



I can't make this interesting, even with alcohol. Even with a case of Miller Lite sitting in the mini-fridge next to the couch, downing a can every fifteen minutes, I couldn't possibly sit through this. Give me a few beers and I can sit through a Brewers game or even a Cubs game, as long as there's a lot of action throughout.

But this. This 'sport' that my roommate's boyfriend is obsessed with. This defies comprehension. I've been living with Katie for three months, ever since I first moved to the city, and I haven't had a single problem with her. I could even tolerate her boyfriend, even though he leaves his weights around the living room and uses two rolls of toilet paper every week. I've been able to tolerate their early afternoon humping sessions, after he gets home from his first shift job at the forge and before her first escorting client comes a-callin' in the early evening.

But *this*.

The living room feels hot and sticky because all of us have been lying around all morning. The sun has been sneaking in through the foyer windows, cooking the entire first floor, limited only by the muggy cross-breeze blowing in through the kitchen screen door.

'Holy shit.' I can't stand any more. The round-about circles and vibrant colors have begun to make me dizzy. The Tide logo burns behind my eyelids in big white neon letters. 'Holy shit, man. You can't be serious. I thought watching golf was the eighth circle of Hell.'

Larry just shakes his head. He refuses to look away even for a microsecond, as if something different is about to magically happen on the TV screen, something other than a bunch of cars turning left.

'What lap is it?' I ask.

'The twelfth,' he says. 'Now shut up. I can't hear what they're saying.'

I stop to listen to the announcer and his colorful commentator. Both of them seem obsessed with the Budweiser car, which has begun to catch up to the Home Depot car a few feet ahead. The camera switches between an inside view of

both cars split horizontally down the center of the screen and an overhead shot of the race course. The announcer is detailing the Budweiser car's engine and a bunch of other shit I can't even begin to understand.

'How many more laps are there?' I ask.

'One hundred and eighty-eight.' As an afterthought, he tenses his stomach so the bulge under his tight white shirts contracts and he lets out a muffled fart into the couch cushion.

'You've got to be kidding.' I turn back to the TV in time to see the Budweiser car slip past the Home Depot car on the far left side of the track. It's enough to throw the jam-packed crowd into a frenzy. 'Now see, I don't get it. If they've all got their feet pressed as far down on the pedal as it'll go, how can someone possibly pass someone else?'

'Jesus Christ.' Larry uses his left hand to reach into the mini fridge for another beer, keeping his eyes glued to the TV screen. As if one of the cars might, in the near future, suddenly decide to try turning right just for a change of pace. 'There're different engines on the cars. Every one handles differently. It's too complicated for you to understand.'

'Oh,' I say, nodding and clicking my tongue against the back of my lower lip. 'Of course. Driving around in circles for four hours is too much for me, I guess. I couldn't possibly understand what's going on, what with all the different-colored cars and turning left so goddamned often.'

Larry just shakes his head. His right ear has begun to significantly redden at the tip. If I manage to really upset him, the hue will spread like a wildfire down the pinna, infecting his face. He still won't do anything, though—for a meat head who listens to gansta rap, he maintains a pretty even temper.

'I'm waiting for a crash,' Katie says, trying to lighten the mood. She's good at finding the positives in any given situation, which I suppose comes in handy when you're dating someone who can rarely string together two independent clauses without getting a headache.

'A crash would at least stop my brain from retarding,' I say, smiling the moment I see the fire spread into Larry's fleshy earlobe.

'Don't you have a shift today?' he asks. 'I didn't know Starbucks ever let you off for a full weekend.'

He gives the comment a real condescending tone, like working at the forge on the north side is something to be more proud of than a shift supervisor at a local coffee shop. And maybe it is, but it's not enough to piss me off, which probably would redden his face even more if he knew.

I pretend to follow the Budweiser car with a pencil, putting it on a blank sheet of paper and just tracing its movements. Would some kind of pattern emerge by the end of the race? Is that why this game is so popular? Maybe each racer has a secret playbook of moves that are gradually, carefully worked out over a large number of left turns.

By the fifteenth lap, I've decided I'm giving this sport way too much credit.

'This is depressing,' I say after the cars successfully make another left turn that's eerily similar to the previous three. 'What if it's all bullshit? What if they just go around, like, five times and then the producers loop it for four hours? You ever think of that?'

