

## Chapter 1

There's an irony to me in that metaphor of the truth being presented in black and white because so little of the world exists in those two colors alone. I suppose that association reflected journalistic photography being a representation of an inarguable reality. Things captured on camera couldn't be manipulated, at that time, at least. Though, now it's a facetious possibility in the internet age. But still even then, in whatever time period that metaphor originated, lenses captured only microscopic snapshots of the world. There's always been more than black and white. The way I see it, reality, and the truth alongside it, is a malleable and easily edited thing. It all depends on the choice of what shades and colors exist inside your eyes.

I experienced this firsthand when, at age seventeen, my friend Taylor and I bought a limited-edition expansion pack of Cards Against Humanity online. Imagine our shock and curiosity when we opened the lid of the sleek black and white box to find shit, like literal feces, brown and rancid and festering, inside the box. We were stunned. We looked at each other for acknowledgment of reality and found the same caricatures of surprise mutually expressed across our faces. Lamentably- or at least you'd think it would be- we were among the handful of unsophisticated victims of a Black Friday marketing stunt, but we were neither disappointed nor out of luck. We had been handily tricked, and to us, it only made practical sense to perpetuate the favor. So, we sold the thing on eBay for a profit, nonetheless. Our original advertisement was a picture we copied and pasted from the website with an item description almost exactly the same as we first read it: "Cards Against Humanity Limited Edition Expansion Pack: Brand New, Never Opened."

People are easy to fool- that's what I took away from the whole shit box incident. But I don't mean that in an arrogant kind of way; I'm speaking of myself most of all. It's just the way

of the world these days. Business, and the rest of the world wrapped around its finger, has long since evolved out of being an honest venture. The things we want to believe are often liable to supersede the truth, and fiction is more pervasive than you'd think.

I wouldn't say that I'm a likeable character. Revisiting the following events of my life, I feel an overwhelming urge to bang my head against the table I'm writing on, to slap the nonsense out of my younger self, or to grab her by the shoulders and scream at her "What the fuck is wrong with you?" In truth, there was a hell of a lot that was wrong with me, more than I can dissect in this short story. All of this was incredibly difficult, at times even painful, to write from an emotional standpoint. The metaphorical lens that colored my view of the world during those years was stained with a dull brown residue from having my head so far up my ass. Some parts of this narrative are fuzzy, or maybe even a little nonsensical, and that aligns with the instability of my perspective at the time. The greatest master of torture is, if you ask me, time- because what is more painful than the inability to take back the things you've done? And what's more, to take back the person that you were?

The reckoning I deserved confronted me viciously throughout the summer of 2018, following an embarrassing event at the end of my junior year of college. I was summoned for a university hearing regarding a Snapchat video. At the end of the semester, I was placed on academic probation and kicked out of my sorority.

I vividly remember the sorority meeting when they told me. The three senior sisters stared me down from across a wooden table, mouths turned down at exactly the same angle and each of them with hair so straight it looked sharp: three iron-spined judges poised to proclaim me guilty. The chapter president, Lauren, with her arms folded on the table and reading from the

piece of paper in front of her, said to me, “Your membership in Theta Kappa Alpha has been hereby terminated.”

And I said:

“Whatever.”

There wasn’t much in the video, just me taking a massive hit of cocaine and gesturing to my UMD T-shirt. Inexplicably, and to my misfortune, the video went viral. But that incident was only the closing act of a three year long shit show. My collegiate career was a downward slide from the first time I drank trash can punch at a frat party freshmen year. Caught up in a toilet bowl of booze, drugs, and boys, I swirled around closer and closer to the drain every day. As much as my classes fascinated me, they were second priority after chasing that feeling of my soul being removed from the world and living at the peak of some musical crescendo. And in a habit that would later drive my fall from grace, I cataloged everything, with as much precision and methodism as a museum historian, under the glaze of Instagram filters.

