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*TO DROWN*

By all accounts the girl, Maggie, is a good student. She is sixteen years old. She excels in Physics and Spanish, and conjugates practice verbs easily:

*I went to the party.*

*You went to the party.*

*She went to the party.*

*We went to the party. We left the party. We would prefer to forget the party.*

She wants to go to Madrid someday, maybe when she is in college, and has a postcard of Dalí's melting clocks taped inside her locker. She once claimed that her gold-colored bangle, imprinted with a pattern of winding vines, was *from* Spain, but later her friend Becca told everyone that it was actually from Target. She likes long-sleeved shirts that can be pulled over her knuckles when she is nervous or flirting or undecided about what to do with her hands. She has long, pale hair that can be wrapped around a fist like a rope.

Everyone agrees that it is a nice house. It is in a historic neighborhood, which means the houses are old but not at all shabby, and the street lamps look match-lit. The living room is like the set of a period piece set in someplace like Denmark. Big windows, heavy curtains brushing the floor, lots of wood. The front door has a stained glass panel, a sailboat drifting across a body of smooth, bottle green water.

The house belongs to the parents of Daniel Wickett, nicknamed *Whack it*. Daniel Wickett is not notably popular or unpopular. In grade school class pictures, he was the boy lost somewhere in the middle row, average height, blondish hair, looking at the scratch on his elbow. Little

has changed; he plays lacrosse, but not very well. He has an older brother, Marcus, who plays lacrosse at a Division I college, where Daniel's parents have driven for the weekend.

If it were a movie, the boys would have played touch football with the large, egg-shaped piece of jade on the mantel, or tested their weight by hanging from the light fixture suspended from the ceiling. But everyone seemed to know better (at least at first). Parties around here are rare, and no one wants to be the reason that they become even rarer. Most weekends, teenagers spike slushies from the Sip n' Dip and congregate at the bottom of the old community pool, closed since junior high. The floor is littered with leaves and flattened cigarettes and beer cans, and last summer someone dragged in a rubber kiddie pool, filling it from plastic water jugs that sat baking in the sun all day. Several girls, including Maggie, are rumored to have lost their virginity in that pool. (She has denied this repeatedly; she has only been to the pool twice, she says, and both times she drank one beer and left before everyone else.) "It's sad, really," one sophomore girl observes. "Like we have nothing better to do than stand around a big hole in the ground."

That night, around nine o'clock, Maggie and her friend Becca arrived at Daniel Wickett's house. Both girls accepted the cups of punch handed to them—it was red and it burned down their throats—and then continued through the dining room, down a long hallway, and into the living room. "Drink but not too much," Becca said. "Otherwise you'll be the girl throwing up in the kitchen sink."

Becca sat on the arm of a loveseat upholstered in thick blue fabric and set her cup on a side table. She knew what to do at these things: smile and talk louder than normal and drink, but not too much. She leaned forward to talk to Jeremy, who was tall and good-looking enough that Maggie was unable to look him in the eye.

Against the opposite arm of the loveseat, Maggie let the weight of the plastic cup and the ice and the liquid—gin, she guessed—anchor her in the room. About a dozen people stood around in groups of two or three or four. Two boys competed to identify the most boring-sounding titles

on the bookcase. “*A Diplomatic History of the Nordic People*,” said one. Another ran a finger along the spines and paused. “*Great Lakes Warships 1812-1815*.” Nearby, a girl opened the window and positioned a lighter over a small glass pipe. “Anyone mind?” she said. No one minded. Another girl used an eyeliner pencil to draw a raindrop on the inside of Daniel Wickett’s forearm. When she was finished she snapped a picture with her phone.

On three separate occasions, one girl or another approached Daniel and touched him on the shoulder. “Whack it,” she would say. “How’s your brother? Everyone misses him.”

“Fine,” Daniel said the first time.

“Broken collarbone,” he said the second.

The third time he shrugged and said, “Syphilis.”