'Shut up,' Larry says. 'Seriously. You're really starting to piss me off.'

Katie flashes me a frustrated, conceding look that I immediately get the gist of: I'm not getting the TV this afternoon, no matter how many runs ahead the Brewers are, no matter how many home runs Geoff Jenkins hits. The channel is staying on Fox, and the sport of the day is NASCAR. End of story.

'Have your fun,' I say, getting up and grabbing my sunglasses from the kitchen.

'Good,' Larry calls out after me. 'Thank you very fucking much.'

I leave the house, giving a wave to our upstairs neighbor who's sitting on her tiny porch with a cigarette before heading down Oklahoma Avenue toward my Starbucks. I stop at the next streetlight and debate whether I should go back and grab a small sketch pad, just in case something along the way catches my fancy. I decide against it—after twenty minutes of watching cars go in circles, my brain already feels like a pile of warm shit.

The Starbucks is virtually empty when I finally get there, save for one lone woman seated in the plush relaxing chair with a laptop across her skinny tanned legs. Three of the high school kids are working, along with Shelley, who's still trying to maintain some sort of authority during an afternoon shift where there's just nothing to do. I haven't decided yet if she's attractive or not—she's somewhere in that middle zone, someone with enough personality to make up for any feature deficits, in her case deepened lines caused by too much tanning. Lines she attempts to hide now by banking left and tanning a little more.

'Where is everyone?' I ask, giving a nod to the kids. Not a one of them is doing any work. They're standing by the drive-thru window, out of sight of the entrance so no one walking in can see them slacking off. Shelley's too nice to tell them to get any cleaning done so the night shift can get out at a decent time. They, in turn, are too lazy to work on their own volition, choosing instead to draft behind Shelley and take credit for any work she chooses to do.

'It's always dead on NASCAR days,' one of the kids says. He tugs on his loose-fitting khaki shorts that are hanging low enough for the red elastic of his boxers to show below his tight black Alligator shirt. That, along with his shaggy blond hair, gives him an acute 'Skater' look.

I glance in his direction and frown. 'Are you serious?'

He nods, a little unsure at first, as if it's some kind of trick question.

I turn back to Shelley. 'There anything to do around here on a Sunday afternoon?'

She looks at her watch. 'Well, if you hang around for another forty minutes, I'll take you frofing.'

I give her a blank expression.

'Frisbee golfing. Disc golf.' She flashes me a half-serious look of concern. When her eyes get big, her pupils dilate, blending in perfectly with her dark blue irises. 'Don't tell me you've never been?'

'I don't even know what that is,' I say. 'But I'm game for anything that doesn't involve stock cars at this point.'

She makes me a hot tea—one bag of Refresh and one bag of Zen, just the way I drink it on my morning shifts. 'Be here at two.'

I take a deliberate sip of the tea, eyeing the kids by the drive-thru window, who are looking at the two of us in a way I'm sure means they're about to start up a rumor. There's no stopping them now, so I don't bother to correct the misconception. 'Okay,' I say. 'Sounds like a plan.'

I walk out of the store and walk down to the small art shop on the end of the block. Maybe the kids are right—this almost sounds like a date. Is it a date? No, it couldn't possibly be a date. It's just two friends going to waste an afternoon together. Right? Probably.

But she wouldn't take one of the kids out to go disc golfing or whatever it is. Well, I mean seriously though, it could be anything. Okay. Slow the hell down here. Play it cool and see what happens. If it goes good, you can always ask if she wants to do something again. But she might think you're asking her out on a date, and then she might say no, and then it would be awkward whenever you saw her at work. No, fuck it, you never work together anyway. Just see what happens. Take it easy.

I walk into the art store with my brain already well into the fifteenth lap and take a pit stop at the ink cart, focusing as much of my mind's energy as possible on finding my favorite fountain pen, the one with the metal tip and the .08 millimeter line that lets enough ink out to sketch light lines and press down for hard, thick black outlines. When I find it, I quickly divert my attention to the aisle of sketch pads and pick out one that's small enough to fit into my back pocket,

just big enough to capture a Polaroid-sized image. I snatch a look at the clock to see how I'm doing on time and of course the minutes are crawling by.

