except, apparently, on nights like tonight, when even embittered juniors could be driven to relive the ritual out of a combination of nostalgia and ennui.

As she leapt up from my rumpled comforter and paced, tapping out a response to the boys, Birdie turned once to flash a grin at me, which I returned automatically while I rummaged for my keys. Birdie and I had lived together in the dorms as Freshmen, shared the same poorly-circulated air for two semesters, and came out on the other side indelibly linked. We existed for that year in a miasma of debauchery and tenderness, all contained in a 12-by-12-foot square. It was the kind of chimera that a fluorescent cell of newly-independent eighteen-year-olds organically fostered, like bacterium on a petri dish.

When I think back on how we morphed from two strangers into the kind of fabled female duo who held each other's hair and had already pledged to move in together as a platonic lesbian partnership if we were both still single at 45, I don't remember specifics. I remember a flashing like the strobelights we danced under so many times at the frats' ubiquitous raves: a chaotic blur of parties, essays, boys, girls, coffeeshops, bars, movies, and music. She was louder and more practical than I, and taller by almost a foot. Where I held my tongue she projected, often abrupt but always sure of herself. She was dark and long-haired, in pleasing conjunction with my pale skin and past-stylish bob. She emboldened me; I softened her. "Girl talks like a freaking *book*," she would jab, still always asking me to edit her essays. And even though I wasn't ecstatic about the details of our outing that night, she and I both knew that ultimately I would almost always defer to her plans, as I rarely had an alternative to offer.

The names she had mentioned, Stratton and Knox, Birdie and I fondly referred to as "our boys." The genderbent dynamic duo to our own pairing, the four of us had been thrown together

in the exciting, careless way freshmen are, almost exclusively at parties and in the post-meridian hours. The two boys had also been freshmen roommates, were in the same pledge class in Kappa Omega, and had grown close as brothers through countless card games and fraternity events.

Stratton was what those in our inner circle called a lovable asshole. Charming to a fault, he was a true Southern politician, effortlessly and calculatedly tailored to whomever he was speaking at the moment. He was supremely confident, the kind of obnoxiously self-assured that only comes with years of experience with a trifecta of money, privilege, and good looks. He was also an incorrigible flirt. He had fooled around with plenty of girls I knew, some of my good friends even, who, helpless, had all blushed and returned his quick wit, his more-quickly-wandering hands. He flirted with me, too, bantered, kissed my cheek, but for some reason, never really tried anything with me. I couldn't decide if that should offend me or compliment me. He was often rude, but possessed the capacity to be so kind. He could just as effortlessly recount his testimony as he could drink you under the table. "A bad boy with a heart of gold," Birdie and I would sigh to each other, rumpling his hair like a little brother's. But still, when he looked at you, you got the impression that really all he could see was the tiny reflection of himself in the orbs of your pupils.

Knox was a big dude. That was the first thing anybody said about him, because it was true. Hulking, chest like a washing machine, he routinely towered over everyone else in the room, and never seemed to know what to do with his football-sized hands. The oldest of five, and in the family photos on his phone, he loomed uncomfortably above his four comically-petite younger sisters in a just-post-pubescent manner that made us roar with laughter. He was quieter and gentler than his gargantuan frame suggested. Some of his brothers in Kappa O had nicknamed him "Fridge" freshman year, and a lot of people still called him that. That, or "Fort." It

was the kind of stupid pseudo-witticism that nearly everyone said upon meeting him for the first time: “Knox? *Like the fort?*”

It usually prompted the same pained laugh that I always coughed up when people met me and said, “Carolina? *Like the state?*” It was that very connection that had first bonded the two of us, freshman year. Drunk and tired of meeting iterations of the same person over and over again, asking the same questions in replicas of the same room on different moldy floors of the Kappa O house, I had wandered into a quieter corner and sat next to him on a suspiciously-spotted futon. We introduced ourselves half-heartedly, then sat in silence, nursing our canned hard seltzers. “You know,” I offered thoughtfully, after a beat. “You’re the first person all night who hasn’t said ‘like the state?’” He had laughed, genuinely, and we had commiserated about having easily-punned names. The conversation was easier after that, and, at some point, I asked, “So, you’re a Kappa O?” “Oh, no,” He had said, widening his eyes. “Nah, I’m just a pledge.”

