

“*Justine* has the perfect electric feeling of that crush you have on the person you want to be next, when you don’t know any better, and you can’t tell if you’re running away from them or toward them. Harmon’s mix of text and image is seamless, intimate, a continuous dream, and *Justine* brings her talents together with formidable force and grace. A showstopping debut.”

—ALEXANDER CHEE, author of *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*

“I’ve known Forsyth Harmon by the luxurious, eerie lines of her illustrations for years, and what a joy to discover that her writing is just as rich as her drawings. *Justine* beautifully captures the ragged-edged complexities of female friendship and the raw force with which a teenage girl moves through the turbulence of her previously quiet life. *Justine* functions like an illuminated manuscript, in which illustration can live independently yet brings wealths of new meaning to a text, weaving together a world that’s pulsingly alive.”

—KRISTEN RADTKE, author of *Imagine Wanting Only This*

“Forsyth Harmon tells powerful stories in both word and image, the two working together to convey meaning and emotion in a way that’s deeply satisfying. As a writer, and an artist, her gifts are on full display here. *Justine* is unsettling, adoring, insightful, and even a little frightening. The best books carry insights that will shake you. That’s what happened to me in this piercing novel. It shook me, and it made me see.”

—VICTOR LAVALLE, author of *The Changeling*

“Desire and self-destruction have a way of eclipsing and re-eclipsing each other in adolescence, as we look for reasons to live and ways to avoid living. With nervy, exacting illustrations and effortless prose, Forsyth Harmon’s *Justine* chronicles that struggle with the clarity and mystery of a black opal.”

—CATHERINE LACEY, author of *Pew*

“With reservoirs of emotional intelligence plus pinpoint precision of prose and line, Harmon conjures the world with a vividness peculiar to adolescence: she is devastatingly attuned to something as tiny as the poem of an unspooling cassette, as well as the enormity of those subtle yet life-shifting currents of longing, loathing, and eroticism that can run between two teenage girls. An exquisite book.”

—HERMIONE HOBY, author of *Neon in Daylight*

“*Justine* is a lushly rendered portrait of suburban teen girlhood in whose urgent and exquisite pages adolescent malaise, disordered eating, and the erotics of obsession are given the gravity of Greek drama. Forsyth Harmon is an artist who understands the holy power of longing.”

