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February 11: Day Before Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday
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September 3: Uncle Sam’s Birthday

So, the first day of school is a good time to start a new diary, right? At least, I thought so last night when I bought this book — back when I actually thought things would be different this year. I was convinced that after my recent leap up the high school hierarchy to Junior with
Popular Boyfriend status, not to mention my summer-long fitness/tanning campaign, I would no longer be Invisible Girl. And somehow I guess I thought that me being different would make everything else different, too.

Okay, yeah, so that was a little naïve. After one day back at Columbus High, I can say that nothing’s changed much at all. The preps stick with the preps, the hoods with the hoods. Doe-eyed freshmen rove around in packs, holding their books with both hands to avoid having them dumped. Haughty seniors pretend they’re having more fun than the rest of us. In classes, teachers make us say our names out loud and something about ourselves. The snippets of hallway conversation overheard are as banal as ever—“Yo, I’m bagging fifth period,” or “Did you see what Sara/Macy/Gina/whoever is actually wearing today?”

Only one thing’s different—Luke Barton. The new kid. He’s from California. I got press clippings about him all day. In homeroom, Jenny Cassell, a tireless socialite who has sat adjacent to me in homeroom since seventh grade, drew an audience with her description: “He’s this totally hot skateboarding, movie-star type with a reddish-blond afro and Salvation Army style, with expensive sneakers and jeans that are perfectly worn in. And he’s all aloof, like he’s in on some secret you’re not.”

By far the most ebullient description I heard was from my best friend. Nikki’s first words to me were straight out of Star Wars: “Luke will be mine.” She had already turned him into a savior. “See Fran, this is exactly what I was talking about! Remember when I said I needed a change? Well it’s arrived. He’s here. Luke Barton’s the thing that’s been missing for me in this town. He’s going to be a catalyst for change in my life—I can already see it.”

Nikki moved here from Carmel, an affluent enclave north of Indianapolis. This happened like five years ago, but Big City Nikki still scapegoats Columbus for some of her personal problems, most particularly her lack of a steady guy.

I hadn’t even seen the dude yet, but already I was tempted to abhor this whole Luke phenomenon. I was thinking how annoying it was that some stranger could penetrate the collective imagination of Columbus High more in one day than I had in the previous two years. And then, eight minutes into my last period class, AP English, in struts this tall, good-looking guy in paint-splattered jeans, a tight hipster T, and a shocking mass of curly reddish hair. Had to be him. More intriguing than hot, I thought. Of course, had I not been happily boyfriended to a legitimate hottie myself, I might have felt a little differently. There was something in his athletic gait that made you want to look. He had, like, star power. I made myself look away, determined not to fall victim to this unabashed “shock and awe” self-promotion campaign.

“You must be Lucas,” Ms. Cloisters said.
“Luke,” he said, apparently not the verbose type.
“Interesting,” Ms. Cloisters said. “Do you know how I knew who you were, Luke?” He shrugged.
“Well, it’s not because your reputation precedes you, or that I received your dossier from the CIA. It’s not because I saw you in the hallway and, admiring your effulgent beauty, rushed down to the principal’s office to find out who you were.” The class let out a few hesitant laughs. Ms. Cloisters had a reputation for humiliating students who didn’t meet her lofty academic standards. “It was more along the lines that you were the last student to show. Why’s that?”
“I’m new.” Luke half-smiled in a way that said he’d played this game before. “I got lost.”
“But you made it. You persevered. Congratulations, neophyte, on finding room 203. For future reference, the room numbers go in descending order from the opposite end of the hall. It’s a logical scheme, and you’re in Advanced Placement English, so you should be cerebral enough
to figure it out. Now find a seat.”

Luke turned his back on Ms. Cloisters, showing off his stolid expression to the rest of the class. I glanced up at him, prepared to avert my eyes at any moment. Didn’t even score a glance. He sat behind me, in the same row. My back and shoulders felt warm. An irrational thought hit me—was he emitting some sort of Luke ray? I slumped down in my seat to fend it off.

Ms. Cloisters introduced the class with a rant about the power of words. Of the four things we would focus on in her class, vocabulary would be foremost. “It drives me nuts when students ask how studying words will ever assist them in the real world. The most bankable skill you could have in our media-driven society is to be articulate. In fact, a study conducted at several major corporations found that one of the most salient disparities between employees at the bottom-, middle-, and top-paying rungs is their skill levels in vocabulary and syntax. Which is to say, those who express themselves the best get the best jobs.”

The final three things we would do in her class were read, read and read. We would read Austen, Dostoyevsky, Marquez, Plath, Hesse and Hurston. We would read short stories, novels, novellas, poetry, epics, even a play. “In fact, we’re going to start right now,” Ms. Cloisters said, handing out a short story by Hemingway for us to peruse.

It was called “Hills Like White Elephants,” and it was about a young couple drinking beer in a bar, somewhere near some hills in Spain. It didn’t seem like it had enough big words or concepts to be “good,” but there was something to it, a certain resonance. Ms. Cloisters asked us what we thought about it. In accordance with my resolution to get more involved in class discussions this year, I raised my hand.

“Yes,” Ms. Cloisters said. “Say your name, and then make your comment.”

“My name’s Francesca Castarelli. And I was just gonna say it seems like the couple in this story has some serious communication issues. They just talk in monosyllables about nothing in particular, and they can’t seem to agree on anything.”

“Okaaaay,” Ms. Cloisters said in a condescending way. “Anyone else want to get a little more specific?” She pointed behind me.

“I’m Luke Barton, and I think the ‘communication issues’ Francesca is referring to are related to the fact that the young woman is pregnant with the man’s child, and he is pressuring her to abort. That’s what they’re actually arguing about, even though they don’t come right out and say it.”

My ears got hot at the sound of my name. He was talking about me. Wait. Was he making fun of me? Was he calling me a dunce?

“That’s right,” Ms. Cloisters said. “Hemingway has a way of making a situation implicit without hitting the reader over the head with it. Nice close reading, Lucas.”

Great. Humiliated by The New Guy. Maybe he hadn’t meant to. I dropped my pencil and turned to steal a glance at him. Luke was looking back at me with a big ol’ smug grin on his face. Jerk.

Vocabulary Drill
September 3: Uncle Sam’s Birthday
abhorr · hate or detest
accordance · agreement
adjacent · next to
affluent · wealthy
aloof · standoffish
articulate · well-spoken
avert · turn aside
banal · bland
catalyst · something that brings about a change
cerebral · brainy or intelligent
condescending · degrading
despising · downward
disparities · differences
dunce · idiot
ebullient · high-spirited
effulgent · brilliant or radiant
emitting · giving off
eclaves · closed society
gait · way of walking
haughty · proud
hierarchy · chain of command
implicit · implied
intriguing · interesting
irrational · not logical
lofty · superior
nave · inexperienced
neophyte · beginner
particularly · specifically
persevered · kept trying
peruse · examine
phenomenon · fact or event
precedes · comes before
rant · lecture
resolution · promise
resonance · character or tone
salient · significant
smug · self-satisfied
stolid · indifferent
unabashed · unashamed
verbose · wordy

September 5: Read-a-Book Day
Okay, so maybe not much is different this year. But one thing I decided was that since I finally had a real boyfriend, I was going to enjoy that standard dating **ritual** that most girls my age have—a dinner-and-a-movie date. So far I had only experienced it **vicariously** through Nikki’s stories and a dozen or so bad romantic comedies. I wanted it to be perfect, so I wore the most flatteringly functional outfit I could put together—tight jeans that showed off my soccer butt, a tank top with a lace trim that **embellished** my thin waist, a jade necklace that **complemented** my eyes, and a padded bra that flat-out lied about my (lack of) breasts.
The date started out great. When Jeremy picked me up, he pulled out flowers from behind his back—white lilies with backward-curving petals and little tongue-like tentacles bursting out of them. We’d been together for almost four months (counting the summer, which, to be fair, he was away for most of), and this was the first time he’d ever brought me flowers. Yeah, I totally swooned. Of course, such a romantic gesture clashed with my expectations about casual dinner-and-a-movie date protocol, but not enough to inhibit my full-on girly meltdown.

Dinner was at Red Lobster. After I recovered from the tank of forlorn lobsters imprisoned near the entrance, their pinchers clamped together with rubber bands, I loosened up and enjoyed dinner. While we checked out our menus, the waitress brought us a basket full of delectable biscuits.

“Well, do these things have cheese in them?” I asked, still chewing.

“You,” Jeremy said. “Aren’t they good?”

“Mmm,” I answered. “They’re incredible. But, like, doesn’t anyone realize that this kind of stuff is why this country has the fattest people in the world? I mean, we biggie-size our fries and inject mozzarella inside our pizza crusts, you know?”

“Huh?” he asked, his head still buried in the menu.

“Nothing.”

“They taste great,” he said, looking up. “And the reason we have the fattest people in the world is no one exercises. We drive everywhere.”

This had become a tedious habit of his—pretending not to hear a question, then answering it. Jeremy slapped his menu shut. The waitress came and gave us her Red Lobster shtick straight out of the training manual. He got the surf and turf. I got the tuna, medium rare. Then that thick, immutable silence that occurs after you order food set in. I nibbled on my cheese biscuit, doing a mental Google search under the topic: things to say.

“It’s true,” I said. “The obese ones are always the most indolent. But really, in terms of weight and fitness, America runs the whole gamut.”

Jeremy tilted his head in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. Chit-chat had never been my forte. “You know, it’s like we have the lazy, fat people, but then we also have the other extreme, the emaciated supermodels and all the rich, yoga-vegan-superstars, people working like mad to be the best, to make more loot, more movies, more stuff.”

Jeremy squinted. “Like Madonna?”

“Exactly,” I said, ecstatic to have made the connection, any connection. I wanted to go for more, to let the conversation float upward into abstraction and absurdity, since I like nothing more than to banter about nothing in particular, but experience said to stop while I was ahead. I decided, instead, to check Jeremy out. I still hadn’t gotten tired of just looking at him, taking in his cut jaw, big shoulders, hair gelled into an unkempt yet perfectly maintained mess. Hazel eyes. Long, curly eyelashes that gave him the lovable-yet-dopey look of the innocuous Joey from Friends.

“So have you met the new guy?” he asked.

This snapped me back into the world. I scrunched up my face, feigning ignorance.

“Who?”

“The new dude. Jake Beachkin, or whatever.”

“Oh . . .” I let out a giggle at that name. Sounded like a Barbie doll. He’d be Ken’s snorkeling buddy, who came with a pair of butt-hugging, banana-hammock Speedo swim trunks and a pair of flippers. I cleared my throat and tried to be serious. “You mean Luke Barton?”
I waved the question away. “He’s in my AP English class. Totally overrated.”
“Really?”
“Yeah.” I felt the inexplicable need to drive this point home more tenaciously. “From what I’ve seen, he’s a pompous jerk.”
“Strong words,” Jeremy said.
“That’s just my personal assessment. You can judge for yourself. Why do you ask, anyway?”
“Just wondering,” Jeremy shrugged. I could tell by how apathetic he was trying to be that something was vexing him. “I heard he’s trying out for the team. He’s a goalie too . . . Whatever. No big deal.”
I hadn’t figured out this whole girlfriend gig yet, but I assumed this was my cue. “Not that it will matter anyway,” I said.
“Whataya mean?” he asked.
“Not that it will matter.” I smiled. “Because you’re better than him anyway.”
Jeremy smiled back. He cracked his knuckles. “That’s right, baby.”
The second half of our date, the movie part, didn’t work out exactly as I’d planned. I was thinking air-conditioned cineplex; Jeremy pulled into the parking lot at Blockbuster. Since he’d paid for dinner and all, I kept quiet. But when he picked out the DVD for 2 Fast 2 Furious, that stupid turbo-testosterone-fueled car-racing flick that, if I recall correctly, didn’t get 2 many Oscar nominations, I decided to take a stand.
“Please no,” I begged, pressing my hands together in the prayer position.
“But the first one was great,” he said. “It’s a great date movie.”
I showed him the movie I had picked out, a foreign art-house film. “I’ve really been wanting to see this.” I knew I had to do a better job of advertising. “The star is this beautiful French actress.”
“Is it French?” Jeremy asked.
“Yeah.”
“Subtitled?”
“I think so.”
“No way.”
I ground my teeth. Guys could be such provincial little puppies. “Okay, well if you insist upon seeing such a bad movie, can’t we at least get some maudlin romantic trash . . . like something with Jennifer Lopez?”
“You girls and your emotional stuff. We’re getting 2 Fast 2 Furious.”
“Can’t we check out the New Releases section?” I pleaded.
“Come on Francesca, don’t you want to see this with me? I’ve been dying to rent it.”
I tried several different types of persuasion—from goading to whining to sweet-talking—but he remained obstinate. I finally capitulated. We drove to his place and dodged his ’rents by parking down the block and slipping into the basement via the back door. Soon enough we were nice and snuggly on the plush maroon love seat that has witnessed roughly half of our hookup sessions, and I didn’t mind so much that Jeremy hadn’t wanted to go to a theater.
After a few dozen previews and a Pepsi commercial, the engines revved and the movie got started. It was just as bad as I’d figured it would be, but when I looked at Jeremy, his face was blue from the screen’s reflection, eyes transfixed like a man possessed. He doesn’t even
I know I’m here. I decided I should save him. Save him from being sucked into this . . . this quicksand pit of **vapidity**. I leaned in and started kissing his neck. Now you know I’m here. Jeremy pressed PAUSE on the remote. By the time he got the chance to unpause it, the screen was all snowy fuzz.

Vocabulary Drill  
September 5: Read-a-Book Day  
**abstraction** · formless concept  
**absurdity** · ridiculousness  
**apathetic** · uninterested  
**assessment** · evaluation  
**banter** · chit-chat  
**capitulated** · surrendered  
**complemented** · matched  
**delectable** · tasty  
**ecstatic** · overjoyed  
**emaciated** · very thin  
**embellished** · decorated  
**feigning** · faking  
**forlorn** · sad or dejected  
**forte** · strong point  
**gamut** · spectrum  
**goading** · prodding  
**immutable** · unchangeable  
**indolent** · lazy  
**inexplicable** · unexplainable  
**inhibit** · restrain  
**innocuous** · harmless  
**maudlin** · sappy  
**obese** · very overweight  
**obstinate** · stubborn  
**pompous** · pretentious, self-important  
**protocol** · procedure  
**provincial** · unsophisticated  
**ritual** · tradition  
**tedious** · dull or tiresome  
**tenaciously** · stubbornly  
**transfixed** · spellbound  
**unkempt** · untidy  
**vapidity** · lifelessness  
**vexing** · troubling  
**vicariously** · experience secondhand

September 13: National Peanut Day
Today was the first day of soccer tryouts. It’s weird to be the captain and have to wear your game face all the time. Coach Haskins started out practice with some rousingoration about how we could be contenders for state this year. It would, however, take the kind of consistent focus and discipline shown last year by this year’s captain, Francesca Castarelli. People clapped, and I got all aw-shucks and kicked at the dirt with my cleat.

“You probably have something you want to say to the girls, don’t you?” Coach asked.

I blanched. “Something to say?”

“Yes. You know, a motivational speech for the players fighting for a spot.”

I hated set-ups like that. It was like when someone said how funny your joke was, right before you told it—always killed it. “A speech, right . . . the thing is, my favorite tradition on this team is the warm-up run, so I was hoping to get to know the girls while we run. To show them that I not only talk the talk . . . but jog the jog.”

Coach agreed it was a good idea. In my most commandingly alpha male voice, I told everyone to get off their butts and follow me. They did. It had been a full-fledged tsunami all day until right before school let out, so it was like trudging through marshlands.

“For those of you who are returning to the girls’ varsity team,” I said, loud enough for Coach to hear. “You know that the most fun we have is after the games we’ve won. But to get to those celebrations, especially the big ones at the end of the season, we have to make it through weeks of wind sprints and lung-heaving, hard-working, tough-tackling G.I. Jane-style pract—”

“Fran,” a voice to my right said. “You can stop. She’s not watching.”

“Oh,” I said, already foreseeing the slip in my credibility as captain.

“Can we run over past the boys’ field?” someone asked.

“How about this,” I said. “We’ll stop right here and count out a set of fifty jumping jacks. Then I’ll score some points for being tough, and we can run over there without risking Coach Haskin’s wrath. Deal?”

We did our fifty jacks, even relishing the out-loud counting for its wink-wink, covert mission element. Of course, this diplomacy was part of a larger psychological ploy on my part to win the hearts and minds of my teammates. It was the old foot-in-the-door ruse. Once I establish myself as one of them, I have paved the way to becoming their intrepid leader.

“Okay, let’s run behind the goal,” I said. “And pick up the pace, so we don’t look too conspicuous.”

I lengthened my strides and listened with satisfaction to the euphonic patter of running feet behind me. I had always dug this part of team sports—a group of people moving in unison toward a common goal. In this case, our rather ignoble short-term goal was to watch cute boys run around in shorts.

“Kyle Yaeger is so yummy,” someone said.

“He’s looking over here . . .”

A din of chatter escalated—the sound of friction between guys and girls checking each other out. As we ran behind the goal, I finally spotted the one I’d been looking for. My guy. Or, I should say, my guy’s better half.

“Hey goalie,” I yelled out. “Nice butt!”

Waves of laughter erupted behind me. I congratulated myself. Not only was I their dauntless leader but witty to boot, and with a cute goalie for a boyfriend. He turned around in a molasses-slow way that struck me as surreal. Uh oh, I thought, his smiling face registering in my mind. That butt doesn’t belong to my boyfriend. My teammates let out a collective gasp. That butt belongs to that face. I broke into a half-sprint at the revelation. And that face belongs
to Luke Barton.

Vocabulary Drill
September 13: National Peanut Day
blanched · went pale
conspicuous · noticeable
covered · secret
credibility · trustworthiness
dauntless · fearless
din · clamor or noise
diplomacy · skillful negotiation
discipline · self-control
erupted · burst forth
euphonious · pleasant sounding
foreseeing · predicting
ignoble · dishonorable
intrepid · fearless
oration · speech
ploy · tactic or strategy
relishing · savoring
revelation · realization
rousing · inspiring
ruse · trick
surreal · unreal or strange
unison · harmony
wrath · anger

September 20: Oktoberfest begins (Germany)
Nikki and I went to “study” tonight at the library. Columbus has the sickest library you’ve ever seen. It’s this big, cavernous lump of red bricks and glass, and the interior is straight off the Sci Fi Channel. It was designed by I. M. Pei. He’s a Chinese guy who is, as far as I know, The World’s Coolest Library Maker.
I put quotation marks around “study” because it’s impossible to be diligent with Nikki around. She’s too damn loquacious. I call her Miss Quack Quack when she gets like this.

“I mean, the problem is, now that this skateboarding magazine that features him is out there, he’s become a total celebrity. Luke Barton, pro skateboarder! I actually saw him get groped in the hallway today. I can already see him starring in some extreme-sports-themed version of a cheesy hip-hop video, with a bevy of smiling half-naked sophomores dousing his silk boxers with champagne. It’s just like me to fall for a rock star at the apex of his career, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said.
“I mean, the kid could run for mayor. It totally sucks. At this point, if a prominent senior hottie steps to Luke, I don’t have a snowball’s chance in you know where.” She looked down and shook her head, all distraught.
“Shhh,” a faceless voice from the other side of the garden said. Nikki made a “talk to the hand” motion in the direction it came from.

“But Nikki, you like challenges,” I said, giving her a maternal pat on the leg. “You like guys who are hard to get. That’s one of the things we love about you.”

“That’s true. And I know I can land him. I’m not worried. Hey, you wanna look at the magazine again?”

“Please no,” I begged. “Not again.”

But it was too late. From her backpack, Nikki pulled out a tattered copy of SK8R magazine. She turned to the dog-eared page. “Just look at him,” she said, tilting the magazine for me to scrutinize his photo, once again. I had to admit, he was more appealing— aesthetically at least—on paper than he was in reality.

“He’s like an angel on wheels,” she said, dreamily. “A flying cherub.”

“Well if you’re so gaga over him, why don’t you just throw yourself at him?” I asked.

“No! Don’t you see? That’s exactly what I can’t do. I have to be subtle, so I stand out from all his groupies. I can’t just slink up to his locker, batting my eyelashes and showing off my cleavage like a skank. I need time and space for him to notice me. I mean, my problem is . . . what I’m missing is . . .”

“A chromosome?” I suggested.

“What? No. I’m missing that thing where you happen to end up at the same party with the right guy because you know the same people through six degrees of separation. You know what I mean?”

“You mean context,” I said authoritatively.

“Exactly! Context. I mean, I don’t have a single class with Luke. Even you, you have AP English. You play on the soccer team. You probably see him some out at the fields, in those short shorts.”

“Not really.” For some reason, I had been too abashed to tell Nikki about the “hey goalie, nice butt” incident with Luke. “The boys’ and girls’ teams don’t mix much.”

“Well, I need to get some Luke context somehow.”

“Force it,” I said.

“What?”

“Force it,” I said. “Create the context.”

She ruminated on that for a second, then shot me a confused look. “What’s that supposed to mean? You saying I should start a skateboarding club or something?”

“You don’t skateboard,” I said. “That would make you a hardcore tool.”

“Ahem,” a voice interrupted.

We both looked up. It was Eric Crowther. He’s essentially a prep/hood hybrid. Too erudite and well-off to be a card-carrying hood, but too stoned and sartorially handicapped to be a prep. At the end of sophomore year, after I had a major growth spurt that led to an accretion of five inches, four guys decided at once that I was no longer “compact” but “hot.” Eric was one of those four suitors from the now-famous Francesca Bidding War, which boosted my social status at Columbus High. Eric lost the auction, of course, to Jeremy, for reasons no more substantive than Nikki’s claim that Jeremy was the “highest draft pick.” Now Eric stood above us, his pale blue eyes at half-mast, his expression stoic.

“Why is it . . .” he asked, stroking an imaginary goatee, “that some people go to the library to talk?”

It seemed like a rhetorical question. We didn’t answer. Eric shook his head and walked
Vocabulary Drill
September 20: Oktoberfest begins (Germany)
abashed · embarrassed
accretion · increase
aesthetically · relating to beauty
apex · height
authoritatively · with command
bevy · crowd
cavernous · huge and empty
cherub · angel
context · setting
diligent · hard working
distraught · upset
dousing · drenching
erudite · scholarly
essentially · basically
loquacious · talkative
maternal · motherly
prominent · well-known
rhetorical · asked for effect
ruminated · thought about
sartorially · style of dress
scrutinize · examine closely
stoic · stone-faced
substantive · real or solid
subtle · understated

September 26: National Good Neighbor Day
Lunchtime. Taco Bell.
Nikki and I have last lunch period, so the dining area was rife with taco wrappers and used hot sauce packets. I sat in our favorite booth, next to the window least obscured by those huge Taco Bell sticker ads, waiting for Nikki to bring the food over. She had magnanimously offered to pay for the food and deliver it to our table. This type of unprompted altruism was so atypical of Nikki that I was, quite frankly, suspicious.

“Here you go,” Nikki said, carrying a tray like a waitress. “A chicken gordita, Mexican pizza, burrito and a Coke.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem!” Nikki said, a little too ecstatically. “I’m just so pumped we have the same lunch period.”

“Yeah. Pretty cool.” We’d had the same lunch period for weeks now. Why she chose this moment to revel in that long-gone stroke of serendipity was a flat-out conundrum to me.

“Isn’t it gorgeous out?” Nikki said, looking outside. “God, what a day!”
I stared at her, **dumbfounded**. This was exactly the type of **saccharine**, glass-half-full **optimism** we had always mutually **railed** against. The first time Nikki and I met was at a CH football game, when she overheard me verbally shredding the cheerleaders for looking like **pliable** plastic dolls. She cackled out loud, and I cackled back, and our cackles **reverberated** throughout the bleachers, and we’ve been us ever since.

“Pintos ‘n Cheese is the nectar of the gods. So good.” Nikki was chewing with her eyes closed.

“I’m not gonna argue there.” I finished chomping my gordita and leaned into the table. “But that alone would not explain your suddenly **metamorphosing** into the Bartholomew County Teen Spirit Queen. Would it?”

Nikki shrugged, smiled and jabbed her spork into what looked like cheese-covered mud. She shoveled it into her mouth with **exuberance**.

“Come on,” I **exhorted**. “Spill the beans.”

She almost snorted up a mouthful of mush. “That was the worst joke ever, Fran . . . Okay, okay, so I was saving it for dessert, but I guess I’ll tell you. I talked to him today.”

“Him? You mean Luke?”

“Yeah.”

“So you figured out a context?”

“I did,” she said. “Thanks for the advice.”

“Wow. So how’d it go?”

“Oh, my God. It was incredible. We totally established **rappor**. There’s just something about that guy—he’s got that quiet simmering brain-power thing. He observes but doesn’t comment too much.”

“He’s **succinct**,” I said.

“Totally. And he stays kind of withdrawn and makes you come after him, you know.”

“So he’s **elusive**,” I said.

“Are you kidding me? Totally. He’s everything. He’s the un-gettable guy.”

“Your ideal mate,” I said, slurping at my straw **disdainfully**.

“Exactly.”

“So how did you do it?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“Create context.”

“Oh. Well. I . . .” Nikki put her spork down. She wiped Taco Bell residue from her hands with a napkin. Not in a normal, massaging motion but more **akin** to the **deranged**, obsessive-compulsive Lady Macbeth manner of hand rubbing.

“You what?” I prodded.

“Well what happened was, I remembered—total **coincidence** here—that you weren’t so **enthralled** with your verbal PSAT scores. And I heard that Luke is a seriously smart guy, with a huge vocabulary, so I figured, hey, we could kill three birds with one stone or whatever. You know . . . help me, help you, help him. It’s a win-win-win situation . . .”

“Excuse me Nikki,” I said. “How exactly did I get involved here?”

Nikki ran her hand over her hair, and I noticed that her hand was **quivering**. “I signed you up for vocab tutoring lessons with Luke. Just like once every couple weeks.”

“You did what?”

“Think of it as an early birthday gift for my best friend,” she said.

I stabbed my spork **vehemently** into my Mexican pizza. “My birthday is a month away.
And why would I want tutoring lessons from a guy I detest, especially in vocabulary, when you know that I pride myself on my verbal legerdemain?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You’re good with words. But I figured that since you scored way lower than you should have that—”

“Be nice,” I said.

“Oh, I know. I’m so sorry. I know I’m psycho. Go ahead and take me away in a straitjacket . . .” Nikki slumped down in the booth. “It’s just that, you told me to establish context, and I brainstormed all night, and that was all I could come up with.”

“Why didn’t you at least ask me first?”

“You would have said no.”

“Valid point. But then—why didn’t you just get lessons for yourself? Why for me? How is my getting lessons from him going to help your cause at all?”

“I don’t know.” She groaned. “I don’t want him to think I’m dumb, especially when I practically needed a dictionary just to carry on a conversation with him. It just seemed too blatant. I didn’t want to put myself, you know, below him from the very beginning of the relationship. I figure this way I can get to know him slowly, through you, and strike that perfect balance between accessible and right there in your face, you know?”

“Sweet. So now I get to be illiterate for you, by proxy.”

Nikki nodded. “I guess you could put it that way. I’m so sorry. I know I’m a bad person . . . deplorable scum, a wretched low-life . . .” She scooched out of the booth and got on her knees, next to me. She clasped her hands together and shot me puppy-dog eyes. “I confess my sins. But please, if you have any empathy for me whatsoever, you’ll take these lessons. I’m paying for them, and you know how frugal I can be . . .”

“Gee,” I said. “Thanks for your patronage.”

“Pleeeeeeeeeease,” she begged. I almost pitied the girl. Unbelievable what we’re willing to do for the opposite sex.

“But I don’t need vocab lessons,” I said. “What am I supposed to do, pretend I’m a moron so he doesn’t catch on to our machinations?”

“That would be nice . . .”

“I don’t know,” I said, though I could feel myself softening somewhat. “I think I need some more incentive.”

“You want another Mexican Pizza?” she asked hopefully.

“No,” I answered, holding out for a better contract. “But something. I don’t know. We’ll see . . .”

Vocabulary Drill
September 26: National Good Neighbor Day
akin · similar
altruism · self-sacrifice
atypical · out of character
blatant · obvious
coincidence · pure chance
conundrum · puzzle or riddle
deplorable · terrible
deranged · crazy
October 1: Chinese Moon Festival
After she bribed me with a gift certificate for a free massage, I finally acquiesced to Nikki’s demands. Which is why, after soccer practice today, she dropped me off in Forest Estates at 3224 Grove Parkway—a.k.a., the House o’ Luke. We could barely see the house number because of all the trees and vines and fecund greenery cascading onto his front lawn.
“This is like a freakin’ rain forest,” Nikki said.
“Well, if I get assassinated by some irate primate, it’ll be on your conscience.”
“You’ll be fine,” Nikki said. “Thank you so much for doing this. You’re the greatest.”
“No prob. Anything for a friend and a deep tissue massage.” I smiled. “By the way, what’s your plan? Are you gonna wait until he answers the door and then just jump out and accost him?”
“What am I, an idiot? Wait—don’t answer that,” she said quickly when she saw the smile
on my face. “I don’t know, I may wave or something. I haven’t decided whether or not to make my move today. Feeling kind of blah. I was thinking I’d let you get to know him a little first, and then give me some hints about the best way to reel him in.”

“Got it,” I said.

I stepped out of the car. The full import of what I was about to do occurred to me for the first time. Getting tutored by an egomaniac I don’t know so that Nikki can score a boyfriend. I shuffled across the lawn and pressed the doorbell. After an interminable silence, there was the tap-tap of footsteps on tile. The door creaked open. I held my already bated breath. A face appeared, but not Luke’s. It was the softened face of a matriarch who, despite her graying hair, maintained the radiant smile and general vivacity of a much younger woman.

“Hello,” she said. “You must be Francesca.”

“That’s me.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Mrs. Barton,” she said with a genial smile. She extended her hand. I shook it. “Welcome to our humble abode.”

“Thanks.”

She gestured for me to step inside. The house smelled like cinnamon and desiccated lemon peels. I heard the mellifluous sprinkle of running water in the background.

“Would your friend like to come in, too?” she asked, gesturing behind me.

“Oh . . .” I turned around and shooed Nikki away with a dismissive flick of the wrist.

“No. She dropped me off. She’s leaving. Thanks.”

“Luke got home late from practice. He’s still in the shower. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No thanks,” I said bashfully, even though I was a little thirsty.