Even though both Stratton and Knox and many others all but vanished from our campus during the months of their pledgship, somehow Birdie and I had kept up with the two of them enough that now they still remained the ones we texted, bored, on Saturday nights two years later. We traipsed down the stairs of our apartment and tore across the parking lot to my car, an ancient black Mazda. I cranked the engine and we veered onto campus to pick them up from fraternity row.

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I recently found a snapshot taken that night, from the cemetery. It’s a polaroid, per the demands of the latest crop of instagram-influenced aesthetics, from Birdie’s overpriced camera. Within its crisp white borders, our faces are conspicuously cropped out of frame, so that we are

rendered headless, with only the bizarre coterie of our trouser cuffs and sneakers and bare ankles taking up the majority of the photo. The figures loitering on top of the wet marble in that picture could be anyone, I had thought with satisfaction after we watched it slide out of Birdie's camera. She had squealed with delight and had shaken it impatiently while the flash momentarily spotted our vision with orange. The flat stone marker looked like a door into the earth, one that could swing open to reveal a pernicious underworld. At that point, we didn't know that later it would.

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Forty minutes and a couple rounds of shots later, Knox set his flashlight on its end, still lit, on the corner of a headstone, and we fanned out, giggling in the dark. The whiskey Stratton had provided held court, half-empty, on top of the gravestone where we had stood, resting where our sneakers had been on the letter-faceted marble. We were converging and scattering like minnows, flashy, stupid, while we darted across wet grass and over other glistening headstones.

We were just drunk enough to feel invincible, for our minds to feel pleasantly blurred and our limbs deliciously light and relaxed. We were talking about an awards show that all of us had wasted three hours watching the previous weekend, despite each only having seen one of the nominated films together. I offered some trivia about the guy who had won best actor. "You know he was raised in a cult?"

Stratton grinned. "So was I, dog. It's called the Southern Baptist Church."

We were laughing still when Birdie gasped, pointing abruptly at a patch of earth a few yards in front of us. Its borders were marked by freshly-turned dirt, lighter in color and slightly

raised in a mound that we could just make out in the shadows. The earth was moving, undulating, like a blanket thrown over writhing limbs.

“Are y’all--”

My voice was swallowed by Stratton’s yelp as the topsoil began to crumble like something was moving beneath it. I was reminded of all the low-budget zombie flicks I had seen, often with Birdie, Knox, or Stratton by my side. My lungs expanded and contracted like crushed tissue paper while Birdie screamed a guttural scream that was so distinct from the way girls usually scream when boys are around, after jump scares in the movie theatre or being playfully tossed over a shoulder. Parts of the earth rose up like waves while others suddenly subducted into pits, soil sprinkling down into the maw opening up in the dirt. Before we could do more than stumble backwards, yell to wake the dead, and curse to make them roll in their graves, out from the dark underneath of the earth came a creature all black and wet and poxed, the clinging dirt obscuring its skin and hanging in clods, so that its entire body looked burned, grainy. It was a boy.

“WHAT THE *FUCK*” bellowed Stratton, rising over the dissonance of our jangling cries as we recoiled. The only break in the blackness of the figure was his mouth, gaping and pink, from which a throaty, catching whine emitted, pattering out in the hoarseness that either comes from not speaking for days or screaming for hours. That, and his mud-caked lids that slit open to reveal his eyes, startlingly blue and watery, glistening and blank and turquoise-clear as hand sanitizer.