I waste the last twenty minutes circling the store, checking out everything from chalk to acrylic paint to canvas supplies. But my brain seems to know that none of it is really important and so it continues its busying task of trying to decipher exactly what's going to happen at this 'Frolf' course. On lap thirty-three, it's firmly decided that Shelley offered only because she knew I'm still new in the city and without a car to get around. By lap thirty-eight, it's decided based on a number of circumstantial conversations and smiles that she must like me and certainly wouldn't pass up the chance to go out on an actual date. On lap forty-seven, it's again mostly undecided, although it's pretty sure there's at least some mutual attraction that could develop. My brain's sponsor, apparently, is Enron.

On lap fifty-two, I'm back to the starting line and the big hand is almost over the twelve. I pay for my supplies, stuff them in my pocket, and hurry back to the Starbucks. Shelley's waiting by her car in the parking lot, arms crossed. She gives me a guilt-inducing frown, then smiles and unlocks the passenger door.

'How was work?' I ask after we're both inside the cramped Taurus. I tuck my feet close to the seat to avoid kicking any of the empty Frappuccino cups.

She starts the car, throwing the stick shift into reverse with two hard pulls. 'I swear to God, Karl hires the dumbest high schoolers I've ever met. They don't do a single thing when he's not around.'

'Don't worry,' I say. 'Just give me two more months to kick em around.' I pound my fist a few times on the dusty blue dashboard.

She laughs. 'Sorry about the mess. This car's pretty junky, so there's not much incentive to keeping it clean.'

I run my finger along the dash, picking up the dust and spelling out my name in cursive. 'I like it. And there's nothing sexier than a woman who knows how to drive stick.'

She smiles and, almost on cue, shifts the car into third as we turn onto the expressway onramp. 'How exactly could someone who grew up in the middle of nowhere never go disc golfing?'

'I always thought it was just a Seinfeld episode.'

She shifts into fourth at the end of the onramp and I feel the engine shudder underneath my feet. She doesn't seem worried in the slightest that the floor has begun vibrating. 'You're going to like this,' she says. 'It's the ultimate hippie sport for those of us who can't stand ESPN. Probably why it's so popular among baristas.'

'What did you do before you worked at Starbucks?' I ask, if anything to keep my mind off the trembling floor.

'I started college right after high school.'

'For what?'

She's quiet for a moment, maybe contemplating whether I'm prodding a little too much. 'Philosophy,' she finally says in a much quieter tone.

'Cool.'

'Oh yeah?' She cocks her head and glances at me before returning her eyes to the road. A few strands of curly blonde hair have fallen over her face. 'Usually that gets a pretty good laugh.'

'I dropped out of a community college,' I say, smiling. 'And I was an art major. It doesn't get much more pathetic than that. Did you at least graduate?'

'Yeah.' She shifts the car into fifth and the floor stops vibrating. 'Then I came out and realized I needed a P.h.D. to get any sort of job. So now I'm sending out grad school applications, stuck paying off my massive student loans whenever I can get ahead in all the other bills.'

We drive in silence for awhile, letting the radio fill in the white noise. I don't know the song, but I know the type: watered-down rock, the kind I could find on just about every pop station in my hometown, the kind of soft-distortion guitars and safe lyrics with just enough of a hook in the rhythm to guarantee air play. Her lips move along to the chorus, but no sounds escape her mouth, which is usually the sign of a good singer. Someone who can carry a melody but doesn't want to admit it.

'Where exactly is this place?' I ask, careful to wait until the song is over.

'Just outside the county,' she says. 'In a little suburb I used to live near. Ever hear of Valley View Park?'

'No.'

'Well.' She looks over her shoulder before changing lanes. 'I suppose it's in a relatively new area. It's a nice park. Probably won't be too busy right now.'

'Because of the NASCAR race?'

'Right.'

'Unbelievable.' I feel my hand grip the door handle as Shelley cuts into the far left lane, taking the onramp onto the intersecting northbound freeway at fifty miles per hour even though the dark paint skids along the concrete barrier should be enough warning not to take it too fast.

'Wasn't it big where you grew up?' she asks.

I try to think back, but the images of stock car posters and racing insignia seem few and far between in my memory. I can remember a friend during college who kept a big Dale Earnheart Confederate flag in his room, and a few bumper stickers on the locals' trucks. 'Maybe I just didn't know the right people,' I say. 'I spent the last two years living with the same guys and they were all pretty serious about school during the week. Sundays were usually reserved for the library and not much else.'