Mrs. Barton and I prattled for a bit about how nice a town Columbus was. She apologized extensively for her son’s tardiness and then asked me to excuse her. She was a therapist and had lots of paperwork to do.

I said no problem. I waited there, alone, in the den, listening to the shower run, for a solid five minutes. Which may not seem like a long time, but it is when the person who is supposed to be tutoring you is flippantly whistling to himself in a shower just a few feet away. I could feel the anger amassing inside me, and I knew that I would have to suppress it somehow in order to maintain my civility. I realized the shower had stopped and poised myself for His Highness to step out and finally grace me with his presence. The door opened.

“Oh hey,” he said unassumingly. “You’re on time. So punctual. I’m sorry. You must think I’m such a punk.”

I didn’t say anything. He stood there, his freckled skin flecked with glistening beads of water, holding up his towel at the waist. I swallowed hard. He was lankier than I expected him to be, more sinewy than buff. I indulged in a shallow thought: Jeremy’s got a tighter six-pack. I wanted him to know I was annoyed without having to say it. I wanted badly to feign disinterest, just as I had planned, but he was suddenly too human, too right there. It was disarming.

“No problem,” I heard myself saying.

“Listen, I’ll go throw on some clothes and grab my stuff. Be right back . . .” He started to walk away, and I couldn’t help watching. When he flipped around, he caught me in a compromising position. “And don’t be checkin’ out my butt,” he said.

I bit my lip, feeling my face turn five different shades of red.

But when he came back, Luke immediately got down to business. I was stunned at how professional, and quite frankly, how good he was at tutoring. I was less beset by ennui than I’d
imagined I’d be. At the same time, it was clear that he grossly underestimated my verbal acumen, which annoyed me. But I sucked it up and played ignoramus in the name of allegiance to Nikki. My aplomb held up for almost the full hour, until, with about ten minutes left, he corrected my pronunciation of the word “arduous.”

“It’s not are-joo-us,” he said. “Technically, you’re supposed to pronounce the ‘d.’ More like, are-dyoo-us.” I threw my hands up in the air. “Listen, I know the word, all right. I know that it means ‘involving great difficulty or effort,’ and I’ve heard it pronounced myriad times, by teachers, parents and newscasters, and I know that my pronunciation is just as legitimate as yours.”

“What?” he said. “Easy there. I’m just trying to help out.”

“Well, you’re not.” I popped the cap on my pen for emphasis. “See, I’m afraid I’ve misled you somewhat. My friend signed me up for this because—um, because she heard me complain about my PSAT score from last year. But I’ve come a long way since then, and I don’t really need this tutoring. In fact, from what I’ve seen, my vocabulary prowess is basically tantamount to yours.”

“I doubt that, considering I’ve taken several SAT prep classes.”

“All the more reason for me to conserve time, energy and money by renouncing this little charade and going back to the vocab workbooks I’ve already bought.”

“Oh, so you are trying to bolster your score then?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, if you are, then trust me, no exercise could be more otiose than laboring over those workbooks without an actual person to help you out.”

Otiose? What the . . . ?


“I know what it means,” I lied.

Luke put up his hands in mock surrender. “Fine. I believe you. Listen, today I’m going to give you the abridged lesson. And from now on, I’ll concede that you’re an advanced student. Instead of doing these mundane exercises, we’ll just do random free-style word-offs, using bombastic words in discussions and polemics, just to amuse ourselves. We’ll both get better scores, and my parents can keep deluding themselves that I’m a responsible, industrious young adult with an actual income from this tutoring gig. How’s that sound?”

I paused, debating. This whole afternoon had been a waste of time, mostly. But I had picked up a few words I didn’t know, and I knew Nikki would freak out if I told her the whole plan was over before she’d even had a chance to take action.

“Sounds okay,” I said, trying to keep my tone from sounding as sulky as I felt.

“You know, I have to say that you deserve some plaudits yourself. From my first impression, I presumed you were totally regs.”

“Regs?”


“I get your point.”

“But I’m not so sure about you anymore. You’ve got some guts.”

Vocabulary Drill
October 1: Chinese Moon Festival

abode  · home
abridged  · shortened
accost  · approach
acquiesced  · agreed
acumen  · intelligence
allegiance  · loyalty
amassing  · collecting
aplomb  · poise
arduous  · difficult
assassinated  · killed
bashfully  · shyly
bated  · restrained
beset  · troubled, harassed
bolster  · strengthen
bombastic  · pompous
cascading  · pouring
civility  · politeness
clairvoyance  · perceptiveness
compliment  · flattering remark
concede  · grant
conscience  · moral sense
deluding  · deceiving
desiccated  · dried out
disarming  · charming
disinterested  · lack of concern
dissolute  · haughty
egomaniac  · self-centered person
ennui  · boredom
extensively  · in-depth
fecund  · fertile
flecked  · speckled
flippantly  · disrespectfully
futile  · pointless
genial  · friendly
grace  · honor
grossly  · hugely
import  · meaning
industrious  · hard-working
infuriated  · angered
interminable  · endless
irate  · angry
matriarch  · ruling female
mellifluous  · smooth-sounding
mock  · fake
October 12: Columbus Day

“You thought it was my butt?” Jeremy complained. “How’s that possible? How could we be dating for this long and you can’t distinguish mine from someone else’s?”

“I don’t know!” I said. “We were running. I couldn’t see!”

This was the umpteenth time our conversation had returned to The Incident. We were ambling through Fair Oaks Mall. The search for a present for Jeremy’s niece had somehow turned into me desperately trying to mollify Jeremy’s annoyance. As I probably should have expected, an eavesdropping fullback overheard my comment to Luke, and it had found its way back to Jeremy. Now he was being so querulous about the topic, I was starting to wonder if I’d accidentally exhumed some latent insecurity Jeremy had about his butt.

“But you have perfect vision.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t add up.”

“What can I say? I’m human. I’m fallible. I’m sorry.”

“It’s just so stupid, Fran. I mean, why would you yell out nice butt even if you thought it was me? It’s not like I would’ve been all psyched, like, Yeah. That’s my girlfriend.”

“All right, listen,” I said. “I get your point. I don’t know what I was thinking, okay? Now, can we put a moratorium on this topic? Because we’ve reached an impasse, and I can’t just keep apologizing over and over.”

Jeremy dropped my hand. “And that’s another thing. You’re always trying to use big words. You sound all stilted, like . . .” Jeremy bobbled his head and spoke in a nasally voice, mimicking me. “I’ve noticed your penchant for verbosity and have decided to put a moratorium on your speaking . . .”

“A mora-what?” I asked.

“Forget it. You know what I mean. Why can’t you just talk like a normal person?”

I was about to snap back something about how he should really be working on his own vocabulary anyway, when I saw the hurt look in his eyes and realized this wasn’t the time.
Jeremy’s ego had suffered a real bruising, and what he needed now was some serious smoothing over, not just more fighting.

“Let’s check out this store,” I said, grabbing his elbow and steering him inside. It was one of those gift stores where everything was either a gag gift or a parody of some actual gift.

“How about this?” I said, picking up a box. “You think little Claire would like some edible underwear?”


“Yeah, I’m thinking this isn’t really the place to find a present for your three-year-old niece.”

“I just wish the guys on the team hadn’t heard,” Jeremy muttered. Apparently my attempt at distraction hadn’t worked. “What really bugs me is that now they all think my girlfriend wants that stupid poseur. And you don’t even know the guy.”

“Well, actually—” I froze, clamping my mouth shut before I could say another word.

Okay, I know, it’s big-time wrong to lie to your boyfriend. But is it still a lie if you just, like, leave something out? Because right as I was about to tell Jeremy how Luke was tutoring me, I realized that it would be just about the last thing he’d want to hear. The timing was all wrong.

“Actually, what?” Jeremy asked, his expression wary.

I smoothed my skirt to steady myself. “Oh, nothing—I was just going to say you shouldn’t care what those guys think,” I said. It was totally lame, but it seemed to work, because the suspicious look in his eyes faded back to the scowl that had been there a second ago.

“You just don’t get what it’s like,” he said. “Guys are different.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” I said, giving him my best wide-eyed adoring girlfriend half-smile. “But it’s over, okay? And I just had an idea—we should check out That’s Pretty Personal. It’s a few doors down, and I think you’ll find something there.”

Jeremy followed me to the store, and his mood eased when he caught sight of the display window. “This store looks perfect.”

“I told you. It’s got really unique gifts.”

A woman approached us as soon as we walked in. She was smiling so solicitously that you knew she had to work there. “Can I help you two?” she asked.

“We’re looking for a gift,” I said.

“For a little girl,” Jeremy added.

“How old is she?” the woman asked.

“Three.”

“Birthday?” she inquired.

“Uh huh,” Jeremy said.

“Follow me,” she said. “I think I have the perfect thing. Have you ever seen Groovy Girls? All little girls love Groovy Girls.”

She led us to the back of the store, and Jeremy forgot all about Luke as I helped him choose which Groovy Girl Claire would like best.

I’m not going to say there wasn’t a little twinge hanging around my stomach, reminding me that it wasn’t such a good idea to keep quite about the tutoring thing. But I’m not going to be doing this stupid tutoring thing much longer anyway. Once Nikki reaps Luke in, I’ll be out of there. Jeremy will never have to know.

Ignorance is, as the maxim goes, bliss.
Vocabulary Drill
October 12: Columbus Day
bliss · delight
distinguish · tell between
eavesdropping · snooping or listening in
exhumed · dug up
fallible · imperfect
impasse · standstill
inquired · asked
latent · hidden
maxim · saying
mimicking · imitating
mollify · subdue
moratorium · an end
parody · spoof
pennchant · fondness
poseur · pretender
querulous · argumentative
solicitously · kindly
stilted · stiff

October 22: National Nut Day
Tonight was opening night for varsity soccer. There’s nothing like that anticipation, that nervous churning in your gut as you lace up your cleats. We trotted out of the locker room, me leading my troupe of soccer warriors. A faint zephyr blew across the field, disseminating the aroma of freshly mowed grass. We were greeted by loud cheers from the obstreperous crowd of rabble-rousing fans that Columbus High is infamous for.

The game was tight. This year I’m playing center halfback, which means I’m responsible for setting up most of our plays, both offensive and defensive. Coach says I’m supposed to be indefatigable in pursuit of the ball but never lose my composure. I thought I did a decent job of that throughout the first half. But in the second half, with the game deadlocked in a 0-0 stalemate, fatigue set in and I started to get flustered. The girl who was defending me—this total Amazon chick—kept grabbing the back of my jersey when the ref wasn’t looking. Fed up with her mendacious strategy, and the fact that I was getting no whistles, I jogged up and asked the ref about her vision problems. “What are you, myopic?”

She blew the whistle and gave me a yellow card. I deserved it, I guess. The crowd stood behind me though, heckling the officials with the chant: “Three blind mice! Three blind mice!”

Finally, in the last few minutes of the game, my dogged persistence paid off. Someone passed me the ball in front of the goal, and when I turned to shoot, Amazon Chick hacked me. The ref blew the whistle. Penalty kick. Coach yelled out for Natalie Gaskill to take it, since her shot was the most accurate. Emboldened by the rush of adrenaline that I always feel in the face of injustice, I dissented.

“Let me take it,” I told Coach, with utter certitude. “I’ll make it.”

“It’s all you then,” Coach said.
As I walked toward the penalty stripe, an **intimidating** hush fell over the crowd. Focus, Francesca. I noticed that a group of guys had assembled behind the goal. It was the guys’ varsity team, who had a game right after us. Focus. Don’t look. But it was too late. I saw Jeremy first. He clenched his fist in **solidarity** and nodded as if to say: You got it, babe. I glanced to the left of him, and there, smiling a huge, **beatific** smile, was Luke.

I closed my eyes and tried to block them out. Visualize the ball going into the net. I set the ball down. The goalie was hunched over and glaring at me. Focus. I took a few steps back, exhaled and charged at the ball. But at the last second, something went **awry**. I kicked down the middle, right into the goalie’s chest. Worst shot ever. Luckily, she bobbed it. I pounced on the rebound and scored. It wasn’t pretty, but a goal was a goal. The crowd roared. My teammates surrounded me. I was a heroine, for the moment at least.

After our game, I showered and went out to cheer Jeremy on. Before I got to the bleachers, I saw Nikki running toward me. I assumed she wanted to give me **kudos** for a job well done, but the distressed look on her face suggested otherwise.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“It’s Jeremy,” she said. “He came down hard on his ankle, first save of the game. His parents just drove him to the hospital.”

Vocabulary Drill
October 22: National Nut Day
accurate · precise
anticipation · state of expectation
awry · out of kilter, wrong
beatific · saintly
certainty · assurance
composure · self-control
disseminating · spreading
dissented · disagreed
emboldened · encouraged
fatigue · exhaustion
flustered · upset, confused
indefatigable · tireless
infamous · well-known
intimidating · frightening
kudos · praise, applause
mendacious · dishonest
myopic · short-sighted
obstreperous · hostile
persistence · endurance
solidarity · unity
stalemate · standoff
troupe · group
zephyr · breeze
October 23: My Birthday
Talk about bad timing—can you believe I had to have my seventeenth birthday today, right after Jeremy’s injury? I guess I should have been prepared for disappointment, considering how grim my horoscope was. Here’s an excerpt: “Dear obdurate and controlling Scorpio, Unless you surrender to those circumstances beyond your control, you could end up in the eye of the storm. Proceed with caution. Little quirks may surface in a new relationship (personal or work), leaving you to rethink the depth of your commitment.” Hmm . . .

The day wasn’t a complete loss, I guess. Nikki got me a cool shirt and some sunglasses from Urban Outfitters in Indy. My parents made me a steak dinner and a cake. After that, I went over to Jeremy’s to fulfill my duty as doting girlfriend. I couldn’t even really enjoy my day until then, because I was so anxious to make sure he was okay.

So, he’s going to be fine, but it turns out he sprained his ankle, so he’s going to be out for the rest of the season. I felt terrible for him, but the thing is, it was still my birthday, you know? And I hate to wallow in self-pity, but I couldn’t believe Jeremy didn’t even get me a present. He gave me a card and apologized elaborately for being too incapacitated to go shopping, but that wasn’t enough to make amends. Especially since all he could talk about was one thing. Or, actually, one person . . .

“I can’t believe, after how hard I trained this summer.” Jeremy bared his teeth. “I mean, did you see how bad his technique was? Did you see the way he flopped around like a fish?”

“Who’s that?” I asked, playing dumb.

“Luke!” he yelled. “Did you see how mediocre he was?”

Didn’t look so bad to me, I thought. I noticed he didn’t get scored on. I immediately felt guilty for thinking that, but Jeremy’s self-absorption was getting on my nerves.

“Did you notice?” Jeremy prodded.

“I wasn’t paying attention,” I said.

“Oh.” Jeremy looked back up at the TV. “Well, he sucked.”

Sweet, I thought. Happy birthday to me.

Vocabulary Drill
October 23: My Birthday
amends · apologies
doting · devoted
elaborately · with great care, at length
excerpt · brief passage
grim · dismal
incapacitated · unable
obdurate · hard-hearted
wallow · roll around

October 27: Mother-in-Law’s Day
I had my second tutorial with Luke today. Having listened to a weeklong stream of vitriol from Jeremy about the chump who usurped his spot on the team, I couldn’t help but feel combative toward Luke. Instead of reciprocating my chilly demeanor, though, Luke responded by being gentlemanly and sweet.
“How’s your boyfriend feeling?” he asked.
“Okay.” I figured concise replies would discourage further interrogation.
“That sucks for him, man. Ankle injuries are the worst.”
“Yeah.”
“So how long have you two been going out?”
“Four months.”
“Oh yeah? Did you have a crush on him before that?” he asked, giving me a teasing grin.
“Not really,” I said curtly. “I thought we were supposed to be doing vocab stuff.”
“Oh right. My bad.” He shuffled through his papers and handed me a catalog of words.
“Here. How about we just try having a conversation using the words on this sheet?”
“Sure,” I said. “You start.”
Luke cleared his throat. “Hypothetically, it’s best for a newcomer to fully immerse himself in his new environs.”
I squinted at the page, trying to assemble a thought. “Unless, of course, the new environs are fraught with freaks who throw themselves ignominiously at the newcomer.”
“In which case, he should recoil from those noxious creatures, into his own realm.”
I gave Luke a look. “Which assumes, perhaps erroneously, that our newcomer is male.”
He laughed. “In which case,” I added. “He should be wary not to ostracize himself, to keep from turning himself into a pariah.”
“Perhaps, though,” Luke responded, “if he finds a woman worthy of his idolatry—the very paragon of grace and beauty—and if she arouses within him deep pathos, he will be too preoccupied to care that he’s a pariah.”
I looked at him. There was something coquettish to his tone, but I couldn’t decipher the meaning of what he’d said through the thick morass of needlessly big words.
“But where would one find such a babe?” I asked. “A creature so incredible that she made all other females seem bland and superfluous.”
“He may not have to look far.”
“No vocab words,” I said. “You lose.”
We did a few more exercises, then played Boggle for the rest of the allotted time. When the session was over, I asked Luke about one of the plants in his verdant front lawn as a guise to get him to escort me outside. We were barely out the door when I saw Nikki strutting toward us, using the lawn as a runway to show off a mighty scant outfit.
“Hey!” I said, stretching my acting skills to the utmost. “How opportune. We just finished. Luke, I think you remember my friend Nikki, the benefactor for our tutoring sessions.”
“Of course.”
“So how was he?” Nikki asked in her sultriest tone. “Is he as good a wordsmith as he claims to be?”
I looked at Luke, raising my eyebrows. I wasn’t about to give his superinflated ego any extra stroking.
But it didn’t seem to matter, anyway. Luke wasn’t even paying attention to me. His eyes were glued to Nikki, and judging from the way he was ogling her, even the great Luke Barton was mortal. His mild amusement for our silly little word games was immaterial in comparison. Whatever electrostatic current Nikki and Luke were volleying back and forth didn’t involve me. I was definitely extraneous here. “Is your cell phone in your car?” I asked. “I need to call my mom.”
“Oh,” Nikki said, not even looking at me. “Yeah. It’s in the car. Back seat.”
I sat in the car with the radio on, pretending to call mom but fully absorbed in watching them. It’s weird to witness raw, chemical attraction. I know I should have been relieved to see the way they were flirting with each other. It meant Nikki’s plan was already working, and I was one step closer to saying adios to being mocked by Luke on a regular basis. But for some reason, the whole scene annoyed me. The way Nikki laughed extra hard at whatever Luke was saying, leaning in to touch his arm briefly. The way he looked at her like all he wanted was to kiss her. I’d always thought that once I had a boyfriend I wouldn’t mind seeing how silly people got around someone they liked, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was just too cynical for my own good.

When Nikki finally tore herself away to come back to the car, the whole ride home was one long rant about how “intensely” she and Luke had “connected.” I said I was glad to help out. And I was . . . right?

Vocabulary Drill
October 27: Mother-in-Law’s Day
allotted • prearranged
catalog • directory
combative • argumentative
concise • brief
coquettish • flirtatious
curtly • tersely
cynical • scornful
decipher • decode
demeanor • manner
environ • surroundings
erroneously • wrongly
extraneous • unneeded
fraught • filled
guise • excuse
hypothetically • theoretically
idolatry • worship
ignominiously • shamefully
immaterial • unimportant
immerse • plunge
incredible • extraordinary
interrogation • questioning
morass • tangle
mortal • human
noxious • toxic
ogling • eyeing
opportune • timely
ostracize • exile
paragon • ideal
pariah • outsider
pathos • pity
October 31: Halloween
Just got back from the Halloween party at Megan’s house, which means I come wielding copious amounts of gossip.

Megan, it should be noted, is one of the members of the Triumvirate. (They don’t call themselves that—it’s a sobriquet Nikki and I came up with freshman year to describe their ambition for absolute dominion over the social functions of our class.) Megan, Cecily and Shannon are the three “coolest” girls in our class, as defined by . . . well, themselves. There’s no need to describe them in depth, because they’re as shallow as the kiddie pool. I think most high schools have some version of The Triumvirate. In summary—Megan’s the imperious leader who has the most money of the three, and thus throws the best parties. Cecily’s the pretty but vacuous idiot with the unbridled “Omigod!” enthusiasm. And Shannon, while clearly the smartest, is a witch whom I have loathed since freshman year, when I overheard her describe me as “insignificant.”

So Nikki and I showed up late, partly due to her neurotic attention to the smallest minutiae of her appearance while getting ready. Such thrilling topics as the even distribution of self-tanner somehow became fodder for extensive debate. The sad thing was, I picked out our costumes—nurses, how original—because I figured it would be simple. But I forgot about Nikki’s need to look absolutely perfect, for purposes of enticing Luke. Put that together with a nurse costume, and you have a recipe for getting-ready longevity.

By the time we got there, Luke was already the epicenter of a big crowd. He was dressed up as a monk—a monk who, paradoxically, was surrounded by girls. It was just too much. The sounds of you’re-so-funny giggle fits emanating from his band of cloying disciples was enough to make even the most stalwart of stomach want to vomit.

“I’m going to get a drink,” Nikki said.

And this from a girl who generally repudiates alcohol, like me. We went down to the keg, at the end of the gargantuan deck behind Megan’s palatial home.

High school parties provide some of the best people-watching in the world—especially the ones that actually have alcohol, like Megan’s did. What looks like social chaos is, upon closer inspection, an organized group ritual. People gather in conservative clumps of the same friends they hang out with outside of parties. Everyone grasps their cups like security blankets. Some groups seem entirely dedicated to making themselves laugh. Guys gape at the girls they covet. Girls play coy, pretending not to notice, but are actually putting on a show with their radiant accidental smiles and winsome little hair flips.

Then the alcohol kicks in, for the kids who like to get drunk. A fair amount of guys start
acting like *imbeciles*, *garnering* as much camera time as they can with un-funny jokes and *strident* cackling. The *pugnacious* drunks start fights. The weepy drunks cry.

Me, I tend to opt out of all the above in favor of the state of mind I know best—*sobriety*. Tonight I was the designated driver for Nikki and Jeremy, but the truth is I never really want to drink anyway. It just makes my stomach upset, and after seeing how stupid people around me act, why would I want to look like them?

First up was the Triumvirate *debacle*. On occasion, two members of the *clique* turn on each other, usually *spurred* by the passive-aggressive *conniving* of the third member. This time it was Cecily vs. Shannon, with Megan too absorbed in Luke to take part. It’s hard to say what *trifle* caused the *rift*, but it somehow resulted in Cecily tossing her beer in Shannon’s face. Shannon screamed *indignantly* that her shirt was ruined, then responded by dousing Cecily’s shirt with beer.

The next vaudeville act was, for me, the most entertaining, and not just because it involved my best friend. Just past midnight, Megan cleared out her parents’ *opulent* living room furniture and turned the room into a dance floor. By the time I made it inside to check on my fellow nurse, she was part of a group of girls all dancing around Luke like he was some kind of Greek god or something. I mean, please. He had to be getting a real rush from all that ridiculous attention.

I wasn’t the only one who didn’t enjoy the spectacle on the dance floor. My slouching, bleary-eyed boyfriend kept muttering angry comments from his spot on the couch next to me. “What is it about that guy?” Jeremy said, shaking his head. “He’s such a tool.”

I couldn’t help half-wishing I were out there dancing too—not with Luke, of course. But Jeremy wasn’t up for it, and I didn’t want to leave him by himself.

After the big Luke-a-thon dance, as I correctly *surmised*, the rest of the night was *anticlimactic*. Before long, the party thinned out and I could no longer *stifle* the yawns. “Let’s go,” I said.

“Gladly,” Jeremy said.

I surveyed the dance floor for Nikki, to no *avail*. She’d vanished. Went back out onto the porch. No dice. Went back inside and asked the girls in the long queue for the bathroom if they’d seen Nikki. They all nodded *lethargically*, except one, who pointed up. I walked around to the front and went upstairs. A voice in my head was telling me that someone else was missing from downstairs, too, but I ignored the thought, focused on finding Nikki.

I heard them before I saw them. A familiar giggle, and little murmurings I couldn’t quite make out. I told my legs to walk away, but for some reason I couldn’t. I took two steps up, and . . .

I froze, my mouth falling open. They were standing in the hallway near the wall, their lips locked in a kiss like no kiss I’d ever seen before. Intense, like they were afraid to let go of each other, but still sweet and soft at the same time. They were so in sync I felt like they’d discussed it in advance.

Jeremy and I don’t kiss like that. For some reason it was the first *coherent* thought I could muster. And I was sure it was the reason for the strange way my heart was squeezing.

I cleared my throat, “Um . . . excuse me?”

They broke apart and turned at the sound of my voice, but neither of them seemed too happy to see me. My face felt warm, and I couldn’t meet Nikki’s eye.

“I was about to leave. Just seeing if you wanted to come with,” I said. I was going for casual, but apparently the weird high-pitched thing that happened instead wasn’t under my
control.

“Go ahead,” Nikki said. “I think I’ll stay right here.”

“Right. Um, okay.” I nodded, then headed back downstairs to find Jeremy, swallowing back the funny taste in my mouth.

Vocabulary Drill
October 31: Halloween
anticlimactic · disappointing
avail · benefit
chaos · disorder
clique · group
cloying · sickly sweet
coherent · rational
conniving · scheming
copious · plentiful
covet · desire
coy · shy
debacle · disaster
dominion · power
emanating · originating
epicenter · precise center
fodder · food
gape · stare
gargantuan · enormous
garnering · gaining
imbeciles · idiots
imperious · domineering
indignantly · angrily
lethargically · lazily
loathed · hated
longevity · long life
minutiae · details
opulent · showy
palatial · palace-like
paradoxically · in contradiction
pugnacious · aggressive
repudiates · rejects
rift · split
sobriety · abstinence
sobriquet · nickname
spurred · prompted
stalwart · robust
stifle · cover
strident · loud
surmised · guessed
trifle · little thing
triumvirate · threesome
unbridled · unrestrained
vacuous · empty-headed
wielding · carrying
winsome · charming

November 4: Chaos Never Dies Day
I was standing at my locker today, between third and fourth periods, minding my own business, when Jeremy stormed up—well, as much as he could storm on his almost healed ankle—and blind-sided me with a stream of invective.

“I can’t believe, after all we’ve been through, that you would do this to me. Pretend to be my faithful girlfriend, pretend that we tell each other everything because we’re . . .” He made quote fingers. “Best friends. I can’t believe I trusted you. I can’t believe I thought you were different.”

I was as befuddled as I was concerned. If not for the vein popping out of his forehead, I might even have assumed he was kidding. It sounded like some poorly written soap opera tirade. I glanced over Jeremy’s shoulder. Were we on a hidden camera show?

“What are you talking about?” I asked.
“What am I talking about? Oh, I don’t know. Maybe about the fact that my girlfriend has been meeting up with Luke Barton on the sly, at his own home!”

Oh no, I thought, wincing. Why hadn’t it occurred to me that maybe he’d hear it from someone else, and that it would look a whole lot worse than what it really was? I buried my face in my hands to cover up my deer-in-the-headlights expression.

“Great,” Jeremy said. “That’s great! So it’s not even a lie then. I was really hoping you’d at least try to convince me. I can’t believe this. Finding out about my girlfriend’s infidelities from my teammates.”

“It’s not what you’re thinking,” I said. “There’s nothing going on between us.”
“How do I know that? How long have you two been hanging out?”
“First of all, we haven’t been hanging out. He has tutored me, twice, and trust me, it couldn’t have been more innocent.”
“But why wouldn’t you tell me if it was so harmless?”
Good point. Come on, Francesca. Dig your way out of this hole. I exhaled. “Okay. The deal is, Nikki was, and still is, totally head-over-heels infatuated with the guy. Remember how they hooked up at the Halloween party? But she had no context with him.”

“Context?”
“Just stick with me. She had no way of getting to know him. So she came up with the ingenious idea of hiring him to give me vocab lessons to prepare me for my SATs, because he used to work for one of those SAT review classes or whatever.”
“But you have a great vocabulary.”
“I know.”
“And why you?” he asked. “Why not her?”
“I don’t know, all right! She didn’t want to be too flagrant with her come-on or something. Girl reasons . . . you know . . .”

Jeremy shook his head. He didn’t know.
I put my hand on his shoulder, hoping to turn the tide of his **dwindling** faith in me. “You saw Nikki at the party. You saw how **brash** she was in coming on to him.”

“Yeah, which is why I don’t get why she needed your help.”

“But that’s the thing—she didn’t have the guts to do that until after she’d already laid the groundwork, seeing him each time she picked me up from the tutoring sessions.” I had another idea to convince him. “Hey, who do you think is paying for lessons?”

“**Better not be you.**”

“Of course it’s not,” I said. “It’s Nikki.”

This **disclosure** seemed to calm Jeremy a little. The storm cloud lifted slightly. “So Luke and Nikki hooked up, right?” he asked. “The night of the party?”

“Yes. Thanks to yours truly.”

“So, technically, your job is over. You don’t have to keep up the tutoring charade any longer.”

I knitted my brow. For reasons I couldn’t explain, the **prospect** of quitting the tutorials didn’t appeal to me as much as it had until this moment. More specifically, the **concept** of having to quit the lessons because my boyfriend **mandated** it was kind of icky.

“I guess I don’t have to,” I said.

“But you want to?”

I **hedged**. “No, it’s just that . . . I do think he’s gonna help me get a higher SAT score, so maybe I’ll get into one of those colleges where I’m right on the cusp, like maybe an Ivy League school.”

“No!” He folded his arms in front of his chest. “I’m sorry, but I won’t allow some surfboard-waxin’ nimrod to take my spot on the team and my girl.”

“But he’s not taking your—”

“No more lessons. If you can’t handle that, then that’s it. We’re done.”

Witnessing this **insolent** command, I had to use all my stores of discipline to **quash** a surge of **antipathy** toward him. What a baby. But my mood **modulated** as I gauged the hurt look on his face. Was I being insensitive here? It really hadn’t been fair of me to keep this from him, and he had enough reasons to resent Luke already. Besides, maybe it was sweet in some way that he was so jealous over me. Right?

“Okay,” I said. “The next lesson will be my last.”

“You have to have another lesson?”

“The next one’s my last,” I **reiterated**. “Promise.”