For a brief moment it passed through my haze of panic that someone was playing one hell of a joke, whoever would commit to a gag insofar as to bury himself alive. That fantasy fractured within fragments of a moment, when more details materialized in my perception

unbidden, and the only concrete thought I could grasp was that this was not something someone would do. This was something someone had to do to you.

He looked at us and put his hands out, a farce of a halloween cartoon, except for his splintered nails and bloody fingertips. The blood was dried on his hands and his shirt, an oversized white comfort-colors tee, enveloping his rather bony frame like a shroud. Emblazoned on the chest was an enormous blue and yellow symbol, surrounded by posy-sprays of maroon droplets. I thought for a moment that I might throw up as those symbols, so expensively embroidered and boldly, royally pigmented, pixelated in my starry vision into two greek letters: Kappa Omega.

The creature's monstrous, crumbly resurrection transpired only within a second or two. When our viselike terror had relaxed its grip just enough, Knox, the stoic, the inscrutable, gagged once, and then, regaining himself, ventured a shaky step forward.

Before he had even approached close enough to lay an oversized hand on his scrawny shoulder, the boy collapsed. For one hellish moment no one moved. Robotically, my mind spit up a statistic I had absorbed from my psychology lecture the week before, my professor pacing as he monologued, "Some people think, the more people are around when someone is put in danger, the more likely that person is to receive help." He gestured impatiently while he spoke. "The idea is that more people equals more opportunity for intervention, more likelihood that someone in the group will act. In reality, however, this is not the case. In fact, no matter if there are 2 people or 20 people present at a disaster, the likelihood of someone rushing in to help someone else are all the same:...Low."

And now we stood still, my chest painful, fingers and cheeks inexplicably tingling, until Birdie shook us from our collective paralysis with a shuddering sob, tripping forward. I should mention that Birdie was a nursing major, and always so proud of it. Always the first to answer

the “what’s your major?” question with a barely-perceptible straightening of posture, always the first to offer to be the designated driver with traces of superiority, always the one who helped girls throw up and get back to their rooms when we lived in the dorms freshman year. It had always seemed so clean and type-A to me, so clearly purposeful, in contrast with my amorphous Philosophy major. I had often comforted myself that, while I might have been a little spacier, a little less practical, than my indomitable pre-med friend, at least I knew the *theory* of things. I studied Ethics with its first vowel capitalized. Less squeaky-clean than her track, maybe, but still, certainly, valuable.

It didn’t feel clean anymore, while she scrabbled at his neck and felt over the hole that was his mouth with a hand that tremored. “He’s breathing--” she frantically swiped at her face, smearing her tear-stained cheeks with dirt. “He’s, um, passed out, I think. But his breathing’s really slow.”

“Who is he?” I whispered. The letters on his shirt were so bright they seemed to glow in the dark.

No one responded. Stratton walked over to the hole the boy had been lying in, kicking down some of the loose dirt surrounding its jagged rim. It was a long, shallow pit, shoddily dug deep enough to hold a wooden box. Still splintered and unfinished, the box looked like a poor man’s coffin, just large enough to hold a body. It had been covered with a loose layer of soil, and now the inside was sprinkled with muddy clods that had fallen in when some interior effort had forced open the lid. The boy had clawed through the crust of earth separating him from the clean air about a foot above him. In the corner of the box, its clean glass sprinkled over delicately with dirt, like a dusting of cinnamon, was a handle of cheap vodka, rolling dizzily, empty. The whiskey in my own stomach churned and threatened to rise up, as the pieces came together in my mind of the image of the boy, shut in the dark, exhaling stale air and subrational



panic for hours, until his thirst had driven him again and again to the only refreshment available to him. He had scratched at the edges of the cheap wooden coffin in which he was confined until his fingertips had cracked and bled. They were muddy-red where his hand had fallen, clawed, on the grass next to where Birdie crouched, her pink manicure still hovering over his mouth.

