

# **Handwritten: A Novel in Letters**

by Daniel Canham

## Part 1: Letters from Mitchell

Dear Adrian,

It was a rather pungent cheese that my aunt had me try the other day. She said it was called gruyere. I found it to my liking, a little nutty, a little salty, with just enough sweetness to be reminiscent of Swiss. She served it to me with bread that was kind of dry and made me wish I had some of that tea you were telling me about.

If you can't tell, life has just been sooooo exhilarating for me since the last time I wrote you. I mean, don't get me wrong, it's beautiful up here in Leavenworth, but I don't know what to do with myself. From what I've seen, the locals vary wildly between relatively benign and outright insane, but such is the expectation with small town life, isn't it? I wouldn't actually know, so that's a genuine question. The tourists you see along the main drag are fairly annoying, as tourists usually are. I haven't really been out to explore it, but from what I saw as we drove through I can't believe how much people have bought into this faked-Bavarian hamlet image. It's not even the most interesting thing about the town. It's just plastic and paint and pretty wooden signs, comparable to anything Disney could have put out. A Starbucks is a Starbucks is a McDonalds is a McDonalds no matter what the outside looks like, but people buy into it. They come here and stand in front of literally everything and anything to take their crappy photos on their crappy disposable cameras wearing their crappy faked smiles and crappy Hawaiian-print shirts. I just want to photobomb the hell out of them to numb the incessant boredom. Can you imagine it? I would just dress up in my banana suit and walk around the downtown area during the day. Except I left my banana suit at home. Curses on my lack of forethought!

I miss the lights and energy of the city so much sometimes. I could walk around in my banana suit and barely anyone would bat an eye. It's like one moment I'll perfectly fine staring at Aunt Nedda's cat and then the next I'll feel this overwhelming loneliness vacuuming a hole in the middle of my chest because everything feels so big and empty. But at the same time, I feel trapped and confined and alone despite the fact that it hasn't even been a full week yet. I don't know what to do with myself and I feel like I'm losing my mind. Do tell me if you find it, please? It's kind of pink and squishy and is filled with dirty thoughts.

Still, I suppose it's cool to be able to see the stars like this. The night my parents dropped me off, I slept out on Aunt Nedda's front lawn since my parents were taking up the guest bedroom so it was that or the smelly cat-couch and... and it was just so beautiful to look up see such an abundance of light in a way you can't ever really see anywhere else. I think you would love it. At camp last year, I remember you were always talking about astrology and the constellations and the stories that went along with them. How did the story of Scorpio go? I remember something about it being the scorpion that killed Orion, but I can't for the life of me remember why it would do that. Orion's always been one of my favorite constellations, just because it's so easy to find. It's hard to miss that belt.

It's nice to be able to hear from a friendly voice (pen) even while I'm way away in the middle of nowhere, so I hope you'll keep writing to me. My parents made me promise that for the duration of my stay with Aunt Nedda, I'm going to try to refrain from the internet. Partially because she doesn't have any (how does she live?!), partially because they think it would be good for my health. I mean, I could go to the library and use the internet there if I really wanted to, but I did promise I would try. You may be my only lifeline to the outside world.

Thank you,

Mitchell Forester

Dear Adrian,

I received a postcard from my parents. It's like they're taunting me leaving the country without me and then periodically sending me reminders that they're off gallivanting around Europe without me. I understand that it's their second honeymoon or whatever and having your teenage son around kind of ruins the mood, but they're clearly still thinking about me if they're taking the time to insult me with postcards. Aunt Nedda, err, Endee (that's what Aunt Nedda insists I call her. Well, that or auntie, which I point-blank refuse to do) thought it was cute and wanted to hang it on the refrigerator. I love her because she's family and so far hasn't made me do many chores and she feeds me, but this woman is insufferable! Also, get this, she leaves me home alone during the day. When my parents dropped me off, it was a Friday and they stayed the night and left Saturday afternoon, so I had no idea what to expect. Pretty sure the ol' parental units thought they were leaving me with some kind of familial, extended-stay babysitter, but she does little more than leave me notes so I know what I can have for lunch while she's at work, sometimes leaves a little spending money if she's feeling extra nice. My parents should have just left me at home with an emergency credit card for all the work Endee's doing taking care of me during the day.

Oh, speaking of feeding, last week after I mailed your letter, Endee made the most amazing vegetarian lasagna I've ever had. She used a bunch of local produce she got from the local farmers market. I think she even made the noodles herself, though I have no proof. Every once in awhile she disappears into the kitchen after she gets home from work and makes me go outside. She even gave me a long-range walkie-talkie so she can call me in if I've wandered too far off to hear her yelling from the door. I've only just managed to resist the urge to have conversations with her in radio-speak. Over. I think she'd be game. Over. Time to come eat dinner? Wilco. Over.

I haven't gone too far yet, mostly just staying in the backyard, lying around in the sun with a book or two, maybe playing with her cat, Rumi. He's really taken a liking to me. Well, that or he thinks I'm hunteable food and is stalking me, waiting for the perfect moment to kill me in my sleep. It's funny to me that Rumi is a calico; I've always heard that only female cats could be calico. Maybe Endee knows more about it, I'll have to ask her about it when she gets off work.

I'm still waiting to hear from you, but I'm a little impatient with boredom, which is why I'm already sending you another letter. You have to give a little to get a little, right? I have nothing better to do, so I guess I can give a lot right now. And no, I don't hold it against you; I'm just itching to hear about the outside world. I even started reading the local newspaper when it gets too hot to stay outside.

There was a front page news story the other day about the burn ban currently in effect. Apparently it's so dry that nobody is allowed to light fireworks for the fourth of July. \*YAWN\* I mean, that's normally the case back home, but that's because it's the city and people are worried about catching their homes on fire or whatever. But I guess out here since it's practically desert, people are catching the whole forest on fire. I guess you hear about it on the news every summer, but I've never really tangibly thought about it until now, you know? Like for the people who live up here the whole forest fires and burn bans thing is real life, not just some far off remote thing. I don't know though, it looks pretty green to me, but I guess that's because the plants are adapted to it.

I pulled down one of Endee's plant books and in the area where we are, it's mostly

Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine. Fun fact: The Douglas-fir tree has very thick bark that, before human intervention in forest ecology, protected them from wildfires. They're built to withstand fire, isn't that cool? I can just imagine them looking at the fire and just laughing in its face. And yeah, maybe some of them would have burned, too, some of the younger ones that hadn't built up much protection yet, but they would have been burning with all the other trees and then the older Douglas-fir would just kind of sit there and grow and drop their seeds because apparently the cones open more and drop their seeds after a fire, so then once everything else is ashes or whatever, the Douglas-fir would just kind of take over. Or at least that's how I imagine it happens.

Anyway, I really want to hear from you. How are your siblings? Are you planning on going back to camp this year? Obviously I'm not since I'm here. Write back to me soon?

Mitchell Forester

Dear Adrian,

So yesterday, I was playing with the walkie-talkie that Endee gave me, flipping through channels seeing if I could find anything interesting. I'd climbed a tree more because it was there than anything else. Anyway, I'm flipping through the channels and all of a sudden I hear this girl talking. Not like she's talking to anyone, because there wasn't anybody else answering, just her talking and talking. Her voice made her sound like she's about our age. She sounded really... I don't know how to describe it. It was confessional, broadcasting for the entire world to hear, or maybe aliens, you never know. I didn't stay long because it made me feel a little dirty listening to her confession, like I'd stumbled on someone taking a shit in the woods. Okay, maybe not that gross, but just as embarrassing. I took note of which channel she was broadcasting from though. I might revisit later to see if she's still talking and maybe try to talk to her.

Oh, and I asked Endee about Rumi. Apparently, it's very rare for male cats to be calico, because the distinct genes that cause female cats to be the three-color pattern are only found on the two X-chromosomes, so Rumi has two x and a y. Kind of a kitty Klinefelter syndrome. It means that most likely (meaning like .03%) Rumi is sterile. Which I also thought was sad. Rumi will never be a daddy-cat. I wonder if he knows that. Maybe that's why he stalks me around all the time, he knows we have something in common.

Gosh, this is turning into a really sad letter. I'm sorry. Even though you STILL HAVEN'T GOTTEN BACK TO ME! That's okay though, I trust that you're probably just busy and will write to me when you're done having all kinds of fun adventures. It's no big deal. I'm not jealous or anything, I promise.

Okay, maybe I am jealous of you a little having access to technology and the great wide world. But I'll just have to bear it and survive.

Mitchell Forester

Dear Adrian,

I GOT A LETTER FROM YOU! YAY!

You seriously have no idea how excited I was to hear from you. I'm sorry my last letter was all sad and then passive-aggressive and I hope I didn't in any way guilt trip you into writing me.

So life sounds pretty boring for you. But at least you get to hang out with Eleanor when you're home.

I'm sorry to hear that you have to take summer classes, but if it helps you graduate on time, it has got to be worth it, right? I would offer to help you study, but I'm kind of not around and I'm pretty sure that answering your questions by letter would be far too slow of a back and forth to really be productive. At least it's just an English class. Could you imagine having to take a math class over the summer? That would be a bummer, I can't think of anyone who would want to get up before noon during the summer in order to do MATH. It's by far my least favorite subject, but only because numbers don't make sense. I can count and do all the basics necessary to balance my checkbook, what else is there to know?

I like to think that books are my friends. Have I told you yet how Endee has a massive library? I started randomly browsing books from it while she's at work, pulling things down from the shelves on a whim and flipping through them. I sped through her copy of The Giver in about a day. I think the last time I even thought about that book, I was in elementary school. Revisiting it now, I feel like there's so much I can get from it. Maybe if you tell me what books you're reading, I can see if Endee has them in her collection and I can read along with you.

Remember that girl I told you about, well I've been checking back periodically and so far nothing. She was broadcasting once on Saturday, but disappeared before I could reply. I stood there saying hello, hello, are you there, hello? for ten minutes before I gave up. Maybe next time.

Rumi continues to follow me around. I feel like he's my only real friend out here other than you. Sure, Endee tries, but she's family and is gone so much that she's not really a peer, you know? I need someone my own age to interact with up here. Maybe you could come up for a weekend or something. I'm starting to get used to this place. Well, mostly Endee's property but bits and pieces of the town itself as well.

The trees speak to me for some reason. Not in any kind of Grandmother Willow sort of way, but the longer I'm here, the more I feel connected to the land. There's this one maple tree that I started visiting almost every day. It's big and old and smells like tree. Which, I know, duh, of course it smells like tree, but that's not the point! Or was it? I don't remember anymore.

Mitchell Forester

Dear Adrian,

Of course they're making you read Romeo and Juliet. The Bard knows no bounds when it comes to high school English. Gatsby and Beowulf were no surprise either, though I was a little excited to see that your teacher is having you read Whitman, poetry doesn't seem quite as in vogue at our level from what I understand. Whitman has always been such a character in my mind. A man quite literally larger than life. My dad would always read me bits and pieces of Whitman growing up since that was always his favorite. I think if I'd tried, I could probably have memorized Leaves of Grass before I even got to high school. Mom always liked to joke that where dad liked Whitman, she was Emily Dickinson. The infinitely large paired with the infinity in all the tiny cracks and crevasses, proving that at least in this instance, opposites attract. The joke being that as their offspring I would only ever end up being the infinitely in the middle.

Oh. You're one of those people that likes math. I'm sorry if I offended you, but I stand by what I said. Math is gross.

I asked her about it and Endee is okay with you coming up for a weekend. If you take the train we can pick you up at the station. Or if you drive, we can give you directions. Do you drive? I

don't drive. I feel a bit ridiculous almost out of high school and still unable to drive, but I feel like I can get away without it if I go away to college. If I go to school in a city, I'll have my bike and public transportation. Have you thought much about life after high school?

Endee left an old canteen and emergency whistle conspicuously on the table and I think she's hinting that I should explore so I've started going on hikes during the day. There are so many trails and ridges to try from the house. I'm taking her plant guide with me when I go so I can learn about the wildlife. There are a lot of pretty flowers and berries and stuff and I want to know more about them. Plus the views are spectacular; I wish I had a camera so I could send you pictures.

I'll start reading the books on the list and get back to you with some thoughts. Isn't it great to have literate friends with too much time on their hands?

Mitchell Forester

Dear Adrian,

I was finally able to catch hold of the girl yesterday after I sent your letter! I had just finished my usual hike and was flipping through the radio to her channel and she was broadcasting. She sounded just as funky as she has every other time I've come across her broadcasts. This time I took a minute or two and just listened to her voice. It was Billie Holiday smooth with a Janis Joplin twist. I felt like Romeo in the balcony scene. I was even standing in a small orchard, though nowhere near a medieval Italian mansion. You probably should have read that by now, if not I'm telling you to go read it or you won't pass this summer class. But, soft! What voice through yonder ether breaks? It is the east and Juliet is the sun!

She seemed a little taken aback when I interrupted her. And then immediately suspicious.

"How long have you been listening to me? Were you eavesdropping?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down I jus--"

"Don't tell me to calm down! I have no idea who you are and no idea how much you've heard."

I had to promise her a hundred times that I'd only just stumbled across her and only listened for a few minutes because her voice is quite enchanting and beautifully sad and I'm lonely and I swear to whatever gods she believes in I didn't mean anything by it.

"Oh, well in that case, hi, I'm Myra. Are you from around here?"

Of course, I'm not. I wasn't going to lie to her either, so I explained how I'm staying with my aunt while my parents are away on their second honeymoon.

"I see, so you're on a two-way radio why exactly?"

I told her that it's not like there's much else going on where I am. I got bored and started looking for something, anything interesting.

"Ha! That's the same reason I have so much air time. I'm bored so I'm talking to the aliens, or whoever will get this broadcast. Humans are such noisy creatures. We send out all these signals to the stratosphere and beyond with our radios and lasers and satellites. None of us alive today can know the real meaning of silence. There's always some kind of technologic thing out there somewhere interfering with the moment."

She sounds kind of crazy, right? But at the same time, she didn't sound as sad as she did before I interrupted. That should count for something.

"Well I suppose now I know my broadcasting is reaching someone, though you're probably

not as far away as I thought. Why don't we meet up, say tomorrow? I know this little coffee shop on the outskirts of town that probably wouldn't be too busy."

And just like that we have a date for tomorrow. Not like a romantic date, but a scheduled meet up.

I'm a little nervous about this Myra. She sounds like she's about our age, but we didn't even discuss anything about that, and she didn't even ask my name. I think I'm going to bring the walkie-talkie with me when I go into town tomorrow, try to radio her when I get close in case she thinks the same. Otherwise I have no idea what she looks like.

Even though you'll probably get this after our meeting happens, wish me luck.

Mitchell Forester

Dear Adrian,

As I write this you're probably only just now receiving my last letter, but I really wanted to tell you that my meet up with Myra went well.

That afternoon, when I got close to the coffee shop she told me about, I radioed Myra to say I was almost there.

She responded right as I was walking through the parking lot. Her back was to me, I could see her through the front window, lifting a walkie-talkie to her mouth.

"I'm wearing a red jumper, sitting by the window on the east side of the room."

I don't know how to describe her. She looks utterly normal. Though, I feel like in the course of our conversation I lost all concept of what normal even means. Short brown hair, brown eyes, taller than me, though it took me a little bit to realize this. She carries herself the way Manny did at the beginning of camp, all hunched over and shrunken in like she's hiding. It's a kind of physical shyness that makes people disappear when they aren't comfortable.

She doesn't really dress in any kind of way that makes me think she stands out. She just kind of is. She's someone who's there and could easily be overlooked. I don't know if I would call her mousy, mousy to me says brown and grey and very Kansas before Dorothy's trip to the land of Oz. No, she's a wallflower in the most beautiful sense of the term, a colorful, radiant being hiding on the sidelines, managing to blend in with all the festive decorations.

"O! speak again, bright angel; for thou art as glorious to this night."

She laughed at that. It was the first time I'd heard her laugh. Once I was inside and we started talking and I was actually able to introduce myself, it didn't take her very long to warm up and positively drown me in words. It was like hearing my name instantly unlocked something in Myra that made her trust me.

I didn't ask, but I'm pretty sure she is our age or at least pretty close. Maybe a year older. We talked for a bit, and I mentioned you briefly, and she seemed vaguely interested in this mystery man that I write letters to. I teased her with the information, knowing full well I would pale in comparison (quite literally, actually) to you.

She knew who Endee was, but that's not really a surprise since she works at the grocery store. Didn't know that she had any family, let alone a nephew who was staying with her for the summer. She asked if I was into rock climbing since the area has become well known in recent years for its awesome formations and whatnot.

I asked her again about her radio show or whatever you want to call it. She told me that she



originally started because she was bored, but then it turned into a diary of sorts. It was her way to leave everything behind, except there would never be a record of it except radio waves going on forever, getting weaker the farther they travel until eventually they're lost in the background noise.

Hearing this made me a bit dumbfounded. I didn't expect existential crises when agreed to meet up with the sad-sounding girl I found on the radio. It almost feels like a postmodern fairy tale. Still, she is so far the most fascinating thing I've found out here. Maybe because I don't have any kind of social group through which to meet people, I actually am in a fairy tale. You never hear about Dorothy or Snow White or Red Riding Hood or Momotaro having friends until after they've started their grand adventure. I wonder what my happy ending will be?

We've agreed to meet up again soon, maybe go on a hike together or something. Life feels like some indie film about a coming age between two awkward, lonely, misfit teenagers reaching out to each other in the middle of nowhere, finding love and learning the true meaning of friendship. Doesn't that just sound sickening? :P And I'm sorry, but I think you would be the dead, limited omniscient narrator. Don't ever let them make my life into a film, okay?

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Just got home, checked the mail and was surprised to find a letter from you!

We're really bad at this timing thing where one of us writes a letter and then the other replies and so on. Instead it seems to be a mish-mashed free-for-all where anyone writes anytime they have something to say. That said, I'm excited! I'm so glad you get to come up to visit next weekend. Even though she already said yes, I'm going to double check with Endee to make sure we have space for you. I don't know why there wouldn't be, I'm in the guest bedroom and it has a queen size bed which is more than enough to share. There's also always the couch and I wouldn't be surprised if Endee had an inflatable mattress. In short, I think you have your pick.

I can't believe it's been almost a year since we first met, even though I'm pretty sure we were best friends from the moment we met. I'm so glad I've had you to write to this summer and over the past year. It was a whirlwind week full of songs and keeping in touch with you has kept it from all fading like a dream.

So you've finished Romeo and Juliet? Isn't it so sad? Everyone always talks about how it's such a beautiful love story, but main characters are thirteen! Or at least Juliet is, Romeo might be a year or two older. They need to look at their life, look at their choices. Hell, I don't even trust the things I did and thought when I was thirteen. I was a punk-ass kid with too much time on my hands and waaaaay too many hormones coursing through my bloodstream. Middle school was a dark period for all of us. Puberty in general is a dark time and I'm glad to be almost done with it.

Anyway, I'm glad to hear you're on to the next book. It's Gatsby, correct? I was never too fond of it, but as I recall I kind of liked Nick, the narrator. Make sure to pay attention to some of the bigger scale details and how they might reflect Fitzgerald's time. If you don't know what that means, look it up. When you have the internet, any and all information is just a Google search away. I wouldn't rely on that as your only source, and we should always try to form our own opinions based on a reading of the original work, but if you have no idea where to even start, just do a search. It won't take more than ten minutes of your time unless you get really wrapped up in one of the articles you find. Even if all you did was skim, you'll sound like you at least have an idea about what you're talking about.

That beach party sounds like it was fun. I miss the wetness of the West side. This mountain air is just too dry for me. I've taken to carrying around lip balm at all times and the canteen Endee

left out for me is rarely empty and never more than arm's reach away from me. I've never skinny dipped before. From the way you describe it, it sounds like fun. Except for the part where your friend almost drowned, that sounds scary, but luckily you were there and not drinking.

I can't wait to see you! It sounds like I'll have to introduce you to Myra since she's decided that we're going to be awesome friends.

Until next time,  
Mitchell Forester

Dear Adrian,

Even though you're showing up in three days, I wanted to write to you to tell you about hanging out with Myra.

As you may recall, I told you we met up on Friday. We hung out on Sunday, and yesterday as well.

At first it was kind of weird because it was different from my routine. Usually, Endee makes sure I'm awake by cooking breakfast before she leaves for work. Then, once she's gone, I clean up and pack myself a lunch. Sometimes she'll have packed one for me already, but usually that's no more than a snack, so I end up making more anyway. I've grown partial to peanut butter and honey sandwiches, though the homemade rosehip jam Endee has is tasty as well.

I pack my lunch with a book or two, emergency whistle, compass, flashlight, and canteen in my backpack, and take one of the trails away from Endee's place. It's usually not very hot yet, but after about the third hour while I'm out there it's around noon and it really starts to get warm. I usually find a tree or boulder to sit under/on and have a long drink of water and read while the sun crosses its zenith.

The views from up on the ridges are gorgeous. I'll have to take you up on a hike. I'm getting rather fit from all this up and down, should start doing pushups or something for some of the time I spend reading and I'd really get in shape. I'm also getting a nice tan, too. You may have noticed I didn't list sunscreen in the things I put in my backpack. I probably should have some, but, and call this laziness if you want to, I haven't gotten around to going to the store and getting some. I've yet to burn, but when even in the shade of a tree I can feel the sun's rays, I know it's probably not the best for me. But those are problems for future-Mitchell, right? Or perhaps just tomorrow-Mitchell to get sunscreen. If I don't have any by the time you get up here, maybe we'll make a trip to see Endee at the store and buy some.

Once its past midday, I usually hike back. It's the hottest part of the day, but the sun isn't directly overhead anymore. I'm getting really good at knowing a lot of the plants, and I enjoy being quiet in order to see the animals. I'm terrified I'm going to see a black bear this way, but there haven't been many sightings yet this year so I might get lucky. You're supposed to be loud when you're walking through the forest to scare them away before they even get close enough to see you. They say a surprised black bear is a dangerous black bear so give it a head start when you're out. Ha, I sounds like a public service announcement.

A nice cool shower followed by yet more reading and possibly working on a letter to you until Endee gets home from work and we have dinner together like today.

With Myra, not so much.

She came over right as I was about to leave for my hike on Sunday. Said that she stopped by

the grocery store on her way and asked Endee if I was home. Call me both flattered and a little creeped out. She pulled up in front of the house just as I was stepping out of the front door and screamed through the open passenger side window.

"Get in, loser, we're going shopping."

Dumbfounded, I got in the car.

"Did you really just--?"

"Just what? We're going shopping. Which means you need to get in the car, unless you want to walk to Wenatchee. Also, I love you, but you're a bit of a loser, now GET IN!"

She took me to essentially all the stores we have back home. The kind of corporate, strip mall places you find off of every third exit through any well-travelled highway corridor. I don't think we actually bought anything, but we did have a mini-photoshoot in the dressing room. I felt like I was in some teen dramedy montage. When did my life become such a cliché?

It was fun and on the way back, we stopped at one of the local fruit stands and picked up a variety of fruits and vegetables from a list that Endee had given to Myra. We picked up some early summer squash, corn, a watermelon, cherries, peaches, tomatoes.

She stayed over for dinner and we read passages of Gatsby to each other. She plays such a great Daisy Buchanan.

"I love to see you at my table, Mitchell. You remind me of a--of a rose, an absolute rose. Doesn't he?" She turned to Endee for confirmation: "An absolute rose?"

"This was untrue. I am not even faintly like a rose. She was only extemporizing, but a stirring warmth flowed from her, as if her heart was trying to come out to you concealed in one of those breathless, thrilling words."

(These last two paragraphs are a direct quotation from Gatsby by the way, though I assume you're on top of your reading and know that already).

Endee made spaghetti squash with veggie meatballs. Had she not mentioned they were meatless, I would have never been able to tell the difference and quite frankly I doubt I would have asked either. As my mom likes to say, "Never turn down food made with love."

After dinner, we played a rousing game of monopoly. I was wholly unprepared for how cutthroat a game of monopoly could be. I mean, I've seen card games that get bad (remember spoon?), where war is literally war or slapjack becomes slap jack and games of risk where a country losing the war is akin to someone almost losing a limb, but never, never have I seen such cold, calculated destruction between two players. I barely survived the entire game and I was only caught in the crossfire. And after I was mercilessly removed from the board, I sat in terrified awe as they systematically brought the game to a stalemate. They were so casual about annihilating each other. There were no raised voices. No glares. Only the polite and friendly tones of two people playing a game of monopoly. They haggled and maneuvered like I could only dream of, the math in their heads leaving me scrambling. Then finally, when I begged them to admit an impasse, they called it a tie at 10pm. The whole ordeal was positively Wall Street and I hope I never have to see that again. Give me scrabble, or give me death!

After Myra went home, Endee turned to me and said, "She's nice" with this look on her face that I didn't quite understand.

Then when Myra came over yesterday, she asked me what I normally do, so we went on a hike together. I packed her a lunch and refilled her water bottle, then we set off.

We climbed the steepest trail coming from Endee's property. It took us directly to the top of the closest ridge. We sat up at the top and Myra pulled out a small wooden pipe taking a few hits before offering it to me.

"Uh..."