**Vocabulary Drill**

November 4: Chaos Never Dies Day

- **antipathy** · dislike
- **befuddled** · confused
- **brash** · bold
- **concept** · idea
- **disclosure** · admission
- **dwindling** · shrinking
- **flagrant** · obvious
- **hedged** · dodged
- **infidelities** · disloyalties
ingenious · brilliant
insolent · rude
invective · criticism
mandated · commanded
modulated · moderated
prospect · possibility
quash · suppress
reiterated · repeated
tirade · outburst

November 9: USMC Day

Been doing a lot of pontificating about politics these past few weeks. My parents always have CNN on in the mornings before we leave, and it’s hard not to get sucked in to all the crazy stuff going on in the world.

However, my burning zeal for global affairs was actually not what inspired me, after a laborious twenty-seven hours of deliberation, to announce my candidacy today for Junior Class Vice President.

It was a last minute thing. I had an epiphany of sorts, yesterday. I’ll set the scene for you. It was a crisp, serene autumn morning. Outside the window, our lawn was strewn with variegated leaves, colorful, like a finger painting. The sounds of jazz Muzak—Mom’s “easy listening” station—played in the background. It was an instrumental rendition of “Beat It,” with a flute as a surrogate for Michael Jackson’s voice.

I was sitting in our breakfast nook, leaning my stool against the wall, reading the Columbus High newspaper. There was a story about a student, Jimmy Thatcher, who got tossed out of CH in a plagiarism scandal. The guilty verdict against him had been—in the opinion of the student body (those who I talked to, anyway)—flat-out spurious. But we were powerless to the edicts of The Powers That Be—in this case, Principal Adams and all his cronies on the school board. The article didn’t name any names, of course, but it talked in vague terms about the unfairness of certain recent actions against a student whose guilt hadn’t been proven to the students’ satisfaction.

That’s when the epiphany came. Student Disciplinary Committee. We needed to create an elected board of students to balance the power of The Powers That Be. If a group of kids that reflected the disparate opinions of the student body were allowed to attend the board members’ caucuses, the students could take a stand for their fellow man in the egalitarian manner of this great country. Then maybe guys like Jimmy Thatcher wouldn’t end up getting bilked by the system.

But how would I get such progressive legislation passed? I would run for Class President! Wait a second. Bad idea. I would lose. I wasn’t that popular. Class Secretary? No, I hated taking notes. Vice President. Maybe. Yeah. Now, that was ambitious.

So I went and signed up today after third period. I’ve already started making posters. Jeremy totally supports my political aspirations and has been helping me with the posters. The fundamentalnet of my campaign will be, naturally, the establishment of the Student Disciplinary Committee (SDC). This is a big step for me. It’s a valiant step toward becoming The New Francesca, which I vowed I’d do over the summer. I will hold on to my convictions. I’m gonna make it happen. I can already hear my horde of followers chanting: SDC! SDC!
Vocabulary Drill
November 9: USMC Day
aspirations · ambitions
bilked · tricked
candidacy · standing for office
caucus · assemblies
convictions · beliefs
cronies · buddies
deliberation · consideration
disparate · not similar
edicts · laws
egalitarian · democratic
epiphany · divine realization
fundamental · basic
horde · crowd
laborious · difficult
legislation · law
nook · alcove
plagiarism · copying
pontificating · preaching
progressive · favoring change
rendition · version
serene · peaceful
spurious · false
tenet · theory
valiant · brave
variegated · multicolored
verdict · judgment
vowed · promised
zeal · enthusiasm

November 17: World Peace Day
Tonight was my last vocabulary tutorial with Luke. Aside from the Jeremy issue, Nikki was running low on funds and didn’t have much of a reason to keep sponsoring my lessons now that she had the guy.
As soon as we sat down for work, I told him what the deal was, just to get all the pent-up anxiety out. It went just the way I’d rehearsed it. “I have something to say,” I said.
“What’s that?”
“Due to extenuating circumstances beyond my control, but more specifically due to my expeditious advancement under your inimitable tutelage, I have chosen to forego further pedagogical services.”
“Excuse me?”
“This is my last lesson.”
“Yeah, I know what you meant. But I don’t get it.” Luke scrunched up his face. He looked not only befuddled but a bit rankled as well. Annoyed. A part of me felt a little happy that he wasn’t as psyched to cut off our tutoring as Nikki and Jeremy both were. Maybe I wasn’t so superfluous, after all.
“I thought we had a deal so I could pretend I had a job,” Luke said. “And get some extra cash.”
Right. That was what Luke cared about, not hanging around me. God, how many times over could I make myself an idiot? “Well, deal’s off,” I said brusquely.
“Why? I mean, is it so insufferable for you to stop by my place for some weekly big-worded banter?”
“Frankly, yes,” I bit out. “And I really don’t think I need the practice, anyway.”
“Oh is that right?” Luke said. “Very interesting . . .”
I pressed my lips together and nodded solemnly. Luke began to inspect me more closely, almost like an anthropologist studying the behavior of a primate.
“What?” I asked.
“Nothing.”
“Say it.”
“This wouldn’t have anything to do with Jeremy, would it?” Luke said.
“No. Not at all.”
“Not at all?”
“No really . . .”
“What’s that mean?”
“Not exclusively, anyway.”
“But was he a factor in the equation?”
“I don’t know,” I said. “Why are you grilling me?”
“Would you say Jeremy was an integral factor?”
“No. I mean, yeah sure, I mentioned to Jeremy that, considering how busy I’ve been, it seemed a bit wasteful to be spending time on these sessions with you. And he totally concurred.”
“I’ll bet he did. Looks like we know who wears the pants in your relationship.”
Whoa. His retort was like a cruise missile to my solar plexus. Once I shook off the impact, I was livid. I stepped forward and pointed at Luke’s chest. “I know you’re not gonna pretend you know anything about my relationship with Jeremy, and who does or does not wear the pants.”
Luke backed up, hands raised. “All right, all right. Fair enough. All I’m saying is that it would be a shame if you miss getting into Yale or Stanford because you’re being submissive.”
“Oh, really. And you don’t think it’s a tad presumptuous of you to think that you would be the deciding factor in whether or not I get into Yale? You know, the ancient Greeks believed that humans were punished by the Gods for that kind of hubris.”
“The ancient Greeks are dead,” Luke said. “And you might be misunderestimating the benefit of fifty SAT points and an articulate essay in the admissions pro—”
“Did you just say misunderestimate? That’s not a word.”
“The president used it in a speech,” Luke said. “So now it’s kind of a word.”
“And where did the president go to college?” I asked.
“Yale.”
“There,” I said. “I rest my case.”
“You win. Way to go. High five.” He put his hand up for me to slap.
“Why do you have to be such a wise guy all the time? Do you have a sincere bone in your body?”
“Of course.”
“Oh yeah? Which one? Let me guess, it’s one of those tiny little ear bones?” For some reason, I was suddenly outraged by his cool indifference to everything. I felt like going on the offensive. Luke needed to be kept in check. “You know, Luke. While we’re on the subject of sincerity, I was wondering, what are your intentions with my friend Nikki?”
“My intentions?”
“Yeah. Like, are you planning on going out with her? What’s the deal?”
“What is this? Are you on some sort of reconnaissance mission for her?” His eyes narrowed. “Is that what this whole thing is about, here?”
Uh-oh. Nikki would kill me if I gave her away. “Of course not,” I said quickly. “But as long as I’m here, I figured I could ask.”
“What do you want from me? I like Nikki. She’s cool. Do I want to marry her? I mean, come on. I just moved here. One thing’s for sure. I’m not going to throw my cards on the table just for your edification. If Nikki wants to know, she can ask.”
“She doesn’t have to. I’ve heard things. I know you probably don’t care about Nikki. You just want to get as much as you can out of her. Then you’ll move on to the next one.”
“Whatever.” He flipped his hand at me dismissively. “Thanks for the prognostication there, Adelphi.”
“Whatever. That’s the credo for your whole life isn’t it? It’s all good. Whatever.”
“For the time being, yeah.”
“Well guess what? You know, it’s selfish, lazy people like you who inspired me to go into politics,” I blurted out.
“Yeah. I’m running for Vice President.”
“VP, huh? Very impressive. But isn’t that the kind of thing where the President gets to pick his own running mate?”
I glared at him. “Junior Class Vice President.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?” Did Luke have to mock every single thing I ever said?
Was it, like, his job or something?
He rolled his eyes. “Nothing. Forget it.”
“Too late now. What’s so crazy about me running for Vice President?”
“No, it’s just like, even real politics is complete bull, and running for school government positions is even more absurd because there’s no actual power. I mean, why do you want to be vice president? To really change things? Of course not. It’s a popularity contest, to prove to yourself that people know you and think you’re okay. Who gives a flying—”
“I do!” I yelled, a little louder than I’d planned. “I’m not running to substantiate my popularity. It so happens that I have a political platform that I feel very strongly about. So don’t give me this too-cool-for-student-government crap.”
“All right,” Luke said. “Okay, then. So tell me. What’s your platform?”
“It’s just . . .” Something akin to hyperventilation set in at the realization that whatever I said would sound super cheesy. “It’s not like you actually care.”
“No, seriously. Tell me.”
“I think there should be a student disciplinary committee that has equal footing with the adults—”
“Wait a second, are you serious?”
“What?” I asked. “Why’s that so stupid?”
“It’s not. It’s just quixotic. You actually think that, as vice president, you have enough political clout to do . . . anything?”
“Yes.”
“Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings here, but you don’t. You’ll be blowing up balloons for the school dance, at best.”
“That’s not true.”
“But at least you’ll know you’re popular,” he said sardonically.
I felt like I was about to explode. Why did I have to take one more second with this jerk, anyway? “Just forget it,” I said. “You’d obviously rather sit here in your room and look down at everyone else in the entire world than actually take anything seriously. So you know what? This has nothing to do with Jeremy. I’m out of here, and it’s one hundred percent my own decision. Okay?”

I was pretty proud of myself after that one . . . but the frustrating part was, on my way out, I turned around and saw that same stupid condescending smile plastered on his face, like he knew I couldn’t stay away for long. Yeah, I’d show him.

Vocabulary Drill
November 17: World Peace Day
anthropologist · scientist of human development
anxiety · unease
banter · chit-chat
brusquely · abruptly
chortled · laughed
clout · power
concurred · agreed
edification · instruction
expeditious · swift
extenuating · outside influences
forego · give up
hubris · arrogance
inimitable · unique
insufferable · unbearable
integral · essential
intentions · goals
livid · furious
pedagogical · instructive
presumptuous · assuming
prognostication · prediction
quixotic · idealistic
rankled · irritated
November 23: National Cashew Day
Okay, fine. I miss him. But that’s totally between us, okay? Not a single soul will ever know. And it’s just because he’s the only person who can actually keep up with my vocabulary, and I think it really was helping me prep for the SATs. That’s all.

Anyway, Nikki *convened* an “*impromptu* emergency meeting” after school today, at Steak & Shake. I wasn’t sure what it was about, but I had an *inkling* that it was about him, so I wasn’t too pumped. We sat at our regular booth, the one nearest the jukebox. Never one for *circumlocution*, Nikki got directly to the point.

“I’m thinking about . . . you know. With him.”
“You mean Luke?” I asked, almost *regurgitating* a mouthful of vanilla shake.
“Of course! Who did you think I meant?”
“No, I guess I knew. It’s just kind of a shock.”
“Well it shouldn’t be. I’ve been talking your ear off for almost three weeks about how mind-blowing he is.”
“Yeah, on the phone . . . you have . . .” I mumbled *incoherently*.
“What?”
“I said, you’ve been telling me on the phone, and by email. I haven’t actually seen your face in almost a week.”
“Oh, honey, I know. I’m sorry. But that’s my whole point. He’s just swooped in on my life and taken over my every thought. His presence . . . it’s just so big and . . . overwhelming . . . and . . .”
“*Prodigious*?” I asked.
“Is that the word? I guess so. Anyway, so what do you think? Should I listen to my heart and just go for it?”
“Hmmm . . .” I slurped on my straw as a delaying *tactic*. My instincts were screaming No way, but I knew that wasn’t totally *objective*, considering how *incensed* I was at Luke. Instead of blurting out what I really thought, I decided to do some careful testing first. “So, let’s go over the pros and cons here. What are your reasons for thinking this is a good idea?”

Nikki snorted out a laugh. “I love it. You’re so calculating about stuff like this. My reasons . . .” She slurped her straw and swallowed. “My reasons are that he’s the most attractive, mysterious, interesting, *stimulating* guy I’ve ever met.” She looked into the distance and smiled this big, dreamy, sickening smile. “He’s the first guy I’ve hung out with who’s smarter than me. Way smarter. Did I tell you he wants to be an anthropologist?”
“Several times,” I said. “And you keep telling me how you love the fact that he’s all independent and *enigmatic*. Which is great, but it reminds me of your scouting report on Jason Reynolds, who ultimately broke your heart because he was a total scumbag player. My point is, aren’t you worried about Luke being a commitment-phobe?”
“No . . . I mean, we’ve been hanging out like three nights a week. I think it’s pretty obvious that we’re on the verge of going out.”

“Have you discussed it?”

“Not explicitly.”

“You haven’t had the relationship talk? The where-is-this-going talk?”

“No, Fran. Chill out. I don’t want to scare him off or—”

“Because I’m concerned that you’re setting yourself up for heartbreak. I mean, I’ve never seen you so exposed like this, and I really don’t trust this guy.”

“Oh, come on. It’s the twenty-first century. You don’t have to have a ring on your finger to have sex.”

“You say that, but I know for a fact that you’ll feel seriously aggrieved if he disappears afterward and acts like you don’t mean anything.”

“Uh, excuse me,” a voice said. Nikki and I looked up. It was the waiter, hovering there above us. He was new here. He had on the standard Steak & Shake uniform of goofy paper hat and a red bow tie. Steak & Shake bore some resemblance to one of those old diners from the fifties, with checkered floors and neon signs and oldies-but-goodies playing. Normally I revered this, but right now it just seemed ersatz. The waiter reached down to hand us menus.

“Actually, I don’t think we need them,” I said. “We know what we want.”

“Okay.” The waiter scribbled for his pad and pen. “Go ahead . . .”

“I’ll have the Frisco Melt Deluxe with cheese fries,” I said.

“Got it.” The waiter scribbled.

“And I’ll have a bowl of chili and the house salad with ranch dressing,” Nikki said.

“Okay, then.” The waiter finished scribbling. “Thanks, guys.”

As soon as he was out of earshot, Nikki leaned in and looked me in the eyes. “I think I know what’s going on. Luke mentioned you two had an argument at your last tutoring lesson. Is that the problem here?”

“No at all,” I said. “I’m just worried that you’re falling in deep like with him, like long-term-boyfriend, potential love like. And if that’s the case, then this may not be the best stratagem.”

“Why are you so convinced that he’s gonna break my heart?” Nikki leaned her elbows into the table. In the background, someone was singing about a “Devil with a Blue Dress On.”

“Do you know something I don’t know?”

“I just don’t trust him. I think he’s a player.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” Nikki said. “Because as soon as I get the chance, I’m going after him.”

Vocabulary Drill
November 23: National Cashew Day
aggrieved · upset
circumlocution · roundabout speech
convened · called together
enigmatic · mysterious
ersatz · false
explicitly · specifically
impromptu · last minute
incensed · angry
incoherently · inarticulately
inkling · suspicion
objective · impartial
prodigious · remarkable
regurgitating · spitting up
revered · respected
stimulating · exciting
stratagem · scheme
tactic · method

November 24: National Parfait Day
It was before first period when I saw it—right next to one of my posters. My jaw almost dropped to the floor in abject horror. A huge picture of him, smirking and giving a snarky double thumbs-up. Beneath it: LUKE BARTON FOR PRESIDENT OF VICE

Oh, no! He didn’t! I looked around, clenching my teeth. There were witnesses. A girl from my pre-calculus class was staring at me. Beside the stairs, I spotted Eric Crowther and a few of his freak-a-zoid friends, looking up and down to cover up their ambulance-chasing curiosity to my reaction. Eric didn’t look away though. He shook his head and bit his lip as if to say, Whatcha gonna do about that?

Instincts took hold and I was suddenly speed-walking down the hall. I passed Eric and started running, indifferent to how histrionic it must have looked. I darted mercurially in and out of aggregations of people, negotiating hallway traffic.

Campaign headquarters was near the entrance to the gym. I caught it out of the corner of my eye as I ran by and put on the brakes like a cartoon character. I wiped my brow as I approached, trying to focus in on the man behind the booth.

Give me a break. Luke was wearing a cowboy hat, a leather biker’s jacket, dark aviator glasses and fingerless gloves. A boom box next to him was playing “Free Bird” at low volume. He was perched on a makeshift throne and held a staff in his right hand. A multitude of well-wishers flanked him on all sides, both male and female. The guys were predominantly composed of mulleted rednecks doing guitar solos, but with a few inquisitive pre-frat boy types in the mix as well. The girls appeared to be a coalescence of fresophomores diverted from gym class by the thick miasma of testosterone. Several signs were posted, with messages boasting varying degrees of inanity. The few that stick out in my mind are: DON’T BELIEVE THE HYPEVICE RULES THE WORLDFREE MONEY FOR ALL!

I charged right up to the front of the booth. “What is all this? Are you running against me?”

“I’m not running against anyone. I’m running independently, for the lesser-known but imperative office of President of Vice.”

A few of his underlings cheered. Luke smiled.
“Oh, yeah?” I said. “What’s your platform?”
“Platform . . . hmm. I guess you could say my goal is to perpetuate the ideals of vice and immorality.”
“Cute. Are you mocking me?”
“Because if so, you’ve gone way too far. You’ve taken uncouth to phase two.”
He smirked suggestively, then started counting to three. They were all looking at each other, reveling in the camaraderie of their shared political beliefs.
“Hell, no, we won’t go! Hell, no, we won’t go!” They pumped their fists in shared gaiety, chanting in unison, flouncing about like a family of splashing ducks. “Hell, no, we won’t go! Hell, no, we won’t go!” Even the girls in their gym shorts had joined in.
“What does that mean?” I beseeched. “Go where?”
“Jerk.” I turned and walked away. I found out at lunchtime that Luke got suspended for two days for his grievous misconduct. To that I can only respond, in the immortal words of Bart Simpson . . . heh heh.

Vocabulary Drill
November 24: National Parfait Day
abject · despairing, cringing
aggregations · crowds
beseeched · pleaded
camaraderie · companionship
coalescence · grouping
composed · made up of
diverted · sidetracked
flanked · surrounded
flouncing · prancing
gaiety · cheerfulness
grievous · serious
histrionic · dramatic
immorality · corruption
immortal · undying
imperative · essential
inanity · stupidity
indifferent · uncaring
inquisitive · questioning
mercurially · unpredictably
miasma · haze
misconduct · bad behavior
multitude · huge number
predominantly · mainly
smirking · grinning
suggestively · implying indecency
uncouth · rude
underlings · subordinates

November 25: Thanksgiving
Ah, Thanksgiving at the Castarelli household. Per usual, Grandma Castarelli turned the
Head Cook position into an appointed U.S. Army command post, barking orders at mom and **censuring** me for my **lackadaisical** attitude toward the kitchen. Dad went downstairs to “work on his computer,” a.k.a. evacuate the **premises**. Grandpa C went outside to rake leaves. My brother Rico was nowhere to be found. And this year’s most significant cameo, Uncle Randy, was the exact opposite. He was **ubiquitous**.

I guess most families have some form of an Uncle Randy. He pulled up right before noon in his **dilapidated** RV, which was **yoked** to the back of a rusty pick-up truck. His horn sounded like a foghorn—AAH-OOH-GA! He dished out a few sloppy hugs and loud **salutations**, a cigarette dangling from his lips like it had a life of its own. “Looks like you’re growin’ into a woman,” he said to me, a **dubious** compliment at best. He spent a **protracted** moment trying to convince dad that he had been **abstemious** for months, despite his blatant beer-breath to the contrary. When Rico and his little skateboarding friends **materialized** in the driveway, he tried to join in and ended up flat on his butt.

A half hour or so before the turkey hit the table, Uncle Randy finished off the last of the **potables** in his Winnebago. He made a beeline for our liquor cabinet, muttering his **rationalization** that he “only drank on special occasions.” Experience has taught us that when he switches from beer to whiskey the results are **cataclysmic**, and this year was no exception. It started with an utterly inappropriate **anecdote** about an experience he had in Guadalajara. Say what you want about him, but Uncle Randy’s a great **raconteur**. Still, the story got a little racy, and my grandparents weren’t much amused.

Then came the momentous Dumping of the Mashed Potatoes. Luckily for him, they blended in well with the beige carpet in our living room. The climax came when Grandma called Uncle Randy a drunken **lout** under her breath. He **rebutted** by calling her a “senile fascist,” and that was his death **knell**. Mom gave Dad “the look,” and Dad asked Randy if he could talk to him outside. I heard Randy offering to **rescind** the comment, but it was too late. He spent the rest of the evening out in the Winnebago, listening to country music.

Thanksgiving went back to the family comfort-fest that it’s supposed to be, so I retreated to my room, where I decided to write a letter to Luke, inspired by the crazy behavior of all my loony relatives. **Dear Luke,** I just wanted to let you know that if your little campaign was directed at me, even **obliquely**, then it was rude and **indecorous**. You have already made your opinion about student politics known, so this extra smear campaign was flat-out **unwarranted**. The only reason I can imagine for you to mock something I take seriously in such a public and **defamatory** way is that you deliberately wanted to hurt my feelings. hat did I do to you? It is one thing to flaunt your **iconoclastic** views to the school to show how much cooler you are than the **peon**s who campaign in hopes of making a difference. But it is another thing altogether to single me out for ridicule (the fact that both “Vice” and “President” are in your **fabricated** title cannot, after all, be a coincidence), simply to amuse yourself. You think you’re such a renegade, such a **nonconformist**. I thought I was—**heretofore**—your friend. But needless to say, I am, hereafter and forevermore, not. Your friend, that is. But thanks for sharing your (rather **paltry**) verbal knowledge, and good luck in the rest of your (completely worthless) life. **Ours in infinite enmity,**

**rancesca Castarelli**
November 30: National Woodmen’s Day
I found out I won the election today. Principal Adams divulged the results over the PA system during last period. Some of the people in my health class clapped, causing me to timorously blush into my desk’s wood veneer. When the bell rang, Jeremy was waiting for me, right outside the classroom’s threshold. He held me up in the air like a pirate showing off his looted plunder, and after he put me down he wrested one of Luke’s posters from the wall and shredded it. At first I was psyched at how supportive he was being, but then I realized that the effusiveness of his enthusiasm wasn’t just about me.

“Babe,” he said, his face practically glowing. “How cool is this? You just won the supreme popularity contest. Pretty nice having Jeremy Malone for a boyfriend, right?”

I felt like I’d been socked in the stomach, and it was even worse when he didn’t understand why I was upset.

I know I still should have felt euphoric about winning. A part of me wanted to do a
victory dance on Luke’s face. But for some reason, I also felt chagrined and a little guilty. Embarrassed at my own self-importance, and about taking my campaign and this whole SDC issue so seriously. Jeremy’s words just confirmed everything Luke had teased me about. Had he been right, even a little? Had I really only won because I was Jeremy’s girlfriend? Was the whole Junior Class Vice President job just one big joke?

Vocabulary Drill

November 30: National Woodsmen’s Day
chagrined · ashamed
divulged · revealed
effusiveness · gushiness
euphoric · overjoyed
looted · burgled
plunder · booty
threshold · entrance
timorously · bashfully
veneer · coating
wrested · tore

December 1: AIDS Awareness Day

I was sitting in the living room this evening after school, procrastinating on my English essay, wallowing in self-pity, and fending off waves of bad cramps. “Blind Date” was on TV. It’s one of those dating shows you can’t stop watching because at least you’re not those people. This particular episode featured Gerald, a turgid Californian weightlifter with an orange fake bake. Gerald was big on first impressions. He started off by ridiculing his robust date’s nutritional shrewdness because she liked pizza, then proceeded to mack on her with slimy come-on lines. “If you would exude a more loving vibe, I swear I’d rock your world,” he crooned while trying to force-feed her organic pasta.

The doorbell rang. I got up, moaning. I saw in the peephole that it was Jeremy and creaked the door open.

“Come with me,” he said. “I’m taking you somewhere, to celebrate your victory.”

I smiled, feeling a little better. Maybe Jeremy’s first reaction was the usual guy thing of making a big scene and taking all the credit himself, but at least he was coming through now. I turned off the TV and grabbed my purse. Out by the car, Jeremy insisted on blindfolding me, despite my protests.

“You said you love surprises,” he argued.

He had me there. While tying the bandana around my eyes, he planted a soft kiss on my neck that melted me, the first iota of pleasure I’d felt in hours. We spun out of there in his Acura, me seeing nothing and him saying nothing, at least not that I could hear over the dissonant screech of some bad rock song. He’s being such a sweetie. Keep your mouth shut, Fran. But as much as I wanted to respond to his romantic gestures with sublimegratitude, my body had other plans.

I know it’s different for everyone, but the first day of my period is always the worst. It starts with the dull, persistent lower-backache. Then my stomach muscles are contracting in
wave-like paroxysms of pain. There’s dizzying nausea. Once, freshman year, I spent eight harrowing hours in the fetal position in my darkened room. “I’m sorry to be annoying,” I finally said, trying not to sound too whiny. “But could we listen to something a little more mellow?” “Oh sure,” he said. “I’m sorry.” He put on Sade’s Greatest Hits, which has sort of become “our CD” after serving as background music to more than a few make-out sessions. And I must admit, the first few notes of her luxuriant voice pacified me somewhat. But mid-way into “No Ordinary Love,” my annoyance had found a new focus. “Um, about how close are we to our destination?” I asked, shifting uncomfortably. “That’s for me to know and you to find out.” “Because if it’s any longer than ten minutes, I’m gonna wig out. I’m sorry, but it’s just too sweaty and dark in here.” Jeremy succumbed and took off the blindfold, and rays of light immediately hit my eyes. I cringed and blinked a few times. “Are you all right?” Jeremy asked. “Yeah, I’m fine,” I said. I had a bad feeling it came out kind of snappy, and he didn’t respond, so I was probably right. Finally my eyes adjusted to the light and I focused in on our surroundings. We were going north on I-65. To our far left, on the horizon, the sun was setting, a transcendent blend of periwinkle and iridescent salmon. “Are we going up to Indy?” I asked. “Maybe.” “Were you planning to leave the blindfold on for a full hour?” “Maybe.” Which, as it turned out, meant “affirmative.” Fortuitously, though, Jeremy’s romantic skills are more finely honed than his kidnapping aptitude, because the place we ended up at was awesome. Located at the pinnacle of a skyscraper, the restaurant rotated slowly on its axis, clockwise, as we ate. The waiters wore suits with towels tossed over their forearms, and the cheapest entrée was like twenty-five bucks. Our seat was by the window, so we got to see the full panorama of the city. I gushed thank-yous at Jeremy over and over, feeling like such a jerk. But he shrugged them all away, saying he wanted this night to be special. And it was. Even my period queasiness abated, that is until just a few bites into my filet mignon. I looked down at the swirling city lights below and felt myself chewing in slow mo, getting more nauseated with each chomp. The fork stopped on its way to my mouth. I clinked it against the plate and closed my eyes. “Are you okay?” Jeremy asked. I felt his hand on my forearm. “Please don’t touch,” I said. “I—I, um, I’m feeling a little sick. It’s, you know, that time.” “Oh man.” Jeremy’s face flushed, and a flash of annoyance passed over his features. “Are we talking Vomitsville here?” “No, I think I just need to stop eating.” “But you’ve only taken three bites.” “I know. I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad at me for being such an abysmal date. Trust me, though, it’s better than the alternative.” “I’ll take your word,” Jeremy said. He got all taciturn after that, but I understood why. I mean, he’d planned this amazing night for us, and my body had to go and ruin everything.
Still, I sensed something else was bothering him, which he soon averred. “You know, some people have been saying that it was his way of flirting with you.”

I frowned. “What? Whose way?” I asked, even though somewhere inside, I knew. Jeremy was looking down at his plate, chewing. “You know, with the whole President of Vice campaign. Some people are saying it’s his immature way of flirting, but I think that’s crazy. I think he’s just being a pretentious jerk.”

I felt my heart lurch. “Of course it is. I mean, he is.” My thoughts raced, trying to piece together the incongruous logic of what he’d just said. “I mean, what could be flirtatious about that? It doesn’t make any sense . . .”

“I can’t say it’s completely ridiculous. It’s kind of like in grade school when you chase the cutest girl at recess. That whole deal.”

I looked at him. He was doing that thing again, where he worked hard to pretend he didn’t care. He still wouldn’t look at me. Was Jeremy jealous?

“I hope you’re not—”

“Forget it,” Jeremy interrupted. “I knew you’d agree . . . How about a toast?” He lifted his glass of Coke. “To you, the new Vice President . . .”

I smiled and lifted my glass. “To . . . me,” I said with a giggle.

“And to us,” he added. “To taking our relationship to a higher plateau.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “To us.”

Vocabulary Drill
December 1: AIDS Awareness Day
aba ted · died down
ab ysm al · terrible
aff irm ative · yes
apt itude · ability
aver red · affirmed
dis son ant · unmusical
exude · give off
for tu itously · luckily
gr atitude · thankfulness
har rowing · distressing
h oned · sharpened
incongr uous · incompatible
iota · bit
ir id es cent · shimmering
lurch · pitch forward
lux ur iant · lush
pac ified · calmed
panor ama · view
par ox ysms · spasms
pinn ace · top
plateau · level
pretentious · pretending to be better than he is
rob ust · healthy
shrewdness · knowledge
sublime · splendid
succumbed · surrendered
taciturn · silent
transcendent · awe-inspiring
turgid · swollen

December 10: Human Rights Day
When I got home tonight, my answering machine was blinking with three messages from Nikki, saying we had to talk . . . now. The urgency seemed to increase with each one, so I grabbed some special “medicine” from the emergency supply in my bedroom and took off right away to drive to her house. Mrs. Abrams answered the door, and even though I normally love hanging around to chat with Nikki’s mom, this time I pretty much brushed her off with a quick hello. I ran up the staircase, taking in the pictures of Nikki and her sister, Claudia. The two of them get incrementally younger as you ascend the stairs, so that, at the top, they are just frizzy-haired little munchkins gamboling about naked in the sandbox. I did our secret knock and then opened her door.

“Oh, my God, Fran, I’m so glad you’re here,” Nikki burst out as soon as she saw me. She was lying diagonally across the bed, face down, not a good sign. Face down meant she’d been burying her face in the bedspread to cry.

