

*Nora and I Stole a Car*

~ A Modern Teenage Love Story

~ Gary Marks

*This book is dedicated to my grown children,  
who have taught me so much about the world  
I didn't want to know.*

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# 1

When I was twelve I had no idea what girls would be laughing about and whispering about when I walked past their lockers. They were not going to tell me if I asked, that was obvious. It was all quite annoying. But now that I'm fifteen I know exactly what they were whispering and laughing about. It was *me*. They weren't picking me out of a crowd from all the other boys. I wasn't deformed, or the nerdy twelve-year-old genius about to go off to college who had no clue about how to actually talk to anyone. No. They would whisper and laugh when almost *any* boy passed by. Exactly why they would bother wasting their time doing that I still don't understand, and honestly, I don't even want to.

But the one girl I wished would whisper about me never did. She didn't hang out with those girls, or anyone really, except her one good friend, Cassie.

Her name was Nora Hudson. Apparently her mom was a fan of a singer named Nora Jones, who, even though she's really old, is in my opinion pretty good. I checked her out on Spotify.

I know a lot about music, since my parents forced me to take piano lessons from the age of four. But that's just what made me aware of music, not what made me know anything about it. I know about it by listening to whatever I decide to listen to in my room at night, because I have earbuds, so its private. My secret world.

So Nora was maybe a little too skinny, and maybe had to wear glasses when she was sitting too far back in class

and couldn't see the whiteboard. Especially because some of our teachers wrote their words too small. They assumed they were going to have to write a lot of words and numbers on the whiteboard, and it had to all fit. Because they didn't think they could just say things, because we wouldn't be listening. So their solution was.... Expo Markers.

What they didn't realize is, when they turned around to write things on the whiteboard it was a signal for us to immediately stop concentrating on school and think about other things.

Honestly, most of what they said and wrote, and tried to mind-meld into our brains was forgettable to begin with. And a lot of it was better to forget than to remember, even if it was hard to do. I mean, I really didn't want to hear the gory details about slaves being beaten on a boat that they were being forced to row here from Africa. Hearing about it was bad enough without having to get into the details like what kind of whips were used, or to see some gory movie about it, which was basically a cartoon, because the Board of Education couldn't afford to pay actors to make a serious movie about it. It's not like I was opposed to *all* gory cartoons. I liked Rick and Morty, for instance. But Rick didn't sit there and hammer you over the head with stuff. And Rick was funny while he was being disgusting, which drives points home better, in my opinion. And Rick didn't make you want to get up and kill someone for being evil either, because in the end, the evil characters were also funny, even if they weren't trying to be.

Anyway, Nora hated school even more than I did. In fact, sometimes she skipped class. I know that sounds

irresponsible, but seriously most of the classes she skipped were a waste of time. The difference was, I didn't have the courage to skip. She did.

I found out where she went when she skipped class. She would go across the street to 7-11 and get a protein bar, or a coffee, or a bag of pretzels, and then sit outside on the curb and listen to music on her phone until the next class began. She would rarely skip two classes in a row.

When her parents found out, they were more than concerned. They took her phone away. Which is kind of like being sent to purgatory. Or solitary confinement. Suddenly you can't answer texts from friends, you're not getting fake texts that say Hi that you can report as junk and delete, which always feels good because you know Apple will eventually find them and put them in jail.

I get it, these are the things parents resort to if you don't do what they think is best for your future. Like if I didn't practice piano after dinner, my parents would get all pissed at me and tell me how much money a private teacher costs. Because now I was old enough to be aware of money, and how expensive everything was.

I realized how my mom and dad both slaved away at their jobs to pay for things. But like, when I was twelve, I couldn't have really told you if piano lessons cost more than a fancy dinner at Fred's Steak House, or a new shirt, or a used car for that matter. I was living in a dreamworld. I was a child. But now that I was fifteen I was acutely aware of the cost of things, because my dad made me acutely aware, and I was also acutely aware that in a few years I would need to go to college, and then get a decent job like the kinds of jobs my mom and dad had. So now I was acutely aware that my

piano lessons, which I hated and didn't want, cost more than the stock price of Alliance Bernstein Holdings L.P., which was the place where my dad worked, which, at the time he yelled at me was \$33.56 a share. So the piano teacher was more than \$33.56 a lesson, but I was not learning \$33.56 worth of information. That's called not getting fair value.

In fact, for the entire last year, we mostly just went over the same boring classical pieces he taught me the previous year, and I could see him stifle a yawn every time I made a mistake. He'd look at his watch fifty minutes into the lesson, and then re-look every minute until right at fifty-nine minutes after the hour he'd not so subtly begin to pack up things in his centuries-old leather briefcase, and then collect his money from my mom, and leave to torture his next victim.

My lessons probably weren't even worth a gelato two-scoop cone, to be honest. And for sure, the taste of the cone itself was way better than the sound of the music he had me learning. It's not like he had me playing Beethoven or anything good. After seven years of lessons, I think I at least deserved Beethoven. But he disagreed.

When I was eleven we didn't go to school. We stayed in our rooms and learned online, and wore masks outside, and watched people die on TV. My dad said the president was killing people by telling them to drink bleach. I'm not sure why a president would do that, but eventually *he* got COVID, and I think this year he got arrested a bunch of times, maybe because he kept saying and doing crazy things like telling people to drink bleach.

But it was a very boring year back then. I took way too many piano lessons, all by Zoom. And my mom and dad both worked from home, which was both good and bad. My mom and dad argued way more than they did before. My baby sister cried way more than she does now. Plus, I met Nora back when we were ten, and kind of liked her even then, but I didn't see her once that entire year.

After COVID was basically over and we all went back to school, we were spoiled, wondering why we had to wake up early to take busses, and eat the crappy lunch food in the cafeteria. It reminded me of prison. You see those scenes in movies where they're all in line in the cafeteria waiting for a bunch of slop to be scooped onto their tin plates by mean people in white clothes. Same as our school! I swear. I longed for the days of COVID, when a far better lunch was served in my own kitchen by Mom or Dad. In fact, Dad would make his famous huevos rancheros for me before going back to work with a cup of coffee. And he wouldn't force me to eat lunch at eleven in the morning either.



Nora hated the cafeteria food too. I could tell. But while she was moving the food around on her plate like they were little characters in a video game she was also talking to the girls at her table, especially one girl named Cassie, and making them laugh. They'd crack up at something she'd say, and she'd just smirk, like, not laughing *with* them. I liked watching her even though I had no idea what she was saying or laughing about. Because I guarantee you they were talking about a lot more than just boys. Maybe they were talking about the food, or a teacher we hated more than all the others we hated, or the janitor who had a shaved head and tattoos all over every inch of his neck and arms, and the back of his hands. One of my friends jokingly called him B.B. King. B.B. stood for blue, and *more* blue.

Then the day came when I was walking past Nora while she was standing alone in the hallway, and she said, hi Oliver. I stopped, because even though I thought it would be the cool thing to do to say hi Nora and just keep walking, I couldn't be cool like that. It felt fake. So my legs just kind of stopped walking, and I stood there in front of her.

"Did you hear about Mr. Heefffer?"

We called him Mr. *Heifer* because he looked like a baby cow.

"What about him? Did he moooo-ve?"

