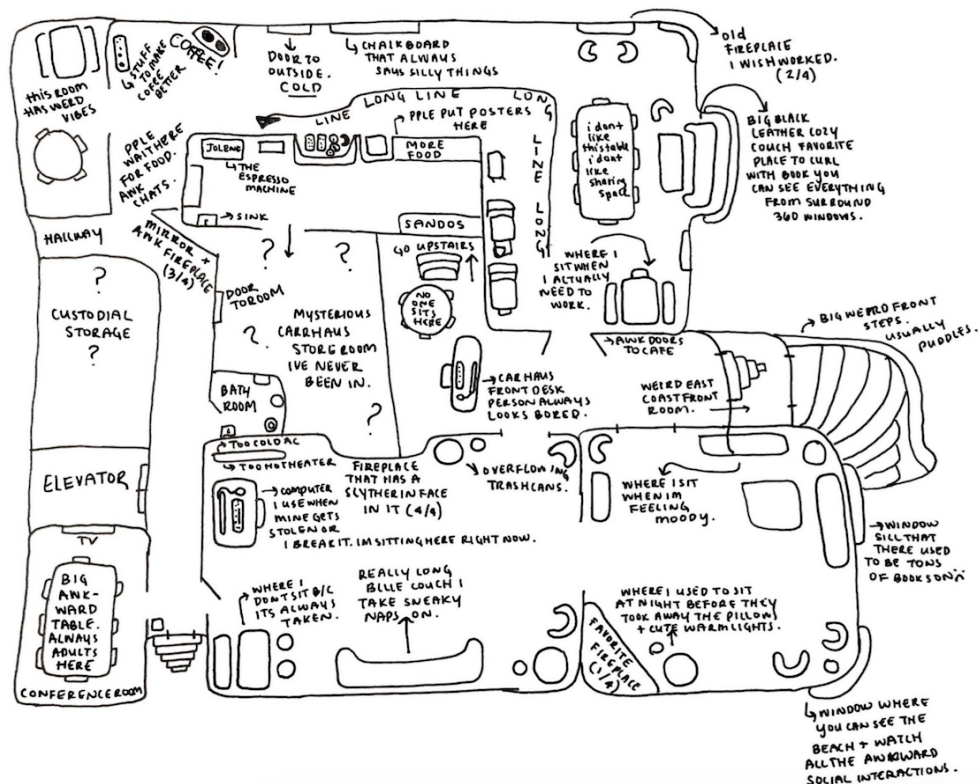


For Someone Who Makes Me Feel Tender

It's 4:47 pm on a Friday afternoon and I'm sitting in my second favorite spot in Carr Haus, RISD's student-run cafe. There's a freshman couple curled on the black leather couch nestled in the bay window, so I'm pushed to the big booth on the front wall (see below, labeled *where I sit when I actually need to work*). Carr Haus is where Anna knows to find me: typing on the charcoal covered computer in the corner near the fireplace, sprawled out with sheets of physics problems at the only big booth in the main cafe, or curled in the folds of the black leather couch with sun glinting in my eyes, reflecting off the pages of whatever book I furiously scribble into. As one of the four managers of the student-run cafe, Anna drags herself back and forth from apparel studio to espresso bar repeatedly throughout the day, depending on how incompetent the student workers happen to be.

I spend an average of 40 hours a week tucked into one of the corners of this creaky building. The peculiar smells of burnt chicken parm and oat milk lattes that float through the engraved wooden walls have stopped making me nauseous and become familiar. Even though we spend approximately 24 percent of our lives in the same building, Anna and I always miss each other. I'm left with glimpses of her messy curls turning a corner or a rushed hug as one of us dashes off to class.



The first time I saw Anna, somewhere in the depths of the freshman quad, her rosebud tattoo peered from behind the straps of a lacy white barely-a-shirt that clung to her chest and long blond curls frizzed in every direction. A grin on her face, a perfect toss of a ping-pong ball into a red cup, every boy's eyes tracing her motions. I was stuck to the wall. My hand was glued to my boyfriend Cameron's, because RISD still felt like his world and not mine. I met Anna's confidence with envy, rather than admiration.

