

ON THE EDGE OF SEVENTEEN

Tammy drove a black pickup, smaller than her son Jack's blue one, which sat idly in their driveway for the four and a half months he spent doing time for "some mob-action shit." That's what he'd called it when I asked him why he had to go to court. He'd assured me, his girlfriend of just a few months, that the whole group-aggravated-battery thing was a simple matter of wrong place, wrong time, as if the cops had only pinned something on him because of his previous record. When we'd met the summer before, he seemed like a regular, appealingly dangerous seventeen-year-old boy.

On a Saturday in the spring of my junior year in high school, I accompanied Tammy on the hour and a half drive up to the prison where Jack was being held. He would be there until a spot opened up in boot camp, a military-style training program—also known as "shock incarceration"—intended to shorten sentences for non-serial offenders. Tammy and I had gone to the mall the weekend before, where she handed me a hundred dollar bill to buy Jack an all-white pair of Nikes that would pass the boot camp's regulations. When the sales associate at Finish Line tried to show me other options, and I explained why I needed the all-white ones, his eyes bulged as if they were trying to escape his head, and he turned to get me the size thirteens.

Tammy and I smoked cigarettes the whole way to Joliet Correctional Facility, which has since been shuttered and used as the fictional Fox River prison on television. When I watched the show *Prison Break* several years

later, I couldn't figure out why I found the medieval-style limestone building, complete with turrets, so triggering. I'd conveniently forgotten the time I was a visitor.

As we approached the barbed-wire fence, I asked Tammy what kinds of criminals were locked up inside. "They got murderers and rapists," she said, pulling over to dump the joint roaches out of her ashtray. "All kinds of shit." I noticed that, along with the Nikes, she had brought a brown paper bag full of magazines and peeked through them when we stopped for gas. Some were about cars, but most were pornography: naked blonde women with their legs spread open, sprawled out on top of cars or squatting next to motorcycles.

Once we got inside, past the metal detector, I heard whistles and catcalls. I kept my eyes focused straight ahead. It had been difficult to choose an outfit that morning. I wanted to look sexy for my prison boyfriend but hadn't fully considered the murderers and rapists. Suddenly I was hyper-aware of my cleavage, showcased by the neckline of my favorite nautical navy-blue spandex camisole. I zipped up my jacket.

When we entered the small, plain visitation room, furnished with a few four-seat tables and vending machines, Jack was already there, waiting. He was wearing what could have been white hospital scrubs, if you ignored the numbers across the back, and he looked pale, like he'd just seen his first spleen—his green eyes were vivid against the sallow backdrop of his skin. I hugged his six-foot-three frame as Tammy went to buy us snacks from the vending machine. Except for that initial greeting, we weren't allowed to touch

at all. He seemed shaken by his new surroundings, but not afraid. I knew I didn't have to worry about him, but something in me shifted when I saw he couldn't be the protective, affectionate boyfriend I had fallen for in the first place.

Twenty years later, our short visit is a blur. More vivid is the joint Tammy and I shared on the way home. After seeing her 220-pound adult baby in prison, she was uncharacteristically silent. Typically, she would ramble on about her boyfriend or her neighbors, who were always doing something that bugged her. "That's ate up," she'd quip, her shaggy bleached-blond hair pulled half-up and held in place with a scrunchie, her long bangs swaying back and forth as she shook her head.

With Jack temporarily out of the picture, I was spending more time with Tammy. I'd come over, and she'd sit in a rocking chair, yakking on about nonsense and every so often getting up to look out the window, as if something important, or threatening, might be happening out there.

"I hear that," I'd respond after almost everything she said, waiting for her to catch on that I had no clue what she was talking about. She never did. Unlike my own mother, who criticized how I dressed and acted, Tammy couldn't have cared less about how I presented myself. Her overly tan face was covered in wrinkles, though she couldn't have been more than forty. She wore crop tops that revealed a leathery stomach—and a belly button that sank into her petite frame like the mouth of a rotting pumpkin during an unseasonably warm October.