—MELISSA FEBOS, author of *Girlhood*

JUSTINE

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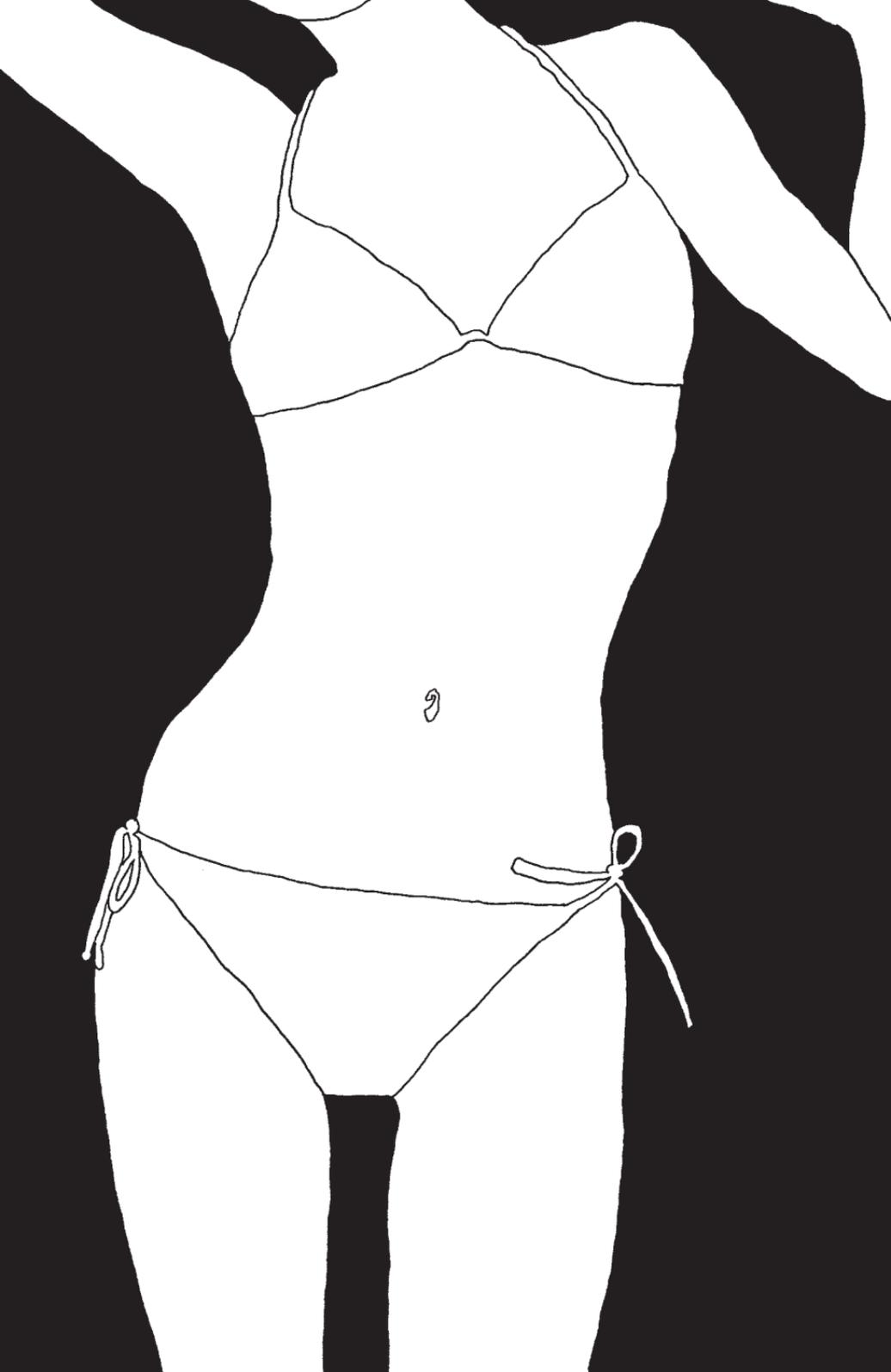
Justine

a novel

FORSYTH HARMON



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon



For my mother and her mother—



ONE

I first saw her on the other side of the conveyor belt. She was so tall and thin she looked almost two-dimensional, her long fingers fluttering over the cash register keys, her long arms passing my Trident sugar-free gum and Diet Coke over the sensor. Her own can of Diet Coke sweated a ring on the countertop beside her. Her face was long too, and her skin was so pale it was bluish like skim milk, and transparent in places, veins visible at the temples. Her complexion created an unsettling contrast with her hair, which was cut into a chin-length pitch-black bob. She pulled at the ends of it with those long white fingers, shoving the hair into her mouth, wide and protruding as though closed around the rind of an orange slice. But her eyebrows were so light they were almost nonexistent, and I could see then that her inch-long roots were an ashy color, dull as dishwater. Most girls would've highlighted hair that color, made it blonder. But Justine went dark. There was something spooky about the lighter roots. There was something spooky about Justine altogether. That's what the name tag attached to her red Stop & Shop apron said: "Justine." She must've gone to the other high school, the nicer one the next town over.

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“Two dollars.” Justine looked at me and smiled a wide, bright, dazzling smile. It was like the whole supermarket went silent when she smiled: there was a pause in the fitful beeps of scanned barcodes; the tinny music faded away. Her smile lit me up and exposed me all at once. Justine was the light shining on me and the dark shadow it cast, and I wanted to stand there forever in the relief of that contrast.

I handed her the money, and when the tips of my fingers brushed the soft inside of her wrist, my body went hot. It was a heat I didn't feel when I was with Matt. I felt it from the inside, it overwhelmed me, I tried not to show it. I grabbed my gum and soda.