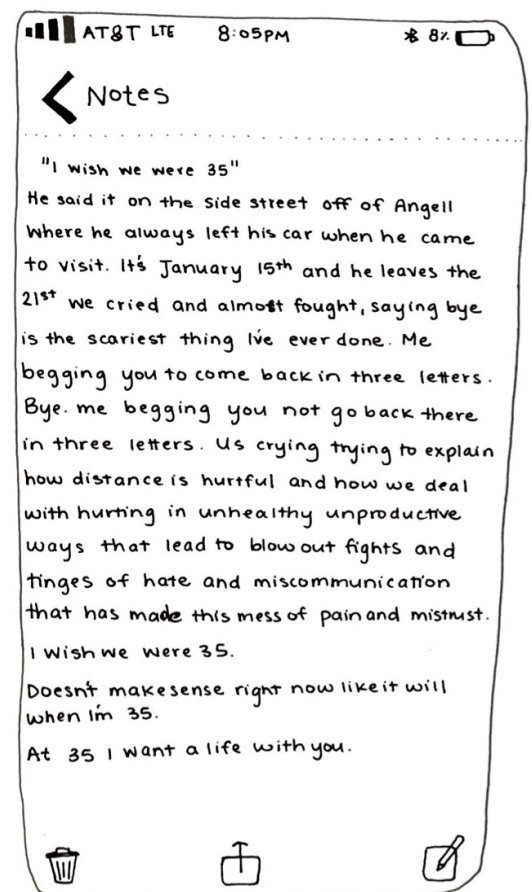
We existed on the fringes of each other's lives for my first year and a half of college, sharing only small smiles as we passed each other in the anxiety-ridden dining hall. I'm not sure when we first talked in Carr Haus. Maybe I looked stressed and she asked what was wrong, or I ordered an iced coffee while she worked the register, late on her Tuesday night shift. Somehow, in early January, fighting the heaviness of winter, her face became familiar. Suddenly, she was smiling back at me across the crumb-covered four top.

I met Cameron the first day of high school orientation seven years ago, sitting at the *your birthday is in July* table at lunch. Maybe we chatted about the food. He says I put my head on his shoulder but I don't remember. We had just turned fourteen. When he first crawled into the tiny room I had carved out of my chaotic home - a futon in a closet with walls painted in wide, uneven strokes of pink and orange acrylic paint - he was timid and obviously nervous. It was somehow endearing. He had unreasonably kind eyes, and they gazed into mine and they healed.

I don't know if Anna remembers the moment she met Mitchell, but I suspect she doesn't, at least not clearly. He's always been a constant. He was her first love in all the cliché ways teenage girls deserve to fall in love, and fractured her in all the ways they don't. We each stumbled carelessly into love and away from our families, relying on its blindness to distract us from everything too strong to feel.

In early February, just as Anna gathers her strength to push away from Mitchell's stability, Cameron and I begin to shatter. Stillness that once felt comfortable is now tense; warmth that was soothing becomes suffocating. I want things to be different. When I don't know how to describe this uneasiness, Anna sends me screenshots of notes she's typed on her phone when she can't sleep on bitter nights. She gives me the words I've been searching for.

I see her late on Friday nights in early spring, in the thick of a mindless crowd. The pressure of bodies twisting, pushing by to go scrounge for another drink is more exhilarating than it should be. Anna and her five-foot-two-but-fills-the-room-with-personality roommate, are joyful through sheer stubbornness. They dance until it forces them to smile. The bottle of gin hidden in a deep coat pocket that they shove into my hands makes it all feel lighter.



Anna sits across from me in Carr Haus on a Monday. It's early afternoon and though we've been up for hours, we both look like we just rolled out of bed. We debrief our past few days spent with boys that aren't Cameron and Mitchell. We talk about how strange it feels to sleep next to someone you don't love, how easy it is to convince yourself of loving someone just by sheer proximity.

When Anna and I don't run into each other we send screenshots of notes we write in our phones or pages of our journals. There's no small talk or casual hiiii how are you's. She dives right in. It's almost easier to be vulnerable when I don't see her for a while, when she exists only as a compilation of words, always the right ones.

Anna thinks about baby fat. She laughs and watches her tiny Irish cousins scurrying around smooth sand on the Cape. She's nostalgic for their curiosity. In early May, Anna doesn't sleep for three days, but a hand-dyed Canadian tuxedo, fitted perfectly to my 50 inch legs, sits waiting for her final critique. Hints of olive denim curl in carefully crafted bunches, like rolls of fat on baby limbs. Her seams might be crooked from working blind with sleeplessness, but the strength of concept is tangible. She twists together bodies and material frighteningly well.

Classes end, Carr Haus closes, and a gentle source of stability falls away. We spend the summer outside with *Seabird* by The Alessi Brothers drifting through the open windows of her grandpa's car that shakes around every turn on the drive to the beach. We float on calm water, early in the morning before the heat becomes deafening and the waves pick up. We are convinced that salt heals. She draws a picture of me floating and hangs it in her kitchen, using musty purple crayon for my bathing suit and peach for my limbs.

Providence sinks into summer sadness and we try to pull each other back, but somehow sink deeper. I stay in bed too long and everything hangs humid in the air. We stumble upon a new obsession with wet felting and spend hours scrubbing soap and water and sun into tightly felted shirts and rings.