She thought my joke was stupid and not even worth a smile, or even a fake smile. "No. He just stopped coming."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe he got fired."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Or maybe his wife got sick."

"Yeah."

"Maybe he got COVID. It's still around."

"Yeah."

The bell rang so the answer remained unknown, but what mattered was that Nora chose me to tell. *Why?* She didn't usually talk to me.

As I started walking to my next class she called out, "Oliver." I turned around, and she said, "Meet me after school at 7-11, okay?"

I said okay, and texted my parents that I was staying after school to work on a project. I'd stayed after school for projects before. They never asked me what the project was, and they didn't ask now. Then, I watched the clock -- endless time passed -- like piano lesson time -- until finally the bell rang.

I ran across the street to 7-11 and got there before her, and waited.

It was drizzling, which it did often this time of year, and as she walked towards me it made her curls look twisted up and misty -- the light brown turned even lighter, because it was like there were drops of sunrays stuck inside the beads of rain in her hair.

I was skinnier than her back then, and definitely didn't have as nice of a face, or sun-drop hair, or rainy blue eyes. My hair, eyes, and eyebrows and eyelashes were all just plain brown. Nothing more than that. I look very unpoetic.

A car whizzed by. It was driving too fast, and the sound of the tires on the wet road reminded me of Saturday mornings when my mom would put that first piece of French toast into a hot buttered pan.

Nora stood there, very close to me. "We're friends, right?" she whispered.

"Sure, yeah." I didn't think so before this because we hardly ever talked and never hung out together. But I was happy she thought so.

"I can trust you, right?"

"Sure." She could, but how would she know that?

"Because I've always felt I could trust you with a secret."

"Okay.... thanks."

"You know my friend, Cassie?"

"A little."

Nora looked around to make sure the 7-11 guy was still behind the cash register and not coming out to smoke a

cigarette on his break, or secretly spy on our conversation.  
You never know with adults in small towns

"She's pregnant."

"*Cassie?* How? Who? *Jesus!* "

"*Who?* It wasn't Jesus, that's for sure! And if you don't know how, it's not for me to tell."

"Very funny. I know how."

"You do? Have you ever?"

"Maybe... no. I mean.... have you?"

"No. But Cassie has."

"Who's the father?"

"... I can't say."

"Is it *creepy?*"

"I think it's creepy."

I didn't want to pry any further. I still wasn't sure why she told *me*.

"Isn't she older than us?"

"Sixteen. But same grade."

An awkward silence fell at the exact moment the drizzle stopped. We had been standing under the eaves of the 7-11. (I had to look up what the overhang of a roof was called. And how to spell it. It wasn't spelled E-v-e.)

I was waiting for Nora to reveal why she chose me to tell, or at least tell me more, but she looked like she was thinking about a lot of other stuff, so I let her keep thinking.

Suddenly she said, "Ok, I have to go. But we need to meet later, if you want to. Or would you rather not care? I mean, it's not your problem."

"No, no. I'll meet. Where? When?"

"I'll let you know later, but you ask a lot of very good questions."

"I know, right?"

Watching her face, it seemed like for a moment she thought I'd said something funny, or at least cool or snarky, but I wasn't sure.

We exchanged contact info on our phones for the first time, and then she left to get on a bus toward home.

## 4

Cassie was the daughter of a state senator (there are lots of them apparently) but this one was friends with the mayor, who was the brother of the governor. Add that up, and I'd hate to be the one who got Cassie pregnant. I also heard of all the creepy stuff that happens, like if it was her father, a state senator, who got her pregnant, that would be a freaking nightmare on a whole other level. Or if it was her weird older brother, who lived with Cassie's mom many towns away because they were divorced, and who didn't go to college and just stayed at home all day playing video games, that would be pretty horrifying also. Like if was graded on a scale, the father would get an F-, and the brother would get an F. Both would be expelled... from Earth.

So who begat whom? as the bible might say. It was a mystery, because besides me, only Nora knew she was pregnant. But the odds were, it was probably someone at school.

So I thought about all the boys who went to our school, but imagining any one of them even kissing Cassie was not easy. They were all dorks like me. And not good looking, like me either. They could never have attracted someone like Cassie, or any other really cool girl for that matter. So I wondered if maybe it really *was* someone creepy. Like an uncle? Or a neighbor?

The next day after school I met Nora at Creek Park, because that's the place she told me to meet her. We leaned our bikes under a tree near a tunnel that looked like a long

steel tube that apparently older kids used to go to have sex in. That was the rumor. I never went in there, and never personally saw anyone go in there to have sex, or even look for someone having sex, but I admired the tunnel from time-to-time, nonetheless. Of course, I dreamed about having sex in there with Nora, more than once, but there was no way I was going to tell her that.

"So I found out who," Nora said. "You'll never guess."

"The father?"

"No!"

"Not the *brother*?"

"Eew! No!"

"Why didn't the father get an *Eew*?"

"I don't know.... *Eew*, alright?"

"Okay.... So it wasn't a family member?"

"I didn't say that."

"I don't understand. She doesn't have any other brothers. And, oh, was it Cassie's new stepfather?"

"I don't think he would technically qualify. Being married for only two months is like a trial period anyway. It might not last. And they'd have to stay married for at least a year for anyone to call a dude that's not your father, a father anyway. So, no."

"But that was a good guess, right?"

"A wrong guess doesn't qualify as a good guess."

"Okay, I give up."

A boy we knew named Devin rode by on the bike path at that very moment, saw the two of us hanging out together, talking, laughing, with our bikes next to each other against the tree, and almost rode his bike into a ditch. I

secretly hoped he'd start a rumor at school. Sometimes rumors eventually come true.

"Well, it's a long story. But Cassie said it was okay that I tell you because she trusts you."

"Why does *she* trust me?"

"Because I told her I trust you, and she's my friend."

"But why do *you* trust me?"

"It doesn't matter, Oliver! You just have to swear on your life, and everyone else's life you care about, that you won't tell anyone, ever."

"The flaw is that it allows me to tell someone I don't care about."

Nora considered the logic and said, "Okay, then on everyone's life you don't care about, too, including me and all your teachers."

"The flaw there is *you*."

"*What?*"

"Never mind. I swear. So, *who was it?*"

"Well, Cassie has this cousin who lives in California who's a year older than her, and for a week every summer she gets to go to this place in California to visit her aunt and uncle, and him. It's a very rich place called Sonoma. Apparently, they make wine there, and *everybody* drinks wine all the time. It's like rich people's preferred way to get high. So one night she and her cousin raided the wine cellar and got drunk when his parents were out at a movie, and they started kissing and, well... *that's who!*"

"Wow. Gross."

"She says she really likes him."

"Well, *so what?* They're cousins! She *can't* like him!"

"Yeah, I know."



"I have a cousin my age. She's cute, but I'd never..."

"Well, I have a cousin too, and I'd never. But Cassie did, and she really likes him." She shrugged.

"So, what is she going to do?"

"Well, she has to *not* have the baby, obviously. But if she tells her parents what happened, everything is going to blow up. They would probably kill the cousin. He'd be like so dead. They might kill her too."

"So then everyone would be dead in the end. Sounds like a love story to me."

"Oliver, what the fuck!"

"Romeo and Juliette..."

"... *were not* cousins!"