Posters covered the windows—“Sprite Lemon-Lime Soda, 12-pack, \$3.49”; “Boboli Original Pizza Crust, 2 for \$5.00”—admitting natural light in only a few narrow slices. I saw a Help Wanted flyer not far from the automatic doors, just above the gumball machines.

A woman with long hair parted down the middle was stationed at customer service. From afar, I wasn't sure what it was about her that scared me, but as I got closer I realized it was her face, how hairless and smooth it was, deleting any indication of age. She could've been thirty or fifty, and for some reason that frightened me. Her name tag said “Theresa.”

“I'm here about the job?” I had to look up at her. The kiosk was raised, giving her a queenly altitude. She was counting postage stamps, mouthing “ten, eleven” with maroon-lined lips. She didn't acknowledge having heard me at first, finally

Justine

raising her brows, which were entirely penciled in—I don't think there was a single actual hair—and handed down a piece of paper and a pen from her little window with a sigh, like I was really putting her out. The counter was too high to use as a writing surface; I had to use a Tide box at the top of a pyramid-shaped detergent display. I suspected she liked that, seeing me slightly compromised.

I scribbled down my information and handed the form back up to her. She snatched it with a French-manicured hand, and I saw beneath her three-quarter sleeves that her arms were hairless too. Luminescent. She cradled a receiver between her shoulder and ear.

“Michelle to customer service.” Her voice sounded nasal over the intercom, more South Shore Long Island than North. She examined the application, looking from it to me, then back at it again, with a seriousness that felt disproportionate to the job.

“Fine.” Theresa glared, snapping the paper into a three-ring binder.

And so I secured a place for myself in Justine's glittering vicinity.

*

At home, Grandma was asleep on the couch, knitting needles Xed across her chest, a ball of olive-green yarn on the floor, Fox News on the TV. I dropped my bag and slumped

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into the La-Z-Boy. Marlina leapt onto my lap and kneaded her claws through my cutoffs, into my thigh. I wrapped my fingers around her neck and pressed my lips to her head.

“You’re my best friend,” I whispered into her little skull.

She wriggled out of my lock and kept kneading. The light made her pupils into slits. I opened the can of Diet Coke with a crack.

Grandma stirred. “I wasn’t sleeping.” She shook her head, sitting up and setting her knitting needles on the coffee table, aligning them parallel to the edge. “I was up at 5:00 a.m. this morning scrubbing the kitchen floor.” She put on her glasses. “Look at that hair,” she said, pointing at the newscaster. “It looks like a chicken scratched in it.” I nodded. She repositioned a doily.

“You should’ve seen *Days of Our Lives* today,” she continued, collecting the ball of yarn from the floor. “Hope hypnotized John. And now she’s pregnant. She’s big as a house.”

Marlina stuck out her chin, I stroked her neck. Grandma smiled at me. “How beautiful you look,” she said. “My little beauty.” She uncapped the tube of Aspercreme she kept on the side table and rubbed the salve into her knuckles. “Matt called.”

I leaned back into the chair, popping the footrest. Junior prom was the next day. Marlina settled on my legs. The oscillating fan in the corner made a rattling sound. Grandma switched on the table lamp.

“Horror God,” she gasped, pointing at the TV. “The children are shooting? It’s come doom-a-day. Are you hungry?”

Justine

She opened the coffee table drawer and pulled out a Twix bar. I shook my head. She shrugged and put it back in the drawer, got up, and pulled the lace from the window. She wore her short hair in stiff finger waves, and the back was flat from her nap. “Look how long Vinny’s grass is. *Vilken sophög*. It looks like a shithouse. I’m going out to mow our lawn.” She petted Marlana’s head. “He’s so lazy.”

“She.”

“She, she.” Grandma dismissed the cat with a wave. “She doesn’t do nothing.”