It's early July and our hands are soapy as we wrap felt roving around our fingers and scrub it into sturdiness. I tell Anna that, in empty moments, I miss my dad, and then I miss Cameron, and then I hate myself for tying it all together that way. Her eyes crinkle like they do when she's about to say something no one else could think of. We talk about our dads, for real, for the first time.

I'm leaving Providence tomorrow morning, so early that my body will ache as I heave it out of bed in the dark. In a month, chaperoning a choir tour to Europe, I'll turn 20, so we celebrate tonight. Nothing I put on feels like me, so I borrow one of my roommate's long dresses printed with splotchy pink flowers. At the corner table of Apsara, a Vietnamese restaurant on the south side, we all speculate about the girl pictured in the life-size photographs around the room, drink homemade pomegranate margaritas out of old pickle jars, and laugh.

The 2.8 mile walk home breezes by. In the parking lot of a funky green and red house we find a fake palm tree,



PVC pipe peeking through the trunk, and carry it all the way home. Tipsy and tired, it's just after one in the morning and I'm scrubbing old crumbs from chipped plates with lemon soap and Anna wraps her arms around me. Her cheek sits gently on my shoulder blade. It's time for her to go and we're dizzy and we're crying and maybe it's just the fog of alcohol, but we're holding each other and I don't think we want to let go. I suddenly feel like I'm losing something, leaving her behind in Providence.

In July, I'm most of the way around the world, sprawled on a bed too short for my legs, in a green hotel near Kensington Palace, and sometime in the past hour I turned 20. My coworker and I had the night off from taking care of teenage girls and went to a local pub. Laughing in the streets on the way home, we sang songs we don't remember learning but are ingrained in every piece of us. I think about home, and for the first time Providence comes to mind. A message from Anna at 6:56pm Providence time.

Happy birthday evie i think i fell in love with you i feel like cameron. Love you for real. forever

Two weeks later, we're sweating with the empty heat of late August in a pizza shop in the Lower East Side. Anna shows me the two hundred dollar corset she just bought with money she doesn't have. It's hand stitched out of embroidered throw pillows and curves around her body like icing. We talk through the little details we've missed in each others' lives, but she doesn't feel quite like the person I've been missing. There's something sticky in the air.

We're at The Glove, an illegal punk venue in Bushwick, late that Friday night and the weight of clustered bodies makes the building feel unstable and I worry it might burn down. I wonder if this is where we would come if we lived in New York. We sip on grapefruit spiked seltzers and the bottle of water Anna stole from the corner store, hiding it in her red disco purse that she says she hates because it reminds her of her coke phase, yet carries every time we go dancing. Our ears are fuzzy with the ruckus of the all-female punk band on stage. They're dressed in untidy nun costumes and using a Hitachi magic wand as a microphone. We're not sure if we're laughing at them or with them, but we're laughing and moving and when I wake up the next morning I think I remember our lips brushing together, but it's all a bit fuzzy now and I'm sure I just dreamed it.

Two days later we take the bus to New Jersey and it feels like us again. We are tired and laugh the whole way. We drink at a house in the middle of suburbia that feels like a sitcom. Someone's mother lives here and we start to steal her little tchotchkes because we think she won't notice one missing among hundreds, but we get in trouble coming out of the bathroom, pockets heavy with hot pink nail polish and mini spoons. We throw ourselves into this world we know we will never exist in. It feels like a movie and everyone else in the room is taking it seriously, so this sarcasm feels like our secret. She sprints on the walk home, falls in the street and scrapes her knees. She likes to run - she always has.

Back in Providence a week later, we dress up in each other's clothes. I bring her my turquoise 1970's hand-altered jeans and matching top, and she ties me into the embroidered corset she bought in New York. We drink grapefruit juice and vodka out of glasses that make us feel fancy and her roommate takes photos of us in the streets.

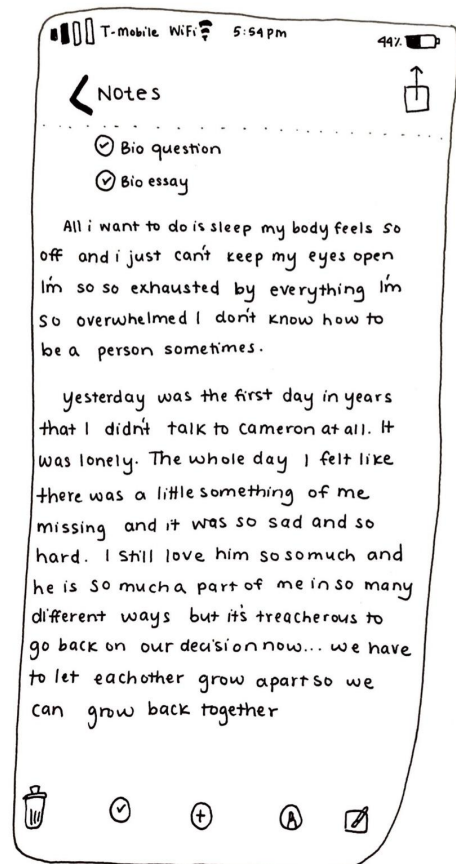
Hours later, we sit at their kitchen table and talk about love. About how we need it but don't want to need it but don't know how to stop. "Maybe I should just hook up with a girl," Anna says, glancing out the window at the light on her fire escape that never stops flashing.