I had heard stories, only through the grapevine, late at night, and with some dubiousness to their accuracy, of pledges buried alive. I was pretty sure Knox himself had been locked in a shed at some point last year, left for a day or two with nothing but a bottle of liquor for sustenance. He had never confirmed nor denied that the incident had occurred, and it had seemed hazy and unreal and vaguely funny to me then. Not like this.

“Hello?” Birdie’s voice came high-pitched, panicked. “Why are none of y’all moving? We need to get help!”

“I’m calling the police,” I said automatically, pulling out my phone and actively concentrating on not throwing up.

“The hell you are,” Stratton spoke up for the first time, his voice cutting suddenly through the dark from the pit where he still stood, peering down with hands deep in his pockets. “That’s one of our pledges.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Birdie spat, flaring up. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means we can’t let this get out. And we sure as shit can’t show up anywhere with him like this. Too many questions we can’t answer.”

“He’s right. We just need to take h--” Knox began, and was drowned out by both Birdie’s and my shrill protestations. Our voices mingled, nonsensical. Stratton continued to nudge at the loose soil.

"I swear to God, y'all, do *not* pull this frat shit right now." I felt something painful and deep knotting in my chest. "Do not look at me and talk about building brotherhood and how you can't reveal the secrets of Kappa Omega and how we can't understand it--"

--you can't." Asserted Knox's stoic bass.

"Bullshit!"

Stratton interjected, talking fast, "Listen, y'all, I know the pledge trainers. Yeah, they're idiots, but they're good guys. I'm literally *positive* they wouldn't leave him here all night. They're probably either already on their way right now to dig his ass up, or they're about to be."

"Literally, what are you even talking about right now?" Birdie could barely get the words out, her face drawn. "Like, do you hear yourself? I mean, this is insane! He's already passed out, probably dehydrated, he could *die*, Stratton!"

"Jesus Christ, he's not gonna *die*--"

--you don't know that!"

--blind stinking drunk is what he is, and people recover from that. Hell, y'all have seen me worse off than he is now! And if anyone found out about this, they wouldn't ask questions, they wouldn't care about the circumstances, our asses would all be toast." Stratton's voice was rising frantically. "We would get kicked off campus! And me and Knox would be tied to it just for being here! People don't actually care about the truth, they would just love an excuse to plaster another hazing story all over the media. You can't even imagine the kind of shit Kappa O would get for this."

"That doesn't matter! Stratton, no, *listen*, that literally doesn't matter--"

They were up in each other's faces now, and Stratton's handsome planes were drawn and etched with something that scared me, the ghost of his confidence born to something

animal and cold and furious. Birdie looked like she could match him, though, shaking with residual terror and new rage.

A flicker in my periphery flipped my stomach.

“Everyone shut up.” I whispered. It was a harsh enough contrast from their bawling dispute that all three turned their heads toward me, Knox opening his mouth to inquire before I shushed him violently and grabbed Birdie’s arm. It was at that moment that it broke through the cover of trees. Through the haze of the dark, we could just make out the car, an aerodynamic shade sliding up the drive, silent and sinister with a black stripe marring its ghostly chrome. “Sssshit.” Hissed Knox, drawing out the word like it stung. “Y’all think it’s the actives?”

We rippled, his suggestion rustling through our company like a draft, mingling anxiety and relief, when I saw the change in my friends’ faces before I even heard the car door slam. In the infinitesimally small moment before the sound startled us from our fraught stances, reality slid down our faces like an eggshell broken on our crowns, cold and viscous. I had the feeling peculiar to terror of being submerged underwater, everything around me slow and distorted and muted, and the stricken faces of my friends suddenly blurred. Then, in a great rushing of blood and gasping for breath, the meniscus broke and many things happened at once. The cop emerged from his car, our wild eyes darted to and from each other’s like startled birds, he lifted a blinding flashlight with the authority of a king raising his scepter, and a cacophony of voices rang out as he bellowed a stupidly inadequate, “*Hey!*” and Birdie to my left cried, “*Scatter!*”