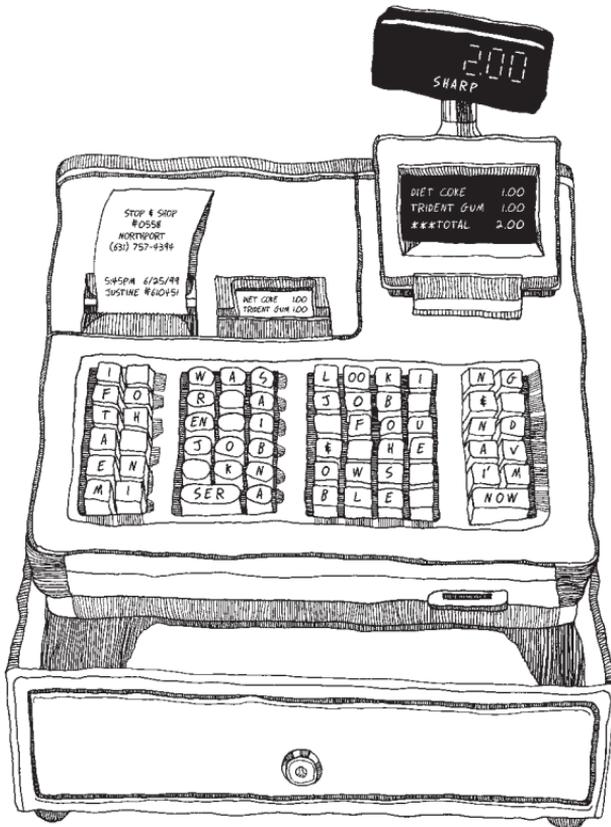
Grandma tied on her orthopedic shoes and put on lipstick. The screen door banged shut behind her. The lawn mower started. I swatted Marlana off my lap. She shot down the hall into my room, and I followed her and closed the door behind us for the night. As I lowered the blinds, I saw it was drizzling. Grandma was mowing the lawn in a shower cap. I slid the scale out from under my bed and tapped it with my toe, waiting for the green zero to appear. One hundred twenty-five pounds still.