Now I'll be the first to admit that I've never smoked pot. I've never drank. I'm kind of boring to be one hundred percent honest. I do my schoolwork. I don't get into trouble. I'm every parent's perfect, well-mannered, virginal boy to go out with their child. Not for lack of options, but rather a lack of commitment, a lack of daring and push and want and need. Not with any of the girls I've been with anyway. So here I am, being offered this little wooden pipe with the eye of Horus carved into the top, a tiny trail of smoke curling up from underneath the fresh white ashes, and I freeze. I stare at it, without actually saying anything.

"Sure."

My hands are reaching up, briefly grazing hers as the pipe is passed between us. She drops the lighter into my palm, the top still warm from her lighting the hits she took. My body is mimicking her movements from earlier, one hand gripping the pipe as the other flicks the lighter.

*\*chk chk chk voosh\**

I'm inhaling the green-tasting smoke, my head wound tight with the scent and fog. Like she did, I'm holding it in, fighting back the urge to cough and slowly exhaling, the smoke floating gently out of my mouth before it dissipates in the stillness of the air. I'm so absorbed in this that Myra surprised me when she touched my hand.

Our eyes met and she smiled.

"This is the first time you've done that, isn't it? You handled my piece like a pro, but your eyes claimed otherwise."

I smiled and nodded. I had no idea what I was supposed to be feeling at first. I just felt... pleasant. Kind of warm, but not really all that different than normal.

Myra told me to take two more hits.

So I did.

I felt kind of like time had slowed down. I felt content. Is this what being high feels like? If so I'm not opposed to it, though I wasn't much opposed to it before this experience though. We sat in the shade of a tree and I ended up taking an accidental nap. Myra woke me up a few hours later by flashing her emergency mirror over my face. We talked for a little bit, exchanging our high school experiences so far. She's a year older than us, just graduated, waiting for summer to end so she can start at the university.

We hiked back down and again, she stayed over for dinner. There were no board games last night, though we did read ahead in *Gatsby*.

And again, after Myra left, all that Endee would say to me was "she's nice." It's like she's trying to say something to me, but I have no idea what it could be. Is she speaking another language or something? It's what she's saying with her eyes more than what she's saying with her mouth that throws me off.

Anywho, it's late, I'm tired. I have no energy to analyze the inner workings of my aunt's mind. Goodnight, sweet prince (that's from *Hamlet* by the way, not *Romeo and Juliet*, and is actually Horatio talking to Hamlet's freshly dead corpse).

Mitchell Forester

Dear Adrian,

I'm writing this even though you're sleeping right next to me. If you wake up, I have no idea how I'll keep you from seeing everything on this page, but I suppose that's a challenge I'll have to face as you begin to stir. For now though, you're still asleep.

I'm sorry if I seemed a bit surprised when you kissed me. It's not that I didn't want it, but I wasn't expecting it. I had no idea you had those kinds of feelings for me. But it was... nice. It was nice. It was hot. It left my skin crawling for more and sent a tingling through my body far more potent than being high. By Hathor, I want more.

But I'm afraid of asking for this. Does this mean I'm gay? Not that it's a bad thing, I mean, you seem very comfortable with it and all but I don't know if it's my thing. I mean, on the one hand I guess it makes sense then why I've never had an interest in women, but gay? It can't be the end of the world. It's not the end of the world. Maybe if I could kiss you one more time, but no, I pushed you away a little too hard and now I'm afraid you hate me for it. Please don't, I just don't know what I want right now. And I want to still be friends, and I don't know how to say that without admitting to you that you make me nervous in a good way. The way you look at me and touch me sends shivers through me and I want more. I want to take you and make you mine. And I want to run away and leave you here while you're sleeping and disappear into the morning and the silence and the trees. And I want to stay here and fall back asleep and wake up to your hand on my cheek.

We were just watching a movie and I felt pulled toward you. My whole body was tingling and then your hand grazed my leg and I saw stars. My hair stood on end and all I wanted was more. Is that what sex feels like? Is this chemistry, because sparks flew and then you were grabbing my arm and pulling me to you and you kissed me full on the lips. Then it was over. You hugged me to you and turned back to the movie like nothing had happened. And nothing else happened the entire rest of the night, even when we went to sleep in the same bed.

I've never been kissed, and I'm glad that of all people you would be my first, but this is big for me and I have no idea how to process just yet. I need to say this though. I feel overwhelmed with the need to tell you how this is affecting me. Is this love? Is this lust? Is it the seeds of either, of both, sprouting their roots and digging into my flesh so they can consume me as they grow into something beautiful?

I fear something has irreversibly changed between us, Adrian. I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. I've always believed relationships were complicated, but everything always told me it would be because of circumstances. The why and the how and the who would cause the problems, not the what. The what is always the easy one. But what is this? What happened, if anything?

I'm going to try my best to put this aside and just be normal around you, so maybe when you read this, you won't have a clue that anything was ever wrong. I don't think it's wrong. In fact, I think it feels very very right right now. And yet I'm still freaking out. I don't want to be freaking out.

\*breathes\*

I guess, right now, I don't know. And I'm sorry if that doesn't work for you. Maybe when I get back to the wet-side of the mountains I'll be able to better articulate myself, but for now, just trust that I think you're a wonderful person.

I respect you, and I think I better understand now some of the things you said to me in your

letters. I don't know if I can be that person. Part of me wants to, but it would be a mistake to act on that too rashly. Grant me peace, give me time.

You seemed on the verge of being hurt when I pushed you away and that's the last thing I want. I'm not saying you forced yourself on me, but next time a heads up would be appreciated. (Does this mean there will be a next time? I don't know.) While you seemed so serene after we kissed, I wonder how much to read into it.

What did you get out of kissing me, Adrian?

I'm going to stop before I leave you with a page of unanswerable questions.

Mitchell

Dear Adrian,

No doubt you've found my letter by now. I apologize if it's an incoherent, panicked, rambling mess. I didn't really take the time to think. I just woke next to you and lost it. It was too perfect a moment. Falling back asleep after hiding that in your backpack on my way to the bathroom helped a lot. It reminded me that maybe I don't need to worry about you and me. Because maybe we just are, at least for now. What we are, what it means, why it happened, that can all wait for another time.

So after I fell back asleep, I resolved to ignore this unreasonable uneasiness and let us simply be. I don't know how successful I was hanging out with you and Endee over breakfast. I don't know if you noticed it, but she gave me the same look that's accompanied her comments about Myra being nice.

I think I finally understand what that look means.

When we hiked up the trails, the same one, actually, that I took with Myra when we smoked, I half-wanted to push you behind a tree. But I didn't. I couldn't bring myself to be that forward with you.

So we climbed.

Watching you toe the edge of the cliff, as if you were daring gravity to try to shake you and throw you headlong over the edge, I imagined myself standing out there with you, poking our heads past the sharp drop-off so close to our feet. Even though I didn't join you, for that moment, I felt free. I was with you and everything was fantastic. Elated, I think is the name for this feeling. I felt elated to be there in the sun with you.

And you turned to me and smiled and I laughed. And you laughed even though you had no idea why I was laughing I couldn't have explained it to you had you asked.

What are we going to do with each other? I suppose this is a conversation we'll have to continue when I'm home from the summer and we can sit and talk.

It's only been a few hours, but it's quiet without you here. Rumi curled up next to me as I started writing this, purring contentedly against my thigh. He misses you, I can tell. He took the exact spot where you'd slept next to me, has been there ever since you left, even before I sat down next to him to start writing.

His presence is kind of comforting because he so clearly doesn't care. Not to say that he's an animal and ignorant and isn't aware. He's unconcerned and this puts him at peace. I wish I could find that kind of peace. Maybe I'll finish this letter in the morning and fall asleep while he's here.

---

Woke up to find Rumi gone. In his place was a note: "I left you something on the kitchen

table, I think you might find it useful.”

At first I thought Rumi had left the note for me, and I guess in a way he had. When I got to the kitchen, I found a book of poetry by Rumi, translated into English. I took it with me on my usual hike, this time taking one of the more familiar trails I’ve been up a few times.

It’s amazing how quickly our bodies condition themselves. The first time I went up this, I was huffing and puffing after only a little bit, but this time I made it all the way to the top and barely broke a sweat from the exertion, from the heat is another matter.

I started reading Rumi. I’m not sure I get it. His writing is definitely ecstatic, and many of the poems read like he’s drunk on God. That’s the point though, isn’t it? To find the ecstatic condition of spirit is to drink [to] god, and through that drinking become one. I don’t know much about Catholicism, but it seems like that’s the idea behind the Eucharist. Gives a whole new meaning to you are what you eat.

*In your light I learn how to love.*

*In your beauty, how to make poems.*

*You dance inside my chest,*

*where no one sees you,*

*but sometimes I do,*

*and that sight becomes this art.*

In wake of this poem in particular, I’ve been asking myself what are these letters I keep sending to you? I think they’re this art that Rumi writes about. When he’s addressing god, but he’s also addressing love: tangible manifestations of love in himself and in Shams and in Saladin and in Husam and in you and in me. I have no idea how this is going to help me, but I guess I feel better, so it must have done something.

I’m going to have to ruminate on this for a few days.

Mitchell

Dear Adrian,

Myra came over again today and dragged me off to go “antiquing.” I only have a loose understanding of what this entails but it seemed like we spent most of our time driving around, hunting for garage sales. Finding the yard sales was more of an art than anything we actually did while at them. Basically, I followed Myra around while she sifted through bins and tables and boxes. I don’t know what she was looking for. I don’t know if she knew either. Every once in a while I would pick something up because it looked interesting and she would slap my hand and tell me no. Guess I just have no taste.

Five hours and twelve stops later, Myra called me over to a table.

“You need this. ‘Ey, Bob or whatever your name is, how much?”

She was holding up a small Pride flag, gauging my reaction out of the corner of her eye. Without looking at her, I turned to Bob. “How much?”

Don’t take this to mean I’m gay. Or do if you want. I think it means I’m feeling more open to the idea. Let who I am be what it is and let no judgment arise from such an existence.

The flag was only five dollars.

Of course, Myra was filled with a thousand and one questions as we were driving home.

“So does this mean Adrian is your lover? What happened while he was up here? Have you

always known? Why didn't you say anything sooner? I'm sorry if I'm coming across as one of those obnoxious straight girls who treats you like a GBF accessory, that's a lie, no I'm not. I had my suspicions from the moment you walked into the coffee shop quoting Shakespeare, but it didn't seem like you were up for that conversation just yet."

What changed? I didn't feel like I had in any way. I'm still me. Still the guy you met at a summer camp a year ago, right? What can of worms have I opened for myself? Oh gods, if I come back and come out to my friends, I don't even know how many Brokeback Mountain jokes they're going to make. And probably not even regarding the novella! Yes, I'm more worried about people making jokes about me because it will be from the film adaptation not the book than I am about them calling me gay.

But in the end, I think that's okay because I'm me and that's what counts.

Endee thinks Rumi has gone missing. Not the poet, that book hasn't left my side, but the cat. I haven't seen him since I fell asleep on Sunday. He doesn't usually answer when called for, but we spent an hour outside yelling for him anyway. No luck. Endee is going to put a bowl of his cat food out on the back table. High enough off the ground and close enough to the house that we probably won't have to worry about most animals getting to it, and in a place where we can see it in case Rumi stops by for a snack.

I'm worried about the little guy. He's been a true friend when I've needed it and now he's nowhere to be found. Endee is hoping he just found "some other cat" to make friends with, a small detail I wasn't likely to neglect, but the outcome seems bleak. The entire time I've been here, he's only ever gone out during the day, and was always waiting at the door when Endee or I got home.

I feel like I'm falling apart and I don't know anymore.

Mitchell

Dear Adrian,

We're slowly forcing ourselves to come to terms with the fact that Rumi is gone. I wrote you saying he was gone on -- Tuesday? It's been three more days since then and I don't think we're going to see him again. It's sad, but Endee refuses to give up her hope.

If he isn't dead, I hope the little guy is at least somewhere safe, enjoying the company of a cool cat to keep him away.

I really appreciated getting your reply yesterday. It made me feel better about what... happened this weekend. I don't know why I'm avoiding calling it what it is. It made me feel better about you kissing me, about me kissing you. It comforts me to know you meant it, but also leaves me fuming that there wasn't more. You've created a monster, Adrian, caused a sexual awakening the likes of which I've never seen.

I'm glad that you harbor no ill feelings and respect that I'm just not sure what I want yet. I think given a different time and place I would want to be with you immediately, but right now life is chaos. I have no idea where I'm going to be in a year. You have no idea where you're going to be in a year. We're almost graduated from high school. College is on the horizon. Even if I knew what I wanted out of this, out of any potential "us", I'm not sure I know what I want from life in general.

So let's try to be friends and if life takes us that direction, let's try to be more, but let's not let one kiss determine our entire future.

I think I could love you, Adrian, but as I have no concept of what that truly means, I don't



want to hurt and disappoint you by jumping too soon. Does that make sense? We're young, let's be young. Love... love is inside us. Like Rumi said,

*If anyone asks you  
how perfect satisfaction  
of all our sexual wanting  
will look, lift your face  
and say,*

*Like this.*

*When someone mentions the gracefulness  
of the night sky, climb up on the roof  
and dance and say,*

*Like this?*

*If anyone wants to know what "spirit" is,  
or what "God's fragrance" means,  
lean your head toward him or her.  
Keep your face there close.*

*Like this.*

It's like this, Adrian.

We're like that.

We have the power and the youth and the hope to see it created the way we want it to be created. I think right now it's right to plant it like a Douglas fir seed, and let it grow somewhere where it won't be disturbed so that eventually it's huge and towering and no fire could ever burn it down.

I don't have passion to give you, though I'm sure if you were here, you could ignite it. I'm a slow burning wick and I want to make sure I know what I want from myself before I ask anything of you. So can we please let us be as we are, as we have been?

Mitchell

Dear Adrian,

The sun shines beautifully down on me as I dangle my legs into the water. One week until my parents get back from their honeymoon. I can't believe it's been over a month already. It's starting to feel like home and I'm not sure if I want to leave just yet. I have this nagging feeling that there's something more for me here still.

Still no sign of Rumi, but strangely we're all at peace with it. Endee insists that she would know if he were dead and that he isn't, and while I miss him, I've also come to terms with the fact that it's not the end of the world. Even if he has died,

*The mystery does not get clearer by repeating the question,  
nor is it bought with going to amazing places.  
Until you've kept your eyes  
and your wanting still for fifty years,  
you don't begin to cross over from confusion.*

He's here in spirit and asking for him won't find him. If he is alive, he'll make his way back when he needs/wants to.

It seems I never let you actually reply between letters because I have so much to say. You're probably busy.

You should be well into Beowulf by now, correct? All I really remember about that was all the swords everyone gave to Beowulf. Think about this while you're reading, Beowulf is the manliest kingly man who kicks all the monsters' asses. He's handsome, he's strong, he wins all the battles and brings home all the gold and yet -- he never has a wife. In the third part one of the central issues is that he has no heir. Hide yo kids, hide yo wife, except not because Beowulf doesn't seem to be interested. And all these old kings he serves give him gold and swords. SWORDS. You want to see an old man's sword? I hear a lot of times they're absolutely legendary.

Do tell me if you're reading the old English or a modernization. There's quite the difference in how you have to read it. Some terms have evolved with the language and don't necessarily make sense anymore.

Oh, and I remember that narration is important. Always remember who's talking. It's important in a couple different ways. The voice that you hear the story from can tell you a lot about the story itself. In Beowulf I remember this comes up with the Christian aspects.

I don't think I've mentioned that we left the beautiful little valley in the mountains for the weekend and are away at Lake Chelan. It's another touristy town, very much disposed to having rich people from the West side buying lakeside property to stay at over the summer.

To be honest, it's a relief to be near water. I didn't really notice until we got here, but I've felt like a lily sitting on the sill for days, waiting for the next passing watering can. Here comes the rain again, falling on my head like a memory, falling on my head like a new emotion...

Sorry, I let the Eurythmics take the reins for a second.

I didn't realize how much I've needed this change in scenery. It's like a vacation from my vacation. My forced vacation while my parents are off getting theirs? Whatever.

We left early yesterday morning when Endee woke me up by throwing an overnight bag at my head and told me to make sure to pack a swimsuit. The drive was about two hours. I had no idea where we were going or what to expect.

We ended up at some little waterfront bed and breakfast with a small swimming area and short walk to a public beach. It's peaceful, a little hotter than Leavenworth, though that may just be because I'm not as hidden away within the trees. Endee wanted us to experience something a little different from the north Cascades before I left.

It's a little crowded, with the heat of summer and the throngs of tourists, but I found some alone time early this morning. I woke up from exceptionally strange and vivid dreams.

I was dreaming that Rumi had come to talk to me. There was no moon, but the stars were ten times brighter than I've ever seen them. Rumi seemed to glow, bright white and orange but also empty and black. He sat in the windowsill staring at me, his eyes flashing a golden green. He wanted me to follow him.

I climbed out of bed even though I was naked and followed him. Outside, everything was frozen and all the people and living beings were lit up the same way Rumi was. Every living thing that moves or grows shone. People and deer and moths like walking stars frozen in a moment of time, going about their nightly business: a couple fucking by the water, a bat in mid-swoop standing out like luminescent statues.

He led me to the outskirts of town, slinking along quickly and fluidly. I was barely able to

keep up. We crossed the street and ended up following a trailhead up a hill. My feet were rubbed raw against the ground and I was bleeding, my footprints a bright, glowing red, stoplights imprinted on the ground as breadcrumbs to lead me home.

I'm luminous and glowing like all of the life around me. The trees with a pale, old light, lit up like Christmas trees from the myriad beings hidden in their branches: the spiders and birds and beetles and mice and squirrels crawling amongst the foliage. We climbed and climbed and not once did I miss a breath. I don't even know if I was breathing.

Finally, at the top of a cliff, Rumi stopped. He looked at me, stared me down as if he were saying something really important but I couldn't understand the language. He just looked at me silently with an intensity that scared me.

And then he jumped. He back flipped over the edge, spiraling into oblivion. I ran to the edge and looked for him, but there was nothing. Nothing but open sky leading down to the tops of trees. I stood there looking for him, wondering where he had gone, hoping against hope he hadn't died. As I stared, I realized the lights were getting brighter, the life below me becoming more vivid, more intense. All the beings shining their life brighter and brighter. It was blinding.

I woke up to the first rays of the sun coming in through the open window, completely disoriented but weirdly refreshed.

Then I came out here and started writing to you.

What do you think of it?

Mitchell

Dear Adrian,

This may be the last letter I write to you from Endee's. My parents are supposed to be here tomorrow. I spent almost all week with Myra. She said it was to capitalize on my remaining time in her fair, dusty city.

The first day we did all the annoying touristy things in town. She had a child's Elmo costume that she insisted on wearing. I think she frightened a few children when she bent down and told them to tickle her. We photobombed several dozens of tourist's pictures. I so wish I had my banana costume! But I left it at home. Basically we ruined everyone's mass hallucination that this town is anything but a big, capitalist fraud.

I've been itching to do that since I first got here. But I also have a long standing hatred of tourists of all kinds. Ever since that time I was four and got separated from my mom at the fairgrounds. There's something innately terrifying about fanny packs when they're at face level. Especially the extra bulgy ones that look like they're full to burst. It makes me uneasy, especially at things like music festivals or carnivals.

On Tuesday, Myra picked me up. She didn't tell me where we were going, this has come to be a theme with her surprise adventures. Apparently I'm not allowed to know anything. She drove us to the middle of nowhere, pulled over to an abandoned-looking trailhead and popped the trunk. Inside were two backpacks, two sleeping bags, two towels, some rope, a tarp, some toilet paper, a flashlight, and some food.

I looked at the pile. Looked at her. Started walking down the road. She chased me down.

"It'll be fun! I left Endee a note when you weren't looking, it'll only be one night, we'll get you back safe and sound sometime tomorrow. You know you want to."

It did sound like fun. I did kind of want to. I walked back to the car and picked up a backpack and started stuffing it.

"Attaboy! The green backpack has a lighter and some newspapers in it, though we'll have to make sure to clear a good area so we don't catch anything on fire, but I've done this at least twice every summer for the last eight years with no harm, so we should be fine."

It was a steep hike and took a good chunk of the morning. We talked and joked and she asked me about you. She wishes she'd been able to hang out when you were up here, but had some kind of family stuff going on. If she has some time before she leaves for school, she wants to come down from the mountains and visit me.

We took an hour long break for lunch and tea. I have no idea where the latter came from except that Myra had it and was willing to share. She likes her tea really strong, which always makes it kind of bitter, but since I was trying to conserve my water bottle for the second half of our hike, I made it a point not to complain. Lunch consisted of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches wrapped in aluminum foil, slightly squished so the jelly bruised the bread a dark purple.

Once we reached our final destination (though I hesitate even to call it a destination since Myra's decision making process seemed pretty damn arbitrary to me), Myra started stringing the rope between a few trees. She had me gather firewood, instructing me to pick the driest looking deadfall I could find. If they were big enough pieces we would only need a few armloads to last the night.

Slowly as I went and came, she worked her magic and formed some rope and a tarp into a fairly passable, fairly large tent. Well, I guess it was more of a lean-to, but I wasn't going to complain it would serve the purpose we wanted it to. I was in awe at her skills as it was well beyond anything I would be able to do on my own.

Together, we cleared a small patch of earth near our tent, what was perhaps a slightly excessive fire margin, and lined our temporary fire pit with rocks. There was nothing within a five foot radius of our pit, including our tent. Satisfied that we'd set up camp, Myra pulled out a blunt. She offered me first hit.

We spent the afternoon wonderfully high, throwing rocks at trees and singing all the bawdy, dirty songs we knew. She even gave me a knife and told me to sharpen a few sticks for s'mores. I almost sliced my hand open sharpening the first stick. Then Myra taught me about proper knife technique and told me how I should always cut away from my body.

Myra told me to light up another blunt while she got the fire going for dinner. I did as told and it made watching her work magical. It was like she was playing with the flames, teasing them and coaxing them the way a cosmetologist works someone's hair. Slowly, the fire responded and it grew, shining like the light of the stars in my dream this weekend. It was oranges and yellows and reds. It smelled like *snap crackle pop* and sounded like warmth.

I wanted to bury myself next to it, wear its smoke like a mantle to hide in when the world becomes too much to bear. It was a gift from the gods, the ember in the fennel stalk, the drop of salmon fat on the thumb of a boy. That fire contained the knowledge of the world and we were creating it. We had the knowledge, had gained from Adam and Eve tasting the fruit and burned the Ash of the world tree Yggdrasil.

In that moment of fire creation, we were the beginning and the end. We were the finitude of existence in a spark.

*I had no time to hate, because  
The grave would hinder me,  
And life was not so ample I  
Could finish enmity.*

*Nor had I time to love, but since  
Some industry must be,  
The little toil of love, I thought,  
Was large enough for me.*

I think this Emily Dickinson poem captures it quite nicely.

In true spur of the moment camping style, we dined on a can of black beans and “toasted” bread because Myra doesn’t believe in baked beans but says that no camping experience is complete without a meal consisting mostly of beans. I wasn’t about to argue, though I was a little disappointed in the toast. It was burnt on one side and not even touched on the other, but if Myra was going to choke it down, there was no way I wouldn’t eat mine as well. We both fed our crusts to the fire as offerings to the forest gods to allow us to come to no harm.

Then Myra took me to where she wanted to set up our bathroom. I can’t say I was good for anything or that I even remembered where it was until we were on our way back. But I remember it was quite a ways off from our campsite. I regret not asking why, because now I’m curious.

Myra pulled out a deck of cards and a surprise bar of chocolate for us to make s’mores with. She beat me in seven consecutive games of rummy and two out of three games of war. I pulled out the book of Rumi that I’d been carrying around and we took turns reading them out loud to each other by the firelight.

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.  
Don’t go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you really want.  
Don’t go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth across the doorsill  
where two worlds touch.  
The door is round and open.  
Don’t go back to sleep.*

Myra told me about how when she first heard this one, it was from her older brother after he’d gone on a vision quest. He was nineteen, summer after his freshman year of college, she was eight or nine.

He came back and he was changed. Not in a bad way, also not in a good way either, but he had this poem given to him by his teacher, and they told him that as he came to unlock its meaning, he would be able to share it. She’s pretty sure he never figured it out, but it stuck with her. She said it always seemed to nag at the back of her mind, especially when she would wake up from a dream.

“I can’t stop, Mitchell. I can’t go back to sleep, once I’ve opened my eyes and started to see the reality behind everything I once thought, I have to keep going. Rumi would probably call it finding the god in everything, but to me it’s more like ending the simulation. It’s breaking through the fourth wall. You can’t go back to sleep once you’ve seen what the world has to offer. You just can’t or it’s so tragic and wrong.”

Her impassioned plea made me wish I knew what she was talking about. It sounded so disillusioned and grandiose. I wanted to reach out and pluck it out of the air so I could carry it with me as inspiration, and that's when I realized where her sadness comes from. Myra's looking for this great beyond and she can't ever find it, and she can never be happy until she does, so she'll never be truly happy, and her sadness is just a resignation of this realization.

We both stripped to our underwear and went to sleep next to each other in our sleeping bags. I stayed awake until I heard Myra's breathing change then crawled out of my sleeping bag and stoked up the fire a little bit. I sat there, staring into the flames, contemplating my life, you, Myra, Rumi.