None of us were in any mental state to posit an alternative course of action, so scatter we did, like so many frightened deer, bounding over gravestones and ducking precariously behind trees and great stone mausoleums. Even as I tripped back up the soft grass of the knoll, I knew that we were all sprinting to a dead end. There was no way we could outrun him, and all of us were either too terrified or too intoxicated or a nauseating combination of both to think of

any clever excuses. My vision was scattered and sparkling with the fragmentation of a pounding heart and a swimming head, and a series of images broke upon me, shimmering, like the falling pieces of a shattered mirror. Birdie faltering helplessly over the body of the unconscious freshman, half-dragging him behind a twisted tree and then turning tail. Knox pulling Stratton, who was reeling and hissing obscenities, frantically with him as he fled up the rising blackness of the hill. The damp moss and uneven fissured bark rising up to meet me as I lurched behind a convenient oak and felt the dampness of the earth seeping into my sprawled form. The glint of the golden bottle, abandoned and still standing upright on the top of the gravestone where we had stood just minutes earlier. I blinked at it and felt the heat of its contents splintering out from my chest in warm, sparkling rods, a prickling texture that cast the dampness of the night in the same amber spotlight that puddled on top of the headstone, of the beam of Knox's flashlight falling through undulating thickness of glass. I rolled over, and barely stifled a scream as I found myself suddenly vis-a-vis with the boy, still immobile on the ground, his crumpled, muddy frame nearly invisible in the dark. His eyes were closed and I could barely tell he was breathing. I could smell the vodka on his breath from where I lay.

Our veneer had so suddenly faltered, in a matter of minutes. Still, we were at that moment still sharp enough to deduce that we could not remain crouched behind headstones forever. That was when I saw them moving swiftly through the dark, Knox's hulking frame and Stratton's leaner one, striding urgently towards the bottom of the hill, where the patrol car was spitting out its store of exhaust. They moved into the beam of his headlights like thespians into a spotlight.

I remember the way they descended the hill, calling out to the cop like rotund t-shirted neighbors calling over fences, dads grilling in suburban backyards, waving their hands and overusing "sir" and "officer." I could hear the agitated strains of his questions and his irritation at

their friendly nonchalance, Stratton's unnecessary introductions. "What's your name, sir? Paul? Well, Paul, we were just talking about the game this weekend..."

They were full to overflowing with varying degrees of courage, from the liquid to adrenaline to the kind that only comes with an inheritance of charm and whiteness. I watched, stunned, as the eerie tableau unfolded in the murky heat, with the moonlit whiteness of the headstones framing their glowing skin like pale watchful faces. The cop kept tugging at his collar, his hand fluttering uneasily at his belt over his radio. He never touched his gun. Their gesticulations were like shadows, morphing and elongating their forms into a phantasmagoric scene I could barely make out. At one point I even muffled my own vehement involuntary oath when Stratton, loose and pontificating, clapped a friendly hand on the man's shoulder, threw his head back, and laughed at some feeble echo of a joke.

"Too far," I hissed through clenched teeth. Moments later, my mouth dropped open when the cop joined him, shaking his head like he couldn't believe he was doing this either, and flapped his hands in an scattering motion-- a dismissal. And in my shock and anxiety and giddiness of that moment he seemed almost to be raising his hands in a distorted benediction, his uniform neck rising up stiffly into the high collar of an indulgent priest. My eyes found the glint of Birdie's in the dark, locating her crouched behind a granite monument, and I could just trace the shape of her lips mouthing, "*What the fuck?*"

Stratton and Knox sauntered away after that, stopping now and then to wave and thank the officer, who he glowed in the spotlight of their effusive praise. I could hear the obsequious smile in Stratton's voice: "Yessir, we will. And I hope to see you at the game as well! Alright, Paul, you take care of yourself!"