'Maybe that was a good thing.'

'Maybe,' I say. 'But damned if I don't miss sitting around with them and watching the Simpsons. Once they started taking more classes for their major, they really buckled down. All of a sudden, there wasn't enough time for a half-hour of relaxation, except on the weekend when we were too busy killing brain cells.'

She nods absently, focusing instead on turning onto the highway road at the next off-ramp. We drive another five minutes, past a giant movie theater complex and a gas station before the large three-story houses give way to more trees. She turns at the road called 'Valley View Drive' and immediately parks in one of the open spots along the curb.

At first, I don't really notice anything inside the park, other than the sparse cropping of trees and a few people far off in the distance throwing their Frisbees in various directions. I'm expecting something more like a golf course for some reason, which is why I don't immediately notice the red-colored baskets set up in various positions around the park. Each one is spread apart from the others by anywhere between fifty and a hundred yards.

Already I like it, even before Shelley reaches into the back seat of her car and pulls out four identical-looking discs, each with a slightly different color and faded brand-name design. 'These are the discs,' she says, holding them out like a hand of cards. 'Each one is a little different. I use this one,' she holds the blue one in her hand, 'because it's a driver. It gets the best distance and I'm not a very strong thrower.'

'Driver?' I ask. 'Like a wood? Like in golf?'

Shelley smiles and nods. 'There are three different kinds of discs: drivers, irons, and putters. Each one handles a little differently.'

'They all look the same.'

'True,' she says, not even hinting yet that she's losing her patience. 'But they have different weights. The edges are different. Take this one.' She hands me the white one with red trim. It has a lot of scratches and a brand name in faded gold letters that I can't quite make out. 'You want to do a little practice first?'

I heft the disc in one hand: it feels heavy, like a stack of plastic dinner plates. The warm air makes my fingers stick to the plastic. 'I'll learn better if we just go.'

'Okay.' She walks over to the nearest concrete slab next to the small brown gazebo holding two vending machines. There's a small wooden sign next to the concrete with a picture of a nearly straight line with the number '1' etched above it and nothing else. If the red basket directly ahead is our target, then it couldn't be more than seventy-five yards away. Still, with the sparse ash trees of varying sizes peppering the area, I can see plenty of opportunities for embarrassment.

She looks at me, smiling through her teeth. 'You wanna go first?'

'No ma'am. Fire away and show me how it's done.'

'Okay.' She positions her body into what looks like a karate stance, with her left side pointed toward the hole. She holds the disc out, pointing it straight and then pulling it back into her body before tossing it in a smooth arc. The disc hovers in the air, catching a little gust of wind and climbing higher before it begins to curve left and roll to a stop next to a small sapling about halfway to the hole.

'Was that good?' I ask.

She laughs. 'Not bad, I guess. I told you I don't put much effort into it. I can't control my throws very well.'

I step onto the concrete slab, immediately running through all of the potentially embarrassing outcomes of this situation. My sandals are going to slip on the concrete when I throw—I knew I shouldn't have worn sandals—and I'm going to go down hard. I'll have to laugh it off and hope she finds it funny, too. Something to talk about later. I aim and throw the disc like a regular Frisbee, not too hard because I really am afraid of falling over. Even as it escapes my hand, I can tell I made a mistake. The disc truly is different from a Frisbee—it cuts through the air differently, purposely curving just a little left as if it was made for someone who normally snapped their wrist a little too hard. It lands next to one of the larger trees away from the fairway.

'Not bad,' she says.

I look at her and laugh. 'It didn't even make it to yours!'

She shrugs, raising her eyebrows in a light sort of way that doesn't judge. 'It was a good first try.'

We walk along the grass to where my disc is sitting, near a much larger maple tree whose branches hang low to the ground. Thankfully, the disc's hard curve left at the last second saved me from trying to throw around the large trunk.

I pick up the disc and look in the direction of the metal basket. 'To be fair, I can usually throw a Frisbee pretty straight.'

The corner of her lip curls into a glossy smile. 'Duly noted.'

I aim low and throw hard, hoping I can adjust for the built-in slice this time. The disc curves left again and lands on its edge, rolling a few extra yards before turning right and running a complete circle, stopping ten or so feet away from the sand surrounding the basket.