I looked up and Rumi was standing in front of me, staring at me the same way he had in my dream, trying to communicate with me, trying to get me to follow him. I stood up and took a few steps in his direction, but and he turned around and walked out of the circle of firelight.

Looking back at where Myra slept in our makeshift tent, I started following after him. He was moving faster this time, trotting just far enough ahead that I almost had to keep up a light jog to follow him. It was around this point that I started to wonder how I was able to see where I was going and keep sight of Rumi in the darkness. I stopped for a fraction of a second to look around and realized I was surrounded by lights. I was naked and I could see myself as if I were lit from the inside by the light of the moon.

I was dreaming again. Sure enough, when I turned back to where I thought the campsite was, I could see clearly our tent and my body slumped over next to the fire.

I turned back around to see Rumi walking back to me with that same look in his eye. He twitched his tail and turned around. The message came across loud and clear, I was supposed to follow him.

We ran this time. There was a kind of urgency to where Rumi was taking me. I had to obey.

We ended up at a cliff. It was the same cliff from my other dream. Rumi stopped. He stared me in the eyes as if daring me to get it. And he jumped over the edge. It was a quick flip and he was gone, a regular Cheshire cat routine. I want to say I didn't run this time, that I didn't try to catch him by the paw before he slipped over the edge. I want to say that, but I can't.

Again I found myself standing at the edge, looking down where Rumi had disappeared. There was nothing there but emptiness. And then everything was getting brighter. And the lights were growing. And I woke up.

I was lying next to the now dead fire. I was freezing cold. The sun was just barely climbing over the horizon. It had to be like 5am at least. I crawled back into my sleeping bag and fell asleep for a few more hours. By the time I woke up, it was starting to get warm and Myra had already reawakened the fire.

She was in the middle of putting together breakfast. I think the green backpack had much more than a lighter and some newspapers because she was making bacon and eggs in a small cast iron skillet. If that's the case, she is a beast because she carried all of that halfway up a mountain without me even knowing.

We ate in silence and took turns going to the bathroom. Myra asked if I wanted to head out now or climb further and head back tomorrow. Realizing I wouldn't have too many more opportunities to do this, I agreed to go further.

We packed up fairly quickly. Everything went back in where it belonged, ready for travel. We

took the most time making absolutely sure the fire was put out before leaving. Myra even insisted that I pee on it for good measure after we hefted our bags to our shoulders.

We climbed and scrambled uphill, doing work to build our potential gravitational energy. We weren't just climbing the mountain, we were climbing beyond the reach of our thoughts, climbing beyond our past. We were climbing so we could jump into the future.

And it was beautiful, Adrian, you've seen it for yourself. This land is so, so wonderful. I know, when I started writing you at the beginning of this summer, it probably didn't sound like it. Well "I am large, I contain multitudes." Walt Whitman from Song of Myself. I reserve the right to change my mind. It's grown on me being out here every day.

Myra told me about how at one time not even a full hundred years ago a lot of this land was clear cut by the logging industry. Can you imagine it? All these hills flat and bare. Then a big chunk of it became part of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest land. There's still a lot of logging, but because it's semi-protected land or whatever, it's rarely clear-cuts and they make sure to plant new trees where they did the cutting. And a hundred years. Just a hundred or so years and already it's grown back so much.

I'll need to come back and visit Endee more after this, if nothing else than because I'll miss being surrounded by trees.

I told Myra about you. Actually, I talked about you a lot while the two of us were walking. I tried not to say anything I thought you would mind her hearing. So I didn't mention how we kissed, even though we're cool with that. She genuinely seemed interested in hearing about you more. If it's okay with you, I might give her your address so maybe you could write to her? If she's leaving for college soon, it might be nice to have a new friend to talk to even if she hasn't met you. I promise I've only told good things, not how you smell after a few days not showering, or how you think it's funny to sneak up on people and poke them in the ribs. Seriously, one of these days that's going to earn you a good smack upside the head.

We finally stopped at what would be our second campsite. It was the same process as before, me gathering firewood, Myra pitching our tent, then we cleared a space for the fire together. Myra seemed to know where we were so after we had the space settled, she told me to follow her and started walking off between bushes. I ran after her and we walked a good ways until we came to a small lake (more a big pond, really). She stopped at the edge and turned to me. She had carried the towels with her.

"Alright, Mitchy-boy time for us to get intimate."

I blinked as she took a step toward me and slowly placed her hand on my chest.

"Go on the other side of that tree and clean up, you stink!"

With a shove, she turned me around and pushed me toward a tree that grew right at the water's edge.

"Hey!"

I turned back around.

"You forgot your towel."

She laughed as I struggled to get the towel off my face.

I stripped and gingerly stepped out into the water. It was surprisingly cold and got deep fairly quickly. I heard some splashing and yelled around the tree.

"How's it on that side of the tree?"

"Fucking cold."

I took the plunge and dove the rest of the way, submerging my head and coming up gasping. I turned around and was surprised not to see Myra anywhere. After a second, she came up from below the surface right next to me, spraying me in the face. The splashing war that ensued could be considered immature to put it mildly. We didn't really wash so much as just kind of rinsed off a bit of the accrued sweat and smoke, then headed back to our separate sides of the tree. I almost didn't want to put my clothes back on, but I also didn't want to walk back to the campsite naked. I compromised by putting my pants on and throwing my shirt and towel around my neck.

That night, Myra and I stayed up for a while talking, staring at the stars. I pointed out some of the constellations I learned from you, including Sagittarius. She in turn recited some poetry she had memorized.

I asked she always seems so sad. She didn't answer.

No dreams that night. Though I swear I heard Rumi meow while I was still half asleep.

The hike back down was fairly uneventful and seemed to pass far faster than the trip up.

I don't even know what time it was when Myra dropped me off at Endee's, probably early afternoon, but I hopped in the shower and started masturbating. I think I came twice in the shower itself and then once more after I had sprawled out on the bed before passing out. I woke several hours later to Myra knocking on the door. Thankfully I was under the covers.

She'd come back to see how I was and (of course) to mooch of Endee's generous cooking skills. She had a plate of cookies with a note from Endee telling us she hoped we had fun on our impromptu camping adventure. I really want to know what she does in her spare time when I'm not around. I wouldn't put it past her to be some kind of healing witch or something and just makes all this awesome food when company is over to hide her magical abilities. Maybe I'll ask my parents about family history during the long drive home.

Myra, Endee and I watched some fluffy kids' movie after dinner. It was cute. I liked it. It was a peaceful night. Myra sat on the chair knitting while Endee and I shared a bowl of popcorn on the couch.

That night I had another dream with Rumi. The way these keep coming to me, I'm starting to think that he's my spirit animal or something and that eight of his nine lives are in my dream consciousness.

This one followed pretty much the same path of the others. He beckoned me to follow him. Like an obedient puppy I did. I was naked and everything was made of light. We climbed somewhere high up and Rumi jumped off the edge not to be seen again. I would go into details, but I don't know if I have any more. It's weird and recurring and I'm starting to feel somewhat unsettled by it. I don't know what he wants from me, or why he's haunting me, but it needs to stop.

And then finally, Myra came over yesterday as well. We mostly hung around the house and read books. She read me a bunch of random poetry she pulled down from the shelves and I read her some Walt Whitman.

We made dinner for Endee as thanks for her working so hard to provide for us. Our lasagna was somewhat misshapen, but it was filled to overflowing with good stuff and love. The love is supposed to be the important part, right? That's how you know we tried.

It was a disaster, but it was edible. I take all of the blame for myself. Myra tried she really did, but I'm a train wreck in the kitchen, or maybe a bull in a china shop would be the more apt



metaphor. I minced when I should have chopped, I broiled when I should have baked. If it weren't for Myra watching my every move, we would have been eating takeout.

Predictably, Endee loved it. And happened to come home with a cake. Magic, I tell you, the woman is magic. Or knows magic or however the hell that's supposed to work. Do I look like a magic user? No, because I don't come home to the teenagers making a mess in my kitchen bearing cake. That's Endee's territory.

We celebrated me going home tomorrow and my parents getting back safely and overall new friendships.

Sorry you have to read this novel of a letter; it'll probably require two stamps in postage to send, but that's okay. Hope all is well.

Mitchell

## Part 2: Letters from Myra

Dear Mitchell,

It's been a few weeks, but you, sir, are a still nitwit. In the short time I've known you, I find that I love you for it, but it is true nonetheless, you are nitwit. You're ignorant beyond belief about some of the most important things and you smell (yeah, I went there, you smell).

I miss you a ton, Mitchy-boy my bitchy-boy. I also can't believe you don't see what's so obvious to everyone else. Though I'm not going to ruin the surprise by telling you what you're not seeing.

I leave for college tomorrow. It's kind of a big scary thing now that I'm actually allowing myself to stop and think about it instead of distracting myself with an adorable doofus staying with his aunt for a month. I leave my tiny little podunk town in the mountains and go to the... moderate sized town in the lowlands to get myself edumacated.

Endee stopped by yesterday to give me the book of Rumi you were carrying around while we were camping. It's like she's a pill pusher except for dead poets. Now that could be an interesting business. Little pills in the shape of dead poets. Each box, no, each bottle can come printed with short poems from all of the featured writers. So there would be no Walt Whitman because that man wouldn't know "short" if it hit him in the face with a shovel, threw him in its trunk, drove him to the ocean and sat next to him chanting, "shooooooooort, shooooooooort" for five hours.

It's a good book and I might be able to use it as a conversation starter with my new roommate. I don't really know anything about her except her name is Kathleen and her email is [RazrKat@razrkat.com](mailto:RazrKat@razrkat.com). She has her own web domain. Who the fuck has their own web domain?

I'll let you know what my address is after I move in and am somewhat settled. For now content yourself with this teaser of a letter.

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

I write to you now from my newly organized dorm room. It's fairly crowded and my roommate likes bubblegum pink, which while I'm not opposed to that normally, at these levels it takes on a level of toxicity, like everything was dipped in nuclear waste. It's not natural to live like a Barbie. EVEN HER SHEETS ARE PINK. I don't know if I'll be able to live with this.

No. I'll survive. I'll thrive in spite of this. I won't slowly degenerate into madness only to have her return to our room after class one day to find me curled into the fetal position, foaming at the mouth, bits of pink stuff torn to shreds all around me.

That won't happen. I promise you... as long as it stays on her side of the room. Beyond that I will make no guarantees.

They made us go to some kind of Freshmen orientation thing. I would lie and say I was paying attention but the fact that I even bring it up should tell you it was boring as hell.

Some bigwig from the school made some speech. Some upperclassmen who works in student government or something gave a speech. Some slightly-less bigwig from the school made a speech. And then everybody clapped. In high school I liked the pep assemblies because at least we were encouraged to dress up. This is college though, so that may not be as highly differentiated from the everyday as it was in high school.

Back in the dorm, our RA stopped by to introduce himself and ask when we wanted to schedule our roommate agreement. Since Kathleen was out, I randomly signed us up for a day, I

think it was Wednesday afternoon though it could have been Thursday morning. I guess we'll find out when Drew comes knocking.

We have three days still until the quarter starts. I suppose I should try getting to know people. As my mom always says, it won't kill me, and if it does, I'll be dead so it will be too late to worry about it. She leads a questionable life philosophy to say the least, though I doubt I'm much better as a byproduct of it.

Until I hear from you or until I leave this place screaming never to look back,  
Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

I think Mitchy-boy my bitchy-boy is a perfectly functional nickname for you, you asshat. Your name is Mitchell. You yourself have said you are a boy. You're my bitch. Yes, that's a problematic term and if any man tries to call you or me that, they'll see how hard this bitch bites. I don't mean it like you are MY dog and I own you. Though if you were my dog, you would have a very long, almost non-existent leash and I would let you piss and shit and hump wherever and whenever you wanted. Including a certain someone. Not that I'm naming names. Or even thinking them.

I keep forgetting that you still have like a month before school starts, you lucky dick. Enjoy your summer vacation, some of us have to start school tomorrow.

Kathleen and I finally sat down and had a heart to heart. She's actually not that bad despite her pink fetish. Found out amid all of the pink and fluff and curls, she's pretty badass. Was known as the Barbiezonian on her roller derby team, a flailing whirlwind of pink death. So I guess when I say "not that bad" I mean pretty damn cool. Ew, I guess this means all those inspirational quotes were right and you can't judge a book by its cover. Can't I just let you do that for me? You like to read.

We agreed that as much pink as possible would stay in her part of the room, and we would alternate with the communal wall space to give it a striped look except for a largish square in the center for her projector.

Will you look at that? I managed to compromise without Drew's help. Turns out our meeting with him is on Wednesday after all. And that time works with Kat. Yay my impulsiveness wins at something!

Yesterday I went to the big info fair hoopla in the main quad. There were so many people it was amazing! I really only went to people-watch and hit on the most awkward looking people I can find. It's a well-known fact that geeks have the best comebacks and despite the perception that they're the virginal loners who don't shower, they tend to know the most about sex. They know about it the same way that they end up knowing the most about everything else: they research it, they think about it, and damn does it show. Don't be friends with people who make fun of geeks. They don't deserve to know what they're missing until they grow up.

I stopped at most of the booths and tables and even spun a prize wheel to win a vibrating bullet thing. So now I'm sitting at my desk with a bagful of handbills and flyers and candy. I think I saw the guy across the hall had a dart board, maybe I'll ask him if I can borrow it to decide what I should try to get involved with this week.

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

No you cannot piss/shit on/hump my leg! I would slap you if you tried, but I'm sure you'd just ignore it. And then you really would be incorrigible. Part of the rules of nicknames are that you don't get to choose them. They're taken from some innocuous thing you say or do and are applied to you for the rest of your life.

I didn't make the rules, but by hell, I'm going to enforce 'em. Except not because fuck rules that's why. I don't make them and someone else can make sure they're followed. As long as no one is getting hurt it's not my business. And I'm still going to call you Mitchy-boy my bitchy-boy.

It's funny to hear a guy with a tattooed tear on the bus talk about his laundry problems. I was on the bus this morning and there was this bro-man-dude with a tattoo of a tear coming from his eye complaining about laundry to the girl next to him. Apparently it's expensive and he didn't separate by colors and there were a few white things mixed in with a few red things and now all his punk-ass white t-shirts are pink. If anything I think that would lend more credence to the idea that real men wear pink, but he didn't seem so easily convinced. And that tear. That goddamn tear. I couldn't take him seriously. The urge to mock him was great, but I did not succumb to temptation. Public transportation is strange thing, it makes me want to be a psych major.

It sounds like your commentary really did help Adrian with his summer class. Congratulations, you were useful for someone. Hopefully this isn't your only purpose in life, but you never know. Adrian could be the next POTUS (okay, maybe fourth from now since minimum age for candidacy is 35 and that means there are four more presidential elections before he'll even be eligible), but still that could be in his future all because you helped him pass this summer class. You've made a difference in this world somewhere down the line, just you wait and see!

Classes started on Wednesday. It sucked. Kinda. I didn't have to get up for class until 10am. High school really is fucking bullshit compared to college if they don't make you wake up at the asscrack of dawn every day to get to campus by seven. Oh my god, it got better. Life got better after I got out of high school. DO YOU HEAR ME MITCHELL BECAUSE I AM SCREAMING AT THIS PIECE OF PAPER? LIFE GOT BETTER!

Ow, Kat threw a pencil at my head for screaming. Girl has wonderful aim and thankfully hit me with the ERASER END!

It's raining pillows and stuffed animals and PINK THINGS at me now. I'll tell you about classes and school in my next letter.

Myra

Dear Mitchell,

Well I just finished my first full week of classes and it sucks.

Don't get me wrong, the whole college thing is a ton better than high school, I'm not changing my position on that, but it's also harder. We got our syllabi on the first day last week and got homework on the first day. I didn't have any of the books yet because I hadn't gone to the bookstore. They're making me take some bullshit math class even though I'm pretty sure I tested out of having to go through that. It makes me want to drop out, climb a mountain and then... die of hypothermia because I don't know how to survive on my own in the wilderness in winter. Scratch that, I'm staying here and doing this whole college thing.

Turns out my "math" class is intro to philosophy: logic. So many if-then statements. So many proofs. So many premises and conclusions. I want to claw my eyes out every time I go to class. It

doesn't help that our professor is an idiot. He clearly hates that he has to be here teaching us this shit instead of off teaching the cool subjects to the upperclassmen. Well that's the pecking order, bucko, you've got to earn your way up to being that cool. It hurts because it's true.

Similarly, my English class is somewhat mundane. We're doing a lot of reading and stupidly simple writing tasks. Basically the graduate student teaching our class has to make people unlearn the super simplified five paragraph essay format that has been drilled into our heads for standardized testing purposes since we were in elementary school. But I must suffer through this in order to get ahead. I must pay my penance like everyone else before I can advance to the true upper echelons of higher education, the fuckers.

And I love my creative writing class. It's just introductory level stuff, but I walk into it feeling like they get me. They really get me.

After putting all the flyers up on guy across the hall (henceforth known as William)'s dart board, it was decided that I would be trying swing dancing, drum circle and the bad movies film group this year. And apparently so is William. I guess that means I now have an obligation to go. Hopefully this doesn't become a regular occurrence.

Kat and I have started a weekly game of scrabble to challenge our wits. We've had two games so far and Kat has won both, but I think I'm starting to understand this game. It's not so much about the words we use as it is geometry. You have to see how the words fit together with the special squares. The fact that you also have to be making words is just a constraint.

Hopefully next week I'll win, but for now, I plot.

Kat wants me to go to this party with her tonight. It's mostly friends of hers from high school that are a year above us. She says it'll be a good way to network and socialize beyond just our dorm. She's been trying to sell me on the idea all week and somehow hasn't realized quite yet that I am the king of impulsive decision making and social gatherings. Ah well, she has time.

So that's life for me right now. Two classes that I kind of hate and one that I love. If I keep these ratios right, I think my college career will be a success.

How are you? When do you start school? You'll have to tell me all about how it feels to be one of the bright and shining future leaders setting an example for all the freshmen. You're gonna be big man on campus, and have all the boys and girls throwing themselves at your feet. It's almost guaranteed that you'll have at least one impressionable freshman crushing on you before the end of the first week of school.

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

I remember in my biology class we did this sweet potato experiment to show how the process of osmosis works. We cut a sweet potato into little chunks to represent cells and submerged them in two different solutions. A plain water solution and a sugar water solution. After letting them sit in the lab for a few days, we came back and checked on them to measure the size of the pieces of potato to see how they changed. If I remember correctly, the ones in the water were bigger and the ones in the sugar water were smaller.

You might be asking yourself why I'm telling you about relatively small "experiment" I did in high school. Easy: I think it's how you have to interact with the world. You have to create an abundance of good stuff in the world (sugar) for good things (water) to come to you. Like is

attracted to like. The more good you make for yourself and for others, the more comes back to you. Basic principles of biology and physics often work on larger scales as well. I define a semi-permeable membrane as the furthest reaches of my social sphere or if you prefer, the people I know. They filter what comes to me so if I'm good to them, they'll make sure good things come to me.

Case in point: William. He's quite a lovely young man: attractive enough, lets me use his dartboard to make arbitrary life decisions, found out he's a solid lead, but also a terrible drummer. He has rhythm in his feet, but that doesn't hold true for his other extremities. It also turns out he's somewhat infatuated with me.

Kat had to explain it to me after we all went out to dinner last night. We got back to the room, after walking back with William and his roommate and she made a point to close the door behind us. She cut me off before I could say anything.

"I realize that you were just about to invite them to hang out with us, but you need to stop for a moment and reevaluate."

Have I told you that the longer we live together, the more I like living with Kat? In three short weeks she's gotten to know me better than half the people I knew back home.

"William likes you."

To say I was shocked would be somewhat of an understatement.

"Oh don't be so surprised, Myra. You're the perfect kind of manic-pixie dream girl for him to fall in love with. And I'm telling you right now that you need to make a decision, and not one of your impulsive, by the seat of your pants, ones either. Think about it and figure out what you want. Now I'm going to open the door and go ask William and Bernard if they want to come over and watch a movie, 'kay?'"

It's like she lets me forget that she's also this kick-ass warrior woman so she can throw me into a headlock of truth when I'm not expecting it and then just flounces away as perky as if nothing had happened.

As we were watching a movie with the boys, I couldn't help but be hyper-aware of how William acted around me. Was he looking at me? Was he sitting next to me because he wanted to be next to me specifically or because we always sat boy-girl-boy-girl when we watched movies and Bernard and I both like sitting on the end? It's amazing how something as little as a simple infatuation can lead you to question yourself and your relationship to the person who may or may not be interested in you so thoroughly. Why does he like me?

You know me. I'm brash and crude and prone to throwing myself into things headlong with no warning for anyone. What is there to like?

But enough about me and my personal life. I got a letter from you.

You started school last week, early September, sounds about right. So, how are you feeling about senior year? Best (and hardest) year so far? Hold nothing back when talking to me, I've been there and I'm not so old that it was forever ago.

I can't believe you're in mostly AP classes you smartass. Which means you'll probably start at whatever university you get into with the same number of credits as me, ya dick. Quit being such an overachiever. How's Adrian doing with school? I know you don't go to the same school as him, but I assume you two are still writing letters back and forth and if he was going to summer school I think I'm right in thinking his course load isn't as rigorous as yours.

I want you and Adrian to come visit me before Thanksgiving break. I can give you a grand tour of the college life. It's not as party-hardy as they depict in the movies, but it's also not as studious as our parents would have us believe either. Parents, right, I've been meaning to ask you how yours have been since they got back from their second honeymoon. God, I can't believe they abandoned you to go on a second honeymoon. I mean, I'm glad they did, because leaving you up in the mountains means I got to meet you, but c'mon, it's like the marriage equivalent of a mid-life crisis. Recapturing youth and rekindling old fires. Just don't think about what those fires mean or you'll want to gouge your eyes out. Sorry, now I can't stop imagining your parents doing it. Bwuahaha! I'm a horrible person, I'm sorry. No, I'm not.

I'm glad that you're still reading Rumi. The copy Endee gave me has been sitting on the bookshelf built into my desk, gathering dust, since I moved in. I feel bad since she seemed really intent on giving me the book, but I'm finding that with all my new class and social responsibilities, the Old Friend has to sit quietly in the back seat with a towel over his head so he can't say anything because I'm too busy paying attention to everyone and everything else.

Also, physics? What are you, some kind of rocket scientist? I wouldn't put it past you, but seriously? You need to get out of that whole school thing. Find a dealer and smoke some weed and go do stupid kid stuff while you can still run around and do that shit. You aren't eighteen yet, take advantage of that.

I've given up on weed for the time being. Not because I particularly want to, but being in a new city with a new social group and not bringing any from home, I'm kind of without sources and I have no idea how any of my friends up here feel about it. Maybe it'll be good for me.

You're still having dreams about Rumi? Damn that cat made an impression on you. Maybe when he disappeared he really just crawled inside your mind and is haunting you. We should take you to the hospital and do a CAT scan! Oh I do crack myself up.

In general, I'm glad all is well for you, Mitchell.

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

Are y'all part duck? Because this whole rain thing is seriously draining my energy. It started raining the day after I mailed my last letter to you and it hasn't stopped since. What the holy Jesus-coitus is going on? I'm drowning just walking across campus. How do you people live? It's so constant, it's pervasive, even the air feels wet. This is crazy, and believe me, I know crazy. I am not okay with this. Kat says I just need to get a better rain jacket, but I have serious doubts about her understanding of the world. I need a wetsuit to go out in this rain. You crazy fuckers live in some crazy fucking water world shit sometimes and I will never understand it. The first day I was cool with it, you know? It was nice to splash in the puddles and come inside to the warm after being out in the wet, and then it didn't stop. It just kept raining and it's been raining like this all week. If it's going to try to be winter, then there needs to be snow. Not rain, snow. Western Washington needs to get a handle on the concept of proper seasons.

Ranting aside, I met someone I really think you should meet. When are you and Adrian coming up to see me? I don't want to ruin the surprise so I won't say anything further, but you two need to come up here and very soon.

How come you didn't tell me about Adrian and you kissing earlier? I mean, it was all but



confirmed for me with the pride flag, but this! This is a development. A few months late, but a development nonetheless. You've been holding back on me! Not that we really knew each other that well back when this happened, but you know I would have loved to know about this.

Clearly you two aren't quite a thing because otherwise you wouldn't come to me with your puppy-dog eyes. Or maybe I should say kitty-eyes given your dreams. Maybe Rumi committing ritual suicide every week or two is a sign you should be reexamining your life. Have you looked up the different things you see in a dream dictionary? Cats, nakedness, jumping off cliffs, glowing, am I missing anything? I would take the time to do that for you, but I have a date with William.

Oh, have I mentioned yet that I took Kat's advice and I'm going to let William be all romantic and stuff? I doubt it will last very long what with school on top of everything we're involved in, but might as well try to have a little fun, right? Plus then I have reason to stay inside and out of this rain.

He asked me out on a date for tonight. He came over as Kat and I were getting ready for bed. So after dinner and our usual Thursday primetime zonkfest, which was weird in and of itself. Kat had staked out the main bathroom with some combination of moisturizers and creams that I'm not even remotely prepared to understand without months of training and research, so I was brushing my teeth in our room when William knocked on the door.

