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by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

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“And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.”
-William Blake
I think everything that happened to us can be traced back to that day in January when America asserted one vision and we claimed another. On that day, and future ones, we had a choice to acquiesce to the nation’s desire for temperance and conventionality.

But we did not. Like all college students, we felt righteous and invincible.

I wish I still believed that.

Perhaps if we’d chosen a different direction, headed down a smaller tributary rather than rowing full force on the Charles River like Harvard’s sleek and speedy crewmen, things would’ve been different.

Perhaps we wouldn’t have drowned in our own liberation. Perhaps the river wouldn’t have been too wide to swim ashore.

But even if I’d known, would I have chosen the calmer path?

To avoid the worst of it—yes, certainly I would have, how could I not?—but the rest?

Even now, I have a hard time giving it—me—up.
PART I.

BEFORE

“It was a queerly assorted company, indeed, for there are more quaint and unusual characters in Oz than in all the rest of the world, and Ozma was more interested in unusual people than in ordinary ones—just as you and I are.”

-L. Frank Baum, The Magic of Oz, 1919
CHAPTER 1
January 17, 1920

The day did not begin with a historic feel. In fact, it commenced in the same manner as every other Saturday I’d spent thus far at Harvard College.

I slept in.

I hauled myself out of bed, sporting just my cotton drawers.

I grabbed a dime novel.

And, inevitably, I returned to bed, beckoned by the woolen cavern of my blankets.

Saturday seemed the only day that was truly our own here at the College, so I liked to savor those mornings with a dashing hero in my hands.

It was not until the arrival of our group’s gossiping nancy—my roommate, Eddy—that the day began to take on a new air.

Eddy whipped open the door and, in his excitement, did not close it behind him. He limped over to my bed, a mischievous grin on his pale face. He threw off my blankets and tossed The Crimson, Harvard’s newspaper, onto my chest.

“What in hell’s name did you do that for, Eddy?” I shivered in just my undergarments.

“Prohibition Day.”

Eddy went to the windows and began pulling up the blinds, continuing his assault on my lazy morning. I lifted the newspaper above my head, refusing to sit up just yet. The bold print on the front page announced, AMERICA GOES DRY TODAY: PROHIBITION IN EFFECT.

“Ernest wants us to meet at Café Dreyfus in twenty minutes,” Eddy continued.

“Didn’t think you’d want to miss it.”
“Ah, bugger. What time is it now?” I let the paper drop to my stomach.

“Ten o’clock, dearie.”

“Don’t you dearie me.” I pulled the blankets back over me. “You sound like Ernest.”

Eddy turned to face me and I could see the wounded gleam in his grayish eyes, the tightness around his thin lips, that indignant stare he lanced my way whenever I joked too far.

“Well then, Keith. I’ve already studied for two hours this morning—studied by candlelight, mind you—and you didn’t stir in the least, thanks to my consideration. And I’ve already been to the mailroom and a treasurer’s meeting and come all the way back again.”

Eddy’s hands tightened and his chin tilted up, a move he did to lengthen his crooked spine. He was debating what to say next. “You—you are a lazy bastard, and it’s about time you got up.” Eddy stormed his little body out the door, perhaps hoping I’d rush out and ask him to wait, but he had no such luck today.

I glanced at his dormitory desk and there were indeed two candle nubs stuck to the wood and a stack of neat papers in the center. He had probably worked on the oration for advanced French, a course we were both following this spring semester. I would have to find a few hours to chip away at that task too, for I was quite assured, knowing Ernest, that there would be no studying done tonight.

I skimmed the Prohibition article on the front page. Most of it was old news at this point. After all, this day had been a year in the making. The Eighteenth Amendment had passed one year and one day ago today, but Congress had built in a one-year time delay for the country to prepare for the drastic change. With the War over, all the papers had talked about this past year was the Volstead Act, the twenty-five pages of rules defining what an “intoxicating liquor” signified and how the Amendment would be enforced.

But on the second page I found some fresh news: FIRST PROHIBITION CRIME JUST 58 MINUTES AFTER LAW ENACTED. Underneath the headline was a photograph
of six masked bandits, handcuffed, shoulders square to the camera. Behind the six criminals stood six police officers. The near perfect, alternating line reminded me of the line dance we choreographed into last year’s show of *Oh, My Dear!*

Oh, the drama of the news, the drama of the Eighteenth Amendment!

The article detailed how the first infringement of the Prohibition Act had occurred in Chicago at 12:59 a.m., just 58 minutes after the law had gone into effect. Six armed bandits had attempted to rob $100,000 worth of “medicinal” whiskey from two freight cars, but the police had been lying in wait. The first six casualties of Prohibition.

I tossed the *Crimson* onto my messy desk that butted the foot of my bed, already making plans to creatively employ the photos for decoration. Eddy’s and my room was sparse. No oil paintings passed down from grandparents, no fancy electrical lamps, the latest models from the Sears Roebuck catalog. But we made do. The half dozen photographs of criminals and policemen and store owners pouring out barrels of alcohol would make a wonderful addition to the myriad other black and white images tacked in a long panorama on our wall. My chain of photographs was nearing the door, and I realized I’d have to angle the photos up and over the doorframe if I were to complete the circle.

In terms of the Harvard “H”—crimson and lined with white, our badge of dignity and pride—we had enough to rival any room on campus. A sizeable H on a crest above our door. H flags on each of our desks. And the most impressive H above my bed, a felt cutout measuring over a yard tall.

I swung my legs to the floor—for the second time this morning—and meandered to my dresser, not yet ready to hasten my pace.

Out the frosty windows, I took in the fresh glaze of snow on Harvard Yard and the cheerfully bright sky that always followed a winter storm. I chose a pair of woolen slacks, my thick white flannel button-up, and a carlisle knit sweater. I threw them on over some long
johns, then closed the drawers. My hands lingered on top of the dresser—cologne or no cologne? As I held up a mostly full bottle of Paul du Bois’s new Prelude cologne, I wondered if Nathaniel would be there at the café. Certainly Nathaniel had not returned to Cambridge. Certainly he was still engaged in family obligations in Buffalo. Sunday, he had said he’d return. My grip tightened on the bottle. I thought about tomorrow. Would he be willing to meet me on a school night, considering the need to prepare for studies the following day?

I sighed. I wasn’t sure he would.

No cologne.

I grabbed my cap and jacket off the coat rack and headed through the door, into the long hallway studded by ten dormitory doors, down the marble stairs, and out the front entrance of Perkins Hall, ready to face this historic day, late or not late, Nathaniel or no Nathaniel.

No sooner had I stepped off the streetcar and into the café portion of the hotel, bells clanging on the glass door behind me, than I heard Ernest’s booming voice.

“Keith, dearie!”

I made my way to the corner of the dimly lit room, made dark in part by the rich cherry furniture and the Victorian satin wallpaper, a maroon color and stretching even onto the ceiling. To the left of an upright piano, a cluster of three tiny round café tables had been pushed together to fit our group. Ernest was decked out in a three-piece light gray suit. His brown hair was parted perfectly down the center and slicked back on each side. He was surrounded by Eddy, Gene, and Kenneth, the three friends of ours who were in town this weekend. The only one missing from our group’s inner circle was Cyril. Ernest stayed seated but continued talking to me as if he had gotten up to greet me properly.
“Welcome. Generous of you to finally join us. I hear you couldn’t get out of bed this morning.” He winked and they all laughed.

I glared at Eddy who was sitting to Ernest’s left. “Always the gossiping nance.”

“Who me?” Eddy feigned innocence.

“Eddy here has clearly divulged his side of the story. Needed to caress his tender ego or something.”

The group laughed and Ken even clapped Eddy, now slumped over and sullen, on the back. I wondered if I had taken the joke a bit too far.

But Ernest saved the moment by targeting me again. “Looks like someone needs a cup of coffee to lighten up.”

I shifted my stare to Ernest and pretended to take offense. “And a good morning to you too.” I took off my coat and slung it over the only empty chair. “But yes, a coffee is most certainly in order. Is Junior the waiter?”

“You know Cyril doesn’t want you calling his beau that,” Eddy said, back at me again.

“Why? Harry’s Daddy owns this hotel. He’s Dreyfus Junior.”

“Cyril doesn’t think that’s how you mean it,” said Ken, Cyril’s roommate.

“How do I mean it then?”

Gene, twenty-three years old and christened Mr. Dentist by Ernest for being part of Harvard’s snooty dentistry program, seemed to be getting anxious by how the conversation was going. He was tapping his fingers vigorously and scratching at the pimples on his long face. Eugene Raphael Cummings: always the balloon popper. He redirected the conversation. “Keith, you missed the beginning of Ernest’s explanations. He’s got big plans for you tonight.”

“I’m quite sure he does.”
In the fall, Ernest’s parties in Perkins 28, just two doors down from Eddy’s and my room, had seemed to get progressively more elaborate. Now we were freshly reunited, just one week into the new semester, and it was the first day of Prohibition, the Volstead Act cinching its belt on us this very day. I was certain that Ernest would fly all his colors.

“Yes, Keith dearie, I—” Ernest started.

“Coffee first.” I turned around to search for a waiter. Sure enough Junior himself, Cyril’s boyfriend of almost two years, came waltzing over in his black and white uniform. Technically there was no Junior tacked to the end of Harry Dreyfus’s name, Eddy was right. But he was eight years Cyril’s senior and calling him Junior had been the only nickname I had come up with before Ernest, so I felt somewhat validated in my choice.

I wasn’t sure why I harped so much on Harry’s age. He was twenty-eight to my twenty, yes. But Nathaniel was twenty-three, so too was Mr. Dentist. It wasn’t that much more of a jump to twenty-eight. Perhaps it was Harry’s beady, watery eyes, which gave him a rheumy, older look for someone just nearing thirty. He had a receding hairline too and wore a shortly cropped mustache the exact length of his lips, no longer. That was not a style sported by students. Or maybe it was his lack of affiliation with Harvard. Despite his sincere efforts, his support of us at Café Dreyfus, Harry could never be one of us, one of the boys.

“Keith, they made it sound like you’d never arrive.” Harry grinned and pulled out a pad of paper, as he always did, even to write down just one order.

“Yes, ha-ha, very funny.” I grabbed the menu, even though I normally took only coffee. My four-dollars-a-week budget would just have to stretch this morning. I was too hungry to avoid it. “I’ll have the largest possible mug of coffee—black, please—poached eggs, toast, and raspberry jam spread between the eggs and toast.”

“Eww, that’s right,” Ken scoffed. “You mix savory and sweet.”

“Don’t you have a track and field practice to be at?” I asked.
Harry laughed and said he’d bring my order right up.

I started to ask Ken about when his first track and field meet would be this spring. I’d gone to one of his boxing competitions against Yale in the fall, and had thus seen his athleticism first hand. But I actually knew more about how good he was at both boxing and track from the campus paper and the trophies in Gilroy Hall, not to mention the Radcliffe women who seemed to flock to him. While it was hard to not get jealous of him at times, he was a good chap, and he and I generally got on well.

But before Ken could respond, Ernest waved his hand in the air to silence us.

“Seriously, let us return to business. Keith, dearie, since your fellow thespian Sappy Cyril, is out of town this weekend, you will need to be in charge of costumes.”

“Costumes?” I stammered. I feared where this was going. Cyril and I were both involved with the Dramatic Club and working desperately to become official members.

“We’ve never done costumes before.”

“Well, we’ve never not been allowed to drink before now. There’s a first time for everything. We’ll honor this Mr. Volstead with some brilliant costumes.” His eyes gleamed and he pushed his coffee mug into the air. “Cheers, boys.”

My own drink had not yet arrived; I watched the four mugs clink in front of my eyes, Gene awkwardly spilling a few drops of coffee on his perfectly pressed khakis. The planning began and I felt myself shrink from the conversation as I found out what was being asked of me.

No, not asked.

Commanded.

Eddy and I, determined to squeeze in a few hours of studying, trekked across the star-crossed paths of Harvard Yard towards Widener Memorial Library. There was so much to do if I
were indeed going to succumb to Ernest’s command and get my work done. When I had gathered my books in our dormitory a few moments before, I had started to feel the creeping tendrils of stress, but now walking outdoors again I felt my calm return.

We set a slow pace. Eddy, with his finicky lungs and crippled spine and uneven legs, could only go two speeds: slow and quite slow. After being born with a spinal deformity and spending eight years in a cast and two in a device similar to a straitjacket, Eddy now had a delicate constitution and wasn’t particularly mobile. But I didn’t mind. It would allow time to let campus work its magic on me.

Harvard College, true to its reputation, always inspired. The perfect brick buildings sang out words of encouragement, the towering oaks thrust their fingers into the radiant blue sky, and the crisp air cut my lungs with such force. I could not help but feel invigorated and ready to study. I had often used the outdoors as a wake-me-up during long study sessions. Last semester, during final exams’ week of my sophomore fall, I took walks almost every night, sometimes at one or two in the morning and sometimes reciting French or Greek words to myself as I looped around campus.

How could I not feel grateful and inspired to be here? Harvard was everything compared to Tufts, where I’d had to spend my freshman year before Mother could afford to send me to Harvard, where I had transferred for both the prestige and the superior Dramatic Club. It irked me when the boys disparaged this aspect or that aspect of Harvard, piling on the insults as if this were just any institution, as if any of us had been happier in our small hometowns with their small minds and small morals.

Eddy and I approached the marble steps of the library, the twelve Doric columns creating a stately entrance to our favorite study spot. As we reached the top of the steps, each side flanked by an artillery gun, a recently placed reminder of the Great War, less than one year over, we nearly bumped into someone rushing out the front door. He sported a long wool
coat that reached nearly to the ground and a fur-lined hat that looked vaguely Russian. As he looked up, his jovial smile and his long mustache, twisted up at the tips, gave him away: it was Dean Greenough, our English professor and Dean of the College.

“Oh!” Eddy said, “Dean Greenough, we apologize profusely for not watching more carefully. Are you alright?”

Leave it to Eddy to sugar-coat the professors.

“Quite alright, boys. How are you two this fine day?” Of all the professors, particularly the Deans, to run into, we’d chosen the best. Dean Greenough was notorious on campus for his love of students and his odd mixture of formality and cheeriness. He was like a completely bald Saint Nicholas but with a passion for classic literature.

“We’re well, Dean. Just on our way to work on our French orations.”

“Oh, I see. Don’t forget to read the Romantic era poetry collection for my class!

*L’anglais est plus important que le français ces temps-ci.*”

I laughed. There was no need for me to work out a translation in my head, because it was a standard variation of a phrase Dean Greenough constantly repeated: my class is more important than every other class on campus. This time around it just happened to be “English is more important than French these days.”

“Of course, Professor.” Eddy nearly bowed to him.

“Well boys, I must go. My wife and I are headed to the opera in Boston tonight. She insisted I depart the library earlier than my normal time. So, good day to you.” He stuck out his glove and shook both of our hands vigorously.

“Good day,” we said. And he ran down the steps as fast as he’d run out the front door.

I had written home to Mother several times about Dean Greenough. He was a legend on campus, and today, he added to my sense of inspiration as we pushed into the library.
We headed to our usual spot at the far end of the tunnel-like General Reading Room. We claimed a cherry table entirely for ourselves, the last one in two long rows of fifteen tables. Even though the massive table could seat ten, the Reading Room was not busy, so we would have the luxury of spreading out.

Ernest, of all people, had been the one to introduce me to this part of the library when I first got to Harvard last year. The chap hardly studied, Cyril either, so it seemed surprising to me that he’d brought me here. And it had not been just part of Ernest’s “Let me show you what I know” routine. We’d actually studied for an hour. But now I usually came alone, or sometimes with Eddy or Kenneth.

This end table was the best because I could have my back to the wall of books and look out over the whole Reading Room. It was one of my favorite places on campus, perhaps because it seemed to me like the closest I would come to going to Europe. The room was like an Old World cathedral, or so I imagined. The two parallel lines of desks formed pews, and the long aisle led to four pillars where a pulpit could stand. The behemoth twenty-foot windows arced up to a curved cylinder of a ceiling, which was no Sistine Chapel, I was sure, but that still had ornate geometric patterns and square skylights with colored panes that shed quilted light on us below.

I was not religious. Praise be to my parents for that! Mother and Father—when Father had been well, that is—had never truly been the churchgoing type. Mother made appearances now and again at Topsfield Congregational in our town, and while she was too proper to ever admit to it, we both knew it was all for show. Mother ran our small family inn just north of here twenty-five miles, and while most of our guests were out-of-towners on their way down to Boston, the townsfolk did frequent our restaurant. Propriety and church networking helped business.
I did not like organized religion, but that did not keep me from having near religious experiences when it came to the Reading Room or certain theatrical productions or epiphanies about psychology or gratitude or relationships.

Eddy was already at work and I could see that his two or three hours of studying this morning had already put him trois or quatre pages ahead of me on his French oration. This depressed me. So I pulled out not my French work for Monsieur Imbert, but my English reading for Dean Greenough’s British and American Romanticism class. Last week we had focused on William Wordsworth’s poetry in Lyrical Ballads, and since the Dean had said Wordsworth co-published the collection with Samuel Coleridge, another British poet, I figured he was next.

I checked the assignment sheet. I was right. The Dean wanted us to read all of Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. I flipped through the pages to get a sense of the poem, and I soon realized it was the longest and most archaic poem I’d ever seen. And that was coming from a student who had chosen a concentration in English. Then the Dean wanted us to read three more of Coleridge’s unreasonably protracted poems, several excerpts from a biography about him, and finally a literary critique of the poet’s style. All of that before the two-page analytical response.

I sighed. At the very least, I was a fast reader. If I were lucky, I could have my reading and the response done in just a few hours. That’d mean I’d have time to head to the mailroom and the costume closet before Ernest’s call time.

The costume closet. Goddamn.

Why did I always say yes?

I placed Lyrical Ballads down on the table, the spine hitting harder than I’d intended. The sound reverberated through the quiet Reading Room, and at least half of the students near us popped their heads up from their books and stared at me. A few seemed perturbed,
but a red-headed lad with large, hoop-shaped spectacles blushed and seemed almost embarrassed on my behalf.

“Sor-ry,” I whispered with exaggerated mouth movements to anyone who could see me.

“Good one,” Eddy murmured.

“Merci,” I replied.

Then I tucked my head into Coleridge.

As I entered the theater, I turned off the Winchester nickel flashlight I had borrowed from Ernest. It would be more prudent to make my way in the dark. The theater was the last place I wanted to get caught red-handed.

Earlier in the day, I had asked to borrow the theater keys from the Vice-President of the Dramatic Club, Otto Griswold, inventing some story about having left an item of importance in the theater during yesterday’s meeting of potential candidates. But I was not supposed to be doing this. Costumes were not supposed to leave the theater, not unless the Club was performing a show on a different campus.

At the very least I hadn’t had to risk asking Nathaniel for help obtaining the keys. If I were caught, this would look bad for him too. Already a senior member of the Dramatic Club, Nathaniel was helping me with my semester-long induction process. This encouraged me that I was at least not blacklisted in his book—after what I had said to him in the fall, that is.

I had met Nathaniel in English 2 in the fall, a Shakespeare course, the one with the anciently boring Mr. Anderson. We only met towards the end of the semester. It had been a large lecture class of about three hundred and he usually sat close to the front. I always sat
about fifteen rows back and near the aisle. One morning he came in late and slid into the seat next to me.

“What did I miss?” he whispered, leaning in as if he knew me. He had olive skin, hair as black as coal, and eyes almost as dark, if perhaps a little too close together. He had big full lips and near perfect teeth and wore a crimson tie and starched white shirt. When I later told him that I had thought he might be part Italian or Indian, he laughed. “Negative. Unless my mother slept with the milkman that is. Just Jewish, middle name’s Stein, there’s the giveaway.” I eventually found out that he came from a wealthy family in upstate New York and was planning to attend the Medical School next year.


“Shocking.” He rolled his eyes good-naturedly, then put out his hand. “Nathaniel Wolff.”

“Keith Smerage.” Nathaniel looked me up and down so calculatingly it was as if he were appraising me for a job in the mineshafts or a spot on the wrestling team. Then he turned his eyes back to Mr. Ancient, but titled his head just slightly so that he could whisper a barrage of questions in my direction.

“Freshman or sophomore?”

“Sophomore,” I replied.

“Hamlet or Macbeth?”

“Hamlet.”

“French or Greek?” Nathaniel’s whispered questions seemed to be gaining increasing speed.

“French.”

“Taft or Wilson?”

“Wilson.”
“Chocolate or coffee?”
“Coffee.”
“Gin or scotch?”
“Gin.”
“Boys or girls?”
“Boys.”

It was out of my mouth before I knew what had happened.

Nathaniel never mentioned that incident again, and when he did not sit with me during our next Shakespeare class, I began to fret. Why hadn’t I added on, “I mean, boys for friends, girls for lovers”? But two classes later Nathaniel sat with me again, and every few classes he would do so. We were quieter though, and sometimes I wondered why he bothered to sit with me at all.

In December, I was surprised when he invited me to the first round of auditions for the elite Dramatic Club and said he would put in a good word for me during the induction process. I was even more surprised when he showed up a few days later to the end-of-the-semester party in Perkins 28. Who had invited him? Ernest ran a tight ship. When it came to Harvard students, only certain ones were allowed in. He was understandably more lenient with Boston folk not associated with the College, since there was less risk of them tattling to the campus authorities.

I reached the costume closet with only one minor stubbing of a toe. I fumbled in the dark with the keys, trying to find the right one and wishing my stealth skills were not so pathetic. On the fifth try, I sank the right key into the hole and tried to open and close the door as silently as possible. I pushed the button on the Winchester again.

There they glowed: costumes, in all their glory. Racks of colorful dresses and suits. Shelves up to the ceiling of hats and shoes and props. It was a right kaleidoscope of color.
I browsed through the collection. I had worn costumes like these before in last year’s amateur production of *Oh, My Dear!* and in the two plays I had been cast in at Tufts, but I realized I had never given much thought to them. I loved plays. I acted in plays. I wanted to eventually write a play. But costumes were not my domain. Where was Cyril when I needed him? And why hadn’t Ernest explained more about what he wanted? For once in my life I wished that Mr. Ernest Weeks Roberts, the one and only, had talked more, not less. I would just have to take as many costumes as the three rucksacks would hold.

I was stuffing in pieces from different racks, when I heard a loud clatter in what sounded like the main stage area.

*Goddamn, no.*

I flicked off my light and froze for a moment. Then I made my way to the door and pressed my ear against the crack, straining to see if I could hear anything else.

*Please do not get yourself caught, Keith.*

Then I wondered what would happen if I did get caught.

I switched my plea: *If you do get caught, please, for the love of the damned Virgin Mary, do not let it be by a member of the Dramatic Club.*

I did not hear any more sounds through the slit of the door and realized I had scarcely breathed in some time. I slowly released my breath and debated what to do. If I waited too long, I would miss the party. If I didn’t wait long enough, I risked running into whomever, or whatever, had caused the noise, and then I still might miss the party if I had to stay for questioning or was brought to the proctor. I decided that if I did not hear anything for another ten minutes, I would consider the coast clear.

I sat on a footstool and tried to convince myself that it had just been a piece of the set that had fallen on stage.
When ten minutes had passed, or so I imagined, I stood back up. I lifted the rucksacks over my shoulders and crisscrossed the straps on my chest so that one bag fell on my left, one on my right, and one on my back. I did not want them sliding around if I had to move quickly.

*Stealth, Keith. Stealth.*

I slipped out the door and tiptoed away at a pace that would put Eddy to shame. I eventually reached the main theater area and started slowly heading up the side aisle towards the front door when I saw her.

She was sitting in one of the chairs on the other side of the auditorium, motionless and staring at the stage. It was dark, but my eyes were well adjusted since I had not used the flashlight in awhile.

It was definitely a she.

“Excuse me, Miss?” I called out, throwing caution to the wind.

My words startled her. She sprang up and pushed herself into the aisle. She wore a green wool coat and had a purple hat in her hands.

“Good day, sir,” she said, dipping her head of black curls in polite acknowledgement. Then she ran up the aisle and into the lobby.

*Good day?* I nearly laughed. I didn’t know which I felt more, shock or amusement.

I ran after her, but the rucksacks weighed me down. By the time I made it through the lobby, again stubbing a toe, and out the front door, she was halfway across the Yard. *Speedy, she is.* I could see she was holding that purple hat on her head with one hand as she ran.

*Well I’ll be damned.* I let out a guffawing smile. *A lady on campus, at this hour.*
I sat in our lone rocking chair, waiting for Eddy. He was running late, as usual. When it came to dressing, Eddy sought perfection. What he achieved, however, came much closer to eccentricity. We didn’t have a separate sitting room, even though most of the dormitories on campus did, so I was left to watch Eddy try on every collared shirt, every bowtie, every last scarf. Our normally drab room now had mounds of color decorating the surfaces. I was just glad that my wider build and taller height kept Eddy from tempting himself in my closet. Not that I had much to offer in the way of clothes.

“Can I just meet you there?” I said. “Even you can manage the long trek.” Our Perkins Hall 24 was just two doors down from Ernest’s 28. I had already dropped the rucksacks at Ernest’s over an hour ago. He had taken them at the door, though, not allowing me to enter. I was itching to see what he’d done to the place, what this evening would turn out to be. I could already hear the music and buzz of chatter, meaning Ernest had officially started the party.

“You slay me with your humor, Keith.” In front of the mirror above his dresser, Eddy turned sideways to see how his crooked and slightly humped back looked in his current outfit. “But seriously, can you just wait?” He didn’t look over at me, but I could sense the plea in his voice.

Why did he need me so? Eddy had every possible friend, despite his deformity and limitations. He had all the boys in our group, plus friends who were part of his Economics major, friends from home who came to visit, even professors who seemed chummy with him. He undoubtedly had more friends than I did.
But he knew I’d say yes. I guess I was predictable in that regard. “Sure, chap,” I replied.

Eddy pinched his pale cheeks several times, perhaps to gain some color, and smiled into the mirror.

Small wall lamps with brass arms and crimson shades lit the hallway in a dim glow. I knocked on Ernest’s door. For perhaps the tenth time, Eddy ruffled his silk neck scarf.

The door swung open and what had just been a muffled mishmash of sounds became the new hit “Swanee.” Ernest threw back his shoulders, one hand still on the doorknob, and sang in mock imitation of Jolson’s rich-as-cream vibrato: “I’ve been away from you a long time!” He leaned forward and encircled both of us with his arms. “I never thought I’d miss you so!” he continued singing, his head between the two of us, his voice nearly deafening in its closeness.

How in God’s name did Ernest already own Al Jolson’s record? I was certain the stores did not have it yet. “Swanee” had only just debuted on the radio stations last week, making its way to the No. 1 position this week. I assumed his father, a former Massachusetts congressman, had secured it for Ernest through some type of connection in the music world. That man had connections in every world. I couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy. Al Jolson was the biggest star on Broadway, young too, and a sort of idol of mine. Ernest didn’t even love theater. Though even I had to admit that he’d be a good actor, if he took it up. I suddenly felt a rush of relief that Ernest had chosen to try for a fraternity this year, not the Dramatic Club.

After releasing us from his embrace, Ernest switched to what would have been a more appropriate, formal welcome. “Good evening, Mr. Smerage,” he nodded to me, “Mr. Say,” to
Eddy. I laughed at his changing antics: lordly arrogance right on the heels of light-hearted clowning.

I took in the panorama of Ernest’s room. There were the usual fringed damask curtains, heavier even than my deadweight feet. There were the framed paintings of nude gods and goddesses, the Chinese porcelain vase that Ernest had fashioned into a lamp himself, the red silk shade. The floor was made lustrous by an oriental carpet expansive enough to cover the whole room. In the corner, partitioning off the bench seat, stood a black-lacquer folding screen with the most ornate oriental design of inlaid mother of pearl. “An antique from eighteenth-century China,” Ernest had told me when I’d first entered his room last semester and been taken aback by the lavish piece. Even for Harvard, so filled with people of means, Ernest’s sitting room was impressive. Enchanting, even.

Yet tonight, Ernest had transformed the room even beyond its normal swank. Chains of pearls were strung from the doorway and fireplace. Long black and white feathers were tucked throughout the room. Balloons danced freely on the ceiling. A half dozen bouquets of flowers, which I had no doubt Ernest had arranged himself, brought color to the wooden surfaces. To top it off, the tables were laden with plates of chocolate truffles and glistening bite-sized delicacies, calling on us to indulge.

The impossibly gorgeous sitting room was filled with about a dozen people. That was already double what many of the parties had been last semester. Besides one or two larger affairs, it had usually been just our close group of six: Eddy, Ernest, Cyril, Ken, Gene, and me. Scanning the room, it looked like all of us were here but Cyril, poor chap.

I nodded at Ken and Gene, who rose from their chairs. Ernest led us over and we all shook hands. I continued Ernest’s lead by saying in my most uppity voice to Ken, “Mr. Day,” and to Gene, “Mr. Cummings.” I could play-act at being a proper adult as well.
Next Ernest sashayed me and Eddy around the room introducing us to each guest: Mr. Ned Courtney, a young waiter, perhaps not even seventeen or eighteen, who I’d vaguely seen at Café Dreyfus and who worked with Harry Junior; Mr. Henry Saxton, a recent graduate who had stayed on at Harvard to tutor students; two young sailors from a ship that had just arrived in Boston’s port, a Mr. Mills and a Mr. Gustafson; several townsfolk; and a few freshman with whom I was already somewhat acquainted.

“This way, my darlings,” Ernest continued, ushering us to a window. It was propped open with General Biology. Ernest was trying for a pre-medical concentration, but his heart just wasn’t in it. Vertically jamming one of his science books in a window seemed quite fitting, considering.

“Now, dearies, drinks are a wee bit complicated at this party, thanks to our Mr. Volstead, and—”

“Yes, yes, yes! Keith and I were just rereading the Volstead Act rules this morning in the Crimson,” Eddy said a bit too perkily.

Ernest refused to allow Eddy into his spotlight. Not tonight. He cut in before Eddy could continue. “I have suspended a fifth of gin and a quart of scotch out the window on these two cords—white for gin, brown for scotch.” Ernest paused. His large brown eyes gleamed our way. I knew he was looking for some type of praise.

“Mr. Roberts, this is ingenious,” Eddy said.

Ernest nodded, knowingly. I did not think he’d caught the snarky tone, the fact that Eddy was at least partly making fun of Ernest while also trying to redeem himself.

“When you want a drink, just pull up the bottle of your choice, pour your drink, then lower the bottle,” Ernest said. “I’ll demonstrate. Mr. Smerage, what’s your choice of hooch tonight?”
I looked around to see if there were other options. The thought of pure liquor made me feel queasy. I had always been a light drinker, before Prohibition that is. We had never had much alcohol at home. With my father ill and my mother not being the type of woman to take wine or spirits, it was not something I had grown up with, though I had certainly seen drunk men at the Inn. Last semester, I’d sipped drinks now and again at the Perkins 28 parties, but never frequently or excessively.

I spotted a tray of glasses, ice, juice, and ginger ale atop Ernest’s dresser. *Gin and ginger ale, perfect*, I thought.

“Gin,” I said and went to fill a glass with ice.

Ernest pulled up the white cord, took the glass from my hand, and began pouring. The gin looked as clear and clean as spring water.

“That’s quite enough,” I said, trying to ensure there’d be plenty of room for the soda.

Ernest held up the glass at eye level to get a good look. “Perhaps, for your first drink. But don’t expect to get away with that on your second. This is going to be the party of all parties, darling, and it will require lots of giggle water.” He winked at me.

Ernest asked Eddy his drink preference, and he replied that he’d take pure scotch. I laughed. An onlooker would’ve likely guessed the opposite: he the sweet-soda-drinking ninny, me the broad-shouldered-scotch-on-the-rocks type fella. But Eddy was tougher than his small, pint-sized body let on. I, on the contrary, needed to go fill my glass as full as possible with ginger ale.

After serving Eddy, Ernest lowered the brown cord. “This secretive arrangement is necessary because should the proctors or the police burst in, I can merely back over to the window—” Ernest did just that, quite dramatically too. “Like Hamlet with a concealed dagger—” Ernest pulled a knife from under his vest and threw up one arm dramatically, his
limbs making a long diagonal. “And cut the cords.” Ernest flourished the knife in the air.

“Voilà! They will find this to be an innocent, hoochless gathering.”

I smiled. Whatever Ernest’s shortcomings, he could throw a party.

“Now, Mr. Smerage, Mr. Say, are you situated? I must leave you to attend to the other guests. I have these gorgeous canapés,” he pointed to a plate of fancy crackers that were topped with various meats and fishes and caviars sealed in a shiny glaze. My eyes nearly popped. I hadn’t seen prosciutto or fish eggs since before the War, and even then they’d been a rare treat. “Some très bons hors d’oeuvres that I ordered in from a specialty shop down near Copley, simply gorgeous. Or should I say handsome?” Another wink my way. “It’s time for me to circle with them.”

“Of course, your highness,” I said, dropping my chin and eyes like a good subject before his King, or, in this case, more aptly, his Queen.

Ernest swatted me before leaving to collect the tray of food.

Eddy took a few sips of scotch, then made his way to a group in the corner, ready to schmooze. I scooted up onto the windowsill and looked out. Nothing but blackness. I pried open the window and craned out my head. The vast Harvard Yard formed its own small horizon, obscuring what lay beyond. It seemed eerily peaceful in the gray shadow of the moon.

I looked down at the two bottles of alcohol suspended below. They clinked lightly against each other in the wind. The sound made me imagine them plummeting the two stories, perhaps hitting the brick walls along the way. They would land a shattered death in the snows below. I could imagine the shards of glass in the morning, the snow stained brown from the scotch. The glass would be a hazard, a blight on the campus. Would the Harvard janitors clean it up? Would they send people to come looking for us?
I scoffed at these unusual thoughts. *What a burst of melodrama, Keith.* It was time to close the window, time to start on the giggle water. I rested the window back on the biology book and turned around to face a much warmer sight: Perkins 28, ablaze with soft orange light, massaged by the sexy notes of jazz, heated by the free spirits of a dozen handsome boys, ready to make this night their own.

My second drink, thrust upon me by Ernest just minutes ago and now almost half gone, was descending to the bottoms of my feet like rocks hurled into a river. The rush downward, the bubble-like tingling, the heat rising in my armpits made me feel thoroughly joyful, yet mildly embarrassed as well.

I needed a reprieve, and one that involved a seated position. I made my way to the armchair and lowered myself into it. *Just five minutes, I’ll be as fresh as snow.*

I lay my head back against the velvet chair. Gene nodded my way in acknowledgement, not breaking from his conversation with Eddy. Gene always seemed aware of where you were and what you were doing. He knew when you excused yourself to use the washroom, where you studied, and when you’d sit for your next examination, even if he was not in the same course. I sensed this emerged from Gene’s anxiety, shyness, and desire to be discrete. It was like these coalesced into an almost obsessive need to know about everyone’s goings-on.

I smiled back at Gene. From this lower angle, the lanky chap seemed to stretch like a telephone pole to the ceiling. To his left, Eddy appeared almost half Gene’s height, though they both shared a bony quality that made the height difference less conflicting. Eddy wasn’t one of those round midgets that populated the pages of *The Wizard of Oz*; otherwise, the two might have been opposites in every regard.
Behind my chair I could hear Ernest at the window delivering his speech to a new group of guests: “...I can merely back over to the window, like Hamlet with a concealed dagger...” Ernest paused. I imagined him angling his arms in the same gesture he had done for me and Eddy. He continued: “And cut the cords... Voilà! They will find this to be an innocent, hoochless gathering.”

I laughed dazedly. How very Ernest of you. When Ernest found something that impressed others, he exploited it. He could repeat the same story word for word, over and over. Like a gramophone, he simply moved the hand of the player back to the beginning of the record and the song started over again. Every melody, every crescendo would be exactly the same as before.

Ken dropped into the armchair next to me. “Mr. Smerage, where is your mind this evening?”

“Atop a cloud of hooch, Mr. Day.”

Ken clunked his glass against mine, and we both drank some more.

“It’s a shame Cyril’s not here,” I said.

“Yes, quite. The poor bugger is likely getting an earful at home, with his low grades and all. I don’t know who is worse, his mother or his brother. Are you acquainted with them?”

“Yes, I met them after the fall production of Oh, My Dear! Remember the falling out?” Cyril had not even invited them. In fact, he had explicitly avoided telling his family he was in a show at all. I remembered the Wilcoxes’ bug-like eyes and puckered cheeks as they pretended to congratulate Cyril on his performance. Later, Cyril recounted how his mother had insisted that he stop theater once and for all. His artistic leanings, she had said, were a waste of time and money for the Wilcoxes. Harvard was two things to his mother, Cyril explained: a badge of social distinction and an insurance policy for a decent career.
Ken said that he too remembered that night, how back in the dormitory, Cyril, in tears, had refused to give up acting, but agreed to change his major to please his parents. They had given him two choices: chemistry to prepare to work in his father’s pharmacy or math to join his older brother as an accountant in the textile mills.

“Well in any event,” Ken said, “Cyril will be home by tomorrow night.”

We were both glad of it. I told Ken I’d be sure to stop by and welcome back Cyril.

Right now, tomorrow seemed a long way off. I knew this party of operatic proportions had not even reached its intermission yet, let alone its climax or denouement.

Ernest had flown only some of his colors, and I was certain he had more hidden backstage. Somehow I sensed, deep down, that I too had more limits of my own to surpass, that college was about to show me what it was all about. Or that I was going to show college that I could be grand too.

I lifted up my glass. “I’ve never much had more than one drink.” I was now nearly finished with my second.

“First times are the best,” Ken joked.

“That’s what Ernest has been trying to tell you all year,” I goaded.

After Ken placed second in a boxing match last fall, Ernest had taken it upon himself to win over Kenneth. “I can bring Kenny boy out,” he had boasted. “Just you wait.” Ernest undoubtedly wanted to be the first to have a go at the blue-eyed, blond-haired, and utterly masculine Ken.

But Kenneth had already come along quite some distance, or so I was told. Cyril had recounted stories of how freshman year, when Harvard assigned the two as roommates, Kenneth had shown hostility toward Cyril. Ken would frequently display his disgust at Cyril’s effeminacy. At one point, they went two weeks without talking. Cyril had been beside himself with worry that he’d offended his roommate and left several apologetic notes for
Ken. Eventually, Ken came around—the sweet and innocent Cyril was impossible to hate—and the two chose to room together again sophomore year. They’d tried to get in Perkins Hall, but had been placed over in Holt.