'Nice job,' Shelley says. 'You're gonna par this one, I bet.'

I follow her to the blue disc. 'Just do me a favor and try not to keep score. For my sake.'

'Deal.' She picks up her disc, puts herself in that same karate-like stance, and gives it a playful toss. The disc still travels pretty far, curving to the right of the basket but landing well on its edge so it rolls to the border of the sand.

'Awesome,' I say. 'You throw so light, but you get such good distance. You know what I just realized?'

She looks at me and cocks her head. A few more curly hairs drape over her left eye. The iris bathes her pupil in a sea of Mediterranean blue. 'What?'

I turn away because I know the feeling inside the pit of my stomach and it scares the hell out of me. I look toward the metal basket and struggle to find some words, any words, lingering in the front of my muddled mind. 'This basket's a lot smaller than I thought it would be.'

'Just take your time and aim.'

I give the disc a light toss and it drops like a rock before reaching the metal chains. I look at her in disbelief. She shrugs, smiling, and walks the extra few feet to her disc. She aims sideways just like she did before and gives it a hard toss. The disc has enough distance, but begins to curve left almost immediately, missing the basket and splashing into the soft sand.

We both pick up our discs and give them a little toss into the basket without trouble. When I look at her again and see the strands of curly blonde hair still over her eye, I get the same feeling right under my ribcage, the kind that won't go away unless I turn away, even though I don't want to and when I sneak another glance, I have to turn away again.

'So what do you think?' she asks as we start walking to the second hole.

'I'm definitely having a lot of fun,' I say, choosing my words carefully. I don't know exactly how much to tell her in this situation. I've never been good at this type of thing—it comes easily to some guys, but not to me.

Speak of the devil. At the next hole, three bigger guys with similar striped shirts are standing on the concrete starting point, looking out in the direction of the next fairway. I follow their gaze up, toward the two short, mostly bare ash trees next to the road. Perched on one of the branches, a large bird is scanning the grass for mice. I point toward it for Shelley to see.

'Wow,' she says. 'Is that a hawk? I've never seen one so close before.'

'Or a falcon,' I offer. Truthfully, I don't know exactly what kind of bird it is. I turn back to the guys to ask if they know, but before I can the one with the yellow striped-shirt is already in the motion of throwing his disc. He intentionally aims high, directly at the bird of prey. The disc soars through the first twenty yards dead-on before slowing, losing its momentum and dropping down below the branches of the trees.

'Oh that's real funny,' Shelley says to them.

The yellow striped-shirt guy just laughs and moves out of the way for his blue striped-shirt buddy to take the concrete.

'Come on, guys,' I say even as the second disc is launched. 'Don't be dicks.'

We all watch the second disc in complete silence, Shelley and I praying for a gust of wind to throw it off-course. The falcon turns its head to follow the red flying saucer as it bounces off the nearest branch and drops to the ground.

'Seriously,' Shelley says. I can see her mouth moving, words unable to form. What else to tell them? Nothing comes to my mind, either. Short of pinning them all down to the ground, which would be a stunning feat in itself, I can't imagine any sort of diplomatic route in this situation. Assholes will be assholes, after all.

The blue striped-shirt guy gives way to the red striped-shirt guy, who takes a long head start before launching the disc. It looks like it's way off-course at first, but—goddammit all—it's got a built-in slice. All three of the guys have begun

swearing in delight, awestruck by the awesomeness of the throw. Even as I'm still debating whether shouting a warning to the bird would work at all, it spreads its wings in one fluid motion and takes off from the branch, climbing a few feet before dropping down and snatching the disc out of the air by its talons. It takes its plastic prey and flies off toward the park's heavier-forested area.

Shelley and I can't stop laughing. Even if the idea of getting mobbed by preppies crossed my mind, I couldn't possibly stifle the hiccups in my gut without splitting my side open. I have to learn hard against the nearest tree just to stay on my feet, in case red striped-shirt guy's two friends can't hold him back. His curses are directed mainly at me, even though Shelley is laughing just as hard. If he were to break the grips of his friends right now, I'm sure I would receive one hundred percent of the punishment, but it's still not enough to calm me down. My confused body releases a little squirt of adrenaline, making the moment all the funnier. My body is numb. Tears run down my cheeks in a steady stream. The back of my throat hurts but I still can't stop laughing.