"Oh, uh, am I interrupting? Maybe I should come back is this a bad?"

He just kind of stood there half-smiling, avoiding direct eye contact, meanwhile Kat could be heard from the bathroom yelling out.

"Who's at the door? Tell them we don't want any, unless they're Mormons, in which case tell them I'm a lesbian and you're pagan, but we'd love to have them over for a non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated beverage and/or milk and cookies and talk about their bible."

The boy blushed at that one. Chances are Kat knew exactly who was at the door and had organized this whole thing. I wouldn't put it past her. I kind of glared at him in a way that was supposed to ask what he wanted, but I'm not sure how successful I was.

"So, uh, Myra, d'you. Do you want to maybe get dinner with me downtown somewhereonSaturday?"

There's something about that stuttering hesitancy that made me want to say yes. He literally is a boy next door, though how much he fits the boy-next-door trope is yet to be seen, but we're also not taking the traditional BND story arch with the unrequited love/lust for years before you even get noticed. So far our experience in that direction is times fifty in both speed and direction.

I said yes. Or I tried to, but I had toothpaste in my mouth still so I dribbled him a yes all the way down my chin and splattered across my bed shirt.

"Heh, cool, I'll talk to you at brunch then and we can figure out what time."

I watched him walk all three feet back across the hall before closing the door. I swear to god he turned back to glance at me before he walked into his room. I didn't sign on for romance when I applied to go to college, just maybe an opportunity to acquire some of the skills necessary to find gainful employment in one of the jobs that I could see myself doing with minimal effort. Romance? A love interest? Don't you have to be a romantic for that? But it should be fine. William's a nice guy, he treats me right, he gets along with my roommate. I see it as pretty damn win-win right now. Tonight we will test the waters and hopefully one of us doesn't tip the boat and cause us both to drown in the pathetically shallow pool we're floating around in.

Take care and please write me you're coming up soon.

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

I'm very glad you don't consider yourself a duck, though that video you posted of yourself quacking around didn't do much to assuage my fears. What is it they say? Something about if it quacks like a duck...

So you think you can make it up next weekend? Cool! It's pretty close to Halloween, so make sure to bring costume just in case, have you heard from Adrian about whether or not he can come? I still have your number, so actually why don't I just text you about it since this whole letter writing thing is pretty slow. Ugh, I can't wait to see you!

Since you asked so nicely, my date with William went swimmingly. We went downtown to this Thai place. Now, I've never had Thai food so I don't know how this place was in comparison to others, but it was pretty good. He recommended I get the phad Thai with one or two stars since it's a pretty basic dish that's popular with most Americans. I of course got it with five stars. I'm not afraid of no spice, and I even added some extra after they gave it to me. You should have seen the awe on William's face as I piled on the chili flakes. Pretty sure he thought I was some kind of capsaicin goddess or something.

Over dinner he told me how he was really embarrassed by Kat's comments when he was trying to ask me out because he was raised Mormon. His family isn't super strict about it, which is why he's here as opposed to on a mission trip or at like BYU or some tiny Christian private school. I made a mental note that I was going to have to have a few words with that woman when I got back.

He really wanted to pay after the meal. I told him we would be going dutch, but he absolutely refused against any and all insistence on my part, so we compromised and agreed that I would pay for dessert elsewhere.

Little did he know I know where the most expensive dessert place in town is and we went there. Any reasonable-sized treat would almost guarantee that we both would end up paying about the same amount between dinner and dessert. It might be a little petty, and just goes to show I'm more stubborn than an arithmetic problem, but it made my point loud and clear. While we were taking the bus back our dorm, William apologized. I told him that so long as it doesn't happen again, we're cool, otherwise he should watch his back.

We didn't kiss goodbye or anything gross like that, though I let him walk me back to my room. Boys have cooties. You can't go fucking around with them without making sure they get a cootie shot, Mitchell. No smoochy-smoo without the circle-dot seal of approval.

And it didn't make things weird between us. We were still able to hang out with most of the people on our floor and be social and go to dinner in at the dining hall together. Which is a good thing. There's a bit of heightened tension and now seating seems to have arranged itself that we almost exclusively end up sitting next to each other, but I suppose that's the way these dynamics work.

I imagine William is the type that will want to have "The Talk" before we start telling anyone we're dating. Probably sometime after the third official date. I suppose you have to put up with some sort of formalities in this game of life. Why worry about titles or about what we call ourselves? He'll learn just like you did, that Myra is a force to be reckoned with.

After I got back from our date, Kat immediately cornered me to get the lowdown. What's

scariest is that I had no idea what I was getting myself in for. She's so nonchalant about it, just kind of waltzing in silently and before I know it I'm giving her every little detail.

She seemed surprised by the Mormon thing. Then she asked me if I was a pagan. When I said no she just kind of laughed. It was weird so I shrugged it off.

Kat is really excited to meet you and hopefully Adrian. She wants to prepare a little nest underneath her bed with a bunch of the extra pillows she has laying around. I'm pretty sure that we'll be good between the shag rug thing we have and the love seat in the corner. It might not be super comfortable, but we can fit y'all. Or maybe the boys would be willing to part with some floor space as well. I'll have to ask before you come up.

And then the real shocker came this morning when Kat played the word "vagina" during our weekly game of scrabble. It was a solid word that earned her fifty-six points and put her ahead by forty. She turned to me and said, "It's such an ugly word, vagina. It's based on the Latin word for sheath, kind of suggesting it's only right if a penis goes with it. What use is a sheath with no sword, right?"

She kind of looked at me, judging my reaction. And then things clicked into place and I knew what she was really trying to say to me.

"You know, if you don't like dick, I'm not going to hold it against you. We're still roommates and friends and I have your back even though you could probably take anyone out before I even knew something was wrong."

It made me feel good when she smiled at that. Score two for Myra. Not that I'm keeping score or anything, that would be a gross objectification of my friends, treating them like some kind of accessory to match with my outfit, and that's wrong. But score two for Myra. I'm like a queer magnet! Where's my rainbow pin, or do you only get those as part of your gay membership when you come out and they send you your gay card?

Then we changed the subject to books and that was that.

My classes are about as boring as yours sound, so I won't go into them. It seems like intellectually everyone I have classes with are idiots, and the people who aren't idiots are all the people I meet elsewhere and never have classes with.

There's this one couple, or at least I think they're a couple, I've met swing dancing. They've been doing since at least last year. Anyway, they're a lot better than William and I but have kind of started dancing near us during a lot of the open dances and kind of give us tips and pointers when we have questions. They're really great and know their stuff. Invited us to hang out one day after dancing. They live together in a cute one bedroom apartment with a nice view of downtown. It's all very charming and sweet and blah blah blah. The small talk turned into watching a movie turned into tea and more small talk. I'm not sure what I was expecting from them, but the whole experience was just so mundane and normal. Like where's the invitation to a foursome or at least a round of Never have I ever or drinking or something. I'm surrounded by squares and I need some distinct stars to rouse me from this college funk before I become one of them.

This is why I need you here, Mitchell.

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

I'm so sorry. I had no idea, and now Kat is pissed and fuck. Just fuck fuck fuck. Tell Adrian I'm

sorry as well. I had no idea, I mean, fuck.

I've managed to calm Kat down enough so she's not going to kill William, though I wouldn't put it past her to try anyway. I don't fully blame her.

Needless to say, any potential dating between he and I is on hold indefinitely. Like cool, he knows Adrian from high school, but to call him faggot while out to dinner with all our friends made me want to slap him. Or maybe I did. The first twenty minutes or so after it happened is still kind of a blur to me.

What I'm trying to say is that I did not expect my pseudo-almost-boyfriend to be a homophobic dickhead toward Adrian. It was extra weird because he was fine with you, but I guess the whole high school thing makes a difference. I don't know. I just. Fuck.

I'm going to do some damage control on my end.

Otherwise, it was absolutely wonderful having you here in my humble shared abode.

Write you more soon.

M

Dear Mitchell,

It's been a few days, life in E403 has started to calm down quite a bit which is really only saying that Kat has stopped ranting about how she's going to go across the hall and bust down a door.. I just got your letter, so I'll respond to that in a sec once I've read it.

Okay. Read it.

I'm glad that while he was kind of freaked out there for a bit, Adrian was ultimately okay -- maybe okay isn't the right word though, it's never okay. I'm glad that Adrian will suffer no future anxiety because of this fiasco. He really is far too nice.

High school can bring out the worst in people with all those hormones and crowded classrooms, it's enough to drive anyone insane. Not that I'm trying to excuse William's behavior, but I think he lapsed back into old patterns and he wanted me to say he's sorry. Take that for what you will.

So how are you liking senior year now, my friend? Everything you thought it would be and more?

In an effort to calm things down, Kat and I started going to the Stich'N'Bitch group on campus. Learning to knit is difficult. I keep dropping stiches like they're hot potatoes and every time I take out my knitting to get to work, the ball of yarn rolls halfway across the room and then I have to deal with potential knots for the next hour. Granted it could be a lot worse, some of the people are using multiple balls of yarn to do stripes or something. I don't understand how they keep track of it all. Despite my lack of fine motor skills though, surprisingly I'm not the one having trouble with it. Where I'm dropping stitches occasionally, she drops entire needles. At least twice now I've seen her knitting flying across the room. We had to have a conversation about how if she wants to throw sharp things she either needs to get knives or stars because I do not want to find a needle embedded in the wall. Still, she's pressing onward as if this is a competition and the scarf... sock... hat? Whatever the lumpy thing she's trying to make is, is her opponent and she will not rest until she wrestles it to the ground and proves to it that she's the master. And naturally she has all pink yarn.

I promise I'll send you my first... creation. I'm still only knitting to practice so it may be a

while before I actually get it to you. We'll see, I may also wake up tomorrow and knit like I'm part spider. It's like underwater basket weaving only you do it with needles... above water.

I've basically given up on my classes, which means I'm doing all the work and turning my assignments in on time. I get the most shit done for these excuses for eating my time when I just kind of forget that I'm paying any attention to them, go figure.

And it's helped me avoid bad movies film club which William still goes to. I'll need to talk to him eventually, but it would feel so awkward to show up there and either sit next to him or on the complete other side of the room from him.

Okay, fine, I don't want people to notice. Because I'm not an adult and I deserve to be a simpering idiot over the boy I kind of liked turning out to be a dick. You can't deny he's not bad on the eyes and is nice in pretty much every other way.

He genuinely doesn't know why Kat is so mad at him either. I mean, I guess she hasn't really come out to anyone but me so he probably doesn't know she's... lesbian? Bi? We never actually got very specific, not that it matters. But that's got to be harsh, having someone who was becoming a really close friend be mad at you and you have absolutely no idea why. But he'll survive, so he can deal until she's ready to.

I really wish I had more to report to you, Mitchy-boy, but we seem to be reaching a calm after your storm rolled through. Where the wind shifts from here I have absolutely no idea, but we'll ride it out.

Myra

Dear Mitchell,

Glad to hear (read?) you got a job! It doesn't exactly sound like making sandwiches, but it's a job, right? You're making money. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. If you have money, you can save up for when you get to college and you get tired of the damn dining hall food because it's the same exact shit week in and week out, but you don't have any money to go out and get food elsewhere, so you just sit there and suffer and eat the same boring shit week in and week out. Or you have money to spend on pretty girls and hot man-boys, because I know you want all the hot man-boys, Mitchell. They want you, too.

And remember, darling, since you're working in customer service you've got to put out if you want them to tip big. Win them over with that charming smile and watch the singles roll in. Then when you come home with a fatty stack, you can make it rain.

I'm not helping am I? I just want to gloat because you got a job! How come you didn't tell me about this sooner, you dick? I would slap you if I thought you'd let me get away with it, also if I could teleport a slap through a piece of paper travelling I don't know exactly how many miles away. Worth a try. Whoop, not just a papercut. Note to self: No more slapping pieces of paper when it's a person you intend the slap for. Paper beats poor, tender, fragile skin. I must remember that.

And a local sandwich shop no less, this some kind of mom and pop joint? Do you know the owners or one of their offspring? Did you get this job through nepotism, young man? If so, can we work this to my favor? I wouldn't mind a job.

I'm still going swing dancing, despite William being there. People kind of noticed that we weren't dancing together pretty much ever, but the only person to ask so far has been one of the officers who just sort of mentioned it offhandedly to me while we were dancing for a song. It was

subtle, and when I didn't volunteer any further information, they didn't ask. Lovely exchange from someone who has learned how to respect people's boundaries.

It embarrasses me somewhat to tell you that I've finally figured out this whole knitting thing. So has Kat, though she likes to have a crochet hook nearby in case she drops a stitch. But that's our Kat, ever the perfectionist. Since we're finally starting to get it, I think we're going to make presents for everyone over break. We got two sets of matching wooden needles for scarves. I call them my vampire hunting sticks.

I squished a very pregnant spider today. Felt bad about it despite the utter hideousness of the thing. I tried to warn it and shoo it toward the window, but it wouldn't listen to me, so it had to die. It was that or burn the building down and I rather like where I live.

We've just finished up our second round of midterms and are headed in to the final stretch of the semester before finals. I'll have a paper, a portfolio and a test due, then it's home for winter break. That's still like a month out, but there's lots of breaks in between with Veteran's Day and the Thanksgiving break.

Time to hunker down so I don't fail my first quarter of university. That would be the worst! Okay, maybe not the worst, but it would be bad.

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

I'm sorry it's taken me a while to write back to you, it's gotten kind of hectic the past few weeks.

I've gotten your two letters, but honestly haven't had time to even read them. They've just been floating around in the bottom of my backpack, getting smooshed by textbooks and the like. I'll go read them now.

Back! Not that you noticed since letter writing does not follow a strict linear progression of words on paper but is instead a convoluted mishmash of the things I write as I write them and there may be huge gaps between them. In this case there was about two days and I'm now home for Thanksgiving, taking a break from gorging myself on food I did not prepare in order to write you.

Wow. You've been busy, stud. I'm glad that coming down to visit me with Adrian brought you two closer. I mean it was unfortunate the way it turned out, but I'm still working on William and nobody was seriously hurt, though it ruined my dinner plans. Sorry, reminiscing on what could have been.

So Adrian came to visit you... and? What did you do? Besides each other, I'm sure. C'mon, details! You if anything happened, you can't leave it out the way you did the kiss. I have my ways of finding out, Mitchell Gordon Forester. So I might as well be hearing these sorts of things from you. Even telling me that nothing happened forgoes making me have to ask.

These dreams you keep having about Rumi have seriously got to stop. They're leaving you deranged and kind of sad. It's cool if the cat meant a lot to you, but dreaming about him for months just doesn't sound healthy and I'm willing to say that up front. You deserve better, like sex dreams about Adrian or something. And he keeps doing the same thing, leading you up into the middle of the highest point and then jumping off. Ooh, you know what you should do? Since this has become such a normal thing for you, you should try to use it to see if you can attain lucidity. It sounds like you already have partial lucidity in that you feel like you're choosing to follow him instead of being

dragged along.

Now you just need to think of doing something outside the narrative you're familiar with. Think about choosing to run in the opposite direction if for no other reason than to see what happens. Trust me, I think it would work really well for you. It's up to you what it means.

Life isn't terribly interesting for me. I'm drowning in homework still swing dancing, starting to actually understand this whole knitting process. Maybe after classes finish for the semester I'll finally get around to making you that hat or socks or whatever it is I promised to make you. I'll make it! Just after I finish with fucking school.

Still, I have a nice break with the whole Thanksgiving thing. My mom wants me to go Black Friday shopping with her tomorrow. I'm tempted if only because the adrenaline rush caused by the terror of being surrounded by that large of an angry crowd is sure to help me burn off all the food I've eaten today.

My family takes our holiday meals very seriously. It's the only time my mom and dad are willing to be in the same room together and seem to have a good time. We started the first course at about noon. It was fairly light, some salad, some appetizer kind of things. Then while the whole extended family is busy catching up, the moms (and my uncle Jeff because he refuses to live out the "tired stereotype of the lard-ass American man who sits around watching football while the women slave away in the kitchen all Thanksgiving because the only way a MAN cooks is steak on the grill") start to bring out the main course.

There's your normal Thanksgiving fare: turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, green beans, mashed potatoes and gravy, rolls, sweet potatoes. I'm talking everything. But every year, we also have two rotating dishes that feature cuisine from around the world. We've had everything from sushi to phad Thai to falafel and Ethiopian cuisine to banh chuoi nuong (Vietnamese banana bread pudding) and Argentine-style empanadas. Mom's always uncomfortable with this, saying that unless we learned to make this food from people who've lived in the actual culture the food comes from we have no business making it and calling it our own, but, like, hell, it's delicious and sometimes you need a little bit of spice or sweetness that isn't our white as white can be cooking. If we only stayed to our roots, I'm pretty sure we'd be eating pickled herring and sauerkraut of some sort. I'm willing to try it because why not, but I like me a little variety.

After that feasting is finished, everyone gets a reprieve while the leftovers get stashed away in Tupperware and tinfoil. That's right now. In about an hour after we've had time for everything to settle, they'll be unleashing dessert on us. My heart and stomach are terrified for my continued existence, but my taste buds want so much more.

I'm so stuffed, I don't know if I can move.

Except there's the chime for dessert. Gotta go, bye!

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

Ah! Just the distraction that I needed. It's the week before finals. I have a paper I could be working on, or I could be writing on paper to you. Guess which one I'm choosing.

That's right, because of my current inability to choose the path of responsibility, you receive a letter. Come to the dark side, Mitchell, we have cookies. I made them myself. Can you believe I've lived in this dorm for going on three months now and did not know there were shared kitchens on

every floor with utensils and appliances and things you could check out from the main desk? Most of them are kind of old and beat up, but cookies, Mitchell. I can make fresh, homemade, cookies and feed them to all the wonderful procrastinating children. Muahahahaha!

Seriously though, much as I love the dining hall, some days a girl needs some warm cookies and those days don't follow a strict, repeating weekly schedule.

I even made macaroni and cheese for my floor the other day. Yes, even William and Drew. By the way, we never properly talked about Drew after you visited. Pretty sure he wants your ass. Or maybe Adrian's. Or maybe both, it was hard to tell. I just remember one time while you were here I caught him looking and then he's been asking if you two would be coming back for a visit any time soon.

When he isn't on RA duty, he's taken to stopping by Kat and my's room to hang out and even a few times eat dinner with us. We're his favorite residents, which either means everyone else on our floor sucks or we did something good one time and now he's latched onto that in an attempt to stave off the ever-present, slowly encroaching reality that it won't always be this way and he must work to maintain it. The more he's here, the more he kind of grows on me. It's still awkward since he's our RA and so we can't do anything while he's around or he could get fired if he doesn't report it, which sucks, but the occasional movie night is nice. And he always wears the cutest pajamas, they're fuzzy and have adorable animals on them. Not that I'm trying to sell him at you (to you?), but I kind of like having him around.

Anyway, food. I made it. People love me and unanimously voted me queen of the dorm and are officially starting a petition to secede from the University so we can operate under a benign monarchy with me as its head. It's good to be queen. Maybe as a queen I can have tea with Elizabeth II. That would be amazing.

The paper that I'm avoiding is for my English class. Just some mundane research thing on a topic of my choosing. Not exciting at all. I'm going to spend this weekend putting together my portfolio and I've pretty much given up on caring about logic (the class). I can't say I'm burning out, but I'm gaining apathy. I can't exactly say it's nice, but it's gotten easier with time in a way that is somewhat surprising.

Procrastination rocks! Whoo! Okay, not really, but it does right now. We're so close, the end is in sight. I just can't bear to put forth the energy for that final sprint. It's bloody, paper-and-number-two-pencil-filled irony is what it is. But already I can hear your voice in my head being all conscionable, telling me I should at least pretend to get back to work. Fine, whatever, I'll do it.

Myra D.

Dear Mitchell,

Do you hear that? That is the sweet sound of freedom. I am finished. Done. Finito. Some nonsense word that means finished since I'm too lazy to break out a thesaurus.

I finished my finals. I'm done with my first term of college. I want to celebrate. Actually, if I want to celebrate, why am I writing you? Be right back.

Okay back. I went and had sex with the cute guy downstairs, then took a couple shots of vodka Bernard has hidden in his and William's room (shhhh don't tell Drew). Kat keeps looking at me and glaring because she still has a test tomorrow at 8am still and I can't stop giggling. I blame



the vodka. Or maybe I blame William. I don't know.

You're probably wondering who this guy from downstairs is. His name is Ammon. We met at one of the documentary showings that Drew put together as part of his job as an RA. He's so cute and I kissed him the night we met. We've been spending pretty much all our time together since then and after a few make out sessions started fucking. I knew something was missing between me and William when we were dating and it was sex. S. E. X. Sex. Which is a shame, because he's attractive despite his unfortunate upbringing.

Ah well, you win some you lose some, and I think I'm on the winning side right now.

I haven't heard from you in a while, though I guess you must be pretty busy. If you're planning on going to college you've probably been working pretty hard on your college apps for the last few weeks now. I don't blame you for not taking time away from that to write to me. I also wouldn't hold it against you if you were still managing to find time to write to Adrian.

I still don't get why you don't just admit that you love him. You two look good together and you're both really nice people. You deserve it. In the modified words of a certain Disney crustacean, you gotta kiss de boy. What do you have to lose? Your dignity? Your self-respect? Your reputation? You gave that up when you kissed him the first time. Nobody is going to care, and if they do you point me in their direction and I will rain random violence upon anyone and everyone standing between me and shutting them up.

Hey there, um... sorry about that, I was a little drunk. I just took a seven hour nap and now that I've sobered up a bit I wanted to say that I still stand by my advice. You haven't asked for it, but I think it would be a mistake to not take advantage of Adrian being in your life. You clearly care about each other and I just want you both to be happy. Next time you get the opportunity, go for it. Don't hesitate. Actually, maybe hesitate a little right as you're really close to him, but not so much that he thinks you don't want it. It'll help build anticipation.

Remember back when I lit the fire camping? You can't go too fast or you risk extinguishing the flame from all your movements. You also can't go too slow though or you risk missing the opportunity of a spark and having the entire fire die on you before it ever gets started.

I guess the advice I'm trying to give you, is to go light a fucking fire. Burn the whole city down if you need to, but don't make the mistake I think you're making.

Myra D.

### Part 3: Letters from Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

You have no idea how much I want you, do you?

I have had a crush on you since we met at camp almost a year and a half ago. You are enlighteningly beautiful and nice and. So. Fucking. Hot. You are everything I want to be, but cannot be and that hurts sometimes.

I think I love you, Mitchell, and that is terrifying.

I think I am not going to send this to you.

I feel like too much of a coward right now.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

I must joyously relate to you the circumstances in which I find myself writing to you. I am sitting on the couch with a mug of hot chocolate while my sister watches some dinosaur movie being all kinds of adorable. The movie itself is cute, albeit a little over the top with the way they are singing. It is amazing what, as children, we seamlessly accept into our realities.

I remember one time when I was little, I got lost in a movie about a cat and two dogs. Their family had moved and somehow they got left behind. I spent weeks wandering around the backyard telling my parents that I was on a grand adventure to find my way back home.

Pretty soon after I started that, they enrolled me in pre-school. I like to think they did it because I was lonely, but I have always had this sneaking suspicion that they really did it because they were worried about me. Little did they know, I had not been at the pre-school for a full week before I had two other children playing with me as my dog companions. They were my first friends.

I would really like to see you again soon. I started winter break on Friday and have had far too much time on my own. I crave the kind of community that we had at camp, but so far you are the only person I have managed to keep in touch with.

Myra is really nice. I know, I keep bringing it up, but she just has a way about her that make me want to trust her. There is something about her that says safe. Maybe the sadness you were talking about when you first met her this summer is what is responsible. The sadness makes her safe because she knows things.

Eleanor just asked me what I was doing. When I told her I was writing to you, she told me she wants to meet you. I told her all in good time, but for now she should go back to her movie, they're about to get to the part with the sharp-tooth. Instantly her attention is back on the screen.

I don't think she will end up like me. She has too much of a fascination with the dark things and the scary things and all of the things that go bump in the night. I had a nightlight up until I was six years old. She figured out how to turn hers off on her own. Her favorite character is almost always the villain (or if not that, then the villain's henchmen). I firmly believe she would be almost completely self-sufficient on her own. She is such a precocious girl, I even imagine she could find ways to make her own food. Probably stacking boxes on top of each other so she could access the cabinets, she already knows how to work the DVD player better than I do. I dote on her far more than she needs, but it cannot be helped. As an older brother, I find it is in my nature. I love my littlest sister.

Film is over now and Eleanorioangajfhajkla~~~~~

I apologize for that^ Eleanor started using me as her personal jungle gym as I was in the

middle of writing. I am lying in bed now, trying to find the correct words to send to you. You inspire me, you know. You make me want to change the world so it can house your brightness.

Please, do not ever lose that.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

It started to snow last night and did not let up until early this morning. I awoke to the most amazingly tranquil and breathtaking scene outside my window. I wanted so badly to capture it with my pen, but as with many things that are this beautiful, it was fleeting. Like a spring butterfly it alighted upon my nose and was gone as I stood there blinking. Jonathan and Eleanor and a few of the neighbor kids were out the door and frolicking in the powder before I was properly awake. The curse of being a teenager, I suppose, our bodies are a war zone of biological weapons priming and immunizing us for adulthood, we need all the rest we can get and yet give ourselves very little.