"Sorry. It's just so weird."

Nora nodded.

"But why, *why* are you telling me this? I have like zero to do with any of this! And I don't know Cassie hardly at all. It's not like *I'm* her cousin or anything."

"Very funny."

"Well then, why?"

"Right. Well, here's why...."

She did this looking around thing again, to make sure no one was within earshot.

"I really don't want to say this too loud...."

"Noted. But...?"

"I kind of like you, Oliver. I think you're a bit of a dork, but I trust dorks more than I trust non-dorks. Dorks don't go rogue and turn into jocks or jerks.... too often anyway. And I'm telling you about Cassie because I need to make sure you're not the kind of person who would ever tell anyone

their secrets. Because then I can also be sure you won't tell anyone I like you."

"You know, you could have just passed me a note in class!"

"That only happens on TV. Besides notes in our school end up on the bulletin board"

"True. Well, I like you too. I think you knew that. In fact, I've liked you since I was ten. But *that's* not weird, because you would have been ten too back then. But still...."

I began to think about the tunnel with a whole new perspective. It became less of a dream, but still less than a real possibility.... It was kind of like a 3-D virtual dream.

She came close to me, like she did at 7-11, and kissed me on the cheek, then on the lips, and said, "Yeah, good thing we're not ten."

Okay, yes, it was my first real kiss, and I had no clue what to do because the only other kiss *on the lips* I'd ever gotten was from my grandmother. And that was *not* good.

After Nora said it was a good thing we weren't ten, I kissed her back.

I learned much later the odd thing about kissing -- after the very first kiss something happens. It could be really good, or... strange. If it's strange, you wish there was a time machine that could rewind you five minutes back so you could say goodbye and go home instead. But if it's really good, you want to kiss again right away, and that's definitely what this felt like.

And then the weirdest thought occurred to me. Devin, the boy on the bike who I hoped would start a rumor about us... well, now I hoped he wouldn't. I mean life is so strange like that.

## 5

Nora lived exactly seventeen blocks away. We rode our bikes one day and counted. I saw her house from the outside but never went in. Our parents' houses are the last place we'd ever want to hang out. Questions from parents would be endless. They have their own secret lie detector tests. So we usually met at the park after school and texted each other all night. Then deleted the texts before falling asleep.

Nora told me that I was not the first boy she kissed. But the other two boys didn't go to our school. She met them at camp, then never saw them again. So I really didn't care. And besides, she let me go a lot further than kissing. Kissing was like flirting. More than that was, well, more than that.

Meanwhile, over the next few months, Cassie's very serious problem stopped coming up in conversation. All I knew was one day she came to school un-pregnant, and Nora and I were the only two kids in school who knew there was a time before that time.

But this story is not about kissing, or romance, or sex, or Cassie's non-baby, or the fact that no one ever found out about that except her dad, the state senator. He knew. She told us no one else knew, not even her mother. But again, it doesn't really matter. What matters is how we got caught doing something else entirely and ended up in a police station.

When I said I was fifteen a while back, that was only one-twelfth true, because by the time this part of the story happened, I'd turned sixteen, and of course, got my driver's

permit as fast as I could. It was a literal rite of passage at sixteen.

Once in a while my parents would let me borrow their car and I'd drive to Nora's and pick up unpregnant Cassie and we'd drive to places where kids our age would hang out, which in our part of the world mostly meant the mall.

On a Saturday night the mall was filled with teens who were basically like human rats. We never bought anything, but we were more than happy to find vendors giving away free samples of stuff, or we'd pretend we were interested in buying a phone, and sit at a kiosk while some kid not much older than us showed us the latest technology and talked about the cool new apps. They weren't shocked in the least when we left without buying anything. In fact, they would have been bored if we hadn't kept them company.

We also huddled together with other gangs of rats that we'd meet near the food court. There were the gamer rats, the downer rats, the nerd rats -- a pack from which I'd escaped moons ago, the punker rats, the "I'm in a band" rats, the jock rats, the "we're already busy looking at colleges" rats, and of course, what gang of humans would be complete without its subgroup of hoods and jerks and bad boys, which included bad *girls* of course, or there would be far less bad boys.

One of these bad boys was nicknamed VW, but I can assure you from what happened, he did not own a VW. He did, however, own a car, which his father bought him to keep him out of trouble, *LOL*. Parents are beyond clueless.

Mine still insisted I continue to "learn" piano in exchange for the use of their Honda (the oldest and most beat-up of their two cars), not knowing that the only way

*actual* learning was going to happen would be to first unlearn everything I presently knew about classical theory, and what was considered "good music," according to my teacher who I called Mr. Lassiter, because we both agreed that was better than calling him by his first name, which was Igor.

Anyway, VW had his eye on Nora for months. She had grown more beautiful by the week, by the day -- I assumed in part because I was her secret boyfriend, and there was this glow that happened and showed in our faces, plus she was eating more, and laughing more, and wearing clothes that didn't need to impress anyone anymore -- because she knew I was already impressed with anything she wore, or didn't want to wear at any given moment, and everything underneath that I was fortunate enough to lay my eyes on every chance I could, which lately was more and more.

But I'm not here to give away secrets, or piss-off her parents if they were to ever read this. Believe me, they are already pissed-off enough, as are mine.

To get back to VW, he had a thing for Nora, and not knowing that *we* were a thing, he asked her to hang out with him Saturday night. That was obviously asking her on a date, and when you ask someone out on a date, obviously that means you are asking them for more than a date. At least at my age that's true.

So she said no thanks, but didn't explain why, and that really messed with his already fragile bad boy self-confidence, and after that, he began to tease her whenever he saw her, then spread rumors about her, then said mean things to her. It was getting bad, and Nora was starting to feel more like the way she felt before I met her.

That's where Cassie came in. She went up to him one day when we were all hanging out at the mall and said, "Lay off my girl Nora, Dude, you hear me? I know you need to find someone you can mess with. But go mess with someone else."

So, of course, he said, "How about if I mess with you, Beautiful?"

And she said, "I don't hang out with messes."

And he said, "So your cousin isn't a mess?"

And she said, "WTF, bro. *Shut the fuck up.*"

And his gang of rats gathered around our gang of rats, and everyone began to laugh at us and bare their teeth until a fat mall cop dressed like some soldier from a third-world country waddled over to break things up. He had a gun in a holster and everything.

So that's all our school could talk about when Monday rolled around. And now of course, *everyone* knew about Cassie and her cousin, and I have no idea how VW found out, but it wasn't me. In fact, the one cool thing that came from this nightmare was that Nora *knew* it wasn't me without even asking, because she trusted that it wasn't me.

Maybe it was someone at the Planned Parenthood office who was a mother, who then told her daughter who happened to go to our school to never *ever* have sex, or have a boyfriend, ever, because look what happened to Cassie?

But at this point, it really didn't matter, because VW blew everything up and was having a good laugh about it.

He also found out soon thereafter that Nora and I were *a thing*, and I call it that because we had not yet defined what that thing was exactly. So why would we define something we couldn't even define to ourselves? Why mess it up?

Once the school found out about "us," of course our parents soon found out about "us," because no one around here can keep their mouth shut about anything.