Maggie drank the second drink because someone handed it to her, and because Becca and Jeremy had started kissing. Around the room, people had divided and rearranged. She considered the possibility that if she drank enough she would be able to divide and rearrange herself, too. She was feeling that sensation she got sometimes when she wore someone else’s clothes, as if she was either too big or too small. She looked around the room and recited the names of various objects in Spanish under her breath:

Beer. *La cerveza*.

Floor. *El piso*.

Tapestry. She did not know the Spanish word for “tapestry.”

Window. *La ventana*.

She moved on to verbs:

To drink. *Beber*.

To drown. *Ahogar*.

To float. *Flotar*.

To wait. *Esperar*.

Becca and Jeremy had moved to the seat part of the loveseat. Their bodies were angled towards one another in that way, like the loveseat

and the living room and the Victorian house and the historic neighborhood had been designed for them in particular. They seemed to know that they were in a room of people who were pretending not to pay attention. They kissed periodically. Once, Becca leaned over to Jeremy and a boy by the window took a picture with his phone—Maggie heard the artificial *click* of the flash right before it went off.

“Hey,” she said.

“What?” the boy said. “Just documenting the evening.”

“Ignore him,” Jeremy said. “He’s an idiot.”

Becca, unbothered, turned to Maggie. “Want us to make room on the couch?”

“No thanks.”

“You sure?” Jeremy said.

“She’s sure.” Becca finished her drink and squeezed the top of the cup until it cracked. “Maggie is maybe the smartest person I know, but she never seems to get what she wants.”

“That’s not very nice,” Jeremy said.

“It’s not nice or not nice,” Becca said. “It’s the truth.”

On the other side of the coffee table, the girl with the eyeliner pencil was now at work on Daniel Wickett’s bicep. She smiled at Maggie and produced a tube of lipstick. “Want to help with the shading?” Maggie looked at Daniel. She had had several classes with him but they’d never spoken. She was nervous at first because she had to touch his arm—it was freckled and softer than she would have imagined, like a girl’s—but after a few seconds she realized that he did not seem to notice or care. He smelled like beer mixed with fresh linen dryer sheets.

“We took Physics together,” he said. “Mr. Gardener’s class.”

“Yeah,” Maggie said.

“I remember your egg drop,” he said. “It was the only one that worked.”

Maggie remembered Daniel’s egg drop, too: an elaborate cage-like structure of straws and Scotch tape, an ineffectual parachute made from an old t-shirt. Hers had been simple: a halved kitchen sponge, an egg-

shaped hole cut from each half, secured with duct tape. Easy, but she had taken pride in how the egg fit snugly inside, protected from the fall. “Ha,” she said.

“Hold my cup a second?” Daniel rolled up the sleeve of his t-shirt and studied the design on his arm. “Hey,” he said to the girl with the eyeliner pencil. “I asked for a dragon.”

“Did you?” the girl said. “I thought you said ‘butterfly.’” Maggie took a sip from Daniel’s cup and realized that she had had enough but not too much to drink. A pleasant kind of slackness spread through her body, like her arms and legs were more bendable than usual.

“The butterfly suits you,” she said.

“See?” the girl said.

When they finished, the girl dropped the eyeliner pencil and lipstick into her purse and wandered out of the room, in search of a bathroom. Maggie realized that she did not know what to say to Daniel. She glanced across at the loveseat; it was empty. (Later, she would learn that Becca and Jeremy had left without saying goodbye.) “So,” she said. “You’re Marcus’s brother, right?”

Daniel circled his hand around her wrist and squeezed. Hard. “Want to know a secret?”

“Sure,” Maggie said.

“Say it,” he said. “Say, ‘I want to know a secret.’”

Maggie laughed. She was nervous. “I want to know a secret.”

Days and weeks and months later, people would ask why he did what he was—allegedly—about to do. Maybe he was preoccupied by her wrist. He wondered if he could snap it in half, if he wanted to, or he was curious about how it compared to the hipbones concealed beneath her jeans. Or maybe he remembered a conversation from months earlier, in which Marcus had accused him of being a virgin. “You know your body’s not actually a temple, right?” Marcus had said. A boy from Daniel’s lacrosse team, at home with mono on the night of the party, offers the simplest explanation: maybe he had convinced himself that because he wanted something bad enough, she wanted it, too.