I am glad that mother nature waited until after school let out to blanket us in this solid precipitation, as much as I love the idea of snow days, I find that they can be such a hassle with people on the roads being stupid. I walked to the library this afternoon because the Humphrey Bogart film collection I had checked out was due. There were so many squealing tires from people ill-prepared to be out driving. At least we live in a fairly flat part of town so there wasn't much of a risk of cars backsliding.

Tomorrow will be the true test. The temperature is just warm enough outside that the snow will turn at least partly to slush, but I know tonight it will get cold enough to refreeze and then everything will be covered in a layer of ice.

I was glad to get your latest letter. Eleanor brought it in with the rest of the mail and hand delivered it to me saying that she could tell it was for me because of the green. She sits with me as I read them often enough that she's starting to recognize your handwriting... and the green pen you so love to use. One time she asked me if you use the green because you want to be with the trees. I had no idea how to respond. Why do you like to use a green pen when you write to me?

I read your letter after dinner. Have you ever noticed how the night seems so much brighter after it snows? I think the snow captures something of the daylight and holds on to it for as long as it can. The snow wants to be like light, which is why the night is brighter in the snow.

After writing to you for so long, I think I'm going to restart journaling with the new year. It's less than a month away now and this whole process of putting words down on paper is kind of soothing. I did it for a little bit after camp last year, but I failed to keep it up.

Your letter seemed kind of troubled. Perhaps this is a projection of my own unease onto your situation, but the whole college application process is really stressful. You can probably imagine it makes me nervous, with my poor grades and lack of extracurriculars it will be a lot harder for me to get accepted anywhere. I barely passes that summer class and doubt I would have were it not for your help.

I wish I could write the way you do. It always seems like as if you have such passion and life, like you are offering a part of yourself through the page. Some days I wonder if I have that much life in me.

Are you going to see your Aunt Endee over break? If you do, will you say hi to her for me. Myra as well, since I have no doubt you would at least be in contact with her enough to tell her visit

her if you were in the area. Her Resident Advisor, what was his name? Drew? Seemed to like you when we saw her back in November. It seemed like he was staring at your butt a few times and only at your butt. Regardless, I think it would be fun to go down and see her again once classes start up, before any of us gets too busy.

You think you can stay with me for a few nights the week prior to Christmas? That would be awesome! I am so excited at the prospect of seeing you. If you can stay for that Friday, my parents are planning a Holiday party and so long as we stay in and help keep the younger ones locked away upstairs, they may well let us drink some mulled wine.

Wine might be a bit of an acquired taste, but after you mull it, it just tastes like spices. Kind of cinnamon-y and kind of clove-y and kind of citrus-y. It is one of my favorite drinks this time of year. My mom usually adds a sprinkling of brown sugar as well to give it a molasses-y sweetness.

I remember back before Phoebe moved out, it was the last year she was really here for the annual Holiday party. I think I was about twelve and Eleanor had not been conceived yet, it was the first year that my parents let me have mulled wine. Phoebe had been allowed to since around the same age, so she was actually the one who poured my glass for me.

It was warm and smooth and delicious. The citrus softened the alcoholic bite and the spices burned warming fire on the way down. I was kind of fucked up by the end of the fourth or fifth cup. I had not eaten and Phoebe had to escort me to the upstairs bathroom lest I vomit in front of the guests. I made it a point to learn my limits sometime soon after that.

It would be fun to have you and you would make Eleanor happy.

Cannot wait to see you!

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

If it puts your mind at rest, I will repeat, hosting you was no problem at all, Mitchell. I was glad to have you over even if it was only for two nights. We got to hang out and see people and I finally watched North by Northwest. I've never held a guy's hand through an entire movie. The way you kept tracing circles and lines around my hand sent shivers up my spine. Hands have always been intimate for me. Maybe because I try to use mine for so many things. It scares me to give anyone else control of them. Like when as a child you have a new toy and your best friend is over but for whatever reason you cannot allow them to know about your new toy lest they try to play with it because it is your new toy and the idea of sharing it is sacrilegious. My hands are sacred to me, which is weird, I know, but that is the way I feel about them. In a way it felt like I was surrendering to you somehow. I feel so comfortable around you I could melt. I have never realized exactly what that felt like. Take that as you will.

My parents, while still not overjoyed by the fact that I am gay, actually told me they were happy to see me happy with you around. The conversation did not go any further than that, though I wish it had, but I suppose it is progress toward them accepting me for what I am. They were reassured by our camp connection and that I had met at least some of your family when I visited you this summer even if they didn't pay attention to who it was.

As usual, they just want to make sure my most basic social needs are being met. I will give them credit there though that it means they're paying some attention to me. I feel as if I prefer it this way compared to strict scrutiny.

Eleanor, that blessed child, told me that she thought you had pretty hair and a very green voice. You do have wonderful hair. I asked her what the green meant but she wouldn't explain it to me except to say she understood now why you use the green pen. I tried to get her to explain to me what that meant, but she outright refused to say another word on the subject and any time I try to bring it up she changes the subject to her dolls or whatever is currently on the television because talking about it brings out black in me.

I find it somewhat alarming since I have no idea what it means. I'm just going to try to write it off as one of those five-year-old things that I'm now too old to remember how or why they work the way they do. Just leave it be for now and find an answer in the morning as dad always told Phoebe.

I wonder sometimes what your Rumi-dreams mean. The fact that you keep having them seems pretty significant, more so considering they started right around when he disappeared. It seems like you mention one at least every other letter you write to me. And it never changes. I feel paranoid when I go walking around the neighborhood. I feel as if all the cats are watching me and if I take my eyes off of them, they will sweep me away to some kind of magical land or something.

You have me paranoid, my friend.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

Eleanor was really excited to see you again even if she was unable to stay up until the midnight fireworks. And regarding what happened after the fireworks... thank you. If that was anywhere near as intense for you as it was for me... damn. I finally feel like I can say I didn't die a virgin.

At some point soon, I think we need to talk more in depth about what happened though. It was wonderful and I am glad my first time was with you, but I do not want it to change things between us. We are and always will be friends first. Because I think love works that way, and I think this limits it and contains it in ways that are somewhat harmful. It crosses over all of those borders that we make for it.

I think Eleanor noticed a change in me. She said that I sound more brighter. Even if she makes no sense, I think she is perceptive. When I talked to Phoebe about it, she said that maybe Eleanor can see things that we can't. She said it sounds like Eleanor might be a little bit synesthetic. I had to ask what that means. Apparently synesthesia is the perceptual ability to crisscross senses. So like sounds or letters or words can have colors or textures. It gets used a lot in language and writing but people have a way of not recognizing it. The example Phoebe gave me was when someone says look sharp. Which sounds really cool. I wish I was special like that because it sounds magical in some way, you know?

I want that bit of magic in my life. To be the guy in the nice suit who has a sweet dame walk into his office looking like trouble. I want to be the one she runs away with to the far side the world when her husband gets shot. And I know I could just get there if I had some way pull myself together, some way to focus the way I operate. Right now I feel broken, not because I am gay, but because I have no way to bring my life together and make it some kind of cohesive unity of me. Who am I?

Eleanor has it so simply. Mitche is the guy with pretty hair and green voice. Adrian is her

biggest brother. Mom is mom and Da is Dad. Phoebe is the fun lady who comes to visit sometimes. Jonathan is her littler big brother. Food is yucky or food is yummy. Naptime is at 2:30. Everything has its place in her world.

Whereas all I have is uncertainty. Except in you, which I would never burden you with that as a responsibility. Except for a parent to their child, no person should be made responsible for another's life that way. It would crush them with the weight of it. Right now though, I am happy in this uncertainty. Because this uncertainty comes with you and you make me so happy for us being in each other's lives.

I knew you would like watching *The Stranger*. Especially after we watched *North by Northwest* last time. It is one of my all-time favorites. The way Orson Welles twisted and played with language and sound and the black and white medium. So much of it really was about timing. With the way film worked back then, the dialogue and music played such a larger role in driving the story. The acting was done with eyes and voice and the special effects were built into the world. And despite popular opinion, they were not as clean and wholesome as most think.

I probably should not have drank so much wine but it just went so well with the film and you and it was right before the New Year's party... No, no excuses, I knew exactly what I was getting myself into drinking wine. I barely remember the fireworks, I was so gone, and then I remember you and the warmth and the fire and it was amazing. I feel as if it opened something up in me.

I felt as if in that moment I had the kind of clarity I was talking about earlier, that magic that makes the world such a wondrous, place for Eleanor to experience.

Ah, but the hour is late and today was my last day of winter break so it will be so hard to force myself out of bed in the morning to make it to school on time. I think both times you were here were the earliest I have been up in the last three weeks and even then it was ten. Six is going to be waking up in hell, literally since it will still be dark out.

What I meant by all that was I should be going to bed.

Adrian

P.S. Thank you

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal:

Happy New Year! The air is breathing excitement right now. We are so close. I feel so alive. My life is opening up and I am the happiest I have been in years. I am sad because Mitchell just left but I had sex with Mitchell and I cannot contain myself. I have no idea what I am containing, but I feel as if I am glowing. I never knew, nor expected it would feel like that, for it to be so warm and hot and slick. I feel it, inside me right now, burning and growing and consuming me. This is sex. This is what I have been missing for the last, well six or seven years of my life. Learning to jack at ten or eleven was probably comparable to this at the time.

I want more and yet I know I cannot have it. It would get so complicated with Mitchell so fast, because I know I love him. We have to be friends for both our sakes.

Eleanor as a synestheliac, it seems so weird for me to think about, but I guess I have no reason for it not to be. I wonder if there are meanings to the things she sees and hears. Like, does the fact that Mitchell sounds green to her mean that he is a nice person? She seemed worried when she said that it brings out black in me. I wonder what color I am normally. Maybe I can find a way to ask her about it without making it seem obvious.

Phoebe left yesterday to head back home. I miss my big sister sometimes. She was always

there for me and then right after she went away to college, Eleanor came around and it felt like I had to take her place. All of a sudden I was the one who had to be inspirational and cool and a big brother to look up to. Jonathan had no way to do it because he is too young. So it became my job even though Eleanor was so tiny she barely knew what her own hands were. She grows so fast and now she looks at me and there is this adoration and trust, different from what she gives to mom and dad, and different than Phoebe. Phoebe is kind of a stranger to her, familiar enough that she laughs and smiles and does not hide, but still an outsider, a visitor to her little five year old environment, where I am the hallmark of that world. In her world, I am the mountain on the horizon, reliably in the distance even on cloudy days.

I know because that is the way I used to look at Phoebe up until about the point when Jonathan was born. She was my hero. She still is my hero. And I think she is kind of my parent's hero as well. She was the first, the flower, the fledgling out of the nest and already looking to build one of her own. But when she is in the house, she touches the space differently than all of us. Her home is elsewhere. When Phoebe comes back it feels very clear that she is visiting and in a way has passed that particular torch on to me. I get to be the responsible one, the older one, the strong one. That scares me. It terrifies me and exhilarates me at the same time. It makes me scared for Jonathan when I go away. Will he have to step into this same roll the way I did after Phoebe left?

Dear Mitchell,

I am happy to crawl into bed today - after a very full weekend (details momentarily).

The first week back to school I had one small quiz in my English class on the book we were supposed to have read over break. Considering I only read half of the book, I think I did okay. The questions were pretty easy, which makes me think my English teacher was trying to be nice to us which was a relief to say the least. My friend at school says not to worry about it because there is nothing more I can do about it anyway, which is true I suppose.

I stayed up until 4 a.m. with my friend Tucker on Friday night. I met him and a few other friends at his truck as soon as school let out and he drove us out into the woods to one of the old parks and we drank most of two twenty-four packs of beer between the four of us. We were laughing and talking and throwing things at the trees. Tucker pulled out his baseball bat and we took swings at empty beers cans and then one or two full ones, but those exploded and sprayed all over us so we decided to stop wasting them. I hit one of the empty ones I swung at so hard that it collapsed in on itself and got stuck to the bat. We fell asleep in the bed of Tucker's truck. It was cold as fuck but we had sleeping bags and just kind of passed out on top of each other.

We got back to my place early Saturday morning kind of hung-over and made breakfast together: pancakes and bacon and eggs. Tucker left to drop the guys off at their places while I cleaned up. I was sitting nursing a cup of coffee when Eleanor came up to me and gave me a hug. She had had bad dreams about me that night apparently and was glad to see I was okay. I kissed the top of her head and offered her a piece of bacon. She took it and ripped it to pieces with her fingers while she talked.

"And then in my dream, you were being chased by a cat and it wasn't a good cat because he wanted to eat you, but I wouldn't let him so I chased him and we went round and round in circles because you were chasing me and there were black spots in the air trying to get both of us even though the green words and the yellow words kept trying to fight them off."



She sat down on the floor and ate the bacon pieces while she looked up at me.

"I finally caught the kitty and he scratched me so I threw him off a cliff but he survived because he's a cat and cats have nine lives and this was only fifth so there were plenty left but I could see the light through the trees then and they were so pretty I picked one up because it came close to me and it was a moth with the prettiest little eyes. It kissed me to say hello then flew off to join the other lights as they moved to the tops of the trees to say hi to the stars. Where were you last night?"

She had finished eating the bacon and was staring at me with this look of curiosity. I had been so wrapped up in her story that I completely forgot she was talking to me.

The last thing I wanted to do was lie to her but telling her the truth, that I had been out drinking until the early hours of the morning seemed inappropriate. I smiled and told her what truth I could without ruining the illusion of her looking up to me. I told her I went out with my friends and we had fun together.

Still nursing my coffee, I joined her on the couch a few minutes later to watch one of her favorite movies. We laughed at the Muppets' antics and I tickled her to make her laugh when the jokes were over her head. We took a nap together cuddling on the couch until Jonathan got home from staying the night at his friend Peter's for a birthday party. He found us sleeping on the couch and tried to be quiet. And by tried to be quiet I mean he started singing at the top of his ten year old lungs. Eleanor, not willing to take shit from anyone, least of all one of her big brothers, leapt off the couch and tackled him.

I picked both of them up and carried them up to Jonathan's and my room. Throwing their giggling forms onto my bed I growled and tickled them until they were both squirming and screaming. I stopped when they both picked up pillows and started smacking me. Neither of them might have the best leverage or efficiency in their movements, but it still stung when they would catch me with a corner.

Downstairs, I made us all tuna sandwiches for lunch with barbeque chips for crunch. I cut the crusts off for Jonathan and toasted the bread for myself and Eleanor.

I chased them around the house for a bit and they ran off to play together while I cleaned up in my room. I showered and shaved and changed my clothes. Parents got home and recruited me to help with dinner.

After dinner, Trish picked me up to go to a movie night at her place. She was undecided on what film to watch. But had a bunch of people over. I only knew one or two of them and we ended up watching several movies and drinking pretty heavily. After a few vodka shots, this one girl Megan started making out with me. I kept thinking about you the entire time and trying to find a way to dislodge her. Nothing seemed to work until Trish found us on the couch and redirected Megan onto Zach. Free once more, I thanked her with a wink and a nod. She smiled and nodded toward the door.

I met her outside and she apologized for Megan. Trish said she could tell I had no interest in Megan; she thought Megan would be a better pair with Zach since he was actually into her. She kept walking toward me, moving closer. When she got really close to my face, I could detect the faintest touch of alcohol on her breath. It made me nervous. It made me hot. It made me... vomit all over her. I was mortified and worse, she barely noticed. I had to tell her I threw up on her and lead her to the bathroom to clean up. She stripped her shirt off and stood there in her bra, running it under the water as she looked at me. Thankfully my stomach had been somewhat empty except for alcohol so

there were no chunks to wash off, but it still smelled like bile and stomach acid.

Things get a little hazy after that. Somehow I got home, because I woke up in my own bed this morning, so I hope nothing happened. Woke up this morning with yet another raging hangover. Popped several aspirin to dull the pain enough so I could function. Eleanor and Jonathan were no help in that regard, running around and screaming like they do pretty much every day. It would be cute if my head would stop pounding every time they opened or closed a door.

The rest of the day has been running errands. I biked to the library to pick up a few holds, then locked myself in my room to work on a few scholarship applications and started looking for a job because my mother insisted.

And now I am home, exhausted, but staying up to write you. I find comfort in your presence though two hours travel separates us.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

I know what I said fixes nothing and I am deeply sorry you feel that way, but I think we are both at a place where we can move on and continue as friends. I understand how it might be hard for you. This is life, no one ever said it would be easy. I try to be patient, but it often feels lonely and confusing to be in this place without you. If you ever need anything of me, I am here for you. I feel as if I am at least partway to blame, and I want to take responsibility for that. I am truly sorry.

Your letter blindsided me a bit, but I guess I can understand. We were never meant to be in a relationship, not really. It would not, cannot work, not right now. You made a good point about us having our whole lives ahead of us to find someone. If it is meant to be, we will end up together and trying to force it right now would just ruin things for both of us, which is not the same thing as me not wanting this, wanting us. I bow before your wisdom, though it pains me to do so, and seek to find solace in our friendship.

You were always more hesitant than me, more unsure about us as something more. I still think we were always meant to be bigger than that though. You and I, we are transcendent to traditional definitions of love and relationships.

We should talk soon.

Adrian

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal:

I'm hurt and lonely.

I know I put a lot on Mitchell as one of the only people that I feel like I can trust and be open with, but even as kindly as he put it, it still hurts to have him say that romance between us is an impossibility right now. I have to accept that for what it is.

School starts tomorrow, so there won't be time for me to mope and sit around feeling sorry for myself. I have to put on a face for everyone and be the Adrian they expect to see. I may not owe them anything, but I owe it to myself to maintain my reputation.

Onward and upward despite the pain.

Dear Mitchell,

Classes are going well. Exam season is upon us and I have to finish the semester strong if I

am going to graduate high school. I have to do well, or at least above mediocre. It seems like it should be such little effort and yet it takes so much time and energy.

Whenever I take tests I choke. I get so nervous all thoughts leave my head. It takes the control of years of practice and expectation to finish. I force myself through it, telling myself time and again that I will fail. There is no rationality. I have no control of it, of the panic and anxiety hovering at the edges of my consciousness trying to wrestle my mind away from me. I fight, but in fighting I lose because my focus is not where it should be: on the task at hand.

But I made it through that summer course (in part thanks to your generous help) so I know I can make it through this. Then I just have a straight shot to graduation and life afterward.

Jonathan came to me the other day and asked me all kinds of awkward questions about sex and stuff. As his older brother, it makes me proud to know he trusts me to ask this kind of stuff, but it frightens me that he asks me this at age ten. Pretty sure I had no conception of my body in a sexual way until I was at least twelve, but maybe I remember incorrectly. What year do schools start teaching you about puberty? Around ten or eleven, right? Maybe Jonathan asking me is less weird than I thought.

I had to explain masturbation to him. I tried to limit my description to touching yourself for the sole purpose to feel good when by yourself. The last thing I need him doing is for him to start masturbating in public while we are out somewhere. Naturally, he asked me if I did it. For fuck's sake, kid, of course I do it! If I catch him going at it in our room at night, I have no idea how to react. It makes me feel dirty just thinking about it. I may have to try and talk my parents into letting me take over Phoebe's old room soon, just to give our growing boy the privacy he is inevitably going to need.

They grow up so fast. If I thought Jonathan was bad, I am completely and wholly unprepared for Eleanor to even think about the concept of sex. I think if she were to ask me something about it my head would implode. I should remind Jonathan that he should only talk about it with me or Mom and Dad.

Hope you are experiencing a far less stressful time than I am right now.  
Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

Finished with classes. Midwinter break then my final semester in high school starts. Even though I have been going to this school for several years now, I still get lost on the first day of a new term. Maybe not as badly as I did when I was a freshman, but it takes me longer. I have reasonable confidence that I passed all my classes. None of my teachers seemed to indicate otherwise when I asked them what my report card would say. I get nervous just thinking about it.

So changing the subject.

My mom still has me looking for a job. I have an interview on Saturday. She says it will help me build a resume and save money for college. Right now I have no guarantee I will even be in college, but the idea of having a small reserve available is kind of nice. Can you imagine me working? I have this feeling that I will be one of those guys you see at department stores wandering around the parking lots in those fluorescent half-vests over all their bundled jackets, corralling carts that have been improperly abandoned in the dividers between rows. Not ideal by any means, but given my situation, gainful employment is a fairly modest goal because it would entail any kind of

employment.

Surprisingly, the idea of an interview makes me less nervous than the idea of a test. An interview I can do because that just means talking to people and telling them about myself or what they want to hear.

A test means I have to show what I know and confidence in what I know is not something I always have.

Ugh, can this be over? Why must we continue waiting?

If I die from anticipation, you know what happened to me.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

New semester, new bunch of things to worry about. I got my first rejection letter from college. It was one of the schools I applied for early decision, but it was also my big dream, my such-long-shot-that-the-admissions-board-would-have-to-be-high-to-even-consider-me school, so their decision was unsurprising. It was still disappointing and left a little sting when I saw the envelope.

My math class is super hard but I love it. One of the problems we had to do went something like this:

When  $f'(x) = |x-2|$ , what could a graph of  $y=f(x)$  look like? It was a multiple choice question and there were a few different graphs. It was one of the easiest problems out of the set. You know that because it says  $f'(x)$  that  $f'(x) = df(x)$  or the derivative of  $f(x)$ . That any value found for  $f'(x)$  is the slope of  $f(x)$  at that point. If  $x=0$  then  $f'(0) = |0-2|$ .  $f'(0)=2$ . So at 0, the slope of  $f(x)$  is 2. Same thing with  $f'(1, 2, 3)=1, 0, 1$ . So on a graph of  $y=f(x)$ , the line should be moving up steeply at 0, getting less and less steep as you move toward 1 until the line becomes perfectly horizontal at 2. After two it starts getting steep again, still going up. It was a trick question because the only graph of  $f(x)$  that followed that slope had a weird break in it. Still got that one right, but like I said before it was an easy one. Are you surprised? I might have failed multiple other classes in my past, but I always do extremely well in math. My math grades have always been the one thing keeping me from failing completely at school.

All my other classes... well let us just say that my grades are tentatively satisfactory. It could be a lot worse, but I have to really get my act together this next semester and go above and beyond to pass with anything but the barest minimum.

I already know you do the whole books thing pretty well. Do you know anything about the US government or French?

I should just hire you to live here as my personal tutor.

Be back in a bit, Eleanor is knocking and wants to play.

That little she devil. Somehow playing turned into hungry turned into dessert at the new frozen yogurt place at the mall. Forget the synesthesia or whatever she has mind control powers. Made me glad that Jonathan is staying the night at his friend's otherwise I would have had to drag him along too.

Of course, when we got to the place it was packed with some little league soccer team and all their moms. I was drowning in screaming kids and soccer moms, dressed in my regular Sunday afternoon grunge, carrying this pristine five year old girl wearing her superhero pajamas. I swear at

least one of them gave me this look like she thought I was some underage father into drugs and dropped out of school to try to be a good father. There was so much pity with an undercurrent of disgust emanating from her.

It caught me by surprise and I just sort of stared her down until she looked away. Then Eleanor started tugging on my ear pointing toward the cake-flavored froyo.

It was all self-serve so I snagged a bowl and waded my way through the thigh-high terrors to the cake flavor. Eleanor kept saying "More, more!" because she knew I would be sharing and she wanted to get as much as possible. I finally had to tell her no more otherwise there would be no room for toppings.

Of course we got some of ALL the toppings. Have you ever had strawberry pieces and chocolate chips and Reese's pieces, coated in sprinkles and cookie crumbs floating in cake and mint flavored yogurt soup? Everything is sweet so I feel wrong saying it tastes horrible, but the lesson to be taken away here is that with age comes a refinement of tastes and pairing and when you are only five, fuck that shit, I want it all. Ended up costing me damn near fifteen dollars after tip, too. I ate most of it, but we really need to start teaching Eleanor about portion control or kid is going to develop diabetes.

Got home and I was ready to lapse into a sugar coma while Eleanor was just ramping up to run around and scream. Dad was back with Jonathan so those two ran around while I had a couple glasses of water in hopes it would help wash all that extra sugar out of my system.

Dad asked how Eleanor was and gave me twenty bucks for watching her all the time. My parents struggle enough with bills and Phoebe's college loans that they are unable to give me a regular allowance for helping out with the younger ones, but try to slip me little bonuses when they can.

I think it means more to them than it does me but I take the money anyway. I am still a teenager after all.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

I got the job! I am now officially the newest sales associate on the block. I start tomorrow and will probably work most days for an hour or two after school. It sounds like I will alternate between cart return and bag boy. Oh joy! I had to buy a pair of slacks and a few non-patterned polo shirts.

Still, boring as it sounds, I will be getting paid and that is the very least I ask of them. Since I will be employed at a grocery store though, I anticipate my friends frequently making trips just so they can tease me or make me carry their bags. But like I said once already, I will be getting paid. I just need to remember to not spend it.

No, I was not serious about you staying here as my personal tutor. I may have just gotten a job, but even then, I still would not have enough to pay you, and feed you, or even have room to house you to be honest unless you wanted to share a room with me and Jonathan. What I would give to have you here though.