“I brought you chocolate,” I said, holding up the little yellow box. “Whitman’s truffles.”
She forced a weak smile, and I saw the telltale redness in her eyes. “Thanks,” she said. “But I don’t know if I can stomach anything right now. Could you just put it on my bed stand?”
Whoa. Not an augur of good things to come. The last time Nikki snubbed chocolate was after she’d been tripped by Gil Smith at a seventh-grade track meet. I reached down to hug her. “What is it? What happened?”
Nikki slithered back on the bed and sat Indian-style, her back propped against the bed board. Pulling up a desk chair, I scrambled to get into listening position. “So, you know how I was planning to move things further with Luke, right?” she asked.
I bit my lip, a sense of dread coming over me. “Right,” I said, eyeing her warily. “Well, the last two times I’ve seen him we haven’t had much alone time. But tonight, I was over there and no one else was home, so it was just us.”
“Uh huh.” The dread was slowly spreading through my body, reaching every limb until even my fingers tingled with apprehension. “So . . .”
“So we’re in his room right, and we’re listening to some funky music, and we’re, you know, kissing and stuff. And we’re both really into it. We’re totally dissolved in the moment, in this perfect rhythm with each other . . .”
I swallowed, feeling the same bitter taste fill my mouth as the time I’d seen them kissing for the first time at the Halloween party.
“Synchronicity,” I said, almost whispering.
“Exactly. It was amazing. The way he touched me just made me feel so . . . I don’t know, so great.”
I glanced away, trying to hide the swirl of emotions inside of me. Focus, I reminded myself. This was about Nikki. She needed me right now, and I had to forget about whatever I was feeling. I narrowed my eyes at her, still confused about where everything went wrong. “So
then, did you guys . . .?”

Nikki blinked a couple times, and I saw she was about to cry again. “I’m sorry Fran,” she said. “I feel like such an idiot.”

“Nikki, what happened? What did Luke do to you?” I jumped up and came onto the bed with her, putting my arms around her and pulling her into a hug. Now I was just getting scared.

“No, it’s nothing like that,” she said, her voice muffled into my shoulder. She drew back and sniffled, then wiped her hand across her nose. “I had it all prepared, what I was going to say and everything, and I know this sounds ridiculous now, but I said I want you, right now.”

“Wow. You really said that?”

“Yeah.”

“And what did he do?”

“He stopped . . .” Nikki tried to stay impassive, but her lower lip betrayed her with a faint quiver. She fought it off, squinching her mouth up tight. She’s really adroit at not crying, way better than me. “He just stopped.”

“What?”

“He went cold. When I asked what was wrong, he just said he didn’t think we should.”

I frowned, confused. Luke had rejected Nikki? A million thoughts crowded into my brain at once. Why would the ultimate player turn down sex with someone as gorgeous as my best friend? What was up with that? Beneath all of it, though, I felt such a huge burst of relief. For Nikki’s sake, of course. Because I was still convinced it would have been a huge mistake for her to sleep with him.

“So, what did you say after that?” I asked gently.

“I didn’t have to say anything.” Nikki was shaking her head dejectedly. “I was just so pissed, and you know how bad I am at hiding my emotions. Here I am giving him the green light and he screeches the brakes. I was like, ‘You jerk! You should feel privileged. How dare you!’”

I started to smile. “Wow, you really said that stuff to him?”

Nikki groaned. “No . . .” She ran her fingers through her hair. “I was in shock. I guess I was just hurt, you know? I couldn’t process the fact that I’d been wanting him all this time, and he didn’t want me back. I just wanted to get out of there . . . I didn’t say anything.”

The look on Nikki’s face at that moment almost broke my heart. It was enough to make me hate Luke Barton more than I ever had before. “And he didn’t even try to stop you?” I asked.

“He didn’t say anything?”

“He said there was too big of an ‘emotional disequilibrium’ between us . . . that it wouldn’t be fair to me.”

Hmm. The thing was, as angry as I wanted to be at Luke, hearing that made me waver a little. It actually sounded like he was kind of trying to do the right thing. But this was clearly not the time to make that point to Nikki.

Vocabulary Drill
December 10: Human Rights Day

adroit · skillful
apprehension · nervousness
ascend · climb
augur · prediction
dejectedly · unhappily
disequilibrium · inequality
gamboling · skipping
impassive · emotionless
incrementally · increasingly
snubbed · rejected
synchronicity · harmony

December 14: National Bouillabaisse Day
In English class today, we discussed Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen, which we just finished reading. Luke, who has been making snide comments about the book for weeks, started off by calling Austen an overrated “writer of Victorian soap operas.” I led off in Austen’s defense. I said it wasn’t so easy to write a page-turner love story that was also a literary masterpiece—one chock-full of incisive social commentary that was still pertinent to today’s social milieu. He agreed that it was obviously supposed to be a love story but contended it was a boring one at best and flat-out refuted that it contained even the slightest modicum of “social commentary.”

To her credit, Ms. Cloisters said that oftentimes a critique says more about the reader than the writer. One other girl in class called Luke a misogynist. I grandiloquently argued that Ms. Austen wrote social satires in the same vein as modern movies like Best in Show, and that it was my understanding that Luke particularly enjoyed satire, so it seemed ironic that he didn’t dig Austen.

“At least Best in Show is funny,” was all Luke could manage.

Petulant little brat. What’s funny to me is that Jeremy could be jealous of such a clown. And that Nikki could like him and want to share herself with him. I just wish he would go away.

Vocabulary Drill
December 14: National Bouillabaisse Day
contended · argued
grandiloquently · pompously
incisive · perceptive
ironic · contrary to appearances
milieu · environment
modicum · little bit
pertinent · relevant
petulant · ill-tempered
refuted · denied
satires · spoofs
snide · nasty

December 17: National Maple Syrup Day
Luke e-mailed today to say he received my letter, which I finally decided to mail after what he did to Nikki. The sniveling twit said that it made him feel like dung. He also admitted that I was deft with words and that my verbal skills were worthy of approbation, but he claimed
his tutorials were in part to thank for that. And since both of our futures were on the line here, he had a **proposition** for me. If I took a practice verbal SAT test and scored less than seven hundred, then he would **resume** “word lessons” with me, **gratis**. If I got seven hundred or above, he would never bother me again.

I didn’t hesitate. I deleted the message.

**Vocabulary Drill**
*December 17: National Maple Syrup Day*

- **approbation** · approval
- **deft** · skilled
- **gratis** · free
- **proposition** · offer
- **resume** · begin again
- **sniveling** · whining

**December 22: Forefather’s Day**

As part of a larger effort to support her in this time of need, I have spent the last twenty-four hours with Nikki. First off, Mrs. Abrams drove us up to the Fashion Mall north of Indy for some last-minute holiday shopping. Despite my mom’s **unmitigated** adoration of bargains and window displays, I somehow failed to inherit the shopping gene altogether. Among my **peccadilloes** is that I could spend hours feeling fabric and staring at myself in dressing room mirrors, but if I’m not in the “buying mood,” I won’t even splurge for a Twix bar.

My **affliction** today was of a more seasonal nature: Whenever I go shopping for others, especially near Christmas, I only find stuff for me. Does everyone have this problem? I mean, who knew that jeans could be this flawlessly form-fitting, with a special “short” version for my **diminutive** legs? And when did they become so **exorbitantly** expensive?

Ultimately, with help from Nikki’s mom, I finished all my shopping (and pretty much drained my checking account). In the **perpetually** impossible “male” category, I outdid myself. For Dad, I found a device that **discerns** when calls are from telemarketers and automatically hangs up on them. Dad’s love of gadgets is directly **proportional** to his **animosity** toward telemarketers, so the gift couldn’t have been more **felicitous**. I got my little bro Rico a Burton snowboarding jacket because he’s Mr. X-treme Sports Guy. For Jeremy, I got a Puma watch with a wide leather armband that makes it look almost like a bracelet.

Dinner at Nikki’s house is always a great time. Her parents are such **gourmands**. While she cooked, Mrs. Abrams told us the fairy tale about how she met Mr. Abrams—or Hugh, as she calls him—in Paris in 1963. As many times as we’ve heard it, it never seems to get old. When she got to the part where she chooses Mr. Abrams over the young, beautiful, African modern dancer/glass-blower, I asked a question.

“But how’d you know you were picking the right one?”

“Well, when you’re young,” she said, “you can’t. Your **criteria** is single- **faceted**, you know. You just want a cute guy, or a guy who can dance, or who buys you dinner. But once you’ve dated around some, you start looking for what I call The Whole Package.”

“The whole package?” I asked.

“Yes. You have to find him attractive, of course. But there are also all the **intangibles**
like intelligence and conversational skills and imagination and sensitivity and **beneficence** . . .”

“The Whole Package,” I said.

“That’s right,” Mrs. Abrams said. “Don’t forget it.”

“Luke is The Whole Package,” Nikki said **disconsolately**.

“No he’s not,” I said. “He’s a powertool.”

“Food’s ready!” Mrs. Abrams said, in a stroke of **exemplary** timing.

Luckily, dinner was an **efficacious** way of taking Nikki’s mind off of Luke. The first course was chilled pepper bisque with crabmeat and onions sprinkled on top. The entrée was pan-seared tuna with garlic confit and a side of ratatouille.

“Mmmm,” I moaned. “This is so scrumptious. My parents probably had Domino’s delivered tonight.”

Nikki raised her glass of grape juice to propose a toast. “To my dorky parents, whom I love dearly.”

“Aww . . .” We clinked glasses. Claudia stood up. “To me finally getting a cell phone.” Laughter. More clinking. Mrs. Abrams stood up. “Such a touching request, Claudia,” she said, putting a hand over her heart. She raised her glass and gave Nikki a quick glance. “And here . . . here’s to moving past failed relationships.”

I looked at Nikki. Clearly not psyched. She looked like she wanted to say, “May I be excused?” We all clinked glasses anyway.

It was my turn. I didn’t have anything planned. I raised my glass. “Uh, to Christmas Eve Eve Eve Eve? Or maybe not. How about, to finding the one with The Whole Package. To falling in love and staying in love, like Mr. and Mrs. Abrams.”


We clinked our glasses and **imbibed**.

**Vocabulary Drill**

**December 22: Forefather’s Day**

**affliction** · burden

**animosity** · hatred

**beneficence** · good will

**criteria** · decisive factor

**diminutive** · tiny

**discerns** · detects

**disconsolately** · miserably

**efficacious** · effective

**exemplary** · excellent

**exorbitantly** · excessively

**faceted** · sided

**felicitous** · fortunate

**gourmands** · food lovers

**imbibed** · drank

**intangibles** · subtleties

**peccadilloes** · failings

**perpetually** · continually

**proportional** · relative
December 25: Christmas

I won’t bore you with all the odious little details, because Christmas is always Christmas, especially the morning part. Jingle bells, jingle all the way. Ripping apart wrapping paper. “Oh, thanks so much!” Kiss and hug. More ripping. Frosty the Snowman. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. “You’re welcome! Do you really like it?”

As per usual, my parents demonstrated such largess that I couldn’t help but feel a little undeserving of all my gifts—including a digital camera and another pair of jeans. But at least Dad lauded the utility of the telemarketer zapper I got him. Rico seemed to dig his snowboarding jacket, but the quickness with which he put it back in its gift box seemed duplicitous. I pressed him until he said it was just that the colors were a tad effeminate. I tried to act like I wasn’t hurt—no problem, I had the receipt—but it actually made me feel kind of glum. Mom seemed to love the coat and the book and the calendar, but it’s hard to know for sure.

We spent most of the day lazing and tinkering about. In the evening, we adhered to the Castarelli family tradition of cruising around Columbus, looking at Christmas lights. It’s the Christmas day event I look forward to most, one that instills a sense of joyful consanguinity. We drove through Mill Race Park, which sets up these intricate artistic light displays every year. My favorite design was the three random Christmas pigs dancing by the lake.

Then we drove through the neighborhoods, voting on our favorite houses. My dad and I both like the gaudiest, most ornatelyadorned houses with tons of colored lights, Santa and his reindeer on the roof and plastic manger scenes in the yard. Mom prefers the more elegant displays with neatly ordered white lights, ribbons and wreaths. Rico remains dispassionate. But we all chastise the rich people in their McMansions for being too conceited to deign to put up any lights at all.

It’s great to ride around with Mom, because she’s a total gossip queen. When we drove past a familiar house (which boasted a pathetic dearth of Christmas lights), Mom said that that was where the Barton family lived. She intimated that Mr. Barton had already gotten a reputation around town for being a real mover and shaker.

“You know the Barton boy, right?” mom asked me. “Didn’t you study with him a few times?”

“Yeah,” I said, wishing she’d drop the subject there.

“Wait, you didn’t tell me that,” Rico said. “I didn’t know you hung out with Luke Barton!”

I frowned. “Why do you care?”

“Oh, nothing. Except he’s, like, the seventh best skateboarder in the world,” Rico gushed sarcastically. Right. I’d forgotten that Luke was internationally renowned in the sport my brother was obsessed with. “I heard that, on full moons, he used to vacuum out the water from suburban pools in Bakersfield and go skating with his friends,” Rico went on.

“Sounds like a real keeper,” Mom said.

Later on, we passed by Jeremy’s house. Looking at his elegantly illuminated house, a rush of warmth overtook me. Jeremy wasn’t too cool for student government, or Christmas lights, yet he was well-heeled enough to take me out to dinner at a five-star restaurant. I was lucky to have him. He was cute, and sweet, a somewhat adept conversationalist, and not
unintelligent. He was about as close to The Whole Package as a girl like me could ask for.

Vocabulary Drill
December 25: Christmas
adept · skilled
adhered · stuck to
adorned · decorated
chastise · criticize, rebuke
conceited · proud
consanguinity · kinship
dearth · lack
deign · lower oneself
dissipionate · indifferent
duplicitous · dishonest
effeminate · feminine
elegant · refined
gaudiest · flashiest
glum · sad
illuminated · lighted
instills · imparts
intimated · hinted
intricate · complex
largess · generosity
lauded · praised
odious · horrible
ornately · elaborately
renowned · well-known
utility · usefulness

December 31: New Year’s Eve
Jeremy and I exchanged gifts today. He said he loved his watch, and I don’t think he was faking it, because he put it on and didn’t take it off. There’s something about a watch that makes a guy more tantalizing. He got me a brown suede jacket, which is perfect because I never would have bought it for myself. And I’ll definitely wear it sometimes, to like dress-up affairs.

As part of the ratification of the Perfect Girlfriend Act, pushed through the Senate of my mind on Christmas night, I gave him a back massage. It morphed into an intense hook-up session. Weird thing was, instead of reciprocating my masterful handiwork with the proper Francesca adoration, Jeremy became kind of distant afterward.

Fortunately, it didn’t last too long, because we had a New Year’s Eve party to go to. It was, of course, a Triumvirate party, at Shannon’s house. Now, under conventional circumstances, I wouldn’t go there for anything. But after much prodding from Jeremy and Nikki, both of whom trumped the party as a veritable “who’s who of the junior class,” I begrudgingly assented.

As expected, the party sucked. In Shannon’s overzealous pursuit of exclusivity, the party
felt a little thin, and it didn’t help that it was in her basement. Nikki was all flirting with Whomever Wasn’t Luke, with the hopes that Luke was watching. Jeremy was off playing ping-pong with his buddies. I was trapped in social purgatory on a chair in the corner, all by myself.

Finally, I got sick of it and I propped myself up and walked toward the bar area. The tentative plan was to talk to the first person I saw. Unfortunately, that person, or should I say that subhuman, was none other than my nemesis: Shannon Teasdale, prattling mindlessly with two non-Triumvirates. I took a deep breath and made sure my face was smiling.

“This is a cool little bar area, Shannon,” I said. “Great basement for a party.”
“What are you trying to say?”
“I . . .” The blunt churlishness of her tone sent me into a mental tailspin. “I was just trying to give you a compliment.”
“Because the only reason you get invited at all is because Jeremy wouldn’t come without you . . .”

I took a half step back and tried to take in where she was going with this. Did I provoke her in some way? It didn’t matter. There was a point where you had to step up. “That’s funny, because the only reason I came here is because he begged me to come.”
“Oh, really?” she said.
“Yup. Well, that and because I wanted to see what it’s like to hang out with the significant people.” I’d been waiting so long to say it. I wanted more. “But you know what, the thing I’ve ascertained here is, if this party . . .” I motioned behind me. “If you took this basement as a proportionate sample, then guess what? Looks to me like the significant people are a dying breed.”

She looked confused. That was a start.
“What I’m saying is, not many people showed up for your big—”
“That’s because I didn’t invite many people,” she cut in, “and apparently that was still one too many. You don’t have to stay. The party wouldn’t shut down without you. Considering all you’ve done is sit on the couch, and that you’re dressed like a girl scout, I think we’d be better off without you.”

I was wearing a plaid skirt and a white button-down blouse. “Actually, just so you know, I’m supposed to look like a girl scout. If you were up on what’s in style anywhere outside of Columbus, you’d know that this is in right now.”

“Oh, right,” Shannon said. “Let me guess. When you won the big election, your parents took you victory shopping in Paris, and you found that all the hottest boutiques were carrying the Catholic school girl look.”

“What’s the election got to do with what I’m wearing?” I asked.
“Oh nothing . . . I just think it’s funny how you think you’re all sweet, now that you’re Vice President, when everyone knows that only losers run for school office.”

I was about to go to town on her, when a body stepped in between us. It was Luke. I’d never seen him look angry before. “Only losers bother calling anyone else losers,” he said eloquently.

“Exactly,” I said, keeping my voice even despite my shock at having Luke Barton, of all people, coming to my defense. “And on that note, I think I’ll go take a walk.”
“Fine,” she said. “Go.”
I felt like I needed an **encore** here, a coup de grace. “But first I’m gonna fill up my little plastic cup.” I flicked it with my finger, taking special care to **accentuate** the plinking sound. “Excuse me.” I shouldered past her and went to grab a can of soda. It felt good. The New Francesca didn’t back down from a fight. She met the enemy head on and emerged **triumphant**. Now it was time for my Victory Ginger Ale.

“If you’re not staying,” I felt a hand grab my wrist, “then you’re not drinking my soda.”

I turned and looked right into Shannon’s smoldering eyes, fighting the urge to dump the ginger ale right over her head. But I knew better than to stoop to her level. “Fine,” I said. I plopped the can back down on the bar, then turned to head upstairs. Jeremy shot me a quizzical glance from the ping-pong table but didn’t come over. Thanks for the support, I thought. I charged upstairs, grabbed my coat and went outside. I was quite a ways down the block, and still **vituperating** Shannon with my thoughts, when I heard someone calling my name. Too late now, Jeremy, I thought, not breaking stride.

“Francesca, it’s me, Luke. Hold up!”

I stopped, shivering even though it wasn’t actually that cold.

“I brought you something,” he said.

I turned around slowly, unsure what to expect. He jogged up to me, and I realized he was holding a can of ginger ale. He grinned when he reached me, passing me the soda.

I took it and held it for a second, staring at the can like I’d never seen one before. Then I popped the top and took a sip. “Thanks,” I finally said. Luke was just standing there watching me, with that familiar cocky smile. I felt a strange urge to reach out and brush aside the blond curl that dangled over his forehead, but in a second the wind blew it out of his face.

“I wouldn’t sweat that little argument back there,” he said. “That party was lame.”

“Yeah, seriously,” I agreed. I paused, torn. “Listen, this is nice of you and all. I appreciate your sticking up for me. But you know, it doesn’t change the other stuff you’ve done.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

We stood there another minute, not saying anything. “So, can I have some?” he asked, gesturing at the ginger ale.

I frowned, then acquiesced, because after all—he’d chased me all the way down the street just to give it to me.

Luke sat down on the curb and downed some gulps of soda, then looked up at me. With a sigh, I sat down next to him and took the can back to finish it.

“So, do you know any of the constellations?” he asked, leaning back to look at the sky.

“No really,” I said. “Do you?”

“Yeah, but sometimes I like to make up my own.”

I laughed. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?” I teased. “Center of the universe much?”

He grinned, giving me a light punch on the arm. “Nice,” he said. “But no, why don’t you give it a try?”

“So, like... connect any random stars you can see into a shape, and give them a name?” I said.

“Exactly. Like, see that really bright one, right there?”

I squinted up at the stars where he was pointing, following his gaze. “Uh huh,” I said.

“Okay, so, connect that to the one there, and there, and then that one, and what does that look like to you?”
I giggled. “A bunch of little bright dots?”
He groaned. “No, come on. Look closely.”
I pressed my lips together. “Okay . . . um . . . wait, I know—it’s like a skirt! And then
above those, that’s the top . . . it’s like one of those stick figure girls on bathroom doors!”
I settled back next to him and we kept going, making different shapes and characters, and
then telling stories to pull it all together. It was so much fun that when I heard the general uproar
of horns and cheers that came with the stroke of midnight, I couldn’t believe so much time had
passed. I also knew I was in serious trouble.

Vocabulary Drill
December 31: New Year’s Eve
accentuate · emphasize
ascertained · determined
assented · agreed
begrudgingly · resentfully
churlishness · rudeness
conventional · normal
eloquenty · expressively
encore · repeat performance
exclusivity · selectiveness
nemesis · enemy
overzealous · overly eager
prattling · blathering
prodding · urging
proportionate · balanced
provoke · incite
tantalizing · tempting
triumphant · victorious
trumped · talked up
veritable · genuine
vituperating · berating

January 1: New Year’s Day
I hereby pronounce today Black Thursday. Jeremy isn’t speaking to me. He can’t believe
I walked out on the party and didn’t stick around to kiss him at midnight. I kind of think he could
have come after me, but he doesn’t see it like that. Then I called Nikki for support, but she was
all miserable about Luke not finding her at midnight. Ever since their big moment that wasn’t,
she’s been hoping that the “disequilibrium” between them would get straightened out and he
would realized he’s madly in love with her. So when I admitted where Luke was, thinking she’d
be psyched that he wasn’t off kissing some other girl, she pretty much freaked on me. I kept
apologizing and pleading my innocence, but the more I backpedaled, the guiltier I sounded.
Yuck.
Vocabulary Drill
January 1: New Year’s Day
pronounce · declare

January 3: Sleep Day
Gray Saturday. Things aren’t getting much easier. Jeremy finally called. He grilled me about what happened outside with Luke, down to the last detail. For the most part, my story held up against the crossfire. It’s not like anything happened between us. As for why I walked out of the party, when I filled him in on how obnoxious Sharon was to me, it seemed to quell Jeremy’s rage for the time being, and the conversation ended with a relatively gratifying plea bargain—we “might not break up after all.”

In other dreadful news, I asked my brother what he wanted for his birthday next week. He said he didn’t want a gift, just for Luke to show up at his party. No gift? I had no idea Luke’s presence held this much weight. After considering all the relevant factors, including my financial woes and my vow to steer clear of Luke, I told Rico it was a touching request, which, unfortunately, could not be arranged.

Vocabulary Drill
January 3: Sleep Day
gratifying · rewarding
quell · soothe

January 4: Day of Transcendental Boredom
Due to a state of isolation-induced monotony bordering on epidemic, I actually sunk to an all-time nadir today. To cheer myself up, I willfully, even gladly submitted to an online practice SAT test. I got a 640 on the verbal section, which is pretty venerable but still disappointing considering the breadth and magnitude of my vocabulary. The problem is, I’ve always sucked at standardized tests. I’m too slow. I’ll sit for a full two minutes just thinking about what a word really means, and by the time my fifty minutes is up, I’ll still have ten questions left.

I went to my bank’s website to check my account balance—not an uplifting exercise. Christmas crushed me. As of now, I’m worth a grand total of $16.13, which, considering how I feel, is remarkably accurate.

Then I checked e-mail. Two new messages. None from Jeremy. One junk mail, and this one, from Luke: Dear Francesca, Our episode of tranquil cogitation together on New Year’s has increased my desire to make permanent peace with you. So, if you are willing and able, I would like to extend my friendship, in hopes that, by way of some perfectly benign hang-out session, I could fully expiate my sins and leave our ridiculous imbroglio (which was, admittedly, my fault) behind us. Incredibly, Lucas Barton

I thought about it. I came to a decision and, before my better instincts could dissuade me from enacting upon it, e-mailed him back. Dear Lucas, I appreciate your sincere apology, which, considering the insidiousness of your offense, as well as its deleterious effect on my psyche, was a
distinct step toward your **exoneration**. The next and final step on your “road map” to **amnesty** is as follows: On the evening of January 13th, at 7:15 pm, you will arrive at my house at 3370 Wembley Lane, skateboard in tow, as a special guest appearance at the birthday party of my younger brother, Rico. You will doubtless be asked to do a few “Ollies,” or tricks, or whatever it is you people do. You will **comply** with their demands in full and, if you perform to my satisfaction (I won’t be present, per se, but will be observing from afar), then you will be fully **exculpated**. At that time, we will see if circumstances permit a harmless hang-out session between us, as this appears to be an **oxymoron**. Please post your reply within 24 hours, so I can relay it to Rico, who, for reasons I will never **fathom**, has **deified** you as some sort of modern-day teenage Prometheus.

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**Vocabulary Drill**

January 4: Day of Transcendental Boredom

- **amnesty**: forgiveness
- **benign**: harmless
- **breadth**: scope
- **cogitation**: reflection
- **comply**: obey
- **deified**: made god-like
- **deleterious**: harmful
- **dissuade**: discourage
- **enacting**: acting
- **epidemic**: plague
- **exculpated**: freed from blame
- **exoneration**: pardon
- **expiate**: make amends for
- **fathom**: understand
- **imbroglio**: mess
- **insidiousness**: sinister nature
- **magnitude**: extent
- **monotony**: dullness
- **nadir**: rock bottom
- **oxymoron**: contradiction
- **tranquil**: calm
- **venerable**: respected

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January 5: National Stonemason’s Day

First day back at school. I wasted no time. When Jeremy got to his locker before homeroom, I was waiting there. I took no chances on the outfit—it was my colorful flower-print Quiksilver skirt and a tight black fuzzy sweater, the exact same outfit he’d complimented me on a few weeks earlier. My hands were behind my back. I wasn’t smiling. The **prudently** chosen expression on my face was meant to **evince** sincere and thoughtful regret. The moment Jeremy registered my presence, the rhythm of his swagger faltered.

“I’m sorry,” I said, pulling my hand from behind my back. A CD, three Toffifay candy
bars (his favorite confection) and a card. It was a bribe. “It’s for you.”
Jeremy sheepishly accepted. “Great. Thanks. Excuse me . . .” He took a step past me and pretended to be working at his locker combination. “Who’s Less Noobie-ens, anyway?” he muttered.

“Les Nubiens. They’re French,” I said. “You’ll like it. It’s funky but mellow, kind of like Sade.”

“Oh.”
I hoped he got what that meant.
“Listen, Jeremy, I’m really sorry,” I said. “I mean it. But the thing is, you have to believe me when I say I was set up. Honestly. If you let this get to you, then Sharon wins. That’s exactly the sort of melodrama she wants.”

I could see Jeremy’s jaw muscle working. Finally he turned and faced me directly. “Even if that’s true, do you know how bad that looks for me, when you leave a crowded party and Luke runs after you like that? I mean, why’d you let him? Why didn’t you just ask me to come with you?”

I frowned. Because I’d thought he should just follow me, without having to be asked? But maybe I shouldn’t have expected that. “I know,” I said. “I can only imagine what it looked like.”

“Francesca, you have to promise me something. Promise me you’ll stay away from him.”
I thought about Rico’s birthday party, about the e-mail I just sent. “But—”
“No buts this time. Just say you’re gonna do it, and then do it.”
I let out a deep sigh. “Okay. I’ll stay away from him.” After all, I didn’t have to hang around my brother’s party. And steering clear of Luke was a good way to do damage control with the other hurting relationship in my life right now, too.
“All right, then,” Jeremy said. “I’ll take your word.”
I nodded, wishing I didn’t still feel all this distance between us. “Can I have a hug?” I asked.

Jeremy put his backpack on the checkered linoleum, gingerly. He wasn’t quite looking into my eyes, but his lips had flattened out into something approximating a smile. We wrapped our arms around each other, right there in the hallway, and I felt a little better.

Vocabulary Drill
January 5: National Stonemason’s Day
approximating · similar to
confection · candy
evince · reveal
gingerly · carefully
melodrama · showy drama
prudently · wisely

January 8: Go Get a Job Day
I went out and procured a job today, right after I used fourteen of my last sixteen bucks on gas. Indigence can be frightening, the way it constricts your freedom and makes you obsess about what you haven’t got. You don’t have to endure being a pauper very long before work
starts to look appealing.

Instead of just driving around to restaurants asking for applications and looking for POSITIONS AVAILABLE signs, I figured it made more sense to just pick the optimal place to work and drive right over and tell it to them straight. The place I came up with was Viewpoint Books, my favorite place to be frivolous with my time and money. It’s a small, locally owned bookstore located in the Commons Mall. The Commons is this Star-Trek-looking cube of brown glass panels. It was designed by Cesar Pelli, some Italian guy who’s famous for, as far as I know, designing freaky looking malls.

I walked right up to the counter at Viewpoint Books. The face above it was a familiar one—Agatha Renshaw, a girl from my school who’s known for being a hippie type with strong opinions on stuff. I wasn’t sure whether this was a good thing or a bad thing.

“Welcome to Viewpoint. Can I help you?” she asked in that hurried, blasé way that makes sales clerks sound like automatons.

“Hey, Agatha,” I said.
“Hey,” she said. “What do you need?”
“Well, I kind of need a job, and this is the only place I want to work.”
“Um, I don’t know if they’re hiring. But you can fill out an application.”
“All right,” I said. “May as well.”

She gave me an application and I sat down to fill it out. In the experience category, I put my two waiting jobs. In the special honors category, I wrote Soccer Captain and Junior Class Vice President. It was weird to see yourself defined as an accruement of accomplishments. While I was filling it out, Agatha went and talked to the owner of the store. He came and shook my hand. He said he didn’t really need much help, but that he recognized me as a recurrent customer and liked that I said I only wanted to work there. So he hired me, right on the spot! Just for a few hours a week, but still—it seemed like it all came out perfectly. I took it as a sign that everything was getting back on track.

Vocabulary Drill
January 8: Go Get a Job Day
accruement · collection
automatons · robots
blas · unthinking
frivolous · trivial
indigence · poverty
optimal · best
pauper · poor person
procured · obtained
recurrent · repeat

January 13: Rico’s Birthday
All of Rico’s chirping, shoulder-punching, baggie-clthed, hair-gelled friends showed up over an hour early for his party. I know this wasn’t out of fealty toward Rico, but just because of the Luke cameo. This freaked out my mom, who naïvely expects her life to stay within the strictures of her Daily Planner. I solved her dilemma by breaking out that Old Faithful of male
distractions: PlayStation.