Yet despite his progress, as we sat side-by-side in the two armchairs, Ken continued to proclaim his separateness: “I’m not queer, chap.”

It did not sound defensive. It sounded confident, relaxed.

“Drink to that?” I challenged. Without hesitation, we both swigged the remainder of our drinks.

The words that came next did not seem to be my own. They bubbled up subconsciously from some new Keith, and they felt scandalous on my lips:

“Let’s get more,” I said.

Some spell later, Ernest found me deeply entwined in a game of cards with Gene, Eddy, that waiter Ned, and one of the sailors. “Time to pull out the costumes,” Ernest said grinning ear to ear. “Perhaps pull out is the wrong word. We don’t like pulling out, now do we boys?”

Some laughed. Others shook their heads in delighted disbelief. Ernest’s obscenities seemed to be mounting by the hour.

Pleased with his accomplishment, Ernest turned to me: “Keith, dearie, shall we?” He flicked his head in the direction of his bedroom, beckoning me to follow.

We opened the door and entered his single bedroom. Ernest had no financial need for a roommate and the spacious room housed a large queen bed with a fringed silken coverlet that was all his own. Ernest walked over to it, grabbed one of the rucksacks, and tossed it at me. It hit me hard in the chest. He threw a second one at my feet.

I was nearly drunk, but some of my fear and rationality remained intact. I figured I better remind Ernest now, or forever hold my tongue. “Ernest, I—”
“Yes, darling?” He bent over to sling the remaining bag on his shoulder.

“Remember what I said about the costumes—people need to be very careful. And I must bring the items back tonight, after the party, not tomorrow morning.” I tried to say it lightly, smiling. I knew enough about Ernest to know that he only appreciated people’s happy-go-lucky sides.

Ernest did not smile back. He let his shoulders drop, as if in disappointment, and locked his eyes with mine. “Keith, please stop. You’ll spoil my party. I won’t let you.”

“I’m just reminding you. You know the costumes aren’t mine.”

“Oh yes, your precious Dramatic Club,” Ernest snapped. “Have a little fun.”

“That’s not fair,” I said.

For several seconds, Ernest did not respond. “You know what you need?” he finally asked. A slight smirk dimpled Ernest’s right cheek.

Goddamn, I knew that look; it was the one that had gotten me into this costume mess in the first place. But what did he think I needed this time? Earlier today he’d told me I needed a coffee. An hour ago it was a stronger glass of hooch. Now what? My umpteenth drink? Another game of cards? His highness’s advice?

Ernest repositioned the sack on his shoulder and stepped in closer to me. With his one free hand, he did something I most certainly did not see coming: he slapped my crotch, cupped his fingers, and squeezed. Hard.

“A good sucking,” he whispered in my ear. “That will solve your worries. Though in your case, it might be hard to find someone willing to do it.” He nudged past, leaving me to stare bewilderedly at the place where he had just stood.
After having thoroughly convinced myself that I was not aroused and that I was not to pay Ernest any attention—he was mean, senseless, downright crazy!—I finally emerged from the bedroom.

Ernest had turned off the gramophone and was standing on one of his footstools, midway through yet another speech. I slung the two rucksacks at his feet. The stool wobbled a little bit, but Ernest continued unabashed.

“Now, all us who have—How shall I call it?—inner fairies will take the costumes to the bathrooms across the hall and dress as they please. All you regular faggots, and I mean that in the best sense of the word,” he winked at Ken and the group of sailors in the corner, “will stay here and ponder who you’d like to ask as your dance partner.”

“What if we’re not a faggot?” Ken, all smiles, chimed in from an armchair. His words, with their deep pitch, seemed perfectly formed. I did not think he was drunk. There was no slurred zozzle in the words.

Ernest gave Ken his most beguiling grin. He was a politician’s son through and through. “I’ll fix that for you, Kenny boy.” Ernest jumped off his stool, went over, and pulled Ken’s tie away from his body. Ernest pranced his fingers up the tie till he hit first Ken’s chin, then his lips. “It’ll feel better than anything you’ve ever had before, and that’s a promise.”

I could not believe Ernest was saying this aloud. General sexual obscenities were one thing; specific ones were quite another. By the stares on the others’ faces, I gathered that most of the room was in accordance.

“I’ll be back for you,” Ernest said, pulling a finger along Ken’s cheek. Ken laughed so hard he had to clutch his stomach.

Ernest hopped back up on his director’s perch. “Fairies, we have an array of fabulous women’s clothing for you to wear. This is thanks to my dearest friend, Keith Smerage.” He applauded and gestured my way. The rest of the room followed suit.
Facing the others, I gave a mock bow. At least I was receiving some gratitude. But I refused to give Ernest even a nod.

Unfazed, Ernest continued, as he always did: “And permit me to reveal, that I too have added to the stock by purchasing—” Ernest reached to his feet and pulled some type of round compact out of a brown paper bag—“rouge.” Like a model at Filene’s department store, he placed the rouge on one hand, cupped his other behind it, and panned it around the room for all to see. He did the same for nail paint, lipstick, and several other feminine items of which I was not quite sure what to make.

Ernest reached down again into a bigger sack and pulled out several pairs of panties and one brassiere.

The crowd went wild. I clapped and hooted in spite of myself.

“I claim a pair of panties,” Ernest said, hugging a lacy little thing to his chest. “But this last item,” he held up the brassiere, “this last delicacy, will have to be auctioned off because I only possess one. It was rather hard to get a hold of, you see.”

After Café Dreyfus, when Eddy and I had returned to study, Ernest must have gone on quite the shopping spree. I could imagine him approaching a cash register with the undergarments, not sheepish in the least, and enjoying every last wave of shock on the clerk’s face.

Ernest began describing the game he’d chosen for awarding the brassiere, and I found myself drifting over to refill my drink. A brassiere! I mused. I had heard there were establishments in Boston, and especially in New York, where men dressed entirely as women. I’d even seen a picture or two in magazines of real men in wigs and lingerie and lipstick. But aside from on stage, as part of all-male productions, I’d never witnessed such a thing in person. Now Ernest was making it happen, right here in Perkins Hall.
We squeezed into the hall bathroom like dancers in a can-can line. Beside me, the two sailors boasted about having done “drag,” as they called it, dozens of times before. I scanned them up and down. They had to be about my age, yet they seemed much more gallant and worldly.

_Damn Topsfield,_ I cursed my hometown. What were these boys’ names again?—Was it Mr. Milk and Mr. Gusty? Or Mr. Gusto and Mr. Mini? I practically snorted at the names popping into my mind. Everything was just so damned funny. _Giggle water._

Ernest was the first to claim a costume from the bags, then Eddy. When I got a turn, I fished out the remaining items, narrating my every move. “Not this ugly thing, too scratchy, too scratchy by far. Nor this cape of a thing, I’d look like Merlin, _Merlin_… And this blond wig, no good! I’m already blond, dirty blond that is!” I chortled, and some of the boys laughed with me. “Here, Eddy, you take it.” I tossed him the wig and dug through more items. “Too drab… Too Shakespearean… Too, too, too—what’s the image I’m looking for—aha!—_Little Bopeep,_ of all things…”

“Your _verbosity_ is killing me, Keith.” Ernest rolled his eyes. “Just choose your poison.”

Eventually I settled on a loose-draping dress that seemed wide enough to fit my shoulders. It had two layers, one of lace and one of a salmon-colored satin.

A few more boys sorted through the sacks. Then Ernest exclaimed in a high, sing-song voice, “Get naked boys!”

Laughter careened off the tiled walls as we stripped down to our drawers, our normal clothes landing in piles at our feet. I tried to pull on my dress from the bottom-up, like pants, but realized it’d have to go over my head, like a shirt. _Who knew?_

I asked Eddy to zip me. I could feel the fabric cinching around my stomach. “Won’t close, mate.” Eddy patted my back. “How about you zip me?”
I turned to Eddy and admired his choice: a lavish Victorian lace dress with poofy sleeves, a cuffed neck, and a small bump—or was it a bustle?—in the back. Certainly a more dated choice of a costume, but one that seemed to fit Eddy. An Old Maid in a wedding dress.

We turned to the mirror. I saw that the two layers of my dress gave the outfit a Greek Goddess look, not unlike the figures in Ernest’s framed prints. The earthy pink fabric was draped over just one of my shoulders, and the thin white fabric underneath almost blended into my skin, making it seem as if I had nothing else on but the satiny part. Some of my chest hair peeped out of the scooped neck. I felt a bit like an ape in an expensive dress. A Greek ape.

Ernest had chosen a short-sleeved button-up blouse, tighter than a glove, and a short, polka-dotted skirt with a thick elastic waistband. He had strapped on black high heels and was now clipping on some gold earrings. The outfit was scandalously revealing, and I had a hard time imagining what theatrical production it had been a part of. When would a character have worn such a short skirt? I knew girls these days were wearing little dresses that barely hit their calves, which was shocking enough to our parents’ and grandparents’ generations. But Ernest’s skirt barely covered his crotch, let alone his calves.

The room was a flurry of wigs and boas, sequined gowns and flashy jewelry. There were headbands snapped horizontally along foreheads and heels strapped to feet.

When most of us were dressed, Ernest dumped out a bag of makeup on the counter. “Allez-y my fairy-boys!”

He grabbed a lipstick, Eddy a mascara, and one of the sailors a compact of rouge.

After trying a lipstick, I realized I didn’t have much interest in face makeup, but grabbed the nail paint and decided to give that a whirl.

I attempted my left hand first. The paint seemed so wet and slippery. I couldn’t make it stay on my fingernails alone. Was I putting too much on? Not enough? Instead of long,
delicate nails, I now had five red blobs at the tips of my fingers. I held my hand up for all to admire. They hooted in response.

I saw that Ernest actually looked stunning in his makeup. His ruby red lipstick hugged the lines of his lips perfectly, and the blush and mascara and other such items appeared just as they should on a lady. His round eyes, which were already large and noticeable before, now nearly popped out of his head like smoky silver dollars. Where had he learned to put on makeup?

Ernest leaned in and kissed the mirror, leaving an outline of red lips on the surface. “Oh, if Helen could see me now!” he crooned. Then he twirled around and faced us. “I wonder who’s the more attractive broad, me or Hellie?”

I was about to make a sassy remark back, but remembered that I had sworn off Ernest for the evening.

In my self-imposed silence, it suddenly struck me—the oddness and timing of what Ernest had just said. Here he was, dressed as girl, yet not afraid to mention his childhood sweetheart—his fiancée in everyone’s mind, including his own. Ernest seemed able to reconcile all parts of himself. This felt nothing short of remarkable to me, and for the moment, I hated him less.

“Now, for the delicacies,” Ernest began again. He held up the panties for all to see, then bent over and pulled his drawers out from under his skirt. I choked down a laugh. I could not believe this was happening.

The sailor boys started a chant: “Pan-ties! Pan-ties! Pant-ies!”

Ernest slowly and seductively pulled the white lace up his legs. I wondered if Ernest would flash us in order to get the panties on. Part of me wanted to turn away in disinterest and disgust, but my eyes stayed trained on him like everyone else’s. Just as his hand neared
his upper thighs, Ernest bent at such an angle that all was hidden, and quickly slid on the panties with a smooth swing of his hips.

“BOO!” said one of the sailors. Mr. Mini, I thought.

As if in acquiescence, Ernest ran his hand sensually down his leg, giving just a bit more of a show. Then he threw the black brassiere at Eddy, who had won it in the Big Reveal. “Keith, help your roommate stuff it,” Ernest ordered.

I glared at him, but did as he said. I went into the bathroom stall and pulled the line of toilet paper out and over to where Eddy was standing. I unzipped his dress. He positioned the brassiere, and I hooked it for him. “Here’s a wad,” I said to Eddy, crumpling some toilet paper for him. Eddy began stuffing one side of the brassiere and I wondered, out of mere curiosity, what real breasts would look like in those massive cups, but no image came to mind. I had never even kissed a girl, and growing up, when I had tried to force myself to dream of women, to long for them as so many of my high school mates had, my attempts always fell flat. Breasts were just two hills above a woman’s waist; what was the big fuss about that?

I crumpled more paper for Eddy. As he began creating his second breast, the bathroom door swung open. In walked Christopher Smith, of Perkins 21. He wore pinstriped pajamas and had a washcloth and toothbrush in hand.

I don’t know who was more shocked: our motley crew of dressed-up boys, or Christopher Smith himself. I saw him glance from the red polish on my fingers to the toilet paper in my hand to Eddy’s growing breasts. His eyes traveled down Ernest’s bare legs to his black heels to the pile of clothes on the floor.

Ernest broke the ice-chilled silence: “We’re rehearsing for a show at my fraternity next weekend.”

“At ten past eleven?”
Ernest tried to flash his winning smile in reply, but Christopher Smith—for he was always “Christopher Smith” to us—was unmoved. They stared at each other, these two polar opposites, and the rest of us remained frozen, like the stone statues strewn around campus.

Ernest was the first to turn his eyes away. He reached for something on the edge of the sink. “Care to join us?” He held out a lipstick to Christopher Smith.

We statues broke our poses and crumbled into laughter.

Christopher Smith’s eyes thinned. “Degenerates—.” He jerked his eyes around the room. “Fags—. You’ll rot for this immorality.”

*Rot? Immorality? Decreed by Christopher Smith and his toothbrush?* We could not take him seriously. Christopher Smith slammed the door, and we spewed laughter out our lipsticked mouths till we could laugh and scoff no more.

We returned to our makeup with a new, almost spiritual, fervor.

Looking back now, I understand that we could not consider the consequences of something that felt so positive. We could not abstain or keep quiet, because for the first time in our lives, there was finally an option not to.

Old clothes in hand, we waltzed through the hall to Ernest’s room. The furniture and trays of hors d’oeuvres had been pushed against the walls to create a dance floor, albeit one with a gorgeous oriental carpet. We strutted across the open space in our full regalia, and the others became a cacophony of hoots and cheers and jeers. To free up our arms, we threw our trousers, shirts, ties, and jackets on the bench seat behind the folding screen.

Ernest cooed us dress-wearing boys into a line. Like a headmistress correcting her pupils’ posture, Ernest straightened each of our shoulders. Having adequately posed us, he clucked off in his high heels to the record player. He switched out the current fast-paced jazz record for a foxtrot that was half the tempo. The trumpets pulled out each note like strands of
buttery taffy. It was the slowest foxtrot I had ever heard. I was certain this was going to get interesting.

“Gents!” Ernest nodded to Ken, Gene, and the others. “You may now choose your lady.”

Eddy turned to me in his white lace and make-upped face, his long blond curls and buttoned gloves. “We’re both ladies.” There was an awe and lightness in his face that I had not witnessed there before. I could tell he felt differently about this experience than I did. I was having fun, sure, but Eddy seemed—I couldn’t quite pinpoint it—alive? Happy?

“You look splendid, Miss Say,” I told him, wanting him to have his moment.

“I feel splendid,” Eddy said dazedly.

Before I could respond, Gene tapped my shoulder. “Excuse me, Missssss. May I have thisss dance?” he said, slurring his words. Our all-too-serious Mr. Dentist was sporting the silliest grin. His already red pimples were now crimson in his drunkenness. He attempted a bow, but began to lose his balance.

“Easy there, chap,” I said, steadying him. “Looks like I might have to lead.”

We joined arms, and Gene, tall as he was, practically collapsed on my shoulder. I could smell the scotch wafting from his open mouth.

“Gene, how much did you have to drink while we were getting our costumes on?”

“Uh-huh,” Gene murmured. It had not been a yes-or-no question.

“What a gifted conversationalist you are.”

No response.

I was a bit surprised by Gene. He usually drank even less than I did, and was always anxious about everything. He had really let loose tonight, like the rest of us, I supposed. I wondered if the hooch had loosened his self-perception at all. Like Ken, Gene still asserted that he was straight, that he partook in our group’s antics for the fun of it.
I gazed across the room. Ernest and Ken were dancing together, Ernest’s head curled under Ken’s angular jawline. Eddy had paired with Ned, the waiter from Café Dreyfus. Towards the corner, a town boy and a college freshman were beginning to neck. Their eyes were closed and their lips moved slowly. I peeled my gaze away, as I knew I should, but the intrigue and indecorum of it all pulled my eyes back like magnets. Even though embarrassment was coloring my cheeks, I felt like I needed to see this.

As I watched, Gene’s body seemed to be getting heavier on my own. I couldn’t help feeling some stirrings of heat creep their way up my toga. *Keep it down*, I told myself. *Save it for Nathaniel.*

It’s not that I was truly aroused by Gene, or by the necking couple for that matter. It was just that everything happening around me felt so different. I had had experiences with boys, yes—an innocent rolling in the hay with a childhood playmate, as well as a somewhat less innocent encounter with a man’s hands on a train—but there had been no dancing, no romance, no kissing. Tonight felt different, epic. I had known about my queer feelings since before I could scarcely remember, and to some degree, I had always quietly accepted them. But something about tonight—at least the group mentality, the ease of expression—made mere acceptance seem not enough. These were feelings to live, feelings to celebrate.

I smiled. I no longer felt as self-conscious about having said “boys” instead of “girls” to Nathaniel. Perhaps that wasn’t so so bad after all.

I craned over Gene’s head and took in our whole joyous, ridiculous group. I imagined a black and white photograph being taken of us, something to capture the night. If it were to end up on the front of the *Crimson*—I knew it wouldn’t, knew it *couldn’t*—what would I want the corresponding headline to be? *BOYS LOVE BOYS? FOXTROT LEADS TO CELEBRATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY?* A William Blake poem came to mind, one about
desire not being a shameful thing, but something that plants fruit and beauty. How about 

DESIREE GRATIFIED IN PERKINS 28?

Over the slow music, over the pounding of my heart, over the chatter of my philosophical wanderings, I heard the door open. I looked for Ernest to see if he had heard it—he always greeted his guests formally—but he and Ken were nowhere to be seen. Awkwardly, I maneuvered Gene so that I could face the door.

No.

It couldn’t be.

Not when it was almost midnight.

Not when I had Gene in my arms.

But there he was, swarthy and immaculately dressed in a tweed traveling suit: Nathaniel Wollf.

His eyes turned and met my horrified gape. We kept staring. It felt like someone had stopped a movie reel on the worst possible frame. Finally, he gave an almost imperceptible nod. No smile.

He made his way over to the drink tray, and I found my body instinctively turning to watch him. He used Ernest’s silver tongs to fish out small shards of ice, the last that remained in the melted mess. He let them plink into a glass. Then, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a hip-flask, his own private hooch. I wondered what type. I wondered whether he always carried a flask.

Nathaniel poured his drink, swirled it a few times, then tossed back the whole thing in one smooth go. I could imagine the cold-hot burn as it danced down his throat.

Suddenly I felt more sober than I’d felt all night, and my predicament became clear: if I stopped dancing mid-song, it would be obvious that I was chasing after Nathaniel. But I couldn’t keep dancing with Gene. I came upon a compromise: I would settle Gene in a chair,
then go sit somewhere alone. Eventually, with that *stealth* I was so marvelous at, I’d make my way to Nathaniel. I would be freeing myself from Gene, but not seem too overbearing in my pursuit.

    I told Gene it was time to stop dancing, but he did not respond. I used my shoulder to nudge his head up, making sure to grip his arms tightly so that he would not flop over. His normally small eyes looked like bulging olives. His weight slumped still further in my hands.

    “Gene, get a hold of yourself.”

    Something vague and milky passed across his face.

    “Keith—” He sounded distant. “I—”

    Before he could finish, Gene’s mouth opened in a big O and his head curled towards me.

    He upchucked all over my costume.

It was hard for my mind to take in everything that happened next. Someone helped me lug Gene over to a chair. I called for Eddy and begged him to take care of Gene. I saw Nathaniel stare at us—Was it disgust on his face?—then I watched him walk out the door. I berated myself. I cursed under my breath. I tried to figure out what to do next, but that sour smell, nauseating and one hundred times worse than feces, distracted me to no end.

    I looked down at my costume. I wanted desperately to change, but there was no time. I’d have to go now if I were to catch Nathaniel. I didn’t know where he lived, so my only hope was finding him out on the open Yard.

    I approached the folding screen while forming a haphazard plan. I would use the undershirt I’d worn earlier this evening to wipe off what vomit I could, and I’d throw my sweater on to cover the rest of the stench. I rounded the corner.
There, sprawled on the bench seat, were Ernest and Ken. They were petting passionately, hands sliding in precarious places.
CHAPTER 3

January 18, 1920

Campus seemed as still as a graveyard, which suited me just fine. As far as I was concerned, the less noise, the fewer people—the better. I had slept in far later than was my Sunday custom, but my body still felt awful, not to mention my pride. As I trudged across the Yard, I felt famished, yet the thought of food made my stomach roil. Phlegm, sour and dank, coated my throat. Worse, I had a mountainous headache and the wintry white light aggravated it to no end. It made everything around me seem like an overexposed photograph. Giggle water certainly didn’t feel like giggle water the next day. More like vomit water.

_Vomit._

I couldn’t believe all that had gone wrong last night, what I had done, the mess I had hurled myself into.

_Vomit, Gene, dress, running, Nathaniel._

_No, don’t, I thought. Don’t rehash the scene for the dozenth time. Just get through today._

I drafted a plan so that I could at least pretend I was in control. First: something to rid this headache, an aspirin maybe. I think that’s what Mother would give me. Mother—yes—I’d write her a letter, since I hadn’t done so yet this week. I knew she’d be getting anxious to hear from me. And there were the costumes. This morning, after hauling the costumes back to my room from Ernest’s, I had found several tears in the dresses with long trains. And, not to be forgotten, there was my vomit-bibbed salmon dress too. I’d have to walk into Cambridge and find a washerwoman, though where I’d secure one on a Sunday and with same-day service was beyond me. Then I would return to campus and study like a mad man for tomorrow. I had a GPA and at least _some_ remaining dignity to maintain. At the first hint of
darkness, I’d return the costumes—the costumes I’d forgotten to return after chasing Nathaniel.

I pushed through the heavy door into Kirkland Hall and felt grateful for the instant darkness. The curved, cavern-like ceilings of the mailroom always reminded me of a train station, the long rows of mailboxes jutting out from the back wall were like eight parallel train platforms. I went to the third row and squatted. I felt unusually slow and clumsy in locating and opening my little brass box. My combination code was my birthday, how original, but at least I could recall it quickly in this hung-over stupor I couldn’t seem to shake.

I pulled out the wad of papers, then spun the dial to re-lock it. I flipped through the items: several adverts from clubs on campus, a letter from mother, and a plain envelope with my address scrawled on the front but no return information.

My heart plunged into the turbid whirlpool of my stomach. Did Nathaniel know my campus address? But no sooner had I thought that than I wanted to swat myself for my stupidity. Even if Nathaniel did know, he wouldn’t write me.

Yet part of me still hoped. I took off my gloves and ripped open the envelope.

It was a letter from Cyril addressed the Thursday night he’d arrived to Fall River. Most of us had the custom of writing each other, even if we were away for no more than a few days. As I read the letter, I found myself distracted by my ten red-balloon fingers. Damn nail paint.

I pocketed the note, along with the adverts, and found a bench to read Mother’s letter. I knew it would be a long one—as an only child, I received no shortage of attention—and a seat would do my aching body good.
She began with her standard summary of the goings-on at our inn, The Homestead. She passed along greetings from Father and from Mrs. Jacobs, the cook, and recounted the town gossip. Then she began discussing her weekend activities:

_On Sunday, I will attend church. It is imperative that I make an appearance this week to reassure people that our restaurant is indeed open, despite the fact that we can no longer serve ales and wines with our meals._

_After, I shall come into the city on the nine-thirty Topsfield-Boston car to call on your great-aunt Agatha. She is quite sick with pneumonia, according to Jane’s urgent correspondence from Wednesday last. I trust you can join me for the first part of my visit, providing your Mother with solace, as you always do, dear son. If you will collect me at the car terminal at noon on the eighteenth, we can enjoy a light meal at Sutton’s Tea Shop before proceeding to Aunt Agatha’s apartment._

_I look forward to hearing how your semester has started off— splendidly I hope. I miss your stories and enthusiasm._

_Enclosing all my love,_

_Mother_

I cursed myself for not checking my mail earlier in the week, as I should’ve, as Eddy did.

_I rushed to the main hall where I knew a large gilded clock hung above an arched doorway._

_It was ten past noon._

_“Fifty cents, sir.” The taxi driver swiveled around to the backseat and put out his hand._

_I winced at the expensive fare, but pressed two quarters into his palm. I knew I’d be hating myself all week for this unexpected reduction in my spending money. Maybe Mother could increase my allowance. Four dollars a week barely stretched as it was._

_I dashed out onto Quincy Ave and walked as fast I could through the mass of cars and cabs, horses and buggies. I couldn’t believe I had kept Mother waiting for so long. I had left her alone in Boston, on a cold day, and at the seedy car terminal at that. I intensified my self-
cussing, my self-loathing, and begged whatever god I’d angered to stop lancing the lightning bolts my way.

Inside, I searched all the benches, the transit café, and the few shops. But Mother was nowhere in sight.

I located the ticketing agent from whom I usually bought my own carfares home for the weekend. He was flipping through the long booklet of tickets. “Excuse me sir, did the nine-thirty from Topsfield arrive on time?”

“Yes, sir, almost three-quarters of an hour ago.”

“Did you see a woman, about twenty-years my senior, in a long charcoal-grey coat lined with fur? Perhaps with a red wide-brimmed hat?” Mother always seemed to wear that outfit, her best, when coming into Boston. I hoped that the same was true today, or else I would not know how to describe her.

“I most certainly did. She waited over there,” he said, pointing to a long pew-like bench, “for about half an hour.”

“Did you see where she went, sir?”

“No, I’m afraid I did not.”

My only hope was that she had gone on alone to the tea shop. I jogged the four blocks to Sutton’s, accruing many stares along the way. The exertion made me feel quite nauseous again.

I entered the little corner shop in a huff and saw mother at a small table for two, alone, working on a needlepoint hoop in her lap.

“Mother,” I gasped, taking off my winter cap to maintain some decorum after my unseemly entrance. “You’re safe.”

She did not look up; she would not be interrupted so impertinently. “I can manage just fine on my own for an hour in the city, son. Take a seat.”
She finished her stitch, pocketed her thimble, and lifted her chin up to meet my gaze. Her eyes widened instantly. “Dear me!” she exclaimed. “Keith, are you ill? You look so peaked.” She stood up and threw a hand to my forehead. “No fever. What about a rheum, Keith, not another rheum?”

Oh, Mother and the rheum again! At age twelve, I had endured an acute attack of rheumatic fever, and though I had fully recovered after six months time, Mother still feared that I might be stricken again, taken from her.

Given Mother’s reaction, I assumed I looked as poorly as I felt. Damn hooch. I debated what to tell her. I usually told Mother most everything. She had always been an exceptional confidante, not to mention that she could smell a lie. But I knew Mother was not particularly keen on alcohol, and I wasn’t sure how she’d feel about me being hungover. I also couldn’t risk questions about what else had happened last night—who else. I decided to take a vague approach.

“I’m fine, Mother, really. Thank you for your concern. I just didn’t sleep as well as was necessary last night.” True enough.

She squinted her Mother Hen’s eyes at me, her beak seeking a weakness where she could peck a hole. She was not to be shooed away so easily.

When I didn’t elaborate, Mother finally said, “Boys will be boys, that much I know.” The right corner of her mouth rose just a hair and a subtle spark reentered her eyes. “I presume some strong black tea is in order.” She turned to the waiter.

I both laughed and cringed at my mother’s abilities. She knew—at least about the partying, she knew—but what else would she guess? I would have to tread carefully.

Mother began to tell me about the early morning church service. I pulled off my coat and gloves and laid them over the back of my chair.
“This morning, Father was not as indisposed as usual, so he accompanied me with the help of—*Keith!*” Her voice dropped to a whisper and she grabbed my hand. “Whatever happened to your nails?”

I stared down in horror at the red nail paint I had forgotten all about in my rush to hail a taxi and find Mother.

*Stab yourself with another lightning bolt, Keith.*

I had washed the lipstick off this morning, before heading to the mailroom, but hadn’t known how to remove the globs of dried polish. I had figured I’d get Ernest’s help later, once he woke up. He’d still been deep in slumber when I let myself into his room to collect the costumes I neglected the night before. I figured I had all day to deal with my nails. Seeing Mother had not been part of the plan.

“Put your gloves back on this instant,” she snapped.

“Yes, of course.” I fumbled with the tight leather. “I apologize profusely, Mother, it was for—well, a drama rehearsal last night. You know how I’m trying to secure a spot in the Dramatic Club.”

Her Mother Hen eyes returned in a flash. Did she not believe me? I couldn’t risk Mother knowing about my behavior. Drinking was one matter; queer preferences were quite another. How would she even react? Shame sunk deep in my stomach. Mother already had enough shame in her life with Father. The seconds ticked by uncomfortably.

“I approve of your *acting*, I always have, but Keith—”

“I know, I know, more discretion with the costumes.”

Mother looked confused. “That is not exactly what I had in mind.” She sighed. “Do you know how to remove it?”

“No, not in the least.”
“Finish your tea and we’ll return to Harvard before paying a visit to Aunt Agatha. I’m spending the night there, and will have most of the day tomorrow with her, so there is no need to make haste. I’ll help you freshen up.”

Relief escaped my lips. I took a big gulp of tea, the silky liquid helping wash away the sour taste in my throat.

In the Perkins Hall bathroom, Mother pressed a cotton ball with vinegar to my nail. She had bought the supplies on our way back to campus. We had walked the route, telling each other stories and resuming our normal chummy way of interacting.

As I sat on the edge of the sink with my hand splayed on the marble, I thought about having been in here last night under very different circumstances and the oddity of being here again with my mother. I remembered the costumes, my need for money.

“Mother?”

“Yes?” She did not look up from where she was rubbing and pinching my fingers.

I felt sheepish, stooping even lower than my current state, which was pretty damned low: a college boy having his fingers scraped by his mother. But I had to do it.

“I was wondering if you might consider raising my allowance to five dollars a week.”

She moved from my pointer to my thumb. “Food and transportation are expensive, not to mention laundering my clothes, and, well, I have extra laundry and sewing to send out today. I was at fault for… for damaging some of the costumes last night.”

“We’ve had some expenses lately. Your father—the mortgage—” She stopped scrubbing my nails.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, dear. We’re all perfectly fine, but things are tight for the moment, and with Prohibition enforced, I’m not sure how sales at the restaurant will be. I had actually hoped to
ask you a similar question—whether you might be able to manage on just three dollars a week, but it seems that’s not possible, and I don’t blame you, son.”

Things were tight. Tighter than normal even. It dawned on me: that’s why she had taken only tea, no lunch at Sutton’s. That’s why she had suggested we walk the long three-mile stretch back from downtown, despite the chill, despite her heels and stockings, despite her overnight bag.

“So you see, now’s not the time to be sending extra items out.” She held up my finished hands and marveled at her work: “As good as new, dear. Now, what it is you need washed and sewn? I’d be happy to do it for you.”

Mother did not seem bothered, but I couldn’t help feeling like I had just made a mess of the dozenth thing since yesterday. This was low—making my mother scrub with her delicate hands on a Sunday. But I didn’t know what else to do. I had to return the costumes. I couldn’t let the Dramatic Club discover I’d stolen the costumes—though maybe Nathaniel would tell them anyway. I winced at the comment he had made.

We went into my dormitory, and I showed Mother the four costumes. My satiny Greek goddess dress with Gene’s vomit down the front and three other dresses, including Eddy’s, that had rips in the back. I cringed and felt shame rise in my chest. I waited for a lecture, or at the very least questions, but she just stood there with her perfect poise and engaged in none of that. All she did was gather the dresses in her arms and say, “Grab your soap. I seem to remember a washing tub in the basement.”

I had forgotten about that tub, but she was right. We had used it to wash a small stain out of one of my quilts during move-in weekend in the fall. I kissed her cheek happily and rushed to hold open the door for her. I could scarcely fathom my fortuitous turn in luck. Who was this Mother of mine? Was this her treating me like an adult, not questioning my judgment? Or mere exhaustion at my wiles?
Whatever Mother’s reason, I vowed to make it up to her. I’d look for a job in Cambridge. Put in extra hours at the Inn next time I was there. Expand her gardens in the spring. *Something*, for goddamn I was grateful.

After spending the evening at Aunt Agatha’s, I finally returned to Perkins around eight o’clock and wound my way down the dim stairwell to the basement. I checked on the dresses that mother had hung to dry. They were still a bit damp to the touch. Another hour, I surmised, and they would be just as they’d been before the party, or at least I hoped.

I felt exhausted as I trekked back upstairs, a bit glum too. It had been a long afternoon in Aunt Agatha’s stuffy fifth-floor apartment in the outskirts of Boston. Our visit with Agatha and her daughter Jane had been odd, formal, and surprisingly sad. I hardly knew my great-aunt, having met her but twice before. Yet her demise, so near and so desperate, had impacted me. Her wet cough and labored breathing had made her sound as if she were suffocating, drowning. I couldn’t help but reflect that one moment she’d be here, and another, she would not. I knew nothing could endure forever, but I was nonetheless struck by what seemed the remarkable flimsiness of that line between choice and fate, permanence and impermanence. I had held Mother’s hand almost the whole visit.

At least I would be seeing Mother—my stoic saint of a Mother—in about three weeks time. She had said she’d be returning to Boston to close some of the Inn’s accounts and find new distributors. She’d heard that many restaurants were increasing their dessert and soda pop choices to make up for the lack of alcohol, and she planned to do the same.

I knew I’d have to push these thoughts of death and money and Mother, not to mention Nathaniel and the Dramatic Club, aside to work on the French oration I had to deliver tomorrow. I had finished Dean Greenough’s assignments on that longest of long
poems, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but I had barely drafted my French speech. The task felt stressful at this hour, but at least I was fond of the subject.

I entered our room and saw that Eddy was putting on his hat and scarf. He looked as refreshed and debonair as a mannequin in a storefront. No circles under his eyes, no ghostly pallor, or at least no more than was normal for his delicate appearance. His cheeks even seemed to have a new, ruddy hue. The fella could apparently hold his hooch.

“Keith, you’ve arrived just in time!”

“For what?” I started to take off my coat, but Eddy held up his hand to stop me.

“What? I need to work on my French oration.”

“Just wing it. *Tu parle très bien*, or, at least good enough to pass,” he joked.

“But—” Eddy held his hand closer to my face.

“Dearie,” he smiled, pulling his words out slowly. “Cyril’s back.”

“Yes, Cyril,” I said distractedly. How had I forgotten? Damn, that hooch was nothing but stomachaches and forgetfulness the next day. My body was still drinking in the aftermath. The weekend was just not long enough to fit in time with friends, family visits, correspondence, parties, and studying. It needed more hours. Eddy was right though, French could wait. I had promised Ken I would stop by. And amidst all these messes I’d been making, I could use a dose of our Sappy Happy Cyril.

“On y va!” I said and followed Eddy out.

We welcomed Cyril back like he’d been gone for three months, not three days. We embraced him, peppered him with questions, and celebrated with cream soda and boxes of cracker jack.

Cyril, too, acted as if he were fresh off a transatlantic steamer, eternally grateful to be on stable ground. After unpacking his small chestnut leather case, chatting with us all the while, he moved his small, boy-like body around the room touching and admiring his
belongings. Theater bills strung on a long ribbon in front of the floral wallpaper. His ukulele. Our class flag proudly proclaiming: HARVARD 1922. The velvety cloth with little tassels running the length of the fireplace mantle.

While I chowed down on cracker jack, Cyril moved on to his row of hats, fiddling with them, as if in awe of their beauty. He flipped a hat on top of his slicked back hair. The dapper black fedora with its white silk ribbon clashed with his rather drab tweed suit and brown tie, but Cyril clearly felt alive in it. He flashed us his youthful grin, his puppy-like green eyes twinkling, then began tapping out a dance with that elegant coordination I so thoroughly lacked.

Near the end of his little rag, Cyril stuck out his hands and shook them jazzily. “College is a refuge from hasty judgment, old boys!”

“And how!” Eddy clapped in agreement. I gave him applause of my own. I too was drinking in Cyril’s energy.

Cyril threw the hat back on the hook and moved on to his beloved curtains. He took the fabric in both hands and looked at it as if it were a painting to ooh and ahh over. “Curtains, curtains,” he mused to us.

They weren’t Ernest’s lavish curtains, but I thought they were spiffy nonetheless. And I was not complaining about the comfy Murphy recliner I was lounging in either. I was the first to admit that Ken and Cyril had some decent furniture and decor in their two rooms.

Cyril let the curtains fall from his outstretched hands. “I tell you, boys, College is indeed a refu—”

“How about a dose of originality, Sappy Cyril?” Ken interrupted with a mocking but not unkind tone.

Ken had a point. At some time or another, most of us fellas had mocked Cyril for endlessly repeating this favorite saying. It was a line from Robert Frost, also a Harvard man,
though he had not been able to graduate. Cyril had discovered the line in an American literature class he’d taken his first semester. The words had struck Cyril as so true, so important, that he had been scribbling them in everyone’s freshman yearbooks, penning them in myriad letters, and quoting them aloud with unabashed vigor for over a year now.

I was so glad to have Cyril back though, I decided to stick up for the chap. I turned to Ken and said, “Quit razzing him. College isn’t to you what it is to him. You aren’t cursed with Cyril’s family.”

“True, I’ve just been cursed with orphanhood,” Ken grinned. “Though I am right certain that is the better end of the stick.”

We all laughed. Ken lived with his grandmother and cousin Homer. While impeccably proper and formal, Victorian through and through, they didn’t quite know how to raise children, so had often left Ken to fend for himself.

Cyril’s childhood, it seemed, had been marked by the very thing Ken’s had lacked: an overbearing mother. Cyril had told us how his mother had forbid curtains in his private den at home. “Too feminine,” she’d said. There’d been plenty of other orders from both parents too:

“Stop rearranging the furniture, Cyril.”

“Stop going to theatrical shows, Cyril.”

“Be practical, Cyril.”

“Prepare to take over Wilcox Pharmacy, Cyril.”

“Be happy with what we’ve planned for you, Cyril.”

“Please understand, Cyril.”

“No, Cyril.”

“NO!”

Yet for all their demands, Cyril’s parents had rarely visited campus. Except for two surprise visits which had left everyone altogether ruffled, they had left Cyril quite alone for
the year and a half he’d been at College. For the first time in his life, Cyril had been free to adorn his windows with gorgeous draperies, to try out for the Dramatic Club, to let his chemistry grades slip precariously in favor of the activities he loved best: theater, letter writing, partying, decorating, and exploring Boston.

