

# Parentheses Dive Undone

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**“Parentheses Dive Undone”**

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**As she sat alone—but not lonely—boxed, bathed, and burning in fluorescence, it occurred to her that she had found a kind of light that never fell asleep. At the oddest of hours and during the brightest of days, it was everywhere she was. Fluorescence.**

It saturated the inside of buildings where she sat Monday afternoons, radiated against heads bobbing in time with instructive words and ink scrawlings on notebook paper. Five coffees and a world of nighttime hours past, it was the kind of brightness that usurped the emerging sunlight, and blunted her tired, treading mind as it looked through the white glow of computer screen. Its artificial yellowness followed her home in the deep morning hours, a crumpled, defeated feminine body, hurtling itself along the beer-stained hallways that led to her bedroom.

From wall to wall, raw, relentless, it baked through the entire space of the girls' bathroom. Played with vision, blue and black penmanship on inside walls of the third stall, full conversations; it mocked desperate red-inked voices; encircled tiny, dancing minds, pressing down on them with what felt like noonday, equatorial intensity—during every single quiet hour that passed. It never rested. Even when she wasn't there.

\* \* \* \* \*

The girls' room was on the bottom floor of the university's library, burrowed in a corner. The basement, lengthy, narrow, tiled in taupe linoleum, was dead in multiple senses of the word. Though Scottie only visited the library on occasion, when she did, she always went downstairs. It was the only place where there were living room chairs, their cushions still stitched together at every corner. It was one of the only spots in the library that wasn't popular with the students, given its dearth of windows and outside light. The elongated room, its dirty tile glaring with

electric radiation, was a deserted forest—filled with rows and rows of brushwood. Trees remembered themselves, probably forlornly, in the form of old, forgotten books and their ink-ridden pages, and in the wooden shelves that stretched away into the academic distance.

Before, there had only ever been telephone numbers. It was like back home, when Scottie was young, the impulse to write something else—something of depth or curiosity—never existed. As she remembered it, the bathroom stalls in her elite private high school were mostly clean, untouched by the female mind. Maybe in adolescence there had been other outlets, like furiously filling the blank pages of flower-covered journals, screaming to her mother from so very deep, deep in her throat that she was always surprised the sound emitted was so shrill. She never got in trouble for yelling like that, no matter what she had said. It was like her mother had expected it, so it was somehow okay.

Scottie had never done it—written on the inside walls of bathroom stalls. She never felt comfortable with the whole idea. Nor did she ever sign guest books at weddings or other occasions. She hated that, those high-pressure situations to say something clever, gracious, loving—or even all three, in a few short sentences. No one ever noticed, anyways, if she signed that is.

Inside the library, the bathroom, the third stall, Scottie saw that the month of February was passing away quickly, as the door before her was cluttered with much more scrawl than since her last visit. How long had it been, she wondered. There was a foggy recollection that maybe she had been to the library two weekends ago, but she couldn't be sure. The stall, a communal calendar of sorts, confirmed that a number of quiet hours, and nameless visitors, had

certainly passed there without her. Though there was no clock, no windows, she sensed the dissolution of day, into the past chilliness of all those that had come before it. She was late.

Scottie looked upward and squinted into the overhead lights, then down and forward into the stall door. Seeing colored spots, red, orange, and purple, her swollen pupils began to shrink back to their normal size. The colors were going, going, gone...swallowed into a carefully scripted, red ink question graffitied before her. It read: **when did you lose your virginity and to whom? How was it?** Grammatical correctness reigned—in a bathroom stall. Our professors would be proud, she thought. She leaned in closer to examine the responses, neatly lined in three-column form. Hmm, there had to be some eight or more additional since she had last checked.

*Age 16, to my boyfriend, good. Age 15, to my best friend's older brother, great. Age 18, to a friend, it hurt; I bled. 17, 17, 13, 20, 16...* She was later now. Around the corner, on the right wall, there was another question she recognized, written with all capital letters. *WHAT MAKES YOU SHED TEARS LIKE A CHILD?* A numbered, vertical column left room for ten responses. Only two were occupied—no more than last time.

*1. heartbreak*

*2. getting my legs waxed*

Below it though, there was something new. An additional question, scribbled in small lead print. *If you could be anything, what would you be?* The answers: *A trapeze artist, doctor, a capitalist, pretty.* Scottie's eyes ran off the walled page and onto her wristwatch. It was five fifteen.