My hometown is an unremarkable stop off Interstate 55, which cuts a path between Chicago and Saint Louis through soybean and cornfields. Not only was there nothing to do there growing up, but there was no nearby city that felt worth aspiring to—and before the internet, no real connection to the outside world. I was sheltered, unaware that the privileges I enjoyed as a member of the upper middle class were not universal. My parents were quite strict, and in response, I became rebellious. Every one of their actions had an equal and opposite reaction. They grounded me for drinking; I snuck out. They threw away my cigarettes; I pulled them out of the trash. They flushed my weed; I stole twenties from my father’s wallet to replace it.

This went on until I somehow broke them; they gave up, and we mostly stopped speaking. But they let me keep driving their Honda as long as I kept my grades up and got a job every summer. At sixteen, I worked as a lifeguard at a public park, collecting cash for paddleboat rentals and ensuring patrons were equipped with life jackets. Because I was a pothead, I skimmed off the paddleboat operation to order myself deliveries, which came in through a chain-link fence behind the shed where I was stationed.

When my weed dealer told me about a party on the college campus in my town, I went. There, I met seventeen-year-old Jack. Almost two years older than me, he was ruggedly handsome in a white V-neck T-shirt and jeans. He didn’t say much but somehow managed to command the kind of respect normally reserved for star athletes or mob bosses.

I noticed our hair was the same color—light brown with highlights. I later

learned he'd put a garbage bag on his head, poked holes in it, and bleached whatever bits of hair he could pull through. The appropriate terminology for the result—popular in 1998—was “frosted tips.” I bleached my hair yellow straight from a bottle since my mother wouldn't pay for me to have it done professionally.

At the party, the boys drank beer in the flatbed of Jack's blue pickup. Jack looked at me intently, his green eyes picking up on my insecurity. “You're pretty,” he said, lighting my cigarette. I noticed a fresh scar on his hand, and he told me he had just gotten out of jail. He explained he'd gotten drunk and punched through a front-door window—the cause of both the scar and his arrest.

He was unconcerned with sports, popularity, and high school society in general—things I also hated, but for different reasons. I was too rebellious for the nerds, too smart for the jocks, and not into drama class. I didn't fit in anywhere, so I smoked pot constantly to temper my social anxiety. He drank heavily, gambled over card games at his mom's trailer, and rode shotgun in my car while eating pork rinds—a snack I hadn't even known existed. (After Jack got locked up, I found a lone pork rind between the passenger seat and the door—and cried.)

By the fall of my junior year, Jack and I had become a couple, and he took me to homecoming. We doubled with my best friend, Alex, and her boyfriend, the star of the football team. Jack seemed uncomfortable when he showed up at my parents' house—a white-brick four bedroom with blue

shutters—in dress slacks and a button-up shirt. I wore a royal-blue satin dress. My parents took photos of us before we went to the only fancy hotel restaurant in town to get burgers.

After dinner, while traveling to the dance in the football star’s jeep, the air thick with the scent of our rose corsages, another driver motioned angrily at us for cutting him off. Jack rolled down his window, made a deep Marlboro-Red-infused gurgle, and launched the largest loogie I’d ever seen. It sailed over the lane marker and directly onto the other driver’s side window. The man—in his mid-thirties, likely, and wearing glasses—looked back at us from behind the yellow slime, horrified. We all hesitated before breaking into laughter.

I was making a habit of skipping school to hang out with Tammy, chiming in on her rants just so I had someone amusing to get stoned with. Jack didn’t smoke pot, and his relationship with his mom mostly consisted of good-natured ribbing, although sometimes Tammy would get fed up with his antics and let out her equivalent of a sigh—a long, deep, exaggerated *Jeeee-sus*. She was the kind of mother who, at the time, seemed novel—less like a parent and more like a cool older sister, which meant she let us have sex at her place.