After that, their garbled words carrying up the slope towards me, it wasn't long before Paul crunched back over to his patrol car, opened the door, and ducked awkwardly inside. I

watched the cuffs of his black uniform trousers lift inside, stained from lingering in the damp tall grass. When the car door shut, the sound rang out like a shot, and my and Birdie's faces, pressed close to our vantage points from behind trees and gravestones, swiveled in unison as we followed its gliding path away, back onto the road, to disappear around the corner.

We vacillated in a moment of lingering stillness while Stratton and Knox watched him drive off, hands still raised, frozen in farewell. Then it was like a spell had been lifted. As soon as the car rounded the corner, their arms dropped and they folded over like puppets whose strings had been swiftly cut, bending double, clutching their knees and spitting out anxious breathy profanities. Birdie and I scrambled stiff-legged from our hiding spots and streamed down the hill like ants, silent.

"God. I mean... *Ho-lee shit*." Stratton exhaled, then laughed robotically, his expression pained. "I actually thought for a second the bastard knew something was up."

Birdie's face was paler than I'd ever seen it, and, while he was still speaking, she turned her back on him sharply and strode back to where we had left the freshman. I followed her, and stopped a few feet below her on the slope while she checked his breathing again.

I knew it wouldn't take long after that for us to disperse. I could hear the boys conversing low, grimly, behind us. They approached us cautiously, like they were trying not to make any sudden moves that would startle us into hysterics. Knox's voice came quiet, pointing out that we really shouldn't push our luck any further by waiting around until another cop with nothing better to do happened to cruise by. For a few oscillating seconds, Birdie and I blinked at each other.

"What are you going to do with him?" I asked finally, flat, directing my words to Stratton. The adrenaline seeping from my limbs left me jittery and cold, trembling in the grayscale humidity.

“We’ll take care of it, C. All you gotta do is stop worrying about it.” Stratton was suddenly euphoric, now, almost jocular, bolstered by our narrow escape and the way the cop had genuflected to his charisma.

Birdie was crying again, this time angry, helpless tears that fell from her sooty lashes onto her cheeks, flushed with a rage that clenched her jaw and choked her words.

“Stratton,” I sucked in my breath, “You can’t--”

He grabbed my shoulders, sighed. “Carolina, babe, listen--”

Something strangled escaped my mouth.

--Hey, ” He admonished, talking fast, flippant, his voice lilting. “Just shut up for a second. Listen, you trust me, right?” He did not pause for an answer. “Knox, bro, you trust me. My girl Birdie over there trusts me-- are you tracking? So I’m gonna need you to dial it back a notch and just fucking *trust me*, okay?”

His grip was hurting me and I shook him off. I turned to Knox, and he must have felt the heat of my eyes, burning, because he practicedly kept his gaze trained on the ground.

I said his name, softly, like I was trying to coax something untamed.

“Knox. For real?” My voice sounded so high. “You’re really cool with this?”

He looked at me then, but I still couldn’t see his eyes. The striped shadows from the trees and monuments fell over them like bruises, like lacerations over the rest of his face. The bruises swiveled towards me across the space that contained the pledge’s breath, shallow, labored, and my voice, dissipating like steam into the black heat. His chest rose and collapsed once.

“You girls just don’t get it.” He spoke slowly, and I knew that was the end of it. “We all have to go through it. I promise he’ll be fine-- just a little hungover, is all.”

“What’d I say?” Stratton showed his teeth, vindicated. “It’s a brotherhood thing. Call an Uber, ladies.”

So Birdie and I watched as they trudged solidly over the crown of the hill again, flanked the boy’s prostrate form, lifted his arms, limp, and gathered him up, their nostrils flaring from the odor of vodka he exhaled. Birdie grabbed my hand, lacing her fingers with mine, and her overlong manicure dug into my palm.

“Are we gonna do anything?” she whispered.