After examining his curtains and silk scarves, his hair gel and collection of letter openers, Cyril finally seemed to have satiated his desire. He plopped onto the sofa next to his roommate.

At last, with Cyril settled, I could turn the conversation to the party, to that surprising and specific occurrence that had happened behind the black folding screen.

“So have you heard the goods on Ken or has your roomie sealed his old lips?”

“He started telling me about the party last night, but is it more than that?” Cyril asked.

“Yes, big news, headlining news. Let’s see, I’d title the article—”

“I was drunk, drunk and vamped,” Ken defended.

“True, vamped by our very best seductress.”

“Who?” Eddy demanded.

There was a moment of silence, then I saw it dawn on Eddy, what I meant by our very best seductress. “Errr-nest!” he squealed, proud of his little Sherlock Holmes act.

“Et voilà,” I said.

Cyril looked from me, to his roommate’s silent stare, to me again. Then he said, “If the fella doesn’t want to kiss and tell, he doesn’t have to.” I could tell Cyril wanted to know more, almost as badly as Eddy, but he never joked at someone else’s expense, not like the rest of us.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t willing to put it to rest. “Come on, don’t be so hard boiled, Kenny boy.” I punched him above the knee. “How far did you take that flinging woo last night? That is, how far beyond what I was so privileged to witness myself?”
Eddy’s mouth dropped, realizing he’d missed out on a first-hand viewing. He nearly drooled in his hunger for details.

Ken was silent, and it was hard for me to read his face. “You’re asking the wrong question,” he finally said. “It’s not how far that matters, it’s who did what. That’s what counts.”

“I don’t follow,” Cyril said.

Ken smirked, like he had some important knowledge he was about to share with us, if only we would be patient enough. “It’s who does what that determines whether—you know—whether you’re a homosexual.”

I think I knew where Ken was going with this. I’d heard talk from boarding school boys who claimed their behavior was a phase, a convenience necessary at all-male institutions. So long as they didn’t engage in any behavior that couldn’t equally be done to a woman, they were fine—curable, normal. It was those who craved something else that were the real problems. I wondered what categories Nathaniel and I fell into.

“I don’t care what you are. For godsakes, just tell me what you two did!” Eddy begged. “I would like to know exactly what happened.”

“Where’s your propriety, Mr. Say?” Ken asked, pleased with his position over us.

Eddy delivered a deadpan stare. “The goods, Mr. Day.”

Ken cast us each a glance, deliberating. “Well, since I’m sure you’ll get the story from Ernest eventually anyways, I’ll wet your thirst with a little sip.”

Eddy sat up as straight as he could on the edge of the chair and clapped his hands. Ken seemed to loosen under the warmth of the spotlight.

“There was some petting behind that screen, on the bench seat—”

“—on top of all the jackets, mind you,” I added.

Ken glared at me. I’d have to keep my trap shut if the cranky chap were to continue.
“After Mr. Smerage here stumbled upon us last night, we moved to the bedroom.”

Ken was skipping over what had happened behind the screen. Evidently, he was not one for details. Eddy started to protest, but Cyril held up his hand to quiet him.

“And then, all I’ll say is, Ernest received a mouthful, a big mouthful.” Ken leaned back on the couch smugly, put his hands behind his head, and propped his feet on the coffee table.

“Was this your first—” Cyril seemed to search for a word, “encounter?”

Ken raised his eyebrows and held them there. Then he gave the slightest of nods.

“Now, enough of this sissy talk. I heard something much more ghastly,” Ken said, turning his baby blues on me. “I was told by Mr. Dentist, the source himself, that he upchucked on your fairy getup, couldn’t keep his giggle water down.”

Well, I could relate to that. My stomach was still not the placid pool I’d hoped it’d be by now. Then again, I’d been able to keep myself from vomiting on someone else’s clothes.

“Ugh,” Cyril said.

“Have you seen Mr. Dentist since the incident?” Ken asked.

“No.”

“He stopped by here a few hours ago, before Cyril got back,” Ken added. “He asked if I’d seen you yet, asked if you were mad at him. He was all nerves, jittery. He’s avoiding you too, seems to think he can do it all week.”

“Avoiding me?”

“Well, you ran out right after it happened and you never came back,” Eddy said. “He probably thought you were livid. Where did you go anyways?”

I couldn’t respond with the truth. That I’d stumbled down the staircase, out Perkins Hall, and across the Yard. That I held up the hems of my vomit-stained dress and spun in
circles, trying to see which way he’d gone. I cringed at the image. Whatever had possessed me?

Eventually, towards the south, I saw a shadowy figure enter Standish Hall. I wondered if that was him, if that’s where he lived. I picked up my jog, yanked open the dormitory door, and rushed to the center of the stairwell. I looked up and could not see anyone. Yet I heard the tread of footsteps several flights up. I would have to take my chances that it was him.

“Nathaniel.” I pushed out as loud of a whisper as I could manage.

No response.

I was going to have to be louder, despite the hour, despite the hall’s proctor.

“Nathaniel!” I called upward.

He looked down over the banister.

Now that I had found him, it suddenly dawned on me that I had no idea what I intended to say. I had been so compelled by the urge to make things right, I hadn’t thought through the scenario. I was suddenly appalled with myself for running to him like this. I was drunk. I was an imbecile. If I’d been quick-witted, I would’ve fled like Cinderella in that childhood fairy tale: in the opposite direction of the prince.

“Uh, hello up there,” I said sheepishly.

No response.

“I, uh, well, I didn’t get to properly greet you back there, and I just wanted to, uh, say apologize—I mean, say sorry.” I could’ve killed myself for the bumbling buffoon I’d become.

_Speak, please, say anything._

“Those costumes look awfully familiar,” Nathaniel finally said flatly.

_No, no, no._

“Good night, Mr. Smerage.” His feet resumed their clopping up the stairs.
It was over.

This scene had drowned my thoughts two dozen times today and I was not about to share it with these three. I didn’t even want them knowing Nathaniel’s name, let alone this shame. I shifted uncomfortably in Cyril’s recliner, debating how to respond to Eddy’s question about where I had gone.

“I felt ill,” I said. “I went back to our room to sleep.”

“Liar!” Eddy blurted. “I went back to sleep, immediately after getting Gene on his feet.”

Damn. Now what?

I would just have to excuse myself; it was time anyways. I stood up. “Well, chaps, that is a story for another day. You two have reminded me that I still have to return those costumes to the theater. Merci for being such killjoys,” I quipped, hoping that my cheekiness would hide my angry blush. Their mantle clock struck ten. “Good god—see there! I better get going.” I made to leave.

“I’ll help you, old boy,” Cyril said.

Cyril rarely mocked, so I knew his offer was genuine.

“No, that’s alright, you must be tuckered out from your trip.”

“Watch me now,” Cyril said as he launched himself off the couch. “I’m standing up, I’m heading to the coatrack, I’m throwing on my jacket, you’re putting on yours”—he tossed me mine—“and we’re off!”

Cyril, Sappy Happy Cyril, was back. The world felt a little more bearable because of it.
Monday had bared teeth, Tuesday claws, but Wednesday was thus far emitting just a soft, uniform purr.

As I entered my British and American literature class, I determined to make good for having missed this class on Monday. After adventuring into the theater late Sunday night—no mysterious girl this time, though I’d recounted the story to an intrigued Cyril—I had slept through my alarm and missed my eight-a.m. literature class. I had made it to my second course on time, but only to deliver the most disastrous French oration in the history of Harvard. Truly, it was absolument grave. Eddy, of course, had given a flawless speech, sounding like Monsieur Clemenceau himself, the French Prime Minister we’d heard on the radio several times during the War. In Tuesday’s classes, I’d fared little better, and my stomach had continued to feel ill-at ease until evening.

Today, I finally seemed to be retrieving my normal stride. I hadn’t realized how thoroughly soothing routine could be until I had gone nearly a week without it. I hoped the remainder of the day would be as boring and slow as a sermon at Topsfield Congregational.

I could see that Eddy was already seated in his normal spot in the front row. He had probably made it to the dining hall for breakfast and fit in some study time already too. The little snail was miles ahead of me. Again. But I was here, feeling well, and that was a good enough start for me.

Cyril was sitting near the back, so I sidled into a chair next to him.

“Hello, chap,” I whispered.

Cyril smiled. “We both made it.” He’d missed Monday’s early morning classes too.
I was somewhat surprised he hadn’t chosen to skip today, given his yearlong habit of avoiding almost everything having to do with academics. But maybe Cyril was turning a new leaf after his weekend of parental chastisement. And plus, this English class was his only humanities course this semester amid his chemistry curriculum, and with the infamous Greenough as professor, this was not one to miss. It seemed lots of non-English majors tried to take the Dean’s courses. Nathaniel, in his pre-medical track, was no exception. This was the one course I shared with him this semester. While a part of me had hated missing this class Monday—it was my favorite this semester—another part of me had been overwhelmingly relieved. I’d been able to avoid having to face him.

Now here I was.

I craned around to see if Nathaniel was present. At first I thought he was absent, but then I saw him, upfront and to the right. Even from behind, I could tell he looked impeccable. His thick black hair was gelled perfectly into place and he sported what looked like a conservative black serge suit. I wondered what color his tie was.

I knew I should look away, but I couldn’t. My eyes lingered, and Nathaniel must’ve felt the touch of my gaze, for he turned his head slightly. Our eyes met. I could feel the tips of my ears begin to burn. I sunk deeper into my seat. Still, he stared at me. I could take it no longer; I flicked my head to the professor at the podium.

It was time to stop making a fool of myself. I had drawn Nathaniel’s attention yet again and despised myself for it.

*Forget him. He hates you, or worse, he’s disgusted by you. March forward, Keith.*

*Have a little dignity.*

I gave myself a mental slap in the face and told myself I could do this. I tried to tune out everything but Dean Greenough and began scribbling notes.
“Coleridge was a radical writer,” the Dean said, pausing for us to absorb the weight of this statement. An aspiring writer myself, I perked up. “He broke from the tradition of Neoclassicism and began writing in a new manner, known today as Romanticism. While we might respect this form today, to Coleridge’s contemporaries, it was seen as a shocking refusal to follow the customs of Neoclassical literature. Now, who amongst you gentleman can remind his peers what the core features of Neoclassicism are?”

Eddy’s hand shot up. Cyril and I looked at each other and shared a quiet laugh.

“Go ahead, Mr. Say,” the Dean said. Dean Greenough not only knew the name of all fifty students in the small lecture hall, but of every student he’d ever taught, as well as the names of countless other Harvard students. It was impressive, but intimidating too. The Dean would single students out in the middle of lecture, asking them difficult questions and checking to see if they’d completed their assignments.

Eddy began recounting how Neoclassical writers tended to write about realistic goings-on, usually in urban settings, and in strict verse. I realized this must’ve been what I missed during last class and began making notes.

The Dean thanked Eddy and moved on to the defining features of Romanticism. He said the Romantics were intrigued by the supernatural, by new and experimental ways of writing, by nature, by passion, and by human spirituality, not merely traditional religion.

*That’s my genre of thinking*, I thought. *Spiritual, not religious.*

“Romanticism was radical,” the Dean continued, “because it defined itself first and foremost by its very act of rebellion. To be a Romantic, you had to break the rules, the known, the understood, and it swept its writers and readers into chaos, a desired and unabashed chaos.”

Rule-breaking? Desire? Unabashed chaos? I could not help but think about our party behind closed-doors, the alcohol hanging out the window, Ernest and Ken on the bench seat.
And there were the young women I saw in Cambridge wearing shorter and shorter skirts, calling themselves “flappers.” They said the term meant modern women who did as they pleased. And women were likely to get the vote soon, thanks to radical protestors and politicians. Congress had already passed the amendment, though it had won by only one vote. Now it was just up to the states.

It seemed to me that on the precipice of this new decade, there was a whole segment of Romantics, defining themselves by their rebellion. And then there were those hanging onto the Victorian era. Those who had voted against women’s suffrage. Those who had passed Prohibition. They were the Neoclassicists.

What camp was I in? If I put myself with the Romantics, did that mean I was radical? I didn’t feel radical. I was different, to be sure, that much was more than evident, always had been. But radical? I didn’t have the bravado to be radical.

“In the Romantic era, emotion was allowed, even encouraged, to rule,” Dean Greenough said. “But my dear students, can you imagine a society based on emotion? What would be the consequences?” These were the worldly questions that the Dean asked and found in literature. The type of questions that had students begging for scraps at his feet like a horde of puppies. The Dean gave us a moment to ponder the question, twisting the tips of his white mustache while he waited.

“Now if we turn to The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, we can easily see the chaos and rebellion of Romanticism in the text.”

I thought about that long poem I’d read this weekend. The Dean was right. Ancient Mariner was certainly a chaotic and emotional jumble of a dark sea voyage. The mariner was burning with the need to retell his story, to share his emotions, no matter how unspeakable. The Dean guided us through several passages.
“Yet I encourage you not to romanticize the Romantics.” The Dean grinned at this own pun. “Samuel Coleridge, for example, had an opium addiction. While he continually sought to overcome it, we must not forget that he was addicted to something immoral, and that the Mariner can be read, at least in part, as a combination of a ghastly and deranged opium high—a drug-induced dream of sorts— with a severe desire to repent.

“In that vein, I’d like Mr. Rudd to tell us what he thinks the symbolism is of killing the great albatross.” The Dean had chosen his first victim.

The student, whom I did not know, tried his best to impress the Dean with his analysis. The albatross symbolized, on one hand, Christ and traditional religion, and on the other, addiction and guilt. The pupil proceeded on and on about the overlap of those two, about crucifixes and drug illusions and dead gothic birds, but it all felt like too much philosophy for me at this hour. He’d clearly read the text more closely than I had.

The Dean began to tie up his lecture. “Next week, we’ll be moving on to two more romantic poets, William Blake and John Keats. Read your syllabus and keep up with your assignments, lads. I know you have substantial work for your other classes, but this is English, gents! The most important subject you’ll ever take. Your gateway to the world’s answers! Your other courses can wait.” He laughed and waved us away.

With that send-off, the vast sea of young men in suits shuffled to life. Cyril said he was going to attend his chemistry laboratory next and gave me a pat goodbye. Eddy also rushed past, off to an economics class across campus. I had a study period, so packed up leisurely.

When I looked up from my satchel, Nathaniel was gliding my way. He was actually coming towards me. He wasn’t walking away. I looked behind me to see if there was someone else whom he was approaching, but there was not.

What was that look on his face? Was it a smirk? A smile, a genuine one? Pity?
Before I could make sense of it, he was already inches from me, pressing a folded slip of paper on top of my desk. Then he brushed past my shoulder, and was gone.

I unfolded the crinkled note and read the two words penned in crisp black ink.

_They know._

After my last class of the day, I caught a streetcar into town to begin my search for a job. The people around me seemed so quiet, so very much unaware of my pounding, repetitive thoughts. The grandmotherly figure knitting in the corner. The woman with the baby pram. The young boy in knickers with a stack of newspapers on his lap. It seemed odd to me that I could be feeling such fear and self-loathing, and no one could know. To them, I was just another passenger on the tram, as they were to me. I was the only one entirely in my head, and I felt all the more lonely because of it.

I pulled the piece of paper out of my pocket, though there was certainly no need. Two words didn’t take much to sink in. But I wanted to see them again. To torture myself with wondering at their significance.

_They know._

People know about my feelings for Nathaniel? I wondered. No, not that. I’d told no one. About my embarrassing traipse across campus? About the costumes? Who knows—the Dramatic Club? As in Nathaniel told them? But I wasn’t sure he would have, as it would’ve reflected poorly on him too, since he had helped me reach my current status in the induction process. It must’ve been someone else in the Club. Who? How did they find out?

The questions raked me like nails. The cat’s claws had returned.
I jumped off at the Baker Street stop and walked past the row of businesses and into Café Dreyfus.

Harry, in his black and white uniform, was behind the bar, serving a man what appeared to be a Coca-Cola. They both looked up as the bells jingled behind me.

“Mr. Smerage!” he boomed.

I nodded at him politely, “Mr. Dreyfus,” though Junior was the more apt name popping up in my head.

The man on the barstool slurped his Coca-Cola through a straw. He slowly scrutinized me, from the dirty blond hair sticking out under my cap, down to my black leather shoes, and back up again. When he met my eyes, he smiled like the Cheshire cat, got off his stool, and put out his hand. “I’m Mr. Putnam, but do call me Clarence.” He had a sing-song voice.

Harry grabbed his dishcloth off the counter and leaned over the bar to swat the man with it. “Get out of here, Clarence!”

The man lifted his eyebrows at me, still sporting that sly grin, then carried his soda to one of the round cherry tables in the back of the café. He continually looked back over his shoulder, as if beckoning. I’d seen Ken and Ernest approached as directly by older men, but I’d never been the source of such fawning. I had to admit that the attention felt both flattering and creepy, to be sure.

“Clarence is relatively new, but I gather he will soon be a regular here.” Harry laughed, his mustache changing shapes as he did.

“Gee, that’s hard to imagine,” I quipped, knowing very well that Harry, as manager of his family’s café—his father was swamped with running the attached Hotel Dreyfus—had had the freedom to encourage a particular clientele. A clientele of which our group of six were very much a part.
This past fall I had stumbled into our group when the University housing board assigned me to room with Eddy. Last year though, while I was still at Tufts, Gene and Ernest had met in a biology class, one that was required for both dentistry and pre-medical students. Eventually, they’d heard that Café Dreyfus was the bohemian place for young men of Jane persuasions to be, and Ernest had dragged Gene along, despite his protests. There, they’d met Eddy, then Cyril, and through Cyril, his roommate Ken. I guessed we had Dreyfus Junior himself to thank for bringing us together. And to be sure, I couldn’t forget the freedom we felt between these satiny maroon walls. It’s why I’d come here first to seek employment.

“How’s business proceeding in this prohibitive first week?” I asked, trying to be clever.

“Slower in the evenings, certainly.” I could see that the wooden shelves behind Harry, which normally held liquor, were now as barren as trees in winter. The long pieces of mirror behind the shelves now had nothing to reflect expect the faces of customers. I looked at myself and saw a plain face, distracted eyes.

“I was wondering Harry—”

“I knew it,” he interrupted. “I knew the only reason you would come in here alone would be to ask for something.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not the alone type, and what’s more, I think you’re half scared of me.” He let out a belly laugh while slapping his palm on the bar.

I felt my jaw tighten and ears redden.

“I am not entirely sure where you’ve obtained those ideas, and certainly Cyril could attest to my—”

“Cyril, how is the fella?”

“You haven’t seen him yet since he got back?”
Harry’s smile vanished, and I immediately wished I could recant my question. “It’s only Thursday,” I added feebly.

“Yes, I’m sure he’ll be in tomorrow,” Harry agreed. He grabbed the dishcloth and started shining the counters.

“You know how the weekdays just fly by like sparrows,” I tried again. “So much work for all of us.”

“Yes,” Harry said, attacking a watermark on the glossy surface.

“Well, to return to my point that you so thoroughly predicted, yes, I wanted to inquire whether you had any openings for piano playing during the weekends. I seem to recall that you have a regular jazz musician on Saturday nights.”

Harry looked up at me. “You play the piano?”

“My whole life. Love it.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well, good fella,” I smiled, trying to lighten the mood, “you don’t know everything about me, nor I about you.” I hoped he could sense this vague attempt at apologizing.

“We still have old Atwater with us. He’s been playing regularly for several years now. And at the moment, we don’t need another—”

“That’s a shame. But I thank you for your—”

“I wasn’t done,” Harry said. He paused, as if to show me he was back in control. “I’ll let you in on a little secret.” He stopped scrubbing. “Not because you and I are particularly pally, but because I know you and your boys will be prime clients.”

He looked from left to right and then leaned in closer to me, whispering, “My father and I are already discussing the possibility of opening a saloon of sorts in the basement. The space is a little dated, but at one point it was a lounge for the hotel, a spillover for the larger parties and events that we couldn’t fit in the main hall. It wouldn’t take much to get it up-and-
at-'em again, add a dance floor, a secret door, a piano if we can fit it, and I daresay we’re in business.”

“Swanky!”

“But speak-easy about it, Keith. I hear that’s what they’ve always called these unlicensed bars, even before Prohibition, ‘speakeasies,’ they’re the ones that don’t go through the government. Can’t let the police catch wind.”

“Of course.”

“And I’ll let you know if we need a pianist, just give us a month or two.”

We shook hands. And as I stepped out the door into the streets of Cambridge, I imagined myself being the star of the secret saloon, everyone surrounding me as I pounded out a tune, their voices riding my notes. It seemed deliciously dramatic.

The workday was coming to a close, and the streets were babbling with rush hour traffic. I walked away from Café Dreyfus and rounded the corner onto Mount Chelsea Avenue. The thoroughfare was even more crowded than Baker Street had been and a police officer on horseback monitored the area. Up the way, I could see the white tips of signs poking above the hatted-heads of the crowd. I realized this was more than the normal five-p.m. hubbub. It was a protest.

I pushed through the crowd to the front where a ring of onlookers surrounded the protestors. There were over two dozen of them, chaps and ladies, all holding signs on wooden sticks. Most of the boards read: WE WANT BEER!

That seemed to be what they were chanting too. In a loud, level monotone, they said, “WE WANT BEER! WE WANT BEER! WE WANT BEER!”

Most of the picketers stood in front of two black and boxy Fords, the type that had an almost wagon-like backseat where passengers could sit in the open air if they folded back the
cloth canopy. The vehicles had long, canvas banners tied on the side: REPEAL THE 18th AMENDMENT. On the roof of one car, a young man sat, waving an American flag and chanting the slogan. In the open backseat of the other, two young women held signs of their own. One woman’s read, I’M NO CAMEL, I WANT BEER! She wore a green coat and purple hat, shocking black curls cropped around her neck. She sported ruby lipstick, a familiar mischievous look in her eyes.

It was the lady from the theater. I was certain.

I felt shocked and giddy. I wanted to run up to her. Then I checked myself. Why was I so intrigued? Yes, she had been in the theater illicitly, but so had I. It was none of my business, really. And at the moment, she was clearly quite occupied.

But I couldn’t let go. There was something compelling in the fact that she had been there that awful night that might very well be my demise. I needed to know who she was.

I approached the vehicle, but she towered above me and did not look down.

“Miss?” No reaction.

“Excuse me, Miss?” Still nothing.

“MISS WITH THE CAMEL POSTER!” I shouted. I knew this was beyond rude, but then again, this was considerably beyond normal circumstances.

She gripped the edge of the car and turned down towards me. For a brief moment, her eyes widened. She recognized me. Then her eyes narrowed again and she smiled archly.

“Good day, sir,” she said.

I laughed. Was that her signature phrase? The protestors around me started lowering their signs and moving back towards the vehicles.

“You’re the one from the theater,” I said quickly. “What’s your name?”

Some started piling into the cars. Others stepped onto the back mufflers, holding onto the canopy up top.
“If you want to talk with me,” she said, “you’re going to have to get on board. This jalopy’s about to move.”

A splutter of smoke coughed from the tailpipe. I hesitated. I didn’t even know who these people were or where they were going, I had work to do. There was the mess with Nathaniel. The Dramatic Club.

The car started to lurch forward, and the young woman reached out her hand. It was now, or not at all. I made my decision and hoped I wouldn’t regret it.

I stepped onto the running board and hoisted myself into the backseat. We lurched forward, and I practically fell on top of this woman—this crazy, mysterious woman.

“My name’s Hazel,” she yelled unabashedly over the wind. “Hazel Webster. What’s yours?”
After my last class on Thursday, I entered Perkins 24 to an unexpected sight: Eddy, still dressed in his blazer and tie, curled over a compact of rouge. He was peering into the little mirror and brushing red powder on his pale cheeks. The act made him appear even more diminutive than usual, a turtle just barely peering out of its curved shell.

“Eddy, is that rouge?” A dumb question, a rhetorical one. I knew very well what was in his hands.

“Yes,” he snapped.

I waited for an explanation, but Eddy provided none. Instead, he moved on to his other cheek.

I thought back to the look of glee on Eddy’s face during Saturday night’s party. How his lace dress and blond wig, his dolled up face and stuffed bosom had set him aglow like fireworks at a county fair.

“Are you becoming Miss Say again?”

“No,” he glared at me.

I hadn’t meant it meanly, but apparently Eddy was a bundle of quills this afternoon.

“Then…what?”

“I just—” he paused. “Well, I just—you know how my constitution creates such a hideous pallor, and I’m quite tired of it, that’s all. This makes me look less sickly, see?” He clicked the compact closed and stood up.

Yes, it did add life to his cheeks, but it seemed rather rosy, especially in contrast to his mousey hair, thin pale neck, and white collar. His cheeks were now two pink petals on a bed
of snow. What could I say to him? I knew this was not the time to hurl my usual razz of a remark, but we had dinner plans. I needed to look out for the chap.

“I understand,” I said. “But we’re not going to a dormitory party or to some private affair. We’re meeting the fellas for dinner in Memorial Hall, as club members, with hundreds of others present, including some professors, maybe even some distinguished guests.”

“Don’t go all Gene on me,” Eddy lanced. “First, no one will notice. Second, it’s college, no one cares. What’s Cyril’s favorite quotation again—college, refuge, no judgment? Something along those lines I believe.”

“Maybe a good portion of the students do not care,” I countered, “but plenty of others concern themselves with this.” I went to the wall and untacked one of my clippings from my long chain of photographs. “Remember this?”

It was the photo that had made the front page of dozens of newspapers just a few months back. It featured two men dressed in drag and thirteen other military men. They were being arrested at the Navy base in Newport, RI, for charges of homosexuality. Sodomy, they called it. The newspaper story had recounted how private military investigators had infiltrated the group, purposefully trying to seduce young sailors to see if they could gain enough evidence to charge them for their behavior.

“There is a real world out there,” I said.

“Keith! You’re missing the whole point of that story! The head of the Navy, what was his name, a Mr. Daniels? And the assistant head of the Navy, our own Franklin D. Roosevelt from Harvard, are now under investigation for those fifteen arrests. People don’t like how they went about scamming those men. People don’t appreciate witch hunts. And people want freedom of choice. Times are changing, Keith.”

Eddy was right, to a degree. Hadn’t I seen that last night? Hazel—for she had insisted I call her by her first name—had pulled me into her strange and radical world. We’d ridden in
the back of the Ford to a half dozen locations in the city, stopping to protest at each. She’d flirted with several men, then mocked them like she was one of the chaps. She had pulled a flask of gin from her stockings, flashed her thigh to those around, drunk in the open street.

She had told me about the apartment where she lived with two other young women. “See the two gals in the back of the other jalopy? They’re my roommates,” she’d said, “and they’re in a Boston Marriage, if you know what I mean.” She’d jabbed her elbow into my ribs and winked.

I’d heard talk of such an arrangement before: two women who lived together, purportedly to share rent and forgo the financial need of a man, but who often shared just one bedroom. They were generally understood to be lesbians. Apparently they abounded in Boston. I’d never met any before, having attended an all-boys high school and now an all-male college. Needless to say, I was intrigued.

Did they find each other the same way we did? Was there a lesbian café? A theater group? A certain look to give? Was Hazel one of them? Us?

I’d tried to hint at it. I’d also tried to ask about why she’d been in Harvard’s theater that night. How old she was. What she did for work. But all she’d shared was that she had dropped out of Radcliffe during her first semester. “All too prim and proper for me, old sport,” she’d said.

Hazel’s world was one of change and progression, that was certain. But as I looked at Eddy’s rouged cheeks, I couldn’t help feeling like that change was happening outside of campus, not here. At Harvard, we had our true selves, who emerged in each other’s company, during the evenings and weekends. But during the day, we were all supposed to be a variation on one self: the suit-and-tie self, the “Yes, Professor, I agree” self, the I-won’t-let-my-parents-down self. I guessed without hooch or Hazel, I was not nearly so brazen.
Eddy must’ve sensed that I was grappling with the matter, for he said, “It’s just a little rouge, dear.” He cupped his chin to show off his cheeks. “Nothing to fear.”

“Yes, yes,” I said, still distracted.

I turned to the wall and tacked the thin paper photo back up. It was right underneath one of our H flags. I reached up and ran my fingers along the felt cloth. Firm, scratchy.

I hoped Eddy was right.

After dressing formally for the evening, I stood in front of the mirror, contemplating how to spruce up my appearance. From the myriad bottles on top of my dresser, I added a squirt of cologne and touched up my hair gel, which made my brownish-blond hair darker than normal.

“How’s this?” I asked Eddy, the self-proclaimed god of fashion.

“Oh Keith! Your part is all crooked and your tie’s too loose.”

“And you’re a paragon of beauty too, Miss Say.”

“Give me your comb,” Eddy demanded, flinging out his hand.

I acquiesced, and within seconds, my center part was remarkably straight, rivaling even the stern ones Mother had carved into my head as a boy.

“As for the tie”—Eddy’s hands fumbled somewhat awkwardly at my neck—“et voilà.”

Eddy looked at me then widened his eyes. What now, I thought, as he spun around and made his way to my desk.

“Gee, dearie, I don’t think you saw this, and I forgot to mention it.” He hobbled back over and handed me an envelope. “I found it on the floor when I returned from my macroeconomics course. I presume it was slipped under our door.”

It was a plain envelope with my full name scrawled on the front, nothing else.
My heart plunged. Did Nathaniel know my room number? I felt nervous. My stomach quivered as if I were standing atop Boston’s highest skyscraper.

Then I wanted to swat myself for my stupidity. Even if Nathaniel did know, he wouldn’t write me. Yet part of me still hoped.

I ripped open the envelope.

Mr. Smerage,

The Dramatic Club requests your attendance at a task of vital importance. Please present yourself in the theater at 7 o’clock this evening.

Sincerely,

James D. Crumpton ’20
President of the Dramatic Club
Harvard University

I collapsed on to my bed and re-read the letter, each word the prick of a knife.

I realized I’d have to proceed straight from dinner to the theater, and wondered if I should skip dinner altogether. Then it dawned on me: this was Nathaniel’s They know. He had warned me. He had willingly chosen to warn me before any official correspondence.

I could not even pretend to know why Nathaniel had done that, yet it soothed me nonetheless. Maybe everything would be alright. Besides, I had a decadent evening ahead of me. It was time to rely on my happy-go-lucky-side and make the best of it. Positive thoughts would be rewarded with positive outcomes, or so I needed to tell myself.

In our finest eveningwear, Eddy and I walked through the imposing steepled doorway into Memorial Hall’s Great Room. The dazzling Gothic space impressed me perhaps even more than the library, though the library was free for all to enjoy, and this building most certainly was not. The walls were walnut-paneled and arched seductively towards a lofty ceiling. Dozens of buttresses lined the vaulted room and from their dark trusses hung lines of
chandeliers. There were stained-glass windows and venerable portraits of Harvard’s best, candles and long rows of perfectly linened tables. In my matching trousers and coattails, hand-me-downs from Father, to be sure, I felt like a British gentleman at a resplendent ball.

We walked down the long hall to our table, the one that we’d reserved two evenings a week this semester. Eddy and I only had half-board with Memorial Hall’s eating club, one of the many member-only dining halls on campus. Our plan only allotted us five breakfasts, five lunches, and two dinners per week, so tonight was a lovely treat. The others had full-board, though they often did not use it, especially Ernest, which seemed an utter waste to me.

We passed a long center table with several professors and guests. Dean Greenough was at the head, chatting animatedly with several adults I did not know.

When the Dean saw us, he stood up. At first, his eyes narrowed a bit at Eddy, searching. He did not put out his hand right away. Did he notice the rouge? But soon enough, the Dean’s eyes filled again with their normal sparkle.

“Mr. Smerage, Mr. Say,” Dean Greenough boomed, “I’d like you to meet Mr. Bates, the head of the Cambridge police force, out of his uniform tonight. And to my right, we have the distinguished mayor of Cambridge, Mr. Quinn.”

We all shook hands and exchanged a few words. I felt like such a bumbler in front of these figures. Eddy glided through the conversation as if on ice.

“We were just discussing morality in the face of modernity, weren’t we gentleman?” The Dean turned to his guests. It was our cue to go. We gave the slightest of bows and left.

Our six-person table was in the back corner of the Hall and Cyril, Ken, Ernest, and Gene were already seated. As I pulled up a chair, I realized that it was the first time our full group had been reunited this semester. I smiled at them, though Gene did not look up at me.

I leaned over Cyril’s shoulder and whispered, “Did you get a note?”

“Yes, 7 o’clock.”
“I’m so sorry chap, I hope—”

“It’ll be fine,” Cyril said, “for both of us.” I hoped Cyril’s and my optimism was how the rest of the world functioned.

“Mr. Smerage, you’re seeming to make a habit out of your lateness,” Ernest lorded over me. He was probably irked that Cyril and I were whispering without him.

“It was this lady,” I said, clapping Eddy’s back. He shrank from my touch.

“Mr. Say, your cheeks look awfully ruddy.” Ken mocked. “Did you go for a run? Are you sweaty?”

“Yes, if you must know, though it does not concern you, Mr. Day,” Eddy said, “I have indeed been increasing my exercise.” I knew it was a lie. I started to open my mouth, but Eddy flicked his grayish eyes to me and widened them, entreat ing me to keep his secret.

“Good job,” Cyril said. “We all could use more exercise.”

“Not me,” Ken chimed in. “They increased my practices to eight times a week, since our first track and field competition is in just six weeks.”

“Oh la la, I’ll be there,” Ernest said. “Mr. Kenneth Day in a tight track suit, and all those other fine specimens, I can see it now.”

“Shhh!” Gene said, glaring at Ernest and looking behind him to see if anyone had heard. It was the first he’d said so far, and still he had not made eye contact with me even though he was sitting right across from me. To be fair though, it seemed he was not making much eye contact with any of us. Was this because of his embarrassment about vomiting? Or was it more than that?

Gene’s anxiousness and the question of Eddy’s rose-petal cheeks were diverted by the waiter who came to ask our orders for the three-course meal. I decided to take the cream of celery soup, the spiced baked ham with potatoes, and the pineapple-upside-down cake. As that waiter left, another arrived with baskets of rolls and butter in crystal saucers. We all
descended on them in a manner that was not as gentlemanly as our surroundings would’ve warranted.

“So rumor has it,” Cyril said, leaning over his roll, “that that table over there of freshman—”

“You mean fish,” Eddy corrected.

“Yes, that they have their own little underworld going on too.”

We tried to scope them out without being too conspicuous.

“Oui, oui, oui, he looks like a real Jane,” Ernest said about one petite blond boy in a tight, satin-finished suit. “The rest could pass either way, but I’m certainly glad to know they play for our team, at least some of the time.” As he finished these last words, Ernest elbowed Ken and fluttered his eyelashes. Ken just rolled his eyes in response. I wondered if anything more had happened between them.

I gazed out over the ocean of chatter. There might only be two tables of chaps who made their homosexual preferences somewhat obvious, but I knew there were many more out there. Boys who found other boys through less obvious manners.

“At Tufts, my old university, Harvard’s student body is known for being particularly queer,” I said. “Harvard’s Homosexuals, they’d call us.”

“I’ve heard that too,” Ernest said excitedly. “And it does seem to me that half this university would love to take it in the bun, or at least receive a hard sucking, if you ask me.”

“Ernest!” Gene snapped, looking mortified.

“I don’t see what the problem is, Mr. Dentist. You were fine with this manner of speaking Saturday night. And, as I seem to recall, you were more than fine with many things.”

Gene did not reply, but began tapping his fingers, as he often did.
Cyril tried to lacquer the moment with his sweetness: “Now Ernest, leave Gene to think what he thinks, and why don’t you tell us about Oxford University again, since this Hall was indeed inspired by some of the Halls of England.”

Eddy actually guffawed, nearly spewing out some of the water in his mouth. We’d heard Ernest compare Harvard to Oxford two dozen times, yet in order to rescue Gene, Cyril was willing to hear it again.

Paying Eddy no attention, Ernest dove into a speech about how the halls at Oxford put this Great Room to shame. How he’d seen this spectacular sight and that incomparable marvel. How he felt so comfortable in Europe we might as well consider him European and that he preferred the French flare for design to America’s dated fashions.

I began to tune him out, jealous of his many trips to Europe, yes, but also curious about what was wrong with Gene, who also didn’t seem to be paying much attention. He was still tapping his fingers at an impressively even tempo, a reliable metronome, like the wind-up one I used as a child to improve my rhythm at the piano.

I thought I could begin by freeing him from the burden of the costume spectacle. After all, Ken had told me Sunday night that Gene was explicitly avoiding me because of it.

“Gene,” I whispered. “It’s alright about the costumes, truly, I promise it is, chap.”

His fingers sped up and he did not speak for quite some time. “It’s not just that,” he finally whispered back.

“What then?”

“I just… This group, it makes me… Maybe I should just—” Gene stopped speaking and seemed to anxiously scan everything around him. He looked so distraught.

I reached out to put a quieting hand on Gene’s wrist, and he winced at my touch. I looked down and noticed small spots of blood and other yellowish fluids on his cuff.
“Gene!” I said, more loudly than I should have, causing the other fellas to look up.

“You’re—”

But before I could say that I thought he was bleeding, Gene got up and strode down the long aisle of tables, his lanky legs putting quick distance between us. Before the others could start asking questions, I stood up and followed Gene out.

In the foyer outside the Great Room, I saw Gene enter the gentleman’s room and I pushed in after him.

He flopped awkwardly onto the ottoman and bent his head low so he wouldn’t have to look at me.

“Gene, what’s eating you?” I said.

I could not see his face, but I saw a large tear drop onto the carpet.

“Is this about the costumes?”

He did not respond.

“Because you’re forgiven, and it’s not your issue anyways, chap. It’s mine.” And goddamn I wished it weren’t. I winced at the thought of the Dramatic Club meeting, now just two hours away.

Gene looked up and I could see he had indeed been crying. The streaks of tears made his pimples more pronounced.

“It’s all of it, Keith, all of it. I just can’t accept it.” Gene lifted his arm and wiped his eyes on his sleeve, causing the cuff to pull away from his wrist.

It was just enough to reveal the horror beneath the surface. On the thin, delicate underside of his wrist were six small, circular burn marks. They looked fresh, not yet blistering. The edge of each had a purplish-black ring, the center a deep well of rawness like the vulnerable pinkness inside one’s mouth. This was a layer of flesh that was never supposed to see the light of day. I could hardly stomach it. I was no doctor type. I was further disturbed
by the bizarre, seemingly deliberate formation of the wounds: the six perfect circles fell into
two even rows of three. They looked like the six dots etched into the sides of dice.