'We should leave,' Shelley says, once our laughter has been controlled long enough to form complete sentences once again. The three guys have moved to the edge of the course, looking up near the trees where we all last saw the falcon.

I use the collar of my shirt to dab at my bloodshot eyes. 'Let's finish this nine first. I'm having way too much fun.'

'They're pretty pissed off,' she says. 'Really pissed off.'

I put a hand on her shoulder. 'Look, we came here to shoot nine holes of frolf, so let's shoot nine holes of frolf and not worry about the assholes. Deal?'

She wrinkles her nose, looking in my eyes, maybe to see if I'm just trying to put up some kind of tough guy façade to impress her. 'If they pick a fight, what are you going to do?'

'They're not going to pick a fight.'

I'm not surprised that I turn out to be right. We play the remaining seven holes behind the striped-shirt threesome, who resort to taking turns between their two remaining discs. They look back at us occasionally from the next hole, occasionally saying something too soft for us to understand, but so long as we don't respond, they refuse to take things further. And I'm okay with that—I think if you can build up a good enough resistance to taunts early on in grade school, you'll be ready for anything in the real world.

On the ride home, we make fun of our customers. I tell her about the officer who comes in every morning with his partner, about his long manicured fingernails on his right hand, how creepy and out of place they look. She tells me about the mocha lady who always comes in right before close, demanding a tall cup full of mocha syrup so she can make 'chocolate coffee' at home.

When we arrive in front of my duplex, Shelley parks the car and looks at me.

'Thanks for taking me out today,' I say. I'm thankful that, in the growing sunset, I can't see her features as well. The hypnotizing blue tint in her eyes is powerless in the dim light, but the beautiful sunset behind her almost makes up for it.

'What now?' she asks.

It's a pretty open-ended question, so I answer as honestly as I can. 'I kinda want to do a sketch of you real quick.'

She looks at me funny for a moment, then smiles. 'How?'

I reach into my back pocket and pull out the small sketch pad and pen. I unbend the part where my ass has pressed down on it during the car ride.

She laughs. 'Are you serious?'

'It's okay if you don't want to. It's the just sunset, is all.'

She turns to look out the driver's side window, where the sun has begun to dip down behind the taller buildings. 'What about it?'

'The light,' I say. 'It's shining through the strands of hair over your face.'

She looks at me for a moment, maybe to see if I'll crack a smile and laugh it off as just one big joke. But the truth is I really *do* want to capture the moment somehow, before the feeling in my stomach goes away. And the dim sunlight really *is* casting shadows over the left side of her face between all the stray hairs that have fallen down—they're little, almost too small to see, but I could capture them with the right ink tip.

'Okay,' she says.

I sketch slowly at first, taking my time around the individual curls, making sure to use a light touch on every inch of skin before I solidify anything. I start to work faster when I notice that her eyes are always on mine, always looking right at me—through me—every time I glance up from the page. By the time the sun is completely hidden behind the high rises to the west, I've finished most of her face and shoulders.

'Let me see it,' she says.

I show it to her, begrudgingly, after noticing a few obscure lines that are a little off. 'It doesn't do you much justice.'

'I like it. Can I have it?'

'Oh.' I look down at the sketch, hesitant to give it away before it's even finished. I need to fix those lines around her jaw. 'I guess, if you want.'

She smiles, holding the sketchpad in her hands and studying the image closer. 'What were you going to do with it?'

'I don't know,' I say. 'Maybe put something in the background.' I already have a thousand different ideas for the background. My mind is working around the feelings in my chest, focusing on anything else it can.

She closes the small sketch pad and hands it back to me. 'Copy it onto another page and save the original for me. Deal?'

'Deal.' I open the door, pause, and look back. 'Thanks for showing me a good time.'

She's still looking at me, smiling. 'You're welcome.'

I take my time getting out of the car, relishing the warm feeling of her eyes on my back. I shut the door and walk to the front door, pondering what to do with the sketch in my pocket. At first, the right side of my brain begins to detail the sunset, cut off from the far right side of the page and illuminating the area around her hair. The left side of my brain suggests a more rational idea, one of perfecting the raw edges of the lines already drawn and fixing the erroneous ones in order to do her face justice.

By the time I reach my room, I'm back at the starting line.