“You should probably drink more,” Daniel Wickett said. “You look really thirsty.”

Go to the Internet if you would like to read grim, non-scholarly articles about adolescent girls with low self-esteem.

You will learn the following:

1. All adolescent girls have low self-esteem.
2. Adolescent girls are frequently addicted to diet pills laced with speed.
3. Adolescent girls hate themselves even more than they hate each other.
4. They photograph their pale, underfed bodies and then upload the pictures to various social media sites.

Maggie drank no more than three cups of red punch. No one can say for certain what was in the punch—probably gin or vodka or both. It is possible that she had one or two beers in between cups of punch. It is possible that she had one or two shots in between beers. At least two people saw her vomiting out the living room window, onto the rhododendron bush, but this was not especially troubling. Someone *always* throws up at a party; it’s what people do. No one remembers seeing Daniel Wickett and another boy carry her up the stairs. Actually, one freshman *thought* she saw Daniel Wickett and another boy carry her up the stairs, but now she remembers that at the moment, Maggie could walk just fine, that Maggie practically skipped up the stairs. “I mean,” the freshman says. “Someone would have done something about it, otherwise.”

It is unclear how or why Maggie ended up in the empty whirlpool bathtub, her shirt and bra and pants crumpled on the bathroom floor. “Maybe she wanted to take a bath,” Daniel Wickett says. “No,” he continues. “No one took any pictures.” Unfortunately, Daniel Wickett’s cell phone was recently stolen. On the night of the party, in fact. He filed a police report, not long after Maggie and her mother filed a police report.

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There are at least two pictures, both taken on mobile phones, texted and then posted to social media sites. In one, Maggie lies facedown in the whirlpool bathtub. The tub is empty—otherwise, she would be drowning—and she is in underpants but no jeans or shirt or bra. Her pale hair is spread above her head, as if she is under water. Visible on her back are the fading red marks where her bra had bitten into her skin, and also some kind of liquid. Possibly beer. Possibly something else.

The second picture, taken earlier in the night, is worse. It is a waist-up shot of Maggie without a shirt on, wearing a bra. It is the kind of bra purchased by a sixteen-year-old girl who is still figuring out what sexy is: lacy, fluorescent blue with yellow straps. Probably her friend, Becca, held it up on the plastic hanger in the department store and said, “This one,” and Maggie had her doubts but she tried it on anyway. She had her doubts in the dressing room, too, but bought it because it was not like anyone was ever going to *see* it—the idea that someone would see it was so far-fetched it was almost funny.

It is hard to say why, exactly, the second picture is worse. Maybe because it looks like a mug shot, except she is not wearing a shirt and her eyes are half-closed and, reflected in the mirror in the background, you can see a boy’s arm.

It is hard to say how many people have seen the pictures. (It is easy to say how many people at Nathan Bedford Forrest High School, including teachers and administrators, have *not* seen the pictures.) Maggie has seen the pictures. They have been texted to her, repeatedly, by phone numbers she does not recognize.

After the first dozen texts, she tried to look up the word “slut” in her Spanish/English dictionary but could not find an entry. She considered the possibility that the word did not exist in the Spanish language. That in Spain, there was no such thing as a slut. She even typed up a list of reasons detailing why she should spend her junior year of high school in Madrid. She would gain a different perspective of the world. She would become more independent and fluent in Spanish and immersed in a new

culture, in the artwork of Francisco de Goya and Juan Gris, in classical guitar, in dinner at ten o'clock. But her mother dismissed the idea immediately; she did not bother to look at the list. "It just isn't feasible," she said. "The cost of the plane ticket alone, honey."

Anyway, the text messages stopped after Maggie dropped the phone down the kitchen sink and flipped the switch for the garbage disposal. It broke the garbage disposal. "Honey," her mother sighed, when she arrived home from work. "Haven't you done enough?"