So now we were all under neighborhood watch, as they say, and I was no longer aloud to hang out with Nora alone at all, even though Nora's parents didn't know *who* "the boy" was. Basically it was *all* boys, *any* boy -- *no!* (I mean sixteen isn't eighteen. We did not yet have the legal or moral right to protest draconian parental rules. And most of the parents I knew were worse than helicopter parents. They were more like drones.)

Of course, we then had to lie to everyone in order to find a way to meet, which meant we were always in dark private places, which meant that it wasn't long before we were no longer sweet innocent little sixteen-year-olds. We were "together," using anyone's definition of the word. That was okay with us, because we really did love each other, and honestly I was now floating around the halls at school feeling like an adult, and one hundred levels above my clueless loveless friends. We even tried the tunnel. It wasn't bad. Someone had left a blanket in there.

But VW was still after Nora, and if he couldn't have her he didn't want anyone to have her, because that's what bad boys come to in their head when they're lying in bed at night, tossing and turning, with no one to talk to but themselves. So he started literally following us around in his car. And when we asked him politely, and then not so politely, to stop, he would say what most jerks say in a situation like that: "It's a free country."

Now it was winter, and I hated winter. I hated snow, because it was going to turn brown from dirt and car

pollution and air pollution, and then melt away into literal nothingness, so if anything reminded me of time, and what was going to happen to me as I got older, it was snow.

I also hated wearing winter clothes, because winter clothes are a lot harder to take off in dark and secret places than summer clothes, and the dark and secret places were so so cold this time of year, who wanted to even take off one piece of clothing? Or even unzip a coat? Getting our hands to anything warm was impossible.

Winter parties were certainly nothing to get excited about either. Most of them were just places to get high because the parents abdicated their throne for the evening, and then try to have a good time listening to deafeningly loud music.

But when we heard Cassie was throwing a party to celebrate her seventeenth birthday, and that her dad was out of town trying to convince somebody of something, we jumped at the chance to gather in a warm friendly house.

Nora was, of course, allowed to go to her best friend's birthday party, as long as she was home by curfew. Which was 11 p.m., which was really early, because that's actually when some kids' parties start around here, if you're a senior. But we weren't seniors, so this was an 8 p.m. start time, which meant that you weren't really supposed to show up until 8:30, and then you only had two and a half hours to go as crazy as you could, before having to act like nothing at all happened when you got home.

My mother was so naive, she insisted I buy Cassie a birthday present. That's where my mom's head was at when I was *sixteen* --> birthday parties = pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey = you bring a present.



If it's a girl's birthday, why not use Unicorn wrapping paper?

So I bought Cassie a unicorn iPhone case as a joke, and wrapped it in unicorn wrapping paper, and Nora bought her a box of condoms, wrapped in velvet, in case she ever found someone to sleep with that wasn't her cousin.

Things were going swell at our little gathering until VW pulled up in his loud smelly car. How the hell he kept finding out about everything, including Cassie's private party, when no one we knew would want to even say hello to him is beyond me. Maybe he listened into everyone's Alexis or something and could listen in. Or he had a very nerdy friend spying for him because he was just pretending to be a nerd. But anyway, there he was with two of his idiot cohorts, chortling like little girls, ringing the doorbell over and over again, holding a twelve-pack of beer in their cold winter-red hands. It was probably ten degrees out.

"Let the party begin," he proclaimed. It sounded about as rational and inviting as Trump proclaiming he'd won a second term and was staying president. One of his friends looked like a teenage version of Rudy Giuliani. Bad teeth, looked crazy when he smiled, weird flat nose, buzz cut; and the other sidekick was a silent dark-vibed kid I'd never seen before who looked gloomy but intimidating, like a punky Vladimir Putin.

Cassie would have no part of it. "My father is a state senator, and when he finds out you're here uninvited he's going to put all three of you in jail for trespassing. So as they say in Monopoly, I'm giving you a get out of jail free card. Now get out."

"What the fuck does this have to do with Monopoly?" VW said, with his eyebrows squinched.

If we were playing Monopoly at that moment, I would definitely have offered him my Connecticut and Baltic Avenue for his Park Place.

"Leave," Cassie said.

"I just want to share our birthday gift with you and your friends. Then we'll leave."

"Keep the beer. Consider it a party favor. Thanks for coming. Have fun getting drunk in the back seat of your car. I'm sure it won't be the first time."

"No, I think I'm going to sit right down there on that fancy couch and drink it with my buds. You can still have your little pink pre-teen birthday party, don't mind us. Go get straws and enjoy your cherry cokes."

"Cherry! Coke!" Putin guffawed. He thought those were the two badest, coolest words, and VW was so bad, so cool, so funny. *Cherry. Coke.* Erotic poetry at its finest.

Meanwhile, I saw something shiny on the white carpet by the front door. Apparently, VW had dropped his car keys while offering us the very generous twelve pack he'd bought, or stolen from his father's refrigerator. And that gave me an idea.

It was an idea that was going to change my life, and Nora's life too. Possibly a bad idea, but it was theatrical and creative. Cassie would have to hand it to us for originality.

While the gang of rats (I was now thinking they looked more like a thuggy version of The Three Stooges) made their way into the kitchen to look for a bottle opener, I took Nora's hand, walked her towards the front door, reached down to pick up VW's car keys, and then... she immediately caught

on. We opened the front door and sprinted towards his car. We knew Cassie was now feeling trapped at her own birthday party, and her other friends, mostly innocent nerds, were freaking out, sensing trouble, but too afraid to leave.

We entered VW's big dirty car, with empty bottles and porn magazines and all sort of other crap scattered across the back seat. I got behind the wheel. Nora was laughing nervously as she slammed the passenger door. I started the engine and gunned the motor while in neutral and honked the horn over and over, so VW was bound to hear it.

As soon as he came running out to see what was going on I put it in first gear and the car took off like a rocket that had lost its guidance system. Because the gas pedal was a little too far for my foot to reach easily...as was the break. VW was six inches taller than me.... This was definitely a tactical error.

Off we skidded, on a street full of ice, with VW and his loyal oafs running after us. One of them, I think it was Giuliani, slipped and fell face-down in the street. The other one began running in the opposite direction, fearing trouble with the cops. It was Putin retreating. Not a rare thing. But VW kept running towards us.

Now, any car, but especially a souped-up car like this one, could easily outpace even the fastest runner alive. But not if... the car... *hit a tree*. And that's what happened.

And that's how a good idea quickly turned into a very bad idea. I mean, we got VW and his band of goons to leave the party. But, it's possible, in retrospect, we could have come up with a better way. This now seemed like Plan B. Plan A could have been stepping outside and calling the

police. But Plan B was so much more final. This was a lesson VW would never forget.

Anyway, VW caught up to his tree-smashed car, with the engine bellowing white smoke, kind of like if the car had just decided on a new Pope.

He dragged me out of the driver's seat and punched me in the face, screaming and cursing at me. Forgive me if I forget exactly what he was screaming. The sky was spinning a bit from being punched... *in the face!* My ears were ringing. The motor was still on. It didn't sound too good. There were all these burping and hissing and farting sounds emanating from this once fine machine, until finally, the engine stopped altogether. The silence was eerie, because now the only thing I could hear was VW grunting and screaming in the frosty air. His voice seemed to be echoing off the picture windows of this otherwise quiet picturesque suburban neighborhood, where state senators and all sorts of other rich and important people live.