“Gene!” I couldn’t keep the distress out of my voice.

He saw me staring at his wrist and pulled his cuff down instinctually.

“Just an accident in the dental lab,” he said quickly—too quickly for my liking.

“Really? But how? And shouldn’t we go have it dressed at the clinic?”

“No,” snapped Gene. He curled even further into himself on the ottoman and refused
to say another word.

I tried for quarter an hour to reassure Gene, to get him to talk, but he shared nothing.

Needless to say, I felt worried and confused. Why the two even rows of three? What could
have possibly made that formation? How could Gene put up with whole layers of skin just
burned away? Why no gauze on top of the wound? Why had he not gone to the clinic? And
what did I sense Gene was hiding?

Eventually, Gene unrolled his lanky body and sat up straight. He said he felt better
and we returned to the Great Room for the second course, having missed the first.

I was still uneasy. I was convinced that Gene had burned himself on purpose.

At seven o’clock, Cyril and I took our seats in the ring of folding chairs that had been placed
on the stage of the theater. A few boys were already seated, but many more filed in silently.
The long line of dangling spotlights had been turned on, and I found myself feeling heated. I
looked at Cyril and saw a slight sheen on his face too. He seemed antsy, certainly more than
normal.

I hoped desperately that I had not implicated him in this—that Nathaniel’s *They know*
did not include knowing about Cyril entering the theater Sunday night to help me return the
costumes. The prestigious Dramatic Club was lauded all over New England. Membership
was the ultimate badge of honor. It could help you obtain jobs in New York City and jumpstart careers in the arts and humanities. Only five seniors would be graduating in July, so only five new spots would be opening. I knew it’d be hard enough for Cyril and me to secure one of those positions, even without this incident.

Nathaniel was the last to enter. He walked with that same confident ease-of-gait that I could not help but find attractive. He looked at me—Why did I always have to be staring at him?—and nodded.

He nodded at me in front of everyone. A vote of confidence? Pity?

I realized I’d been holding my breath and let out a sigh.

With everyone seated, the president, James Crumpton, and the vice-president, Otto Griswold, stood up to start the meeting. I did not know either of them that well. Crumpton was a senior, extremely formal, and the one who called and led the meetings. He was the one who’d written us the notes in our mailboxes. Griswold was a junior and likely to succeed Crumpton in the presidency next year. He was a bit more blasé, from Maine, I believe. He was the one from whom I’d borrowed the theater—

The key.

No, I cursed. No, no, no!

I stopped breathing. I pressed my eyes closed and tried to untangle the pit of snakes that now inhabited my stomach. I could not believe it. I could not fathom that I could have been such an imbecile, so utterly and appallingly stupid: I had not returned the key. Not Saturday after the party, not Sunday night after returning the costumes, not Monday, not ever. Frankly, even now, I did not know where the key was. Had I lost it? How could I be so goddamn careless?
I could hear Crumpton begin the meeting. “Members, invitees, thank you for attending this rather unforeseen gathering. We will still be having our regular Friday afternoon meeting, so do be sure to join us tomorrow as well.”

I stared down at my feet, only half absorbing the words echoing above me. I had aimed all my efforts at washing and preserving and returning the costumes, yet I had forgotten a task that had been perhaps even more essential: returning the key. To be honest, I had not even thought about what it would look like to Griswold if I did not return it the same day. How could I have been such a dunce?

As my mind catapulted itself in crazy directions, I came to realize that this wasn’t a one-time affair, that I was more of a dunce, and more often, than I’d admitted to myself. I didn’t think matters through. I overlooked things—not checking my mail during the first week and therefore missing mother’s letter, not paying attention to my nail paint, not thinking through the key scenario, not holding my tongue at important moments. I felt oddly mortified at this self-discovery. It made me hate myself all the more. This wasn’t just one mistake. This was me.

Crumpton had finished speaking, and now Griswold began. “It was brought to my attention that this past weekend—”

I winced. Here it came.

“Keith Smerage borrowed, without permission, almost half of the Dramatic Club’s costumes.” Griswold gave more details, describing how he’d been concerned when I hadn’t returned with the key, that he’d gone to the Club President, that together they’d used Crumpton’s key on Sunday. At some point, Crumpton took the reins again and began lecturing about trust and shared resources and morality. But I could hardly take it all in. My breath was shallow. My palms and ears were beginning to sweat. Those hideous spotlights were boring into me like hot rods. I needed air.
I looked at Cyril. Then it dawned on me. There’d been no mention of him. I felt a small wave of relief flit through me, but it passed quickly as all my fears returned.

“Invitees,” the president said, pausing, “even though you are not yet members, we would like you to vote, and we would like you to do so honestly. We will not hold your vote against you in any fashion. Consider our vote tonight a gentlemanly, democratic manner to solve a problem at hand.” I realized the inclusion of the potential members would also make the group an odd number; there’d be no split vote. Twenty members, fifteen candidates, thirty-five total.

“All in favor of overlooking this incident and allowing Mr. Smerage to continue with his Dramatic Club candidacy, raise your hand.”

Cyril’s hand shot up in the air. A speckling of other hands also rose, including a fellow sophomore, Stanley Gilkey, with whom I was already somewhat acquainted. I willed my eyes not to look at Nathaniel. I was certain he wouldn’t raise his hand. And from the corner of my eye, I could see that I was right.

“I count sixteen,” Crumpton said. “Now, all in favor of suspending Mr. Smerage’s application, raise your hands.”

I began counting the hands in my head, but Crumpton was counting aloud and his number mixed with mine.

“That’s eighteen,” Crumpton paused and furrowed an eyebrow. “We’re missing a vote.”

“I abstain,” Nathaniel said. He stared confidently at Crumpton, as if daring him to challenge. They blinked at each other for several awkward seconds.

“I suppose that’s allowed,” Crumpton finally said, though the abstention seemed to perturb him. “No matter, sixteen to eighteen is a clear enough vote. I hereby declare that Mr. Keith Smerage is suspended from potential membership in Dramatic Club.”
The words resounded across the stage like a gavel falling in a courtroom.

All eyes turned to me. Some chaps looked as surprised as I did. Others were smiling.

*How could they be smiling?*

I nodded at them. Without a word, I got up to leave. I needed to be out of the theater before anyone else got up. Before those tears, weak and kiddish and angry, fell down my face.

My status, my future career, my very reason for coming to Harvard—all of it, was over.
For the remainder of that week, and the weeks that came, Eddy put rouge on every morning and reapplied it in the afternoon if it had faded too much for his liking. Eddy maintained his pure energy and spunk, while I dragged through the weeks, a tin man without a heart. Again, I drank too much at Ernest’s party the past two weekends, and again, I’d scored poorly on a French assignment. I still had yet to find a job, and because my funds were growing meager, I’d been unable to go out for dinner with the fellas a few nights back, not to mention that my clothes were beginning to smell, as I now could only send out my laundry once per month.

Sure, there’d been high moments these past two weeks. I’d met Hazel for another protest, and she had agreed to come out with us tonight, so I could introduce her to the group. I was to pick her up at her apartment before heading to Harry’s party in Beacon Hill.

Nathaniel had begun sitting with me sometimes in class. I think we were beginning to become friends, but I feared his actions were out of pity. And so far, I’d seen him in class, and class alone, and we’d never discussed what had happened that fated Saturday night at the party, or his abstention the Thursday night of the vote.

Lest I forget, there was also Cyril’s gesture to quit the Dramatic Club in support of me, but I’d insisted he continue in his endeavor for membership. So the past two Fridays, he’d gone to their regular meeting, and I’d pouted in my dorm room—how mature—as I did now, the third Friday that I could not attend. Cyril always showed up to my dormitory afterwards to show his loyalty.

Yet I could not appreciate these gestures. I had never felt so low. I stared out my dormitory window, twiddling my pen, wondering what they were discussing at the meeting, what playful dramatic activities they were engaging in, whether they’d decided on the spring
production. I sighed and returned to the letter I was writing Mother. At least I could confide in her what I was feeling. Most of it anyways.

\[\text{It seems if things keep going like they are at present, I won’t have anything to show for my time at Harvard, or in life, for that matter. And that is quite a frightful prospect, because we are measured by material accomplishments, in the eyes of society that is. And to have none is, well, intolerable.}
\]

\[\text{I seem to be alone in that regard amongst my peers. Ernest has his money and his near-engagement to Helen of Brookline. Gene has an upcoming career in dentistry, though I’m not sure he appreciates it at the moment. Ken, his athletic success. Eddy, his intelligence in economics and in all his classes, his social ease. Cyril, well, I guess Cyril has a family against him and a major he dislikes, but he does have the chance to go for the Dramatic Club, and, if you must know, is in a relationship. My childhood friends at home in Topsfield are all getting married, of which I have no desire, nor do I feel of age, but they at least have that to show.}
\]

\[\text{I feel my confidence waning and am unsure how to proceed. I’m sure there is a lesson I could pull from this, but quite honestly I am unable to do anything but brood. Please advise, Mother dearest. I cannot continue as I am.}
\]

\[\text{Toujours,}
\]

\[\text{Moi}
\]

I sealed the envelope and slid it into my coat pocket, planning to mail it on my way out this evening. Then I hurled myself onto the bed. The minutes slid by silently. I tried to close my eyes for an afternoon nap, but all I could do was stare at the ceiling in morose contemplation.

I imagined myself as a headline in the Crimson: SOPHOMORE STUDENT KEITH SMERAGE HAS NOTHING TO SHOW FOR HIS MOTHER’S MONEY SPENT AT HARVARD. Or, maybe from the administration’s perspective: HARVARD LOOKS FOR WAY TO REVOKE ADMISSION OF USELESS STUDENT.

\[\text{Desiring some relief from my thoughts, I jumped up and snatched my latest English book from Dean Greenough’s class. We’d just finished William Blake’s poetry this past week, but I figured re-reading some of his poems might be just what I needed to validate my}
\]
sullenness. The lines were full of dark and dreary drama. We had an upcoming essay too, so maybe I’d stumble on a topic.

Back in bed, I opened *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and propped my pillow a bit higher. I flipped to the second part of the collection, *Songs of Experience*, as I remembered the Dean discussing how Blake wrote this second part to contrast to the innocence of the first part. The second half focused on how the human spirit withers and dies when it has been forced to repress itself, forced to conform to society. That sounded just right. I didn’t need to read poems about innocence, about spring and blossoms and divinity.

I sank deep into the book and found that the smoldering negativity of Blake’s poems captivated me in a way I could not quite explain. I could feel the sick roses. The betrayal and prostitution. The storms and cemeteries. The naked boy bound in iron chains.

I kept returning to the last stanza of “The Garden of Love.” It was just so eerie and made me want to linger.

> And I saw it was filled with graves  
> And tombstones where flowers should be  
> And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,  
> And binding with briars my joys and desires.

The line with the nearly rhyming ‘gowns’ and ‘rounds’ felt the most chilling. Who would create—or want—an almost child-like rhyme in this type of poem?

Already somewhat spooked, I was startled by a peppy knock at the door.

“Come in,” I shouted from bed, closing the book.

It was Cyril, here, I presumed, for his weekly let’s-cheer-up-Keith session after the Friday afternoon Dramatic Club meeting. He let himself in and took a seat in my rocking chair.

“Hey there, old boy,” he said, “how are you doing?”
“Oh, everything’s the cat’s meow around here,” I sassed at him, more angrily than I had expected. Cyril’s green eyes showed the instant sting he felt, but he recovered quickly and sported another smile. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I shouldn’t take this out on him. Not on Cyril, of all people.

*Go on, Keith, ask him about himself.*

“How are you? Looking forward to Junior’s tonight?”

Cyril’s young face, so lacking in the angularity and hardness of manhood, tightened again.

Another damn blunder.

“Please don’t call him that.”

“I know chap, sorry. Harry. *Harry’s* party tonight. What can we expect?”

Cyril took a deep breath of his own, then returned to his normal, happy cadence.

Quick to forgive.

“Gee, what can I tell you? His apartment is right off the Boston Common in Beacon Hill. What a view into the park from his windows! Though you will not be able to see it in the dark, shame. As for the party itself, if it’s anything like the previous ones I’ve been to, all the Café Dreyfus staff will be there, as well as some people Harry knows from Copley in downtown Boston—I guess that’s the *adult* hang-out location for our type.” Cyril lifted his eyebrows and smirked. “And then, of course, all of you are invited this time.”

“Did you make sure to ask him about Hazel?”

“Yes, yes. He seemed thrilled at meeting a real-life protestor. Harry himself is not the protesting type.”

“No, clearly not. Just the open-a-secret-bar-in-the-basement-type.”

“Correct!” Cyril smiled. “Not much longer until that speakeasy is open.”
I wasn’t quite sure how to ask, but thinking back to my interaction with Harry at Café Dreyfus a few weeks ago, I was curious. “Errr, how are you and Harry doing?”

“Fine.” But when I didn’t jump right back into the conversation, Cyril’s eyebrows dropped a bit. “Why do you ask? Did Harry say something?”

“Oh, it’s just, he just, a few weeks back, well”—I did not want to make another blunder—“I think he just wanted to see you right when you got back from your trip home to Fall River. That’s all.”

“Oh, yes, he can be—how do I put it?—somewhat needy? But that’s why he’s such a dear, he just can’t get enough of me.”

Needy? I wondered. Or controlling?

“But,” Cyril sighed, “I am trying to balance studying with, you know, other more exciting things. Or so I tell myself.”

“And tonight?”

“Pure time with the fellas and with Harry,” Cyril beamed. “But enough about me. Keith, someone asked about you at the Dramatic Club Meeting.”

I couldn’t help but sit up a bit straighter in bed. The movement did not go unnoticed by Cyril. He seemed to be taking in my every move, watching for something.

“Yes, we chatted for quite some time,” Cyril continued. “He was very kind, concerned about you too.”

I leaned in expectedly.

“His name’s Nathaniel.”

I had to keep a grin from washing over my whole face. As I tried to suppress my own, Cyril let his free. A bright, knowing grin. I tried not to catch his eyes, but I thought if someone had to know, Cyril was about as good a choice as any.
Before going to pick up Hazel, I decided to swing in and check on Gene. The least I could do was attempt to be half the friend to him that Cyril was to me. And I was worried about our Mr. Dentist. These past few weeks, Gene had become even antsier and quieter, and anytime I’d brought up our conversation from the gentleman’s room, Gene changed the subject. I’d tried to get a good look at his wrists too, but had not been able.

I strode down the long first-floor hallway of Adams House, a privately-owned dormitory closer to town and mainly filled with seniors and fifth years, like Gene. I reached my hand out to knock on his door, but was taken aback by a muffled whimpering sound. I pressed my ear to the door. God, no, was he hurting himself? The door was too thick for me to tell the nature of the sound, so I pulled away and pounded my fist.

“Gene!”

I heard the creaking of furniture and something fall to the floor. It seemed an eternity, but finally Gene opened the door, disheveled and with a serious case of bed head. He was breathing heavily, but seemed safe enough.

“Good evening,” I said, trying to lighten the fact that I had just assailed his door.

Gene’s eyes, petite and set in a long face, nearly doubled in size. What was he so surprised about? What had he been doing? Or was it me in particular that was causing his surprise?

“Can’t I call and say hello?”

“Uh, yes,” he mumbled. “But I, uh, thought you’d have already gone to pick up your friend, by this time I mean.” I wondered how he knew about Hazel, as I thought I’d only told Cyril. But then again, this was Gene: he seemed capable of tracking all of our goings-on.

His tall figure still blocked the doorway, his head nearly brushing the top of the frame.

“Are you going to invite me in?”
Gene did not seem to want to, but hesitantly, he moved out of the way. I walked in, helping myself to Gene’s plush recliner. Gene took a seat on his couch. He tapped his leg and I looked out the window. Neither of us said anything. This was becoming more awkward than someone passing gas during a film.

I would just have to address the matter straight out.

“What were you doing in here, old chap?” I asked.

“Nothing, nothing at all, what do you mean?” Gene’s pimply face turned more crimson than the Harvard flag on his wall.

On the other side of Gene’s room, I saw the ruffled sheets on his bed, the towel slung over the frame, the bottle of hair oil on the bedside table. The whimpering groans. The bed-head. Gene’s mortification. It all made sense.

“Oh, now I’m on the trolley!” I said. “Gee, I’m sorry chap, caught you at a bad time, didn’t I?”

Gene saw my eyes lingering on the hair oil and knew I’d figured out his secret. A shadow traveled across his eyes and he looked almost angry.

“Why that look?”

“You know nothing!”

“Whoa! Gene, what’s wrong? Seriously, I’m just glad you were abusing yourself in that way, and not, well, I don’t know, in another way?”

Gene’s crimson-hue returned and he looked out his window. The awkwardness returned between us.

This is not how I had intended this visit to go. How could I get Gene to talk? How could I make sure he was okay? I tried to think of different tacts I could take, but my social graces were failing me, as they so often did. I’d just have to be direct.

“Can we talk about this?”
“About what?”

“I’m concerned about you.”

“What, that I was spending my Friday evening in such a manner?” Gene said bitterly. His quick shift from embarrassment to anger surprised me.

“No chap, come on, I do that all the time.” I laughed, thinking about my shower that morning. I’d actually been able to do it twice. A lovely rarity. “And the other fellas must do it too.”

“Which does not make it right.”

I furrowed my brows. “Is that what this is about?”

“Well that type of, of, touching, is—,” Gene searched for a word, “well, abhorrent, and you know as well as I that it is not, not… allowed.”

Gene got up to make his bed.

“Allowed? I’m not sure there’s a rule about it, Gene, at least not in Harvard’s books, though yes, there is that other big black book. And I know, it’s discouraged on all fronts, religious, medical, and otherwise. As are lots of our activities.”

The drinking.

The cross-dressing.

Fellas getting close to fellas.

Moments behind closed doors.

Suddenly I was reminded of just how many of our activities were not encouraged. In our little group, in Café Dreyfus, in our own minds, in the safety of numbers, in the progressive mindset so many had at the start of this new decade—we could, so very often, be tempted to forget. Forget that only some of society accepted us. Forget that whole laws were written against us. Forget that only some of us could ever tell our families. But none of this was new.
“Why the fuss now?” I asked.

Gene still had his back to me. He was fluffing his pillows, rather roughly, I thought, then arranging and rearranging them meticulously on his bed.

“I can’t lead this life, Keith.”

My stomach clenched a bit. Was Gene about to admit what we all already knew about him—that he was as queer as the rest of us?

“And what I was, well, uh, doing before—” Gene couldn’t even say the word masturbation. “Was the only thing that will stave it off. So it doesn’t consume me, that is. So I don’t act on it.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. In his own way, Gene had basically just admitted to having homosexual urges, feeling unable to pursue them, and dealing with them through masturbation. Good God. Well, that at least put some of the puzzle pieces together for me. But there was still the concern of Gene’s increased anxiety and the burns on his wrists. I had to at least ask. I had to make sure he wasn’t still doing it.

“Is that why you hurt yourself?”

“Will you give that a rest? I said it was an accident in the dental lab.” But he sounded less angry now, less sure, as if perhaps his outer shell was wearing thin.

I got up and went over to Gene. I reached for his arm and he, to my surprise, seemed resigned to let me do what I must. He faced me and I pulled back his cuff. The six burn marks were longer wet and raw. The deep wells of flesh that had marked the center of each were now healing under raised blisters and scabs. No fresh wounds, it seemed. A breath of relief rushed through me.

“Please,” I begged. “Tell me you won’t do it again.”

As we stood by his bed, Gene nodded ever so slightly, then turned his head down to look at me. His eyes seemed misty, as if he’d been holding back tears. There was something
else smoldering there too, but I could not quite name it. Gene exhaled and I felt his hot breath on my face. We were standing far too close. I dropped his wrist and backed away.

“See you tonight?” I asked awkwardly.

“No,” Gene said, still staring at me.

“No?”

“I need a break from this.”

“But, uh, you’ll be good?”

Gene nodded and sat down on his bed.

I let myself out, and as I made my way back down the hallway, I feared I had done little to ameliorate the situation. At least there’d been no fresh wounds. At least.

Hazel, as usual, was full of vim and vigor when I picked her up. Before I knew it, she had pulled me out of her apartment, headed us in the opposite direction of Harry’s apartment, and set us traipsing through the bowels of Somerville. I’d only once passed through this northern suburb, and never on foot. Now here I was in the dark, cavorting through the slick, muddy streets with a crazy girl on a crazy mission. She had told me we were meeting up with a bootlegger. A bootlegger!

I turned to Hazel and took in her cloche hat, the black curls just barely peeking out, the confident gait, and wondered at the mysterious pull she had over me. Hazel had this uncanny ability to drag me into places and scenarios in which I could never, in my right mind, have imagined myself. I was increasingly discovering that one of my serious character weaknesses was my inability to say no to anyone. But, somehow, it seemed that I was in this dreary neighborhood with Hazel because of more than just my habit of saying yes. She brought out parts of me that I didn’t even know existed. And there was something in her radiance that I could not find on campus.
After the first few protests with Hazel, after the intensity of our connection grew, I’d feared that maybe I was developing an attraction for her. But after giving it more thought, as well as, I’m embarrassed to add, attempting to masturbate to her image several times, it became more than clear that I did not carry a torch for her. Not in the least. And Hazel had long since assumed I was queer, I later found out. Regardless, I found my attachment to Hazel growing.

As I looked around at the muddy alleys, a few broken down carriages, the lack of cars, the ever so few street lamps, I said, “God, Hazel, I hope you don’t come here alone?”

“Better than going to Roxbury and Southie alone.”

“Excuse me?” Those were the roughest parts of Boston, and Hazel venturing there alone was, as far as I was concerned, no better than a mouse heading straight into a mouse trap.

“Don’t turn all traditional on me, Keith.” I could sense her rolling her eyes in the dark. “It doesn’t befit you. It doesn’t befit anyone, really. I can handle myself, even in Southie. But yes, down there you risk getting caught between the Irish mobsters and the Italian ones. Just last week”—I could hear the glee and glamour mounting in her voice—“I heard the Gustin Gang started hijacking the Italian gang’s beer shipments. They use false badges and pretend to be the law enforcement agents from the Bureau of Prohibition, then confiscate the goods and sell it themselves. That’s double-bootlegging!”

“But you go alone?”

“This is it, right up here,” she said, avoiding my question. “Remember what I said. Don’t speak unless spoken to. And even then, keep it brief.”

A young man, not much older than I, leaned against a three-story wooden apartment building. The establishment had a small front porch and black shutters just barely hanging
onto each window. The chap wore a newsboy cap low over his eyes and no coat, despite the cold.

“It’s a mighty fine moon out tonight, ain’t it?” Hazel said in a strange accent that I’d never heard her use before.

It was actually a rather cloudy night and one could barely see the moon at all, not that either of them had even looked up. Was this the code talk that Hazel had told me I wouldn’t know?

The fella nodded and looked the two of us over.

“Who you got here?” The fella didn’t pronounce his r and pulled the vowel out in a thick Boston accent.

“He’s just a Barnie, a baby Barnie at that.”

“From the Barnyard then?”

“Yah huh.”

“I’m a what, from where?” I asked.

“Shhhh, baby!” she said, nudging me with her shoulder.

“How I know he not going to squeal?”

“Nah, too much of a baby.”

I slowly registered the insult, and it must have shown on my face, because Hazel nudged me again, this time in the gut with a much harder elbow.

The young man stared me straight in the eye. I tried not to move even a smidgen. After several seconds, he turned up the steps and waved his hand that we should follow him.

“We’re going inside?”

“Shhhh,” was all Hazel said.
As she made her way up the steps, I looked behind me, half expecting someone to be watching, but the street was quiet. So I followed them, my feet pounding all too loudly on the creaky boards.

We were led down a long wooden hallway, the type that reminded me more of an 1800s boardinghouse than a modern building, and ushered into a back room.

There, two older men sat on either side of a table, their feet propped on top. The lanky grey-haired one sported a cigar and the more rotund, balding one held a flask. Around them were barrels and barrels of liquor.

“Well, well, well, if it ain’t our Little Miss Dancin’ Hazel?” the one with the cigar said, taking his feet off the table and standing up.

“How much are we writin’ ya down for tonight?” the shorter one said, all business. I guessed he was the boss man.

The tall man approached Hazel and circled us once. I did not like the way he watched her. “This your beau?”

“Nah, just a chap who needs some of his own.” She turned to me, ignoring the man and his gaze. “How many flask you got?”

“Two,” I said. She’d told me earlier in the week to bring as many as I had. Neither was mine. I’d borrowed one from Eddy and one from Ernest.

“Ten flask and two bottles.”

“Why so many flask today? Bottles the usual,” the little boss man at the table said.

“Headin’ straight to a blow. Couldn’t bother with them heavy ones now could I?”

“Drop ‘em,” the boss said, rapping his fingers.

Hazel began pulling out flasks: one from each stocking, one from each side of her brassiere, a few from her pockets, and one from somewhere near her backside. She put her eight on the table, then pulled out two larger glass bottles from her oversized handbag. I took
the two from my coat pocket—a quite boring location in comparison—and put them on the table too.

The young man who’d led us inside grabbed two flasks and began filling them from a barrel. I could see the clear liquor flow from the tap. Gin.

“So, we’ll write you down for ten flasks, two bottles, or ‘bout two hours,” the big man said, finally taking his feet off the table. He wrote something down in the open ledger. “And you’ll fill those two hours next Saturday, the fourteenth.”

“Same spot?” Hazel asked.

“Yah,” he said. “The club on West Elm.”

“We’re lookin’ forward to it,” the thin one said and winked at her. The man was a creep, and I wished nothing more than to tell him off. But I kept my promise of silence to Hazel.

We picked up the flasks and bottles and tucked them back from where they’d come. The young fella escorted us out, then resumed his position leaning against the building. As we walked away, I kept looking back over my shoulder. He was staring at me every time.

At the tram stop that would take us across the Charles River to Harry’s, I barraged Hazel with questions about what had happened back at that building.

“What’s the Barnyard?” I asked.

“Harvard Yard.”

“So a Barnie is a Harvard student?”

“Attaboy, Keithster. Hey! I like that—Keithster! Ha!”

I still had too many question to devote much attention to the new nickname she’d just made up for me.

“And a blow?”
“A party.”

“And didn’t you need to pay?

“I already did what I needed to do, old sport.”

“And what’s that?”

“Signed up for my repayment slot.”

Repayment slot? My mind reeled through various scenarios until it landed on a horrible, unacceptable image. One involving men, lots of men in succession. The fat boss man. The tall sleazy one. A bedroom above a club.

No.

Hazel couldn’t be a prostitute.

No, no, no.

I was not sure why the idea sickened me so. It was not the coupling with a stranger aspect; even I’d had my own small affair in that regard. Perhaps it was the idea of being forced into unromantic moments, the loss of free will, the potential for violence. I was not sure, but whatever the reasons, prostitution seemed to wreck any dreams of love I had—for myself, and for others.

I would just have to ask.

“And, uh, how do you repay?”

She stopped in the middle of the street and stared at me. She seemed to be weighing what to tell me.

“I’m a dancer, Keith,” she finally said. “Flapper style. With an occasional extra demand to take off a piece of clothing.” She let out a deep breath.

“Wait—take off a piece of clothing, on stage? Or somewhere else, like in, err, a bedroom?”

“No, Keithster! Just on stage. Exotic dancing shall we say?”
“That’s fantastic Hazel!” I was so utterly relieved. The dancing seemed nothing in comparison to the other image that had just addled my mind.

Hazel laughed. “Not exactly the reaction I was expecting. But don’t worry, Keith,” she threw her arm around my shoulder, “I only make whoopee with the people I choose.”
Harry Dreyfus’s apartment in Beacon Hill took up the entire second story of a beautiful brick building. The windows ran floor to ceiling and presented a dazzling view of the tree-filled park of Boston Common. The furniture, ostentatious and gilded, possessed a regal, French royalty look. This was not the apartment of a mere restaurant manager. Harry was seriously living off of his Daddy’s money, I was certain. Another reason to call him Junior.

Hazel and I had shown up a bit late, but as one of only two ladies, Hazel instantly became the center of attention. Ernest introduced her to everyone gathered round as if she were his friend. Eddy asked her where she’d found that cute little slip-of-a-dress. The other young woman, a girlfriend of one of the guests, fawned over Hazel’s beaded headache band. Everyone laughed at the intense, room-quieting way she told stories.

But the attention only lasted so long. Now the party lagged and Hazel and I sat bored on a fancy chaise, wasting our goddamn gin edge as the others around us coupled off. I had warned Hazel about the type of party this would be—of a homosexual nature, that is—but even I hadn’t known it would be almost entirely a private petting affair and very boring otherwise. Cyril and Harry were in Harry’s bedroom. Eddy and that waiter Ned from the café had headed to the parlor, holding hands and carting a big bottle of liquor. Ernest and Ken had disappeared god only knows where. And others were chatting in intimate pairs, scattered around the apartment. I thought about Gene. He would probably be out here with me and Hazel, pairless. I hoped he was okay back on campus. Asleep, maybe. Safe.

Every half hour or so, Harry popped out of the bedroom, positively glowing, hair and clothing disheveled, and asked, “No new arrivals?”
“No, I don’t think so, Junior.” I couldn’t help feeling angry at Harry. Was I in charge of watching the door? So he and the others could neck? Is that what my life had come to?

Behind Harry, Cyril appeared in the open doorway, looking just as unkempt.

“No new guests?” Cyril echoed. When I shook my head, he looked at his watch. “Just past ten pm. The night’s still young. Just you wait,” he said, and raised his eyebrows at me good-naturedly.

Harry turned back to Cyril and kissed him right there in the doorway. He was about three inches taller than Cyril. They shared a similar shade of dark, nearly black hair, though only Harry’s was receding. Cyril threw his arms around Harry’s neck and the two shuffled back into the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind them.

Hazel hadn’t flinched at their kiss, nor had she earlier at the fellas flirting with fellas, the coupling off. I had predicted she wouldn’t, considering her roommates in their Boston marriage and the liberal crowd with which she ran. Plus, there was still the matter of whether Hazel herself was of a homosexual leaning. That would certainly make things less of a shock.

“I’m sorry I invited you to such a bore of a party,” I said to her.

“Baloney!” she said, laying back on the chaise and propping her feet on my lap.

“Gives us time to chat, old sport.”

“Hazel?”

She turned to me and smiled.

“Are you, err, like your roommates?” The hooch had certainly loosened my lips some.

“A lesbian you mean?” She asked the question like it was run-of-the-mill.

“Well, yes.”

“Not most of the time.” She winked.

I waited for her to say more, but she did not. “Come on, Hazel. Level with me. Give me the goods.”
“Well, I find I prefer chaps, but nothing wrong with a little exploring, is there now?”

“So you’ve been with both?”

“Yessir.”

I was on a roll. I’d try for another win. “Why were you in the theater that night? Does it have to do with your dancing?”

“Yes and no.” Hazel paused again. She always contemplated her words, at least with me, which did not seem in keeping with her generally wild and unrestrained actions.

“Do you know James Crumpton?”

“The president of the Dramatic Club? Yes, of course I know him. He’s the one that led my removal from the Club’s induction process.”

“I used to go with him when I was at Radcliffe.”

“What?” I knew that was a rude response, but it slid out of me before I could think twice. After all, James Crumpton? As hard as I tried, I could not imagine her with that quintessentially elitist Harvard prep boy.

“Yes, and the theater was where we’d meet for that lovely act of marriage, as some call it.”

“You made love in the theater?”

“I’m not sure I’d call it that, not with Crumpton. But alas, yes, something along those lines. One night I was really mad at him,” Hazel continued. “And I nicked the key. Figured it would come in useful down the road. He didn’t know it was me. He got all worried, thought he lost it. Said he’d have to go to the administration and get a new one.”

“I don’t believe it,” I muttered. It now seemed supremely unfair that Crumpton had kicked me out. He was free to sneak into the theater for his mischief, to lose the key, but not me? The bastard. “I hope you’re not with Crumpton any more?”

“No, the vamp cheated on me.”
“And now you use the theater for?”

“To practice my dancing. There’s quite a thrill, you must know, in breaking Hah-ward’s rules.” She said the word with a mock British accent. “Besides, I hope I get good enough to move up in the ranks. Have a real gig some day.” Hazel suddenly sat up straight on the chaise. “Hey, this interrogation of yours Keithster, has given me the best idea for—”

But before she could finish, the doorbell rang.

I leaned my head back over the couch and yelled, “Harry!” I called two more times and still he did not come. I was not going to be his bellboy anymore. He could answer it himself, so I got up and banged on his bedroom door.

After a few moments, Harry and Cyril appeared, laughing and buckling belts.

“The doorbell rang.”

“Oh!” Cyril said, and he ran past Harry to the front door.

Why was Cyril the one answering the door? I shot a confused look at Harry who just shrugged, then rubbed his hand over his mustache. I turned away from him to return to my seat, but stopped in my tracks when I saw Cyril guiding someone toward the two of us.

Nathaniel.

What? How did this always happen, Nathaniel—handsome, olive-skinned, plump-lipped, gorgeous Nathaniel—showing up unexpectedly at parties? And when I’d had a decent amount of hooch? I glanced down at Hazel on the couch. At least I was not still seated there, her legs upon my lap.

“Harry Dreyfus, this is Mr. Nathaniel Wollf,” Cyril said. “We’re acquainted from the Dramatic Club, and I invited him to join us tonight.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Nathaniel said, shaking Harry’s hand.
“And you two already know each other,” Cyril said in a coy I-know-something-and-want-you-to-know-I-know-it voice that I hoped Nathaniel had not noticed. “I thought you’d forgotten my invite,” Cyril said to Nathaniel.

“No, certainly not. I thoroughly appreciate the invite,” Nathaniel responded, pure politeness.

“Well, Mr. Wollf,” Harry said formally, “help yourself to cocktails in the kitchen, that way, around the corner, and enjoy my party.” Harry wrapped his arm around Cyril and guided him back into the bedroom. We could hear them laugh as they closed the door.

“Err, so, Cyril invited you?”

“Yes, kindly, he did.”

Silence descended and clamped my lips for far too long. I needed to say something, and quickly.

“I was just sitting on that chaise, there.” I pointed to the couch awkwardly then felt horrified by my actions. Good lord, what a buffoon! I tried to correct myself by guiding Nathaniel over there. “Want to sit down with us? This is my friend Miss Hazel Webster.”

“Pleasure to meet you Miss Webster.”

“Miss Webster’s my old maid of a sister. Call me Hazel, old sport.”

Nathaniel laughed.

The three of us tried to make small talk, but after a few awkward minutes, Hazel said, “Well boys, not that this conversation isn’t stimulating, but I need some spice. Let’s shake up this party. Keithster, your interrogating questions before gave me an idea. You go grab some giggle water from the kitchen, and I’ll round up the crowd from all those nooks and crannies they’re necking in. Nathaniel, you just sit pretty.”
Hazel asked Harry to help move the living room furniture to the side, then she arranged all the party-goers in a circle on the wood floor.

“Keithster, pass around the hooch, and I’ll give out what I’ve got too.”

We distributed the bottles and flasks and cocktail glasses till most everyone had one.

Hazel stood in the middle of the circle. “Sports, this game’s no fun unless you’re at least mildly zozzled. So, on the count of three, everyone take a swig. One, two, three!” Hazel flipped up her flask. A thin line of gin dribbled down her chin. I noticed Nathaniel was drinking, from a cocktail glass though, and Eddy, Ernest, and Ken had their heads tilted up too. In passing out the juice, I’d forgotten to save one for myself. Yet I found I didn’t mind in the least. Nathaniel made me nervous enough, and the last thing I wanted was to be as drunk as I had been at Ernest’s party.

“Now,” Hazel said, “the game’s called Questions or Commands. I’m sure you’ve all heard of it. You ask a person of your choice whether he—or she—,” Hazel gave an appreciative nod to the other girl, “prefers a Question or a Command. Then, based on the response, you come up with either a question, preferably of an intimate nature, or a command, preferably of a daring nature. Ready?”

There were shouts of “yes!” and “woohoo!” The party-goers were the liveliest they’d been all night.

Hazel took a seat next to me. I was now three people away from Nathaniel.

“I’ll start,” Hazel said. “You, the host with the mustache, what’s your name again?”

“Harry.”

“Right. Now, Question or Command, Harry old sport?”

“Command.”

Hazel didn’t have to think twice. “Give me your shirt.”

“Excuse me?” Harry responded.
“Un-bu-tton your shirt. Take off the slee-ves.” Hazel said slowly, enunciating each syllable like Harry was a child. “Throw. It. My. Way.”

Harry arched an eyebrow, but moved his hands to the button at his neck and acquiesced. The crowd hooted, clinking glasses and drinking some more. Harry’s chest was, surprisingly, a sprawl of black hair. I was expecting a shaved surface, or perhaps just a few tiny tendrils in keeping with the thinning hair on his head. But Harry practically had the chest of a bear.

Next, Harry commanded Eddy to stand up and put two handfuls of ice cubes into his underpants and dance until they melted. Eddy’s over-the-top antics had the crowd slamming their hands on the floor and laughing in tears.

Eddy sat back down and chose his own victim. “Ken, Question or Command?”

“Question.” Ken nodded his head upwards and puffed up his broad chest as if he were saying “Hit me. I can take it.” His competitive boxing side was coming out.

Eddy had clearly already thought of a question and rushed out the words excitedly. “Are you and Ernest a couple? As in, seeing each other exclusively? Staying together?”

Dozens of unblinking eyes turned to watch Ken. He seemed to have a momentary lapse of confidence, not quite sure what to say. But he soon recovered. Running his hand through his blond hair, his signature move, he said, “Mr. Kenneth Day is beholden to no man. If any of you wants a piece of this body, you just let me know.”

I glanced at Ernest. I could see his shoulders drop just a smidgen. His lips tighten. Was he more attached to Ken than Ken was to him? Not that Ernest would ever let his facade fall. Not the Ernest that needed to be the center of attention, not Ernest the politician’s son.

Ken called on Cyril, commanding him to give Harry a burlesque dance.

Cyril stood up, not an ounce of shyness. He shook his hips and gyrated on top of Harry. Leaned in and caressed his neck.
“This is just the type of entertainment I was looking for!” Hazel shouted. “Now swig!” She lifted up her flask, but could barely hold it above her head she was so drunk.

Cyril sat back down in the circle. It was his turn to ask someone. He scanned the group then rested those big green eyes on me.