I don’t think I’m alone in my subconscious desire to manipulate reality. What a discordant trajectory our world is taking these days, much of it, in my opinion, propelled by media. I’d describe it as something similar to the expanding of the universe- how it goes and goes and goes in all directions- people roaming into continuously multiplying virtual spaces that a short time ago didn’t even exist, into webs of conspiracies or meaningless niche worlds, some completely removed from reality, entrenched in the depths of the internet. And when I describe this, I’m picturing a comedic image: of all the people on Earth floating in the black expanse of space just outside the atmosphere, all seven point whatever billion tiny human bodies orbiting around the planet unweighted by gravity, and some of them rotating uncontrollably until they

spin so far into the distance, into their delusion, that they're unreachable. I could go on, but it's only a foot note in the contemporary context of this story. This story is about me and all the ways that I lived in a delusion: some virtual, some not, but all of it, self-imposed.

If you had asked me at the time what I liked most about college, I would have said something about partying. Up until then, I fit right in with Greek life. The nights I went out, I imagined that I was living one of the cacophonous and sleezy songs I had grown up to, like my whole life was just a Ke\$ha music video. I really didn't have that much in common with Ke\$ha, other than a fixation with glitter that deceitfully hid a dark and depressing history.

So, junior year ended poorly, but the thing I chose to think about instead was the trip to Daytona I had been planning for three months. However, to my absolute abhorrence and rage, my parents stood a staunch obstacle. When they received notice of the university hearing, my dad reacted as his usual livid self; my mom defended me meekly, and him being like gasoline on my pile of kindling, brought out the worst in me.

"This is completely unacceptable. Your mother and I have sacrificed your entire life to make sure you could get an education. When you got into Maryland we were so proud. You had a golden ticket to whatever career you wanted. What the hell happened? This is a complete slap in the face. I mean, I'm at a loss for words, Sage. What's wrong with you? Did you think we were just going to keep forking over money when you act like this? We expected so much more from you."

"That's the problem! I can't be a fucking adult because you're always trying to control what I do!"

“Don't curse at me. And you're damn right I am because when I don't control you, you're inhaling cocaine. Sage, how are you ever going to hold down a job when you can't even scrape by with passing grades? How will you support yourself with a drug addiction?”

“You always fucking say that. I don't have an addiction.”

“You don't have an addiction? Sage you're suspended for doing cocaine! How many other incidents have there been over the years? You're this close to being a tweaker.”

“Rob-“

“No. It's harsh but she needs to hear it, because, Sage, if you don't turn things around that's where you're headed.”

“That's what you think of me? Fuck you. I'll just shoot up on meth when I go to Daytona.”

“If you think you're going to Daytona after this, you're out of your mind.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

My mom interjected. “Rob, we never talked about this.”

“Well, who is she kidding? We're not going to reward her for behaving like this.”

“I have been planning this for months. This is the only thing I've been looking forward to all year. I'm not missing this.”

“Yeah, you are. You'll just have to get over it.”

I hung up the phone. The rage I felt was entirely typical. My dad and I had been at each other's throats for a long time by then: fighting about grades, about me staying out too late, about the "shady" kids I hung out with, about the brussel sprouts mom made for dinner. Every new argument between the two of us added a brick to the camel's back, to the point where we could hardly stand being in the same room. He was an ostentatious target for my far-reaching anger. That was one of the things I loved about college: being away from my father.

It was after this conversation that I hit a breaking point. I had had enough of his keeping me on a leash and holding me back from my life. There was a laundry list of instances in my teenage years where I had defied my parents, though up to that point, freedom was obligatorily bound to secrecy. Adulthood had brought entitlement and simultaneously ripped away whatever imaginary boundaries contained the flames of my defiance. I was an adult with a human right to my own decisions and mistakes. There was no doubt I would go. In my mind, I was an innocent man and my father a jailer. So, there you have your tragic hero – Me, a wronged and virtuous girl in a courageous act of protest, taking on the world's most evil man.

I didn't speak to my parents for two weeks after that. The next time I would call them would be from just south of the Floridian border. My friends and I packed our bags without looking back. Stepping on that plane I felt invincible, broken free of my chains. I had life by the neck. This is what it is supposed to be like when you're young, I thought. That's what my parents didn't understand. They had spent their entire lives residing in the docks of safety, but unlike them, I wasn't afraid of the world. My best memories were the ones tinged with risk. With chin high and wearing certainty like a fire hydrant shade of red painted across my nose, I ventured into a wasteland of degeneracy, beginning a saga that would string together the greatest mistakes of my life.