Then in the distance, I heard the sounds of sirens. (Not to be confused with the title of the Simon and Garfunkel song.)

Meanwhile, Nora opened the passenger door, ran around the front of the car, and began kicking VW from behind, trying to drag him off me. When the police arrived, VW shoved me back into the driver's seat so they could see clearly that I was the one who'd caused the accident.

And that is the scene the police witnessed as they exited their police car with their flashlights beaming, and blue lights spinning.

They didn't offer to help stop my bleeding nose, or put ice on my black eye. They just quietly -- with a calm

competence rarely seen by officers on a local police force -- gently directed the three of us into the back of the police car. No handcuffs. No strait jackets. Maybe the opulent neighborhood had something to do with it their lack of concern. But I mean, what was to stop one of us from lurching towards the front seat and choking the police officer who was driving, just for fun? Who would put it past kids these days?

Anyway, they notified the local towing company to remove the car, or what was left of it, and took us down to the station.

## 6

My parents were completely bewildered. Who had I become? They couldn't help but remember me as their sweet little boy -- the one who used to sit on the couch each morning before school, innocently telling them my dreams from the night before. I called them "inside stories."

My father probably recalled the many times I would crawl under his desk, secretly, stealthily, and pull his socks off while he was talking on the phone with someone important.

And my mom would of course, remember how I would offer to dip the bread into the egg mixture while standing on a chair, preparing the French toast we would eat on those late lazy carefree Saturday mornings. She'd recall with a smile how I'd always put too much egg on the bread. What happened to that little boy?

Honestly, how would I know? What happened to the melting snow each winter? Where did snowflakes go? What happened to winters? What happened to time, or to democracy? What happened to piano teachers who actually knew how to teach music? *Were there any?* How would I know?

They don't put sixteen-year-olds in jail, at least not in my town. But they did call my parents down to the station at 1 a.m., along with Nora's parents, who until now I had not had the distinct pleasure of meeting. In fact, they had never even heard of me! Way to go Nora! She was so good at keeping secrets.

This was an interesting first meeting, because I was sitting with Nora on a steel bench in a police station, bloodied and near tears. And I was sitting next to their innocent darling daughter, *why?*

The parents politely introduced themselves to each other, and everything was going along just swimmingly until VW entered from another room where a police report was being written. He was accompanied by his father.

But VW was no longer VW. He was now Victor Winslow Jr, the upstanding son of the town jeweler, who as rumor had it -- and God knows there are endless rumors in this town -- spent many a night looking for someone to replace his divorced wife with by frequenting the bars scattered along University Avenue.

Victor, as I will temporarily call him, because he was temporarily someone else in every imaginable way, was ever so politely accusing me of stealing his car. And, officer, was Oliver Benson also possibly kidnapping his good friend, Nora?

Are you okay, dear friend? he cooed, looking directly at her. His eyes became moist with concern. Did he try to hurt you, dearest Nora, or OH MY GOD want to have sex with you?

This was like a Leave It to Beaver re-run. (I used to watch them on YouTube when I was like, eight.)

I wanted to rat on him, but I was too busy trying to move my jaw to convince myself it wasn't broken, while nodding to yes or no questions from the local interrogator, who seemed to take on the role of judge and jury.

Did I steal the car, yes or no? My words were muffled because my jaw wouldn't open.... "*Well, the reason...*"

"Yes, or no."

I tried to help my jaw open and close with my hand, but my words were still muffled, "Not exactly."

"Yes or no!"

I decided to nod no.

Because it wasn't stealing *exactly*.

That led to, "Then what were you doing in his car?"

My anger loosened up my jaw enough to scream, "*Do you really want to know?*"

But at that point my father was witnessing the inquisition and interrupted. He told the interrogator I wasn't on trial. He said if there were any more questions he would have to talk to our lawyer. The interrogator looked crestfallen. Sensing an unwinnable battle with an equally Alpha adult, he dismissed the lot of us, and made a police report based solely on Victor Winslow Jr.'s version of the story.

VW's father looked like he was about to fall asleep as we left the station. I mean it was 2 a.m., which is when bars closed. So I guess he was a creature of habit.

But VW kept droning on to the interrogator about why I stole the car, and about me kidnapping his friend Nora, and then claiming I was driving drunk. How else could I possibly smash up his car within half a block of where -- by the way -- it had been *legally* parked?

My father took away my car privileges (surprised?), and grounded me on weekends until further notice, and told me it was time to get a part-time job, and also it was time to get straight A-s in school, or there was no way they would pay for college.



I had become a spoiled brat, a punk, a thug. I had lost his trust.

Nora's parents grilled her about me, and why was she hanging out with a car thief? She was told never to see me again.

VW filed a civil claim. He wasn't about to let this go. He demanded we pay for damages to his car. But he also seemed hell-bent on taking me to juvenile court to face justice. He also continued with the claim that I was kidnapping his friend Nora.

But there was one thing VW was not planning on. Cassie's father, the state senator. When he came home and heard what had happened, with Cassie framing the story through *her* perspective, everything shifted.

To him, key point number one was they were uninvited guests. Key point number two - minors bringing beer to a party. But there so was much more....

You see, Cassie's father had been a high-powered attorney before becoming a state senator. As it turns out, he had a very interesting meeting with Victor, a.k.a. VW, and his Rolex-ed father.

The visit was presented to the Winslows as their state senator trying to help get the all the facts straight.... Maybe it was help their claim. Or maybe he was going to offer a monetary settlement from my family -- maybe we would pay for his car, maybe even buy him a new car, as long as he dropped the charges.

But the plot suddenly turned.

Cassie was listening, hiding in the shadows of the hallway outside her father's home office. She reported the meeting to Nora and I:

The Senator, in a jolly, welcoming tone, smiles, "Thanks for dropping by, gentlemen. As you know, I want to help you with this unfortunate situation. It happened at my daughter's party while I was away at the Capitol. I'm none too happy about the publicity, especially since this happened in my district."

Mr. Winslow respectfully says, "Understood. I appreciate you trying to help us with our case, Senator."

"Well, let's see what I can do."

The Senator turns to VW and begins his trap by softening his voice, "So this was your car, Victor, correct?"

"Yes, sir," replies sweet kind VW, dressed in a sports jacket to hide the tattoos on his arms.

"Victor, in the police report, it says they saw you hitting Oliver Benson after he allegedly stole your car."

VW senses a brief moment of being on the right side of the truth, "He *definitely* stole my car!"

The Senator says, "Right. They also saw you shoving Oliver behind the wheel of your car. And at the same time they saw Nora Hudson kicking you, and trying to get you away from Oliver. Is that your recollection as well?"

"Sir, I was trying to make sure the police saw he was the one who'd been driving, and he was putting up a fight about getting back in the car. But Nora, I think she was trying to kick *him*, not me."

The Senator sits back in his chair and says, "I see. So you're saying she just had bad aim, and kicked you in the backside over and over again by mistake. Is that what you remember?"

VW stammers, "Sort of. I mean, *definitely*. It was late at night. I was trying to save her, I thought she was being kidnapped, but I also needed to stop Benson from stealing my car.