That November, I got pregnant. I didn’t bother to tell Tammy and hid it from my own parents, along with the abortion I quickly decided to have. Jack drove me almost two hours away to the nearest clinic in Illinois, where protesters carried signs about killing babies and screamed at the car as we entered the parking lot.

“Bunch of assholes,” Jack said.

He walked me inside, and once my name was called, waited in the parking lot. When I came back out dazed, the sunlight burning my eyes, I spotted the smoke from his Marlboros rising up from the sunroof of my teal '95 Honda Accord. I felt sick but not sad. Just a few weeks later, Jack committed the crime that would send him to Fox River—his “mob action shit”—and the following month he received his five-month sentence.

Once he was gone, I'd go over to Tammy's house on Sunday nights and talk to Jack, who could call collect only once a week. Sometimes I'd get to answer the phone and hear the recording: *You have a collect call from*—he'd say his full name—*at Joliet Correctional Facility*. He also sent letters to my home address, which my mother collected and read before eventually handing them over in a screening process that seemed, to me, at least as strict as the prison's.

“I don't know why I'm letting you have these,” she sighed, raising an eyebrow. “Some interesting illustrations in there.”

She had not expected to find teddy bears, drawn by a convicted felon, on an envelope addressed to her teenage daughter. I thought they expressed his soft interior, hidden from the rest of the world but accessible to me. The lines had been traced over so many times the pen had nearly punctured the paper—the same ink, I later learned, he'd also used to give himself a prison tat, a small blue mark at the base of his thumb. Happy to have proof he'd been thinking about me, I looked past his misspelled declarations of love and toward the

promises he made about getting his life straightened out.

He became my first long-distance boyfriend. At seventeen, the relationship that existed within the confines of my own head satisfied teenage social pressures to have a significant other, as well as my penchant for melodrama: I loved someone, and we'd been torn apart by a force greater than my parents. All of this made me believe in starry-eyed things like destiny and romance, while, in reality, Jack and I didn't know each other all that well. We'd only been together for six months and hadn't had a real fight.

With Jack gone, I was free to hang out every night at the apartment the boys in the graduating class above me had rented for the summer or "The A-P-T," as we called it. My friends and I would go there and smoke weed in an outdoor stairwell overlooking the train tracks, talk about *The Blair Witch Project* and shriek, while the boys sat there squinting, red-eyed from smoking.

I found myself attracted to one of them and ended up going home with him. We agreed that no one should know, especially not Jack. When I went to his house I would park in a lot down the street, and he would look both ways out the front door before letting me in. But I couldn't help myself and eventually confessed the affair to a friend, who, predictably, told Jack's ex-girlfriend. If I had learned anything from hours of watching Jerry Springer after school, it should have been to keep my fool mouth shut.

When I Google Jack today, I find, on the first page of the search results, his MySpace page, a 2005 mug shot (from when he was charged with resisting

arrest while on parole, shortly after getting out of prison following another sentence, years after I knew him) and a court document referencing an abusive relationship. In a publicly available database, I also find records of at least twenty criminal charges, nine of which include a form of battery. When I see the word “domestic” in front of one, I begin to sweat.

I’d tried to block out how our relationship ended, to move on. But even with years of therapy, it was difficult—partly because I wasn’t sure about exactly what had happened. It took me two decades of living 900 miles away to build up the courage to request copies of the court documents from my case. They arrived at my apartment in New York City, where I worked for a women’s fashion brand. My days were spent reviewing photography layouts featuring stick-thin models in oversized minimalist garb, their eyes vacant.

When I emptied the contents of the manila envelope onto my marble tabletop, some of what I found surprised me: the fact that, the year we broke up, Jack had been charged a \$100 domestic violence fine and then been processed through court collections for not paying it. Or that I still recognized the backward slant of his handwriting on one of the forms—and could imagine the tip of his tongue sticking out through the side of his teeth as he carefully printed each tiny letter of his name. But mostly, I was surprised at the acts described in the charging documents.

Jack and I remained a couple for the duration of his sentence. At his boot camp graduation, he looked proud, an expression so unfamiliar it read almost