This satiated them for a good forty-five minutes. I stood there, listening to them chatter. They’re at that age where girls are starting to become the thing, which means bravado is of utmost importance.

By the time they started getting restive, Mom was ready to begin the party. Rico had told her repeatedly that the key to the party was brevity. The only elements he sanctioned were an ice cream cake (nothing written on it), gift unwrapping, and music (all songs preapproved). It was the first time I’d ever been to a party where the birthday person was able to successfully proscribe the singing of “Happy Birthday.”

Toward the completion of the gift unwrapping, the boys were already rhapsodizing about Luke. He was five minutes late, then ten, then twenty. I went from being slightly irritated to internally haranguing him for his negligence. These kids look up to you. At around 7:40, Rico walked up to me, and his hapless expression was enough to break your heart in half. “What’s going on? You weren’t kidding when you said he would show . . . right?”

“No . . . no . . . be patient,” I said. That’s when the foreboding sense of dread kicked in. Would he not come? If this was a hoax, if he was so callous that he would set me up for this big of a fall, then this was it—his final, most unforgivable transgression. I heard a scratching sound that made my ears perk up like a rabbit’s at the snap of a twig. “Hey, wait a second,” I said. But my brother and his pubescent munchkin buddies were a step ahead of me, clustered against the living room window.

“Dude!” one of them yelled. “That’s so hardcore!”

The whole raucous throng of thirteen-year-olds scrambled outside, laughing and crying, “He’s amazing!” His arrival couldn’t have been timelier. I knew Luke planned it that way, for the same reason the Rolling Stones never show up at the time printed on the ticket stub. Own the crowd. I bounded the stairs three at a time and set up shop beneath my bedroom window.

He had a whole course set up. It was circumscribed by the grass on two sides, the garage on the other, and Luke’s rusted-out pickup truck parked at the end of the driveway. Inside was a labyrinthine skating course with a ramp thingy, pylons and this triangular-shaped metal bar like a staircase balustrade. He was wearing earphones, tuned out to things worldly, flipping up and back on the ramp, delineating the shape of a “U.”

I was more impressed by his temerity. Skateboarding, the way he did it, looked like a surefire excursion to the hospital. But it was like walking to him. Luke took his Walkman off and carved out figure eights. I reached down and—my face concealed by my half-drawn Venetian blinds—opened my window. A gale of cold air swept across my face. Luke jumped onto the opened tailgate and started wiggling around on the bed of the truck. But the crunch of his wheels was soon drowned out by the roar from his rollicking legion of fans. Luke flipped his board up into his hand, and with the other hand, pulled his earphones from his ears.


“And then you’ve got your grind tricks. Grinding’s fun because you get the sense of gliding through the air in slo mo, like this . . .”

“All right, now, Rico gets to do the first trick!”

Rico slapped his board onto the ground and got a running start. He glided on it for a few feet, pushing once, and then did some sort of strained jumpy thing. “Yeah!” Luke yelled. “Nice move! Now everybody else join in!”

They all cascaded onto the driveway and started cavorting around on their skateboards,
like a swarm of contented bees. Luke unleashed a big smile in the general direction of the house. I pulled away from the window. What could I do? You had to give props where props were due. That was quite a coup he’d pulled off.

Vocabulary Drill
January 13: Rico’s Birthday
balustrade · railing
bravado · boldness
brevity · briefness
callous · unfeeling
cavorting · frolicking
circumscribed · bounded
coup · brilliant act
delineating · defining
excursion · outing
fealty · loyalty
foreboding · ominous
hapless · miserable
haranguing · criticizing
involuntarily · automatically
labyrinthine · maze-like
legion · crowd
navely · inexperiencedly
negligence · inattention
proscribe · ban
raucous · wild
restive · restless
rhapsodizing · praising
rollicking · high-spirited
sanctioned · allowed
satiated · satisfied
strictures · limits
temerity · boldness
transgression · misbehavior

January 26: Day of Absolution
Today I got an e-mail from Luke. Dear Francesca, I believe I have complied with my end of our arbitration (in spades), without so much as a thank you from you. But so be it. I will assume that I’m absolved of all guilt. Let’s fast forward to the matter of our hang-out session. Perhaps it would work better for you if I exhumed some tangible motive for us to hang out. Which segues nicely into the following question: Did you ever get around to taking a practice exam? Because one of the things I’d been meaning to tell you was, the SAT is less about how much vocabulary (or math) you know. It’s a game, and you have to play the right way. ee, America thinks it’s meritocratic—that people gain access to schools and cultural capital because
of intelligence and hard work. But the truth is, rich kids from big cities and the suburbs are taking courses for $800 that prepare them for the SAT, while penurious kids from the South Bronx don’t have that option. But I digress. The point is, since you have the option of getting an advantage for free, you may as well take it. I can show you things that will improve your score. That provides, in my opinion, sufficient motive for you to rationalize hanging out with me. Do you agree? uke

Vocabulary Drill
January 26: Day of Absolution
absolved · forgiven
arbitration · negotiation
digress · wander
exhumed · dug up
penurious · needy
segues · leads
sufficient · enough

February 2: Groundhog Day
Punxsutawney Phil must have seen his shadow today. I think things are looking up for me. I wrote an editorial in the school paper that the editor-in-chief called “brave.” I got compliments for it today at school.Open Letter to Principal AdamsDear Dr. Adams,In my recent campaign for Junior Class Vice President, I pledged that I would create a Student Disciplinary Committee. It only makes sense that the perspective of students should be considered in disciplinary matters with potentially grave consequences, such as expulsion. If you would abrogate or at least amend the antiquated policies now in existence and permit a group of students to offer their perspective, I’m convinced that it would stem the tide of student-wide discontent that has occurred after past controversial disciplinary measures. Confidence in your leadership, Dr. Adams, as well as in the forces of the Powers That Be, would be totally solidified. sincerely, rancesca R. Castarelli

Not bad, right? So anyway, Dr. Adams called me down to his office during fifth period. The meeting was pretty cursory, which was good because I was sweating bullets. I had to wipe my clammy hands on my pants before shaking his hand. Dr. Adams was cool as a cucumber. He said that he admired my initiative, and that he would take my idea up with the members of the board. Meanwhile, I should draw up a proposal delineating the specifics of my plan, including how many students would be on the committee, and how they would be nominated.

Riding a wave of optimism, I walked right up to Luke after English class. The more I’d thought about it, the more I felt like it was no big deal to just get a little more SAT prep help from him. I knew I’d have to be careful not to let Jeremy find out since he was so crazy about the whole thing, but wasn’t it worth it if it meant the difference for me getting into a good college? Not that I’d ever admit to Luke that I think that’s the case or anything.

So, anyway, first I thanked Luke for his heroic performance at Rico’s birthday party. Then I said I wanted to start tutoring with him again, and we decided to schedule a time for next week.
Vocabulary Drill
February 2: Groundhog Day
abrogate • end
amend • change
antiquated • old
cursory • brief
initiative • proposal

February 8
I definitely did the right thing. It’s like Luke is this totally different person lately. He asked me today if we could have our lesson Wednesday night, but I told him Thursday night worked best for me. He said he’d made other plans for Thursday, but he could probably defer them or move them up. I said that that would be very conciliatory of him and then went to my last-period class feeling good.

Vocabulary Drill
February 8
conciliatory • appeasing
defer • postpone

February 8 (Later)
Nikki showed up at Viewpoint Books tonight, in the middle of my first shift. I was glad to see her, because after a week of debating, I knew I had to tell her about the lesson I was having with Luke. Especially now that we had a real date and everything. I mean, not a date date—you know what I mean!
Keeping a secret from your BF is one thing, but you just don’t do that to your BFF. I just hoped I could make her understand that this had nothing to do with what had gone down between them. I mean, she was the one who had the idea in the first place that I could use some help with my SAT score, right?
But it turned out I didn’t even have to worry. Because before I could say anything, she came out with her big news—Luke had asked her out on a “real date,” with dinner and everything.
“Wow. I don’t know what to say.” I really didn’t. It was a total turnaround.
“Say you’re happy for me!” she said, her silly, goofy grin getting even sillier and goofier. “Fran, this is exactly what we wanted!”
We? Somehow I was having trouble mustering a silly, goofy grin of my own.
But it was okay, because she didn’t seem to care about my reaction. She was too busy raving about how this was her watershed moment and she needed my advice. I kept shushing her and admonishing her to pretend she was a customer, but she was too elated to calm down. Finally, I convinced the manager to let me take my break then because my friend here had a personal emergency.
“So, what night are you going out?” I asked as we walked toward the food court.
“Well, he originally said Thursday at lunch, but then something came up later so he called to ask if we could go on Wednesday—”

“You mean, this Thursday?” I asked.
“No, I said we changed it until Wednesday.”
“But you originally had it planned for this Thursday?”
“Uh, yeaa-uuh. Fran, that is so not the crux of the story. Sometimes it amazes me that you can be so smart and yet so clueless. Anyway . . .”

Nikki continued on a mile a minute, but my brain was stuck like a CD skipping. He said his Thursday night plans could be changed. So he rescheduled their date around . . . us? Why would he have done that? Didn’t a first official date with Nikki rate higher than a stupid vocabulary lesson with me?

“. . . So what do you think, Fran? Should I do it?” she asked.
“Huh?” I asked, snapped from my reverie. “I’m sorry. What?”
“Oh,” I said. “That. I don’t know. I don’t think so.”
“Why not? You were supposed to say yes.”
“I think you know why,” I said. “Who was it again that told me that relationships are like a teeter-totter, and since guys are inherently heavier, girls need to do whatever it takes to maintain the balance and weigh down their side?”

“Did I say that?” Nikki scrunched up her face, confounded. “If so, I was just talking trash, because that analogy doesn’t even make sense. As a woman, you want to be the one in the air, up on a pedestal.”

I picked a straw wrapper off the table and crumpled it with my fingers. “Exactly. You want to be the exalted one, which is why you should not ask him and not mention the dance at all. Let him pursue you.”

“Yeah, that sounds great. But then who do I go to the dance with?”
“But what if he’s not?”
“Who cares?” I posited. “At worst, you miss the stupid Valentine’s Day Dance. At best, you go with someone else. I’ll bet you’ve already turned some poor guy down anyway.”
“No . . . I mean, just one.”
“What?”
“Brant Durgin.”
“What? But he’s so cute! You used to always flirt with him.”
“Yeah, but that was when he was going out with Vanessa. I just wanted to see if I could tempt him.”

“You’re awful.” I smiled and leaned against the booth. My fingers were ripping the straw wrapper into shreds. “Listen, the thing is, it’s a game. You’re the one who taught me that, Nikki. Sometimes it helps to show a guy you don’t need him.”

Nikki cocked her head to the side, staring at me like she was only just now seeing me there across from her. “You know, sometimes I feel like you only give me one type of advice with Luke. I don’t know whether to listen, because you’re always telling me to hold back. Is there something more—something you’re not saying?”

“What are you talking about?” I said, my heart skipping a beat. “What, like I have some kind of ulterior motive?” I met her gaze, then looked away, feeling suddenly awkward.
“You said it, not me,” Nikki said. “All I know is that you never seem like you really want us to get together. Even now, when he’s doing everything right.”

“That’s crazy,” I said, forcing out a laugh. “I have a boyfriend, and you’re my best friend. You asked my advice, and I gave it.” I shook my head at her for a second, letting it sink in. “You know what? Do whatever you want.” I glanced down at a watch that wasn’t there. “I have to get back to work.”

Vocabulary Drill
February 8 (Later)
*admonishing* · cautioning
*analogy* · comparison
*confounded* · confused
*crux* · core
*elated* · overjoyed
*exalted* · glorious
*inherently* · essentially
*posed* · put forward
*reverie* · musing
*ulterior* · hidden

February 10: Opposite Day (aka, Antithesis Day)
So I don’t know why I made the decision right then, while Jeremy and I were kissing in our usual spot in his basement, wedged in between square-shaped sofa stools, listening to Les Nubians. But suddenly it hit me that I’d be repeating history if I kept the tutoring thing from Jeremy again. This time, I had to tell him the truth and find a way to make him understand.

The next time we took a break for air, I pulled back and cleared my throat. “Listen, Jeremy, there’s something I have to tell you,” I said. Great—why’d I have to phrase it like that? Way to make it sound much worse than it was.

Jeremy’s brow furrowed. “What’s up?”
I took a deep breath. “The thing is,” I began, “I had a long talk with my mom last night about college and stuff, and we’ve decided I should start up more tutorials with Luke . . .”

Jeremy pulled away from me, all ruffled. Flamstrated. It’s a word my soccer coach used all season long—one that, *incidentally*, doesn’t exist. But the word captured his response perfectly. He cocked his fist back and punched the sofa pillow.

“Easy, killer,” I said.
“You and your mom came to this decision together?” he asked, *incredulous*. “Women are so crazy.”

I knew Jeremy. He could hold his ground. I was going to have to hold mine—even if it wasn’t absolutely, exactly, the whole truth. “Listen, Jeremy. I’m gonna do it whether you agree with it or not. And you watch, I’ll get a seven forty on my SAT and then I’ll get into Harvard and Stanford, all the Ivys.”

“Big deal. Save your parents the hundred grand and get a full ride to IU. It’s a great school.”

“I love IU,” I said. “It’s just that . . . whatever, maybe I’m just a superficial glory-hound.
I’m competitive. Deal with it. Anyway, that’s why I’m gonna continue to work on my vocabulary . . . with Luke.”

Jeremy hunched his shoulders and didn’t speak. He was pleading the fifth, which meant he wasn’t going to take a stand. I put a hand on his shoulder and backed myself onto his lap. I craned my lips to the right and kissed the side of his mouth. “Don’t worry. You’re the only guy I want,” I said, hoping a good dose of cheeseball sentiment would do the trick.

Vocabulary Drill
February 10: Opposite Day (aka, Antithesis Day)
- antithesis · exact opposite
- incidentally · by the way
- incredulous · disbelieving

February 11: Day Before Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday
Nikki just called and woke me up. I was in that deeply relaxed state of half-sleep that comes right after you set your book down but before you’re fully conked out. I looked at the clock — 12:47.

Nikki was pretty delirious herself—but in a more energetic way. She was rushing her fragmented thoughts and giving me the events all out of order. The conclusion, which came first, went something like this: “I’m sick of it. This is it. I’ve had enough. I’m through.”

“Through with what?” I responded, blinking awake.

“With him. He’s such an egomaniac. He thinks he’s so much better than everyone else . . . This whole time, I thought things were getting better, and I had no clue. I feel like such an idiot! Fran, I’m so sorry for not trusting you. You were totally right about him.”


“I asked Luke to the dance. At first he kinda laughed and said he’d never been to a dance in his life. So I said yeah they were stupid and we didn’t have to go. We could just hang out that night. That’s when he said that he was having a visitor. And I was like, a girlfriend? And he was like, not exactly. And I was like, what does not exactly mean? And he said that they had been going out when he left California, so even though they broke up he wasn’t sure what it would be like when she comes to see him . . .”

I swallowed, trying to process this latest piece of information. Luke had a girlfriend back home? One he still had ties to? So what was he doing asking Nikki out on a date? Hadn’t he already put her through enough? I felt a sudden surge of appreciation for Jeremy. Sweet, dependable Jeremy. There I was getting annoyed all the time at how jealous he got over me. That was a lot better than being a player like Luke!

“Oh, Nikki,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Can you believe it?”

“What a dog,” I said.

“I know, I know! And he even told me her name.”

I cringed. “Do I want to know?”

“Brittany.”

“Oh, my God. Like Spears? And Murphy?”

“Exactly.”
“So wait—is he taking her to the dance?”
“That’s what I asked. And he said he hadn’t planned to, that it was up to her. She only has a few days in town, so everything’s up to her. I asked him what he was doing asking me out when he had this ex-girlfriend coming to town, and he said I’d read it all wrong—that our date was just supposed to be a friends thing or something stupid like that. He said it had been a while, and he thought we could “chill” together now without any weirdness.”
“Nikki, I’m so sorry,” I said again. “What’re you gonna do?”
“I don’t know. You know, I don’t even want to talk about it anymore. I’m sick of the whole thing. I’m sorry I woke you up.”
“Don’t worry about it, Nik. I’m totally gonna rail on him tomorrow at our . . .” I caught myself and stopped. I’d never ended up telling her about the tutoring lesson, because how could I after she said he’d moved their date because of it? I’d hoped that by the time I actually went, everything would be fine because they would have had their date, and she wouldn’t have cared anyway. But now was the worst time possible to give her one more reason to cry herself to sleep.
“After class, at school,” I finished lamely.
“Thanks Fran, that’s sweet of you. But it’d probably be better if you didn’t. I don’t want him to know he got to me. I’m gonna go now. You go back to sleep. Sorry I woke you up. Bye, Frannie.”
“Bye,” I said.
I hung up, then lay back in bed, staring at the ceiling. Great. Now I was wide awake and more confused about everything than ever.

Vocabulary Drill
February 11: Day Before Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday

**Delirious** · **Feverish**

February 12: Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday

I was late to the tutorial, but Luke hadn’t even been in school that day so I wasn’t sure what was going on anyway. The whole ride over to his house I rehearsed my **diatribe**. He was either being insensitive or just clueless, and regardless, it was toying with Nikki’s heart, which was inexcusable. She was my friend, and I had every intention of protecting her. So, if he really liked her, he’d better start being a gentleman. And if he didn’t, he’d better leave her alone. This was what I was thinking as I stood on Luke’s porch, waiting for someone to answer the door.

But the second I saw Luke’s face, my entire plan **dissipated**. In my rehearsals, I had been picturing him the way he’d always been—self-possessed, with that **supercilious** air of looking down at you. But his blue eyes were a shade of gray, and rimmed with red, and his shoulders slumped down at his sides.

He blinked when he saw me. “Hey, Francesca,” he said, looking confused. Then something seemed to click in place. “Oh, right, tutoring. Sorry, I totally forgot.” He ran his hand through his curls, sagging against the doorframe. I recognized the hopelessness in his voice. It was the same **inconsolable** tone that used to bug me when Snuffle-upagus used it on Sesame Street. But it was so out of place coming from Luke.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He stared **wistfully** in the general **vicinity** of the ground behind me. “Come on in.” He
turned and walked down a dimly lit hallway. I followed Luke through the kitchen. There was the sound of scurrying footsteps and the squeak of a door closing. We went past a room I’d never seen before—an aqua blue office space with African masks and a fish tank filled with aquatic life.

We ambled up a flight of stairs and into Luke’s bedroom. Jazz music was playing—the dolorous bleats of a tenor saxophone. Luke shut the door.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Is everything okay?”

Luke looked at me. “My Aunt Denise just died.”

“Oh, my God,” I said. “I don’t—Luke, I’m so sorry.”

He nodded, then sank down into his desk chair. There was a framed photo on his desk, of a woman with red hair cuddling her cat and smiling at the camera.


“She loved that cat,” he said. “She always loved her cats. She had, like, fifteen or something. I mean, not all at once.”

He smiled, a small smile, and I smiled back.

“We knew it was coming for a while,” he continued. “But it still felt like a shock, you know?”

“I’m so sorry . . .” A wave of compassion swelled within me, causing my eyes to tear up.

“Please don’t do that,” Luke said. “Maybe we should go outside.”

We went for a walk. For a while we didn’t say much. We crossed over National Road, the dewy grass saturating my shoes, and then ducked under a row of trees to the Oil Can Church.

That’s what we’ve always called it, because it looks like this big ol’ colossal oil can. It has one immense spire that cuts way up into the sky, which is pretty stunning if you sit there and look at it.

“North Christian Church,” Luke said, breaking the relative silence of whizzing cars and chirping crickets. “I don’t go to church or anything. But this is where I spent a lot of time, late at night, when I first got here.”

“Why?”


“Right.” I pointed up. “So d’you know that cross up there is six feet tall?”

We leaned way back and craned our necks. At the top of the church’s spire was the jet-black adumbration of a cross that looked roughly the size of a small bird.

“I didn’t know that,” Luke said. “But I did know it’s designed by the dude who did the St. Louis Arch.”

“Really? I thought it was his son. Saarinen.”

“Whatever. One of those guys . . . hey, wanna go check out the playground?”

“Sure.”

We headed over and started out on the swings for a while, then climbed across the swinging bridge that linked the slide with the monkey bars. There wasn’t much to do on the bridge but bounce up and down and laugh about it. Luke stomped past me and artfully pulled his way across the monkey bars. I ran down the slide at breakneck speed, then ran back up and did it again. Luke hopped on the tire swing, and I pushed him. I forgot all about Nikki and her and Luke’s disastrous “date.” I was just relieved to see Luke acting more like himself.

After a while, our vervediminished of its own accord and we hopped onto adjacent swings. We just sat there, not swinging. With no activity to drown out the morbid thoughts, I worried that Luke’s mood would slide back into melancholia. A part of me wanted to go back to
playing, but my gut told me he kind of needed to talk.
   “How do you remember her?” I asked.
   “What do you mean?”
   “You know, when you picture her with your mind’s eye. Is she just like in the picture, smiling at the cat?”
   “No. She’s standing, like this . . .” Luke pulled himself off the swing. He balanced himself on his left foot, with his right foot pressed against his knee, like an ostrich. “And she’s asking me questions about my life, and really listening to my answers. She always stood like that, and it struck me as odd when I was a little kid because she was tall . . . like five ten.”
   “Really?”
   “Yep.”
   “You couldn’t tell from the picture,” I said.
   “Well, she was . . .” Luke’s thoughts seemed to trail off with his words. Just as I began to worry that I was losing him, he spoke again. “You know what, that’s not totally true.” I pivoted in the swing so that I was facing him. “The way I remember her isn’t quite that majestic. I mean, I remember her that way, too. But the way I usually see her is that last time, down at her place. She was thin as a rail from all the chemotherapy, but she still somehow managed to have a better disposition than the rest of us. She would sneak junk food behind Grandma and Grandpa’s back and talk with me in the kitchen. The thing I remember most vividly was, one day, and this was only a few months ago, she was lying on her little portable bed in the living room, half-conscious from her pain medicine, and she looked over at me and said, ‘Luke, those are just the nicest socks.’ I had on these thick blue cotton socks with green and white stripes . . .” I could see he was losing it. “They really are great socks, and you could tell she wasn’t kidding. She really liked those socks . . .”
   With that, Luke just seemed to cave in on himself. I mean he was really bawling. I didn’t know what to do—I’d never seen a guy cry like that. I was crying, too, and I reached over and patted him on the back. But it felt so weak, considering, and my heart ached at how much he was hurting. So I foot-pedaled in Luke’s direction and put my arms around his neck. He swiveled and grabbed onto me, hugging me back. We sat there in our swings, holding each other so tightly I could feel his ribs against mine.
   At first, I really was just consoling him, but then eventually he stopped crying, and so did I, and we didn’t let go. I could hear the steady thump of his heart beating so close to mine, and feel his soft breath on my neck. Suddenly there was this thing between us, something new. He pulled back from me, just a little, and looked into my eyes. A shudder passed through my whole body—I could feel myself being turned inside out, what that look did to me. Luke’s face moved toward mine, until our lips nearly touched. My breath caught, and I felt dizzy, like if he wasn’t holding me I’d fall. He inched closer, and my eyes fluttered closed, waiting . . .
   A second later, I felt his lips touch—my cheek. “Thanks,” he murmured, and then he let me go.

Vocabulary Drill
February 12: Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday
accord · agreement
adumbration · symbol
aquatic · sea
February 14: Valentine’s Day

The universe really does have a great sense of humor. I mean, what’s the deal with plopping Valentine’s Day right in the middle of the most confusing time in the history of my barely existent romantic life?

I can’t tell you how many times in the past two years I’ve replayed that scene on the swings with Luke in my mind. Was he about to kiss me? Did I just totally imagine it? Did I want him to kiss me? How could I, when I have a boyfriend like Jeremy who adores me and never pulls any of the stupid stunts Luke’s capable of? Never drives me crazy like Luke does all the time. And when my own best friend is so hung up on the guy?

I told myself I’d just gotten carried away with the moment. That was typical me. But today was about love, and that meant today was about me and Jeremy. I spent the afternoon decorating the school gym for the dance. You’ve never seen so much red and pink in all your life. At least, as Vice President, I was allocated a group of three delegates from Student Council whose job descriptions were to accommodate my every whim. We were to keep the tubs of punch full, take turns DJ-ing and emceeing, and watch the bathrooms for shady activity. Basically, hold down the fort.

I was too busy toiling to really enjoy the dance itself, but such is the life of a public servant. At least it went off without any major glitches. Of course no one had the guts to dance for the first hour, but that’s par for the course. Not until the DJ put on that jam from last summer did a small, eclectic smattering of Junior girls start moving. At first all the guys played the wall—scattered clumps of fidgeting head-nodders huddling around the periphery. But it didn’t take long. The song changed to some cloying R&B ballad, and a few couples trickled out. Having broken the seal, hordes of guys flooded the floor. Jeremy even went out there—a rarity. Too bad it was the one night when I couldn’t really be out there with him.
I noticed one guy who wasn’t dancing. He was circumnavigating the floor, taller than the rest, accompanied by a girl with long, blonde wavy hair. They turned in my direction, and my heart raced.


He was walking right toward me, holding the girl’s hand, and I frantically searched around for an escape route but realized it would have looked too obvious. So I waited, giving my best impression of a “Hey, what’s up? I’m certainly not at all flustered at the sight of you” expression, and hoping it couldn’t be easily mistaken for “Flustered! Flustered!”

When they reached me, he cupped his hand to my ear and said something that was inaudible over the clamor.

“WHAT?” I yelled back.

Luke leaned in closer and touched his lip to my ear, sending a chill down my spine.

“We’re not going to stay. I just wanted to say thanks, for the other day.”

“You’re welcome.”

He stepped to the side and gestured at the blonde. “THIS IS BRITTANY!”

I’d kind of been hoping she would be a toad. Just so Nikki could feel better, I mean. But this girl was really something. Her blond waves cascaded down onto a worn-out t-shirt with “Bakersfield T-ball” stretched wide across her chest. Baggie camouflage pants on her long, lean legs. Momentarily blinded by her annoying resplendence, I didn’t notice she was extending her hand.

“Oh, Hi!” We shook.

“Yeah, SO WE JUST WANTED TO STOP BY AND SAY HI!” Luke yelled.

I waved and did a nervous little dance.


“You, TOO!”

That was weird, I thought as they walked away. It was almost like a staged scene. I think he just wanted me to see her.

No, I was still stuck in paranoia mode. Had to get out of that. I gave my head a little shake, then glanced out at the dance floor, scanning for Nikki. There she was with her second choice date, Dennis Dalelio. Had she seen Luke and Brittany? I hoped not. She actually seemed to be having a good time with Dennis. Maybe pigs would start flying, and Nikki would actually be willing to consider dating someone who wasn’t a total challenge.

I stayed to clean up after the dance, and Jeremy met me right outside the gym door with a fervent kiss and a look that said something was up his sleeve. “What?” I asked. “What?”

Jeremy pulled a key ring out of his front pocket and jingled it in my face.

“What’s that?”

“Keys.”

“Thanks, Captain Obvious,” I said. “Keys to what?”

“To our hotel room.”

My eyebrows flew up, and I gaped back at him. “Our what?” I guess it shouldn’t have stunned me as much as it did. Jeremy had been dropping all these hints about how after the dance we’d have a special Valentine’s Day celebration of our own. I’d figured that meant the usual—making out in his basement. But apparently Jeremy had decided to get serious. The question was . . . did I feel the same way?

Jeremy’s smile faltered. “Don’t you think it’s time?” he said. “I mean, we’ve been together forever, Fran. All the other guys and their girlfriends—”
“Okay, stop right there,” I interrupted. “Before you sound way too much like a bad cliche.”

He rolled his eyes, then took a step closer and put his arms around my neck. “I just—I want to be with you, that’s all,” he said softly. And the thing is, I believed him. I knew he really did care about me, and he had been pretty patient. And what was my problem, anyway? He was my boyfriend. This is what girlfriends and boyfriends did.

“Okay,” I said.

“Really?” His whole face lit up, and it made me feel warm and cozy to see how happy he was.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

I called my parents and told them I was staying over at Nikki’s, feeling a streak of rebellious excitement. We drove in separate cars to the Best Western just outside of town.

Jeremy and I walked into room 312, holding hands, not saying much. It was so quiet and anonymous in there, so bereft of atmosphere, that I felt myself losing my nerve almost immediately. In dreams, my first time usually occurred in some fantasticalsolarium on a bed enshrouded with white lace. Jeremy turned on the radio and the bathroom light. With all the built-up expectation, it was a little unwieldy to get started. Was I supposed to take my clothes off first, or wait?

We sat beside each other awkwardly on the bed. He leaned in and kissed the side of my neck in a way that he knows gets to me, then moved over to kiss me on the mouth. I closed my eyes, trying to relax, but it was no use. My whole body tensed up, and finally I couldn’t take another second—I pushed him away, mumbling, “Stop, I’m sorry, stop.”

“What happened?” he asked, opening his eyes.

I shrugged.

“What’s that s’posed to mean?” Jeremy asked, stupefied. “Why did you push me away like that?”

“I don’t know. I just can’t.”

He let out a frustrated sigh, then fell back on the bed. “So why’d you say okay, before?” he asked, his voice barely masking his annoyance.

“Jeremy, I’m sorry. I thought I could, but—I’m not ready.”

Another deep sigh. Then . . . “Okay.” He turned over and groaned into the pillow. So much for our special Valentine’s Day together.

Vocabulary Drill
February 14: Valentine’s Day
accommodate · provide for
allocated · given
anonymous · lacking identity
ballad · song
bereft · lacking
circumnavigating · going around
clamor · noise
delegates · representatives
eclectic · selective
enshrouded · enclosed
fantastical · wonderful
fervent · intense
glitches · snags
inaudible · too soft to hear
periphery · edges
rarity · uncommon circumstance
resplendence · brilliance
solarium · sunroom
stupefied · amazed
toiling · working
unwieldy · awkward
whim · impulse

February 22: George Washington’s Birthday

We’re stuck in that stagnant period of deep winter when days just sort of blend into each other. A week just rolled by, and I swear nothing happened. Wake up, hit snooze, get bundled up, go to class, eat, talk, do homework, eat, sleep. Repeat. My conversations with Nikki go back to the same focal point—me describing Brittany, in minute detail, since Nikki didn’t in fact see her, and the fun time she had with Dennis wasn’t enough to erase Luke from her brain. Luke, meanwhile, missed four days of school this past week because of the funeral and the wake, so Nikki isn’t sure what’s up with them. The only thing we know is that she definitely can’t stop thinking about him.