The Senator laughs. "Well it's hard to steal a car after it's become part of a neighbor's tree, don't you think?"

VW laughs back, " Absolutely, sir!"

The senator's little joke had VW and his Rolex-ed father starting to relax a bit. It seemed like the Senator was enjoying their company. Perhaps they would be invited for dinner someday? Cassie and VW could sit together...

The Senator, however, had no intention of entertaining the Winslows for dinner.

"However, what I don't understand, Victor, is this... Your friends at the party were a witness to him stealing your car. And you had Nora, the damsel in distress, you might say, as another witness. You had Oliver legally dead to rights. So why fight with him?"

"Like I said, I just wanted the police to see he was the driver."

"Yes, I heard you the first time. Anyway.... good job preventing him from kidnapping the girl.

"Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome."

Victor Winslow Sr. is beginning to think that maybe he could bring a nice bottle of wine when the Senator invites them to dinner someday.

The Senator says, "And by the way, thank you for bringing a gift to my daughter's birthday party."

"Excuse me?"

"The beer, the six pack. Thoughtful. So many kids didn't bring any gift at all."

VW thinks fast. "Oh, I may not have brought it. Or bought it. It could have been someone else, one of my friends."

The Senator apologizes, "No, no. Don't get me wrong. It was her birthday, after all."

VW remains silent.

The Senator moves on, "You know my daughter, Cassie as a friend, right?"

"Yes sir. Wonderful girl, sir."

"I agree... Did my wonderful daughter invite you to her party, or did you come uninvited with your two friends?"

"Uh, I think she invited me."

"You think?"

"I'm not sure if she invited me directly."

The Senator's trap had now been fully laid. He leaned back in his chair and says, "Well, let me tell you how I see it, Victor. I've known Nora for a while. She's a friend of Cassie's too. My understanding is, Oliver is her boyfriend. Cassie also told me that you were clearly aware of that. And I think you'd agree that boyfriends don't usually have much of a reason to kidnap their girlfriends."

"The other problem with your story is, apparently, you have a bit of a record, Victor. I saw a speeding ticket attached to the police report. And I saw petty theft as well. What were you stealing?"

VW begins to panic, "Oh, no, I wasn't stealing. It was a mistake. It was just an iPhone cover. I forgot I had it when I walked out of the store."

The Senator says calmly, "Well, someone like a judge might question your testimony in court because of these little mishaps. They kind of add up, they create a picture. And... the kidnapping charge... that's a big problem for us."

VW says, "I don't understand."

"Well, Victor, what if Oliver and Nora said, for instance, that *you* were trying to kidnap Nora?"

"What? That's a total lie!"

"Well okay, but was anything *you said* a lie? Because lies tend to come to light eventually. Are you sure you weren't an uninvited troublemaker at the party that night? And that maybe Oliver was just trying to get you and your friends out of *MY HOUSE!*"

The Senator screamed the last two words louder than just an italic scream. It made VW fall back in his chair as if from a powerful gust of wind.

VW peeps, "Well... that's not the way I remember it."

The Senator pounces, "Well, that's what Cassie told me. Are you saying my daughter is a liar too?"

Mr. Winslow finally emerges from his daydream about dinner at a Senator's house. He is no longer considering what kind of wine to bring. He's been blindsided. Not just by the Senator, but by his son too. "I think we've heard enough, Senator."

"I understand. But you might want to get your boy a lawyer or a public defender, Mr. Winslow. Because, if we press charges for trespassing, and prove that your son was a minor in possession of alcohol, that would be a terrible thing. And if Oliver's parents' lawyer also brings a false kidnapping charge against your boy, he could be in real

trouble. And his past criminal record won't help.... Do you understand?"

Mr. Winslow doesn't know what to say. Maybe he thought, "Dear Lord, I could really use a drink right now."

But the Senator was not likely to be the one to offer him one.... Not anymore.

'Or," the Senator's tone softens, "Maybe we could all decide to drop the case and make this whole thing go away."

Mr. Winslow nods slowly, "That sounds good to me."

VW hisses in a loud whiney whisper, "*Dad!*"

But his father had heard enough. He looks at VW and says the following words: "I've heard enough!"

Sometimes saying the same thing back works.

The Senator says, "Okay, let me see what I can do. I'll draw up some papers."

Mr. Winslow says, "Thank you, Senator. I appreciate it. I don't want any trouble."

The Senator gets up from his chair, walks over to a now shattered ghost-like figure, Victor Winslow, his six foot-five frame slumped over, standing there disillusioned about so many things, and they shake hands.

The Senator says, "Nice meeting you, Mr. Winslow. Glad I could help you and your boy out. Just don't forget to vote for me in November."

Within days, the case against Nora and I was dismissed. In exchange, the case the Senator threatened to bring against VW on my behalf was left unfiled. My parents never even knew about the false kidnapping charge. So all was well, justice had been served.

VW's story had crashed head-on into a forest of lies. The Senator had lopped his lies down, branch by brambly branch. Except...

Nora and I were still forbidden to see each other after school. In fact, there would be no more unquestioned "after school projects," or phantom chess club meetings, or casual walks home, in a blizzard, or excuses like going to watch our school's scintillating two-hour volleyball games -- *Go, Sun Dogs* -- when actually we were in the dark empty school auditorium behind its thick black velvet curtains doing far more than kissing.

No more. We had been flushed out in to the open. We were both being watched 24/7 by the higher authorities known as Parent Nation. Drones were everywhere.

There *was* one upside to my insane attempt to save Cassie's birthday party. Nora and I were now heroes at our school. We had stood up to the bad boys, gotten them in huge trouble, and wrecked VW's crappy car in the process. All because he wanted to crash a girl's birthday party. He picked the wrong girl.

Rumors were flying. The full story was being passed along throughout every grade in the school. Everyone was laughing at VW now, and applauding Cassie's father for blowing up his little scheme. Even the teachers secretly appreciated my stupid bravery, although they never would have told me that to my face.

We also knew if VW tried to retaliate, he would have a state senator to answer to.

So Nora and I seemed doomed, star-crossed, but of course, human teens are wired for disobedience. And Nora and I were determined to find a way to see each other, drones be damned.

Our solution was the exact same solution to our original problem of smashing VW's car into a one hundred year-old oak tree -- Cassie.

First, Cassie would pick me up, ringing the bell and saying hi to my parents while giving me a quick hug hello. Now, this was a smart choice for their son, they thought. A girl whose father was a state senator, who also happened to be the man who got their dumb-assed son out of legal trouble.



In fact, Cassie presented me to them as a hero. Someone who had prevented hoodlums -- *hoodlums!* -- from wrecking her sweet innocent birthday party, and trying to turn us into alcoholics.

"Why, if it wasn't for Oliver, Mr. and Mrs. Benson, that party would have been the worst night of my life. Instead, your son was a hero, and the entire school knows it."

"Really?"

"Really. And now we've become... *best* friends."

"Well, isn't that wonderful," said Mom. "And might you even consider going to the same college...?"

At which point I'd heard enough, "Oh God. We need to go, Mom. I'm going to go study at Cassie's house."

"Yes, my father has a big office at home that he hardly ever uses. And it doesn't have a T.V., so we'll get some good work in."

"Music to my ears," my father said.

"Speaking of which, have you ever heard Oliver play piano?"