“Keith. Question or Command?”

There was no way I was risking a Question. I wasn’t a good liar, and I didn’t want to have to divulge the truth of my sentiments to this crowd.

“Command.”

Cyril tapped his fingers on his cheek, thinking. The gesture made him look even younger than his normal boyish self. I hoped he wouldn’t make me do some type of dance, like he had had to do. I could dance about as well as a donkey in tap shoes. I could sing though. Or play the piano in the other room. I made a silent plea to Cyril to be nice, to please be nice.

“Hmm, let’s see, I want to involve someone who hasn’t had a turn yet.” He panned the crowd, zigzagging his finger around the circle. “Yooooooou!” Cyril pulled out the word like he was singing a whole note. His finger was pointing at Nathaniel.

My stomach tightened and I found myself holding my breath. Would the crowd know I had a thing for Nathaniel? And why did I care so much? Relax, I told myself.

“Keith, I command you to go into that bedroom,” Cyril paused, a drunk grin on his soft face, “and switch clothes with Nathaniel, all your clothes, underclothes included! Then you have to wear each other’s clothes for the rest of the night.”

While everyone looked at Nathaniel, taking in his reaction, Cyril winked my way. He had clearly commanded this on purpose. To push Nathaniel and me together. My eyes widened at him. I was trying to send him a how-could-you?-look. I was already mortified. But Cyril would have none of it. He tossed his head to the side and whistled innocently.
I turned to Nathaniel. He nodded at me. Apparently he was willing to follow through with this.

“Now Hazel,” Cyril continued, “you check the color of Keith’s drawers, and I’ll check Nathaniel’s, so we can verify when they return.”

Hazel’s hands were on me before I knew it. They slurred across my body, reached down my hip, yanked up a piece of my drawers. “Red and white striped! Ha!”

“And Nathaniel’s are just white!” Cyril announced. “Et voilà! Go on, you two.” He made a shooing motion with his hands.

I stood up and headed to the bedroom. Nathaniel followed suit. I could feel him walking behind me, closer than my shadow. My heart had jumped up into my ears, which were now, I was sure, sporting an embarrassing crimson color.

On y va. Here we go.

As I unbuttoned my shirt, I felt exceedingly self-conscious about the quality of my clothes, the sweat-soaked armpits of my shirt, the brown ring on the collar. Hooch made me sweat far more than normal. At least I’d worn my Prelude cologne.

We tossed our shirts and ties on the bed. I was about to apologize that Cyril had put us in this situation, but Nathaniel seemed well past that. He had already dropped his pants and was holding them out at arm’s length. He again sported that seemingly innocent smile. My eyes dropped from his face to his nearly naked body, his white drawers so very white against his olive skin. He had little hair on him and his body seemed tight and polished. It was not that he was thin. In fact, he had a bit of pudge around his waist, and I was surprised to think that I had far more muscle. But his flesh had this thick, taut quality that was most attractive.
Heat rose in my cheeks as I realized just how obvious it was that I was ogling him. I transferred my clumsy hands and gaze to my belt and loosened it as quickly as possible. I unbuttoned my khakis, let them fall to the floor, held them out like Nathaniel had.

We exchanged pants, then laughed awkwardly.

“Guess we have to set these down to take our drawers off,” Nathaniel said.

“I’ll look away—” I started.

“I’ve got nothing to hide.”

My stomach fluttered like a bat startled from sleep. How did he mean that? I stared at him for a moment wondering what to say or do next. When Nathaniel began to untie his white drawers, I looked away instinctually, embarrassedly, even though I yearned to see. To my horror, my member began to rise. Seeing Nathaniel’s hands on his drawstring, so low on his waist, had been more than enough. I willed it to stay down. I’d soon be naked and there’d be no way to hide it.

I bent over to pull off my red-striped drawers, wishing I’d worn plain white and keeping low to cover myself and my member. Nathaniel threw his undergarment at me. It landed at my feet. I tossed mine in his direction. As I slid on the new drawers and scrambled into his silk-lined pants and starched shirt, I swore I could feel his eyes on me, but perhaps that was wishful thinking.

I turned back to Nathaniel. He’d only just finished buckling my belt and my shirt remained unbuttoned and open on his satiny chest, my tie draped around his neck. It was odd to see my clothes on him. He seemed to add a swank to them that they so desperately lacked on me.

“Damn, you look much better in those clothes than I do.” It was out of my hooch-loosened lips before I realized what the words implied: my attraction.

“I could say the same.”
I started to smile, then caught myself. Could say the same? What did he mean by that? That he could, but wouldn’t say the same? That—

“Keith, don’t think so hard.” Nathaniel sat down on the bed to lace up my shoes.

Had my brow been furrowed? Did he—

God Keith, stop thinking! Just act and ask freely. Now seemed as good a time as any.

“Hey, Nathaniel?”

“Yes.”

“I appreciate your abstention at the Dramatic Club meeting.” He nodded in response, his hands and eyes still on the laces. I wanted to say more. Come on Keith, ask your question.

“Err, why’d you do it? Abstain, I mean?”

Nathaniel had finished securing my shoes. He stood up from the bed and took a step in my direction.

“Probably stems from the fact that I was in the War.” Nathaniel took in my surprised face. “You mean you didn’t know?”

I shook my head.

“Well, that’s a story for another day, but let’s just leave it at the fact that I appreciate—how shall I put it?—ummm… adventure.”

“Adventure?”

“Adventure.”

“So you weren’t mad I borrowed the costumes then?”

“Not in the least.”

I was confused. Hadn’t Nathaniel looked disgusted the night Gene had vomited on me? Hadn’t he commented on the costumes when I’d chased him back to the dorm?

“What did I just say, Keith?”
For a moment I did not understand his question, then I laughed. “Don’t think so hard.”

Nathaniel stepped forward. Every muscle in my body froze. He reached out, adjusted his tie at my neck.

“You’re not half bad, you know.” He let one hand drop, but two fingers of the other hand slid just under my collar. He fiddled them slowly. Seemed to be caressing my neck. “I’d even venture the word… endearing.”

He let his hand slip down my chest, not losing contact until he’d reached my belt.

Then he walked out of the room.
During the week following Harry’s party, we noticed that Cyril had returned to his normal habits of skipping classes and completing only a negligible amount of work. His improved academic behavior had seemed to endure less than a fortnight after his weekend of parental chastisement. Cyril was now lavishly spending his time at the theater, Café Dreyfus, and Harry’s apartment.

Eddy and I decided that we had to at least try to save Cyril from another round of summer school remediation. So on Saturday morning, Eddy and I dragged him to the library despite his protestations that we were all too hung over from Ernest’s Perkins 28 party last night, and who could think about studying after being so fried to the hat?

“If we all work on Dean Greenough’s composition simultaneously,” I said to Cyril, “it will be less painful.”

“I vote we all write on Blake,” Eddy added.

In English class, Dean Greenough had already moved on to Lord Byron’s poetry, but for our first long composition, we were allowed to write about any of the romantics we’d studied thus far. Blake held a particular interest to us because his poetry was infused with such illicit subject matters that it was, without a doubt, the most scandalous. As such, we felt like we were adventuring into a secret world.

We flipped through our books on the long cherry table in the Reading Room perusing Blake’s dark words for an essay topic. “Listen to this stanza,” Eddy said.

*Abstinence sows sand all over*  
*The ruddy limbs & flaming hair*  
*But Desire Gratified*  
*Plants fruits & beauty there.*
He looked up at us. “Well I’ll be…Desire Gratified… you horny dog, you lounge lizard, Mr. Blake!”

We all re-read the stanza. The import did indeed seem clear: abstaining from sex was dark and problematic, but giving into desire was positive and beautiful. This was clearly one of those rebellious Romantic poems, not a Victorian one, and it made me look forward to a whole semester’s worth of Romantics. Damn, what a good class.

Eddy turned toward Cyril and me. “Dearies, I submit that we all complete essays not just on Blake, but on sex.” He only barely mouthed the last word.

“And what experience do you have with that?” I played with him.

Eddy pursed his pale lips and tilted his chin up, attempting to protract his curved spine. As his roommate, I knew the total sum of his sexual experiences: a drunken kiss from Stanley Gilkey freshman year and the necking that had happened with Ned Courtney, the Cafe Dreyfus waiter, at Harry’s party last weekend. And Eddy had spilled the goods about that: there’d been no sex. To be frank though, my own experiences had not amounted to much more… Emma… John… The nameless man on the train…

I wondered how experienced Nathaniel was and felt almost sick thinking about it. He was a senior. He’d been in the war. He was Nathaniel, so debonair and attractive and in charge. It had been he, not I, who had made the first move, asking me out on a date, so confident, as if he’d done it a thousand times.

I had relived that moment almost hourly since Monday. The knock on my dorm door—damn good Eddy hadn’t been there. My shock at seeing Nathaniel in front of me. His black gelled hair. His expensive silk tie. The stack of my clothing from the Questions and Commands game just two nights prior, laundered and pressed in his hands. My mortification that his clothes were still in my hamper.
"It’s fine Keith, really," Nathaniel insisted after I’d apologized several times for not having washed his yet. "I have plenty of clothes. Actually, come to think of it, just keep the getup."

One would think his gesture would’ve made me more assured about his feelings for me, but it did not. It just unnerved me. I could barely speak straight and mumbled something incomprehensible, taking on, yet again, the part of buffoon.

"Are you going to invite me in, or am I going to have to breach my manners and invite myself in?"

I’m sure my ears turned crimson at Nathaniel’s blatant reference to my awkward behavior. I opened the door and motioned for him to come in, preferring to remain speechless than risk bumbling again.

Nathaniel took in my room and my embarrassment mounted. We had such a shabby room, Eddy and I, and I suddenly wished I’d kept Nathaniel at the door. But there he was, walking around my room. He ran his fingers along my long line of newspaper photo clippings. Followed them up and over the door frame, studying every one.

"This is nifty," Nathaniel said. "You should add the photo that just appeared in the Boston American this week of the speak-easy that was raided down on Sixth Street."

"Thank you, I’ll do that."

"Well, Keith, I must run to my lab."

He was leaving already? God, couldn’t I have at least tried to be less dull?

"But quick question," Nathaniel paused and looked up at me mischievously.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes," I said instinctually.

"Red or black?"

"Red."
“Neo-classicism or romanticism?”
“Romanticism.”
“Lunch or dinner?”
“Dinner.”
“Italian or tavern food?”
“Italian.”
“Seven or eight?”
“Seven.”
“I’ll pick you up at seven o’clock on Saturday. We’ll dine at the Lighted Lamp, Italian food, my treat.”

Before I knew what was happening, Nathaniel reached over and ran his finger up my shoulder, along my neck, over my jawline, and to my lips. Every ounce of my body was prickling in anticipation, beginning to sweat, and I willed myself to stay still, all parts of me to keep still and down. He pulled at my bottom lip, sensually, daringly. “Until then, Keith.” He was gone before I could put together a sentence.

I pulled out my leather-bound date book and, seeing the date, smiled a gushing, kiddish smile. Perhaps my time at Harvard was turning itself around.

Saturday was February 14.

Valentine’s Day.

I looked at the big clock in the Reading Room. It was only noon. Seven more hours till Nathaniel would be at my door.

While I’d been lost in a woolgathering of Nathaniel-ness, Cyril had been working to mollify Eddy, who had become ruffled by my joke about his sexual prowess. “Help me find a passage for my essay,” Cyril asked, trying to head off an Eddy tantrum.
Eddy took the bait, and after perusing for a few minutes, he announced, all too loudly, “I have the perfect one for you Cyril! You and Harry!”

Disdainful heads popped up in our direction. Disrupting the library seemed to be becoming a habit of ours. At the table across from us, an auburn-haired chap in a three-piece tweed suit, continued to look at us even after the others had put their heads back down. I expected the usual glare we received for marring the sanctuary of the Reading Room. But his look was passive, quiet. Through his round spectacles I could see hazel eyes flecked with other colors. He looked possibly familiar. When he saw me staring at him, he immediately returned to his reading in a frazzled, embarrassed manner, as if he felt like he were being the rude one, not us. It was a strange reaction.

In an exaggerated whisper to emphasize that he could indeed be quiet, Eddy told us to read the passage he was pointing to:

The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

The first part felt positive enough, possibly alluding to scandalous and passionate male sex. But the ending made me shudder—his dark secret love does thy life destroy. Why would Eddy have selected this one for Cyril? Because all of Blake’s poetry was dark, and therefore there was nothing else from which to chose? Or was he implying something about Harry?

Cyril took it lightly though. “Eddy, my boy, I think you have discovered a new saying: ‘the invisible worm has found out thy bed.’ Similar to ‘bury the bun.’”

I laughed. It was a bit more literary than bury the bun, a crass saying for anal sex, but it still seemed rather obviously sexual with the word ‘worm.’
For the next hour we continued to make our way through Blake’s work, amusing ourselves with the homoerotic innuendoes and male love. It felt agreeable to be having fun while studying—perhaps Cyril might do it more often now—and nice to see our queer lives appear in poems of almost a century ago. It made me feel part of something.

I decided to compose an essay on “The Garden of Love” poem, the one that had garnered my attention last weekend as I’d been reading in bed. In keeping with Eddy’s theme, it had a sexual part too: a political and religious statement on sexuality. The main image was that the Church binds the positive force of desire with briars:

\[
\text{And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,}\n\text{And binding with briars my joys and desires.}\n\]

The last two lines had a rhyming scheme that was uncomfortably upbeat for such a dark poem, and yet the rhymes were just off: gowns and rounds, briars and desires. I couldn’t quite make sense of Blake’s reasoning yet, but it seemed a promising enough topic for a composition. With more work, it would hopefully earn me high marks from Dean Greenough, who, if I was being honest, I thoroughly wanted to impress.

At the Circulation Desk, we each signed up for one of the twenty typewriters available to students in the Typing Room. I saw from the list that half of the slots were still empty. Saturday early afternoon was not Harvard students’ most preferred time to clack away at a keyboard. We headed to the typing space off the Reading Room and each settled down at a little desk. I had just barely started writing when someone threw an arm around me, making me hit an unintended key. Damn, now I’d have to start over or messily fix the mistake with pen. Who would have…

Ernest.

There he was, those saucer eyes bleeding mischief. And just behind him, Ken, in his track uniform of high-cropped shorts and a crimson sleeveless shirt with an H. I was
surprised Ken had walked through the snow in that, let alone made it past the inspection desk. Ernest must have made some regal excuse for Ken’s skimpy attire. What in God’s name were the two of them doing here?

“Pack up, darlings,” Ernest said, “we’re going to watch a track and field practice. There’s nothing superior to boys with good *track*-tion.” He winked at Ken.

As Ernest spoke, I found myself waiting for Gene’s shushing, his fear and embarrassment at Ernest’s joke. Then it dawned on me: Gene was absent. All of us were here but Gene. It had been the same last night at Ernest’s party when we’d each donned boas and danced into the evening.

“Has anyone seen Gene in the past few days?” I asked. Some distant dread roared up in my chest.

“Not I,” responded Ernest who always seemed to be the first to respond. “But I can’t say I care much, it’s Mr. Dentist’s loss, not ours. He’s been such a killjoy of late.” Ernest nonchalantly adjusted his cuff, then looked up again. “Ready?”

Was he serious? Was that all the care he had for Gene? I assumed the others did not know what I knew about Gene’s—*habit*—but was Ernest so self-absorbed that he hadn’t noticed Gene’s depressive moods or considered how to help? I spent a minute on my high horse before realizing I’d done little to support Gene either. And I had no idea where he was right now or how he’d been doing the past few days. And I had my date… so I couldn’t find him tonight. I resolved to check up on Gene tomorrow.

I turned resolutely to Ernest. “We have to stay and write,” I said, my anger at Ernest allowing me to uncharacteristically refuse him.

“Speak for yourself, Keith,” Ernest said flatly, but not without a hint of malice.

“Eddy? Cyril?”
“Sorry, I’m done with these books for the day. College life awaits me!” Cyril popped out of his chair like one of the sprites from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “Plus, Ernest needs my company.”

_Ernest._ After all Eddy’s and my work to get Cyril to the library. After finding him a composition topic amidst Blake’s poems. After helping Cyril amuse himself studying, for goodness sakes! After all that, Ernest was taking him from us—no, taking him from _me_—for now Eddy was standing up to leave as well.

“Sorry dearie,” Eddy said with a shrug, his curved upper back and shoulder, already so close to his ear, now brushing against it.

As Eddy put on his jacket, Ernest leaned closer to the table and whispered to me, “Looks like I won this round.”

What? We’d been competing? Jesus.

“Bugger off, Ernest.”

“Will do,” he said with a smug smile.

As they left the Typing Room, I saw Ernest’s hand drop down Ken’s arms. Their fingers embraced momentarily before they rounded the corner. I looked around to see if anyone else in the room had seen, but I appeared to be the only one. Not that Ernest would’ve minded. He seemed to want all of Harvard to know of just what persuasion he was. A lover of males. And an *asshole*, I would add.

Eddy and Cyril were finishing packing up their belongings at their typewriter desks.

“Can’t you swing in on Gene before going to the arena?” I asked Eddy.

“Maybe,” he said, not making eye contact with me.

That was as good as a “no.”

“We’ll try at some point,” Cyril assured me. They shouldered their belongings and walked out.
I was left alone with the darkness of Blake, the darkness of my anger at Ernest, and the darkness of my fear for Gene. Writing Greenough’s essay felt like nothing more than a chore now. But at the very least, there remained the prospect of tonight: that light and fluttery feeling that comes with the anticipation of a first date.

The countdown began.

At the top of a narrow staircase and through a set of colonial-paned doors, the Lighted Lantern awaited us. It resided on the third and top floor of an old building along the Charles, and the plethora of windows made it feel as if we were on the roof. Flecks of candlelight danced out of dozens of lanterns, cloaking the place with fireflies.

“This is the cat’s meow—” I began, but suddenly felt childish for my colloquial language choice amidst such sophistication. Nathaniel had hardly noticed though. He was already addressing the host at the podium.

“Reservation for Wollf.” He paused. Then, “Please seat us at your quietest corner table. And if you’d be so kind as to remember, I only take Sergio as my server.”

Nathaniel had the commandeering attitude of a true blue blood, a trait he shared with Ernest, and a trait, I’ll admit, that intimidated me. Direct. Dignified. Polite, but not overly friendly. At the very least, Nathaniel’s manner was different than Ernest’s lavish arrogance.

On the way to our table, I glanced out the floor-to-ceiling windows. The Charles was just a stone’s throw below us, the building descending directly into the waters like I’d seen in books about Venice. The effect was marvelous: it was as if I were atop a house boat or paddleboat or Venetian gondola cruising down a candlelit river. In every way, I was being swept away.
“Here we are,” Nathaniel said after we’d been seated at a table pushed up against the window. We were sitting perpendicular to each other, not across from each other, in order to both have views of the river.

“Yes—” I mumbled. How was I supposed to respond to that?

But Nathaniel continued without my needing to add anything brilliant. “It was my father who first brought me here. He had read fine reviews about the food in the paper. After dining here, however, he was so horrified by the owner and clientele that he refused to ever return. I cannot say he’d be pleased if he knew I ate here with the frequency I do.”

I was about to ask just what he meant when Sergio arrived at our table.

“How is my doll Nathaniel?” The waiter said it with a lisp and a flaunt of his hips. A classic “giveaway,” one could say.

“I was just telling Keith here about this fine establishment.”

He looked from me to Nathaniel and back again, then grinned like we had just made him the happiest man in the world. “You two dolls fit right in here, you do!”

I looked around and for the first time noticed that the majority of tables had just men. The few women present appeared to be women of extravagant, liberal tastes, draped in pearls and peacock feathers. Flappers or nouveau-riches.

“Sergio, do you still have that brown paper sack I left behind with you?”

“Yes, of course,” Sergio said with a roll of his eyes, as if Nathaniel had asked the silliest of questions.

“In that case, two coffees, please.”

Sergio winked and left us with the menus. With how well Nathaniel appeared to know this place, I wondered if he had brought other fellows here. I pushed that unwelcome thought out of my mind and selected the most economical noodle dish, avoiding the expensive
seafood, and closed my menu. Nathaniel had not even opened his. He looked at me intently, a small smile hovering on his lips. He did not say anything, leaving me to break the silence.

“Umm, so your father, what profession is he?”

“A banker—like a good Jew,” Nathaniel laughed lightly and I forced a laugh too. “I couldn’t stand the career though. And according to my father and his wallet, I only had two other options: doctor or lawyer. I chose the former. Far more adventure in medicine.”

“Adventure?” Adventure wouldn’t have been the first word I paired with medicine.

“Yes. I have no intention of becoming one of those doctors who sits in an office all day prescribing cough syrup and foot creams. Not after what I saw in the War. I was a medic’s assistant, you see.” Nathaniel shared this in his usual even, controlled voice, but I thought I could sense an edginess there.

I wanted to ask more about the War—the War I had just barely missed by being seventeen when the draft began and then luck of the draw the following year when I had to register but was not conscripted—but I did not want to pry, nor did I know the questions to ask. It was another impenetrable arena in which Nathaniel felt above me, apart from me. Instead, I took the tactic of asking him about Europe, soon discovering that Nathaniel had been to Europe almost a dozen times. Before the War, his family would take a transatlantic steamer every other summer from New York City to London, then often onto Paris and Prague and Rome.

Every other summer, I thought. And I had never even been once! I hoped the longing and jealousy in my eyes was taken more for polite interest.

“What does your father do?” Nathaniel asked, changing the subject.

My dreamy images of Notre Dame and Versailles dissolved into grayness.

I was not ready to tell Nathaniel. Not yet.

I could feel my ears starting to burn, my throat tighten. My delay in response was becoming awkward. I opened my mouth to mutter words I had not yet decided upon, when Sergio intervened with a tray, putting a basket between us, and with it, a distraction.

Saved by the bread and butter.

“And here, my dolls, are your coffees. Now, what do you fancy this evening?”

I ordered my noodles. Nathaniel requested two appetizers and two salads—“for the table,” he said, but I knew it was to compensate for my meager order—and the sirloin topped with shrimp.

As Sergio left us, Nathaniel raised his coffee cup and looked at me in his intense, examining manner. Then, under the cover of the tablecloth, with neither a warning nor a blink of his eyes, Nathaniel put his hand firmly on my knee. Having just picked up my mug, I nearly dropped it in surprise. But I tried to keep our eyes locked. His, as dark as my coffee. Mine, pale blue.

“Cheers,” he said. He began massaging my knee with his inner and outer fingers, and I had to purse my lips to maintain a straight face, though that did nothing to control my organs below the table.

“Cheers.” We clinked mugs, and I took a drink.

Even before the effect on my throat, I could feel it on my tongue. I had to puff out my cheeks to keep from spewing out the liquid, and while I was able to swallow, I started coughing immediately after.

“I’ve seen you hold far more… coffee than that,” Nathaniel said.

By coffee he meant hooch.

As I coughed a few more times to clear my throat, Nathaniel took the opportunity to progress his hand an inch further up my thigh. He never once took his eyes off me. He was
watching me, my reaction. My whole body burned. My tongue, my throat, my stomach… my thigh. I wondered how much of it showed in my face.

“Yes, that you have,” I finally managed. “I assure you that this was just my, umm, surprise at the, shall I say, strength of the coffee?” I grinned, perhaps foolishly, but I found myself feeling less intimidated by that gaze.

“Don’t you find it a bit odd that in America, we’ll send a young man to war, let him decide when to kill another, but not let him decide whether to drink just a half glass of wine?”

“Yes, it’s illogical that—” Nathaniel’s hand slipped so close to the apex of my pants that I was too distracted to finish my thought. It was a small area of my body, to be sure, but there was no doubt that at the present moment it was sequestering all of my attention. His fingers were tantalizing.

Nathaniel lifted his eyebrows as if to say, “Yes? Do continue. Don’t let me distract you.”

“It’s not the only law that’s illogical,” I finally managed.

“Agreed,” Nathaniel said.

With the arrival of our appetizers, Nathaniel withdrew his hand. I regained some of my composure and was able to contribute more insightful thoughts to the conversation. We discussed Blake’s poetry and women’s suffrage. We laughed. We cursed Mr. Volstead while clinking our coffee cups. We shared a piece of tiramisu, coated in the finest layer of Belgian cocoa, and we continued to make eyes in the romantic candlelight of the Lighted Lamp. I felt suspended in the heavens: two gods from an Italian fresco, cupid on our side.

A delicate flurry, the type that feels neither wet nor heavy, fell from the skies as we walked back to campus. It swirled through the air like the fluttery butterflies that now commanded my stomach. I had begun the night with this type of jittery nervousness, but it had subsided as
the candles, the hooch-laced coffee, and the lull of our own words had warmed us to each other. The sensation was fast returning, however, for there was that awkwardness in the air when two people know something’s going to happen but are not talking about it directly. Time had taken on a new languor, and every action, a world of meaning. I could see the shared anticipation in his eyes. I could feel it in the way he’d grabbed my hand. And there were no words, just the brush of snow on the streets.

We reached the main gate to Harvard Yard, the oldest part of campus and the only section entirely enclosed by brick walls. We stood between the two tall pillars and beneath the rod-iron arch overhead. I looked around and realized this was where Nathaniel would head left, and I, right.

It would be now, I knew it would be. But that did not ease my jitters. I looked up at him and my stomach dropped like a pile of wet snow from a bough of pine. How would he make it happen? And would I be any good?

Nathaniel looked down at our hands. He rubbed the inside of my palm with his finger. Then his eyes swept the Yard, Harvard’s most famous buildings, the crisscross of paths.

“I do not, out of habit, kiss with such indiscretion, in the open streets.”

So that is how he would bring it up: directly. Nathaniel, always direct.

He took a step closer to me. His face was now inches away. We possessed nearly the same stature, but I, being a hair taller, stood just above him. He seemed to be waiting for a response.

“Perhaps you’d make an exception?”

His finger again ran the length of my palm.

“Perhaps is an interesting word.”
He leaned into me, our thighs touching first, then our bodies, two parallel lines zipping together. I felt his hand slide behind my neck with the ease and luxury of expensive silk.

And then it was happening—his lips on mine. They were off to the side, kissing the left corner of my mouth, his lips over mine so that I could barely kiss back. Then he moved his lips to the right side, gently kissing that corner too.

I kept my eyes open. I had to. This felt like the first time. The first real time, that is. The first filled with true emotion, not just flaming desire and rough touch and kiss-less moments. I took in Nathaniel’s tight olive skin, his smell of coffee and cologne and snow. Then he pushed to the center of my mouth. I parted my lips and kissed back.

Finally, I kissed back.
For three straight days after that kiss, I felt as giddy as a clown from Barnum and Bailey’s Circus. Every ounce of me refused to exude anything but happiness. Even my feet were smiling. I was certain others were noticing, for I could not keep a straight face with them. Not with Hazel when I lay on her couch as she practiced a dance. Not with the fellas at Café Dreyfus. Not with Mother, when I’d met her in Boston to secure more dessert and soda pop distributors. And not even with Dean Greenough when I turned my paper into him on Monday.

It’s peculiar: our thoughts are completely our own, yet sometimes we feel like others must know, that they can just reach inside and pull out a strand of our swirling selves. Or perhaps it’s that the memory’s so vivid in our own minds, there seems to be no possibility that the event is not occurring for everyone around us. I felt like they perceived the difference in me, that they knew I’d kissed Nathaniel, knew the lascious things I was thinking, knew I was being swept away.

In hindsight, I see the irony of that first kiss under Harvard’s arched gate. We put ourselves on the steps of power and dared to be who we were. But at that moment, and in the days that came, I cannot say it felt ironic or radical, or even particularly taboo. No, it was as it should have been: a first kiss on Valentine’s Day, a mutual step forward, a start to something sublime.

After classes on Tuesday, Cyril waltzed into my room, his jazz hands in the air. In his favorite black fedora, Cyril seemed as happy and giddy as I did. Though, to be sure, if I were the clown of the circus, all klutz and big feet, Cyril was the acrobat or mime, all elegance and
coordination. I was glad to see Ernest was not with him, for I was finding myself progressively more annoyed with him.

Cyril opened his coat to reveal a rolled up copy of *The Crimson* tucked into his belt like a gun in a holster. “Go on, flip to page three. You get a second chance, old boy!”

I took the paper from him and unrolled it. There, on the third page, was the quarter page advert that was certainly the one Cyril had been referencing:

**Read Dramatic Club Play Monday**

Next Monday afternoon at 4.30 o’clock in Phillips Brooks House the Dramatic Club will hold an open meeting at which this year’s play will be read and details explained. Candidates for all departments of the play, and particularly acting aspirants, will report. After the read-through the Dramatic Club will hold auditions.

The play selected for production this spring, Benevente’s “Governor's Wife,” has been only recently printed, but has attracted much favorable comment from critics. Other plays by the same author, especially “The Passion Flower” have been and are playing with success in various cities of the United States. “The Governor's Wife” is a play dealing with modern Spain, and has three elaborate settings.

I looked up from the paper and Cyril grinned, his eyes gleaming like pools of water. “College is a refuge from hasty judgment, old boy! Am I right, or am I right?”

“But there’s no way I’ll get a part, not after what happened.” I cringed to remember that awful night in the theater, that night that had ended the very reason I had transferred to Harvard.

“You know the rules: you don’t have to be in the Dramatic Club, or even running for it, to be in the school play.”

“Two words,” I said. “James Crumpton.”

“Nonsense. He’s only one vote. We just have to find you an exceptional audition piece, and you’ll be a shoo in. I’ve seen you act.” Cyril took off his coat, dropped into my rocking chair, and settled in for what looked like the long haul. “Now, let’s polish a piece.”
I marveled at this chap in front of me: Cyril might be failing his classes, but he never failed his friends.

For over two hours, Cyril and I went through every non-musical show we knew. All of Shakespeare’s canon was too archaic. *Oh Boy!*, too upbeat. *East is West*, too absurdist. We toyed with *The Boomerang Comedy* for some time, but ultimately decided on an earlier show: *The Man of the Hour*. We settled on the famous argument scene, for it shared the same comic fear of modernity that we heard was the base of *The Governor’s Wife*. Being a whizz at elocution, Cyril helped me improve my inflections and accents.

At four o’clock, Cyril stood up to leave. “See you at the Smoker tonight, right?” At Café Dreyfus earlier this week, we had all agreed—minus Gene that is, who had not been present—to attend the after-dinner event. It was the first Smoker of the semester, and they were always a real pleasure.

“Yes,” I said.

Cyril grabbed his fedora off the rack and spun it into the air before allowing it to land on his head. Coat in hand, he was about to let himself out.

“Cyril?” I said. He turned back around. “Thank you.”

“You’ll do great. I’ll help you practice over the weekend as well.”

“Not just for the help with the audition—”

Cyril tilted his head in question, reminding me of a canary. I laughed. I had never properly thanked Cyril. And I figured it was about time.

“For inviting Nathaniel to Harry’s the other night.”

“Oh,” Cyril said, looking at me carefully. He didn’t demand the goods, as Eddy would’ve done. He just arched an eyebrow, which was his way of asking if there was more I
wanted to share. I debated for a moment, but sensed that telling Cyril would make it feel more material, less ethereal. Plus, there was the fact that I didn’t know what to do next.

I summarized Nathaniel’s and my interactions thus far. When I was finished, Cyril attempted to paraphrase, but with a very different emphasis than my own: “So, after the Questions and Commands game, he brought by your laundered clothes, he invited you on a date, he picked you up for said date, he kissed you after said date, he came and sat by you in literature class yesterday—”

“A class you should have been at,” I interrupted.

“I was in a much dreamier place. Where one should be at eight in the morning.”

“Harry’s?”

“Why yes.”

Our first major composition had been due yesterday, and I wondered when, if ever, Cyril planned to finish his and turn it in. Damn Ernest. I started to ask about the paper, “But what about your—”

“I’ll be fine. Let’s talk about that later,” Cyril said sincerely. “Where did I leave off?… Oh yes, the last item: Nathaniel invited you to swing by his room, correct?”

He had. In literature class yesterday morning, Nathaniel had been the one to find me in the auditorium, to sit in the seat next to me, to encourage me to visit him in his dormitory—room number nineteen, he’d said.

“Yes.”

“Then, C’est a toi.”

It was my turn.

I sighed. Without a dose of giggle water, the task seemed much more daunting than it had the first time I’d pursued Nathaniel.
I looked at Cyril across from me. In one respect, it felt odd receiving advice from Cyril; he looked so very, very young. I didn’t doubt that he could pass for a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old. And he was always so positive—Sappy Happy Cyril—I didn’t usually broach deep topics with him. That was usually Eddy’s domain. But in another respect, Cyril was my best model for someone who was making a real relationship work. They had courted—in a manner of speaking—for over a year now, despite his parents, despite Harry’s and his age difference, and despite that, well, legally speaking, it was forbidden.

“Umm, Cyril?”

He nodded.

“When did you know it’d be more than just well, a one-time thing… a boys-school affair?”

Cyril rocked a few times in the chair, taking his time before responding. It took on the air of a grandfatherly gesture from a boy’s body. “I suppose when I decided that’s not how I felt.”

“Pardon?”

“That what Harry and I shared did not feel like a short-lived boys-school affair. That if I were being honest with myself, I most assuredly could not put it in that box.”

I thought I understood what Cyril was saying, yet it did not satisfy me. What I’d been looking for was some type of formula: a question I was supposed to ask Nathaniel, a certain number of dates I was supposed to go on first, a script I could read.

“That’s the beauty of it,” Cyril said. “No box, no rules. No rules, no expectations.”

“But a box is a reassuring thing for a novice.”

He laughed, not unkindly. “You just have to go. Make it your own.” He stood up. “I’ll expect a report at the Smoker.”

He gave me a pat and left.
Nineteen Standish Hall was on the first floor, a corner room, and Nathaniel answered the door promptly when I knocked. The top two buttons of his dress shirt were undone and a tie was draped around his neck. He gave me his customary look: an intense stare with only a hint of a smile. I tried to remind myself that I shouldn’t feel unsettled—not after Saturday’s kiss—but that hardly succeeded in quelling my nerves. There were still so many unknowns. What was Saturday night? What were we? What *could* we be, for that matter? Unlike Cyril, this was, to be sure, new territory for me.

“Do come in.”

I entered the largest sitting room I had yet seen on campus. A corner suite.

Nathaniel put a hand on my shoulder, “May I take your coat?”

“Please.”

While he hung my coat in a hall closet, I stared in awe at the grandfather clock, the fireplace with busts of several men, and the dozen oil paintings of dogs and hunters. Where was I? The White House? Through a doorway I could see he had his own private bathroom. On the other side of the room, tucked into a nook, was a piano, a Steinway.

*And how!* I wanted to clamor. I resolved, however, to withhold my comment. I was embarrassed, and almost tired, of being constantly impressed. I wouldn’t let slip another “Cat’s meow,” as I had at the Lighted Lamp.

Nevertheless, Nathaniel saw where my eyes had landed. “Do you play?”

“Yes,” I said.

He gestured in the direction of the piano.

I felt the heat of a blush rising in my cheeks and ears. This was not how I had imagined the afternoon would go, but I felt that I could not decline. So I went and sat on the bench.
I decided on Mozart’s Piano Sonata No. 12 in F Major. It was impressive, but not too showy. The third and last movement was quite difficult technically, and probably the most impressive of the three movements, but I wasn’t sure I would get there. The piece was eighteen minutes long. Twenty-five with repeats. The first movement would probably suffice.

As I started in, I could feel Nathaniel standing behind me. Close behind me. His presence initially made me nervous, but eventually my hands acted of their own accord, handling the abundance of arpeggios and key changes with ease.

My hands had always been able to perform in ways my poor feet could not: namely, they could move together in coordination. I had started piano at age five and taken to it immediately. Mother always said I had a confidence on the piano bench that I lacked elsewhere. At age ten, Father had let me start to play for our inn’s restaurant on certain occasions, and even now, when I returned home for a weekend or holiday, he would always ask me to play for him, no matter his disposition. “My own personal concert,” he would say.

I stopped after the first movement, and was about to turn and look up at Nathaniel when he reached his right arm around me and played the slow melody in b-flat major that signified the start of the second movement.

Ye gods, you could’ve warned me!

Although, the more I thought about it, I could’ve warned myself, for of course Nathaniel would play the piano if he had a Steinway in his room. I’d been a buffoon. Again. But if I were being honest, he didn’t have quite the technique or feeling for the music that I did. It felt good to be above him in that regard—not that we were competing. It was more that it was pleasing to have something to shine in. To hold an attribute that might be attractive to Nathaniel.

I returned my left hand to the keys and played the lower part, the broken chord accompaniment that eventually changes to the tonic minor. Together we progressed through
the second movement, a few stumbles, as this was our first duet, but it didn’t matter, because it was unbelievably wonderful to be doing this, with him. I’d always been intensely connected to and inspired by music, and to be playing this piece, with Nathaniel, his arm reaching over me, pressed against me, making music together, it intensified my attraction to him—that feeling that I was melting into him.

When we finished, Nathaniel straddled one leg over the bench seat and sat down. The front of his body touched my side. He fiddled with the keys one-handedly.

“I don’t play much anymore, and frankly, for how little use the instrument gets, it is rather a pain to move it to new buildings on campus each year. But my parents insist I have one.”

I watched Nathaniel’s hands run scales up and down the keys, but my mind was honed in on my right side, every place where Nathaniel’s body came into contact with mine, specifically where his crotch was angled towards my hip.

“Playing together was superb though,” Nathaniel continued. “We should make this a regular occurrence.”

The thought alone aroused me. I worked hard to rearrange my legs—it would be so obvious at this angle, the way he was facing me. I searched for a killjoy thought, something to help me regain control. I was reminded of the piece of paper in my pocket: auditions.

“I nearly forgot,” I said. I pulled the ripped piece of newspaper out of my pocket. “I came to tell you that they announced the spring play.”

“The Governor’s Wife,” he said.

“You knew?”

“We were sworn to secrecy.”
That didn’t stop you before, I thought. He had warned me about the costume chastisement. Why had he held back now? I turned and searched his face for a clue. He must have felt my eyes on him, for he stopped playing.

“Keith, you don’t need to read my every action like a metaphoric line of poetry.”

I felt my throat tighten. I looked down at the keys and put my hand in the position of a chord but did not play. If I was willing to admit it, there was truth in his statement. “Sorry,” I mumbled.

“No need to apologize.” Nathaniel put his hand back on the keys too. And for a moment, we sat there in silence like that. “Though do you want to tell me what you are really thinking?”