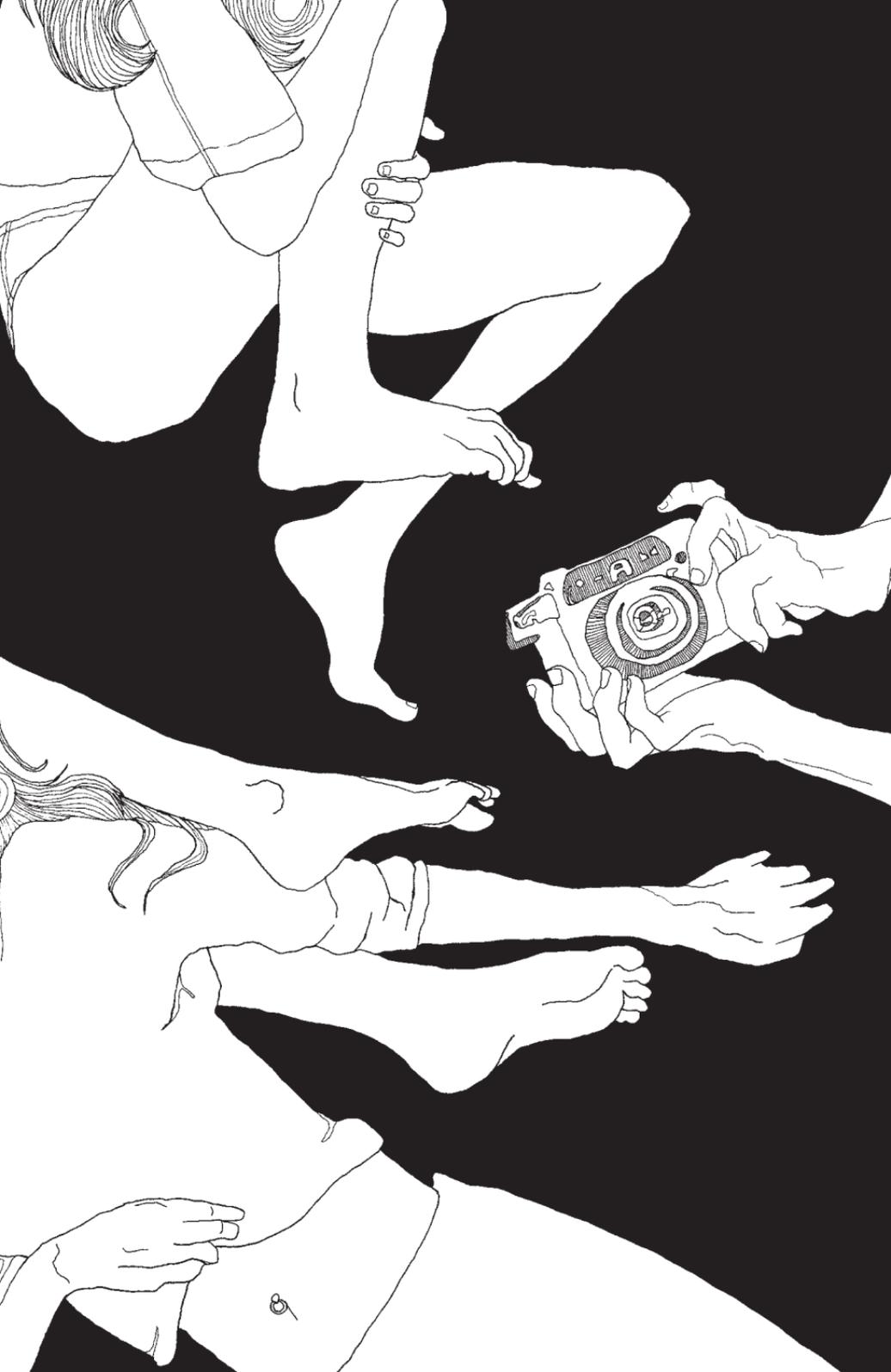
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The next day, the only good thing about junior prom was the feeling of eyes on me: Grandma’s in the mirror as I curled my hair; Matt’s as he slid a white rose corsage onto my wrist; his parents’ as I stretched the length of my neck for photos; his best friend’s, in the limo, as I wrapped my lips around the mouth of a vodka bottle.

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But later, in a motel room in Hampton Bays, I didn't like the feeling of Matt's eyes on me at all. He saw my body, but that was all he saw. No, Matt didn't even know me. And the next morning, as his truck turned into the driveway to drop me home, I told him it was over.





TWO

When Justine lowered the red Stop & Shop apron over my head, it felt like an anointment. A name tag had already been affixed to the left breast. It said “Alison.”

“But my name is Ali.”

“That’s just a nickname.” She tugged at my hair.

“It’s what my birth certificate says.”

“Alison’s better.” She wrapped the apron strings around my waist and tied them into a neat bow just above my belly button. I flushed with the intimacy of it.

Justine taught me how to bag groceries—how to construct the most efficient bottom-heavy grids, like playing Tetris; how to distribute the weight evenly across each bag; how to bag by category: refrigerated items in one, household cleaners in another. She taught me all the apple PLU codes: Braeburn, 4103; Gala, 4133; McIntosh, 4152. She taught me how to tell the difference between cucumbers (cold, waxy, and bumpy) and zucchini (rough and dry), without once insinuating male genitalia. She showed me how to casually turn my back on a not even very rude customer and spit on her strawberries.

Watching Justine at the register from my end of the conveyor belt, I was learning other things too, things she didn’t say—like after I saw her make several trips to the bathroom, I

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learned that vomiting was one way to counteract eating freely from the candy rack. When she passed items down to me to be bagged, I saw the small red teeth cut-marks on her first and third knuckles.