"Mom!"

"Well, some other time perhaps," mom shrugged. "Do come for dinner one night, sweetheart."

"I'd be happy to. Thank you so much for the invitation."

Cassie's voice was buttery, and kind, and polite, and, well, perfect. Being a state senator's daughter had taught her how to fake it in all sorts of adult situations. I had a lot to learn.

After dropping me off at her house and actually making me promise that I'd study for twenty minutes, she went to pick up Nora, using the same routine.... "Hello, Mrs. Hudson! ...My father has a large office..." Blah blah blah.

Once Nora came running in, she and I would go flying off into the guest bedroom for an hour. Meanwhile, Cassie was on the phone with some boy from the city who she'd met through her dad. She liked him, but not "cousin" liked. Just liked.

Anyway, after our time together in Cassie's guest room the three of us became like *The Three Musketeers*, or maybe a modern-day version of *The Three Mouseketeers*.... We weren't into smoking pot like a lot of our other friends, or drinking -- no one who drank would be considered a friend anyway. Or vaping or smoking cigarettes. All that was considered super lowlife.

We were basically *straight as an arrow*.

But one of the arrows was Cupid's arrow, and no one was going to stop Nora and me from being shot, over and over again, with an arrow like that.

But then one day, that game also came to a sudden halt. Cassie's dad came home early one late afternoon and found out that we were rolling around in the upstairs guest room.

"This is not a Brothel, Cassie!" he hissed. "I could get in serious trouble if anyone found out about this. Why would you allow this?"

We came downstairs sheepishly. "Sorry, Mr. Delancey. Please don't blame Cassie."

"Ah, well if it isn't the two car thieves!"

"Dad, they weren't stealing the car."

"Guys, let me tell you something. If I'd allowed them to press charges and took their case, you would have been convicted of stealing a car. You need to know that, so you don't do anything that stupid again. Understand?"

I nodded, "You're right, Mr. D."

"It's *Senator D...*"

"Sorry."

"Only kidding about the name, son. It's fine. But being here like this really isn't okay. I assume your parents don't know you're here?"

"Uh, right. But they also don't believe I stole a car anymore, thanks to Cassie."

"She can be very persuasive... But, honestly, what the hell were you thinking when you got in that car? I still don't get it."

"I wanted to get VW out of the house so he wouldn't ruin Cassie's party. That's the truth."

"So you figured, if I steal his car, he'll run after his car, and his friends will follow him running after his car, and the party will resume as if nothing happened while you drive off into the sunset?"

"Basically. I guess I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"Do you know how stupid that is?"

"I do now, yes."

"And do you know how funny that is?"

I shrugged.

"Seriously, you should run for politics when you're an adult. Maybe you'll come up with some insane idea to solve global warming that will somehow make sense to everybody except *logical* people, which would put you in the majority these days."

"I don't think so. Politics isn't for me, sir."

"There was a very famous Senator named Benson. He ran for Vice-President long ago. Lost."

"No relation, I don't think."

"I wouldn't have thought so. Anyway, please get the hell out of my house now. Both of you."

Cassie said, "*Dad!*" She went over and gave him a hug and lowered her voice, almost to a whisper. "Dad, seriously, they're in love. They're not just messing around. But their parents are so mad that these two saved my birthday party from becoming a nightmare that they're not allowing them to see each other."

"So these are our town's latest misunderstood heroes, is that what you're saying?"

"I'm saying they're my best friends, and I want you to leave them alone."

He looked at the three of us -- standing together now as a united front -- and assessed the pros and cons, the potential legal and political ramifications....

"Look, I've got work to do. Stay out of my office. Go study somewhere else."

He went over to his big antique desk, piled our books in his arms, and put them on the narrow entryway table in the hallway near the front door, usually used for keys and glasses and such, then shut his office door behind him.

"Good Daddy," Cassie whispered. "Come on, little car thieves. The senator has work to do. It's time to go to the mall. Oliver can walk far behind us and pretend he's shopping for a new girlfriend."

Nora laughed. But looking back, that ended up being a very weird thing to say.

Elton Gold was a senior. An A student. And born into a family who, for some reason, thought it would be a good idea to name their son after an old gay British rock singer with a serious drug problem.

But as kooky as his name was, it didn't stop Nora from falling in love with him. And he with her. And that was the end of us, because he wasn't old, or gay, and didn't do drugs, and wasn't looking for a threesome. And anyway, it would have actually been a foursome, because my heart was broken in two.

Nora was the only girl, actually the only person, I'd ever felt true love for. And still is to this day. And I know she felt it with me too. But hiding, and lying, and keeping secrets from our parents, and ducking into the shadows from all the parent drones flying overhead, started to make us feel like we were in the Hunger Games. It got exhausting. More for Nora than for me. I would have done anything to keep us together.

But time passes, and I guess people eventually want something different, something easier, something acceptable to their parents. And I guess Elton became that something.

Elton's father was the editor of the town newspaper. He also loved to bicycle around town during biking weather. Elton tagged along with him from an early age. Sometimes they'd bike fifty miles in a day.

The day Nora and Elton met, she was tending to her bike's flat tire. Elton stopped to help her fix it, and actually

didn't ask her out after the tire was fixed. Instead, he mentioned that he was headed to watch his girlfriend's volleyball game at school. By chance, his girlfriend's teammate (often riding the bench with her), was none other than Cassie. So Nora decided to ride along with him to surprise Cassie, and support her playing a sport she couldn't have cared less about.

Elton's girlfriend, it turned out, was not his girlfriend. As Nora soon found out, his girlfriend was actually his *girl friend*. His neighbor from childhood. Innocent mistake. Maybe.

Allison loved Elton like a brother, and thought he was the nicest kid in school, but *her* actual boyfriend was a skinny weird kid named Rex.

After the game, Cassie took one look at Elton and imagined what a kind and smart and wonderful potential boyfriend he might be for *her*..... but Elton was awestruck by his new bicycle mate. Cassie told me later she could see that right away.

Elton made a point of getting to know Nora better by talking to her in the hallway in between classes at school, and then inviting her on an occasional "friendly" bike ride. On the third friendly bike ride, he asked her out.

Nora told him about me.

He said, "I know. And that's okay with me. I just want to be friends."

But no kid I know just wants to be friends with *anybody*. There's always a catch.

By the time Nora got to know him, and felt like he actually *was* becoming a good friend, a *trustable* friend, the sudden out-of-nowhere *first kiss* happened, with the

perfunctory, "Oh man, I'm sorry, I didn't mean for that to happen."

And Nora, because Elton had become such a trustable friend, and also happened to look like a Caucasian version of Zeus, just for fun, kissed him back. Just for fun.

And as they both stood there agape, post-kiss, the Greek Gods converged, Pan began to dance, Eros appeared, the moon rose suddenly in the noon sky -- a full moon, of course -- night fell in a flash, and the stars blazed and twinkled above them, the way stars do only when two people are starstruck.

When Nora broke the news to me that she wanted to go to the movies with her "friend," I understood what that meant.

And never being the kind of person to fight a battle I knew I couldn't win, I told her, "Have fun with your friend."

She then she knew *that I knew* what the word *friend* might mean after this friendly date took place.