My eyes flicked back and forth between my left hand, his right, my left, his right. My whole body buzzed in uncertain excitement. If I was wanting to be more direct, now was the moment. A direct question called for a direct answer. Vas-y, Keith. Go right ahead.

“That… that I am keen on you?”

There. It was out, floating upward to join the quiet musical vibrations still lingering in the room.

Nathaniel looked up at me. His lips were inches from my cheek. Without turning to face him fully, I could only see him well out of one eye. “And what does one do in such a scenario?” Nathaniel had started out the question stone-faced, but by the time he’d reached the last word, he was unable to help himself: he released a small smile.

“Am I that pathetic?” I said, for in Nathaniel’s book, that seemed like practically laughing at me.

“No.” He played several harsh minor chords with his right hand. “I’m just dying a slow death on the battlefield over here, that’s all.”

He was waiting for me.
I turned slightly, since I was not straddling the seat as he was. I could do this.

This time I closed my eyes. I leaned in, but realized, too late, that I had not turned towards Nathaniel enough. I lost my balance and my hand clanked the keys.

I opened my eyes and Nathaniel was grinning. He didn’t laugh, but he said, “Endearing.”

“You slay me,” I replied. “Literally.” I felt a layer of my self-consciousness melt away. That is not a comment I would have sassed back at him before. Perhaps the music had loosened me, or perhaps it was the feeling that I was getting to know him better.

I took a different approach: I swung my leg over the seat to face him, our knees touched, I grabbed his head in my hands, I pulled him towards me, and I kissed. Hard. There’d be no slipping or falling or clacking of keys on my second try.

Good gods, what a little necking can do for the human spirit! As I left Nathaniel’s and breathed in the invigorating night air of Harvard Yard, I would’ve sworn that the stars scattered above had never been brighter, that the old buildings had never been so lustrous in the moonlight. I would have told anyone who would have listened that I was going to turn the semester around, that I knew I could, and that I was determined to leave some type of mark. I could see myself on the pages of the *Crimson*: KEITH SMERAGE: BEST COMEBACK IN HARVARD’S HISTORY.

Like a hero in a Greek epic, I was all confidence and optimism—and we’d only kissed. Yes, it had been more and longer and harder and different from the first time—but still, only kissed. I could not help my mind from thinking about what it would be like to do more.

Cradling an increased faith in the world, in myself, and in others, I decided to turn, not left out of the Yard towards the Union, but right towards Gene’s room.
I would bring him to the Smoker.

Gene did not rise to greet me at the door, but rather, called for me to let myself in. While it was not yet eight o’clock, he was already in bed, sporting his pinstriped nightclothes. One lone lamp illuminated a halo of light around his pointy face and tall torso. He had a dental textbook on his lap.

As I entered, Gene began thumping the book with his thumb. I immediately noticed a spot of blood on the cuff of Gene’s nightshirt and had to withhold the urge to run over and examine his wrists; I wanted him to know that I was there for more than that. I walked to his closet, pulled out one of his perfectly starched white button-ups, and said, “You’re putting this on, chap.”

“No?”

“You know very well there’s a Smoker tonight. And I want you there.”

“You do?” His mousey eyes took on the innocent incredulity of a five-year-old who had just gotten invited to a birthday party from which he was most certain he’d been excluded. Always that shocked expression when I was around.

“Yes.”

Gene looked away—was that a blush?—then tentatively, he closed his textbook.

“So you’ll come?” I had expected to have to pull out Mr. Dentist’s teeth to get him to join us, seeing as how he had stopped socializing with us recently. I had also feared that we would have another incredibly awkward conversation like the last time I stopped by his room. So I was surprised at this seeming resignation. Perhaps he missed us.

“Yes, but that does not mean I’m committing to anything else. No drinking. No party at Ernest’s afterwards. Just the College-sanctioned Smoker,” he said firmly. He seemed to be speaking more to himself than to me.
I put my hands up in self-defense. It had taken far less argument on my part to get a yes out of him than I had presumed. Plus, I thought I’d handled the whole affair rather smoothly—*Well played, Mr. Smerage!*—so I was not going to push my luck.

“Agreed. Now strip down and let’s get going.”

In the grand, plush Living Room of the Student Union, corralled around a projector screen set up for the occasion, we sat puffing away at free cigarettes and cigars and laughing our way through the feature film, *His Majesty, The American*. Thus far, it seemed to be just a comedic showcase of the stunt skills of Hollywood’s one and only: Mr. Douglas Fairbanks. In every scene, the actor jumped and dashed, rolled and bounced, bedazzling us with his wild athleticism. Even Gene, beside me, let out a small laugh as the actor hurled himself out his hotel window and swung precariously between two buildings on a rope. A very Fairbanks attempt to rescue a cat from a fire.

Yet this comedy was quite different from the slapstick shorts of my childhood. Yes, it was still black and white, and there was still no real sound except for the music set to each scene. But it was a long movie, four to five times longer than Charlie Chaplin’s shorts. So long it required six reels that the students in charge of the Smoker had laid out on a table and kept changing. As such, it had to have a plot to sustain it: Fairbanks played a European prince, kidnapped at birth and raised in America without knowledge of his royal heritage. We had just reached the part where the prince, having returned to Europe, was falling in love with his *mother*, not knowing she was his kin.

I liked this new style of cinema. And of course, I adored Fairbanks. Who didn’t? He’d become America’s most popular star, and what’s more, he and Chaplin had just joined hands and formed their own film corporation. A dynamic duo, to be sure. The newspapers were also recounting that Fairbanks was currently filming an extravagant picture called *The Mark of*
Zorro that would be released later this year. I was planning to read the book version before then.

As the reel of film clicked forward, I found myself watching Fairbanks’s facial gestures and hand movements, trying to glean any tips for my upcoming performance. I was no Fairbanks, but if I could have just half his charisma and wild energy on Monday, I could woo the crowd. I could.

To my left, Ken tapped my leg with something. He leaned in close and whispered, “Hh-hh-hhooch,” aspirating the h so that his gin breath washed over my face. Leave it to Ernest and Ken to add some flair to a College event. I hunched over and took a small sip from the flask, just enough to top off my already spirited evening. The flask made its way up and down our line of chairs several times, but Gene had none, and I didn’t have much more, feeling rather giddy on life as it was.

Half an hour later, with the flourish of a cursive “The End” on the screen, the motion picture ended. As the chandeliers came to life, the room seemed far smokier than it had in the dark, and it was hard to make out the hundred other fellas crowded around us. Gene, the only one of us who had chosen not to partake of the cigarettes, waved his hand in annoyance, trying to push away the wisps of smoke that were now obviously manifest in the air. He was not having much success.

“Best Smoker yet,” Cyril called down the line of fellas to me. He was sitting four seats over, Ken, Ernest, and Eddy squeezed in between us. Gene was on my left. Had insisted he sit by me all night. At least I did not have to sit next to Ernest, who I had not completely forgiven.

“Oui,” I answered back to Cyril, though this was only my third one. Tufts had not had Smokers at all, and I had not been here at Harvard with them for the four they’d gone to freshman year. But it was true, this one had been a real hoot so far. Before His Majesty, the
American, we had seen a short one-reel animation, a hilarious Mutt and Jeff cartoon, and listened to a lovely violin performance by a junior student. We’d also been served refreshments and cigarettes several times and had breaks to socialize. What was there not to love about being served popcorn and smokes from silver bowls and platters? How could I not love the feeling of our group back together, patting each other’s backs, sharing the secret of what we passed in our hands and—coursing much deeper than that—the secret of our happiness? I was grateful for these fellas, for my chance to be at Harvard, for this epic feeling that life was as it should be.

A student at the podium, not someone I knew, called for our attention. “Next in this evening’s program is a singing performance by Harvard’s Burnham Lewis, class of 1920. However, before we begin that segment, I have been given the following announcement to read. It pertains to freshman and sophomores only.”

Our crew stopped chatting and perked up at the mention of sophomores.

The student held up a piece of paper at eye level and began to read: “The College entertainment committee would like to announce that March 12 has been set as the date for the freshman and sophomore annual dance instead of March 5. A number of reasons have made necessary this change, among the most important of which is the fact that the University hockey team will not be out of training before the first-named date.”

Some boys two rows ahead of us whooped several times. Eddy began to join in on the whoops, but Ernest scoffed. “Hockey? So little to see.”

“Another cause for the change of date was that the swimming team is scheduled to make a trip to Annapolis and New York at this time—”

“—Swimming, now there’s something to wet your pants about Eddy. All those tight little swimming trunks. Oh la la!”
“—And lastly, the annual prom at Princeton had also been previously scheduled for March 5, and the committee feared that complications would arise if both dances were given on the same night.”

There were some murmurings at this announcement, even some curse words directed at Princeton, Harvard’s rival.

“Ehem,” the announcer tried to regain our attention. “Freshman and sophomore men should ask the girls they intend to invite immediately. A tentative price of $4 apiece has been set for the tickets of admission, but no final decision on this point has been reached by the committee as yet.”

Four dollars! That was eight dollars for two people, or two whole weeks of my stipend! Yet my initial shock wore off as I realized that, with no girl to invite, this would not be an event I’d be attending.

“Are there any questions?” the student at the podium asked.

A chap in the front row, a freshman, I believed, asked about the band that would be playing. Then Ernest, sitting smugly two chairs away from me, put his hand in the air.

“Yes, you in the back?”

Ernest stood up and cleared his throat in an I’ll-wait-until-all-eyes-are-on-me-manner.

“You say we should ask the girl we wish to invite.” Pause. “But what if we’d rather not attend with a lady?”

The chap up front looked around awkwardly, perhaps hoping for someone else to save him. “Excuse me? Uh, how do you mean that?”

“What if a chap—” Ernest rolled his globe-like eyes to the ceiling, weighing his words.

*Oh, this could be bad, this could be very bad....* I wondered how drunk he was.

“—would prefer to not dance with a lady—”
Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Whatever eyes had not been on Ernest before, were certainly on him now. Eddy, who had just taken a sip of soda water, rushed his hand to his mouth. Rivulets of liquid dribbled between his fingers as he tried to keep his soda—and his laugh—in. Gene sunk deeper in his chair and tucked his chin to his chest, hoping no one would see him. Ken raised an eyebrow, interested but unfazed. Cyril just laughed.

And he was not the only one. There were some looks of horror, but I was surprised at the humor many of the students found in this. A few slapped their knees they were so amused. Others jeered phrases like, “Yes sir, tell it how it is!” or “Boys will be boys!”

Yet before anyone could take the weight of what Ernest was saying too directly, Ernest softened his question: “—and attend the dance alone?” It was like he’d reeled the crowd in, just to say, “Ha, got you! Not as you think! Can’t pin me.”

The announcer, who had been among the horrified portion of the crowd, looked too shocked and embarrassed to put a sentence together. “I, well, I, the rules, there must be boys and girls, there must be an even number, for the dance cards. You must invite a girl… Umm, sorry.”

“What?” I mouthed to Ken. “Did he just say sorry?”

“Yes. That he did.”

Unbelievable. Ernest had mastered a suave and haughty demeanor that allowed him to intimidate almost anyone, regardless of the subject matter.

“Thank you,” Ernest said with a lordly nod of his chin. He sat down and turned to us with a look of triumph. I guess he had triumphed: he’d shaken the crowd, gotten some laughs, and had all the attention on him.

“Now I’ll be forced to invite Helen,” Ernest said with a dramatic sigh. “She’ll not let me get out of it. In fact, I’m sure she’ll even be hoping for a proposal after the dance. Ha!—if
that isn’t still a far way off, then I’m not the son of a Congressman.” He winked at us and leaned his shoulder into Ken.

Son of a former Congressman, I wanted to add.

Throughout the singing performance, I noticed an auburn-haired fellow staring at us through a set of exceedingly large spectacles. It did not appear to be with disgust. Was it curiosity I saw? Ernest was certainly a specimen that merited some level of inquiry, so perhaps it was. I took in the chap’s shy gestures, that youthful face and those slightly bushy reddish-brown eyebrows. Then it dawned on me: I knew him—well, more accurately, I’d seen him.

I called Eddy over after the song finished. His scarf and sweater were still wet from the soda water he’d spewed. “That chap across the way, we saw him in the library this past weekend. Do you know him? He keeps looking at us.”

Eddy jumped up and down awkwardly, trying to gain the height he lacked. Not the king of discretion, that one.

“No, I do not, but I always see him in Widener. My opinion on him?” Eddy leaned in closer. “He’s the College’s most studious pupil and its loneliest. I have never seen anyone sit with him, ever, poor dearie.”

It was true. The chair he was sitting in was isolated from the other chairs, and he had spoken with no one since I had started watching him. The student looked familiar in another respect as well. Perhaps he belonged to our same eating club. Or I’d attended a class with him.

“Watch this,” Eddy said.

Before I could put a word in edgewise, Eddy scooted a few chairs out of his way and hobbled over to the bespectacled lad. With his back turned to me, I could not hear what Eddy
was whispering, but I saw the surprise on the student’s face. Then the fella stood up and followed Eddy over.

“Dearies, meet Joe—Joe Lumbard—a sophomore like us. Or like most of us,” he said, glancing at a still slouched over Gene. “Joe, meet Gene, Keith, Ken, Ernest, and Cyril.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Joe said in a quiet, but surprisingly deep voice.

“From where do you hail?” Ernest asked without a smile. I could tell he was drunk, but not too drunk to take charge of our new visitor.

“Manhattan.”

“I see,” Ernest said, as if he did not approve.

During the last dwindling minutes of the Smoker, we acquainted ourselves with Joe. We learned that he was pre-law at Harvard, and that his dad was a physician working in the new field of anesthesiology in the city. He liked sports, but did not play on any of the teams. And he did not have many friends, a fact Ernest had pulled out of him rather meanly, I’d thought.

When the students in charge of the Smoker announced that no more cigarettes would be passed out, Ernest stood up. “Well, dearies, it’s been the bee’s knees, but the night is calling.” He grabbed Ken by the shirt and pulled him up. “Someone here has to get it buried in the bun.” Ernest winked at us all and pushed Ken past the chairs and out the door.

I looked at Joe to see if he was horrified, but in a shy sort of way, he looked amused. Just glad to be in on someone’s joke, no matter the joke.

I came to realize later what a wonderful, new experience the night of the Smoker had been for Joe, one that opened a door to friendships he had never known. Yet while there is a great deal I wouldn’t give up, couldn’t give up, about that semester at Harvard, I can’t help wishing that Eddy had never gone over to Joe. Never brought him back to our group.

For his sake.
CHAPTER 10
February 23, 1920

Literature class on Monday brought the introduction of a new beast: Frankenstein. Done with Coleridge’s albatross and Blake’s worms, Byron’s menagerie and Keats’s nameless monster, we had moved onto Shelley’s complex and iconic creature. *Frankenstein* was our first novel of the semester, and I was enjoying being able to immerse myself in the Swiss scenery and dramatic plot. This morning, however, I found myself distracted by the fear of my upcoming auditions this afternoon, and by the fine chap sitting next to me: my dreamy Nathaniel. We’d sat towards the back and had been passing each other notes and making eyes through most of the lecture.

Dean Greenough paced back and forth at the podium below.

“May I remind you that Mary Shelley started this novel when she was just nineteen. She finished it at only twenty.” It was the second time the Dean had repeated Shelley’s age during the lecture. In his jovial and idealistic way, he seemed intent on reminding us that we could, and should, make something of ourselves.

*Twenty*, the same ripe old age of moi. Suddenly my goal of securing a part in the spring play felt pale in comparison to young Shelley’s dreams and accomplishments at my age. I tried to imagine what it would be like to craft such a work now. It seemed impossibly complex and as if Shelley were part of a different world than I. Yet I longingly pictured her gallivanting around the snow-capped peaks of Switzerland, pen and paper always in hand. I imagined myself doing the same, and for a moment, wondered if I could be a writer, if that would get me to Europe.

“Another interesting tidbit of information,” Dean Greenough continued, “is that Shelley began the novel as part of a horror writing contest. One night when the weather was
keeping them from enjoying the great outdoors, she and her esteemed colleagues decided to compete against each other in the writing of horror stories. And who, gentleman, might those colleagues be?”

Predictably, Eddy’s hand ascended into the air. Given his position in the front row, it looked, from up here, almost as if his hand was in the Dean’s face. I actually knew at least part of the answer, so I raised my hand too.

From under his bushy white mustache, Greenough smiled at Eddy, but then lifted his chin and called up to me. “Mr. Smerage?”

I cleared my throat. “I imagine her husband and fellow author, Percy Shelley, must have been present, sir.”

“Correct!” The Dean looked so proud, even though I’d responded with the obvious one. Nathaniel knocked my knee with his. A congratulatory nudge of sorts. I should participate more often, I mused.

“Who else, Mr. Swain?” he asked, calling on another student.

“Lord Byron, sir.”

“Correct again! Lord Byron, whom we have already studied, was great friends with the Shelleys. Imagine the three of these romantics, plus two other lesser known authors, huddled around a fire on a dark and gothic night. Add in some dreams, a love of Roman mythology, a dose of inspiration from Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner—another link, gentleman!—and a trip to Switzerland, and there you have it, the inspiration for Frankenstein.”

Dean Greenough pulled out a pocket watch and said, “Oh dear, it’s almost time. And still I must return your compositions.” He twisted his white mustache distractedly.

Our essays! Our essays on sex!
I hoped desperately for an A, but the Dean was the hardest of graders. Such a mark from him would be akin to winning a Nobel Prize or being anointed by the Pope. Nathaniel didn’t look nearly as excited at the announcement as I did. Perhaps he was just being his usual collected self.

“What did you write about?” I asked him.

“Oh, the usual.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, quite.”

“So…,” I leaned in close to ensure my whisper would only reach his ear, “you mean you wrote about how you’re in love with William Blake and have fantasies of him joining you in bed?”

“Exactly.”

I felt the urge to kiss him right there—I was already so close to his neck—but clearly, I could not.

“Once I call your name,” the Dean announced, “you may come collect your paper and excuse yourself. And when I’m through, I’d like to speak with Cyril Wilcox and George Marston.”

I pulled away from Nathaniel and looked around for Cyril. He was nowhere to be seen in the lecture hall. I assumed this meant he never turned in his paper. I sighed. I felt somehow responsible.

Eddy’s name was called—“Mr. Edward Say!”—and a few names later, so was mine—“Mr. Keith Smerage!” I stood up and collected my belongings.

“I’ll see you at the script read-through,” Nathaniel said.

He was calling the afternoon meeting by its gentler name: read-through, not auditions. I wondered if he was worried about my prospects, or just being kind.
Down at the podium, Dean Greenough handed me my paper. “Quite a topic, Mr. Smerage.” He gave me a stern look, one that did not suit his round face, and I felt all my hopes of a high mark fade into nothingness. Before I could respond, he moved onto the next student. I clutched my composition in my hand and pressed it against my leg so no one could see his comments on it. I walked briskly up the aisle and out of the auditorium.

I held off looking at my composition until after my French course with Monsieur Imbert.

Back in Perkins, I sat on my bed and tried to brace myself emotionally. It was not even halfway through the semester. Still time to rectify a low mark. Nonetheless, I found my heart beating rather too quickly for my liking.

I pulled my composition out of my satchel and took a deep breath.

On the front page, Dean Greenough had only written a few comments. One was about making sure to avoid the passive voice. Fair enough.

I reached the last page.

Mr. Smerage,

At times, your analysis borders on the inappropriate and the sacrilege. I encourage you to consider the fact that William Blake was an addict of sensual pleasure, just as Coleridge was an addict of drugs. The Romantic period did wonders to free the confines of literature, but there is no doubt that the ways it freed the human soul were recurrently excessive and sinful. Blake actively sought to bring a second wife into his house, and when that failed, he ushered concubines into bed with his current wife. You write of Blake’s “The Garden of Love” with noted awe and appreciation, and I urge you not to forget your morality. There are far better idols in literature than this man of “free love.” Nonetheless, you do a fine job of honing in on specific words and passages and putting forth an original argument, which academia lauds. Bravo in that regard.

A-

Cordially,

Dean Greenough
I fell back in bed and let out a sigh of relief. An A- was sensational. An A- merited writing
Mother. An A- gave me the confidence I needed to face this afternoon’s auditions.

An A-, it so happened, also allowed me to ignore the Dean’s first paragraph.

After writing Mother, I walked into the common room on the first floor of Perkins Hall and
picked up the telephone. It was the only telephone in the whole building, and on occasion it
rang incessantly when parents were trying to get in touch with their sons.

It was four o’clock. I had very little time remaining, but wanted to make sure Hazel
would be there tonight at Ernest’s party. I would try to be quick.

I held one piece of the telephone to my ear and one to my mouth. The voice of the
campus switchboard lady buzzed in my ear. “How may I connect your call?”

“Good afternoon, ma’am. I was hoping you could connect me to the following
address in Cambridge.” I read Hazel’s street address from a little slip of paper.

The line rang nine times. I was about to hang up, but on the lucky tenth ring, Hazel
finally answered.

“Howdy!” she said.

“Hello Hazel, it’s Keith.”

“Keithsssstterrr!”

I smiled. She and Cyril never failed to lift my spirits. “Say, can you make it to a party
tonight?”

“What time, old sport?”

“Eight o’clock, after my audition. It’s in Ernest’s room, Perkins 28. I’m sure all the
fellas would love to have you, seeing as how you were the spice of the party at Harry’s.”

“Ahh, such a kind sport my Keithster is, throwing me a compliment. Ms. Spice will
be there.”
“Excellent!” Hazel felt more essential to the life of the party than Ernest, in my humble opinion, so I was elated she’d be joining us. “Hey Hazel—” I paused. “I’m nervous. Wish me luck?”

“You said the show was a comedy, right?”

“Oui.”

“Well, just imagine James Crumpton naked. He has a birthmark on his behind and a very small winky. That should do it for you.”

Armed with Hazel’s image, I made my way to the Phillips Brooks House. I felt more confident than I’d felt in a long time. I had Nathaniel and Cyril behind me, both of whom would be in the crowd. I had my saint of a mother. I had an A- from Dean Greenough, which was not an A, but damn close. And I had over two more years at this magnificent place called Harvard.

*Break a leg*, I told myself.

Besides James Crumpton’s crass remarks at the door of the meeting—“Mr. Smerage, I never thought I’d see you amongst our ranks again. Oh, but that’s right, I’d forgotten, you’re the *foolhardy* type. Please come in!”—the read-through portion of the evening had gone well. The secretary of the Dramatic Club had passed out dozens of bound copies of the script. In a massive circle of chairs, we’d read all three acts, rotating who read which parts. We’d also been told to pay attention to roles we thought we would perform well. Standard procedure, really.

After the read-through, the chairs had been rearranged to form a more traditional theater setting for the auditions. I sat midway back, Nathaniel on my left, Cyril on my right. The panel of Dramatic Club officials lorded upfront, a table above their laps, pens poised in hands, ready to judge us. I took stock of them. There was the President, James Crumpton, boy
of small penis. *Merci,* Hazel. The Vice-President, Otto Griswold, boy from whom I’d borrowed the goddamn key. The Treasurer, Jules Goodman, boy of plump proportions. The Secretary, Winthrop Ames, boy of little hair. Less cap coverage than Harry Junior, in fact.

As I stared at the Secretary, he called the first student from the sign-up list: “Mr. Stanley Gilkey, please!” I knew the chap. Stanley was a fellow sophomore who occasionally frequented our parties, and he’d been one of the fifteen who had voted in my favor that ill-fated day. He gave what I thought was a decent performance, if a bit lackluster in its originality, but I sincerely hoped he received a part. I sent out silent votes of affirmation to the judges.

After five more students, the secretary announced that it was Cyril’s turn. I was surprised at how slowly he stood up. I started to feel nervous and embarrassed for him. The four judges even turned around to ascertain what was keeping the student. Rather than pass all the others sitting in our row and make his way to the front, Cyril stayed erect above his chair. Then he spun slowly around, as if looking for someone or something.

What was Cyril playing at? I tried to catch his eye to see if he had gone mad, to try to urge him to the front. But Cyril maintained a distant, focused look, marked by the arch of an eyebrow. I’d seen that look before and suddenly understood his behavior: he was starting his performance from right here.

“Why can I find no specimen to my liking?” Cyril boomed, causing no small number to jump in the audience. “Your *visage,* too thin! Yours, too disfigured!” Cyril snapped his wrists at students around the room. “Yours…?” He gave a look of disgust to one student and everyone laughed. “Yours, too, too… *je ne sais quoi.*” Too I-don’t-know-what. “My gowns must be modeled by the *crème de la crème!*”

I now knew which part he was enacting: Madame Lucy from the Broadway hit *Irene.* Madame was actually no Madame; she was a flamboyant male designer who pretended to be
both French and female, and who recruited women to model her—or his?—gowns in the Upper West Side. Irene had just broken the record for the longest-running show on Broadway.

Cyril transported us there, to Broadway. We became Madame Lucy’s entourage, the common room her garment salon. He waltzed around the room. He measured some students’ girths, asked others to stand up and spin around. He sat seductively on the judge’s table, enumerating the woes of a dressmaker.

I realized I had not even asked Cyril what piece he would use to audition; our practice sessions had been to help me, and me alone. I had asked Nathaniel though and been surprised to find out that he was not auditioning at all. He had too many preparations for medical school to partake of the spring play, though he’d been able to act in the fall production. But Cyril, the very one who’d aided and encouraged me, I had not even asked, let alone aided and encouraged in return. Not that Cyril needed me. He was still up there wooing the crowd. All the same, I felt a tad bit sheepish.

Cyril’s performance, with its remarkable combination of daring and class, garnered an impressive applause. Madame Lucy had been a perfect fit for Cyril; it had allowed him to showcase his feminine side in a Broadway-sanctioned manner. It showed his range as a performer, even if all the female parts this year were going to girls from Radcliffe. I felt assured that Cyril would obtain a part, perhaps even a leading one. I thought about Cyril’s dream of making a career out of acting, his theater bills hung from ribbons in his dormitory. Cyril had proven himself worthy of this dream. If he could only obtain membership in the prestigious Dramatic Club, every Broadway connection would be his.

Cyril, somewhat short of breath, sat down next to me.

“Sappy Cyril did it again!” I whispered to him. “A perfect performance, folks! Headed to Broadway, then to Hollywood!”
“Thank you, kind sir.” Cyril was downright glowing.

I was happy for him. You could not be jealous of him, truly, you could not. I wondered what made him immune to this. His young, boyish face? His pure heartedness? For I was certainly covetous of others. At times, I was jealous of Nathaniel—jealous in that reverential I-wish-to-be-you type of way. Ken’s athletic build had raised jealous feelings in me. And Ernest. Oh, Ernest. I hated to admit it, but I was frequently envious of his opulent lifestyle. The trips to Europe. The Jolson records he could buy before they were even released on the market. The ability to spend with utter disregard. I was not, however, jealous of Ernest’s personality. That much I could live without.

I was startled when my name was called. How had I forgotten that Cyril and I had signed up together? His name first, mine second. Oh good lord, I could not follow an act of Cyril’s caliber. No.

No. No. No.

But the choice was not mine. I took a deep breath, Nathaniel patted my back, and I walked to the front of the room. The eyes of James Crumpton and his clan landed on me like spotlights. I feared that my jitters would return and my ears turn crimson under their watchful heat. To my surprise, this was not the case. Imagining Crumpton with a small pecker certainly helped. But it was more than that.

I felt ready.

I closed my eyes briefly. Then I snapped them open and launched into my excerpt from The Man of the Hour.

“How does one proceed in such a world? Tell me. Tell me!”

I could see Cyril mouthing the words as I said them. He’d evidently memorized my audition piece during our practice sessions. I remembered what he said about adding an inflection of desperation to this next section, of shifting delicately from anger to need.
“If you know how, tell me. For hereafter I cannot proceed, no, I cannot.”

I delivered a flawless performance. I did not know how it compared to Cyril’s or whether it had impressed the judges, but I knew that for me, it felt flawless and new. With Nathaniel and Cyril in the crowd, with a new sense of confidence brewing within me, I was able to do—I was not quite certain what—but something more. It felt as if I had pushed past my normal level of performance, past worrying about stumbling on words or not landing a part, and plunged into formerly unknown depths.

I could not hope for the leads of Santiago or Baldomero, but maybe roles like Teodoro or Trino, characters who played small but still comically dramatic parts. I expressed these preferences to the Club’s officials when they asked, and went to take a seat. I found I was sweating more than I realized, but I did not care and I did not pull at my shirt as would have been my norm.

“It’s the Man of the Hour!” Nathaniel whispered to me.

“You’re a shoo in,” Cyril added.

For once, I let myself believe them. For once, I let my audition rest as it was and did not over-think it. I’d find out next week if I received a part, and that would be that.

Letting go was a glorious feeling.

“Kenny Boy, it’s not fifteen minutes past eight,” I said.

Cyril and I had scarcely been in Perkins 28 for more than a moment, and already it was evident that Ken was as corked as a barrel of liquor. He must have started drinking at seven o’clock, perhaps earlier.

“No track practice to-mor-row,” Ken responded rather loudly with drunken intonations.

“O-kay,” I mimicked.
“I go. I play cards… I mean, I go play cards!” Ken laughed at his own incoherence.

“Come, wife!” He threw his arm around Cyril, who, as his roommate, was indeed Ken’s “wife” in student lingo. Then he pulled him off to the card table where several townsfolk were playing poker.

As usual, Harry was not among the players. He didn’t frequent our parties. It seemed we’d go to his get-togethers at Café Dreyfus and at his apartment, but he did not come to ours. I wondered, for the first time, if Cyril had ever invited him, or whether Harry stayed away of his own accord. I supposed Nathaniel was a bit separate from our group too, not joining all of our parties and meals and such. I also had yet to clearly inform all the chaps that Nathaniel and I were… well, were whatever we were. For the moment, I was enjoying this partial separation. I was not sure from where this stemmed. Perhaps I wanted to keep Nathaniel wholly to myself. Perhaps having him separate from those who knew me so well allowed me to ease into this relationship with Nathaniel slowly. Perhaps it allowed me to make it my own, as Cyril had encouraged.

No, neither Harry nor Nathaniel were at the party, but Hazel was already present. She was chatting with Ernest on the velvet settee. I felt those familiar pins of jealousy poke me, but I was determined to stave them off this evening. Hazel could be friends with both of us. I did not care. Or, more accurately, I would try not to care.

To my surprise, Gene was also in attendance. His tall giraffe of a head was easy to spot above the other students. When his eyes caught mine, he rushed over.

“Uhh… good evening,” he said awkwardly.

“Swell to see you here, chap.” I gave him a pat on the arm.

“Swell to see you here too, uh, chap.”
Gene’s response was so eager and awkward, I was about to reply with a sassy remark that would have been the norm amongst the other boys in our group. “Find your own words!” or “Gene, so gifted with words.” But Gene had been so sensitive of late, I held back.

“Want a drink?” I asked. Not that this choice of response was much better, as I knew Gene had been refraining from liquor recently. But I didn’t know what else to say to him.

“Sure, if you are.”

We went over to the open window, the one with General Biology jamming it ajar, and pulled up the white cord: gin. I poured the smallest of glasses, because I, for one, wanted to be awake for my Tuesday morning classes, and this semester had already shown me that my hangovers were as monstrous as a wooly mammoth. I handed the two glasses to Gene and began to lower down the cord. I looked out over the Yard and saw the shadow of two figures on the sidewalk not too far away. Probably students, I thought. Some inkling urged me to look more closely though. I leaned a bit further out the window and squinted. One silhouette appeared to be using a cane. The other sported a sizable hat of an unusual shape, not a round bowler. A few steps closer and I recognized that hat for what it was: Dean Greenough’s Russian fur car.

The duo was none other than the President of Harvard, Mr. Lowell, and Dean Greenough. The President had made it his custom to take a stroll around campus every night between eight and nine. I glanced at my watch: 8.23. Usually our parties were on the weekend, or later in the evening. How had we, or Ernest for that matter, not given this thought?

“Ernest, hit the lights! Now!” I shouted.

“Whatever for?” Ernest, who was lazing on his couch, feet propped up on an antique coffee table, sounded annoyed.

“The President and Dean are about to pass in front of Perkins!”
“Do you think we should invite them up for a drink?” Ernest asked, holding up his glass in a cheers position. *Is he serious?*

While Ernest refused to take any action, the others began bustling about. Gene tripped his way away from the window. Cyril rushed over to help me pull up the alcohol. Two jugs of liquor suspended out a window would be a sure giveaway. Some of the chaps had flattened themselves on walls that could not be seen from the windows. Others threw themselves on the floor. Finally, someone switched off the lights. I hoped it was not too late.

Cyril and I collapsed against the wall, knees against our chests. For a moment, everyone was silent. Then there was a clatter of metal on the floor. A serving utensil? A flask? Whispers came next. Then laughs. I could pick out Hazel’s amongst the others. I heard someone dart across the room and knock something over. Laughs and splutters waterfalled out of people anew. A room full of boys and alcohol—and Hazel—was not conducive to silence.

“Hush!” someone said from the other side of the room. It was probably Gene.

Amidst the noise, we heard a knock at the door.

The room immediately regained its quiet. I felt my breath descend into my stomach. Everyone else seemed to hold their breath too. Cyril grabbed the arm of my shirt.

What would happen to us if we were discovered? A simple demerit? Or worse, a one-week suspension? My mother would be so ashamed, so very ashamed. Cyril’s parents would no doubt behead him. At least Harvard liked to handle its own affairs. They would not call in the police and they would not expel us. Harvard just did not treat its students that way. Chaps had gotten off the hook for far worse than this.

“Who’s there?” Ernest asked.

We heard only a mumble.

“Who’s there?” he demanded again.
“Joe Lumbard.”

Joe? Joe from the Smoker? Oh, thank you, Zeus! It wasn’t the President or the Dean or the proctor of the dormitory. Hallelujah!

“Just a moment Joe!” Eddy called out, not sounding particularly surprised. I presumed it must have been Eddy who’d invited Joe.

“Joe from Manhattan,” I heard Ernest say with a bored disdain.

I felt the urge to smack him right then. *He wouldn’t know it was me in the dark,* I mused.

For another ten minutes, we sat like this, lights off. One student called out a vulgar joke. Another asked someone to pass around the hooch. At some point, a half dozen chaps moved to our side of the room and—accidentally or purposefully, I do not know—sat on top of us. I had to give a light punch to a fella who was squashing my left leg. Two others seemed to be wrestling on top of Cyril. It was all in good fun though, and they asked us to scooch over. I soon found myself squeezed between two students I did not know at all.

I’ll admit, I loved every minute of it. It reminded me of the childhood games I played at night with the other neighborhood boys in Topsfield, adventurous games like Kick-the-Can and Ding-Dong-Ditch. Perhaps this was the college equivalent. There was an instant camaraderie too. The risk of getting caught, the turning off of the lights, the knock on the door—all of it unified us in a way I cannot describe. I felt so happy in that moment and would’ve voted to continue the party in the dark, had I been asked. But eventually, Ernest turned on the lights, and we rose to our feet.

I would’ve sworn, in the newly glaring light, that I saw a few other disappointed looks too.
Throughout the party, Joe kept to the fringes. Eddy would frequently swoop down on his auburn-capped friend and guide him into the mélange under his mama bird wing, but after a quarter of an hour, Joe would retreat meekly to a chair in the corner. He watched us from afar through those big spectacles and seemed to snort with laughter when someone did something even mildly amusing.

After finishing up our card game, Hazel and I decided to go chat with Joe. Just a few minutes into the conversation, Hazel asked, “So, Joe, any love interest?”

Straight for the goods, Hazel, straight for the goods!

Yet it seemed that Hazel did not feel she was prying. Unlike the demanding, overly excited manner in which Eddy posed questions like that, a manner which exposed how scandalous he felt he was being, Hazel asked the question like any other. She did not see any boundaries. Proprieties and Hazel mixed about as well as oil and water.

Joe did not seem overly bothered. In fact, he seemed appreciative that someone was expressing interest in him.

“Yes, her name is Samantha,” Joe said in that oddly quiet yet still robust voice.

“And where did you two meet?”

“High school.”

“How very traditional,” Hazel said, rolling her eyes. “But if I must, I’ll allow it’s still a bit romantic.”

“So that puts you two lovebirds at how many years?” I asked.

“Five.”

“Have you given her a handcuff yet?” Hazel asked, elbowing Joe.

Joe and I both laughed.

“No, no ring. We are not engaged yet.” Then, in a tentative manner, he offered, “But, I imagine that’s in the future for us.” He seemed genuinely happy to share this with us, and his
light brown eyes, flecked with so many other colors, lit up as he continued to talk about his girlfriend. I’d seen that look in my own eyes, too; one glance in a mirror after having spent any time at all with Nathaniel, and there it was, that look. It was not one that, when real, was easy to hide.

“So the redhead can talk?” Ernest said from behind me. I had not seen him approach. Eddy was with him too.

Ernest pushed his way into the center of Hazel, Joe, and me, and to my surprise, sat down on Hazel’s lap. “Excuse me, Hazel dearie, I forgot to ask you before, where did you get those darling gold hoops?”

She reached up and felt her ear, as if reminding herself which ones she had put on that evening. “Oh these old things? Just a gift from a certain someone I’d rather forget.” She winked at me.

James Crumpton. Must have been.

“Well they’re just darling—”

“Yes, they are,” Eddy tried to add. He too was looking longingly at the little thick hoops.

Ernest just raised his voice and kept talking: “—I’ve long yearned for a piercing of my own. I have it all planned: right ear, gold hoop. I once saw a fine looking Jane down at Copley Square wearing one, and let’s just say, he was the fountain of my inspiration.”

“What’s held you back?” Hazel asked.

Someone other than Ernest might have taken the question as a challenge to the veracity of his statements, but Ernest just shrugged. Still in control.

“Oh, nothing really. I guess I never prioritized it amongst all my other exploits.”
“Well, let’s bring this yearning of yours to fruition, old sport.” Hazel pushed Ernest from her lap and stood up. “I’ve done this for a thousand of my gals. Who’s got a needle and thread?”

“How now?” Gene asked nervously from the other side of the room. Neck like a giraffe, face like a mouse, but ears like a hawk, that one. Always monitoring and worrying about everyone else’s actions. The word needle had probably made him nervous.

“We’re going to pierce Ernest’s ear!” Hazel said loudly this time, so loudly that I did not doubt that the entire second floor of Perkins had heard her announcement.

She grabbed a wooden chair, placed it in the center of the oriental rug, and pushed Ernest down into it. Everyone gathered round. Eddy arrived with a needle and thread.