Up on her feet, she unlocked the stall door and zipped toward the sink, passing a thin brunette, who was staring into the mirror. As she washed her hands, Scottie looked in the mirror,

too. It was a female compulsion, she figured. Gazing back at her was a flawless, but faded, pastel face, a clear palate calling for colors to accent her otherwise plain features. It was only when she leaned in towards her reflection that Scottie thought she looked remotely beautiful. Her eyes, green rimmed and speckled with tired beige, were slightly too close together—only widened by mascara-swept eyelashes, pulled out diagonally towards her ears. Cradling her left eye, Scottie recognized the tiny scar, which had grown and altered with the shape of her face since she was four years old. In pre-school, while spinning in circles on red carpet, she had tripped and fallen into the edge of a wooden desk. The doctor had insisted that he only needed butterfly tape to heal the wound. For years, growing through adolescence, she had cursed him. Stitches would have made the crease so much smaller, less red and noticeable. So unfortunate that he had been the doctor on call that day. Scottie had always been resistant to accepting change, seeing its positive. It was not until years later that she came to understand herself as lucky—not to have lost an eye.

Grabbing a paper towel to dry her hands, she checked the girl to her right, who had since leaned closer into her reflection to examine a burgeoning red spot on her chin. Though her face was squarish, she was pretty. Pushing through the swinging door, Scottie glanced back quickly to the girl, wondering if she inwardly agreed.

Outside the wind was brisk, the precipitation bosoming in the New England clouds. Scottie churned down the library steps, two at a time, looking off into the distant quadrant that lay ahead. The three main academic buildings, dimmed into near slumber, looked somehow majestic. For a moment, university life felt that way, too. Felt as she had expected it to, the day she sat shotgun in her mother's SUV, traveling northward. To a self-contained universe shrouded in history and academia, filled with children reared as equally well as she, capable of intelligent

conversation, similarly interested in feeling the raw emotions of humanity, and sharing her big, big dreams.

By the old bell tower—built nearly a hundred feet high, brick by brick in the early 1800s, when that pre-imagined, quintessential world might have existed—Scottie checked her watch again. Five twenty one. Though they could always blame her for running late, no one could criticize Scottie’s hustle. She wasn’t the kind of girl who resisted breaking into a light jog, even if she appeared uncouth doing it.

Tremont Street wasn’t far now if she cut through the quad. Inside the black wrought iron gates the grass was moist, though luckily not wet enough to splash mud onto her denim calves. All was quiet—in place of her breathing, its pace increasing in tune with her speed. From above, Scottie was a lone figure sprinting through a dimming winter evening, shadowboxed by the night’s first few snowflakes, making their way down from the sky.

Across the sidewalk, onto the black pavement, she slowed in diagonal across the street. On its sign, three storefronts down, letters spelling *THE MATCHBOX* were lit in red, buoyant against the navy aquatic sky. In front of the steps, she halted. Pushing her cold hands against her cheeks so as to monitor and absorb their chill, switching her bag of books to the other shoulder, Scottie ascended the stairs and went inside.

Out across the empty space of the restaurant, she could see an idle bartender and two waitresses, quietly milling among the back bar, tequila, rum, and whiskey.

“Well, well, look who decided to show,” Rana announced, only having to raise both her arm and voice slightly to wave Scottie back and into the corner booth where she and Alex were sitting.

“Sorry.” Scottie inhaled a breath and heaved it out. “Sorry!” she repeated again, approaching her two friends with a smile. “Where is everyone? I thought this place would be packed!”

“Yay for pig day!” said Rana in her characteristic mix of excitement and sarcasm. Alex gave Rana a look as Scottie slid into the booth next to them. Then, she laughed her sophisticated chuckle.

“It’s called *Fat Tuesday*, Rana. We’ve been over this,” Alex said. She turned to Scottie with a smile, “I prepped her, I swear.”

“Pig day...Fat Tuesday. I’m Muslim. Pick a winner,” Rana defended.

“You live on a Christmas tree farm in West Virginia,” Scottie countered.

“That’s just my day job,” she said with a wink. Rana signaled to a dodgy waitress in jeans and a small black tee shirt that exposed her extra stomach. “Let’s get this girl a drink,” she said, more to Scottie than to the waitress. “Whaddaya want?” Scottie looked to see what the other two girls were drinking.