It in no way surprises me that you got straight A's in all your classes, and I know you were trying very hard not to sound like you were gloating, so I am not offended. A little jealous, but not offended. Congratulations, now would you mind helping me out? For the next few weeks we are

focusing on the amendments to the constitution. Slowly I am starting to learn how writing is just a formula of words and the different variables and constructions use ideas and concepts instead of numbers. I have writing to you to thank for that.

I feel less hesitant expressing myself through words and giving opinions even if they may be wrong. I hope that is what shows up in my college applications, that I am here to learn.

I got my second rejection letter this afternoon. This was another early decision long shot school. Again not too surprising that I did not get in, but also no less discouraging. I still have three more schools to hear back from before I have to look at my life and look at my choices and really decide what I want to do with myself.

Have you heard back from anywhere yet? Probably everywhere you applied to, you smart bastard. You make me regret not ever being involved in anything. Besides, if no University wants me, I can stay home, probably start at the community college and be around to help mom and dad with Eleanor and Jonathan. While not ideal, I could do it as a last resort.

Here is to hoping it will not come to that.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

Between work and school I am so exhausted. Most days I get home just in time for dinner with the family, of course work leaves me famished, ready to pounce on anything that holds still long enough for me to put it in my mouth. I started buying a small snack for my walk home after my shift just so I would stop wolfing down a plate of food before anybody else is even halfway done.

See, I was right, every school that has gotten back to you so far has accepted you. Starting to lose hope on my end. No new rejections, but it seems like I should be hearing back from more places by now. I hope this is just a matter of no news being good news.

I wish I could see you again, but with school and everything, I can understand why it would be hard right now, for either of us, to find the time in our schedules. Plus now that I work, I have less and less free time. Spring break will be here before we know it, maybe I can come visit you sometime around then.

Eleanor asked me yesterday why she never sees me anymore. It was heartbreaking to see that sad look in her eyes. She misses me and noticed I am not around as much.

This is the one thing that makes me hate my job even a little. But it has to be done I suppose, they pay me for a reason after all.

Tiredly,

Adrian

Excerpt from Adrian's journal:

I'm starting to have mixed feelings about this "relationship" with Mitchell. I'm happy for him, but I'm also jealous of him and his success. It's only because I don't feel like I'm getting any for myself. I've been trying so hard this past year. It has to mean something. We're just friends, but... I don't know. He leaves me feeling all tingly inside. I just have to feel this out for now.

I'm wiped from my day, and I just want to drift off to sleep, but it feels like I need to write. After work today, my co-worker Everett asked me if I wanted to hang out with him. He's a bit older, but seems pretty cool. We went back to his apartment and he brought out a few beers. He put on

some movie, told me to call him Rett and we drank for a bit, and then he asked me if I wanted to take a few tequila shots. We had two each and I started to feel a little bit lightheaded, but in a good way. He kept moving closer to me, and I felt my heart rate spike and I felt hot all over. He put one hand on my leg and when I didn't push him away, he kissed me. I kind of recoiled and he pulled back to ask me what was wrong. I just told him I was surprised.

He sat back and we watched the movie. He got me another beer and then a little while later we both took another shot. He put his arm around me and I was leaning on him. With his other hand, he lifted my chin and kissed me. He tasted like alcohol. It felt good and hot and so I kissed him back. This wasn't like the time I was with Mitchell. Compared to Rett, Mitchell was so soft. There was a kind of hardness and passion in the way Rett kissed me. He was very much in control.

There was an obvious bulge in Rett's pants and he absentmindedly rubbed it as he kissed me. I found myself on top of him, rubbing myself against his erection. I was moaning into his mouth, breathing hard, my whole body so hot. The movie ended and it took all my willpower to pull away, I was so horned up.

I put on my shoes and walked home from Rett's place. He had offered to give me a ride as he pushed me against the wall to kiss me even harder while I made it toward the door. I did my best to politely decline.

Dear Mitchell,

Slowly but surely I am getting to know my co-workers. The girl in the deli who always seems to be working as I leave smiles and has memorized my usual order of chunk of cheese and a few potato wedges as a snack for my walk home. This guy, Rett, also seems to like me. A few times now he has invited me to hang out with him after work, but normally I am so focused on getting home that I have not taken him up on it.

Very glad to hear that you got a job, too! Are you excited about it? It sounds exactly like the kind of thing you would do, working in a bookstore. Do you get to be part of any kind of "Employee's Picks" shelf? I bet your picks are the most popular.

School is going okay. Not great by any means, but no longer do I find myself stressing about it. I got another rejection letter the other day. That makes three out of five so far. All my out of state schools are now no longer in the running, which is probably for the best. I do not think I would want to move that far away from home just yet. It scares me just a little. Phoebe did it, but she was also always more adventurous than me and wanted to get out.

You're going to see Myra again over the long weekend next month? I hope you have fun. I would want to come along if I wasn't so busy. It would even be worth bearing William's presence. We will never be able to see eye to eye after high school, but I am willing to be civil if he is. Kat and Myra are worth any damper he would put on the fun.

You should let me know the next time you go visit. Maybe if I see you for the first part of spring break, we could both go see Myra for the second part. At least we have it as an option anyway.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

I'm still trying to process what happened, but I don't think I'll ever be able to fully

understand. Mitchell, I had no idea and by the time I knew something was going on, it was too late. I should have been paying better attention. Mom and dad keep telling me that it wasn't my fault, but it was my fault. I did this to Eleanor.

I'm crying right now, because I don't know what else to do. I'm only writing this because you comfort me. Even at a distance and it hurts. It hurts so much.

I've been drinking a lot recently. I've crashed at least three different parties this past week alone. It makes me feel better to be around people. If I'm drunk and there are people, just for a little bit I forget and then everything is good and I can make that feeling last until I get home and pass out and then I don't have to think or feel until the morning when I struggle to force myself out of bed.

Last night, I snuck out and found the jackass who did this, his car was easy to find and I had all this rage and all this anger and all this venom built up inside of me and I wanted to hurt him and I wanted to smash his car into teeny tiny pieces, but I couldn't. I got there and I just deflated. I walked home with my head hung in shame because what am I going to do? I'm a worthless piece of shit who couldn't even save his baby sister. And it's not like the guy meant to hit her, he barely tapped her, but that was all it took.

He stuck around after and was even the first to call for an ambulance, but it was too late. She was so young, Mitchell. All that lost potential. What does life even mean anymore?

I keep asking myself that last question and I can't answer it. It's such a fragile thing. We kill things all the time. And I don't mean things like bombings in the Middle East or anything like that, though I guess they happen, too. On an even smaller scale though, every time I wash my hands I cause mass xenocide of untold millions of bacteria. We don't think about them as having life but it is life, it's millions of lives just so tiny we can't see them. It's the same with plants and bugs. I don't want to sound like I'm Buddhist, because I have no concept of them outside what I've read in comics and seen in some of the old movies I watch, and that makes them seem like stone-unmovable pacifists, but I think that life is everywhere and we keep killing it. You know? It's dead and dying and killing and there's nothing we can do to stop it. None of us want to stop it, except we all want to stop it, but we can't because we're powerless.

I'm sorry that didn't make any sense, I'm a little drunk right now. Have I mentioned I've been drinking a lot lately? Oh yes, I have right there at the top of the page. I went over to Rett's place, have I told you about Rett? We drink and I get drunk, then we do things and I drink some more, which is how I got here, drunk, righting to you like a drunk person, but I needed to, you know? He made me feel better and gave me a ride home.

And I don't hurt as much. I can feel calm.

I need to learn to find peace again.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

Eleanor's funeral was today. It's hard for me to tell, but I think Jonathan coping okay. He still seems really sad though. At Phoebe's urging, mom and dad and dad are getting rid of Eleanor's stuff. There are a few things they couldn't bear to part with for fear of forgetting her, but most everything else either went into storage, donation, or trash. The room is barren and doesn't even look like Eleanor's room anymore, more so since they started painting over the walls. I wonder if they realize it feels like we're erasing her, removing her presence from our lives. It might be a soothing thing for



them, but for me it's like ripping the wound open wider. It just points out that this was her and now it isn't any longer.

A few of her friends showed up with their parents, but none of them really knew what it meant. They just kind of picked up on the sadness vibe and went with it. Most of it was family paying their condolences to mom and dad and me.

We had a small little wake and basically fed people's grief. There was such pity in everyone's eyes. Fuck them. Bastards didn't even know her, they saw her once maybe twice a year at best.

I've been getting in a lot of fights with mom. She doesn't approve of me being out all the time and is saying my grades are suffering. Doesn't she get that I just don't fucking care anymore? Why should I?

And to top it off, another rejection letter. Fuck it, I don't need school and if I get into my last choice, my safety school, it shouldn't be a problem. It's a good school and I would have no shame from graduating there and I would be a lot closer to Phoebe.

Sorry to keep bringing you down.

Adrian

#### Excerpt from Adrian's Journal

I went over to Rett's again. We watched a movie and this time drank wine. I didn't burst out crying like I have the last two times I was over. He's been so understanding about Eleanor. Between the two of us, we finished off at least two bottles of red. It's not my favorite thing because of the taste, but it's growing on me for sure.

I got kind of wasted and Rett started kissing me again. And it was so hot that I kind of kissed him back, but then I started laughing because I had a charley horse in my right leg and we fell over on the couch and he was on top of me massaging my leg, which hurt but also felt so damn good. And he was kissing me and he asked if he could take off my pants and I said yes and next thing I know, I'm naked and his hands are all over me and he's leading me to the bedroom. It hurt at first when he started fucking me because he was so rough, but I was drunk and it felt good after a little bit and he was kissing the back of my neck and his hand was playing with my erection and then I was coming and he was coming in me and I could feel his cock spasm in my ass and he collapsed on top of me. I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I know, it's morning, I have a massive hangover and I'm naked in his bed.

I freaked out a little bit because I didn't remember everything that happened and I felt sick and queasy and it felt wrong, wrong, wrong, like we shouldn't have done that like, it was disrespecting Eleanor's memory. I felt used and dirty and I kind of ran out of there. I spent an hour in the shower trying to wash it off of me, but the feeling was underneath my skin.

The next day, I got home from school and passed out on my bed fully clothed until my mom came in to tell me about dinner. I told her I wasn't hungry and she told me I should probably eat anyway but she would leave me a plate in the fridge.

Jonathan came in a little bit later and went to bed. Eventually I got up and ate the food. It was like 2am. I left mom a note saying thank you.

My life is in shambles.

Dear Mitchell,

I lost my job. I'm not surprised by this since I stopped showing up two weeks ago, but it still sucks. My mom is trying to be understanding, but I can tell even she is starting to lose patience with me. I don't blame her.

I started to go into work on Thursday, but ended up jumping on the bus instead. I rode it all the way to the downtown bus station before I got off. I wandered around for a bit and ended up picking up a rock and just sitting with it in my lap at the bus station.

Have you ever spent a lot of time at somewhere public like a bus station, people watching and noticing the little things?

Let me tell you, you see a variety of people. A lot of them are poor or low income or homeless. A lot of them might experience psychological problems or addictions that make them seem erratic. I just sat there and watched as people passed through, coming and going, mumbling incoherently to themselves and yelling to each other. There's a kind of culture at the bus station, a non-verbal etiquette that dominates the space. There are the passers through, the well-to-do people just taking the bus to take the bus, they're usually dressed pretty nicely and don't stick around to talk to anyone. Often they're the ones with books or headphones. I would have considered myself one of them until yesterday.

And then there's everyone else, we're the ones that people avoid eye contact with at all costs, because once they make eye contact they can't hide the disgust or pity no matter how slight no matter how hard they try. We're the outcasts, the untouchable, the invisible. Once you notice it, it becomes a painful reality that you can't avoid anymore. You have to look and it will break your heart.

One of the guys who was out there with me, he was a veteran. Lost hearing and sight out of his right ear and eye in some war from before we were born.

I wanted to cry looking at him. He sat on the bench next to me and my rock for a while and started up a conversation. He told me how it's like this everywhere, but also not like this everywhere. The big cities are more crowded and during this time of year this area is only really populated by the hardy types, the ones who know how to survive the cold and wet.

He smiled at me and seemed to want to convey something, but I was too frozen to hear it. I'm sure they were some kind of warm, inspirational words from someone with significant life experience, but I couldn't. I just couldn't and he knew it, so he moved on after a bit.

There was another man, he smelled like old piss and pot. At first he asked me if I knew where to buy some weed, but when I said no, was just as friendly. He asked me what the rock was for. I made up something about it housing my spirit animal. He laughed at that. Told me he knew people with real spirit animals. One man who could commune with cats in his dreams and found they could lead him to higher truths. He always made it a point to listen to cats.

It reminded me of your dreams of Rumi so I told him about you and your dreams. He said that you should listen to what Rumi has to say to you. You aren't listening to him properly. He didn't tell me how to listen to him, just that you have to listen differently. Maybe that will make more sense for you than it does me.

One woman with three children walked past me without even looking, but her kids stopped. They looked at me and danced around me. When one of them took the rock that I was holding and threw it to the side, I didn't stop them. The woman noticed then after all the clattering and ran over. At first she tried apologizing to me, but told her it was okay. That they reminded me of my kid sister.

She sort of smiled at that and asked how old she was. I told her she was five. I sat with her while they waited for their bus and we talked. It was kind of sweet.

Once they caught their bus, I finally decided to head home.

Rett called me, and I was tempted to have a drink or two with him, but I didn't answer.

I went home and crawled into bed.

They called me about letting me go this afternoon. I was expecting it. I didn't care.

Do you ever have moments like that, Mitchell? Where it's just so hard to care about even the smallest things that you just don't. It's not even a matter of caring anymore. You just can't.

I don't know what to do anymore.

I just, don't.

Adrian

Dear Mitchell,

Another rejection letter to the pile. I have one more school left that I applied to, but with the way things are going, I highly doubt I'll get in. And then what? I start again with community colleges? I'm not sure if I even want to anymore. Is it worth it?

I'm useless and good for nothing, that's what the world is telling me, and I hate saying things like this to you because you've always been so full of hope, so full of light and you bring out the goodness in the world when all I seem to do is bring pain and suffering on myself. I'm sorry. I don't want to bring you down and dim your light.

I'm sending you my favorite book. I think you'll like it.

Adrian

#### Part 4: Letters between Mitchell and Myra

Dear Myra,

I don't know what happened. I got a phone call from Adrian at like 1am and I could barely understand what he was saying because he was crying and slurring his words. He kept saying Eleanor's name over and over. I think something happened but I'm not sure.

I'll make sure to keep you in touch, but I'm worried.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

Holy fucktits, Batman, you serious?

I don't even. Keep an eye out for him, y'hear? If you're right he probably needs a friend right now. I wish I were closer so I could go see him, but I can't take the time off school so that job falls to you. We're like his only friends, right? He needs us. Oh, and Kat says give him a hug.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal:

I gave Jonathan my iPod, I'm done with it, it's about time he started learning good taste in music.

Mitchell says he wants to come see me, but I'm not sure if it would be a good idea. It's chaos right now and while I'm sure he would have all the necessary tact, we're a little sensitive.

I remember the last thing Eleanor said to me. "Don't follow the cat through the green trees."

I have no idea what it meant, but the way she said it was just so profound. Maybe if I had stopped to ask what she meant instead of paying attention to Jonathan, none of this would have happened.

Dear Myra,

So I got a letter from Adrian that kind of explained things better. Kind of. Something definitely happened to Eleanor. From what I was able to piece together, she got hit by a car and... and died. I feel so bad for their family, Adrian especially. You haven't seen the whole picture the way I have, but he dotes on her so much. He must be devastated.

I'm still not sure what I can do for him except just be there as he needs it.

He must be hurting so bad.

I want to come visit you again soon. Maybe over President's day weekend if you aren't going home. Otherwise we can figure out a different time to make it happen.

I took a walk while trying to figure this out and process. It's the first time I've really been outside for a good amount of time since this summer really. It felt nice. I went to the park a few miles from my place and just walked the trails. It's a huge, old park that you could easily get lost in, a couple acres actually. A good chunk of it is marsh, but most of those are blocked off by the trees that line the trails.

I just wandered up and down the trails a few times. I wandered them aimlessly, crisscrossing the park, kind of avoiding people and so I could just be by myself and think. I didn't have any kind of music player with me. I just wanted to be out and listen to the sound of the trees and animals and little bit of rain. I don't know if it helped me figure anything out. Probably not, but it did lead to some interesting results.

That's right, you guessed it, another Rumi dream.

This time he led me up and down the trails just like every time I dream about him. I was naked, and the park was awake with life. Possums in the trees, a few deer here and there, bugs and trees and ferns and lichen. We found our way to a cliff that doesn't geographically exist and did his usual thing, teasing me at the edge. This time though instead of just watching him jump off the edge from a distance, I chased him to the very edge and almost fell off myself as I skid to a stop, landing on my butt. It was cold by the edge of the cliff, a first for one of these dreams, but also burning hot as if the edge marked an instantaneous transition between heat and cold.

This time I could remember climbing back down the way I had come. As I went, the light of all the living beings faded. I faded. We continued to dim until I got back to where I had started and I found myself standing fully in the dark, as if I were a harbinger of death and the dissipation of the light was a show of respect.

I was fighting back tears when I woke up, weighed down with a sense of both loss and responsibility. It settled on my chest and I've felt it sitting there like a monkey all day. I can't shake it.

I've got a bad feeling.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

Whoa, that's some crazy dream shit, Mitchy-boy. Cats and life and death, it's all very epic. Do you suffer -- no, experience delusions of grandeur at all?

President's day weekend should work fine. Drew will be on duty if you catch my drift.

Kat wants you up here so she can introduce you to her girlfriend. They met after the winter drag show on campus. I had to explain to her what that means since I'm an out of place mountain girl and am not yet cultured in all things queer. Katie (don't get me started) seems pretty cool. She likes a lot of the same bands as me so I immediately had mixed feelings about her as either competition or my new best friend. I'm definitely asking Kat if I get custody should the two of them break up.

Ammon and I parted on more or less amicable terms pretty much right after we started, ah well, we tried. He was good for like the week we were together. William has formally apologized (again) for being a dick and Kat says she thinks he might be trying to win me back. I'm tempted to let him "win" me back just to get into his Mormon man-pants, because I'm 97 percent sure I would be his first. I have to tell myself that while it's okay to be a slut, I am still what my mom calls a proper lady, which means I should act the part and make him woo me before just giving it up. Her advice doesn't really take into the account that in this instance I might have to woo him to get the D, but tact and plotting still apply. I would feel really bad for using him, and kind of bad for coercing him, which is why I come to you my bitchy-boy. Good idea? Bad idea? Should I use my feminine wiles to attract a mate perhaps better suited to my... shall we call it voracious capacity to rule the world?

I don't know what you can do about Adrian. He needs help and it sounds like you aren't the best one to be giving it to him. He's in pain. He's alone. The one thing he wants most in the world for comfort doesn't exist for him anymore. I think you're right that there's nothing we can do except be there for him.

Here's hoping he's receptive.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal

Rett was really understanding and nice after I got fired. He took me back to his place and we finished off his bottle of tequila and had sex again. Up until he told me I needed to leave pretty much as soon as we were done. He told me he had another hook up on his way. So with his cum still leaking out of my ass, I got dressed and walked home.

I felt dirty and used and drunk. When I got home I threw out the pair of underwear I'd been wearing. I didn't want to even worry about cum stains that would just remind me of Rett. I went into the bathroom and tried to throw up, but couldn't. On top of that, the more I think about it the more it starts to concern me that we haven't been using any kind of protection. I can't get pregnant obviously, but if Rett is sleeping with other people, doesn't that put me at higher risk of catching AIDS or something? We haven't talked about it at all and doing some research online, I feel like I should be scared. But I'm not. I just can't muster caring all that much. I'm using that fucker just as much as he's using me.

Dear Myra,

I told you this this weekend, but it bears repeating, if you want to be with William, please let it be because you want to be with him and not because you want to sleep with him. There are plenty of other guys you can do that with and I'm sure they would be more than willing. You're pretty. You're forward. You know what they want. Even as a queer, I have to admit that I'm a little bit attracted to that. But don't, don't, don't, use him for his body. You're better than that and think about what the next woman will have to deal with when you're done with him. Do you want to be responsible for helping create an emotionally stunted douche who doesn't know how to treat a woman right? The answer is no, you don't.

I'm still worried about, Adrian since I haven't heard from him in a little while. Last thing he sent me sounded very depressed and down on himself and I have no idea how to reach out to him. He stopped going to work and got fired. It's frustrating because I just want to tell him to snap out of it, but I know that won't work.

When I called him, his mom said he wasn't there. I worry about him so much. Maybe I'll try again tomorrow. He's become kind of erratic.

Tell Kat it was nice to meet Katie. You're very right that she's like a lesbian version of you, a good balance for Kat's energy. I hope they last longer than you and any of your boys, excuse me, men have so far.

I have no idea why you insisted on apologizing for the dining hall food repeatedly. It wasn't any worse than your standard buffet-style fare, and was probably better since there were vegetarian options. Since I went veggie for New Year's, I find that it seems like everything is covered in meat or uses meat-stock for the sauce or fries it in animal grease. It's disgusting and I had no idea how common that is.

I'm getting to the point where I have to figure out where I'm going to college. I applied to your school, but that was just because it's kind of close to home without being in the same city, not because I really wanted to go there. Granted the more I visit you and make friends, the more I kind of like it. Plus the campus is nice and I like the downtown area.

We'll have to see and I guess I'll make my decision by the end of March.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

I couldn't help but notice how you didn't say anything about what passed between you and Drew when he pulled you down the hall for an HOUR after dinner. Kat and I were rooting for you. We know he keeps a fishbowl of lube and condoms in his room "for us residents" so I wouldn't blame you two for a quickie, though I have a tendency to overestimate your sex life.

I hope he asked you out on a date or something. At least gave you his number. He's a few years older, so I can understand if that would be a little weird for you, but go for it. And if that is the case, you know he would like you to start up here next fall. I mean, make whatever decision feels right for you, but know you have a social group here.

Katie was excited to meet you as well. She wanted to stuff you in a box and keep you in her dorm, though Kat convinced her that you might not be as down for that. Never fear, Room 402 has your back.

Since you left, I've just been buckling down with school. I'm not that worried, but midterms just hit and after I barely scraped by with B's last semester I want to kick a little more ass. Gotta build up that credit load so I can kick ass and get into the classes I want and am interested in. They don't tell you this, but as a freshman, you're kind of fucked getting into the classes you really should be in (i.e. the interesting ones) because all the sophomores and even some of the upperclassmen register before you so you get stuck with the dregs. Granted, with all those AP credits of yours, I'm sure anywhere you go you'll start about where I am. Jerk. Do you have to be good at everything? You make the rest of us look bad.

Speaking of bad, shit, it sounds like things with Adrian are getting bad. That poor guy. It's like the perfect storm of everything possible going wrong going wrong. If there is a god, some benevolent creator/ruler who micromanages our everyday lives because he has nothing to do late at night, he's kind of a dick for no apparent reason.

There's not much you can do for him, especially at a distance. He won't want to hear the usual clichés: that it gets better with time and blah blah blah, but that's about all we can give him. What's his address? Maybe if I send him some condolences or something it'll help him feel better.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal:

Dear Mitchell,

I doubt you will ever see this, but on the off chance that you do: I want you to know that I do not want you to blame yourself. Everything that happened was my choice and my choice alone. Never blame yourself for my choices.

What I didn't say to you in my last letter was that there were two rejection letters waiting for me in the mail. I just couldn't take it. On top of everything else, it just seemed like the icing on the cake.

I've tried to be elegant for you, tried to write only the truth and only things that would bring you up, but even in that I have failed. You're smart enough to have noticed, smart enough to see my slow deterioration so this should be no surprise. I wish it could be any other way.



I'm sorry to put my parents through this and to put you through this. Especially with everything that has happened, but I don't see any other way to continue. I need a drastic change and I think this is the best course of action.

I'm sure when they find this letter, they'll ask you what you know, ask you how much I've told you, but by then it will be too late. I'm sorry to put you through that, but I do it because I trust that you of all people would be able to withstand it.

Adrian

Dear Myra,

Adrian mailed me his copy of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Like his personal copy that has a stamp on the inside saying "This book belongs to: \_\_\_\_" with his name in like kindergartener scrawl. There are marks in it, in varying colors of pen and pencil. Like he's had this forever. And now it's... mine. I'm super honored or whatever that he wanted me to have this, after all, he knows how much I love books, but why?

He's killing me with this, Myra!

Haha, you were half right about Drew and me. He did ask me for a date! And while we did make out a little bit, we did not have sex. He wanted me to stay the night in his room, but all I had to do was say "Myra" and he just kind of nodded. You, girl, have quite the reputation in the dorm apparently. Nothing too bad, except for being fairly loud and opinionated and loud. And everyone knows you know your shit and if it weren't for the fact that you're also likeable, people would probably hate you for all of the above. I was a little proud when he told me that, except he didn't tell me. The look of abject defeat at any further hope getting me in his bed was enough. I was like, that's my girl. But don't let that go to your head. I don't love you that much.