“You are going to ice my ear, aren’t you dearie?” Ernest asked.

He seemed nervous, and I couldn’t help myself: “Not getting cold feet now, are you?”

Ernest glared at me, but did not respond. A politician must not seem like he’s on the defensive.

“You, in the back, grab me two cubes of ice from the cocktail table!” Hazel gestured to a freshman.

While Hazel used the ice to numb his earlobe, Ernest couldn’t help taking advantage of being the center of attention. “Did everyone notice the new antique vase on the way in?” He waited for the nods, the yeses, the ouis. “A late seventeenth-century French antique. Possibly resided for a short time in the palace at Versailles. I’ve spent years looking for a piece like that, and dearies, can you believe I finally found it? Had to pay an arm and a leg, mind you, but antiques are always worth it, they appreciate substantially every decade, you know. Oh, how I dream of having my own antique shop!”

Ernest looked around, as if noticing for the first time that some lord or minstrel was missing from his high court.
“Kenny boy?”

I turned my head and saw that Ken was passed out in an armchair on the other side of the sitting room.

“He’s tanked,” someone said.

“Wake him up!” Ernest demanded. “He can’t miss this.”

Ned, the Café Dreysus waiter who Eddy had started necking with a few weeks ago, threw Ken’s arm around his shoulder and hauled him over to the circle. Ken’s massive body dwarfed the young waiter below him.

Slowly, Ken came to. He looked around groggily, then pushed Ned off of him.

“Good morning, dearie!” Ernest said. “I’m getting my ear pierced. Did I tell you I’ve always wanted a piercing? You see, down at Copley, I saw—”

I noticed Ken’s pale blue eyes darkening as Ernest spoke. Was it incredulity? Drunkenness? Annoyance?

Eventually, Ken interrupted Ernest. “Bugger off, Ernest! I’m not interested.” He pushed his way out of the circle and back to the armchair.

Most of us were stunned into silence.

“Uh, is your ear sufficiently cold?” Cyril asked, trying to distract Ernest.

“Yes.”

Taking her cue, Hazel removed the ice and dried Ernest’s ear. She used a pen to make a small mark in the center of his lobe. Then she sterilized the needle with a swab of gin, threaded it, and held it high in the air.

“Dreams must come to fruition! Let’s hear it pirates!”

“Aye-aye!” we bellowed, though it did not possess the same fervor and excitement that it would have before Ken’s outburst.
Hazel bent down. We leaned in over her. She held an eraser behind Ernest’s lobe. “So the needle won’t go through and puncture his neck,” she said, winking at the crowd.

Before Ernest could protest, Hazel plunged the needle swiftly through his lobe. Ernest screamed like a banshee.

“Stop moving!” Hazel yelled as Ernest tried to pull his head away from her. Drops of blood splattered on Ernest’s collared shirt and he screamed again.

“Applesauce!” Hazel cursed. “Someone fetch me a rag!” She sounded vexed. “I usually do not draw any blood. Not one bit. But this old chap decided to move before the eraser and needle were pulled out.”

Cyril handed her Ernest’s initialed towels from his washbasin in the bedroom.

“No, not those expensive things!” Ernest said, shooing away Cyril’s offer. “Rags. Old things. Not those family heirlooms.” Evidently, Ernest was not in too much pain to protect his cherished belongings.

“That, I have,” I said. “I’ll go gather some.” I did not mind excusing myself from this spectacle, nor did I mind the idea of Ernest being indebted to me.

“I’ll come with you,” Gene said.

“Oh? Okay.”

In Eddy’s and my bedroom, Gene seemed absolutely distraught.

“I shouldn’t have come!” he stammered. “Why? Why do I do these things?” He began pacing back and forth in the small space between Eddy’s bed and mine. I didn’t have what Mother called a strong intuition, but it did not take much to see that Gene was troubled by more than just the ear piercing incident.

I told him to stay there while I ran the rags down the hall to Ernest’s.
When I returned, Gene was staring out the window. His back was to me, but I could
hear the remarkably fast tapping of his fingers on the panes. He could’ve been a piano player
with that speed. His tempo suited the third and most difficult movement of the piece I had
played last week with Nathaniel, Mozart’s Piano Sonata No. 12. We had not made it to the
third section though, and I smiled, remembering what had kept our hands from the keys.

Gene stopped tapping. The silence broke my reverie.

“Gene?”

“I cannot bear this anymore.”

“Bear what?” I asked.

When Gene didn’t respond, I went over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. I wanted
to see his wrists, but was at a loss for how to go about it discretely.

“Please, will you turn around so we can talk about this?”

“No,” Gene said curtly.

Maybe he was crying, and ashamed of it. Or maybe he feared my examination of his
wrists.

“You can talk to me, chap.” I patted his shoulder again. “Please let me help?”

Slowly, Gene turned to face me. For a moment, our bodies were parallel, but telephone-
pole Gene kept his gaze above me. Then, he lowered his eyes towards mine, and he did the
unthinkable.

He kissed me.

On the lips.

*Gene* kissed me on the lips.
There was only one thing that could haul most of our group out of bed at nine a.m. on a Saturday morning: the first track and field meet of the season. Ken was competing in the running broad-jump and 100-yard dash, and we’d all promised to come out and support the fella, even if we were feeling the effects of our Friday night intoxication. At least spring was upon us, and with it, a certain contagious buoyancy that kept us afloat. The snow had more or less melted over the past two weeks until only a few patches of sullied ice remained in clusters around campus. The weather had begun to warm so that it no longer bit quite so fiercely along one’s neck and ears, and the birds were returning in flocks.

That’s not to say it was balmy. The five of us—Ernest, Cyril, Eddy, Joe, and I—huddled and shivered under our woolen coats and scarves. The metal bleachers of Technology Field were chilly beneath our bottoms. On the field below, the Harvard track and field team was warming up, each on a different event, and we could see their puffs of breath as they hit the air. They all sported the same uniform: a crimson sleeveless top with a large H on the chest and tiny white shorts with crimson stripes down the sides.

“I can’t believe they’re all so scantily clothed down there,” Eddy said. He hunched his petite, curved body down even further. His cheeks were extra red this morning, his rouge augmented by the spring chill.

“Well, I brought something to warm us up,” Ernest replied. “Something that’s going to add some whoopee to our morning, gentlemen.”

I expected him to pull out a flask. Ernest and Ken could always be relied upon for a dose of giggle water. Hazel too, for that matter. But out of his satchel, Ernest pulled a pair of binoculars.
“Those tight little shorts are just too dear to pass up!” He put the large lenses to his eyes and moved his head around until he had clearly located something to focus on. “Oh la la! That one’s got a Tootsie Roll the size of Texas! And those giblets—they’re downright bulging!”

Joe snorted in amusement, probably at Ernest’s choice of the word ‘giblets,’ a slang term for one’s balls that was becoming quite dated.

“I want to see!” Eddy demanded, his voice cracking. “I claim the binoculars next!”

“Aren’t we whiny this morning?” I said, not able to hold myself back. Eddy was, after all, my roommate, and I felt we could joke without offense. But Eddy glared at me. He meant business, and apparently, I was not to get in his way.

Ernest, however, was not ready to share and continued broadcasting his thoughts as he looked through the binoculars. “Maybe during the hurdles I might secure a better angle up those shorts,” he said. “Now, let’s see how Princeton compares to Harvard, shall we?” He shifted his head to the other side of the field where the Princeton team was warming up.

“I think Princeton had its prom last night. That’s why ours got changed to this coming Friday,” Cyril said.

Joe spoke up for the first time. “I bet those lads down there had to miss their dance, what, with traveling all the way from New Jersey to here?”

Slowly and dramatically, Ernest lowered the binoculars. He took a huffy breath through his nose, and passed them to Eddy, who whipped them to his eyes with the speed of an archer.

“First, such an insightful comment that they would have to miss their prom, Mr. Manhattan.” Ernest rolled his eyes. “That much is obvious.”
For the dozenth time this semester I felt like smacking Ernest. What did he hold against Joe? But I looked to Joe and he appeared relatively unfazed. Joe just shrugged his shoulders and smiled at me from under thatslicked back auburn hair.

“Second, as I predicted, I’ll be attending the prom with Helen. The little minx has already fixed the whole affair. Therefore, I was thinking,” he paused for effect, “we should arrange for all of you to attend too. Helen has plenty of lady friends if you’re in need. And of course, I’ll share Helen. We can pencil her in onto all your dance cards.” Ernest looked to his left, then his right.

For a moment, nobody said anything. Then, to my surprise, Joe spoke up.

“My girlfriend is unable to leave Manhattan next weekend. I already checked.”

“Then take another girl,” Ernest snapped. “I already said Helen’s got plenty of lasses that’ll be begging to come with us.”

The expression behind his glasses revealed that Joe could scarcely fathom that possibility. “Take another girl?” he asked.

“That’s what I said.”

“Umm, I’m not, well—I’m not so sure about that.”

Ernest looked away from Joe in disgust. He pulled at the hoop in his ear in annoyance. I noticed it was still a bit red, even almost two weeks later. But it had survived, uninfected, thanks to Hazel I’m sure.

“And the rest of you?”

“I’m sorry, Ernest,” Cyril said. “But Ken and I were just speaking last night about holding our own dance of sorts, one antithetical to Harvard’s traditional one. You see, we knew Eddy here would want to come in a dress, I want to invite Harry, and Ken wants to hold a party in our room for once.”
“That’s a marvelous idea, darling! Though my room would be the better choice. But all this can wait till the following weekend.”

“I’m afraid it cannot,” Cyril said gently. “Harry thinks the new bar in the basement of Café Dreyfus will open the following weekend. Most assuredly that is not an event we want to miss. Imagine, our very own speakeasy!”

“We’ll discuss this later,” Ernest said bitterly. “Eddy, give me my binoculars. Now!”

By the start of Ken’s first event, the running broad-jump, Ernest was temporarily willing to talk to us again. He even deigned to share his binoculars once more. I took a turn ogling all the fine athletes that were jumping from the white chalked line into the pile of dirt. I winced each time one landed. Given that they were leaping with all their strength, often over twenty feet, and then landing smack on their bottoms, I couldn’t help but think how much that had to hurt. I resolved to ask Ken if the sand caused a burn or got lodged in uncomfortable crevices. Those shorts were, after all, très miniscule. I realized it was amusingly telling that I was focusing on the sand and the shorts. I had never been much of an athlete, and my current approach to the track meet seemed to confirm that much.

As I scanned the field, I wondered if Nathaniel would care that I was looking at Harvard’s fittest men through binoculars. This reminded me that I had not yet told him about another Harvard student: Gene. Nor, in fact, had I told Gene about Nathaniel, though with Gene’s uncanny ability to keep tabs on everyone, there was every possibility that he already knew. What do you do when one of your closest friends, a fragile one at that, kisses you and you don’t return the sentiments? What do you say? How do you retain the friendship? Do you have to tell your current love that it happened? These were the questions that had plagued me all week following the Monday night episode with Gene. I had a study date with Nathaniel
this afternoon and knew it was time to chat with him about the matter. The thought was the sharpest of killjoys.

I could not dwell long in my woes, however, for Ken approached the white line. He squatted into a running stance. His pale blue eyes were utterly focused, his muscular face and neck as stern as a war general’s. The judge knelt down by the sand plot, ready to measure the jump. He gave the go ahead. Ken ran, swung his arms, catapulted himself forward, then—\textit{wham}!—that uncomfortable looking landing on his bottom.

The judge bent down over the sand, then stood up and announced, “Twenty-three feet and one inch! Mr. Kenneth Day, the current lead!”

We all shot off the bleachers and roared.

“That’s my Kenny Boy! \textit{Wow-ow-owwww!” Ernest howled.}

Below us, Ken pummeled his fist into the air. He smacked the big H on his chest a few times, as if to say to the crowd, “I am Harvard! \textit{This is Harvard! Harvard always wins!” He jogged over to his teammates and shook their hands. His coach threw a letterman jacket over Ken, and another athlete, who looked like the team captain, slapped Ken’s buttocks.

Cyril started up a chant: “That’s our Day! That’s our Day! That’s our Day!”

I put down the binoculars and joined in. As I yelled, I looked not down at the field, but at our group of fellas: at Eddy, who had hopped up on the bleachers to shout from a higher perch; at Cyril, who had just begun a little victory dance; at Joe, who held his glasses to his face as he cheered; and at Ernest, who was rallying the Harvard students around us. I felt grateful—even giddy—for this crazy assortment of friends.

Ernest’s efforts were successful. Dozens of Harvard students stood up to join the ruckus. The bleachers burst into life: “That’s our Day! That’s our Day! That’s our Day!”

There’s nothing quite like school spirit, nothing quite like being a small part of something much larger, to make one feel like he’s living life to the fullest.
I shouted all the louder.

Some time later, Nathaniel and I sat Indian-style on the rug of his sitting room, our legs tucked under his wooden coffee table. We had spread our school books dutifully on the surface, but rather than study, I spent half an hour recounting the surprising twist of events that had marked the end of the track and field meet. Ken had been leading in the running broad-jump until the eleventh hour, when a junior named Edward Orval Gourdin, a Negro from Florida, one of the few at Harvard, made a jump that was almost a foot-and-a-half past Ken’s. The crowd was shocked; scores were usually a matter of inches, not feet. Moreover, Gourdin had broken Harvard’s record and even approached Olympic levels. This we learned from the students next to us who were far more acquainted with field events and were trying to convey to us the gravity of what we had just seen. I wondered how the newspapers would cover the event. Would Gourdin make the front page of *The Crimson*? I sincerely hoped he received due credit. It had been, without a doubt, a spectacular jump to watch. In the end, Ken had taken second in the broad-jump. We were still right pleased about this; he was, after all, only a sophomore and still had two more years to prove himself.

Nathaniel seemed to have enjoyed my retelling of the track event, but now gestured toward his books. “Shall we study, as planned?”

“Yes, certainly.” My response belied the fact that I did not want to stop talking with Nathaniel at all. Rather, I wished to converse with him for hours. There was also the matter of what I needed to tell him—tell him about Gene. I tried to commence with my French reading, but found myself feeling rather distracted and burdened by this matter. When and how was I going to bring up Gene? Was Nathaniel going to be mad? It was not like it was my fault. This last thought did not reassure me though, for it seemed impossible to predict how Nathaniel
would take the news. I could not help but remember his disgusted reaction to Gene’s vomit on my dress that first night of Prohibition.

My eyes wandered from my French book to Nathaniel’s smooth, olive face. I loved how his eyelids were a darker shade of brown than the rest of his face. I loved how his cheeks, round like a chipmunk’s, added a softness to his jaw. In contrast to my distraction, Nathaniel seemed focused and efficient. He did not look up at me.

I told myself to just do it now. To start talking. To find a way to broach the matter. It would only become more difficult.

“What are you working on?” I asked him.

“Research for a medical paper I need to write.”

“On what topic? Or are you not going to tell me,” I joked, “like you did not for our Romanticism compositions?”

“Correct, I am not. But that’s because I do not, as of yet, have a true topic. I keep reading references to a book by one Havelock Ellis, a scholar who evidently wrote about sexual inversion, or homosexuality, from a medical stance. I’m trying to see what more I can find about him and the topic in all these books.”

Nathaniel returned to his reading, and thus my chance of talking disappeared.

I tried to recommence with deciphering my French novel, but apparently, nervousness only made my French that much more deplorable. What did heurter mean again? Or néfaste? Or effroyable?

I looked up at Nathaniel de nouveau—at least I had mastered that French phrase—and watched his chest rise and fall slowly with each breath. I felt a sudden desire to play the piano and turned to look at that stunning Steinway tucked in the cozy nook off to my right.

“You have something to tell me,” Nathaniel said without looking up from his reading.

My head snapped back to him. How did he know? Was I that much of an open book?
“You sound like my mother,” I said.

“It’s your endearing innocence, Keith. Innocence has a natural transparency. It’s not a great concealer.”

He finished jotting down a note, then raised his chin. Those coffee-brown eyes splashed over me and then locked intensely on mine.

“Now, out with it.”

My stomach—and loins, for that matter—lurched. He was so very, very attractive. I sighed.


Nathaniel blinked a few times, then said, “Gene was the one you were dancing close with at the Prohibition Party.”

No, no, no! I did not want him interpreting it like that.

Perhaps it had been a blunder to say it so shortly, to not preface the reveal with more of a story. Oh, goddamn, why was I never any good at these types of encounters?

“No, no… I mean, yes, he was the one that was dancing with me, but no, it’s not like that, let me explain. He was the one to ask me to dance, and he was the one to follow me back to my room the other night. And he kissed me, I swear by it.”

“And, what did you do?” There was no emotion in his voice. If I was an open book, he, at times, was a closed one.

“I pushed him away.”

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow, waiting for more.

“Then I told him… well, I told him I just couldn’t do that.”

Nathaniel let out a small smile combined with what sounded like a scoff. “Oh really, is that what you said?”
It really was what I had said. As I had pushed Gene’s chest away, I had tried to come up with something that sounded gentle. Gene was so fragile, vulnerable. I had feared he could not take the blow. It had seemed too harsh, too personal, to state that I didn’t want to kiss him, even if that was the truth. So the first thing that had come to mind was that I couldn’t. That for some reason, I just couldn’t. Gene’s reaction had been one of distant shock. Looking back now, I believe it was not so much shock at what I had said, but at what he had done.

Eventually, something had called Gene back down to earth, and he’d snapped, “This did not happen.” He’d turned face and marched out my door. When I’d gone back to Ernest’s party, Gene had not been there. As of yet, I had not had the courage to face Gene, and likewise, he had not had the courage to face me, or our group.

“Yes,” I said. “That is what I told him. I haven’t seen him since. I’m so sorry, Nathaniel. I—”

“There’s no need to be sorry,” he interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

“Young men habitually neck with a great number of people in short periods of time. It happened all the time at Exeter, my boarding school. And it’s not as if we had established the nature of our relationship.”

My mouth gaped open. His response was not at all what I had expected. Pas de tout. Was he saying he didn’t care if Gene kissed me? That he himself was necking with other fellas? I felt wounded. The thought of Nathaniel kissing ‘a great number’ of young men, especially passionately and purposefully—not like the mistaken and platonic kiss that I had endured with Gene—caused me to run through a gamut of emotions. Jealousy. Outrage. Possessiveness. Insecurity.

Nathaniel reached across the table and pushed my chin gently back up. He left his hand there and lightly touched my neck. “Keith, talk to me.”
It took me a moment to find my words again. “I, umm… I guess I didn’t expect this reaction.”

“What were you expecting?” He continued caressing my neck.

“That you’d be upset.”

“But I’m not upset, so is that not the better reaction?”

“I suppose. But it feels… well, as if you don’t care about us.”

“That’s not at all what I said.”

Nathaniel’s lack of response was starting to vex me. I pushed his hand from my neck.

“What do you mean then? And why don’t you care about Gene?” I did not conceal the bitterness in my voice. I waited for Nathaniel to respond, but he just nodded at me encouragingly, perhaps knowing I had more to let out. “Okay, and I’d like to know if you have been kissing other fellas and how you feel about us and what the hell we’re doing together, because this is killing me.”

There. I’d said it.

Nathaniel smiled, which he always seemed to do at what felt to me like the most inopportune moments.

“I have no problem answering those questions. You needed only to ask. To address your first concern, and perhaps your second too, what I meant was that it seems if I approach the situation with logic and sensibility, I have no basis from which to be upset if you kissed Gene—”

“He kissed me. Please believe me when I say I found no pleasure in it and stopped it immediately. This was not my doing.”

“Fair enough. But regardless, without first establishing and communicating our needs and expectations, there are no grounds for me to extract fidelity.”
It all sounded so cold and clinical. He apparently had the doctorly skill of detachment down pat.

“Third, I have not kissed any other fellas since you and I first kissed. And the last concern?—Oh, you and I. Well, I feel happier than I’ve felt in a long time. I feel very attracted to you. I can’t say precisely what we are. This is, after all, the first time I’ve ever been with a chap for this long with so little sexual return.”

I must have given off a hurt look, and Nathaniel must have sensed that I was about to interject, for he put his hand up to shush me.

“I mean that in a complimentary manner, Keith. I enjoy being with you. It feels as if we are building something here, and while at times it’s difficult to restrict myself to the lips and the outer garments, I can wait.”

“So it can be just the two of us, together?”

“Yes. And since I know you’ll over-think the matter, let us make it official. I, Nathaniel Stein Wolff, hereby ask Keith Smerage to be my beau. What say he?”

I smiled, beyond relieved that this was happening. “Keith Smerage replies in the affirmative.”

There ensued an awkward silence between us. But it felt, surprisingly, like a natural awkwardness, as if this were how it should be. I recalled being pressured to court Emma during my high school years in Topsfield. The awkwardness had been of an entirely different nature. How disagreeable it had been! I could only liken it to feeling forever like one’s wearing a swimming costume to a formal dinner party. And then Emma had tried to kiss me one day, in our barn. Had begged me to lie down in the hay with her. Nothing had felt less desirous to me. I’d said no, to be sure, and she’d cried that my denial had shamed her more than I could imagine. She’d never spoken to me again. Mother had begged to know what rift had come between us, but it was one of the few things I had not shared with her back then.
Yes, I had stopped anything physical from occurring with Emma, but I did not believe I was doing the same now. I thought about what Nathaniel had said about our slow sexual progress. It did not match how I constantly thought about what more petting with him would be like. Or how, to the image of his body on top of mine, I rubbed my parts. Rubbed them at night, in the shower, wherever possible. Rubbed them with a frequency that surely some doctors would have discouraged, since many claimed that too much self-masturbation decreased vitality. Not that that opinion stopped many of us young men.

*If you want it, you must go for it Keith.*

I could neither muster a confident tone nor maintain eye contact with Nathaniel, but I eventually succeeded in getting the words out, and felt both proud and a bit reckless because of it. “You know, I have not been holding you back from more. From more, ummm, petting that is.”

“Oh? I guess I sensed that you weren’t ready yet.”

I could feel the tips of my ears begin to redden. How had I sent him the wrong signals?

“I think it’s more a matter of awkwardness than readiness.”

“So you’re not all innocence?”

I snapped my head up. Nathaniel was grinning. He was mocking me.

“So what should we start with?” He raised both eyebrows and nodded my way, daring me.

I could not believe we were talking about this. And in this manner, in daylight, with a pile of French and medical books in front of us. I was probably blushing more than the crimson on Nathaniel’s Harvard banner, but I willed the nerves in my stomach to maintain his intense stare.

“Umm, something with our hands…?” I mumbled.

“To ourselves or to each other?”
Jesus! I couldn’t believe he just asked that. Deep breath, Keith. Play along, I told myself. I could do this.

“To each other.”

“Now or later?”

“Umm, now.”

“Here or somewhere else?”

“Here.”

“Agreed then.”

Nathaniel seemed to have finished his interrogation. For several moments we were quiet. Nathaniel continued to stay seated on the other side of the coffee table. Was I supposed to do something?

Finally, Nathaniel said, “I believe you have not yet seen my bedroom.”

At this, my heart began beating up in my throat, a hummingbird lodged in my jugular. This was going to happen. And happen now. My mind had known that minutes ago, but now my body realized it too.

“Oh, I said. I endeavored to match his confident, regal tone, “I’d be most pleased if you could present it to me, fine sir.”

Nathaniel stood up and put out his hand. “This way, Mr. Smerage.”

We stood less than one foot from each other, pants and drawers already on the floor. Our dress shirts, with nothing tucking them in, now hung freely down our legs. They covered much of us.

Nathaniel stepped closer. Our noses nearly touched.
I should have been expecting it. We had, after all, explicitly talked about what was going to happen. Nonetheless, I was startled when he put his hand lightly on the bare skin of my inner thigh.

Up he moved it. Slowly. Ascending a few inches, then tantalizing descending one. Ascending, then descending. I could feel goose pimples rising on my legs.

With his other hand, Nathaniel took hold of the back of my neck and pulled me close. As he kissed me, his lower hand ascended up to my crotch, now screaming in anticipation. I could barely focus on the kiss. It was the first time someone had touched me on bare skin, not just over clothing. And to say the experience was new and explosive and divine would be the understatement of the century.

I felt Nathaniel’s hand leave the back of my neck. He took my own hand and put it on his member.

I gasped. If I had been aroused before, I was now doubly so.

As I began to touch him, I found it hard to pay attention to both kissing and moving my own hand, not to mention what Nathaniel was doing to me; it was like three intensely domineering sensations competing to win me over. The effect was inebriating, though it also caused much fumbling on my part.

We moved to the bed. We took off each other’s shirts. I nearly ripped off one of Nathaniel’s buttons in the process. Nathaniel reached down to continue, but I put my hand on his chest. I had to take a moment to admire him—all of him. Yes, I’d caught glimpses of him the night of the Questions and Commands game, but not like this. Not a naked, swarthy young god, reposed on his elbow, smiling at me, waiting for me. For me. I found myself reaching out to touch his hip. There was something about how his soft belly transitioned into his legs that seemed scandalously intimate to me.
When my eyes had had their fill, we proceeded. Nathaniel urged me on in whispers. I tried hard to not doubt myself. And, as the sunny rays from the outside world landed on us through the small part in the curtains, we gave in wholly to our mutual desires.

Afterward, our sweat dried and became chilly, so we tucked ourselves under Nathaniel’s half dozen layers of fine linens and shivered and cuddled and dozed and chatted.

“It’s downright amazing how efficient we’ve been,” I mumbled from the pillow. “We should study together all the time.”

“Agreed,” Nathaniel said sleepily.

The grandfather clock in the hall chimed four, and I noticed that the light in Nathaniel’s room was fading. I could now barely make out his elaborately carved armoire, the family photos of his mother, father, and sister, the oil paintings with their gilded frames. I almost laughed as I realized that we had this mansion of a room at our disposal, that we could meet like this and touch each other without a care in the world. No one watching our comings-and-goings. No parents asking questions. The liberty to make whatever choices we desired. Oh, college! Yet another reason I was grateful to be here.

As I thought that, my mind jumped to Gene. I willed it not to, but I was unsuccessful. Here I was, in a state of bliss, and where was he? Did he have fresh wounds on his wrists? Did he hate me? Himself? All of us?

“Nathaniel?”

“Mmm,” he murmured.

“I still need to try to be friends with Gene.”

“Of course, my horse.”

“Did you just say ‘Of course, my horse’?”

“Indeed.”
I laughed. It appeared that Nathaniel became more loopy and informal after sexual acts. I could hardly wait to discover more hidden quirks.

“Indeed,” Nathaniel repeated in a half-conscious whisper. I wrapped my arms around him, and again we slipped into a light slumber.

In the darkness, I made my way to Gene’s dormitory, a trip I seemed to be making with some regularity these days. The faint smell of Nathaniel still lingered on me, and—questions of hygiene aside—I felt the desire to never wash my hands.

I first knocked at Gene’s door, then banged, then shouted. These efforts produced no answer. I thought about finding the dorm proctor to see if he knew anything about Gene, but then recalled that the dental lab was open till eight on Saturdays. It seemed as good a place as any to start. I had been there once before last semester when Gene had needed to pick something up, so I knew the location on the east side of campus.

As I crossed the Yard for a second time this evening, I tried to plan out what I would say, but such an awkward conversation seemed impossible to plan for. Moreover, my mind had not fully departed Nathaniel’s bedroom. Like a reel of film, I rewound the scene and started it anew, reliving the moment, analyzing it for new details I had not caught before.

Twenty minutes later, I reached Westchester Hall and made my way up to the third floor. Only one door shed light on the long black hallway. I walked up to it and peered in through the glass. It was indeed Gene. He was in there alone, sitting at a lab table with his back turned partially towards me. The blue and orange flame of a Bunsen burner shot up resolutely to his right. I reached for the doorknob, but something stopped me. I was not sure what. I stood there and continued to watch.
Gene inserted the tip of a small metal instrument into the flame. He twisted it slowly. He moved his other hand closer to the Bunsen burner and laid it flat on the table. His wrist was facing upwards.

Before I could realize what was about to happen, before I could notice that there were already three small marks on his skin, before I could barge in and stop him, Gene pulled the instrument out of the flame and pushed the hot metal tip into his thin, pale wrist.

My first instinct was to smack at the window with my hand. Anything to get Gene’s attention. He whirled around, but did not stand up and did not drop the instrument. I fumbled with the brass knob and pushed the door open.

“Gene!”

He did not speak. Rather, he turned away from me. He put the metal piece down. He switched off the Bunsen burner. His movements were slow, gentle, methodical. I think that’s what shocked me the most—how systematic it all seemed. All the electric lights were on in the room. Everything was orderly and in its place. Gene even appeared to have his homework open next to him. This was a clean and organized act, not a haphazard impulse committed in the dark of his bedroom, which must have been how I’d been imagining it.

Still in shock, not planning out my words, I said, “Jesus, Gene—”

“I don’t need to hear it,” he interjected.

“Okay, okay,” I said. He was right. But shit. What to do? What to say? “Umm, shouldn’t we clean that? Bandage it? Umm, bring you to the doctor?”

“No! Leave it.” Gene whipped his wrist away.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Think. I pulled up a chair next to Gene. “We should talk, as in, candidly talk.” My intent was to try to avoid Gene’s previous denial and to bring him to a point where we could bandage his wound.
He neither agreed nor disagreed. He just stared at the black surface of the lab table, tapping it with his unmarred hand. He cradled the other in his lap.

I looked around at the dozen tables bolted in rows to the floor, the corked beakers of chemicals, the sets of fake teeth, the sharp metal equipment looming in the shadows of the wooden shelves. What was Gene doing here? Literally, I knew the answer, yes, but at a deeper level, I did not. I felt at a loss for words, felt unnerved by the scientific devices around me, felt convinced that Gene had to possess far deeper emotions than I’d ever experienced, for this all seemed so alien to me. My naivety and idealism felt thrown into sharp relief against these darker and more complex forces, and I felt both foolish and self-conscious because of it. What I wouldn’t have given at a moment like this to have had Cyril’s gift for supporting his friends. Even Eddy would have been better at this than I. Mother also came to mind. She had always made me speak at length about my childhood woes, made me elaborate on every detail so that all that was weighing on me came up and out. Perhaps her goal had been for it to stay out.

Then the analogy struck me: goddamn, it was like trying to make someone upchuck so they would feel better when they were painfully drunk.

Gene’s issue seemed of an entirely different breed, but I figured I’d at least give it a go. I recalled the six round burns I had seen in the formal dining hall over a month ago now. The two even rows of three had looked like the six that appears on dice. There had to be a reason for that.

“So, umm, you usually make six burns?”

Gene snapped his head my way. My question had clearly surprised him. Several moments ticked by, and just when I thought Gene was not going to respond, he said, “Yes, six.”
I gave him time to elaborate, but when he did not, I tentatively tried again. “Umm, why six?”

Once more, that long pause, but eventually, in a hesitant whisper, Gene said, “I’m not sure exactly, but, I guess, well, I do know there’s something soothing in the even number. And in doing them in two even rows.”

“Does it make you feel better?”

“Physically? No, of course not.” He sounded bitter, but it did not feel directed towards me. “Emotionally though—I suppose so. I think it provides a sense of control, however convoluted that might sound.”

He looked at me to see my reaction.

I nodded, trying to look as if that sounded natural and rational, even if to my ears it did not.

“I’ve never told anyone this.”

As he said that, my stomach muscles clenched together like one of the sets of teeth on the shelf. No. This could not turn down the route of him fancying me more or anything of that nature. Damn, was I going to have to tell him about Nathaniel? Not now, please not now, I begged.

I glossed over his comment and asked him more questions. Eventually, his responses got longer and more willing. He talked about how this was the first year he’d ever hurt himself. That he’d contemplated the notion in high school, even sat with a knife a few times, but had never done it. Gene spoke of how it was such an easy thing to take charge of, far easier than controlling one’s regrets or fears or desires. He said in college there was no one watching him, so it was easier to assert control. At home, he’d feared his parents seeing his wrists. That fear had outweighed the desire to hurt himself. They were conservative Falls
River, Massachusetts folks, just like Cyril’s. The two came from the same town, though they’d not known each other well growing up.

I latched on to his comment about desires, for Gene was yet again speaking of his homosexuality indirectly. “Gene, why do you have to control your desires? Chaps of our type are everywhere. Surely it’s natural.”

“Not to many people.”

“Yes, I’ll allow that. There are some segments of society who do not yet agree with it, but really and truly we must be headed in that direction for it is everywhere. Plus, it’s 1920, the start of a new decade, and women are getting the right to vote and shedding their corsets, surely we’ll have rights soon too.” Gene still looked so sad and distant. I decided to try and bring some humor to the conversation. I cleared my throat and adopted a deep voice. “Down with the Victorian era!” I said, pounding the table with my fist. He did not smile.

I groaned inwardly; this was not working. I’d have to try a new tact.

“Please, Gene. Even if I’m wrong in that regard, you’re at Harvard right now, homosexual capital of all the colleges in America. Here is the most free possible place to be who you are. You can act on it. That much should be clear. And perhaps you’ll feel better. Maybe you’ll see it’s not as unnatural and sinful as you’re making yourself feel.”

A new emotion passed through Gene’s small mousey eyes.

Horsefeathers! Did I just insinuate that he could and should act on his desires with me? I had to say it now. I just had to. Besides, he probably already knew.

“Gene? Since you spoke candidly, I should too.” He looked at me expectantly. “I’m, uhh, seeing Nathaniel, Nathaniel Wolff.”

I could see the shock spread itself across Gene’s red, pimple-flecked face. Gene, who usually knew everyone’s whereabouts and goings-on. Gene, who usually tracked us like a
hawk. This very same Gene had apparently failed to notice—or, perhaps more accurately, had not wanted to notice—what Cyril and Eddy, and even a few others, had already figured out.

“I’m sorry. And, umm, it’s nothing against you, to be sure. It just, uh, happened with Nathaniel first.”

That was not entirely true. Even if things had not progressed as they had with Nathaniel, I was almost certain I would not have found myself attracted to Gene. But I was hoping my white lie would soften the blow.

“Gene, we’ll find you somebody,” I continued.

“It’s not that simple,” he said quietly.

He was probably right, but I was not sure what else to say or do.

“Fair,” I said. “But can’t you at least return to our group? We miss you, and we could do you some good too, you know, keep you out of this lab. Moreover, fine sir, I need your help in the epic battle against Ernest’s ego.”

Finally, Gene laughed. I was glad of it, for I could hardly take more of his heaviness and more of my blundering. I asked Gene where some gauze was, and together we cleaned and wrapped his wound. The four burn marks were still oozing, and he actually seemed grateful for the help in caring for them. I tried my best to quell my nausea and play the role of supportive friend.

“What should we do for the rest of the night?” I asked.

Again, Gene looked surprised, as if me wanting to spend time with him was a novelty and privilege he did not deserve.

“Well, I thought you’d want to be with the other Dramatic Club and cast members tonight, like Cyril, and—Nathaniel.”

“What do you mean?”

“With the cast list being posted and all, I assumed—”
“The cast list is posted?” Gene was not even involved in theater, but yet again he knew
and followed its workings.

Wait, he just said I’d want to be with the others tonight. Did that mean I’d received a
part?

“Gene. Please tell me you know who was cast in which parts.”

“I do.”

“And?” I ventured.

“You were cast as Damian.” He said it so matter-of-factly. “Cyril as Trino, Stanley
Gilkey as Clerk, and since I did not know the other people, I did not commit them to
memory. So, as I just said, you’ll be gathering with them tonight, I’m sure.”

I’d received a part in *The Governor’s Wife*. I’d received a part. Despite everything that
had happened at the start of the semester, I’d received a part. I could scarcely believe it.

“Thanks, Gene.”

“Have fun tonight.” He said it as if the conversation were over. As if I’d be leaving.

I cannot deny that my first desire was to run out and share the news with Nathaniel.
That I momentarily resented Gene. His issues. This need to take care of him. But I felt
ashamed to even think such a thought, let alone act upon it. I knew Nathaniel would still be
there later and felt a rush of motivation even thinking about him. About us.

“No, Gene, it’s you and I tonight!” I said. “We must celebrate my part in the play and
your embracing of college life. How shall we do it?”

“A picture?” he asked.

I almost laughed. Such a conservative, un-celebratory choice for a Saturday. A motion
picture would be in a theater, not even part of a Smoker this time, since the next one was
months away. It would also be silent and solitary. But I did not want to offend Gene. The
least I could do was acquiesce and help him get out, in whatever manner that meant for him.
I looked at my watch. We could still catch one in town if we hurried.

“Of course,” I said.

With that precision that was beginning to scare me, Gene carefully tucked away all the tools, burners, and books. He pushed in his chair, making sure to perfectly align it parallel to the edge of the table. Then he placed his bag on his shoulder.

Together, we left the dental lab and made our way out onto Harvard Yard.

For the moment, we’d staved off Gene’s hurt.

But I’d be lying if I said my efforts had been anything more than temporary.
I had meant to write Mother immediately after hearing that I’d been cast as Damian, but already five whole days had passed. There’d been our first rehearsal in the theater, my French composition, a visit to Hazel, and the vast fields of Ralph Waldo Emerson to plow through. We had transitioned from the British romantics to the American ones in Dean Greenough’s class this week, and I had to admit that Emerson, while inspiring, was a demanding and heady start to our continent’s literature. I had hundreds more pages to read, but it seemed improbable that I’d get much work done on a Friday at four o’clock, especially with our all-boys prom just a few hours hence. So I decided to write Mother. She’d start fretting if too many more days progressed.

After asking questions about home and providing the usual updates, I shared with Mother my feelings about my role in the play.

Garnering a part in The Governor’s Wife has imbued me with a spirit of confidence, a sense of equality, a ‘terra-firma’ for future endeavor, as well as inspiration. You know well that a lack of confidence is, or has been, my stumbling block hitherto, but I intend to make things different now.

Unlike Cyril’s parents, I knew Mother would be proud of this news. Perhaps she might even make it down to Cambridge for one of my performances, if Father was in a state to be left, that is.

I found myself wanting to write about Nathaniel. How could I not share such a meaningful part of my life with Mother? I twiddled the pen in my hand and for a good moment considered it. Mother was a saint. Mother would still love me, of that I felt sure. So why not? I could start by just hinting at it, fall back on that good old indirect speech and the safety of vagueness. But something made me hesitate. I decided to wait to tell Mother. This
saddened me, a feeling I did not want to harbor for long. I thus committed to trying to tell her eventually. I was not going to lie about this—about me—forever.