Nikki isn’t the only one. Because, see, I have a secret to admit. Something I didn’t even write down when I was describing that whole miserable episode with Jeremy at the hotel.

God, I don’t even know if I can make myself put it on paper now. No, I have to. If I get it out, maybe I’ll realize it’s crazy, and it’ll be out of my system. Right? Right.

Okay. Deep breath. Here it is: When Jeremy and I were in that hotel room, the reason I couldn’t go through with it wasn’t just that I wasn’t ready to have sex, even though I’m really not, and I know that now for sure. There was more. It was also that I didn’t want to have sex with Jeremy. And I think I know why. I think it’s because of something that changed between me and Luke on those swings.

I think I’m falling for Luke.

Vocabulary Drill
February 22: George Washington’s Birthday
minute · precise
stagnant · stale

February 29: Leap Day

Got a message on the machine from Luke saying he couldn’t make tonight’s makeup tutoring session because he had to work. I couldn’t stop wondering—did he really have to work, or was he just afraid to see me? Was he feeling as mixed up about everything as I was? I know, I know, he has Nikki, and this Brittany chick, and who knows who else waiting in the wings. But I
had Jeremy, and that wasn’t stopping me from feeling like Luke and I had connected out there on the playground in a way that felt like nothing I’d ever experienced.

I was slowly driving myself insane. I had to know for sure if these feelings for Luke were real, or if maybe I was using them as an excuse somehow, to avoid getting too close to Jeremy. Or was I just overthinking everything?

I grabbed the phone and dialed Luke’s number.

“Hello,” Mrs. Barton’s voice was hushed almost to the point of silence.

“Hi, Mrs. Barton. This is Francesca Castarelli.”

“Oh, hi, Francesca. How are you?”

“Just fine. Actually, I was wondering how you were . . .”

“Oh, thank you. It’s been hard over here, but we’re getting through.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sure you really miss her.”

“Yes, very much,” she agreed, sounding especially sad. “Thanks for coming to see Luke that day—it really seemed to help him.”

It had? And he’d told her about my visit? I had to stop.

“He’s not home right now, but I can tell him you called,” she continued.

“Yeah, actually, that’s why I was calling—he said something about working tonight, but I, um, I forgot the name of the place.”

“Oh, no problem. It’s called Jitterz, with a z.”

“Coffee shop?” I guessed.

“Yes, exactly, over in West Hill.”

“Great, thanks a lot. I hope you feel better soon. Be well, Mrs. Barton.”

“Thanks Francesca. That’s sweet of you. You take care, too.”

I hung up, making my decision. I could easily go to Jitterz under the guise of needing a new atmosphere to study in. Besides, the notion of getting homework done at a coffee shop appealed to me. And the added impetus of Luke Barton being my obeisant waiter-slave made driving out to West Hill not seem so bad.

I quickly slipped on my maroon-and-white Pumas and did my hair up in two ponytails, then threw my homework into my backpack with celerity. I wasn’t in the mood to dawdle. Nikki had also left a message, asking me to call when I got back from “hanging out with Jeremy,” which was where I’d told her I’d be tonight instead of ‘fessing up about the lesson. I didn’t know what to say to her, exactly, but I’d think of something when I got back. Maybe by then, I’d know the real deal myself, finally.

Clumps of cars peppered the parking lot of the shopping center where Jitterz was located, and a bunch of kids my age were loitering in their vicinity. I figured maybe Noble Roman’s Pizza was having some sort of two-for--one deep-dish deal. As it turned out, Jitterz itself was quite populated, with a cheery, well-lit ambience. The front section was filled with kids from school—mainly female. Was this some unexplored, underground scene going on in Columbus? It seemed highly implausible. Where was Luke? He was supposed to be behind the register, parroting that age-old ingratiating salutation: “May I help you?” Ah well—so be it. I ordered a large Chai Tea Latte and sat in the back, where I could plug in my laptop, people-watch and work in relative peace.

But I wasn’t much in the mood to do work. Something was in the air. I felt like writing down my thoughts instead. I’d been besieged by a steady influx of intense thoughts for the past few weeks. And it wasn’t just my own situation. We just happened to be reading Anna Karenina, by Tolstoy, in English class, and the story had all these eerie parallels to my own life right now.
Well, okay, maybe that was a little bit of a stretch, but Anna K. was all confused about whom she wanted to be with, too.

Maybe I needed a break from anything too close to home. I decided to work on my vocabulary, instead, and write up a paragraph about my surroundings using words from my SAT prep book.

As an inveterate eavesdropper, I find the lives of perfect strangers way more captivating than they know. At the moment, I’m tuned to the wavelength of the assemblage of thirty-something women behind me. “Oh, my Gawd! Of course I saw her engagement ring! Was that not, like, the biggest, most garish rock you’ve ever seen!” “She only wants him for his money!” But my capricious ears tire quickly of their cupidity and tune into a different channel—the two artisans who just walked in the door . . .

I looked up. My heart thumped as I realized that one of the arty guys, the one with the guitar case strapped across his shoulder, was Luke. He noticed me simultaneously and flashed me a confused and rather inscrutable look.

“Hey,” he said. “What’s goin’ on? Didn’t you get my message?”
I opened my mouth to form the perfect, cool and casual response. “Yep,” is what came out. “I got it.”
“So . . . how did you find me here?”
“Oh. I called you. Your mom told me where you were.”

What was I doing? Hadn’t my plan been to pretend this was purely a chance meeting? There went that. I’m a sucky liar.

Luke’s eyes narrowed, and I realized that I sounded a little stalker-ish. My face reddened. He turned to the guy on his left, a tattooed and yet somehow urbane-looking, dark-tanned, twenty-something guy with an easy smile.

“Francesca, this is Minh. Minh, this is Francesca.”
“Men?” I asked.
“That works.” We shook hands. Where did Luke find these people? This guy was so not-Columbus, so in his own world. He looked like a GQ model.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, wondering what this guy was thinking of the weird stalker girl.

“Minh is one of three members of my jazz collective. I play flamenco guitar, and he plays drums. The other dude, who plays bass, is late. Again. Did you come here for our gig?”
“Gig? No,” I said, and meant it. “I just came to study—and to, um, say hi. I thought you worked here as, like, a waiter or something.”
“We make great background music,” Minh said.
“All right, well, we need to go fuel up,” Luke said.
I laughed. “Okay. Break a leg then.”
“That’s just for acting,” Minh said.
I pretended to get back to my homework, scribbling thoughts to myself instead. WE’RE BOTH BEING DODGYNO, I’M BEING DODGY, HE’S BEING SKETCHED OUT ALMOST KISS MEANT NOTHING

They got on stage and started warming up. I focused on his fingers massaging the strings. I knew he was a musician, but I’d never seen him play before. The bass player showed up, lugging his stuffed instrument case. They plucked around, did a little mini jam session and stopped. Luke leaned into the mike, which responded with the shrillest of sounds. A few girls up front screamed.
The same girls were now a giggling gaggle of chickenheads, puppets on his string.
“Sorry about that. But seriously now folks. We are The Lords. We want to thank you all
for coming out tonight. And a big shout-out to Jitterz!”
We all clapped. The barista, a **convivial** brunette, curtsied at us from behind the **bulwark**
of her glassed-in counter.
“We’re gonna play something new tonight.” Luke hushed the crowd with a delicate strum
of his strings, letting the sound drift away. “I lost someone very close to me recently, and I wrote
this song.” He pulled away from the mike and took a dramatic swig of his water bottle. “It’s
called ‘**Moribund**.’”
With a title like that, you’d expect the song to be a bit heavy. But it was actually soft and
**lilting**, a tribal drum line rolling along on guitar licks. I was **mesmerized**. I think everyone in
there was. These guys were no wannabe hippie **charlatans**. They were talented musicians. Luke
pressed his lips up to the mike. “**Lamenting** that you were with me before, but with me no more . . .”
There was real emotion in the song. You could feel that it was real.
When the band took a break, Luke walked over and sat down across from me.
“Sorry about having to cancel the lesson again,” he said. “They called us in at the last
minute when the scheduled performer canceled.”
“Yeah, sure,” I joked. “I know what’s going on here—you’re just trying to **sabotage** my
chances so you can beat my score and take my spot at the Ivys.”
Luke smirked. “That’s me—cutthroat academic all the way.”
I had to laugh at that image. Luke was one of those people who just happened to be
smart. As arrogant as he was about his superior intellect, he didn’t get caught up in all those
contests in school over grades, class rankings, that stuff.
“So, I guess Brittany’s back in California,” I said, tracing the pattern on the table with my
finger.
“Yep, it was a short visit.” He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back in the chair.
“We’re just friends now, you know. Me and Brittany.”
I coughed. Why was he telling me that? “Okay,” I said, not sure how to respond. My gaze
traveled over to the stage where he’d been playing. “So, the band—you guys are pretty decent.”
“Decent, huh? Okay, I can work with that.” He grinned back at me, and for a second,
there was that thing between us again—that weird vibe that I couldn’t even describe except that
it made my neck feel warm and my palms start to sweat.
I guess it’s why I didn’t hear her footsteps, or see the familiar figure heading toward us in
my peripheral vision. The first thing I heard was . . .
“Sorry to interrupt.” Her voice was steely, cold, but also full of sadness that only
someone who’d been her best friend for years could recognize.
I winced, knowing what her expression would look like before I turned to see it. But
actually, it was even worse.
“Nikki—” I started.
“No, no, you guys are in the middle of something, no problem,” she said quickly. I could
tell her facial muscles were working overtime to hold off the waterworks.
“Nikki, it’s not—”
“Don’t worry, I covered for you with Jeremy,” she practically spat out. “You know, when
I tried his cell, looking for you, and he didn’t have any idea where you were.”
I went white, putting it all together. Didn’t I say I was a sucky liar? Nikki had realized I’d
fibbed about my plans with Jeremy, and she’d tracked me down here. That’s why this looked so, so bad—like Luke and I had plotted some secret rendezvous.

“You might want to consider clueing him in, though,” she added. Her gaze moved to Luke. “Sometimes it’s not the worst thing in the world to actually let someone know how you really feel.”

With that, she turned and stalked out, ignoring my yells of “Nikki, wait!” and slamming the coffeehouse door shut behind her.

I dropped my face into my hands, rubbing my throbbing forehead. When I finally glanced up at Luke, he was avoiding my gaze, looking supremely uncomfortable, like he’d just been forced to eat spoiled brussel sprouts. A lot of them.

And that’s when it sunk in. Luke didn’t like me—I mean, at least, he didn’t like like me. He’d been vulnerable that day on the playground. For God’s sake, his aunt had just died. But he didn’t want anything to do with all this girly melodrama. He just wanted to be friends, with me and with Nikki. And now I’d blown things with my best friend in the entire world over something that never was even anything.

Vocabulary Drill
February 29: Leap Day
ambience · atmosphere
artisans · craftsmen
assemblage · group
besieged · overtaken
bulwark · wall
capricious · fickle
captivating · appealing
celerity · speed
charlatans · frauds
collective · group
convivial · sociable
cupidity · greed
dawdle · hang around
garish · gaudy
guise · disguise
impetus · incentive
implausible · unbelievable
influx · flood
ingratiating · flattering
inscrutable · unreadable
inveterate · habitual
lamenting · grieving
litting · rhythmic
loitering · loafing
mesmerized · captivated
moribund · dying
notion · idea
March 8: Working Women’s Day

Nikki hasn’t talked to me in a week. I’ve left like six bizillion messages on her machine. Finally, today, I decided I couldn’t take it anymore. I furtively sneaked up on her at her locker and kind of pinned her there. “Hey,” I said.

She looked at me, then banged her locker closed and turned to walk away. I followed. We were going to settle this. “Come on, Nik,” I said. “You can’t run away from me forever.”

“Watch me.”

I wracked my brain for something that would assuage her feelings. “I know it looked really bad, I do, but if you’d just let me explain, you’d see it’s not like what you’re thinking at all. See, we were originally supposed to have a tutoring session that night, but I didn’t tell you because I knew you couldn’t take hearing the sound of his name even, so I said I was out with Jeremy. And then Luke canceled the lesson at the last minute, so I went there to study, and his band was playing and—”


“Just because I go to study at a place where he happens to be, doesn’t mean I like him. It’s a small town, that’s all,” I protested.

Nikki shook her head. “You are either in serious denial, or you’re not the person I thought you were,” she seethed. “The whole time, I’m trying to get this guy, sharing how I feel about him with you, and you’re stealing him from under my nose. You and Luke probably got a good laugh out of it.”

My mouth dropped open. “Nikki, how could you say that? You make it sound like—I’m colluding with him against you. You know me better than that.”

“I thought I knew you. Look, do what you want, Francesca. Just do it somewhere else, away from me.” She picked up her pace. “And quit following me.”

Vocabulary Drill
March 8: Working Women’s Day
assuage · ease
colluding · scheming
furtively · secretively

March 15: The Ides of March

I was forced to prevaricate to get a day off school today. I claimed PMS complications, even though mine won’t come until late next week. It’s quite possible that I’m losing my mind. The only person who still wants to be around me is Jeremy, and I feel so guilty around
him, even though I never actually did anything with Luke. But I feel ten times worse about Nikki. She’s right—I can argue facts with her, and on paper I didn’t do anything wrong. But I did lie to her, and I did have some mixed up feelings about the guy she’s been pining after for months now.

But the thing is, she’s the one who sort of pushed us together in the first place, with that whole elaborate tutoring plan. Am I evil for thinking about that? I know I have to stay away from him now—I know best friends come first, and I broke that rule. But I also can’t help feeling like all of this is a little bit her fault. Just a little bit. Because as usual, she pulled me into one of her wacky schemes, and this time it had a little unintended consequence that I really couldn’t prevent.

My horoscope today said, “You are not being honest with your heart.” All I do is mope around in a tragically lackluster fashion, watching bad movies and reading Anna Karenina. I feel more and more like I can relate to Anna’s predicament. The guy she really wants couldn’t be more inconvenient. She’s at odds with the society around her, and she’s bound to lose in the end. I wonder what’ll happen to her.

Mom came up to check on me this afternoon. She called through the door and asked if I wanted to talk. I didn’t. She said she’d feel a lot better if I would let her in. I did. As it turned out, I did want to talk. I told her the whole story, unabridged, from alpha to omega. I even used episodes from Anna Karenina as instructional metaphors so Mom could relate to my dilemma.

“So what’re you going to do?” Mom asked. “Break up with Jeremy and go out with Luke?”

“I can’t.”

“Stay with Jeremy and do nothing about Luke?”

“Can’t do that either.”

“Well I say you drop them both and make up with Nikki. That’s the most important thing. Never let a guy wreak havoc on your friendships with your girlfriends.”

“You’re probably right,” I said. “But I just hope it’s not too late.”

Vocabulary Drill
March 15: The Ides of March
consequence · result
havoc · chaos
lackluster · unimpressive
metaphors · comparisons
predicament · dilemma
prevaricate · lie
wreak · inflict

March 17: St. Patrick’s Day
I couldn’t stand it anymore. No longer could I languish alone with my thoughts, my best friend hating me, too overcome by the inertia of self-hate to sleep, do homework or function socially. A decisive and valiant step had to be taken.

Such was the misguided logic in place when I hopped into my cute little Saturn and drove to Jitterz tonight, looking for Luke himself. I tried to time my entrance perfectly with the end of
his set. The plan backfired though, because when I got there, the place was almost empty. I asked a waitress, who was sweeping up, if The Lords had played there.

“Finished up about a half hour ago. They all left. Except Luke, of course. He’s out back with Ol’ Buckethead.”

“What?”

“Our dishwasher.”

“Oh. Can I see him? It’s kind of an emergency.”

“Well I’m not supposed to take customers through the back offices.”

“Please,” I importuned. 

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt anything. The owners aren’t around. Follow me . . .” She lifted up the counter and ushered me back. We walked past an office space, which couldn’t have been more immaculate.

“It’s right through that door,” she said. “And tell those guys that I’m leaving in another fifteen minutes, so it’s about time for them to leave.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

I opened the door and saw Luke and an elderly swarthy man with graying hair, sitting across from each other on milk crates, backs propped against opposing dumpsters. This guy was presumably “Buckethead,” though nothing about the shape of his head warranted such an epithet.

Luke glanced up and saw me, and I tried to judge his reaction but couldn’t really decipher anything from his poker face.

“Hi,” I said. “Um, Luke, I need to talk to you.”

“Go ahead. Shoot.”

“Could we maybe have a little privacy?”

Luke nodded. “If you’ll excuse me,” he said to the older guy. He pulled himself off the milk crate, slowly. “Where were you thinking of going?”

“I don’t care. Right over there, I guess.” I pointed to behind the dumpster.

“Okay.”

I walked around the dumpster until we were out of earshot, then turned to him.

“I just have to get this out, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, smiling in that condescending way of his. At least that made what I had to do easier.

“We can’t hang out, ever again,” I said.


“My best friend hates me, and my boyfriend’s totally suspicious.”

“And this is my problem?”

The casual way that he said it enraged me. “I guess it’s not then. If you don’t care.”

“Did I say that? I’m just not sure why you have to jump every time someone in your life says the word.”

I drew in a deep breath. “Maybe you don’t understand what it means to have an actual commitment to someone,” I began, “but when people are counting on me, I take that seriously.”

Luke shrugged. “All right then, fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yeah, if we can’t see each other any more, so be it. What am I supposed to do?”

I stared back at him, feeling angrier by the second. “Nothing, I guess,” I said. “You’re good at that, right? Feeling nothing?”
I knew I wasn’t making any sense—he was agreeing to what I asked for, and I was furious at him for it. But couldn’t he show he cared, just a little?

“Hold on,” Luke said. “If you want to show up here and make a big production out of how we can’t talk anymore, go ahead. But you can stop with all the cuts, okay? What about you? You are the most self-absorbed, solipsistic human I’ve ever met. And I know you don’t know what that means, so you’ll just have to look it up when you get home . . .” (True.) “You think the world only exists in your head, from your perspective. But guess what? I’ve had some real problems lately, from my perspective, and I don’t have time to kowtow to you, and whatever overwrought issues you’ve fabricated in your little head."

“Oh,” I said, tears springing to my eyes. “I see.”

“But it sure has been a pleasure knowing you.” Luke extended his hand for a final, sarcastic shake. I shook my head instead. “Have a nice life,” he added.

“Fine!” I yelled.


I stomped past the dumpster, wondering where a handy door to slam was when you needed it.

Vocabulary Drill
March 17: St. Patrick’s Day
epithet · nickname
immaculate · spotless
importuned · pestered
inertia · sluggishness
kowtow · bow down to
languish · suffer
overwrought · exaggerated
solipsistic · self-centered
swarthy · of dark complexion

March 18: National Crochet Week Begins
Jeremy is the only string of hope I have left, and even our relationship feels tenuous. Which is why I went out of my way to smother him with affection today.

I even told him I was ready to do it, and I wasn’t playing around this time. Luke had my head all messed up, but now I know Jeremy’s the one I belong with, and I need to do this to prove I’m serious.

Jeremy hedged at first, worried I wasn’t really ready, but ultimately relented when I stuck to my story. He said his parents were going up to Indy for a play on the twenty-first, in three days, so that would be perfect. That’d be great, I told him, and meant it wholeheartedly. So there you have it, the official word on my virginity: T minus three and counting.

Vocabulary Drill
March 18: National Crochet Week Begins
relented · yielded
tenuous · shaky

March 19
Mom came up to my room tonight, as a sort of follow-up visit to the heart-to-heart we had the other night. She wanted to know if I had made peace with Nikki. I hadn’t.

“Well, maybe this will alleviate her anger.” Mom pulled an envelope from behind her back.

“What’s this?” I asked, ripping it open. It had five tickets, from Indy to Ft. Myers Airport, for next week . . . spring break! “Oh, thank you, Mom!” I screeched, throwing my arms around her neck.

“The extra ticket in there is for Nikki,” she said. “And your father and I reserved a separate room for you two, to give you some time together.”

“Mom, you’re amazing,” I gushed.

Nikki has to forgive me now, right?

Vocabulary Drill
March 19
alleviate · lessen

March 20
I e-mailed Nikki three times. The first time, I said I had a surprise for her. The second time, I said it was an emergency and she had to contact me immediately. The third time, I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I told her the whole deal—that my parents had purchased tickets and a hotel room for both of us down in Florida. She finally replied: “That’s sweet of your parents. But I’ve already got plans. I’m going to Jamaica with my parents.”

March 21: Naw Ruz (Persian New Year)
I was totally prepared. I really was. Jeremy picked me up at home. We went to Applebee’s for dinner. It went fine, though my Chicken Cobb Salad was more filling than I’d expected and left me feeling less than sexy. And then, there was the fact that Jeremy kept looking at his watch. He snarfed down his food and, even though I was less than half-finished with my salad, asked for the check. We had to hurry up, he said, or we would “miss our window.”

He drove like a banshee to his place. We dashed up to his room. We started kissing, with good old Les Nubians playing on the stereo. And then it happened, again. I felt terrible when it hit me, that I still couldn’t go through with this. It was cruel to Jeremy, I knew. But that wasn’t enough to make this huge, gigantic mistake worth it. You can never have another first time, you know?

“Man!” Jeremy said, sensing my withdrawal. “What’s wrong this time?”

I bit my lip. What was wrong . . . that I still couldn’t get Luke off my brain? That, if I would just be honest with myself, for once, I would know I’d only decided to do this as a way to forget about Luke and stop feeling guilty with Jeremy?
“Maybe we should wait until after spring break,” I said.
“What? Are you kidding me? After you promised me, again? I’m sorry, but you just can’t
do this to me, Fran. I asked you if you were sure, remember? You said you were. You swore you
were.”

I flinched. “I know. I’m so sorry. But the first time has to feel right. And this just
doesn’t.”

Jeremy turned away, buttoning up his shirt. “That’s it. I can’t take it anymore. With you.
With us. I think it’s time we took a break.”

“Whoa,” I said. “You’re gonna break up with me because I won’t have sex with you?”
“It’s not just that, Francesca. It’s the way you’ve led me on, and all the Luke stuff . . . I
don’t even feel like you like me. You’re just using me for . . .”

“I’m using you? Interesting. What am I using you for?”

“I don’t know. As a prop. It’s like I’m another notch on your stick or something. You
know, Vice President. Soccer Captain. Girlfriend of Jeremy. I feel like you’d put me on your
college application if you thought it would help you out.”

“Wow,” I said. “Well, it’s good to know how you really feel.”

Jeremy let out a frustrated groan. “That came out wrong,” he said. “It’s not like that.”

“So then . . . what’s it like?”

Jeremy raked his hand through his hair. He sat back down on the bed and faced me.

“Actually, what I was trying to say to you . . . what I’ve been wanting to say is . . . I love you.”

“What?”

“I said, I love you.” Jeremy looked satisfied with himself, for the valor it took get this
out. But somehow, just like everything else tonight, it didn’t feel right. See, I had thought about
those three words in relation to him. I had thought about whether we’d say them, and how, and
how you would have to feel right before you knew it was time to say them. I had even felt close
to saying it myself. But I wasn’t sure anymore, and, regardless, this was not the right moment.

“Did you not hear me?” he repeated. “I said I love you.”

“I heard you.”

“And?—”

“And . . .”

Jeremy’s eyes flashed. “Forget it.” He said. “Forget I said anything.”

“What do you want me to do?” I entreated him. “Just a second ago, you wanted to break
up. You said I was superficial and I was using you for my college application, and now you’re
telling me you love me? You can’t keep vacillating like that.”

“Forget it,” he repeated.

“No, Jeremy, wait—I mean, the truth is . . . I think I love you, too,” I forced out,
desperate to stop this situation from spinning further out of control.

“Oh, my God, Fran. You think you love me? That’s even worse than not saying it at all. I
don’t need your pity. I was right the first time—it’s time to take a break.”

“So now we’re breaking up?”

“Taking a break,” Jeremy corrected.

The emerging possibility that he wasn’t kidding, that I could, within the next few
seconds, become the former girlfriend of Jeremy Malone, suddenly hit me. But I wasn’t exactly
grief-stricken. Just stunned. It was crazy the way you could be one thing one second and
something else the next. How fast life could change so drastically. “You really mean that?” I
asked.
“Uh huh.”
“All right, then. I guess that’s that.”
“I guess so. I should probably drive you home now, before my parents get here.”
Up to this point, I was convinced that whatever damage I’d just incurred was still reversible. It was a fight, and maybe we’d take a break, but not for long. But the fact that he wanted me to leave now, before his parents got home, seemed extra final.
“I’ll walk,” I said, knowing it would either be the longest drive of my life, or we’d get back together. Right now I wanted neither.
“Don’t be stupid. It’s like a half-hour walk. I’ll drive you.”
“No, really. Thanks, but I’ll walk.”

Vocabulary Drill
March 21: Naw Ruz (Persian New Year)
entreated · begged
incurred · brought on oneself
vacillating · wavering
valor · courage

March 25: Spring Break
Why didn’t anyone tell me Anna Karenina dies? She actually throws herself onto train tracks, too. That is seriously messed up. And really not helping matters right now.
It’s just like me to pick spring break for the onset of severe, acute depression. The enormity of what has transpired in the last week hit me full-throttle on the plane ride down here. Nikki thinks I’m a traitor. Jeremy thinks I’m a tease and a user. Luke thinks I’m self-absorbed. And right now, I’m pretty sure I accede with all three of them.
So just because I’m at the beach doesn’t mean I’m feeling particularly buoyant. I have spent my first three days here sleeping, watching TV, and laying out by the pool with my book. At around noon each day, groups of college kids, mainly guys, start coming by. They boisterously yell back and forth. I feel them looking at me, but they never approach. I’m hoping this can be ascribed to the depressed vibe I’m giving off, as opposed to me just being straight-up butt ugly.
My parents check on me, to give me reassuring pats. They take me out to dinner and grill me about why I’m so sullen. But talking about it just makes it worse, so I don’t. I’ve cried a handful of times, but for the most part I’m just numb. Being reclusive is weird like that. After a while, when no one can hear you cry, you just dry up. Last night, I finished reading Anna Karenina. Aside from being ticked off at the frustrating ending, I decided that the story is a decent metaphor for how I feel—like I’m sliding down a long slope, powerless, toward some unforeseen tragedy.
This morning, however, I woke up and the cloud had lifted somewhat. I stopped fixating on the friends I’d estranged. I got up, took a shower and put on my bathing suit. I went down to the pool again, but this time I went without a book, hoping, for the first time in days, to interact with the world. Unfortunately, it was only half-past-seven, so I was the only one there except a portly old man who was cleaning the pool.
I watched him sweep a long pole across the surface of the water, whistling to himself. For
most people (myself included), this would be the most boring no-brainer of a job you could ever imagine. But this guy did it with such *élan*—skipping around the pool’s *perimeter*, smiling even as he cleaned the gook from the drains with his bare hands. I had never seen such a commendable attitude. I was sure that, if you pried, this guy, like the rest of us, could find reasons to despair. He just chose not to. It reminded me of a quote I’d once read by Martin Luther King, Jr.: “If you’re a street sweeper, be the Michelangelo of street sweepers.”

After a bit, the man walked up to me. I thought I’d been watching him clandestinely, without him noticing, but I should’ve known better. He was the type who saw things.

“Excuse if I am nosy, miss,” he said in broken English. “And please don’t take the offense . . .”

I smiled an easy smile to let him know I wouldn’t.

“But can you say how it is that such a beautiful young woman is down here all alone?”

I know. Sounds like a *trite* Dirty Old Man line. But there was something about his delivery, his whole bearing, which simply didn’t make it seem that way. “You’re sweet,” I said. I was even blushing a little.

“No, really, I mean it. Where I come from, a young woman like you would be swarmed.”

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“I am from Greece.” He said it with such pride. “A little village, in the south part. If you were there, I tell you, you would not walk ten feet without guys coming . . . from everywhere!”

He laughed a few happy snorts.

“That sounds nice,” I said.

“Yes. But really, this I don’t understand. What is wrong with American men? Where are they?”

“Asleep, I guess. It’s pretty early.”

“But that is not excuse! I have seen you here before, in the day, and where are they?”

I shrugged. He shrugged.

“I cannot understand,” he said.

“To be honest, I don’t think it’s entirely their fault. I’m kind of alone by choice.”

“Oh,” he said, stunned. “I see. But why?”

“Sometimes guys are more trouble than they’re worth,” I said.

“Oh, no, no . . .” He started waving his hands around, as if swatting at an invisible bee.

“This will not do. This is not life.”

“Excuse me?”

“You read, yes? You are reader?”

“Mm hmm.”

“I will tell you something from my favorite book. You have heard of the Zorba the Greek, by Kazantzakis?”

“I think so.”

“In that book, he writes something that I don’t forget . . .” He took a step back and raised two fingers in front of his face, like a man about to say something noteworthy. “He says, ‘To live. Do you know what that means? To go out and look for trouble!’” He let out a big, bellowing laugh, then looked at me with his piercing brown eyes. “You understand?”

“I think so,” I said. “Yeah, I understand. I’m good at trouble.”

“That’s good. Remember that. It is something to know, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now I must go. I am not to talk to the swimmers. The boss, he knows how I love to talk.
I will see you, yes? You will remember me?"
   “Of course I will. How could I forget you?”
   “That’s good. Everyone wants to be remembered.”
   “What is your name?” I asked.
   “I am Stavros. And you are called?”
   “Francesca.”
   “Ah, Francesca! What a beautiful name! A beautiful name for a beautiful girl to start off a beautiful day! Have the best day, Francesca! Go out and look for trouble!” With that, his closing line, Stavros grabbed his pool supplies and walked away.

Vocabulary Drill
March 25: Spring Break
accede · agree
acute · sharp
ascribed · attributed
boisterously · energetically
buoyant · cheerful
clandestinely · secretly
commendable · admirable
estranged · alienated
lan · flair
perimeter · outside edge
portly · stout
reclusive · solitary
sullen · grim
transpired · happened
trite · stale, commonplace

March 27
Today there was a guy at the pool. A plenitude of them, actually, but only one that mattered. I had been watching him for a while, and not just because he was exceedingly cute—bright blue eyes, a tanned, carved-up bod straight off the cover of Men’s Fitness, a cowlick on the right side of his forehead. I was utterly riveted, also because of something he did.