The Wickett family is saddened and troubled by the events that took place at their home on October 6<sup>th</sup>. The police are currently in the process of conducting interviews in order to determine what, precisely, happened. The Wickett family asks that you respect their privacy, and the privacy of their son, until all the facts have been uncovered. It is sad when young people with such promising futures, girls and boys alike, exercise the kind of poor judgment that can change the outcome of their lives.

On a personal note, Daniel's mother would like to share a memory from when Daniel was a small boy: the two of them would take trips to the fabric store, where you could buy assorted buttons in bulk, and together they would choose an assortment of buttons, one by one. And Daniel would take them home and use them to build strange, flat, shiny villages on the living room floor, with a school and a pharmacy and a grocery store, buildings that did not resemble buildings, really, but the kind of accidental rock formations you might stumble upon on a remote beach. She wonders: would a boy like that—*could* a boy like that—do what he's been accused of?

The school psychologist at Nathan Bedford Forrest High meets with Maggie twice a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays. She is a decent woman who cannot look at Maggie without seeing her own daughter, now married with a child, who, at fifteen, once said that she imagined herself as a piece of paper, one that could be folded in half and folded in half and folded in half. The psychologist refers to what happened at

Daniel Wickett's house as "the event." It is not bad that Maggie remembers almost none of the event, but it is important that they try to explore it together.

It is impossible to fully understand the large and small ways that the event will shape Maggie's future. Here is a brief, uncomplicated, and incomplete look at her future:

1. She will go to college. During her freshman year she plays a game like truth or dare with three other girls from her hall, except all of the girls are mostly nice and everyone is allowed to abstain from the truth if they feel strongly about it. Maggie is asked what her biggest fear is, and without thinking she says, "Trapped in an elevator with everyone from high school." Lena from Akron, Ohio, objects. "Another one," she says. "That's everyone's biggest fear."
2. She will study abroad in Spain her junior year and become fluent in Spanish, learning that in fact there are several words for "slut." While overseas, she travels to Portugal, France, Slovenia, Croatia, Italy, and Morocco.
3. She will not sleep with a man until she is twenty-three. She questions, repeatedly—before and after she is twenty-three, until she is somewhere around twenty-eight—the appeal of sleeping with a man.
4. Periodically, she will receive friend requests from people she went to high school with—possibly the same people who sent her cruel, unrelenting text messages. They are now married or divorced or remarried, and some have small children who will be in high school someday.

On the psychologist's desk sits a small rubber doll modeled after Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. It is weighted at the bottom, so that when you push it over it pops back up again. Maggie flicks it with her index finger. She watches as it sways back and forth precariously, like a drunk. "Do I have to talk about it?"

"No."

“I barely remember it.”

The psychologist nods. She weaves her fingers together. “Maggie,” she says, “all we can do is discuss or not discuss what you *do* remember.”

What Maggie remembers is waking up in the bathtub. It was cold and slick with moisture, and she’d wished wishing that it was made of something besides porcelain. If it had been made out of sand, for instance, she could have started to dig. She could have dug her way out of the house, or burrowed into the sand and stayed there indefinitely, surrounded by damp, grainy weight.

Instead, she stood up. She had never been on a boat, but now she knew what it felt like to be seasick. She stepped out of the tub and gathered her jeans, shirt, and bra. She stood at the sink, avoiding her reflection, and washed her hands. She washed them for a long time. The soap smelled like lemons. She shut off the tap and listened to the sound of water swirling down the drain. She thought about what would happen to it next; she had learned about it last year in Earth Sciences class. It would travel from the pipe to the sewer to a water treatment plant, where it would be passed through various filters and chambers in order to remove dirt and cigarettes and ground-up pieces of cell phones and other pollutants. It would be treated with a chemical like chlorine to remove disease-causing organisms. Purified, it would be returned to nature, channeled into a nearby river or lake, immersed within the larger body of water.