I put pen to paper again and signed off in my wonted fashion:

_Toujours,

Moi

As I fished for an envelope in my desk drawer, I was startled by the sound of the door rattling open behind me. I whipped around.

Eddy.

“First death from Prohibition!” He hobbled over to my desk and unfolded a newspaper on top of my letter. “The cops killed a man yesterday when they raided a speakeasy in Manhattan, off Broadway. Three bullets in the back as he fled!”

Despite its grim content, Eddy narrated the event like a schoolboy in possession of a tasty morsel of gossip. His red-petaled cheeks glowed with both rouge and excitement.

“It’s the first known death since the enactment of the Volstead Act. And look at that photograph!”

The black and white picture showed the inside of the speakeasy. A whole wall, roped off by the police, was filled with bottles. There was a grand piano. Fancy barstools. A chandelier. I had to admit, dangerous police raid aside, it made me rather excited for the opening of the bar in the basement of Café Dreyfus in just one week’s time.

I read the article. The death had occurred yesterday, March 11. That was less than two months since that day in January when all this had begun. The country, and its secret enclaves, had lasted only two months, two short months before the start of violence and death.

“May I have the photograph?”
“Another clipping for your panorama?”

“Yes.”

“Then oui. But don’t cut from the fashion or financial sections. I have yet to read those and both are musts, my dearie.”

I laughed. Those two sections neatly summed up Eddy: an eccentric economics major with a penchant for both skirts and stocks.

I cut out the photograph and tacked it at the tail end of my long snake of clippings.

“What are your plans before the dance tonight?” Eddy asked.

“Well, I have to finish addressing this letter to my mother—”

“Applesauce!” Eddy groaned.

“Pardon?”

“I have to write my mother and father too.”

I had not met Eddy’s parents, as I had Cyril’s bug-eyed Wilcox clan, Ken’s Victorian-laced aunt and uncle, and Ernest’s politician father. But from what I’d heard from Eddy, they were a decent couple, sweet and loving, but rather too boring for Eddy’s liking. His father ran a small grocery store in Waterbury, Connecticut, and because he was such a poor businessman, the store was slowly failing. As regards his mother, Eddy maintained that all she did was knit—knit so much that by now she must have knitted a scarf long enough to bridge the Atlantic. Eddy felt he possessed very little in common with them.

“What do I get in return?”

“My undying appreciation for your gift of correspondence.”

“Umm, no.”

“Well, seeing as how a ten year old could tie a tie better than you, I’ll ensure you’re all dapper tonight for your dance partner, Na-than-iel.”
Eddy had a point.

“Fair enough. But you write. I’ll dictate.”

“Deal.”

While it felt a bit odd to be at an on-campus party anywhere other than Perkins 28, I found myself welcoming the change. Ken and Cyril’s sitting room was not Ernest’s, nor were their decorations as swanky, but they had a flare that was distinctly their own, or, I should say, distinctly Cyril’s. I doubt Ken had much to do with the decorating. The furniture had been pushed to the walls. The chairs, recliner, and couch organized into small seating areas for onlookers. The rugs had been rolled up, revealing shiny wood floors underneath that beckoned us to dance. Cyril’s theater bills still dangled in front of the floral wallpaper, adding a Broadway feel to the party. From the ceiling, there hung two dozen triangular flags with the Harvard H, and if one reached his hand up, he could run his fingers along the tips of the flags.

Perhaps most notably, Cyril had closed his beloved curtains and pinned homemade rectangular dance cards to the velvety cloth. It reminded me of a towering bingo grid. Each dance card had a hand-drawn crimson H at the top, and I could only speculate just how excited Cyril had been to immerse himself in crafts, an activity outlawed by the Wilcoxes.

There were so many Hs around us, so much crimson, that I could almost hear the sitting room whisper, “This too is a Harvard event. This too is a prom.” Maybe that had been Cyril’s intent.

Over the next quarter of an hour, myriad young men filtered in: the chaps from our small group, the Harvard tutor Henry Saxton, Harry, friends of Harry’s, Ned Courtney and other waiters from Café Dreyfus, and a few sailors in full regalia. Nathaniel had warned me he’d be a hair late, but since we had already agreed to be dates, I did not allow myself to become concerned.
In the meantime, I chatted with Gene and Ken. Gene seemed as refreshed and happy as I’d seen him in a long time. It was as if he’d vacationed at the seaside and was now most pleased to return home and catch up on the gossip.

“I heard Ernest had a hissy fit when he found out you and Cyril were continuing the dance party without him,” said Gene, ever the informant. Ernest was indeed off at the official prom with his as-good-as-fiancée Helen. “And is it true that he broke one of his antiques in rage?”

“Yes, and you know how he is about his antiques,” Ken said with a marked bite in his voice.

I’d never seen Ernest lose his cool. Ever. I could not help wishing I’d been there.

“And if he finds out what I, let’s say, borrowed, from his room, he’ll break twenty more.” Ken pointed to the record player and stack of records in the corner. It was Ernest’s new Victorola gramophone with its sizable, flower-like brass horn.

“Ken!” Gene said.

Ken shrugged innocently, a smug grin on his face, and left us to go replenish his drink.

Was Ken purposefully trying to incite Ernest? Or had he just wanted high-quality music for our prom?

The door opened and there, at last, was Nathaniel. Gene fled my side before I could encourage him to stay. He clearly wanted no part of Nathaniel’s and my greeting. In tailcoat and top hat, Nathaniel was dressed, as always, to meet the Queen. I felt predictably self-conscious in my shabby clothes and was glad Eddy had put some finishing touches on my rather drab outfit. He’d also made me walk through a mist of my Prelude cologne. “It’s more subtle and effective than squirting it directly on your skin,” Eddy had said.
Oddly, Nathaniel had a book in his hand, which he put down on top of Ken and Cyril’s side table before coming over to me.

“Love the touch of crimson, Mr. Smerage.” I instinctively touched the silk scarf in my upper pocket. *Merci, Eddy.* He’d been the one to tuck it there.

Nathaniel reached down and laced his fingers through mine. In the cupped space between our hands, he ran a lone finger along my palm.

I felt immediate stirrings below my belt. I had to remind myself to keep my eyes open, to breathe with regularity, to ignore what felt like the rays of five hundred suns burning through my body, crisping my ears, blushing my cheeks.

It appeared that those hours spent in Nathaniel’s bedroom last week had amplified my desire ten fold. My mind no longer confined itself to infantile fantasies and imagined sexual encounters. It now possessed real images to associate with desire, a visceral awareness of what *had* been and what *could* be. I imagined rushing Nathaniel to a stall in the hallway bathroom, pushing him against the wall, even skipping the dance all together. Before I could act so brashly on the desire of my loins, however, Cyril began speaking. And as quickly as such arousal could come on, so too could it fade.

“Good evening fine fellows! Mr. Day and I welcome you to our humble abode and to Harvard’s first ever All-Male Prom.”

We gave a hearty round of applause.

Cyril was wearing his favorite black fedora with its white silk ribbon. He took it off, brought it to his waist, and gave a bow. He seemed in his element.

“Since I believe everyone invited is now in attendance, we will proceed to filling out our dance cards. There is one for each of you.”

This was new. At the dances I’d attended in high school, and one at Tufts, only the women were given dance cards.
“Many of you arrived with dates, but I know not everyone did. Those with dates, please find your handsome beau and stand next to him so we can pair off our lovely bachelors.”

There was some shuffling around as the room divided into pairs. I noticed the two sailors stayed together, as did Harry’s two friends, who were already holding hands and cozying up. Only Joe, Gene, Ken, Stanley, and two waiters from the Café remained.

“An even number—swell!” Cyril said of the unpaired guests. “Okay, Joe and Gene together, Ken and Stanley, and Bobby and Howard.”

I had not known the names of the two waiters before this, but it made sense that Cyril did, as he most certainly spent more time at Harry’s café than I.

“Now, just like our brethren at the official Harvard dance tonight, we will follow the tradition of dancing our first and last dances with our dates. There will be ten dances total, so the middle eight will be with other attendees. You’ll find the pencils over there next to the drinks. Lastly, please take care unpinning the cards—these curtains are my joie de vivre!”

As I went to fetch a pencil, I noticed Ken and Cyril had made no efforts to conceal the alcohol. It seemed that at this point in the semester we were done with hanging the hooch out the window.

I claimed a dance card and immediately penciled Nathaniel Wolff onto my first and tenth lines. Cyril put on some background music and encouraged us to mingle on the dance floor. He and Stanley were the first two to request dances with me. After writing them down on the second and third lines, I wondered whether I should ask Gene for a dance. What would aggravate his vulnerabilities? Would giving him attention make it better or worse? I guessed that avoiding Gene would feel like a slap in the face to him, so Gene became my fourth dance.
My card was nearly full when a man with a receding hairline and ugly mustache approached: Harry.

Ugh. I knew it would be most awkward for me to dance with Junior. Why in God’s name had he even asked me? It’s not like we had ever gotten on together.

“Mr. Smerage, Mr. Smerage.”

“Mr. Dreyfus, Mr. Dreyfus.” I added Junior in my head.

“I see you and I both have dance nine free. How about we have a whirl at it?”

I wondered if traditional dance etiquette still applied. A girl could not refuse a boy a slot on her dance card; if asked, she was compelled to say yes. Were we following such decorum tonight? After all, this was an anti-prom. I could make my own rules, could I not? But for Cyril’s sake, and for my anticipation of the opening of the Dreyfus bar, I said yes. Perhaps I could ask him about that piano playing gig. Lord knew, I could use some pocket money.

After adding Junior, I had a complete dance card.

H
Cambridge, Massachusetts

1. Nathaniel Wolff
2. Cyril Wilcox
3. Stanley Gilkey
4. Eugene Cummings
5. Kenneth Day
6. Edward Say
7. Joseph Lumbard
8. Ned Courtney
9. Harry Dreyfus
10. Nathaniel Wolff

The dance card had a string at the top, which I hooked onto one of my buttons. Others looped theirs onto their cufflinks or around their wrists.
Ken adjusted the gramophone, and after a brief scratching sound, a lovely English-sounding waltz trumpeted out of the horn. Cyril made a sweeping gesture over the dance floor and said, “Let our Anti-Prom begin!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Nathaniel whisked me away in the firm arc of his arms.

“Who granted you the male part?” I teased.

“Keith, I assure you it’s not a matter of male or female. It’s a matter of who’s the most capable of leading the waltz.”

Seemingly on cue, I missed one of the turns and our feet hit. How could a pianist who could keep perfect rhythm be so hopeless at dancing? I still did not understand it.

“Touché,” I said.

Nathaniel smiled and pulled me closer.

With flags dangling from above and dance cards from our suits, we gallivanted across the room to waltzes and foxtrots and ragtime numbers. My dance with Cyril was the most spirited, my dance with Gene the most clumsy, my dance with Eddy the slowest, given his inability to move quickly. My dance with Harry yielded the piano playing gig I’d coveted, and Joe, it turned out, was a far better dancer than his awkward personality would have suggested. While I could not call him gifted at the art, I had to admit he was far more adept than I.

As we danced the night away in traditional fashion, I did not think about how radical this act might seem to some. How we were claiming a traditional heterosexual rite—the age-old couples’ dance—and in so doing took away its exclusion and sacredness. How we were using it, unknowingly, to validate not just our experience, but its normalcy too. No, in the moment, I felt merely happy and comfortable, energized by the male couples that surrounded me.
It was only much later, after everything changed, that I came to understand that a person does not feel radical when he lives out what feels, at its core, a natural experience; he feels radical when the world makes him.
Ken and Cyril’s anti-prom had its liberatory aspects, but it was what came after that brought us closer together in ways we hitherto could not have imagined.

After the last dance and after the departure of many attendees, including Harry and his clan, a small group of us pushed the furniture back into place, lit a fire, and ushered in the early hours of Saturday morn curled around the jazz-jumping flames. The hosts, Cyril and Ken, were naturally still present, as was the ever-ready-to-socialize Eddy. Joe, who seemed to stay on at such events out of some type of shy default, resided in the Murphy recliner to my left. The oddly rejuvenated Gene had also stayed and was sitting on the floor with his lanky legs stretched towards the fire. Nathaniel and I were cozied on the couch next to the most unexpected addition to our little group: Stanley Gilkey. At the drama-related events at which I’d spent some time with Stanley, he was normally quite outspoken, a bit of Jane too. Tonight he was quite silent.

Ken was very drunk and kept excusing himself to the bathroom. “To make water!” he’d exclaim, laughing at himself as if it were the most comical occurrence in the history of Harvard. When he finally seemed to have relieved himself enough times, he decided to settle in for the long haul and launched himself running broad-jump style onto the couch.

“Oww!” I said. “Jesus, Kenny Boy, you’re like a sack of potatoes!” Ken’s drunken state seemed to add weight to his already dense and muscular body. At least his head had landed on Stanley’s lap, not mine.

“Who’s hungry?” Cyril asked.

“Moi,” I said, suddenly realizing how truly famished I'd become after a night of dancing. All the chaps answered in the affirmative.
“Then, voilà, a midnight snack!” To our surprise, Cyril pulled from the ice chest a package of hotdogs. He went and fetched a sack of buns from the front hall closet too. He held up the food with the brightest of grins. “Camping. Harvard Style.”

The whole crew hooted in delight.

“We need green sticks for roasting the hotdogs though. Who will go collect them while I stoke the fire and prep the condiments?”

When no one volunteered, Cyril prodded his roommate. “How about you, Kenny Boy? That cold air will do you some good, no?”

“Fine,” Ken said from his sprawled out position. I was shocked at how quickly Ken had just acquiesced. He reached up and gave a light smack to Stanley’s face. “But Stan My Man, you’re coming with me!”

He and Stan threw on their jackets and left. When they returned some thirty minutes later, they carried three long sticks. Apparently, the desired effect had been achieved: Ken looked far more awake for his time outside, flushed too. His blond hair, no longer slicked back, stuck out from his head like ruffled feathers.

“Only three sticks?” Eddy groaned. “There are eight of us! What the hell were you doing out there for so long?”

“I don’t see you limping out to go fetch more.” Ken tossed the sticks on the coffee table and plopped back down on the couch. “Just cook two on each stick. I believe all you lads know how to deal with two wieners at the same time anyways. Except perhaps Joe. Joe the Homo or Joe Not the Homo?”

Joe blushed instantly, his cheeks now redder than his hair. He fiddled with the corner of his glasses. Gene didn’t look particularly comfortable either.

“I’ll start the roasting!” Cyril jumped in. Joe got up to help him, no doubt so he could face his back to the group.
When the first dogs were ready, Ken couldn’t refrain from yet another sexual innuendo. “Now bury it in the bun, boys, bury it in the bun!” He ripped apart the connected hot dog rolls and threw one at each of us.

“Speaking of such matters,” Nathaniel said, “I have just the thing for our campfire.” He got up and walked to the front hall. He came back with the thick black book he’d brought with him to the party.

“I refuse to allow anyone to engage in studies right now,” Ken said.

“I assure you this is a study in which you will want to engage,” Nathaniel said calmly, unshaken by Ken’s cantankerousness. Unlike Eddy, who seemed to become queen of his own little feminine world when drunk, Ken seemed to become king of the tyrants with too much hooch, something I was noticing more of late.

Nathaniel sat back down next to me and held up the book. “Gentleman, I present to you Dr. Havelock Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion*.”

The title alone was enough to garner our attention, even Ken’s. We had heard the term enough to know that sexual inversion implied homosexuality, particularly the idea that people were born with it as a biological predisposition.

“So illicit is this book that for many years it was only able to be published in Germany, a country that has thus far defended homosexuality more than its neighbors, as well as studied it more in-depth. Eventually, Ellis, a medical physician, found a British publisher, though even then, the bookseller was taken to court and the book was found to be indecent. From there it made its way to the U.S. where there were more willing publishers. While Harvard has recently acquired a copy of it, they guard it like it’s the devil himself. It took quite some finagling for me to succeed in persuading the Circulation Desk to find and check out the book for me. I assured them it was necessary for the completion of my medical degree.”

“And what is it?” Ken asked impatiently, readjusting himself on Stan’s lap.
“A book of and for our people.”

“Janes?” Eddy chimed in eagerly.

“Well, all types of homosexuals. Bisexuals too. I’ve already read it cover to cover. Each of you will undoubtedly want a look.”

Nathaniel started to hand the book to Cyril, but Cyril suggested Nathaniel first read a bit aloud for everyone to hear. So Nathaniel opened the dark canvas cover and cleared his voice. Always the professional, that one. He began with the first chapter, which highlighted for us several scientific studies on the common occurrence of homosexuality in animals. We all laughed and joked at the impressive range in the chapter:

Partridges.
Doves.
Pigeons.
Dogs.
Rams.
Bulls.
Insects.
Monkeys.
And my favorite: puppies.

Ellis seemed to be suggesting that biological homosexual urges were more common than they were not. Nature seemed to be on our side.

Next, the introduction broached the topic of homosexuality throughout history. Babylonians despised it, but ancient Egyptians condoned it. In fact, the Egyptians of old attributed homosexuality to the gods of Horus and Set. They revered male beauty, and they recognized an intermediate, in-between sort of sex. They were liberal beyond their times. Homosexuals flourished amongst the Carthaginians, the Normans, the Tartars, the Celts, the
Eskimos, the natives of Australia. The Dorian Greeks allowed a type of homosexual marriage, even bestowing upon it religious consecration.

“By homosexuality,” Nathaniel read about the Greeks, “a man propagated his virtues, as it were, in the youth he loved, implanting them by the act of intercourse.”

“Anal sex as the passing on of virtue?” Eddy guffawed. I too was taken aback by this idea.

“In Greece,” Nathaniel continued, “the homosexual impulse was recognized and idealized; a man could be an open homosexual lover, and yet, like Epaminondas, be a great and honored citizen of his country. There was no reason whatever why a man, who in mental and physical constitution was perfectly normal, should not adopt a custom that was regarded as respectable, and sometimes even as specially honorable. But it is quite otherwise today in a country like England or the United States.”

Then came the words about specific homosexual or bisexual men in history:

Nero.

Pope Julius II.

Leonardo DaVinci.

Michelangelo.

Sir Francis Bacon.

Walt Whitman.

Oscar Wilde.

Julius Caesar. The ruler whose passion for both heterosexual and homosexual intercourse earned him the satirical title, “the husband of all women and the wife of all men.”

We were everywhere; an unbroken chain through history. I felt a grounded connection that I had not known I’d lacked.
Nathaniel stopped reading and looked up at us. “And that, gentleman, is only Chapter I. The book gets even more, shall we say, interesting, in Chapter III: Sexual Inversion in Men. Plenty of personal stories from plenty of homosexual gents.”

Cyril, who had been gazing out the dark window, lost in some reverie, turned to us and said in a bit of a daze, “I propose we all receive a turn. That each chap chooses a story that he wants to read aloud to us, one to which he relates or which incites his interest.”

And so began an incredible act of validation. A discovery of what it means to see oneself on the page. A defining college moment one wants never to forget.

Predictably, Eager Eddy wanted to be the first. He was as good as drooling in anticipation. However, Ken, who had taken yet again to the hooch, was the first to grab the book from Nathaniel’s hands.

“I know what part fits me. That part that Nathaniel just read about the rats.” With remarkable speed, Ken flipped through a few pages and found what he was looking for. “Here we go: ‘Among white rats, which are very sexual animals’—now that fits Mr. Kenneth Day—among those rats, ‘Steinach found that, when deprived of females, the males practice homosexuality, though only with males with whom they’ve long associated; the weaker rats play the passive part’—and let me assure you I am not the weaker rat—‘But when a female is introduced they immediately turn to her;… they never actually prefer their own sex.’” Ken smacked the book shut. “And that, in a nutshell, is Mr. Kenneth Day.”

Very sexual rats. Absence of females. No true attraction to males. Ken was yet again insisting that he was only queer out of convenience, only a homo at Harvard. Needless to say, I didn’t find myself wholly convinced. If Ken was able to enjoy such acts and relationships in the present moment, even if a part of him still liked, even preferred, females, didn’t that put
him outside the standard box of heterosexuality? Into the realm of bisexuality, perhaps? Or queerness, as they say? But Ken seemed to find these an affront to his masculinity.

“Rhatz, Kenny Boy!” complained Eddy. “That was indisputably a disappointing passage to start on.”

A blasé Ken just raised his eyebrows and leaned back further on the couch.

Many of us concurred with Eddy and hassled Ken in turn.

“I hereby limit us to Chapter III,” Cyril proclaimed, attempting to stop the arguing.

“Human stories. Not scientific research. And nothing Nathaniel has already read. Will you please choose again?”

“For you, Cyril? Fine. Anything.” Ken’s response was half in jest, half in candor. It seemed that even alcohol couldn’t drive all sincerity out of Ken when it came to Cyril. I was becoming more aware of the fact that we all, even an angry Ken, would do far more for Cyril, far more because of Cyril, than we would for the others in the group.

Ken opened the book anew and skimmed the pages. He laughed a lot and after awhile, he began shuffling his legs and pinching his knees together. I presumed it was to hide his rising arousal. He was, after all, lying down on all of us, supine, and a tent in his trousers would be rather obvious.

While we waited for Ken, we roasted another round of hotdogs. We wondered where Ernest was and whether he’d taken Helen back to Brookline and stayed there. We discussed our next formal dinner in Memorial Hall.

At last, Ken said, “Here we go. I have just the passage. A man I can relate to.” I could hear the bravado in Ken’s voice even before he began the passage. “The chap writes: ‘My penis, though perfectly shaped, is rather enormous—erect, ten and a half inches in length, seven and a quarter inches in circumference.’” Ken paused and ran a hand through his blond hair. “Yes, fellows, that’s me.”
“I’ll have to ask Ernest if he agrees with your measurements,” Eddy said. “I, for one, have my doubts.”

“I wouldn’t trust Ernest to measure an inch accurately,” Ken snapped with surprising bite.

The insult reverberated around the room.

“There’s more,” Ken continued. He didn’t seem to notice our silence. “This man, it appears, turned partly to homosexuality because his penis caused pain in the women with whom he tried to have sexual intercourse. Then, once he did try homosexuality, it looks like he certainly enjoyed it. Listen to this: ‘One evening, in Broadway, I conceived suddenly a full-fledged desire for a youth issuing from an hotel as I passed. Our glances met and dwelled together. At a shop-window he first accosted me. He was an invert. With him, in his room at the hotel whence I had seen him emerge, I passed an apocalyptic night—’”

“Apocalyptic?” Eddy squealed.

“Pipe down, will you?” Ken slapped Eddy’s leg with the book. “I’m not through yet. Listen. The young man writes, ‘That boy, that god out of the machine, I see him clearly: his brown, curling hair, his eyes blue as the sea; his chest both arched and so plump, his rounded arms, his taper waist, the graceful swell of his hips and full, snowy thighs; I recall as of yesterday the dimples in his knees, the slenderness of his ankles, the softness of his little feet, with insteps pink like the insides of a shell. How I gloated over the ample roundness, his rich undulations!’”

“Good lord!” Eddy said, unable to keep himself from interrupting. “I am unquestionably next in line for that book,”

“He sums up his sexual life,” Ken proceeded, “by stating that, ‘In the last eight years I have performed fellatio (never pedicatio) with more than three hundred men and boys.’” Ken
clamped the book closed between his palms. “Now that, my friends, is a chap who I would gladly allow to seek out me and my member.”

“Wait, what’s *fuh-la-she-o* and *ped-uh-ca-she-o*?” Joe asked from the recliner in that quiet yet hearty voice of his.

For Joe’s sake, I felt grateful that Ernest wasn’t there to slaughter the question.

“Fellatio is oral sex—” Cyril began.

“Sucking a penis!” Eddy chimed in like a ten-year-old boy with a bad word on his tongue.

“Thank you, Eddy, for that mature insight,” Ken said.

“And pedicatio is anal sex,” Cyril said. “As in, anal connection, anal intromission, intercrural intercourse, burying it in the bun, buggering, and so on.”

“Translation: a penis in your anus!” Eddy squeaked.

“Yes, I’m sure that’s where you like it, you fairy!” This time Ken threw the book at him.

Cyril and I exchanged a concerned look. Eddy, apparently unabashed by Ken’s drunken lashings, dove for the book as it fell to the ground. He had his nose nuzzled in it before any of us could even think how to respond.

While Eddy skimmed the chapter—frequently uttering a “Damn!” or an “I’ll be!”—I lay back into Nathaniel’s arms and took in the room, our group, this Harvard experience in the wee hours of a Saturday morn. With the crackle and glow of the fire, with the dim light of a kerosene lamp, with the growing sense of closeness and expectation, I would’ve said the evening felt almost, well, romantic. It certainly had a similar air. But clearly that’s not how I felt towards my friends, amorous that is. So what was it? What was I feeling that shared that intensity, that desire to never leave the present moment that you experience on a date, with a lover, before a kiss?
“C’est ça!” Eddy shouted, putting a halt to my contemplation. “You must listen to this one. Damn, it’s good. The story is from a young inverted man who used to frequent a Turkish bath.”

Eddy cleared his throat at great length and pushed his chin into the air, giving his spine that coveted extra length.

“Here I go. The chap writes, ‘In my twenty-fourth year, a tall, handsome man who used to frequent the baths one day sat down beside me and playfully knocked my toes with his; he then pressed his naked thigh against mine and a little later in the cooling room slipped his hand under my sheet and grasped my penis; he then asked me to meet him a few days later in the baths, saying I would be pleased with what he would do.’” Unable to contain his excitement, Eddy began to read faster. “‘I kept the appointment and he took me into the hottest room, where we lay on the floor; in a few minutes, he turned on his side and threw one of his legs across me; I got frightened and jumped up; he had a powerful erection, but I refused to lie down again, although he pulled his foreskin back to excite my desires; I was afraid of being surprised by another bather. Twice on future occasions I met this man and he made advances. I believe that I would have yielded then if we had met at a private house.’”

The image the words painted in my mind were vivid and alight with the smallest details of the Turkish bathhouse. The communal bath surrounded by arched, Romanesque windows. The luxurious bathrobes. The private, windowless rooms. The key around my wrist to one. I was the seducer. Nathaniel the man I spied in the pool. I invited him to my private hot room. I was not awkward. I knew just what to do. I pulled back my foreskin…

Ken jumped off the couch.

“Gross! Keith’s going hard on my leg!”

“And you can talk?” I defended, shifting my position and squeezed my thighs tight.
After I’d received my fair share of jabs from the fellas, Nathaniel included, we continued with the sharing of Havelock Ellis’s book. I found it aroused not just my member, but also new ideas about homosexuality, self, society. What I most noted was just how many diverse stories there were, and, as such, how this implied a certain universality to our lives and experiences across age groups, continents, and personalities. We weren’t alone and we weren’t a group of people easily pigeonholed into a certain type.

Joe, as a pre-law major, felt drawn to the sections about the laws in France, how only negative aspects of homosexuality were punished, like pedophilia or underage intercourse. More normal manifestations were allowed.

Cyril shared a love story, a relationship that grew for years, a couple that had not just sexual passion, but also intimacy, support, and partnership.

I read a story about a man’s deep crushes throughout his life. That he always devoted himself resolutely to only one man. That even if he didn’t pursue the crush, he would dream of him in his arms each night. That his crushes had started at age 6, and his first crush had been on the family gardener. He had even kissed the man’s lower legs when he’d been playing at his ankles as a child.

Stanley chose a man who felt he should’ve been born a woman. I was not acquainted well enough with Stanley to understand his exact connection to the story, but I wondered if Eddy had had similar experiences to the man in the book. That perhaps he felt he’d been born into the wrong body. I thought of our Prohibition Party, months ago now, when Eddy had sported that lace dress and blonde bob with such comfort and bliss. And now there was the rouge, the daily rouge. I became interested in Eddy’s sense of self, in this diversity of homosexuality, and resolved to ask him more about it.

But that evening, it was what Gene shared that haunted me most.
Unlike Ken who’d read with the looseness of gin on his tongue and Eddy who’d read with the feigned formality of a boy on stage, Gene read his chosen passage quietly and awkwardly.

“A youth left my class at the age of 16—16 1/2 I mean,” he stumbled over several words, “to take up an, umm, apprenticeship in a large wholesale firm. Almost nightly, and especially when new fellows came, the youths in his dormitory (eleven in number) would, umm, waylay him, hold him down, and rub his parts to the tune of some comic song or dance-music.”

Gene stopped for a moment. When he began again, his voice was even quieter.

“The boy who could choose the fastest time had the privilege of performing the operation. They would sometimes subject him to this for a week. This boy, having been brought up strictly, was shocked, dazed, and alarmed; but they stopped him from calling out, and he dared not report it.”

Gene closed the book and put it on the coffee table. For a moment, only the sound of the popping embers filled the room. The same thought must have been running through several of our minds. Cyril was the first to ask it.

“Did something like that happen to you?”

Cyril’s words were gentle and inviting, but Gene did not rise to the bait.

“Who, me? No, no.”

“Because I’ll beat up the bastard,” Ken said. He unbuttoned his sleeves, rolled them up, and flexed his muscles for all to see. Unable to laugh freely with such tension still in the room, several of us released short, grunt-like laughs.

“I went to a boarding school,” Nathaniel said. “Exeter.”

Gene looked up expectantly. Nathaniel did not make eye contact with him. He tried to speak to all of us, as if he knew not to target Gene.
“Many, many boys engaged in homosexual acts freely and reasonably, but there were also cases of forced touching, such as the initiation of certain freshman by some seniors. At least Exeter had only older secondary students. Ellis’s book mentions a boarding school in England where a proctor who was charged with bathing the elementary school boarders would fondle them in the tub, each and every one of them, almost daily, and swear them to secrecy.”

“In the part I was reading in Sexual Inversion an hour ago,” Joe said, “Ellis said that’s exactly the type of behavior that they punish in France and Germany.” He paused, those bushy red brows furrowing slightly. He seemed surprised that we were still listening. I wondered if perhaps Joe was not accustomed to holding an audience. As he continued, I noticed that his shy tone gaining some confidence.

“The law descends on violence and pedophilia, both heterosexual and homosexual, thereby distinguishing it from the more appropriate forms of homosexuality that are private and consensual. They punish harmful sexuality, not different sexuality.” With those round glasses and his feet kicked up on the big recliner, he looked the part of a shy and intellectual professor. He lacked only a pipe.

“I had a bad experience when I was young,” Eddy ventured. Unlike Nathaniel, Eddy chose to speak right to Gene. “There was a school bully, Martin. One Martin Bancroft. It started with him and his posse pinning me to the wall and kicking me in the groin. I was effeminate, and, of course, there was my deformity. Martin said he doubted I’d been born with balls, that he needed to kick them to see. That much, I could’ve handled. But then it turned perverse. He began making me kick him in the groin. Next it turned to punching his groin with my hand. He said he was aroused by the pain, that pain was manly.” Eddy shook his head in disgust. “A few months later, the bully was gone. I heard he moved. His cronies floundered without their leader and finally I was free. Good thing too, as I knew my parents
would’ve been at a loss of what to do. I thought about telling them, but my mother’s only solution would’ve been to knit me a thicker scarf.”

I reached out and put a hand on Eddy’s shoulder. I had not known this about my roommate. Here at Harvard he always seemed so brazen and popular to me. Perhaps he’d found his home here too.

“What felt the worst about it all was that I already knew I was different, already knew I felt things not for girls but for boys. This felt like a goddamn ungracious initiation into my sexuality. It took years for me to think about it as anything but dirty and painful.”

Gene made a nearly inaudible grunt. He was staring into the fire, and I wasn’t sure he’d even realized he’d made a sound. Was it a sound of affirmation?

“What happened to you?” Cyril tried again.

The silence stretched so long that I began to count the tick-tocks of the clock. I thought Ken would get annoyed and move on to something else, but he waited like the rest of us. Our collective patience and concern surprised me. This was certainly a new level of group consciousness for us, and being a part of this moment gave me a feeling of maturity and significance.

Finally, Gene spoke. “I had a cousin.”

The words contained no momentum.

The silence returned. Cyril added another log to the fire. And we waited.

Eventually, some twenty minutes later, Gene began again. “He used to make me, well,”—Gene mumbled over the next words—“masturbate him.”

He began drumming his fingers on the coffee table and I knew his anxiety was increasing.

“It was when he’d spend the night at our house during the summer. He was very—well, umm, I don’t know the word—exacting? It always had to be from behind. He didn’t want to
see my face. I’d have to reach my small arms around his teenage body. It had to be faster.

Then slower. Then this. Then that.”

A lone tear squeezed out of the corner of Gene’s eye. He swiped at it with his pointer finger, then craned his thin neck away from us.

“I hated it,” he whispered. “I hated him.”

“You probably still hate him,” Cyril said.

We could see the back of Gene’s head drop forward in a silent nod.

I had no idea what to say, how to comfort him, if I should even comfort him. To be frank, I felt consumed first and foremost by the image of such abuse. I could see in my mind the child Gene, an even thinner version of his current telephone-pole self. So young, such porcelain skin, lying in bed in his attic bedroom. I could sense the fear of sleep, the fear of every sound in his family’s farmhouse in Fall River, the same hometown as Cyril. I could see the cousin entering Gene’s bedroom in the dark, closing the door quietly behind him. I could see the whole awful scene, and needless to say, it sickened me.

No wonder Gene had negative associations with masturbation, more so, that is, than the average Puritan-influenced New England boy. No wonder he was unable to accept his homosexuality when this was what he’d known of it. I could now understand, to a degree, why he hurt himself and why he sought complete control. Perhaps with each new cut he felt the pain of the abuse move farther away, layered as it was beneath new hurt. Perhaps with each action he could control, he regained pieces of what had been taken away from him.

Months later, I wondered what would’ve happened if I had liked Gene back, if that moment when he had kissed me in my bedroom, which might very well have been his first attempt at a positive step forward, had not been quashed and unrequited.

If maybe it would’ve made all the difference.
While what Gene had shared started as a heavy topic, it eventually transitioned the night into a positive, more personal relationship to *Sexual Inversion*. Thanks to Gene, we became willing to see our own experiences in the text, on the page, in the lives of others, and, more importantly, willing to share them.

As such, we discovered that several of us agreed with the man from History XXI who had found himself turned on by the heroes in the novels he’d read as a youth.

We realized that many of the inverts in Ellis’s book emphasized the age at which they’d commenced with masturbation, and so we found ourselves asking each other the same question.

“Eight years old,” responded Eddy.

“Twelve,” I said.

“I was eight too,” Ken added.

“Ten,” Cyril said.

“Eighteen,” responded Gene, which was by far the latest age in the bunch.

“Thirteen,” said Stanley.

“Nine,” said Nathaniel.

Next we read about a boy getting caught masturbating by his father. This led to Cyril sharing that he too had been caught in the act and that his father had said he must never touch himself, especially not to full release, as it would diminish his future pleasure with women.

We learned that Joe, like one young lad in the book, had been propositioned by a college student at a café, but had said no, and that Joe, in fact, had no sexual feelings whatsoever for men. We learned that Stanley and Eddy, like the chap in History VII, found themselves quite repulsed by women. That the two of them, along with Gene, Cyril, and I had never kissed a girl, while Joe, Ken, and Nathaniel had. Nathaniel’s inclusion in this latter group was something I made a mental note to ask him more about later.
We found out that many of us agreed with another man from *Sexual Inversion* that emissions, whether through masturbation or intercourse, felt similar to the sensation of having to urinate, and how as children, that was a confusing similarity. A few of us had even staved off having an emission for a few years, as we didn’t know what the sensation was, and didn’t want to wet our beds.

This was not a fact we would’ve willingly shared before reading Havelock Ellis. I eventually came to realize that Ellis’s book that night, and later nights, allowed a certain distance from ourselves that made talking about a new topic okay. We didn’t have to venture a risky, potentially embarrassing comment all on our own. We didn’t have to jest about it or lash out at one another in boyish manner, pretend to be better than each other, pretend we were above this, beyond that. We could now share our truths with the book as our buttress. That night, we discovered the confidence of, “I am who I am. I will stop trying to impress.” We discovered the reassurance of, “Look—I’m not alone!”

I’ll admit, these discoveries, the validation, the learning so much about each other, were addicting. I did not want to relinquish the night. Would it be the same tomorrow? Would we feel so intimate? Or would we return to the banter, bashing, and competitiveness, the *modus operandus* between us?

Yet no matter how much I wished it, the night would not deign to last forever. As the clock struck three, then four, as dawn approached and the flames turned to embers, we found our eyelids betraying us, our stamina fading. Cyril and Ken hauled in blankets from their bedroom for us to camp out in front of the fire. No sooner had Eddy claimed a pillow than he started snoring, as he was wont to do.

The others fell into slumber, and I almost had too, when Cyril, still curled on the couch with the Ellis book, looking ever the part of a young schoolboy, whispered, “Keith, I have another passage. It’s beautiful.”
“Hmm?” I mumbled with closed eyes.

“This man writes, ‘I cannot regard my sexual feelings as unnatural or abnormal, since they have disclosed themselves so perfectly naturally and spontaneously within me. All that I have read in books or heard spoken about the ordinary sexual love, its intensity and passion, lifelong devotion, love at first sight, etc., seems to me to be easily matched by my own experiences in the homosexual form.’”

I heard Cyril close the book. I propped open a leaden eyelid and saw that he was hugging Ellis’s book to his chest.

“That’s how I feel about Harry,” he whispered.

Some time later, I awoke to a chill around my neck. The blankets had fallen off. The fire had died. The grayness in the air spoke of the nearing dawn.

Slowly, I became cognizant of the muffled grunts emerging from my right. This must have been what woke me. I rolled over to see Ken, eyes closed, chin arched to the ceiling. He was moving ever so slightly.

At first I thought I’d caught him masturbating, that he’d verified everyone was safely asleep and gone on to rub himself. After all, there’d been much, much talk about it this evening. But as I turned my head in the direction of our feet, I saw a boulder-sized mound under the blankets. It wasn’t Ken’s hand, to be sure. It wasn’t his member either, despite what he claimed about its size.

It was someone.

Someone was down there, moving rhythmically.

Quietly, I lifted my head and looked around. I’m not sure why I insisted on not interrupting Ken, not getting caught by him when he was the one, in fact, getting caught by me. But something urged me to hush.
I saw that Nathaniel was still sleeping next to me, Eddy on the other side of Nathaniel, Cyril on the couch, Gene by the fire, Joe in the stretched out recliner.

That left only one person. Only one interpretation to what I was witnessing.

Under the covers, Mr. Stanley Gilkey was performing fellatio on Mr. Kenneth Day.