They were throwing a football, he and his friends, from the shallow end to the deep end, to the hot tub, and into the arms of whoever would call out “Hit me!” before running toward the pool’s edge for a spectacular, highlights-reel-style diving catch. But this guy—the one I’m talking about—was the only one who noticed two younger boys, no older than eight, splashing around and watching the whole scene with wide-eyed admiration.

“You wanna play too?” the guy said to the younger boys. They were too diffident to answer, but you could see that they did. He threw the ball to one of them, who fumbled it in the water, then dog-paddled after it as quick as he could and threw it back. Then the guy—my guy—threw it to the other kid, who caught it and threw it back.

“Nice toss,” My guy said.
“Yo, man,” one of his buddies in the hot tub said. “You’re jackin’ up the game. Throw
the ball over here.”

“Shut up!” my guy said. “Chill out.”

He passed it a few more times with the younger kids, then threw the ball over to his hot-tub buddies. That’s when I knew I had to be **plucky** and try to talk to him. Go out and look for trouble. The problem was, there was no way to get close to him without making an idiot of myself. I couldn’t just dive in there and kind of swim around in his vicinity. And even if, by some divine **infusion** of courage, I could summon up a smooth conversation-starter, I would be instantly crushed by a chorus of oohs and ahhhs from all his primate buddies.

It was then that an idea hit me and came to full blossom in my head. I opened the copy of Zorba the Greek that I’d bought the day before at the local bookstore. There were a couple blank pages at the end of the book. I ripped one out and, with the pen that I’d been bringing to the pool daily but, until this moment, had never actually used, I wrote out the stupidest message you’ve ever read. I promptly **jettisoned** that message and wrote the following on the scrap that remained: *Francesca oom 312*

Not bad. What it lacked in specificity, it made up for in mystery. Could seem a little slutty if it fell into the wrong hands. But I knew, or felt strongly, that his hands were not the wrong ones. It was just a matter of getting them there. When I saw him swimming toward the ladder, I realized opportunity was about to knock. I gathered up all my stuff and walked toward the projected point of contact. My timing couldn’t have been more precise. Just as his water-glazed body rose up from the ladder, I “accidentally” bumped into him.

“Oh. Excuse me,” he said.

I said nothing. I held a tiny piece of paper up for him to see, flashed a slight smile and handed it to him. Using every shred of **restraint** of which I am capable, I didn’t sprint out of there, but **sauntered** away with calm, measured steps.

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**Vocabulary Drill**

March 27

- **diffident** · timid
- **infusion** · outpouring
- **jettisoned** · abandoned
- **plentitude** · abundance
- **plucky** · gutsy
- **restraint** · self-control
- **sauntered** · strolled

March 28

No sight of him yet. I am beginning to doubt the Greek man’s **sagacious** advice, or at least my interpretation of it. I’m 130 pages into Zorba the Greek, and I’m grooving on it, though Zorba’s having a better go of it than I am. I’ve played so many games of Boggle that I actually **attained** the Boggle Holy Grail: an eight-letter, eleven-point word. The word was epitomes—totally underused word. As in: If there were two of me, both of us would be the epitomes of sheer idiocy if we kept waiting around for this guy to show up. Okay, fine, **epitome** really isn’t plural, because there’s only one epitome of something—but I think I deserved a little slide on that one after everything I’ve been through lately.
Finally, my **forbearance** pushed to the breaking point, I made the executive decision to go with my parents to the manatee park. The manatee park is next to this big electricity plant. It’s almost like a Simpson’s episode. The manatees come to huddle in the warm glow of the plant’s **incandescence**, which could be **discomfiting** if you think too hard about it. We walked out onto a wooden bridge and watched these overgrown slugs with mammalian facial features float up to the surface to sniff for air.

We were all on the hunt for them. When someone pointed—“Hey look!”—the rest of us would run over to that spot to coo at this snorting sea cow. It made you feel good that these **benevolent behemoths** were **extant**, swimming around, tending to their young and gnawing marine grasses. It made you want to kiss their **cleft** chins and nuzzle up to their whiskered snouts. The Everglades had shrunk, sure, and the churn of boat propellers had **lacerated** their backsides (or so I read on a sign posted on the bridge describing the life cycle of the manatee), but none of it could **deter** the manatees from this dose of warm, wet love. These **resilient** beasts had the same recipe for comfort as us **terrestrial** mammals: a **distended** belly and some warm, cozy love.

**Vocabulary Drill**
March 28
- **attained**· achieved
- **behemoths**· mighty animals
- **benevolent**· noble
- **cleft**· cracked
- **deter**· discourage
- **discomfitting**· unsettling
- **distended**· swollen
- **epitome**· ideal
- **extant**· existing
- **forbearance**· patience
- **incandescence**· radiance
- **lacerated**· slashed
- **resilient**· durable
- **sagacious**· wise
- **terrestrial**· earthly

March 29
He came.

My heart shot up through my esophagus when I heard the knock. The first thing he said was, where had I been? He had stopped by three times already, yesterday afternoon and once in the evening. (Stupid manatees!) He said he even talked to the grouchy **dotard** next door. He told me his name: Connor. I was Francesca, I said, barely holding it together. Thank God he was wearing a shirt, or I would’ve been fidgeting like a freak not to gawk at him. I told him straight up that if he thought I was some **ingénue** and his designs were purely **amorous**, then we should just shake and say bye now. I was just out for an innocent, friendly adventure. He said that was good to hear because he was dating someone back at school anyway.
We went out to walk and talk on the beach. Connor’s official deal was dreamy-college-athlete-frat-boy-Communications-major. He played lacrosse at Virginia, a fact gathered by the insignia and number on his orange baggy shorts.

“What exactly do you study as a Communications major?” I asked.
“I know. It sounds ridiculous, right? It’s, like, are they teaching me how to talk on the phone or what? I mean, from the sound of it, I could be working toward my degree right now.”
I laughed. “Because we’re communicating.”
“Exactly. So Francesca, tell me, what do you think about my communication skills? Pretty awesome, huh? What grade would you give me?”
“On your communication skills?” I asked.
“Yeah. Go ahead. Hit me.”
“I don’t know. B-plus?”
“B-plus!” Connor mock-yelled. “That sucks! That’s the worst grade of all, ‘cause it’s not quite an A!”
“A-minus?” I squeaked.
We laughed. When it subsided, I asked, “So, seriously, what does that mean? What do you do with a Communications major? You know, as, like, a vocation?”
“Oooh. That one. Toughie. Hmm. To be honest, that’s where we run into a little bit of a gray area.”
“How gray?”
“Charcoal.”
“You stole that line from Chevy Chase,” I recriminated.
“You’re right,” he said. “From Fletch. I’m impressed you know that. You an eighties movie buff or something?”
“Yeah, sort of.”
“Cool. Me too. You know, that wouldn’t be such a bad thing either. Maybe I’ll go to Hollywood and become an actor, like Chevy.”
“So Communications majors become actors?”
“They can,” Conner said. “Lots of us go into journalism. I was kind of thinking about the game show host route. What do you think?”
I looked at him, trying to see if he was joking or not. After a second he started to laugh, and I laughed too. This was how all our conversations went—lots of talking nonsense and laughing at it. His self-deprecating sense of humor kept me in stitches. He said he couldn’t wait for me to go out partying with him that night, obviously oblivious to the fact that I was down there with my parents. No reason to tell him, really. It was enough to admit that I was in high school, even though I somehow turned into a senior who would be matriculating at Northwestern in the fall. (Which wasn’t a total lie. I was thinking of applying there.)

For the rest of the day, I felt lighter than I had in weeks. It felt nice to take a little break from hating myself and feeling incessantly guilty. I walked into town to buy myself a shirt suitable for being seen among the “college crowd.” I acquired a SnoKone and ended up with a purple ring around my lips, just like back in the day. Read a few more pages of my novel out on the patio and ate dinner with my parents and Rico.

Later, I went down to Connor’s apartment at around ten. The guys staying there—Steve, Ryan, Mike and Watts—were all gregarious and nice-looking, with their baseball caps worn in the exact same way. After hanging out in their apartment for a while, we drove to some garishly decorated dance club that was fairly burgeoning with carousing spring-breakers. Connor
showed his gentlemanly side by paying my ten-dollar cover charge.

It was funny. Seemed like the second you had a guy-friend around, guys would start coming out of the woodwork. I got hit on by a plethora of guys, most of whom didn’t even bother to utilize come-on lines. Luckily, my crew of Virginia lacrosse boys emancipated me each time, boldly stepping in between the most recent interloper and me.

Connor and I didn’t get to talk as much as I’d hoped, because the place was just too loud. But we danced like fools. I was psyched to see that he had enough rhythm to dance respectfully to hip hop music. At around four in the morning, Connor asked if I was ready to split.

Never in my life had I had the option to take a guy back to “my place”—a place in which my parents weren’t. It felt cool and mature, but on the other hand, inviting Connor over, especially after my brazen pool-side introduction, seemed like the type of courtesy that could be easily misinterpreted. So instead we went for another walk on the beach, talking some more about our lives and even about his girlfriend and my ex, Jeremy. He said Jeremy didn’t deserve me, and that I’d find someone else who did. I couldn’t believe it when the sun started to come up—the night had flown by. Conner walked me back to my room and said goodbye.

“I guess this is it,” he said when we stopped in front of my door. “It was cool meeting you, Francesca. Wish I’d met you earlier.”

“Me, too,” I said. We hugged goodbye, and he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

And yes, it reminded me of a certain someone whose name starts with the letter “L,” okay? But we’re not going there right now.

Looking back (I’m on the plane ride home now), that whole day and night with Conner was really perfect, probably because it was also so transient. We had just enough time together to know that we liked each other, and not long enough to start figuring out we didn’t. Stavros was right about looking for trouble. Unfortunately, as soon as I get back, I have to do the exact opposite—extricate myself from the trouble I’ve caused. But for now, it’s time to put my tray table up, lean my seat back and catch some sleep.

Vocabulary Drill
March 29
acquired · bought
amorous · interested in love (erotic)
brazen · bold
burgeoning · bursting
carousing · partying
deprecating · insulting
dotard · old person
emancipated · liberated
extricate · remove
gregarious · outgoing
ingnue · naïve young girl
interloper · intruder
oblivious · unaware
plethora · excess
re Grimmited · accused
subsided · died down
April 1: April Fool’s Day

On the plane ride back, I thought a lot about Nikki. I knew that if we were ever going to reconcile, drastic measures were needed. I had a few tricks left in my arsenal that might get us talking again. Conner and I had done a quick analysis of all our favorite eighties movies on our second walk on the beach and thinking about Say Anything—the one where adorable John Cusack does everything he can to win over Ione Sky—gave me an idea.

So last night, I threw on some clothes, grabbed my boom box and sped over to Nikki’s house. Walked around to the back of their house, bribing Duffy, their golden retriever, with some Snausages I’d brought for this express purpose. Pulled the cassette tape out of my pocket, popped it in the deck and pressed play. The music was so loud—such an egregious interruption to the neighborhood’s sedateness—that I had the urge to run away. But I didn’t. I stood my ground and even furthered my Cusack-ness by lifting the boom box over my head.

“Don’t cryyy out louuuud! Just reach deep inside, and learn how to hide your feelings . . .”

Nikki and I used to do karaoke performances to this song, for an audience of stuffed animals. We wore Sunday School dresses and used spoons as microphones. Just as lights started flipping on at the next-door-neighbor’s, Nikki lifted her window.

“Turn that off!” she yelled. “What’s wrong with you?”
“Are you coming down to talk?” I asked.
“No!”
“Then I won’t turn it off . . . Don’t cryyyyy out louuuud!”
“I should call the cops on you.”
“Double-dog dare you,” I said.
“Turn that off, Fran! My parents are gonna kill you.”
“Are you coming down?” I beckoned.
“All right, all right. Just turn that thing off.”

In a matter of minutes, Nikki was right out there in the yard with me. I wanted to run up and hug her, but I knew that wasn’t how the old foot-in-the-door technique worked. It would take some patience to seal the deal. Without saying a word, Nikki walked past me and sat down on the bench back by the shrubbery.

“Thanks for coming out,” I said. “How was Jamaica?”
“It was fine,” she said brusquely. “Start talking.”
“I’m so sorry, Nikki,” I said. “Sorrier than the sorriest sorry, really I am. Please forgive me.”

“For what?” Nikki crossed her arms and stared straight ahead.
“For, um, for making you so upset, when you didn’t understand what was—”
Nikki stood up and looked poised to walk away.
“Ohay!” I said. “That’s not what I meant.”
She sat back down.
“I guess what I’m sorry for is that I wasn’t always totally honest with you about Luke.”
“You guess?”
“Basically, yeah. I mean, nothing really ever happened between us. We never did anything. But—but we almost did.”

Nikki cringed. “When?” she asked.

“After his aunt died. He started to cry, so I hugged him. And then there was this moment, and it did seem like he was going to kiss me, but he ended up just kissing me on the cheek instead.”

She looked away, then back. “Okay. You know what—I don’t want to hear this. Just tell me, do you like him?”

I let out a shaky breath. There it was, the million-dollar question. I hadn’t said it out loud, ever. I’ve barely even written it in here!

“I guess I kind of do.” I looked at her, my heart aching. “Do you hate me now?”

She was silent for just about the longest moment in the history of time. “No,” she finally said, so softly I could barely hear. “At least you can admit it now. That was the worst part, feeling like you were lying to me.”

I wanted so badly to give her a big hug. “I’ve missed you so much, Nikki. Over break, every time I thought about you I would get so despondent.”

“Yeah, me, too.” She sighed. “So what are you going to do about Jeremy?”

I blinked, confused. Then I realized that for the first time in forever, Nikki was in the dark about a huge development in my life. “I forgot you didn’t know,” I said. “Jeremy and I broke up.”

“Really? For good?”

“Well, I think it was officially labeled a break. But we’ll see.”


“No,” I said. “Because I wouldn’t have sex with him.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry then. That sucks.”

Her slight note of sympathy just made me hungry for more. “But you know what? If I lose Jeremy, I do. But you . . . that I couldn’t handle. And I couldn’t wait until tomorrow. Which is why I came over here to play our song and make up.”

“You’re crazy.” She let a little laugh escape, a faint glimmer of hope.

“Maybe so, but losing you would make me certifiably, stark raving mad.”

“I doubt that.”

“Please, please take me back, Nikki. You are everything to me, the one and only confidante I ever want and need.”

“Easy on the cheese,” she said.

“So, am I forgiven then?” I asked.

“You’re not only forgiven, but I’m officially dropping out of the Luke race. He’s yours.”

“No. You don’t have to do that. It would probably be best for me to be alone for—”

Nikki put her hand on my leg. “Trust me, Francesca. I don’t want him anymore. The truth is, I think I was over him a while ago. It was more like an ego thing, you know? It drove me crazy that he didn’t want me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Since when are you so self-aware?” I asked.

She bit back a smile. “Well . . . there’s something new on my end, too,” she admitted.

“What is it? Spill!” I demanded.

She giggled, then leaned in closer, lowering her voice. “Turns out, Dennis Dalelio’s family went to Jamaica for spring break, too,” she said, her eyes sparkling. “Same hotel as us and everything.”
“Oh my God—so, wait, are you guys together?”
She shrugged. “We’ll see,” she said. “There was definite kissage happening, I’ll say that much.”
I almost shrieked, then clapped my hand over my mouth as I remembered we were in Nikki’s garden in the middle of the night.
“So the point is, I think you should just go for Luke,” Nikki said. “Really.”
I frowned. “I’m happy for you and Dennis, Nik,” I said, “and it’s really nice of you to be okay about the me and Luke thing. But honestly, I don’t think it’s happening anyway. After we fought, before Jeremy broke up with me, I went to see Luke at Jitterz and kind of made a big stupid scene. I told him I couldn’t see him anymore, at all.”
Nikki winced. “Because of me?” she said.
I nodded. “Yeah, because of you, and Jeremy. I just thought it was the right thing to do. But I said everything all wrong, and I don’t even think it matters because it doesn’t seem like Luke’s into me either.”
“I’m sorry,” Nikki said, putting her arm around me. “I really am.”
I forced a smile, pushing Luke out of my mind. “It’s okay. You know why? Because as long as I have you back, I don’t need any of those guys.”

Vocabulary Drill
April 1: April Fool’s Day
arsenal · weapons storehouse
confidante · friend entrusted with secrets
despondent · depressed
egregious · conspicuous
reconcile · reunite, restore to friendship
sedateness · calm

April 9: Good Friday
During my fifteen-minute break at work today, I went out to my car, where I knew a bag of delicious spicy nacho Doritos were waiting for me. While unlocking the door, I saw a shock of color that was definitively not Doritos. A huge bouquet of flowers was sitting in the shotgun seat. I grabbed for them and read the card, which said, simply, I miss you. No signature. A thought flashed through my brain, causing my heart to thump in my chest. Are they from Luke? Of course, I was immediately ashamed at the stupidity of it. They could only be from Jeremy, because only he knew the code to my car’s manual lock. But somehow, having had the thought, I couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed now that they weren’t from Luke. Stupid, I know.
When I got back to Viewpoint, my little dilemma was still bothering me. I decided to get Agatha’s opinion.
“So a friend of mine got this gift from a guy, right?” I said. “Let’s say, a beautiful bouquet of flowers, for the sake of convenience. And the flowers weren’t signed or anything, and this friend imagined—”
“You got flowers?” Agatha asked. “Who got you flowers?”
“I didn’t say me! I said a friend.”
“Oh don’t pull that,” she said pejoratively. “Whenever anyone says this friend this and
this friend that, they’re doing a cover-up for themselves.” It had taken me a while to get used to Agatha’s *acerbic* wit, but I had started to really dig it. “So who’re they from?” she asked.

“Jeremy,” I admitted.

“Damn! You preppy, goody-two-shoe girls get all the good stuff. The guys who like me buy me bags of incense that stink up my locker . . . So, why’d he give you flowers? I thought you two broke up.”

“We did.”

“Aha. Restart flowers.”

“What’s that?”

“Well did you break up break up, or like, take-a-break break up?”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Is it possible that he *construed* your break up as temporary? How was it phrased?”

“Well, now that I think about it, we agreed to take a break. But it felt pretty permanent to me.”

“Right. But be careful. What feels permanent to you may be a strategic ploy on his part. He may be thinking: I’ll take a few weeks off, date some other girls, and then get restart flowers and go back to my safety net. When did you break up again?”

“Right before spring break,” I said.

“Need I say more?”

“Hmm. Interesting.”

“But what was it that you were going to say? That whole scenario about your friend getting flowers?”

“Forget it.”

“Can’t do it. Too late. You’ve brought it up, so now you’ll have to follow through, or face the wrath of Agatha and be *mercilessly* throttled within inches of your life.”

“Sheesh.”

“Sorry. That’s just the way it goes.”

“I was just gonna say that when I first saw the flowers, for like a split second, I kinda sorta hoped that they were from someone else.”

“Oh,” she said. “Who?”

“I’d rather not tell. But is that a bad thing?”

“As far as your boyfriend goes, I’d say yeah. It’s bad. Restart flowers are like jumper cables. If you get them, and you don’t instantly know that that’s what you’ve been waiting for, then it’s pretty much over. Were you pining for him over break?”

“*Moderately,*” I said. “Not too much.”

“Yeah. Time to suck it up and break up for good.”

“But they’re such gorgeous flowers.”

“If you let it drag on, he’ll hate you for life.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right. But what about, you know, the other guy?”

“You mean Luke?” she asked.

I just smiled.

“Well, if you’re wishing that the flowers were from him, then yes, that is significant.”

“How significant?” I asked.

“Quite,” she said. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, the gentleman behind you would like to purchase a book.”
Vocabulary Drill
April 9: Good Friday
acerbic · acid
construed · interpreted
mercilessly · cruelly, without mercy
moderately · not excessively; a reasonable amount
pejoratively · critically, negatively

April 11: Easter
Not a big Easter turnout this year. Just my parents, myself and—as a substitute for Rico, who’s off at tennis camp—my Uncle Randy. Tremulous about the potential of a repeat performance from Thanksgiving, Dad emptied the liquor cabinet. Mom hid her nice blown-glass vases in the basement. Personally, I was kind of looking forward to his picaresque stories.

But Uncle Randy was short on histrionics this time. On the contrary, he was sober, docile and oddly sincere. After a casual breakfast of sausage, eggs and toast, we went to church. Church was always nice on the holidays—everyone dressed well and it allayed your fears, for an hour or so, that you might be a bad person. When we came back home, I changed into shorts and went out to shoot hoops in the driveway. After a while, Uncle Randy walked out, duck-footed and slack-jawed, still wearing his light blue polyester suit.

“Mind if I shoot a couple?” he asked.

“Of course not.” I gave him a bounce pass. He dribbled a few times, his elbow bend constrained by the suit jacket. He tossed up some wacky leap-frog of a shot that went backboard, rim, backboard and in.

“Nice shot,” I said, giving him a chest pass this time. He dribbled, his eyes fixated on the ball and his whole body bouncing up and down in rhythm with it, like a kid who just realized he was a kid.

“You seem like you’re doing all right, Uncle Randy,” I said.

“You’re right there,” he said, giving me a little giggle.

“Uncle Randy,” I said.

“Yeah?” He stopped dribbling to look at me.

“I was just wondering. I think about older people sometimes, like Mom and Dad, and I just wondered . . . do you regret anything about your life?”

He smiled, bounced the ball once with both hands, then caught it and held onto it. “Well, you know, when you’re young, you worry that you’ll grow up and regret not having made the right career choice, or having not traveled enough, you know, missing out on things. But I think when it comes down to it, the main regrets involve the people in your life. Your relationships.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said.

“Yeah. Like, looking back, I wish I had told my first wife that I’d follow her to the ends of the earth. I should’ve covered her bed in rose petals each night. And my second wife . . . I should have told her she was a miserable witch the night I met her, because I knew.” Randy laughed. He bounced the ball and put it in shooting position. “So, I guess that’s the thing. The people that you really care about, don’t be afraid to shower them with love. And the ones you don’t, get out of there as quick as you can.”

“Because life’s short,” I said.
Uncle Randy took a shot that clanged off the rim and landed in my hands. “Exactly,” he said.

Vocabulary Drill
April 11: Easter
allayed · calmed
docile · obedient
fixated · stuck
picaresque · roguish
tremulous · shaky

April 17
I sought out Jeremy today, after school, and found him at Olympia, this joint right near school where they sell candy and doughnuts and other such nutritious lures. It’s the main nexus spot for meeting up with friends, primarily because of its proximity to school, but also because of the congenial Greek family that runs it. (What is it with me and the Greeks lately, anyway?)

When I walked in, Jeremy was sitting at a corner booth with his regular group of jock stooges. His right arm was around the shoulders of some nondescript sophomore blonde. Not that I cared, but it just helped seal the decision that I’d already made.

“Jeremy,” I said. “I need to talk to you.”

As soon as he saw me, he dropped his arm from the girl, his face going white.

“Francesca, hey—”

“Outside, if you don’t mind.” I didn’t wait for his answer. I just walked out.

I crossed my arms, enjoying the sunlight on my face. The door opened. Jeremy affected a casual stroll as he walked toward me. “You liked the flowers, baby?” he asked.

“I did. I wanted to thank you. They’re very beautiful.” I leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“No problem,” he said. “That’s my way of saying no hard feelings.”

“Very effective,” I said.

“To be honest,” he said. “I think I’m almost ready to take you back.”

I tried not to laugh. “Sorry, Jeremy. But I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“What?”

“I appreciate the flowers, but I still think we should take a hiatus.”

“A whuh?”

“I just know I want to stay broken up . . .” I trailed off, realizing this sounded too much like an affront, which I knew would translate, in Jeremy’s eyes, to fighting words. “Don’t be mad, please.”

His lips were pulled so tight they were turning blue. “You mean permanently?”

“Well . . . yeah.”

“That’s almost funny.” His tone was caustic. “God . . . I made you.”

“And then you released me,” I said, as amicably as I could manage.

“No, I didn’t,” he adamantly insisted.

“Actually, you did.” I hadn’t expected him to be this reluctant to abdicate his position. I crossed my arms in front of me to show I could be just as obdurate as him.
He snorted. “I’ll bet Luke is psyched to know you’re finally free for the taking.”
I sighed. “Luke has no idea, Jeremy, so please don’t vilify him. This has nothing to do with him.”
“Right. I’ll bet.” Jeremy pressed his lips together and nodded in sarcastic abjuration.
“Well, you two have fun together. Feel free to give him a few flowers from that bouquet I bought you.”
“Come on, Jeremy,” I said softly, in a last-ditch effort to placate him. “This really isn’t about him. I just feel like our relationship has run its course, and it’s time for us both to be unfettered for a bit. Can’t we try to be nice here?”
“Cool, cool. I know a few girls who will be happy to know that I’m back on the market. I won’t have any trouble finding a replacement for you, you know.”
My jaw tightened. This was the last thing I wanted—incendiary words tossed back and forth like Chinese throwing stars. I refused to stoop to that. “That’s your prerogative. Whatever it takes to move on. I don’t understand why you’re being so sophomoric about this, Jeremy. I was thinking we would be friends.”
“Or enemies,” he said. “Either way works for me.”
You impudent little infant. He was pulling out all the stops to get me to retaliate. I pressed my tongue against the back of my teeth to keep from snapping.
“Actually, this is good,” Jeremy said. “This works well. At least I know my next girl won’t torment me until I’m blue in the face—my next girlfriend won’t be afraid to have sex.”
Okay, he wanted it to be like that. Well, not much I could do then.
“Bye, Jeremy,” I said. I turned and walked away.

Vocabulary Drill
April 17
abdicate · give up
abjuration · retraction
adamantly · stubbornly
affected · artificially assumed
affront · insult
amicably · peaceably
caucistic · biting
congenial · friendly
hiatus · break
impudent · disrespectful
incendiary · combustible, explosive
nexus · connection, link
nondescript · ordinary
obdurate · inflexible
placate · pacify
prerogative · privilege
proximity · closeness
retaliate · get even
sophomoric · immature
torment · torture
April 29

Down to the wire—two weeks to go until the prom—and I’m still deficient in the date category. Luke and I do that thing in the hall at school, where I’m sort of looking at him, and I think he’s looking at me too, but whenever the other one notices we just glance away and it never really evolves into an actual conversation. So, I’m pretty sure I was right about things being over there, even now that Jeremy and I are done and Nikki’s given me the green light. Ha. Life cracks me up.

Anyway, I was walking to class between first and second periods today, and I felt a presence hovering to my left. I glanced over, and there was Eric Crowther.

“Oh,” he said in that drier-than-dust laconic way of his. “Hey, there.”

“Hi, Eric,” I said.

“Yeah, so I was actually thinking of going to see a Pacers game, but they’re playing like a bunch of wusses . . . And then I thought it might be fun to just sit at home and watch bad TV, just pretend it didn’t exist. But I figured the only way I’d go is if you went with me . . . do you already have a prom date?”

“I—um, what?”

“Do you wanna go to the prom with me?”

It wasn’t exactly the Casanova approach, but then, it was the only approach I’d gotten.

“I’ve got a cool tux,” Eric added. “And my dad’s got a Lincoln Town Car that could almost double as a limo.”

“Sure,” I said.

“What?” Eric looked all discombobulated.

“I said sure. I’d be happy too.”

“Oh. Cool.” His face lit up. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

“Actually, I don’t know when I’ll pick you up. I don’t even know when the prom starts. I just wanted to say something definitive, you know . . .”

I had never heard Eric this garrulous. It was kind of cute. “Just call me,” I said.

“Whenever.”

“Sure. Right.” He looked around suspiciously, as if some nefarious hobgoblin were about to come and snatch this moment away. “I guess I’ll see you then. Bye.” He turned to walk away.

“Hey, Eric,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want my number?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “I’ll need that.”

Vocabulary Drill
April 29
deficient · lacking
discombobulated · confused
May 8
Today the candidates for Junior Prom King and Queen were announced. Among the candidates were Jeremy, Luke, Nikki and yours truly. I was psyched, especially since various rumors are still circulating about me since my big breakup with Jeremy. But then, I guess I guess I should consider it an honor that I’m being talked about at all, considering the wallflower anonymity status I’ve held for so long. Wouldn’t it be funny if Luke and I won? Ack—I have to stop thinking about Luke!!

Vocabulary Drill
May 8
anonymity · state of being unknown
circulating · spreading

May 17
Eric and his Lincoln Town Car showed up with remarkable alacrity at seven on the dot. Not unsurprisingly, his idea of a “cool tux” didn’t necessarily corroborate the image I’d had in my head. In fact, it wasn’t so much a tux as . . . not a tux. It was, in fact, according to him, a “vintage lemon yellow zoot suit.” Its abundant accessories included a top hat with a feather, baggie pants tucked into black boots and a long chain that hung from his waist to below his knees. My mom’s reaction gave voice to what I was thinking: “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

But somehow Eric pulled it off. At first, I was a little embarrassed, then ashamed that I was embarrassed and finally not embarrassed at all, but kind of proud. The fact was, Eric was capable of something I find very difficult—flying in the face of public opinion. It turns out that what you’re worried about when you imagine others are censuring the way you look, is actually no big deal. For every person pointing and laughing snidely, three people would walk up and say that it was the most interesting outfit they’d ever seen.

When we pulled out of my driveway, I asked Eric where he’d made reservations. “Reservations?” he asked. Turned out he had no clue dinner was part of the night. We laughed so hard we had to pull the Town Car off the road. After a brief discussion, we decided on Texas Roadhouse, this casual steak joint with a floor covered in peanut shells. Eric said this was called “embracing the absurdity of the situation.”

Our appearance at Texas Roadhouse was the closest I’ve ever been to celebrity-hood. The entire restaurant clapped for us as we paraded down the peanut-shell-littered aisle toward our corner booth, with me holding my dress up and doing little curtsies.

Eric interlocked his arm with mine and smiled at me. “Your dress,” he said. “It goes so well with the peanut shells.”

“And your zoot suit,” I replied. “It goes so well with . . . nothing.”
We laughed, sitting in a corner booth. Eric threw a peanut at me.

“You ever see the movie Pretty in Pink?” I asked. “Because you remind me—”
“Please don’t tell me I remind you of ‘Ducky.’ The novelty buddy guy, the guy who wears funny clothes and gets dissed at the prom.”

Oops. I swallowed hard. For someone who would be widely considered smart, I said some pretty **asinine** things.

“I mean it’s no big deal,” Eric added. “I guess I just have some insecurities about being a lovable clown who no one can take seriously.”