I learned, during downtimes, which magazines I should and shouldn't read when she actually took away my *Seventeen*, putting it back on the rack and replacing it with *Vogue*. On the cover, Kate Moss's face stood in for the *G*. She was laughing so hard her eyes were closed, her terrible but somehow endearing teeth exposed. She wore nothing but dark denim jeans, her fingers covering her nipples. The thinnest women never look slutty, no matter how slutty they are.

Justine stabbed a finger at Kate's bare stomach. "They say she had ribs removed to accentuate her waist."

"Really?"

Kate was entirely naked on page 185: a tiny square of pubic hair, her nipples erect. How long her nipples were! I brought the magazine to my face. On the next page, in profile, they were grotesque, the left one a little inverted.

"She's only five foot six, you know," Justine said.

"I'm five foot six."

Justine shrugged.

At the end of our shift, Justine offered me a ride. I followed her out back to her old brick-red LeSabre, like that was what we did every day. The interior was immaculate. She pulled down the sun visor and studied herself in the vanity mirror, then fumbled through her purse for a tweezer,

STOP & SHOP

32446

HESS

WEED	10	00
SHROOMS	10	00
ECSTASY	20	00
COKE	50	00

HESS EXPRESS

Forsyth Harmon

which she took to her eyebrows with great ferocity, creating little pink wounds where she attempted to prematurely excavate ingrown hairs as though they were mites infesting her brow bone.

When she turned the ignition key, a strange meandering falsetto pealed through the car. I didn't know what the music was, but tapped my fingers on the door handle as though it were familiar. The lyrics posed an existential question about the mind-body divide. Justine sang along. She was so off-key she must've been tone deaf. She didn't put on her seat belt. She took the speed bumps hard and fast, racing toward the adjacent lot, turning into the Hess station. Her bare thighs did not spread across the seat like mine did. They were no wider than her calves. I went up on the balls of my feet to bring mine in a little.

A tall, tan, dark-haired boy shuffled out of the Express Mart, jeans slung low, pant legs so wide you couldn't see his shoes. His Yankees cap sat high on his head, the brim angled forty-five degrees to the side. Justine pulled up to the pump and the boy shook his head. She rolled down the window.

"Tank's on the other side," he said, laughing, flagging us right.

Justine huffed, backed up, and pulled forward to the pump at the other side of the aisle. I rolled down the passenger window and the boy looked in past me at Justine very seriously, dark eyes half-closed, lashes interminable. His nose was large and irregular—he must've broken it—but that one imperfection only seemed to exaggerate his beauty. His name tag said

Justine

what I thought was “Chris”—I couldn’t quite make out the bubbly Sharpie graffiti.

Sitting there between them, I felt ordinary. My thighs spread miserably, my legs were disproportionately short—especially my calves—my torso too long, and my features were too large to be considered fine. My hair was long and thick but coarse—it had the tendency to get frizzy—and my fingers should’ve been thinner, but my skin was too thin, making me prone to cuts and scars.

Justine stared straight ahead and made her mouth a long straight line. Chris unscrewed the gas cap, filled the tank. Another boy appeared at the driver’s side. He pushed himself through the open window, leaned across Justine, and turned off the car stereo. She swatted his wiry arm and opened her mouth around it like she might bite. She had big teeth.

This boy was ugly, with a smug smile and crooked incisors, his freckled features crowded into the middle of his broad white face, pinched into an expression of demanding dissatisfaction. He looked directly at me with narrow eyes so black I couldn’t see into them: it was the look of a person who’s heard a rumor about you but won’t



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say what it is, doesn't care if it's true, actually prefers and even enjoys being offended by you. His name tag said "Ryan."

"Yo," he droned, leaning his forearms against Justine's sill, nodding at me, "who's she?" His fingernails were long, dirt collected beneath them.

Justine reached her arm around me and squeezed. "Isn't she cute?" She kissed me on the cheek and I felt it everywhere. "Alison." I just let her call me that. That's who I would be with these people.