Alexandra—vodka tonic, three limes. L.A. native, rosy cheeks, eyes crystalline—blue almonds. Stunning. Sad.

Scottie and Alex had met in their freshman dormitory, midyear. It was in the dismal month of February the night there had been a power outage on campus due to a terrible lightning storm. It had been early morning, some large window of time after midnight, when both girls had been awake. Scottie had been reading, admiring the lightning. Alex was sleepless, watching

television and chewing on uncooked macaroni. When the lights had blitzed out, both activities ruined for the evening, Scottie and Alex had been the lone two to meet in the blackened hallway.

“Hello?” Scottie called out.

“Hey,” a quiet voice responded, from some nine or ten doors down the way. Scottie didn’t recognize it. Disoriented in the darkness, she wasn’t sure what to say. Just then, a crack of elastic white light spiraled through the window at the end of the hallway, wrapping the two girls’ bodies in a momentary electric glow. The voice belonged to Alexandra.

“I have a lighter. You have any candles?” she asked Scottie.

They had never really met, not officially. The hallway unit was long, inhabited by some forty or more students. It was like a small neighborhood. Everyone had only traversed so far in baking bundt cakes and dropping off salutations during the first few weeks of school before life had gotten too busy—even for short hellos.

Alex had introduced herself to Scottie by her full name—Alexandra. That was at a time when she had insisted that no one call her by a shortened one. Scottie knew now she had done it mostly just to be a pain in the ass—because she disliked the place and everyone in it. Alex hated the idea of shortcuts, the thought that everyone—she included—had gotten accepted into the prestigious university with the help of legacies and wealth. She loathed the ease of it all, even her own stunted ability to appreciate privilege. Making them all call her Alexandra—four syllables—instead of Alex, was like a small ‘fuck you’ to the whole system.

After lighting the candles, Scottie settled on Alex’s floor, knees to her chest. In the flickering firelight, Alex was striking. Maybe the most intimidatingly beautiful person Scottie



had seen in the flesh. If symmetrical facial features and wide-set eyes on a woman made her attractive, then Alex looked perfect. Her skin, pale like Scottie's, was lightly freckled along her high-rise cheekbones. Her rich brown hair, finger raked into a high ponytail, hovered over her head, centralized, a crown placed at the top dip of her heart-shaped face. And her eyes, they were so blue! Scottie could tell, for this girl, beauty was no longer an exception, but an expectation. Part of who she was.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Alex asked, interrupting Scottie's examination. Startled, though hopefully not noticeably so, Scottie shook her head no. Alex hopped to her feet, her knit boxers exposing long, shapely legs, knobby knees. She pushed the window upwards, welcoming the quiet rumble of thunder into the awkwardly silent room, and lit up an unusually long cigarette.

"You ever been to L.A.?" She turned to Scottie.

"No. I wish," Scottie responded.

"Well, that's where I'm from. I don't know if you knew that?" she posed, raising her eyebrows and exhaling in the general direction of the window. Again, Scottie shook her head. "Anytime I smoke these things," Alex began, motioning towards the one-hundred-style cigarette between her two fingers, "it reminds me of this hotel along Sunset Boulevard, in West Hollywood. It's called the Chateau Marmont. It's really glam, like very old world charm. Built in 1929. It looks like a castle. There's this red-carpeted tearoom with gothic vaulted ceilings and dark wood paneling. Like James Dean and Elizabeth Taylor stayed there back in the day."

She paused for a drag of smoke and continued, "Anyway, the whole summer before I came here I spent with my friends, going there. It's practically the only place left in L.A. where you can still smoke inside. So we'd just pass away the afternoons, lounging on worn plush sofas,

puffing these cigarettes. It was so Daisy from *The Great Gatsby*.” Alex smiled, nostalgic, missing it, and turned towards the window again. Scottie was reminded of her father, nostalgic, missing him.

And suddenly, they were friends.

Rana—beer, on tap, probably warm. Big nose, blondish hair, physical manifestation of contradiction. Boxed within pink walls of sarcasm. Suffocating.

Rana, like Alex, was a smoker. They had met her in the springtime, outside. Though she had been trying to kick the habit, when you feel lonely, you’re out of matches, and someone offers you a light, it’s difficult to pass up.