While she spoke, an image of Knox and Stratton glowed on the backs of my eyelids, traces of neon ghosts that tiptoed around their dim forms stooping in front of me in this cemetery, breathing heavily. I saw them as freshmen, the way they had disappeared for weeks at a time, each time resurfacing with darker circles under their eyes. It was them softer and rounder, before giving way to leaner bodies and harder faces. It was every time I had tried to banter, playfully jibing about where they had been disappearing to, and their eerie parroted response, “I’ve been having a lot of fun bonding with my pledge brothers.”

And now Knox was pulling the pledge doll-like over one shoulder, so that the freshman’s jersey with its electric letters fell limp to his waist, revealing a scrawny, full-ribbed chest, like a bird’s. Stratton walked over to us and held out his hand, wordlessly, for the keys to my car. I gave them to him.

“I’ll get these back to you in the morning, at some point. All good?” He didn’t look at me, and I didn’t speak.

“We’re good. Y’all be careful.” Birdie let go of my hand when she said it.



The sound of my engine spitting into ignition skidded across the cemetery, blooming out like the toll of a bell. The car slid away down the drive just like the cop's had, only this time with lights off, running the stop sign at the end of the street.

Birdie stared out into the dark for a moment, then walked over to a headstone and sat on it, gingerly, the way elderly people lower themselves into their chairs when their joints begin to curse them for getting old. She swiped at the blue glow of her phone with a grimy fingertip, face wan, eyes puffy. She looked horrible.

*"Fucking. Frats."* She spat abruptly, with venom. I was searching for something to say back when she tapped her phone again. "Oh, shit. Our Uber's almost here."

And when the red Toyota Camry had arrived and idled, rumbling, at the edge of the grass, I glanced back at the grave that had been our initial target that night. The stone looked like an over-polished table at a restaurant, reflecting off the yellow ribboned glow of Knox's abandoned flashlight. It was still topped with the bottle of whisky, which rested among a scattering of our plastic shot glasses.

It looked like what it was, the site of a pilgrimage, a ritual that, I realized then, had been dictated to us by others just as stupid and just as guilty. All was illuminated by the watery light that refracted off of the grave and the glass and Birdie's shining cheeks. And the moment was mythic and unreal, and we were just characters in the story that the boys would tell, laughing, at a party in a week or two, embellishing some details and omitting others.

Birdie trudged to the street's edge, compared the car's plate number with the one on her phone, thumbs-up, and we both clambered into the backseat, settling ourselves heavily among the vibrations of the radio's bass. Our driver, touted on Birdie's screen as "T.J.", (37, 3.74 stars) was blasting an overloud top 40 R&B track that he almost definitely hated as much as we did. "Birdie?" T.J. asked, without turning around.

“That’s me.”

Silence.

“You been busy tonight?” I offered.

“Not so much, for a Friday. I’ve had plenty busier, but you ladies are the first to request pickup from a graveyard.”

As he spoke, both my and Birdie’s phone glowed simultaneously, flashing identical turquoise messages at us, obnoxiously bright. From the group message titled, “Kappa hOs,” a text from an active that we didn’t know glowed at the bottom of the screen:

“what’s up ladies. it’s been a long week and Kappa O is BACK. late night at the house. y’all come on out and let’s get wild”

Birdie’s bloodshot eyes met mine, and I knew we were both thinking of the same thing: of our apartment, sterile and empty, of the weary routine of us going to our rooms and washing our faces with expensive astringent potions, of sliding into high school t-shirts that we wouldn’t wear in public anymore, of going to sleep, of waking up in head-prickling pain tomorrow morning.

She was quiet for a moment, her finger hovering, then she liked the message. She looked at me, rubbing the dirt off her cheek with her hand.

“I mean, what else are we gonna do tonight?”

I leaned forward and touched the driver’s shoulder.

“Hey-- sorry, can you actually turn around? We need to go to campus.”

“Sure thing, hon.” He said, and his hands played a spider-like rhythm on the leather of the steering wheel, and when he craned his neck and glanced over his shoulder at me, his eyes were watery blue, like hand sanitizer.