So the end of Nora and me as a couple felt about the same as the beginning -- an awkward non-verbal tumbling through time that coalesces with a kiss, a secret knowing, and a second mutual kiss that some might call fate.

Nothing more had to be said.

At school I was now a hero without a sidekick; Batman without Robin; a Robin with robin's egg blue eyes. She was gone. And I was now just a skinny awkward Batman without joy, without a purpose. And without sympathy from anyone at school about being replaced, because everyone loved Elton, the all-American boy who was going to some Ivy League school in the fall.

What was left for me was a shitty part-time job selling ice cream - gelato, in fact - while my classes were now getting too damn hard, and were kind of freaking me out.

My parents kept bugging me about school, and about deciding where I wanted to apply next year, and reminding me to keep my grades up, and bugging me about Cassie too. Why wasn't she coming over for dinner? Did something happen between us?

Yes, something happened -- *Nothing happened.*

I mean, looking back, most of my life since I was fifteen was just a mountain of lies and secrets I couldn't talk with them about. They didn't know me, because they didn't want to know me. But I did finally convince them I didn't have time for piano lessons. That was one good thing out of the thousands of bad things.

Being that my relationship with my parents sucked, school sucked, my job sucked, and my girlfriend had sucked the life out of me, I found myself sinking into a pretty bad depression.



I tried smoking weed with friends; it made me feel more alone than ever. Cosmically alone. Snow meltingly, *star* meltingly alone.

I looked at my friends and realized I had no friends.

I then tried smoking weed alone, assuming at least *I* was my friend. It made me feel even worse.

I tried drinking with friends. After two beers I got sick and threw up in an alleyway.

What the hell was wrong with me? What kind of teenage misfit can't get high without feeling even worse than when he started?

After a few months, my parents finally noticed something was wrong.

So here is something people reading this should know - being depressed is different from depression. Being depressed is like, things feel bad and dark and like they're never going to get better, so I think I'll go and shoot some baskets, or get some pizza and pig out.

Or, maybe for some people getting high works for them for a while. Good for them.

But depression is like, things feel bad and dark and like they're never going to get better... and I don't care, and I can't seem to get myself out of bed. And where are these tears coming from? *I hate this....*

So, one day, my mom took me to see a therapist.

Walking up the steps to his office, with my mother right there beside me, was so embarrassing. It felt like *the walk of shame...* climbing one agonizing step at a time until we opened the heavy spring-loaded door to his office and looked at magazine covers until some lady left and I was

invited in. At least my mother was not invited in. This was going to be private, he said, just between you and *me* (a total stranger). Great. I was supposed to bear my soul, and maybe get an answer to why this all happened, and what to do to get rid of this raging jumpy feeling inside of me so I didn't jump out the guy's window before fifty minutes was up. I thought to myself, if I were to jump out his window, how was he going to keep that private? I guess confidentiality only goes so far.

So then I started thinking to myself, what can I actually say to him before he shakes his head and says, well this is something I'll have to talk to your parents about.... You stole a car at what age?.... You had sex when... where? What's the name of that senator? .... This was not going to work.

After exactly fifty minutes of totally bullshitting my way through my "introductory session" he just assumed I thought he was some kind of genius, and that we were now best friends, and he scheduled a second session with my mother before I had a chance to tell her that I hated him, and didn't trust him, and wasn't going back.

When I did tell her, she started thinking I was not only depressed but paranoid, and maybe I needed medication. So of course she began researching psychiatrists.

I was just stressing her out. In fact, ruining their lives. My dad stopped talking to me. My baby sister was now walking and talking and getting most of their attention, and honestly that was fine with me. They had wanted to have one last kid, a second child. A child that would perhaps grow up to exceed the successes of their first child someday. At this point, they probably prayed she could at least turn out normal.... Was that too much to ask?

One down, one to go.

The psychiatrist saw me twice before informing my mother, much to her disappointment, that I didn't need medication, and in fact it would probably just make things worse.

Mom said, "Well then what do you suggest?"

And she said, "You might try talking to him. He's basically a good kid. I think you need to let him tell you who is really is, and what he really feels and thinks, without judgement. I think he wants to feel loved and understood by his parents and accepted for who he is. And I think he deserves that. Everyone does."

My mom broke down and began crying right in front of him. "Are you saying this is *my* fault?"

"I'm saying there is a good chance that if you hear him out, you might see there is no one to blame. No fault. No serious issues to be concerned about going forward. Everything is fine. Or, *could be* fine. All you need is love, as The Beatles once said."

Yes, but did this therapist also know that the beginning of that song is in 7/4? My piano teacher never taught me things like that. I learned it from watching a video on YouTube about famous songs that were written in asymmetric meters.

I also hadn't told the shrink (ironically, she was also rather short) half the crazy things I'd done or thought or felt, but she said she'd heard enough. She wasn't there to analyze my decisions one by one, or judge me, *other than* to assess whether or not I needed medication, or was a danger to myself or others. Or, whether I might be in trouble for some reason and needed her help. Or, whether I seemed to be

*headed* for trouble -- for some reason. And she didn't hear enough of a reason.

On a brain chemistry level she said I was fine.

Morally, she told me I sounded like a pretty together kid, for a teen.... Then she laughed, "Believe me, I've seen worse."

Overall, she made me feel better. I was relieved. And even before I had a big heart-to-heart talk with my mom and dad, my depression slowly started to melt away, like snow.

So here's the epilogue -- First of all, what you just read is my autobiography, to date. My English teacher wanted everyone in the class to write an autobiography for their last assignment of the school year. She said she didn't care how long it was, as long as it wasn't shorter than a thousand words. I get an A+ right there. I wrote thousands of words more than that.

She said, no diaries. No resumes -- we weren't applying for a job.

No outlines of accomplishments -- we weren't applying to college -- yet.

So, I just decided to be myself, and be totally honest, and I might even let my parents read it after this is graded, if they want to, because I don't have anything to be ashamed of.

As of today, I still feel really sad that Nora is with Elton. But honestly, he seems like a pretty nice guy. I met him once. And rather than it making me feel worse, that actually made me feel better. Not because I'm crazy, or the wiring is crossed in my head, or because I don't ever feel jealous thinking about them. I do. But it's because I still love her. She changed my life. There would be no autobiography without her, because nothing would have happened to me at all yet. So I want her to be with someone who makes her happy. If that's not me, maybe it will be him.

Cassie -- she's a freaking angel. A great friend. *Just* a friend. But a best friend. When I'm with her I can't stop

laughing. She's so cool and weird and confident and smart. I wish Nora and Cassie and I could still hang out together, just the three of us. Those were the best times of my life. If Cassie ever runs for state senator, I'll definitely go out and campaign for her.

My parents let me quit my part-time job if I promised to study with all the extra free time.

I do *not* study with all the extra free time. But I *am* having fun with friends, and therefore studying in a happier state of mind when I do study. So, I'm grateful for that, and maybe someday I'll even look back and think high school was not terrible. The jury is still out.

Speaking of juries, the senator made it clear that if it came down to a jury trial, I would have been convicted in juvie court for stealing a car. It *was* stealing. Technically. I know that. And Nora would have been convicted for being my accomplice.

But the truth is, if that's what it took to save Cassie's birthday party, if that's what it took, I'd do it all over again.

Oliver B.  
Grade 11