“Where are you from?” Scottie asked, as Alex lit a cigarette for Rana.

Rana hesitated. Birthplace, a farm in West Virginia. Usually, people laughed, or sometimes more subtly—worse—they scrunched their eyes and noses, looked simply puzzled, as if her response demanded further explanation. Sometimes they even repeated the question after she answered. New England snobs. Think they’ve been everywhere, seen everything—meaning Colorado, California, and Europe. Rana had a full arsenal of rhetoric and clichéd stories to deal with that half of her life. Her home. *Oh shit you guys, whenever I listen to this one song I get all patriotic. I mean, our common people can beat the shit out of your common people. Like, I used to be an auto-mechanic, but now I’m kickin’ your German-speaking, schnitzel-eating ass. And now I’m back to doing my thing. Don’t mess with America, dude.* In some strange way, it was self-defense.

Then there was the other half, the visual one. From the day her siblings began taunting her, working to convince her that she had been adopted, Rana remembered looking in the mirror, nights, after the whole household had fallen asleep. She would examine her face, lightly complected like her mother's—a native West Virginian. While her parents had met when her Persian father was finishing medical school in the states, they had moved to Iran in the 1970s where Rana's two siblings were conceived, living there until the country's revolution. The youngest, she was born back on West Virginia soil in the big-banged, bright colored eighties. By then, per her travel abroad, Rana's mother had abandoned her Christian roots and converted to Islam.

Her father had since converted to another religion—Americanism. Hence, while he practiced medicine in wild, wonderful W. V., he simultaneously nurtured a Christmas tree farm in their backyard.

Back to considering Scottie's question, regarding her origin, Rana puffed out a cloud of invisible whiteness, one swallowed into the warmth of springtime air. Later, she had told the girls how clearly she remembered that moment—how Scottie and Alex had appeared so nonchalant, leaning against the brick building. Alex, tall, prepubescent lankiness, womanly charm. Scottie, curvaceous and relaxed, in dress and attitude. So unique, a bit contradictory, both with boys' names. Scottie herself remembered the moment as well, remembered being tired—she and Alex both were—of reveling in their unapproachable force.

Rana cleared her throat, swept her hand up to itch her nose, oversized and looking out of place for the slimness of her face, and answered. "I'm from West Virginia," she said, watching for the girls' reactions. There was nothing notable from either one. And suddenly, they were *all* friends.

“Hey!” Rana called out, snapping her fingers in Scottie’s face. “Drink? What do you want?”

“Sorry! I was thinking,” she responded, backing herself into the present moment. “Um, okay, white wine,” Scottie said hesitating. “Pinot grigio?” she asked, lifting her voice in sweetness. The waitress nodded, scribbled a few letters onto her pad, and turned towards the bar.

“So...where were you?” Rana said, directing the question at Scottie.

“Library.” Alex and Rana gave her looks over a beat. “Reading,” she added. “Lost track of time.”

“Yeah, that happens to me all the time when I’m reading,” Rana followed, raising her eyebrows and taking a gulp of her beer. Though all three girls were intelligent, each pretended to do as little work as possible.

“Yep,” Scottie laughed, and then changed the subject. “What did you guys do today?” Neither girl answered right away.

“Well, I went to class...and passed the forty-five minutes of boredom by undressing my professor with my eyes,” Rana stated matter-of-factly. Scottie and Alex exchanged glances. By now, they were experts at dissecting the shock factor from Rana’s words and quickly discarding it, so as to get to the crux of her comments. Alex took in the last swallow of her drink and looked to Rana, a signal so as to prompt her to continue.

“So yeah, did either of you take the class ‘Education and the Economy’ with Rich Marosi?” Alex shook her head no, just as the waitress returned with a glass of wine for Scottie. Alex lifted her glass in signal that she wanted a refill on her vodka tonic. Rana requested another beer.

“Yeah. I took that our freshman year. Good class, hard exams though,” Scottie responded. “Small class, right?” Rana nodded her head in consent.

Scottie—withdrawn, but inquisitive, groping in the interim between then and now; she cringed inwardly, always.

It had been at nine a.m. that year. Classes had started on a Tuesday. It was her first of college. When she had entered the room, she was overwhelmed by a storm of chatter. It had seemed like everyone there already knew someone else. Were these people freshmen?