I'm in her bed, white sheets with embroidered red flowers, and she kisses her way down my neck and we're laughing because neither of us knows what we're doing. She kisses softly. She's warm and gentle, but there's something fiery beneath it all. I feel comforted, affectionate, loving, but not exhilarated in the way I thought I might. We fall asleep holding each other.

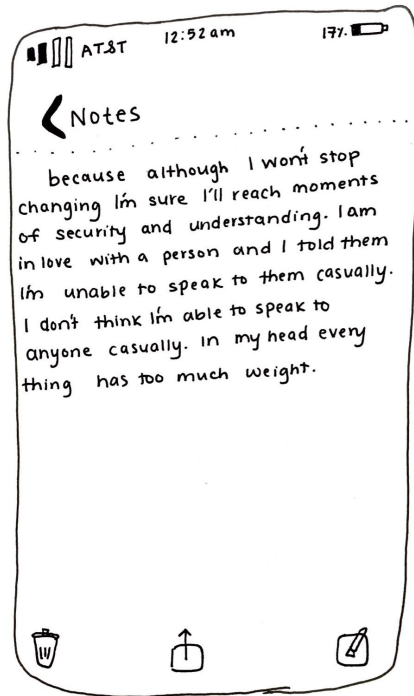
I wake to warm light in her frigid bedroom and smile. We open her phone and burst into laughter at the photos we find from the night before. We don't talk about it. We let there be strength in ambiguity.

I'm sitting at a friend's kitchen table on a Thursday night in September, gazing out the third floor window at the dull lights of the Providence state house. The tears in my eyes compliment the pink carton of rosé clutched in my palm. I feel a clench in the back of my throat, hiccupy panic that makes my heart thump too quickly and something wants to claw its way out of my stomach. An hour ago, at a painting show in the student gallery, I saw Cameron from across the room. He was wearing my dark pink Carhartt jacket, the one we jokingly fought over who would keep if we ever broke up, until it stopped being funny. His presence still felt comforting, even from afar. As I walked over to say hi, my chest twisted as I realized that the head of curly brown hair in the corner was the senior that Cameron's been taking on fancy dinner dates, according to his roommates. They must have come together. Though my palms were starting to sweat, I walked over to him to say hi, give him a hug, see how he's doing. His small smile was just as warm as always, but felt distant. I wanted to hold him and linger in it. If he squeezed my arm too tight, looked at me too long, or asked about something that only he knows, it would prove that love like ours - passionate but dependably familial - doesn't just dissolve. He vaguely said hello, turned back to his friends, and continued talking. I felt small, but somehow I took up too much space and had to push through the crowd to get away from it all. Cameron took her to dinner at the Thai restaurant we saved for anniversaries.

The minute I walk into the kitchen, I break. The tenderness in my friends' faces lets me shatter. I don't have to explain. They know what's wrong and don't miss a beat pulling me back to reality. Anna starts, saying, "Cameron's literally shitting himself right now because you're in the same room as this new girl and he doesn't know what to do. That's all this is." My chest is heaving with tears and laughter and hiccups all at once and I bury my face in my jacket. "And I know, I *know* it might not feel like it right now but he *loves* you. He's treating you like this because he loves you, not because he doesn't."



I'm looking at Anna, and she's wearing my jacket - the dark blue wool one that she borrowed last week and probably won't give back - and all I can think of is Cameron holding someone else's hand, but she won't look away.



It's a Friday morning in early October and we'll probably dance tonight. We'll scream *Untouched* by the Veronicas and jump up and down and up and down and maybe we'll go home with boys we know we won't ever fall in love with, but will convince ourselves we might just to make it feel like intimacy instead of lust or maybe we'll fall asleep sprawled on our own beds in our own cold houses typing our frustration into notes on our phones that we'll send to each other the next morning. And sometime next week she'll read this essay. Maybe she'll cry or maybe she'll laugh, but either way she'll find me in Carr Haus the next day and smile back at me across the table, and the gaze from her blue-green eyes won't feel casual. It will make everything feel soft and vivid and bearable again.