I leaned forward and blanketed Eric’s hand with mine. This got his attention. I was looking him in the eye. “I wasn’t trying to **intimate** that you were a Ducky, okay? You are lovable, but that’s not such a bad thing. And I, for one, take you very seriously. I actually envy you, because you’re a total **anomaly**, especially in high school. You are a true individual whose personality isn’t **malleable** based on what others expect of you. You’re real, you know, and different, and you’re not afraid to **flout** the norm. Which means you’re stronger than most of us. But I imagine that at times it makes you vulnerable, too. But just hold tight, because when high school’s over, college comes. And from what I understand, college does a better job of recognizing the genius of people like you.”

“Wow.” Eric’s eyes were wide and a little watery. “Thanks. That’s the highest **acclaim** I’ve ever gotten from a girl. Ever.”

**Vocabulary Drill**
May 17  
**abundant** · plentiful  
**acclaim** · approval  
**aisle** · passageway  
**alacrity** · promptness  
**anomaly** · rare event or occurrence  
**asinine** · foolish  
**corroborate** · agree with  
**flout** · defy  
**intimate** · suggest  
**malleable** · moldable

**The Prom**
By the time we arrived, I wondered whether I wasn’t too bloated to dance. But Eric wasn’t having it. He pulled me out on the floor and just started boogying. After a few dances, he decided go by the **alias** “Lothar, King of a Thousand Dances.”

“Can you do the Spinning Pickle?” he asked, spinning himself on one foot until he was so nauseated he had to stop.

“And how about the Injured Duck?” He flapped his elbows up and down, one **spasmodically** and the other limply, making freaky quack noises.

The charade went on like that, until we were both sweating **profusely**. I asked Eric if he wanted a beverage and then ambled over toward the concession area. It was there, while reaching for a cup of seltzer—that I heard the lyrical **cadence** of Lucas Barton’s deep, **sonorous** voice.

“See, I thought I was supposed to come alone, and then you would come alone, and by the very nature of our mutual aloneness, we would find each other and become de facto prom
It was the first time he’d spoken to me in I don’t know how long. Every nerve ending in my system started firing little white-hot spurts.

“That’s not the way it works,” I said, keeping my back to him. “You’re supposed to ask me. And then I say yes, or no.”

“Oh,” Luke said. “See, no one ever taught me the rules.”

I turned, slowly, to face him. “About what I said,” I started. “At the coffeehouse that night—”

“It’s okay,” he cut in. “I’m sorry, too.”

I nodded. “So, then . . .”

Luke tapped his fingertips together. “I guess I should probably leave now, since, you know, we’re not allowed to talk in public.”

I rolled my eyes, then smiled. A little. “Ha ha,” I said sarcastically.

Why did he have to look so amazing? Not to take anything away from Eric’s zoot suit, but Luke was on a different level in his black tux, with cummerbund and bow tie, the whole deal. He had morphed from grungy X-Games to comely diplomat.

“So if the restraining order’s up,” he said, “then how come we didn’t come to this thing together?”

“What?” I blurted out. What was I supposed to make of that? “Maybe because you didn’t ask me,” I said, and on cue, my muscles betrayed me, because I jerked a little and spilled some seltzer on my dress.


“Yeah.” My skin felt like it was melting from the heat. “But, um, it’s okay—it’s just seltzer. You know, the stuff they use to get stains out.”

He backed up, giving me a lopsided grin. “Oh. Right.”

“I don’t get it,” I said, letting out my breath. “Why can’t you just tell me what’s really going on here, with us?”

He shrugged. “Well, we’re at the prom, right? And, let’s see, you just spilled on your dress . . .”

God, he could be so infuriating, always equivocating—only giving an inch, and then taking it back the moment you felt comfortable with it. It wasn’t the way I wanted it to be. It had been a while since I’d known how I felt, but I knew now. And I wanted him to know.

“It’s too bad you can’t be serious for once,” I said. “Because I like you, Luke.”

“I like you, too,” he said.

“I don’t think you understand.” I grabbed him by the wrist. “I like you.” Luke was looking into my eyes, not saying anything. “And I think you like me.”

Nothing.

“Luke?”

“Yeah.”

“Am I wrong about that?” I asked, giving him the chance to disavow before I made a complete idiot of myself.

“No,” he said. “You’re not wrong. I do like you.”

Somehow I still wasn’t sure—if he meant the words, and how he meant them. I thought about Conner and the jokes we’d made about his communications major. Luke and I talked in all
these gargantuan vocabulary words, but we never seemed to actually communicate successfully.

Before I could say anything else, Principal Adams’s stentorian voice suddenly filled the auditorium. “Columbus High juniors, it’s time to reveal your prom king and queen.”

The announcement reminded me that I was actually here with a date, who I was sort of ditching at the moment. Looking over at the dance floor, I saw Eric watching me and felt a major stab of guilt.

“Look, I’ve gotta—”

“Go,” Luke said. “We can talk later.”

As I walked away from him, gliding through a sea of darkened faces and couples holding hands, I felt an odd mixture of relief and dread.

Eric smiled when I reached him, and he took my hand while we waited to hear whose names Principal Adams would read.

“Our prom queen this year is . . . Nicola Abrams!”

I clapped until my hands hurt, then ran up and gave her a huge hug before she made her way to the stage. I was so psyched for her. She totally deserved it—she was the most beautiful Junior Prom Queen to ever don a tiara. And when her royal counterpart—Prom King—was announced, I’m not ashamed to admit my gratification that it was neither Jeremy Malone nor Luke Barton.

The rest of prom was pretty uneventful, and then the main after-prom party was out at Jack Russell’s lot. I couldn’t convince Eric to accompany me. He said he was too introverted and misanthropic, and he knew the party would just depress him. He gave me a kiss on the cheek, thanked me for the best night he’d had in a decade and went off to hang with his alterna friends. I’d heard many fables of debauchery from parties out at Russell’s lot, because it was remote enough that cops were less inclined to bust it.

I rode with Nikki and her date, Dennis. After almost a half-hour of weaving along sinuous roads through the arboreal hinterland and not seeing a single car, I looked down at the map.

“This should be it right here,” I said.

“Where?” Nikki said. “All I see is trees.”

“I’m not sure exactly, but we just passed Youth Camp back there, so the driveway should be right here on our . . .”

Nikki jammed on the breaks so hard I thought the air bags were going to balloon out and smack her and Dennis in the face. “That’s it, right?” she said.

Off to our left was an empty black hole in the trees and what appeared to be a gravel driveway. Still no cars in sight. We pulled into the driveway and followed it through a dark, tree-lined passage.

“This is total serial killer territory,” Nikki said. “Maybe we should turn around.”

“Just drive a little farther,” Dennis said.

Soon enough, we saw traces of civilization. A few cars were parked off to the side of the road. We parked next to them and walked toward a luminescent orange light and the sound of music. As we grew closer, the light revealed itself as a gigantic, crackling conflagration.

“Yo whassup, ladies!” someone yelled at us from the porch of an archaic log cabin. It was Jack Russell, a senior who, before this year, was either unaware of or indifferent to my existence. “Welcome. Help yourself to whatever you want.”

No other girls had arrived yet, so a congregation of guys encircled us, even with Dennis there. Some dude named Dave, whom I’d seen in the halls but never met, decided that we were
fast friends and kept offering to re-fill my soda cup.
   “You wanna go check out the lake?” Dave finally asked in a suspiciously ardent tone.
   “That’s okay.”
   “Oh come on. It’s really beautiful. Check out the full moon.”
I looked up and saw a big luminous circle looking down at us. “Yeah. It is pretty.”
   “Let’s go check it out,” Dave cajoled.
I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Come on, Francesca.” It was Nikki. “Let’s go check out the bonfire.”
   “Thanks for the rescue,” I said as we walked away.
   “No problem. The next guy who asks you to go check out the lake with him, give me the rescue signal. Just go like this.” Nikki touched her finger to her nose. It was so nice to have her back on my team.
   “Got it,” I said. “Thanks.”
Before we could get to the fire, Nikki saw one of her dance friends. “Congratulations, Queen!” They ran toward each other and started hugging and talking. I sat on a log by the fire and stared into it, sipping my soda. I sat there, focusing on one particular ember and the way the heat seemed to pulsate through it in almost imperceptible wavelike motions. Fires were mesmerizing, more so than people. I’d discovered I wasn’t the party type way back in eighth grade. Whenever I went to one, I tended to recoil into my own little world like this.
   “Fire’s cool,” a voice said, following it up with a Beavis-and-Butthead cackle. “Fire, fire, fire!”
I looked up. Luke was standing over me, smiling.
   “Hey,” I said, totally flummoxed by his sudden presence above me.
   “You mind if I sit down?” he asked.
   “Not at all.”
Luke sat beside me. “Looks like you’re having a pretty rockin’ time.”
   “Oh, shut up,” I said and punched him in the shoulder. “Go get me another soda.”
   “Ginger ale?” he asked, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.
   “Sounds good.”
He came back with a ginger ale for me, and a beer for him. “Cheers,” he said.
   “Cheers.” We went to clink cups, but they just kind of smushed into each other.
   “This is going to be my one and only beer tonight, because I’m driving,” Luke said.
   “Such a mature boy.”
He smirked. “Yeah, too bad they can’t all be like me. Francesca, I wanted to say that I’m sorry about, you know, the way the whole Jeremy thing ended up.”
   “It’s all right. We were gonna break up eventually anyway. Things happen for a reason, I guess.”
   “Yeah, but I mean the way it happened. That was pretty lame of him.”
My brow furrowed. “What do you mean?” I asked. “What do you know about it?”
Luke looked trapped. His eyes darted around deviously for a second and then he buried his face in his cup.
   “No, really,” I said. “Enlighten me.”
   “No I mean . . . you know . . . I just heard.”
   “What did you hear?”
   “Nothing.”
“You really do?”
I nodded.
“And?”
“And . . . you had sex.”
I felt breath force its way out my nostrils. “And?”
“And it was your first time.”
“Is that it?”
“And then he broke up with you.”
“What?”
“You asked what I heard. That’s what I heard.”
“Who’d you hear it from?” I asked. “A reliable source?”
“A couple of Jeremy’s friends on the team. They said he told them.”

There were no thoughts, just a surge of unmitigated fury. My body puffed up as if I’d been infused with extra pints of blood. I must have kicked the cup as I stood up because my foot felt wet. It squeaked as I charged off. I walked up to the first stooge in sight.

“Where’s Jeremy?” I asked. Judging from the way he warily stepped back, I must have looked psychotic.

“He’s right over there.” He pointed.

The gap between us closed quickly. How dare you start such a disparaging rumor about me, you duplicitous sack of dung. Thought you’d avenge your bruised ego, huh? You think you got me, but you don’t even see me right now. You have no idea. My first contact was with the cup raised to his treacherous lips. I smacked it with the palm of my hand and beer splashed everywhere.

“Hey!” someone yelled. “Cool out!”

The second contact was a decisive knee to the groin. Jeremy was too busy processing the first blow to prepare for the second one. I doubt he saw much of anything, as he lay there crumpled up on the ground, moaning. “What the hell’s wrong with you?” he cried out.

“Nothing,” I said. “Feeling much better now.”

“What did you do that for?”

“It’s what you get for lying.”


“Attention, everyone!” I yelled out. “Let the record show that I never had sex with this guy!” I pointed at Jeremy.

“Oooohhh . . .”

I started to walk away, wiping the beer off on my jeans, which I’d changed into after the prom. I could feel that everyone was watching me.

“Lying? Lying! LYING!”

I turned around. Jeremy was on his feet, rushing toward me.

“You’re talking to me about lying when you’ve been hooking up with—” He pointed at Luke, who was standing just a few feet away. “— him—the whole time we were going out together.”


“Oh, please! You’re so full of it, both of you. You planned this whole thing to make me look like the bad guy. But I know the truth! Everyone knows the truth!”

“You wouldn’t know the truth if it was affixed to your epidermis,” Luke said.
Red blotches appeared on Jeremy’s cheeks, and he ran right up to Luke and got in his face. “You think you’re cute? You always got a line for everything. Got one lined up for when I pop you in the nose, chief?”

People were gathering around to see the potential fracas. Jeremy’s eyes practically had sparks shooting out of them, but Luke’s expression was unperturbed.

“Come on, Jeremy,” I said. “Relax.”

“No! I’ve been relaxed for too damn long. That’s what got us into this mess. I should have clocked this guy three months ago. Then we wouldn’t be having this problem.”

“We’d have different problems,” Luke said, maintaining his unflinching gaze.

“Well, you’ve got a problem now.” Jeremy rocked back and forth, his nostrils flared.

“Don’t do this, Jeremy,” I begged.

He didn’t even hear me. He stepped back and put up his fists. “Come on,” he said to Luke. “Let’s go. Let’s see if you throw down as well as you ride your little board.”

Luke just stood there, hands at his side.

“Come on! Let’s go! You scared, man?”


“Then come on!”

“I’m not going to fight,” Luke said.

“That may not be up to you,” Jeremy said.


“You will once I hit you,” Jeremy said.

“No, actually, I won’t. Your fist will collide with my face, and it will probably jerk back. Blood may even spurt. Then you’ll yell ‘Come on!’ a few more times, until you realize I wasn’t kidding, that I really don’t fight. Then you’ll walk off high five-ing your boys like a hero.”

“Whatever,” Jeremy said. “That’s the long way of saying, ‘I’m a wuss.’”


“Come on, Luke!” someone yelled. “Go after him!”

People laughed, but the crowd started to disperse when they realized there wasn’t going to be any action. I rushed right up to Luke. “I’m so sorry,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay,” he said, obviously peeved. “He didn’t even touch me.”

“Sorry you had to deal with that,” I said.

“Yeah, so am I. You actually dated that jerk? What were you thinking?”

I pulled back, stung. Jeremy had made a huge idiot of himself, no question, and I was still furious at the stupid rumor he’d spread about us. But the thing was—Jeremy wasn’t so off base to be suspicious about me and Luke. And I knew I hadn’t always treated him the greatest. I’d stayed with him way past when I first had doubts about our relationship, which wasn’t totally fair.

But regardless of all that, it was the same old Luke to judge me like that. Since when did I need to justify myself to him?

“I think the real question,” I said, hardening my voice, “is why you get to say anything about whom I date.”

I held his gaze, daring him to answer, to finally come out and say it if he really cared
about me the way I cared about him.

And for a second, I thought he was going to do it—to grab me and kiss me and get all of this ridiculous will-we-or-won’t-we over with once and for all.

Then his eyes glazed over, and he looked down at the ground. “Whatever,” he said.

I stood there, blinking rapidly to keep from crying. My mouth filled with an acid taste, which somehow stayed after I swallowed. I looked around and saw, of all people, Agatha Renshaw alone a few feet away.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Agatha,” I said. “Will you take me home?”

Vocabulary Drill
The Prom
affixed · attached
alias · assumed name
arboreal · tree-filled
archaic · ancient
ardent · passionate
avenged · get even for
cadence · rhythm
cajoled · coaxed
comely · attractive
conflagration · fire
congregation · gathering
debauchery · wickedness
deviously · deceitfully
disavow · reject
disparaging · degrading
disperse · scatter
enlightened · tell
epidermis · skin
equivocating · speaking evasively
flummoxed · confused
fracas · brawl
gratification · satisfaction
imperceptible · unnoticeable
inclined · prone
introverted · withdrawn
luminescent · glowing
luminous · glowing
misanthropic · cynical
mixture · combination
peeved · annoyed
profusely · liberally
remote · distant
sinuous · winding
sonorous · loud, deep, or rich in sound
spasmodically · fitfully
stentorian · loud
unflinching · relentless
unmitigated · absolute
unperturbed · composed

May 18: Administrative Professionals Day
I woke up this morning with a headache the size of Rhode Island. Let’s just say there was a lot of crying last night. After three Excedrin and a long hot shower, I moaned all the way downstairs.

“You don’t look so good,” Mom said when I walked into the kitchen.
“Don’t feel so good either.”
“Yoohoo?”
I felt like I was about to cry all over again. If she knew I needed Yoohoo, then I must have looked bad.
I sank down at the table while she got me a nice cold Yoo-hoo out of the fridge. After a few sips, the phone rang and I reached over to pick up.
“Hello?”
“Fran, what happened to you last night?”
“Nikki, I’m sorry. It’s just, there was this huge scene with Jeremy and Luke, and then Luke and I...” I didn’t even know how to describe it. “It just sucked, basically, so Agatha Renshaw was there and she drove me home.”

“Wait, something happened with you and Luke? I guess that’s why, well, you know.”
I scrunched my face up. “Why what?”
“You haven’t heard?”
“Nikki, will you just tell me what’s going on?”
She sighed, and I could picture her leaning against her headboard, all set to start the story.

The possibilities raced through my mind, but the one I couldn’t escape was the one that hurt the most. Luke had hooked up with someone else. I knew he had.

“Luke is in major trouble, Fran. Major.”
I looked over at my mom, who cocked her head back at me when she saw my expression.

“He was a wreck after you took off last night—in a seriously black mood,” Nikki went on. “He saw me and told me you left, but he wouldn’t explain why or anything. Then he left the party, and we all thought he went home. But this morning, I heard from Shannon that Luke was caught on school grounds later on, drinking. Do you know what that means? It’s grounds for expulsion.”

“Why would he do something so stupid?” I breathed.
“Hello? Obviously whatever happened with you,” she said. “You really messed him up, Fran. Now do you finally believe me that the jerk is completely in love with you?”

May 21
I went to see Luke today, at his house. He looked like a textbook derelict, with a two-day stubble and that depressed, hopeless glint in his eyes. And he didn’t smell too good, either. I told
him to shower and shave, and then we’d talk. When he came back fifteen minutes later, he looked like a new man, but his attitude hadn’t changed at all.

“Come by to take a last look at the condemned man?” he asked.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What were you thinking?” I demanded. “Getting drunk at school? Come on.”

“I know, I know, it was a bad move,” Luke admitted. “I went there after the party, to be alone. And I thought I was showing some decent responsibility, waiting to get wasted until I was walking distance from home so I didn’t have to drive anywhere.”

I pursed my lips. “So you walked to the school?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah, of course. What do you think, I’m one of those idiots who’d actually get behind the wheel loaded?”

“No, I guess you’re a whole different kind of idiot,” I said, starting to smile. He tossed a pillow at me. “Hey!” I objected. “I’m here to help. So wait, you went to the school to be alone . . .”

“Yeah. I needed to think.” He focused his gaze on mine, and I shifted, feeling that swirlly sensation inside of me that I got whenever he looked at me lately. “About what happened, at the party . . .” he began.

“It’s okay,” I said. “That’s not important right now.” I paused, thinking how a big part of this was my fault—for storming away from that party, and Luke, without giving him more of a chance. I knew he wasn’t good in those moments, yet still I’d pushed him instead of just laying everything out on the table and letting him do the same. “We’ve got to figure out what you’re gonna do.”

“There’s nothing I can do. I’m totally, thoroughly, irrevocably screwed. I already had the special meeting with Principal Adams. They’re kicking me out of school, which means I won’t be going to college anytime soon. Unless it’s like Far Eastern Nebraska State Tech Vocational College or something.”

“I’ve heard they’ve got a great Forestry program,” I quipped.

Luke rolled his eyes.

“Not funny,” I said. “But honestly, I don’t think you’re gonna get kicked out of school. Not if I can help it.”

“Oh, yeah. And what exactly can you do?”

“Did you forget already? It so happens that I am a founding member of the Student Disciplinary Committee.”

“Ha.” For the first time since I’d been there, Luke cracked a smile. “That’s a good one. No, really.”

“What? This is exactly this type of situation that I created the SDC for—so we’d have a forum to foster discussion between students and school officials, to challenge the hegemony of people like Dr. Adams. It will be a good opportunity to test the concept in its inchoate state.”

“Suh-weet. Can’t wait to be the testing ground for your failed school government bureau.”

“Don’t be so cynical. I’m a staunch libertarian, and, in my unbiased opinion, you were not in violation of any school codes.”


“Can they prove that? Tell me exactly how it all happened.”

Luke leaned back, tilting his chair off the floor. “I was out at Pond Field, behind the gym, and I was having some beers. I didn’t think anyone would be there, obviously. But I guess some
of the cleaning crew gets there before dawn to get started, and—they caught me. Saw me drinking, the whole thing. There’s not really a way out of it.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Listen, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you’re totally delusional. I don’t have a snowball’s shot in Hades, and I’ve already inured myself to that rather noxious fact.”

“Well, at the very least, maybe I can get them to go lenient on you.”

“Look, face it Fran, there’s no chance here. Adams showed me the line in the faculty handbook—no alcohol on school premises, ever. They have every right to expel me. Now can we talk about something else, please? Hey, the SATs are a week away. Are you ready?”

“I guess so. Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Well, I have one last pointer for you. You should wake up early the day of the test and go running. It gets the blood flowing to your brain.”

“Really?”


“No,” I said. “Trust me.”

Vocabulary Drill
May 21

derelict · bum
forum · meeting
foster · promote
hegemony · power
inchoate · formless
inured · accustomed
irrevocably · unchangeably
lenient · merciful
libertarian · individual rights advocate
noxious · toxic
unbiased · fair

May 23: SAT Testing Day
I convinced Nikki to wake up early and go running with me before the test. I was totally exhausted when the alarm went off, but I did it anyway. And at first, during the test, it did seem to help. My mind was totally alert, and on the first three sections I finished with time to spare. But after that I started to get groggy, and my performance waned considerably. If I were the paranoid type, I’d have to wonder whether Luke just said that to hamper my test-taking ability and lower my score. But I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.

Vocabulary Drill
May 23: SAT Testing Day
hamper · obstruct
waned · declined
May 27

Today, for the first time in the history of Columbus High, the Student Disciplinary Committee got its day in court. I was so proud. I had advised Luke to give as few details as possible but to show how deeply he regretted his actions—which were admittedly wrong, wrong, wrong. Then he left the room, and it was time for the committee to negotiate with the administration.

Dr. Adams stood up first and, like the disreputable despot that he is, made his (totally biased) case against Luke. His claim was, plain and simple, that the charter of the Bartholomew County School Corporation stipulates that being caught either in possession of an open alcoholic beverage or intoxicated on school property is grounds for immediate dismissal. And from the sworn testimony of the member of the cleaning crew, Mr. Jameson, there was incontrovertible evidence of possession and inebriation.

That’s when I stepped up to the plate, eager to share the ace I had up my sleeve.

“First of all, let me say that I don’t think anyone on the committee here condones the behavior of Luke Barton. We agree that underage drinking, which is, of course, illegal, should also be forbidden on school property. What Luke did was stupid and reckless—although, as he pointed out, it should be considered that he did not intend to drive while under the influence.”

“A fact which cannot be proven either way,” Dr. Adams interjected.

“Granted,” I said. Ha! I just said “granted.” I felt like such an adult. “But isn’t it also difficult to prove that Luke was even drunk? Mr. Jameson never called the police. He just reported what he saw directly to you. So there was never a test performed to ascertain the amount of alcohol in Luke’s system, if any.”

There was a low murmur in the room, and Dr. Adams actually started to look concerned.

Wow, had I won this thing already?

“We understand that Mr. Barton is not subject to legal action,” Dr. Adams said. “But that does not mean we cannot undertake our own action here at Columbus High. We have a rule that anyone caught with alcohol on school property will be expelled, and we are taking Mr. Jameson’s report very seriously.”

Okay, just as well things hadn’t ended there. Because now I got to deliver my final oratorical flourish. “Can you show me that rule, Dr. Adams?” I asked, smiling innocently at him. “I’d like to see you point it out, in front of everyone present.”

“Certainly, Ms. Casterelli.” Dr. Adams reached over to the desk behind him, rifled through some papers and pulled out the county’s staff handbook. He flipped through, then stopped at a page in the middle and held it up. “As you can see right here, the school system expressly prohibits drugs and alcohol on school property, with a punishment of expulsion.”

“Hmm, interesting,” I said. “And who has access to that handbook, Dr. Adams? Do students?”

He frowned, looking more confused than upset. He still hadn’t gotten it. “No, they don’t,” he said. “But the students have their own handbook from which to glean the rules.”

“Right, I’m getting to that,” I said. I whipped a copy of the student handbook out of my backpack, which was lying on the desk next to me. “Exhibit A for the defense,” I announced. “Francesca, this is not a trial.”

I blushed. I’d just been so excited to say that, like they did on “Law and Order.” “Feel free to read through here,” I told Dr. Adams, “Every sentence, every page. And you’ll see that there’s nothing in here about the policy on alcohol on school grounds. Sure, we know it’s wrong,
and stupid. But we, as students, would have no way of knowing that it’s cause for automatic dismissal.”

“Ignorance of the law—”

“Is no defense, I know. But it is when there’s no reasonable way for us to know the law, don’t you think? How can we be expected to follow a rule we aren’t even allowed to read?”

Silence. Thick silence. I’d nailed them with the linchpin. A little research goes a long way. I’d had the idea after Luke made a reference to Dr. Adams showing him the rule in the faculty handbook. It had occurred to me that it was strange that he wouldn’t have showed him the passage in the student handbook, the one we all read and had to sign a form saying we accepted at the beginning of the year.

There were a few moments of discussion, but my points were too strong. Luke was called back in, where he was informed that he would receive a brief suspension and no expulsion. Meanwhile, we all agreed that the student handbook was to be immediately revised to incorporate the rules about drugs and alcohol, because, yes, this wasn’t something that should happen at Columbus High.

I just couldn’t believe I’d done it—I’d saved Luke!

As I walked proudly out of the school, I was almost flattened by my jubilant client, Luke, who ran up and practically attacked me.

“How’d you do that?” he asked. “What did you say in there? Man, you really saved my butt.”

“Oh, so now you believe in the Student Disciplinary Committee, huh?”


“It’s okay.”

“Oh, and Francesca . . .”

“Yeah?”

“There’s something I’ve wanted to say. For a while.”

My heart started to beat faster, but I kept calm. After everything Luke and I had been through this year, I wasn’t about to let this be easy for him.

“What’s that?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking . . . and, maybe you and I should, you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” I said.

Luke groaned. “I was thinking maybe we could, like, go out or something,” he mumbled.

“You were thinking maybe? What makes you so sure I want to go out with you, anyway?”

“Valid point,” Luke said. “Hey, I’ve got an idea. We should get our SAT scores back in a few days. How about, whoever gets the higher score on the verbal section gets to choose our fate?”

I laughed. “Like a roll of the dice?” I said. “Okay. It’s a deal.”

Vocabulary Drill

May 27

despot · tyrant

disreputable · having a bad reputation

flourish · grand gesture
May 30
Today, directly after school, I drove to Donner Park for my meeting with Luke. The venue, the Donner Outdoor Auditorium, was picked by him for reasons he refused to explain. But it was a great choice, because today was a real halcyon day: bright yellow sun and a delicate breeze that tickled the leaves, the birds adding to the soft chorus with chirps and flutters. I was sitting on a bench, gazing out at the trees and ambling people, enjoying a moment of being alive, when I saw him approaching. He held a torn envelope in his right hand. Mine was in my pocket.

“Nice day, huh?” Luke took a seat at the far end of the bench.
“Absolutely beautiful,” I said.
“Well, I guess the time has come, the day of our reckoning, the roll of the dice as you so aptly described it.”
“I guess so,” I said. “You wanna go first?”
“Why don’t you.”
“No,” I insisted. “Go ahead.”
“All right.” Luke slapped the envelope on the bench in front of us and smiled. “Drum roll please. . . . On the verbal section of this year’s SAT, Lucas William Barton is ambivalent to admit that his rather unimpressive score was . . . six hundred and fifty.”
“YES!” I jumped up off the bench with a rebel yell. “I win! I win! You lose! I win! Ha!”
“Seven hundred and twenty, baybayyyyyyyyy!” I did a few more victory jumps and a spastic jog around the bench, my joy so extreme and ineffable that it overrode all other sensations and became the very essence of Francesca Castarelli at that moment.
“Oh, wait a second,” Luke said. “Are we talking about the verbal section? Because I I was actually talking about the quantitative part.”
“Shut up,” I said, my joy instantly truncated. “What does that mean? What did you get?”
“Well, on the quantitative section, as previously mentioned, I got a six hundred and fifty. But on the verbal section I got a different score. It was a little higher.”
“Oh, no.” Apparently my victory dance—the one I was now acutely embarrassed by—had been a bit premature. I should have realized Luke would have done better than that.
“What did you get?”
“A seven forty.”
I sat down again and ran my hands through my hair. “Let me see your score sheet,” I said. He handed it over, and there it was, plain as day: 740. As thoroughly vexed as I was by the stark reality of seeing that number, there was another emotion somewhere lurking inside of me, one that felt akin to enraptured anticipation. This was the way I’d envisioned it, and maybe the way I wanted it. I knew what—or I should say whom—I wanted. But I wanted Luke to choose.
“So, then,” I said. “Congratulations.”
“Thank you. Thank you very much.”
“So . . . ” I prompted.
“So, it looks like I won,” Luke said, his mouth widening into a grin I knew all too well.
“Indeed,” I said. “And, how, may I ask, do you intend to exploit your victory?”
“You know what I mean. Just say it, okay?”
“Actually, I’m really not sure I understand what you’re getting at. I’m too busy basking in my own glory.”
“Cute.” If he kept this up, I would have to question whether I actually wanted what I thought I wanted.
“So elucidate for me again, quickly,” Luke said. “What did you want to know?”
I pounded my fist against the park bench. “Come on, Luke. I want to know what it is you want.”
“Oh,” he said cheerily. “Why didn’t you just say so? That’s easy.”
“And?” I asked.
“I want you.”
They were the words I had been waiting for, the figurative key to the door of what was certain to be utopia. Luke Barton wanted me, and he was admitting it. My heart was pounding so loudly I could feel the blood rush in my ears.
“So, then,” I said. “Isn’t there something we should do to commemorate this emotional apogee?”
“Perhaps. I have a suggestion.”
“I figured you might. Let’s hear it.”
“My vote is that we osculate.”
“Osculate?” I asked. “What’s that?”
“Let me show you,” Luke said. He leaned over the bench toward me, cupped his hand against my cheek and, looking into my eyes, pressed his lips to mine in the sweetest, most delicious, perfect kiss I’d ever experienced.

Vocabulary Drill
May 30
ambivalent · of two minds
apogee · peak
aptly · suitably
commemorate · honor
elucidate · clarify
enraptured · ecstatic
essence · core
exploit · use
figurative · symbolic
halcyon · idyllic
ineffable · indescribable
osculate · kiss
quantitative · numerical
truncated · cut short
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