When Professor Marosi arrived, he did so silently with a stack of papers. He split the pile in half, starting each on opposite ends of the room to be passed throughout. When Scottie received hers, she perused its type and recognized it as a survey of sorts. Marosi wanted the usual information: name, year, email, major, all that. She started to write *Scottie* at the top of the sheet in pen...but then scratched it out and opted for her real name, Eleanor. One wrong answer. And the one, out of all the rest, that made her most want to cry.

It was her father who had chosen her name. Scott Salveson, P.h. D. in English from Duke University. Thereafter, he was a professional banker and loving father, irreplaceable. 1952-1999. Died from leukemia.

He had been an avid lover of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Since he had written his dissertation on the southern influence in Fitzgerald’s writing, he knew the man outside and in. History affirmed that, no matter the gender of his firstborn child, Fitzgerald had been arrogantly determined to

name the offspring in his own honor. So when Zelda delivered their first and only girl, they had called her Frances Scott. Then, he had nicknamed her Scottie.

Since Scott Salveson's wife had resisted having children in the first place, he had likewise jumped at the opportunity to name his daughter. Not that Scott Salveson was anywhere as self-obsessed as his authorial idol, but naming his baby girl Eleanor (his wife's pick) Scott (his) and calling her Scottie seemed appropriate. If nothing else, it was for him a 'fun' factoid to tie her, he, and the great Fitzgerald together forever. For his daughter, the name was more of an anchor—a semi-absent affix to the undertow of her, and his, past.

Marosi's survey included two more abstract questions, intended to conjure his students' personal pasts and interests much more than a simple name blank. Two and a half years gone by and Scottie recalled them exactly. He had wanted to know the title of her favorite book, and the most terrifying thing she had done in the past six months. It was a pressure situation, to appear as interesting as possible. Even now, she could see herself still sitting there, well beyond the time when all the other students had taken their surveys to the front and put them on the professor's desk. Staring at the piece of paper, Scottie couldn't think of anything to put down.

Eventually, she opted for cliff jumping to fill the space for the most terrifying thing she had done. It was actually three years earlier at camp, but she figured it would do, given that she could still fully visualize the forty-five foot drop, still feel the stinging in her knees and breasts as she slapped through the water's surface. For her favorite book, Scottie wrote *The World According to Garp*, by John Irving. She hadn't read it.

Just before coming to school, Scottie had been upstairs in her Maryland attic, searching through boxes and boxes for a small desk lamp, which her mom had insisted was up there, *somewhere*. There had been this cardboard box, thoroughly taped closed on top, which was labeled **SCOTT'S COLLEGE BOOKS**. Scottie had spent a good part of the afternoon sifting through the old pages, their margins filled with lead notes. *The World According to Garp* had been on top.

Two birthdays past, she still hadn't read any books by Irving. And in roundtable discussions, when other people asked the title of her favorite book, she had molded a clever answer. She just plain hadn't read it yet.

Just as her next brew arrived, Rana launched into conversation about Richard Marosi, the 'gorgeous' Texan with nice facial features, salt and pepper gray hair. As she spoke, she ran her pointer finger down the bridge of her nose and stuck it in the surface whiteness, swinging it in a circle to dissolve the froth.

"I'm so tired of these collegiate assholes. I'm looking older now. You know, into the faculty," Rana said, tilting her head and fluttering her eyelashes in Scottie's direction, so as to subtly bring her friend out of memory and back into table conversation. Rana was clearly joking, both girls could tell by the look on her face, but the undercurrent of her comment was somehow real, resonating. Somehow connected to Ian and his most recent biting comment. *There was nowhere else to go with them. He was tired of their stop-gap-lovin'*. When Scottie had heard that she had wanted to laugh. What the fuck did that even mean? Overly pompous pseudo-ghetto intellect was what it meant to her. But Rana had been really upset.

Rana continued, “Anyway, the only problem is that I don’t think Richard will go for me. I might be too ethnic for a man from Texas.” Scottie and Alex laughed, at Rana’s cynicism, and the pale skin and blondish hair that belied her half-Persian identity.

“Hey,” Scottie intervened with a smile, “I think he’s married anyways.” All three girls laughed, single syllables. Alex swallowed the last of her drink—clearly strong with vodka—grimacing.

“Oh, monogamy is a social construct,” she said.