I had another dream with Rumi. Somehow I have this feeling that it's going to be the last one. It started out the same as all the other ones. The usual naked, lights, trees and all that. I still followed Rumi up to the edge of the cliff. I had a plan in mind and it seemed like this first part only took a sentence or two in a paragraph instead of the half page it had been before. This time instead of just standing there and watching him jump, I jumped after him. I took a running leap and flew off the edge of the cliff.

At first I was falling. I was weightless and my stomach was in my throat and I thought for sure that this was it, that I would die and it would be the end. But I kept falling. Talk about falling through the rabbit hole! It was weird and it was definitely scary for a bit, but it felt right. And as I continued to fall, the lights got brighter. They got brighter and brighter like in the first dream until I was blinded and blinking and completely overwhelmed.

All of a sudden I was standing in a kind of nowhere space. Everything around me was white, there was no floor to speak of, no walls or ceiling, just endless whiteness. And then a dot way off in front of me. You can probably guess that it was Rumi, walking toward me ever so slowly with this smug cat smile on his face as if to say "it took you long enough."

"How are you getting on?"

The voice wasn't like any voice I know, and it wasn't out loud. There wasn't anything to hear in the white space. Except it wasn't white anymore. It was black. Pitch black just as complete as the white had been.

Rumi seemed to think that there was enough of himself in sight, and took no more steps

further. I wondered if he was playing with me, if I was alive or if I was dead.

"Oh, you ca'n't help that," Rumi said, or whatever passed for speech. "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

He was quoting the Cheshire Cat at me.

"Don't you get what this has been, Mitchell?" The place or not place or limbo or whatever you want to call where we were was orange. Orange in all directions in smooth, uninterrupted shade of tabby. "A message from the great Friend, but you're too late. So very late, but that's okay. It will be okay in the end, green-child."

*A stone I died and rose again a plant;*

*A plant I died and rose an animal;*

*I died an animal and was born a man.*

*Why should I fear? What have I lost by death?*

And then in Rumi's place was a little girl. She couldn't have been more than five years old, she had dark hair that went down about mid back. She was wearing Batman pajamas and no socks or shoes.

She smiled this brilliant smile and then I don't remember anything else in the dream after that. Isn't that freaky? I'm kind of praying it isn't true since that would be just way too scary, but I think I dreamed about Eleanor. It seriously has me a little freaked out because I have no idea what it means.

I think there's some message about reincarnation or hope or death and I'm just not one hundred percent sure to be honest. But there was a finality here. I don't think I'm going to have any more dreams about Rumi.

I should tell Endee. Or maybe just leave it be. I don't think I'm going to tell Adrian about my dream just because he might freak out over the Eleanor thing. He's been through enough because of me and rather than bring up more pain, I should probably just apologize.

It's late, so I think I'm going to bed. Hope to hear from you soon.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

I KNEW IT! Don't base your decision on a boy, but I think you should definitely come here for school and date Drew and just be awesome in my presence. It seems like everyone is pairing up beside me. Even William has found a new girl. Some redhead that most of us don't like, but we're willing to tolerate her for now because we won't necessarily all be this close next year since we won't necessarily all be living in such close proximity. I've kind of accepted being a single lady and am enjoying the attention of being able to just sort of be around. I'm a hot little tart and I know how to work it.

But seriously if you come down here you know we would have a blast. Drew and Kat can show you all the cool queer things to do, I can just show you the cool things to do. It would be awesome.

But don't base your decision on this. Go to school where you think you'll be able to thrive and learn your passions, or be with friends. You know, no pressure. The decision is completely up to you.

Okay, fine, I promise I'll shut up about your imminent decision of which college you will

attend... for now, but know I have a strong preference.

It's still a few months away, but I'm already thinking about going home for the summer. I was never meant to stay up in the mountains. I have a few friends back home, they're a few years older and they either never left or came back. I don't want to be that. It's nice and I'm thankful for my family, but I can't stay there. After next year, I think I want to try to move off campus so they don't kick me out and send me home every break. Not only is the effort of packing up tedious, but I need a change of scenery, at least for a few years.

Kat has been getting angry with me talking about moving out. I don't completely blame her since we haven't even gotten to spring break yet. But after that, the rest of the semester is going to fly by. We've agreed we're going to live together next year and maybe if we can still tolerate each other after two years, move into an apartment or house together.

Do you think you would come visit Endee again over the summer? If you do, you have to call me so we can hang out.

But it's almost time for dinner.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal:

So I just got home from some summer camp my parents made me go to. I wanted to stay home with Eleanor and Jonathan and take them out to enjoy the sun, but they wanted me to spend some time around people my own age.

It was sunny and there were far too many people at first, but as I got to know everyone there was a shift somewhere in the middle of the week. All of a sudden, we had this sense of cohesion. All the staff kept talking about community and I think that's the moment it clicked and we all really felt like a community.

The dynamics on the individual level were pretty much exactly the same, but it felt different. It was like when a storm is coming and you can feel it in the air. It's this weight in the sky pushing down on everything and everyone. You can't see it and you probably won't have any idea what it is until the storm breaks when all of a sudden it's pouring and everything immediately feels lighter and brighter even though you're getting drenched. That's what it was like.

That and I noticed Mitchell.

I couldn't tell you what it was about him, but looking at him, I knew. Still not one hundred percent sure what I knew, but I knew. He would be with me until the end of my life.

Dear Myra

It's been almost a month now since Adrian committed suicide. I called his house a little after my last letter to you and his mom answered. She was crying so hard she couldn't even tell me what happened. Finally a younger woman took the phone from her and asked me what I wanted. When I explained that I was Adrian's friend Mitchell, she just said "oh" and got all quiet.

I thought she'd hung up or dropped the phone, but she was still there. I could hear her breathing and Adrian's mom was still crying in the background.

"Mitchell, I'm really sorry, but.. I'm so sorry." And then she was crying, too.

That's about when I knew that something was wrong. I started to panic. "What happened?!"

"Mitchell, Adrian is dead."

I stayed on the phone with them for an hour, trying to piece together what I could. Apparently he was driving drunk and hit a tree head-on. When I called, police were still investigating, but they're saying it might be suicide.

It was in the news the next day. The tree was too far off the road for it to be an accident and with how smashed up the car was, he was going way too fast in a school zone to cause that much damage.

Here's a copy of a newspaper clipping. I might come down to visit you a lot sooner, just as an excuse to get away.

Mitchell

### **Car crash resulting in death of teen being investigated as a suicide**

A local teen died on Tuesday in what appears to be a suicide.

The teen, identified as Adrian Moore, 17, was driving on Drury Lane early when he had a head-on collision with a tree. The crash woke neighbors who called police, but by the time officers arrived on scene, Moore was dead said Sgt. Robert White.

Moore was a senior at Northcrest High School and while suicide is being investigated as a possibility, no final ruling has been made. Early reports show Moore to have had blood alcohol levels of almost 0.16 percent, nearly twice the legal limit. It is believed that Moore died instantly.

In a tragic twist for the Moore family, this is not the first death in the family this year. They lost their youngest daughter when she was hit by a car while playing outside in January. Family members said that Moore, as the oldest child still living at home may have felt partially responsible for his younger sister's death.

Dear Mitchell,

Fuck.

Fuck shit fuckity fuck shit fuck.

Feel free to come up if you need to. I was wondering why I hadn't heard from you in a while. And I mean, this is probably going to take a bit to process and I want you to know you're supported. I've got your back, as does Kat and Katie and Drew. Are you going to the funeral?

Just SHIT!

I got your letter after classes, but didn't check it until after dinner. Subsequently started screaming and scared the fuck out of Kat. When I calmed down enough to tell her what happened she gave me a big hug. That poor family. From what you've told me, it's pretty obvious that Adrian was depressed, especially after Eleanor died, but damn. Did you know he was drinking a lot? For that matter, where was he even getting alcohol?

There are so many unanswered questions.

Take care of yourself first, you know it's what Adrian would want.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Diary

Two days post camp and I'm already feeling like the world is closing in on me. It's hard to notice while you're there how much more open everyone is at camp.

On the second to last day, I finally talked to Mitchell. I just sat down next to him at breakfast and started talking. I mean, it wasn't like that was the first time we met, the camp was big, but it wasn't that big and as two of the oldest youth, we were kind of automatically looked to by some of the younger youth, which put us together anyway.

He just smiled at me with this dazzling smile and asked how I slept. It was just so perfectly normal. I'm totally infatuated.

We talked a few more times and sat near each other on the bus ride home. Before we said goodbye, he asked for my address so he could send me letters.

Dear Myra,

I went to the funeral this weekend.

His family just looked so defeated and broken. Especially his mom. Phoebe, his older sister, approached me afterward and asked if I would join her for lunch after the service.

The final results came in and it was decided that Adrian did commit suicide. Just like I said to you, at that speed and that far off the road, even drunk it couldn't have been an accident. Plus they - they found a letter in his journal written to me that was basically a suicide note. The police have a copy as evidence, but Phoebe wanted me to have it since it was addressed to me. That's why she asked me to lunch, so she could give me his journal. She didn't want to do it in front of their parents because she felt like they would be too upset by it. It was the same journal from camp. I remember because Adrian had me sign it at the end of the week yearbook style and he made this beautiful collage for the cover.

Because of some other things written in his journal, police are investigating this guy, Rett, that Adrian met at work before he got fired. Phoebe blushed a little as she told me that, so I can imagine what I'm going to find. I hope that if this Rett guy is in any way involved he feels bad about what he contributed to.

She also gave me a shoebox full of all the letters I've sent him over the last year or so. She said they would probably just get thrown out otherwise so she wanted me to have them. Apparently they're moving pretty soon. I don't blame them, with how much they've lost I don't know how they could stay in the same house.

It sounds like Jonathan is going to counseling and will be for a while, at least until they're sure they won't have to worry about him reacting badly to Eleanor and Adrian. Jonathan is young enough that he can probably grow up with it only as a distant memory, but there's a lot of mental and emotional baggage for him to carry around as it is. Their family can't take any more losses right now.

We sat in silence for a bit before our food came.

After lunch she gave me a big hug and just held it for like a minute, then whispered "thank you" and started crying. I held her while she cried and when she finally pulled away, she looked me in the eye, kissed me on the forehead and said thank you again.

"Mitchell, you have been the greatest source of light in my younger brother's life these last few months, and even though it wasn't enough to change the way things turned out, I just want to say thank you for doing what you can."

I got home later that night and started reading his journal and some of the letters I sent him and I broke down crying too. I just don't understand how someone can carry around so much pain and blame and never let it out.

It's heartbreaking, Myra, to see so much pain and never be able to do anything about it. I mean, we try. We try like hell, but I'm not sure if it makes any kind of difference. But you can't just not try. If you don't try, you might as well be causing more problems.

Anyway, I just wanted to update you.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

At the very least there's some kind of resolution now. Adrian might be dead, but he's at peace. And if you believe in an afterlife, he's with Eleanor.

I don't want to know all the details of Adrian's journal. I'll leave that between you two and for one time in my life will refrain from asking. Even I could see how much you meant to him so as you're reading you'll probably find a lot of deeply personal stuff. Don't do like he did and hold it all in, okay?

So will you be coming up over your spring break? Our school schedules are a little off, so I think you have break the week before we do, which would be perfect because then you know I would be here for you to visit.

You could come visit me up in Leavenworth too, but I might not even be there. Kat wanted me to come with her to their family's beach house in California. Have a little bit of a road trip, maybe invite a few of the boys. The usual kind of spring break stuff us college kids are supposedly getting up to every year around late-March or April.

Okay, maybe not that usual a kind of stuff, but you know what I mean.

I should be studying because of midterms, but I'm not. I'm starting to think I have a bad habit developing. I would act worried, but no one would believe me.

Granted two of my midterms are take-home papers and I'm well-versed in the game of last minute bullshitery. In fact, it's something at which I quite excel. I'm more than able to keep up with writing you, aren't I?

Kat and I went up to the mall for the first time. I desperately needed a new pair of shoes for a job interview, and Kat needed a new backpack because hers conveniently decided to split apart at the seams on her way through campus last week. While downtown is nice, it just doesn't have the kind of things we were looking for, at least not at a price we're willing to afford.

It was a madhouse! I have no idea why, since it's not like the holiday season anymore, but there were so many people. I don't know, maybe malls are always like that and I'm just the mountain hick who's not used to seeing crowds that large, or maybe I've been spoiled by the sprawl that is our college campus, but it was packed. If it weren't for Kat's fluorescent coat, there were multiple times where I'm pretty sure I would have lost her in the crowd. Grandmas with ankle weights and sweatbands, roving bands of middle schoolers, screaming children on little primary-colored leashes walking within a six foot radius of mom or dad, they all made an appearance. Great masses of people sometimes agitate me to the point of anger, and at least twice I wanted to go on a flailing elbow rampage leaving no survivors in my wake.

I didn't though and after a few stops at some of the bigger chains, Kat and I both found what

we were looking for at a reasonable price. We weren't super happy to be supporting the Man, but when you have a need that must be met, you make sacrifices of your smaller moral stances in favor of getting the job done. It's an unfortunate truth of the world, Mitchy-boy, and I hope you never have to experience it, but odds are not in that favor. Malls are evil, terrible places filled with sadness and pain. They're also one of the best year-round places to people watch.

As Kat and I were leaving the music store, we saw this guy just come streaking out of one of the clothing places with a giant pile of clothes stacked higher than his head. He made a beeline for the exit, so we were pretty sure he was shoplifting. I'm not saying I condone it, but the sheer absurdity of a pile of clothes that big was just too much. I burst out laughing and Kat kind of glared at me but was clearly doing her best to contain her own cackling.

My favorite thing we saw though was the posse of middle schoolers loitering by the entrance who attempted to cat call us as we walked past. They were clearly going through some kind of faux-punk sub-hardcore phase or something with their backwards baseball caps and skate shoes. Kat sort of bristled as we walked past, so I knew if her hackles were raised I would be given full reign to make them regret their decision.

I immediately stopped and turned around, I walked to the one closest to us, stole his hat from his head and, putting myself at risk for lice, put it on my head before sitting next to him on the bike rack.

"So, you got a giiiiirlfriend? Jack?"

"My name's Tim." I loved how his voice kind of cracked as he said it.

"Whatever, Martin, do you ever want to have a girlfriend?" I put my arm around him.

"Uh, yeah."

"Well, Ashley, you're not going to get one if you and your friends keep acting like this. Do you still think it means you like a girl when you pull your hair or have you grown out of that phase yet?"

He was getting flustered. Like a shark smelling blood, I went in for the kill.

"See, you boys need to learn how to talk to a lady. Take my friend Kat here. She's pretty, right?" I some pressure on his shoulders as I said it.

"Right."

"And if you wanted to compliment her, you'd probably say something to get her attention first, right?"

"Mhmm."

"But you have to stay a little distance off, making yourself look smaller. Smaller things are cuter and thus less threatening. Excuse me, you chose to wear a very lovely jacket, it flatters your figure."

Thankfully Kat played along. "Thank you."

"See, you always want your compliment to compliment her. It's never about what she has. A lady does not have a nice ass. Kat, do you have a nice ass?"

"No, I work hard to make my ass look good and I think it shows. It isn't an object I carry around with me."

"You see, Alvin? And this isn't just about a fine ass, either. The same principle applies to anything. A nice shirt or shoes are nice choices. Most importantly, your compliment has to be sincere."

He was squirming under my arm.

"Now, I'm going to be back here in a week or two and if there's some girly on the playground who tents your basketball shorts when the guys aren't around, you compliment her the way I just told you, right before you ask her out on a date, and if you treat her right, there's a good chance she'll be your girlfriend. I expect a full report."

Grabbing Kat by the hand, I skipped away. His friends were ribbing him and giving him a hard time. We were just rounding the corner when I heard him squeal "my hat!" and then we started running.

I still have the hat. Hung it on my wall next to the poster of the Abby Road album cover. I consider it a trophy for educating America's youth.

When you come up, we should troll the mall rats.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Diary

I got my first letter from Mitchell today. He wrote using a green pen. At first I had a hard time reading his cursive, but after a little while I got used to it. He told me how he was nervous about starting his junior year of high school.

Eleanor sat with me while I read his letter. She put her head in my lap and fell asleep. I finished the letter and looked down to find her completely zonked out. There's something indescribably peaceful about the sight of a sleeping child that makes me feel bad about disturbing them. Though that might also be partially the fact that when they're awake they're hyperactive little monsters that never turn off. It was the same way a few years ago when Jonathan was her age, but I also had to pee.

Try as I might though, I couldn't get up without waking her. She's such a light sleeper sometimes.

I started writing Mitchell back but couldn't think what to write about. I'm not really doing anything interesting. My life is so boring right now. I need to pick up a hobby or something. I went through five pieces of paper before even starting to write back. I've never really written a letter before.

Dear Myra,

Haha, that sounds like hella fun. You have to tell me if Tim gets a girlfriend. I still want to try to come up for spring break, even without Adrian.

I really miss him, Myra. Some days I find myself thinking about him and just sort of idly wondering what he's up to before I remember he's dead. But it's slowly getting easier. Having his journal helps. I can look back at time when he was happy, you know? And sort of trace how he fell so far. It doesn't really make it any better, but knowing how and why helps me come to terms with it. If I can understand, I can't blame him. I can't hold it against him. He was really hurting from a lot of things and even if we did everything we could, he needed a lot more help than that even.

I've been talking to Drew a lot, and he knows what it's like. He had one of his friends from high school die in a car crash a few years ago. It's not quite the same thing as suicide, but he knows what it's like to lose someone you're close to. I'm glad he's so willing to support even if he only met Adrian the one time. He even told me that at first he was jealous of Adrian because he thought he



was my boyfriend. Which isn't completely untrue since there was always something between us, but also not completely true because we weren't seeing each other.

I had another dream about Rumi. Only this one was different. He didn't lead me anywhere. He just sat there looking at me. And that's when I knew he didn't have anything more for me. I learned whatever I needed to learn during his last visit to my dreams.

*This place is a dream.*

*Only a sleeper considers it real.*

*Then death comes like dawn,  
and you wake up laughing  
at what you thought was your grief.*

He was warning me because he knew. That's why he disappeared, isn't it? Maybe we'll never know. I nodded at him and he nodded back then walked away into the trees. I just started walking in any random direction.

Anyway, I woke up with a distinct feeling of peace.

So do you have a lot of take-home exams in college, or does it depend on the class? I think I've finally decided where I'm going to school (mailing my acceptance response in the morning) and I want to know more about what it's like actually taking college classes and stuff. If I maybe come up for a few days during the week of my spring break, do you think I could shadow you or Kat to some of your classes? I might ask Drew if I can go with him to some of his as well.

Graduation is so close, it's going to be so hard to keep up any kind of motivation.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

So you're coming here in the fall!? I'm so excited! I know you didn't say as much in your letter, trying to be all sly and shit, but you mentioned talking to Drew and I figured he would know what your decision is. Loverboy squealed like a stuck pig (what's a stuck pig?). You should have known better than to try to keep secrets from your best-bitch Myra. I have ways of finding out everything. And I mean everything.

It also sounds like you have a rather serious case of senioritis. You should probably get that checked out. Dr. Myra prescribes talking to a guidance counselor or wide-eyed, impressionable freshman who still thinks they're the shit in high school even though they haven't even finished puberty yet. It will either give you a perspective that makes you want to finish strong, or convince you to just give up entirely. I probably should have prefaced this with the fact that your results will vary greatly.

Yes, you can come with us to class, though if you come to my intro to psych class, you may be called on to answer things. The professor has a habit of pointing at people randomly and expecting them to know what's going on. You can't say I didn't give you fair warning.

So will you be staying with Kat and I or will you be staying with Drew? There are advantages and disadvantages either way. Let me list them out for you.

Advantages of staying with Kat and I:

- We're awesome.

- You've stayed with us before so you know what to expect.
- Pillows galore.
- Projector.
- Balls of yarn (gays are like oversized, cat-boys, right?)
- More people means more warmth.
- Katie might stay over a night as well.

Disadvantages of staying with Kat and I:

- Despite our best efforts, we're women.
- Our bathroom is currently a disaster area.
- Katie might stay over a night as well.
- With three or four people, our room is kind of small.

Advantages of staying with Drew:

- He's kinda cute the more you look at him.
- Cuddling and/or sex to keep warm.
- Bigger room/fewer people = less crowded.
- Bathroom, while probably a mess, is boy mess that you would be used to.
- That little bowl of condoms he keeps for residents is cute.
- Still close to Kat and I.
- He is an excellent conversationalist and consistently whoops both Kat and me in Scrabble.

Disadvantages of staying with Drew:

- As an RA, he may be on duty.
- Guaranteed not as many pillows
- You don't get to be with the awesomeness that is my room.

Okay, fine. Staying with Drew would kind of win hands down if you had to choose. I won't hold it against you if you stay with him, just promise you at least get shirtless. I'm not saying have full on sex, but get close. And be safe!

Maybe coming to college for a bit will inspire you to finish school strong and get that diploma.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal

I was driving around town, not necessarily looking for something to do, just kind of thinking to myself. My summer break is coming to a close and I have to start thinking about the future, but not just my future. I also have to look at Eleanor's future and Jonathan's future and think about what kind of role model I want to be for them.

Phoebe was that kind of role model for me, but she hasn't really been around in their lives the way I am. I feel like it's my responsibility as an older brother. My parents deny it, but whether they mean to or not, it's the truth.

I want to be the best big brother out there.

Dear Myra,

Why am I not surprised? I would lecture you for your outbursts and general intrusiveness, but I know beyond a doubt that you're incorrigible and so anything I do in that regard would be pointless.

If it makes you feel better, I plan on splitting my time between you and Drew, and not just because I'm interested in him. Like you so rightly asserted, y'all are girls and while I love and celebrate you for it, that's kind of not my main interest. Though the yarn is tempting...

I'll be down next week, probably around Wednesday if that works for you. Call me since I doubt a letter will get to me in time to change plans. My parents already know I'm going to see you, so we don't have to worry about them freaking out and calling me several times in the middle of a movie like they did last time. That was embarrassing, do you remember that?

I took your advice and talked to one of my "wide-eyed, impressionable freshmen" friends. She actually gave me some really good perspective on high school. I'm not going to try any harder than I have to because the conclusion that we came to is that high school is kind of a joke. You have to sit through it and finish, but it's not something to hang your life on. You can do well without high school and there are so many more important things to worry about.

The important thing to get out of the high school experience is the social life. To realize that we're all in this big melting pot of adventures and thoughts and backgrounds. It's dipping your toes into the ocean of life. You can't stop there, you have to jump in headlong and go as far as you can. High school should be a springboard into the future if it's anything at all.

We were a little high at the time, so most of that thought was probably just stoner rambling. But the point is, I'm not going to give up on high school yet. There's still too much to experience to give up on it just yet.

I'm glad that my hours at work are so flexible. Sandwich making is so boring, I feel like I've gained at least five pounds from working here because of all the meat and white bread. Plus people are obnoxious. At least once a week I get someone in here that calls it an "I-talian." I'm like, no dumbass, do you call it "I-taly?" No, you don't because you would look like an idiot, but the customer is always right so I just have to bite my tongue and ask if they'd like mayonnaise on it, all the time secretly hoping they tip me well and if they don't tip at all, wish that the mayo gives them a heart attack. Which is mean, I know, but not unwarranted! Who wouldn't tip someone as cute as me? A cruel-hearted devil who probably deserves to die. I'd even be happy if they just throw pennies in. Just validate me, goddammit!

Sorry, is my inner attention whore showing?

I'm looking forward to seeing Drew. We've been talking pretty much every day for a few weeks now. At first it was kind of helping me process Adrian, but after a while, I found myself just wanting to talk to him more and more. He's a nice guy and a great kisser. I'm kind of looking forward to that last bit. And if I find out you told him about this, I will murder you in your sleep. Kat will be my accomplice and then we'll run away together to Argentina to escape from the law. But seriously, you get to know everything, but that does not mean telling everything. PLEASE!

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

I'm so glad to have had you stay in my humble dorm again. E403 gains a new kind of light to it every time you're here.

The random dance party in the hallway last night was so much fun. You're the only reason it was able to happen, you know that right? If you hadn't been there, Drew wouldn't have joined us and I'm pretty sure as an RA he would have had to shut it down. But since you were there, he partook so it was okay. Plus the look on William and Bernard's faces when they peeked their heads out the door as we were blasting past. Classic!

I hope college classes didn't scare you off too much. In my defense, I did warn you about my psych professor and especially with such an embarrassing question. Granted you knew the answer, you smartass. Way to make a girl proud.

How come you've never once mentioned that you can knit circles around Kat and I? I was only joking when I asked you if you wanted to come to Stitch'N'Bitch with us, but then you went and showed us up! You dick! How am I supposed to surprise you with handmade gifts knowing you could make something twice as good in half the time. Now I need to think of something else entirely to get you for your birthday.

William asked me about Adrian after you left. I felt a little bad breaking the news to him, but for what it's worth he seemed genuinely conflicted. Someone might even say sad. It was in the middle of open dance at swing. He asked me how come Adrian didn't come up to visit this time and I just sort of paused in the dance and said "Because he's dead."