Ryan lifted his chin a little, judging me. His freckles shifted with his expression, and I could tell he disapproved. Yes, he hated me, and I hated myself, which created an unexpected point of agreement between us.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and headed over to the other island, where a van waited. Chris banged on the LeSabre hood twice. Justine switched on the stereo and pulled ahead; she seemed to be leaving without paying. She veered toward Ryan like she might run him over, slammed on the brakes just short of him, then sped out of the lot like none of it had happened.

"That's my boyfriend," she said.

"Which one?"

"What?" she shrieked, turning left without looking right. "You think I'd go out with Ryan?" The person driving the car behind us leaned on the horn hard. "Disgusting." She banged a fist against the steering wheel, laughing. "How could you even think that? No. Christopher."

Justine

Of course. And yet I couldn't imagine Justine and Chris having sex. I guess I couldn't imagine Justine having sex with anyone. But I could imagine Ryan having sex with pretty much anyone, including me.

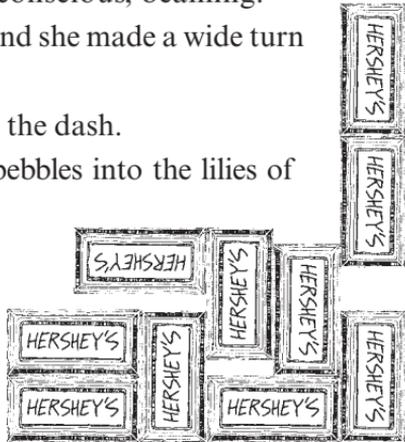
Justine drove with just two long fingers touching the wheel. Her other arm was out the window, hand weaving in the wind, wrist arching over and under Country Hot Bagels, Napper Tandy's, Nina's Pizza. She took wide looping turns, entirely unaware of the shoulder, the yellow double line; she sped and slowed erratically as she dipped in and out of one thought or another; she ignored stop signs and slammed on the brakes at the last possible second at the traffic light, causing me to shout; she laughed at me. I gripped the passenger door handle, scared but kind of happily distracted. She sang at the top of her lungs, snaking her head back and forth with the beat, occasionally turning to me, totally unselfconscious, beaming.

I directed her to my street, and she made a wide turn into our driveway.

"Watch the cat!" I pounded the dash.

Marlena bolted across the pebbles into the lilies of the valley.

Grandma was up on the ladder with the hacksaw, cutting off a sugar maple branch. She shouldn't have been doing that. She wiped



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her forehead, waved the saw at us. She climbed down as I got out of the car.

“That’s not Matt.” Grandma examined Justine through the windshield. “Matt called.”

“I’m Alison’s new boyfriend.” Justine looked up at Grandma, pulling the ends of her hair into her wide, smiling mouth.

Grandma laughed and waved a hand. “Well of course.” Grandma was always pretending she knew what people were talking about. Sweat stained the underarms of her house-dress. “What a pretty lady,” Grandma said as Justine got out of the car, “and not too fat.”

“Grandma!”

“*Vad?* She can’t understand what I’m saying,” Grandma muttered. “My English is no good.”

Justine crouched by the lilies of the valley. “What’s your kitty’s name?”

“Marlena,” Grandma said, “from *Days*.”

“*Of Our Lives*,” I sighed.

“Austin found Carrie in bed with Michael today.” Grandma shook her head, holding the door open for us. Justine sped through the kitchen and poked her head into my room. When she bounced onto my twin bed I wondered why I hadn’t taken down that old Mariah Carey poster. I turned a framed picture of Matt and me facedown.

“You have the same sheets as Fiona Apple in the ‘Criminal’ video,” she said.

Justine

“I know.” I sat on the floor and pinched the flesh at the inside of my thigh.

Justine rolled to her side, propped her head in one hand, and put the other on her hip. She extended her lower leg and crossed her top leg over it, resting her foot on the bed. She should’ve taken her shoes off. She breathed deeply and deliberately, lifting her bottom leg on exhale, lowering it on inhale. “Do this,” she said, repeating the motion.

I mirrored her.