I know, that's not the most tactful way of letting someone know, but since when have I been known for my tact? Also, I'm still kind of processing myself. Like, what do you say to someone? William said he wants to talk more about it later, which so far still hasn't happened, but he always manages to follow through somehow so I should hear from him before the end of the week.

On a different note, I'm looking forward to my own spring break. As soon as you left on Saturday, Kat and I finalized plans to go to her family's beach house in California! I'm so ready for sun and fun and swimming and maybe some kind of shark encounter (you never know) and boys boys boys!

Yes, I'm a little crazy. A little boy crazy. Ahahaha! I crack myself up.

We leave on Monday and I wanted to mail this to you before we left. Talk to you when we get back.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal

I read a news article the other day that was actually a feature about camp!

It was a nice reminder that that kind of world exists. It was also kind of sad that it sounded like the organization is struggling. They do such great things to change people's lives. I mean, I wouldn't have met Mitchell without it.

It worries me. If something that great can't sustain itself, what about the rest of us? We're all so tiny in comparison. It kind of breaks my heart to think about. A couple of camp friends started a group online to try to raise money, but based on the comments from some of the staff who got added to the group, I'm not sure if that's the best thing to do. It sounds like there are a lot of issues on the leadership end. So we're kind of powerless and I don't know what we can do.

Still, there are people working to make it happen, people dedicated to making sure camp

survives. That's a good thing right? It won't end if we don't let it. We just have to keep working hard.

Dear Myra,

Your professor's question was really easy. I mean, what pair of researchers investigate human sexuality in the 60s and 70s? Of course it would be Masters and Johnson. Even if I wasn't queer I would know that, but I am pretty damn gay (as Drew could tell you) and most of us gays are pretty well read on the whole topic of sexuality. I read about the Kinsey report in middle school and despite being gay I have known more about the female reproductive system (short of actually seeing and interacting with it) than most of the boys my age since I was fifteen.

I could explain the difference between the major and minor labial folds, describe why many women experience rhythmic contractions of the uterus during orgasm, name all the tubes and passageways that sperm passes through on its way out of the body during ejaculation. I am a master of sexual knowledge and not just because of porn. Though to you I'm willing to admit that that was a big educational factor. Not exclusively since porn is kind of biased toward big tits and unrealistic positions that require ridiculous flexibility. Also, it's faked. But analyze porn with appropriate knowledge of what real sex can be like and it can be quite interesting regardless of your orientation. Mostly I just think straight porn is hilarious because the acting is so bad. The kind where it's supposed to be a parody of an actual movie is my favorite. It's like, people actually buy this. They go to work at a grocery store or whatever and bag produce for little old ladies and then go home and jack off to people pretending to be sexy vampires or something. The entire straight porn industry is a joke to me.

I had the weekend to myself after I got back. My parents had gone out of town to see a friend and instead of calling me or texting me before they left (let alone telling me they were leaving for the week ahead of time), I got home to a completely empty house with a small note on the refrigerator that I didn't notice until the next morning. I spent Sunday just kind of hanging out around the house. It was nice to be alone. This was exactly how I imagined last summer could have been had they not sent me to Endee's, but I can't really complain about that because if they'd let me stay home by myself, I wouldn't have met you.

This week has been full of catching up. I had an English assignment I'd totally forgotten about over break and then since I was scrambling to work on that, I started to fall behind in some of my other classes and shit basically snowballed on me. Luckily by Friday I had managed to get my shit together and even had a successful study session with my friend Jake who's also going to be starting as a freshman in the fall. You should meet him, you kind of remind me of him sometimes. Though maybe that's a reason you two shouldn't meet, you'd probably kill each other.

Hope your spring break was good!

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

It. Rained. The. Entire. Trip.

I was so pissed. Kat was wonderful of course and had all kinds of things planned for us to do, but I wanted to ogle hot guys on the beach.

Instead we played I don't know how many games of scrabble and monopoly and clue. In exchange I taught her card tricks. I taught her the rubadub vanish and the ace shake trick before we

accidentally left the only deck of cards out to be soaked by the rain on the one day it was kind of dry. She tried to teach me how to play guitar, but that was kind of an epic fail. I don't think I have the right kind of coordination in my hands. Also, I don't understand music. Things go up and down and I just want to dance.

By the third day, we were suffering from a mild case of cabin fever and were probably a little bonkers, so we took video of ourselves in all kinds of crazy outfits lip-syncing to pop songs. I hope we get internet famous from that shit. I'll post you a link after I finish writing this. Tell me what you think and be honest.

By the fourth day, we had to get out. Kat told me to put on some clothes and we went to the mall. It was basically the same as the mall back home, except slightly less packed. That makes me think that the one at home is just ridiculously high traffic. I hope it does something for our local economy. There were still a lot of people, and some of them looked about our age, so I'm guessing they were there for the same reasons we were, to escape the rain.

We people watched and window shopped and basically had a great time getting out. Kat helped me pick out a new outfit (a pink dress. Pink, Mitchell, PINK!) because she'd found this all-ages show in town that she wanted us to go to.

The show was amazing! The band was this hella cute punk group. Nobody I've ever heard of and I wasn't really paying attention to Kat when she told me who they were. She was excited that they had a female drummer who kind of kicked ass. Which I agree. Best person up on stage, though I liked the bassist's dreads. Wanted to run my hands through that grungy mess and pull it while we had some other kind of fun... Danced with this one guy who totally grabbed my ass and started making out with me while we were dancing. His breath tasted kind of like whiskey. It made me want to throw up, but he knew how to use his tongue. At one point he asked me if I wanted to go with him to the bathroom and I tried to decline as politely as possible...

That means I laughed in his face and told him to fuck off. Just because you stick your tongue down my throat doesn't mean I'll take my pants off for you. Kat stepped in when he really didn't get the picture. She started making out with me!

That was a complete surprise. I actually got kind of into it, though that may have been the vodka Kat had found for us before we left for the show. Her mouth was so soft and sweet comparison to anyone else I've kissed. I asked her about it once we were sure the guy was gone and she told me it's the lip gloss she uses. Before you ask, I'm not going lesbian and this isn't the start of some kind of exploratory phase. It was a onetime thing that happened during one drunken moment and neither of us has plans to repeat, especially since Kat is dating Katie. But suffice it to say that it wasn't bad.

The next day I woke up feeling like hell. I had a hangover, I smelled like cheap drinks, sweat and smoke, and I was covered in unknown amounts of glitter. It was great. I showered downstairs while Kat showered upstairs and we convened in the kitchen for breakfast.

We spent the day in recovery and marathoned old movies her family had hidden in the cupboard. The next day we went out again, this time walking around downtown in the rain, just kind of exploring town. We had to pack up when we got back though in order to leave on time in the morning.

The drive back was just as long as the drive down, but it was nice. Ironically, the farther north we got, the sunnier it got. It seems like we brought the rain south with us. Got back to the

dorm kind of late on Saturday and both passed out cold.

Today has been preparing for the last month or so of the term. Going to try to finish strong. Aiming for that 4.0 to finish my first year of college.

Myra D.

\* \* \*

Totally forgot about your letter until just now. It was sitting in the mail when I got home, but I just sort of threw it on my desk to focus on writing to you. Was grabbing an envelope when I saw it and then I had to add another page.

Damn right you met me! I'm awesome and you'd best be glad you got to meet me. Otherwise I have some strong words to share with you next time I see you. But I guess I'm glad you got some time to yourself. You need to take as much of that as you can. Once you get to college you're going to have a roommate and your chances for alone time will be much fewer and further between. I lucked out with Kat, you might not be so lucky rooming with guys and all.

What?! Porn is fake?! Someone alert the newspapers! I'm glad you've got your whole sex thing figured out, but I do not need to hear that much about it. Just because I have a uterus doesn't mean I want to know all about how it works. You can keep that information to yourself thank you very much.

And this Jake intrigues me. If he really is that much like me, you're right, I may have to kill him. There's only room in this world for one of me. Anyone else is competition and I will win.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's Journal

It's been a little while since I wrote. No good news really. I failed my English class, so now I don't know if I'm going to graduate next year. My teacher told me I should talk to one of the guidance counselors during free period next week to see if there's anything I can do. I might be able to take a summer class to make up for it. I'm not excited about it, but if it's the only option I have, I guess I'll have to.

I wish I was better with words. I have such a hard time with reading though. It just doesn't make sense. I see the words on the page and I can read them, but analyzing it and writing about it? What the hell am I supposed to do? The words are words, there's supposed to be some kind of deeper meaning there?

This sucks, but it could always be worse.

Dear Myra,

Two months until I graduate from high school. Time's just flying by. It seems like it was years ago that I was listening to you through a radio. On top of that, it looks like I might be graduating with honors. This feels like the home stretch. My parents are getting kind of annoying with the way that they keep reminding me that the home stretch is often the hardest stretch. Like I don't know that already.

My plan is just to keep working all summer, maybe take some time off to come visit you and Endee for a week or two before I move down for school. It'll be nice to have a little bit of money saved up especially if financial aid isn't able to help much beyond the basics.

Speaking of Endee, I got a card from her. She wanted to tell me that "after much thought and

consideration she has finally come to terms with the fact that Rumi is gone and will not be coming back” but since she is a single woman, still values companionship and so has “adopted a puppy and named him Hafiz.” I had no idea who Hafiz is, but I had this sneaking suspicion so I did some research and I was right. You can probably guess this, but he’s a Sufi poet who wrote in Arabic and in the last fifty or so years has gained international acclaim as his work has been translated into other languages. I swear, if I start having dreams about this dog, I’m going to kill myself.

Ouch, suicide jokes, maybe a bit too soon for that.

I hate to be bringing him up all the time, but it still stings a little thinking about Adrian. He didn’t even get to experience graduating high school, you know? Looking through some of his older journal entries, it was one of the few things he was really excited about. That and us (both you and me). It’s crazy to think how much of a difference just being there for someone can make, you know? He really valued having us in his life.

Your spring break adventure, while not everything you hoped it would be, sounds like you still had quite the trip. In the interest of full honesty: Your video just kind of makes you two look crazy. It’s adorable, don’t get me wrong, and the outfit you’re wearing in the third sequence is just fantastic, but you look like a couple of crazy people. I hope you’re proud of yourself.

Jake really wants to meet you, too. I showed him your video and he thought you were cute. That makes him somewhat deluded if you ask me, but I don’t necessarily think deluded is a bad thing. In fact, with you it would probably be helpful. Just make sure you don’t break him. He’s not a toy, he’s my friend. He’s a good guy, nice, cute, funny, crass as all hell, and more than willing to put up with my shit. He also looks great in a swimsuit, but don’t tell him I said that.

Maybe if I come down again I could bring him with. Though he’s planning on visiting the school with his parents already anyway. If I give him your information, would you give them an appropriate tour of campus and the town? It would likely help them feel at ease so Jake will have an easier time. That way they know that he at least won’t be alone when he gets there (despite the fact that I’ll be there).

I would owe you.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

You owe me anyway, Mitchy-boy, because I’m one of the best friends you have and I’ve given you a taste of the college life. I’ve introduced you to one of the hottest guys you’ve ever kissed. I keep things interesting.

I’ll give Jake and his parents a tour, but no promises it’ll be clean, not if this Jake is as much like me as you think he is. It’ll be boring otherwise and I’m sure his parents will be used to any amount of “crassness” I would provide to the experience.

Hafiz and Rumi? What is it with your aunt and naming pets after dead poets? Has she ever had a parrot named Poe? A hamster named Shakespeare? It’s cute and I guess at the very least it proves her to be well read.

I do hope you don’t start having dreams about her dog as well, at least not until you’ve met it. Maybe she could get a bunny that would lead you down the rabbit hole! I’ll be the Mad Hatter if Kat can be the Queen of Hearts.

But you’re getting ready to graduate, that’s an adventure in wonderland all on its own.



It's going to leave you feeling somewhat directionless at first, but then once you realize we're all directionless and that you were just as directionless while you were still in high school so things haven't really changed that much. It's a bigger world afterward, you know, that? I think you do, which is why I'm not worried about you. Of all of us, you're going to succeed. You're smart and motivated and know how to make a difference.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's journal

I turn seventeen in a few days. Everyone is getting really excited for it, but I just don't see what the big deal is. It's not even a significant birthday. I'm still a teenager, I earn no legal privileges. I can already drive. Seventeen is like nineteen and twenty, it's just another year.

I'm not sure if I want to have any kind of party. It would be fun, but I don't know who I would invite and I would have to keep it PG for Eleanor and Jonathan.

Maybe Mitchell can come visit. That would be fun, though I'm not sure how my parents would feel about him being here.

Dear Myra,

Sorry it's taken me a little while to get back to you. The home stretch has proven a bit more difficult than I thought it would be. With all the AP classes I'm taking, I've been cramming for a ton of exams. Hopefully I'll do well enough to earn some college credit before I actually start.

My brain is exhausted, but it means after these exams I'm essentially finished with my year. Might have a few bullshit projects just so that we're occupied and the state can claim it's still providing us with an education, but class has been nothing more than prep for testing. It's go time and I plan to win. I may be pretty calm most of the time, but when it comes to stuff like this, I'm competitive as fuck. Papers and scantron sheets are the enemy and I will conquer them.

I'll be a little mentally exhausted for the next few weeks. But it's worth it in the long run. It has to be, otherwise what am I doing with myself?

So I don't have much of a social life to tell you about. If that means I'm boring, so be it. I'll make up for it later.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

Jake is a crazy-ass motherfucker. He doesn't know a thing, but thinks he's right about everything. He's stubborn as all hell. I think I'm in love.

I gave them a tour, just like you asked. Kept it relatively PG-13. Or least as much as I possibly can. His parents seemed to like the downtown area, treated me to a nice lunch at the Diner. It's kind of a dive, but it has all the hallmarks of local flavor, so it seemed like the best place to take them. The food was greasy, but tasted great. I was happy to get a free meal that wasn't the "healthy" crap they give us at the dining hall. Don't get me wrong, healthy food can be good. I love Endee's cooking after all, but they just manage to do it wrong somehow.

I kind of wanted to jump his bones, but I restrained myself. For you, you lucky bastard. Next time, my pretty. I feel like the wicked witch of the west, except prettier and I'm from the east. Make sure your friend Dorothy doesn't drop a house on me.

But no, I can't keep thinking about that. I'll worry about that when you're both actually up here. Kat approves so far, though she only met him in passing as she dropped me off to meet with them downtown.

She told me that there was something shift-y about him, that he looked impulsive. Not that surprising I guess, but I have no idea how someone can look like that. I trust her opinion on most things by now.

I'll write you more later.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's journal

Got a letter from Mitchell saying his parents are going on a second honeymoon this summer so he's going to have a lot of time to himself. That seems a little weird to me, but whatever. Maybe we'll get a chance to hang out because of it. I haven't seen him in almost a year. I can't believe how fast it's flown by.

I remember when Eleanor was born. I was twelve, just on the verge of puberty. Phoebe was just graduating high school and leaving for college, so she was too distracted for it to really matter to her, but I was so excited. Jonathan was only about Eleanor's age now, and I remember he barely understood what was going on. He thought a new baby would mean more toys for him. He was only five, so I guess his logic makes sense. I was just old enough to be excited to have a new addition to the family. Eleanor was literally this little bundle of joy that I wanted to carry me around with me everywhere. One day, I even wanted to take her with me to school so I could show her to all my friends.

And the moment she looked at me, she just smiled, like all of a sudden the world was a different place. I think that's the moment I fell in love with my little sister and vowed to try to take care of her as best I can. We just connected.

Her first word was an attempt to say my name. It was kind of fail, since she only really managed "A'dan" but she tried. It was so cute. My parents kind of accepted at that point that while she was their youngest daughter, I was the one she had truly connected to.

Dear Myra,

I should start selling my services as a professional matchmaker, because Jake seems fairly infatuated with you as well. Act surprised, but he's planning on asking you out on a date at some point. He's pretty good at the whole dating thing, or at least from what I've seen, so I would say expect good things.

Getting closer and closer to graduation. I finished all of my exams and just have my final senior project left. Basically I need to present my portfolio. It's not even like it's a hard presentation. I get to talk about myself for five minutes. Difficulty rating: two stars out of five.

Almost done. Almost done. Almost done. I just have to keep reminding myself of that.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

Will you hurry up and graduate already so you can shut the fuck up about it?

But seriously, I'm ready for you to get to college and try all of the stupid things that college

students are normally known for doing. Underage drinking. Drugs. Oh wait, you've already done those things. Does that mean I'm a bad influence on you?

Yes, yes it does. I'm so proud of myself.

Kat and I decided to redecorate our room. It seems kind of pointless since we won't be living here much longer, but we felt it was time for a drastic change. You might be surprised to know that I have embraced the pink and am willing to let Kat redistribute it across our space equally between our belongings. I let her put a stuffed pink cat on my bookshelf. I normally I would never allow such things to happen, but I guess you could say I've had a change of heart. Ugh, blast my fickle heart!

Or perhaps I should curse Kat for winning me over with her lovable lesbian lack of drama. Hey, that was a lot of alliteration. Either way, our room has been broken down and reassembled to be bigger and better than ever. Well, not bigger since I think we now have significantly less floor space than we did before, but it seems better equipped to deal with our collective insanity. There are more natural hiding places for when we have epic Nerf battles in our dorm. It's better suited for creating forts and having places to hide when we throw things at each other.

We figure with finals being only a week away, we might as well take advantage of this while we can. We're going to have to face the reality of moving out. Sure, we already signed up for housing for next year and are planning on living together, so it's not like this is the last time we'll ever be together, but it seems like there's a kind of finality to the idea of moving out.

Plus I'll have to meet Kat's parents and possibly introduce her to my mom. That's going to be a fucking mess. College is such a world away from family, you know? Winter break was a bit of a reminder, but it seems so much more real now. I'm going to have to move back in with my parents and I'm not going to have constant autonomy over pretty much everything I do with my life.

Freedom is fleeting, so take what you can and run with it. Run with it like you fucking stole it from the grocery store as a middle schooler. I know you can do it, Mitchell. You have the power within yourself, you just need to choose to use it. Don't let it go to waste.

Sorry, I'm just feeling all kinds of dramatic.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's journal

Dear Myra,

Fine, I'll stop talking about my impending graduation BECAUSE I JUST GRADUATED! With honors, eleventh in my class. BAM!

The ceremony itself was kind of long and drawn out and one of the most boring things I've had to do for my entire high school career. We sat around while they called the names of 600-plus students one by one. Full names. You've been through this, but somehow I feel like your experience wasn't nearly as exhaustive as mine since your school was probably a lot smaller than mine. You probably had what? A hundred people in your graduating class? It must have taken like an hour or two? Four hours sitting in graduation cap and gown over full formal attire on basically a summer day in the middle of the afternoon. It sucked sweaty gym socks, and probably smelled like it, too, but we were all too excited to really notice. You could feel the it in the air, bubbling across the sea of green robes and seething beneath them, there was a kind of antsy-ness that shook us while the

choir performed some corny cover song that was supposed to inspire us for everything that lay ahead in our future.

It's just like, come on, seriously? Let's play into every single cliché high school graduation trope there is. I wanted to smack our ASB presidents for planning it like this, more so after their speech. More than half the people here have no idea who the fuck you are, a good chunk of us who do know who you are think you're a pretentious dickwad, and the remainder are your so called friends, shut the hell up so we can get out of here. We don't need to know all about how we did this together and how we've all been on this same journey for the last twelve years. No we haven't. For some of us, it's been a busload of suck since day one. Get over yourself. But, if I had really cared that much, I would have been the one making that speech, because I could easily have won the popularity contest of ASB elections, not on some kind of anti-hero ticket, but because I'm good at that shit and everyone knows it.

Anyway, I graduated. Whoo!

Now I get to focus on starting college in a few months. I'll slave away at my job making sandwiches for idiots.

In short, I'm happy, Myra. Life is good and the only way I can think of to make it better would be to share it with you and Kat and Drew. That's why I've included invitations for all of you to my graduation party in a few weeks. We're holding off on it so I'm not competing with all my friend's parties, plus this way I can combine it with my birthday party and just have it as an excuse to spend time with awesome friends like yourself.

I'll let you know when I find out what my housing status is after I figure that out.

Mitchell

Dear Mitchell,

Thankfully I got your letter before I moved out of my dorm. This is it, Mitchy-boy. I have finished my first year of college. It's been an experience to be sure and so far I regret almost nothing. I say almost nothing because I'm sure if I sat around and took the time to think about it I would be able to come up with many little regrets. I don't even consider William a regret, not nearly as much as he does. That boy has so many self-esteem issues, he might as well be train (it's a play on words, get it? esteem: steam?), but that's not my problem. He's a good neighbor and eventually became a good friend. I can't complain.

I became best friends with my roommate, which apparently can be fairly hit or miss. I had sex. I got a 4.0 for my last semester of the year (that's right, bitchy-boy, I did it. I got those A's and damn did I deserve them!). I got involved in things. My first year of college was pretty much a success.

And because of me, at least in part, you're going to be joining us. I'm glad to say that I had a hand in that, because if I did awesome my freshmen year, you're going to blow me out of the fucking water. I hate you for that, but such is life. I'll survive and will just have to work twice as hard to put you in your place, because nobody claims they're better than me. Not even you.

If you're going to send me mail any time between when you get this and when you start college, you should send it to my Leavenworth address (obviously), otherwise you run the risk of me not getting it, which while no huge loss to me, would be quite the bad thing for your letters. I don't want them to have to spend any more time sitting around in the hands of dirty postal service

workers than necessary.

Their hands aren't clean, Mitchell. You do not want that all over your letter. Send it to the correct address.

I will hear from you soon.

Myra D.

Excerpt from Adrian's journal

I just got back from visiting Mitchell at his aunt's house up in Leavenworth.

Goddamn it was beautiful up there. The air was so clean compared to in the city and there were trees and animals everywhere. It was like a completely different world, the kind of world you see in movies and documentaries.

Mitchell's aunt was really nice and fed us great food. Her house is so pretty and homey. There were pillows everywhere and all sorts of nooks and crannies in which to sit and read. If only I liked reading. Mitchell seemed fairly content. The longer he's there, the more I get that from his letters as well.

My first night there we watched a movie together. We sat next to each other on the couch and I looked at him and just thought to myself, why do you always feel like a coward? Why do you always hold back on the things that really matter to you? He's an amazing person and you really like him, why don't you make something happen? So I did, I put my arm around him. And then I sat there, frozen and scared. And then something magical happened and I felt electrified and I put my hand on his arm and pulled him to me and I was kissing him. Not like making out, but a kiss. The kind of kiss you see in the movies, and it felt so good and then it was over and we were cuddling. That was my first kiss. It was magical and special and I don't know if there's anyone I would rather have shared that experience with. And when we went to bed, he let me sleep next to him. It was so warm and comfortable. I want to fall asleep like that every night.

I got home and found a letter from Mitchell hidden in my bag. He seemed kind of freaked out by me kissing him. I'm not going to lie, reading it kind of hurt. Not because of anything he said, because he was actually really understanding and asked for time to process, but because I was his first, too. In some small way, it feels like we were meant to be. That kiss was a defining moment in our lives and neither of us is going to forget it. I'm never going to be able to forget him for the rest of my life, because you can't forget firsts like that.

On our second day there, we went hiking because Mitchell's aunt's house is way out in the middle of nowhere. It's surrounded by trees and trails and Mitchell's been exploring them pretty much every day he's been up there.

We climbed up one of the ridges. Mitchell was so cute the way he kept pointing out all the trees and plants and naming them. He's really learning a lot being out in nature all the time with Endee's books. We finally reached the top of the ridge and just stood at the top of this cliff. I moved all the way to the edge and leaned out, looking over the edge and wondered what it would be like to jump, to fly down the side of a mountain, down past all the trees and rocks and just crash at the bottom. I wondered what it would be like to splatter my body across the bottom in a thousand pieces. It made me nervous because I really wanted to find out. I wanted to throw myself over the edge and just fall. Something about the idea of it was just beautiful to me.

I turned around and saw Mitchell looking at me and smiling and he started laughing. I

started laughing because I was so nervous and I wondered if he knew what I was thinking.

In that moment, I wanted to pull him to me and kiss him again, kiss him to let him know that he was what pulled me back and what kept me from doing anything more than considering the jump. I wanted to make sure he knew that as tempting as the thought was to find out what it would be like, I would never do it, not if he didn't want me to.

That's what he means to me, and I'm grateful for it.

And then we hiked back down the mountain as if everything was normal and I pretended I hadn't just stared into the endlessness that is my own mortality. I don't know if I'm the same person after that. You can't be.

After we got back from the hike, we watched another movie and Endee's cat joined us. He seemed especially drawn to me and kept crawling into my lap and putting his front paws on my chest as he licked my chin. Mitchell said he was never that friendly with anyone else. I took it as a compliment.

**Afterword:**

Suicide is a serious issue.

Rape is a serious issue.

Practicing informed, contraceptive use is a serious issue.

Alcohol and drug abuse are serious issues.

If you need help, don't be afraid to ask. There are hundreds of resources all across the country and all across the world if you experience abuse or harm of any kind. There are people trained to help you get through anything that's troubling you. I can't list them all here because there are literally too many for me to have a comprehensive list that's applicable to everyone, but you can do a Google search for your area or talk to someone at your school or work and resources will come up. It's a big step, and it's a scary step, but you don't have to take it alone.