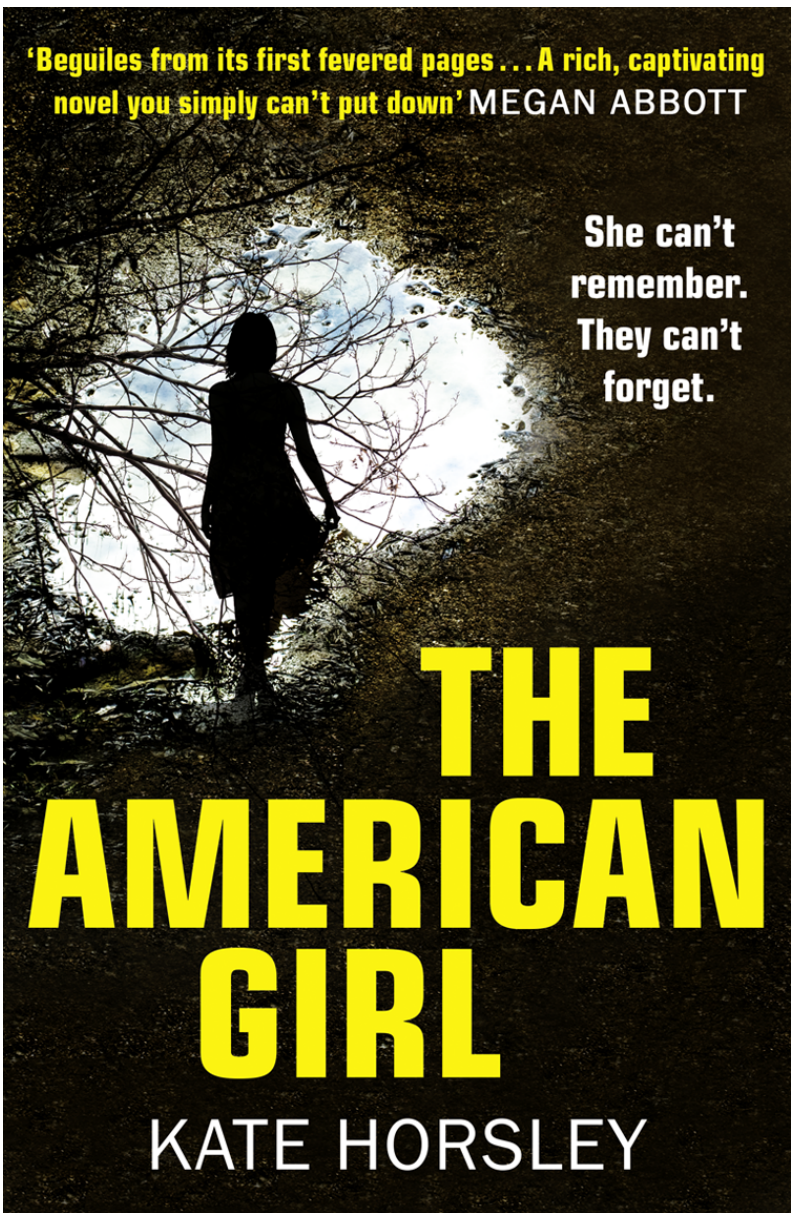




'Beguiles from its first fevered pages . . . A rich, captivating novel you simply can't put down' MEGAN ABBOTT

**She can't
remember.
They can't
forget.**

THE AMERICAN GIRL

KATE HORSLEY

Kate Horsley

**The American Girl: A disturbing
and twisty psychological thriller**

«HarperCollins»

Horsley K.

The American Girl: A disturbing and twisty psychological thriller /
K. Horsley — «HarperCollins»,

From a bright new talent comes a twisting psychological thriller with a shocking conclusion, perfect for fans of Ruth Ware, B.A. Paris and Helen Fields. A MISSING FAMILY Barefoot, bloodied, with no memory of what has happened to her – Quinn Perkins stumbles out of the woods in France and discovers that her exchange family have mysteriously disappeared. A SMALL TOWN SEEKING REVENGE Journalist Molly Swift is drawn to the mystery and prepared to do anything to learn the truth, including lying to get close to Quinn. But when a shocking discovery sparks fury in the town, Quinn is arrested for murder. DARK SECRETS DRAGGED INTO THE LIGHT As a trial by media ensues, Molly is left to unravel the town's disturbing past and clear Quinn's name – but is she really innocent? Or is she a cunning killer intent on getting away with murder?

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THE AMERICAN GIRL

KATE HORSLEY

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Dedication

To my family

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Acknowledgments

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Quinn Perkins

AUGUST 5, 2015

Video Diary: Session 6

[Quinn, a girl of seventeen, sits on the edge of a hospital bed wearing a white gown. As she talks, her bare legs kick the frame of the bed and monitors beep softly in the background]

You ever have one of those Magic 8 Balls as a kid? Yeah, pretty retro, I know. I remember asking mine if Adam Epstein was planning on taking me to senior prom. It said, *Don't count on it*, so I sat on my little pink bed with the daisy-pattern comforter and shook it again and again until I got the answer I wanted.

Um, my mind keeps circling. Back to that Magic 8 Ball. See, if I can remember those details—my room, the pattern on my comforter—then why can't I remember all the other things that are so much more important? The therapist who gave me this camera told me to keep a diary. He gave me some exercises and helpful advice, too: "the mind is a mysterious place" kind of thing. But in the end, I guess, he found it just as frustrating trying to get inside my head as I do. Everyone seems to.

[Quinn moves closer to the camera and stares into it]

I'm that 8 Ball, y'know. Shake me once—one answer bubbles to the surface. Shake me twice—I say something different. Might not be the thing you want to hear, though. I can't help it. All those sharp little shards inside me could be answers, but they've come loose. Now I see them in fragments that don't make any more sense than my nightmares do.

Those puzzle pieces are all in there somewhere. I know it. They're waiting for the right person to fit them together. That must be why they keep shaking me over and over and over, asking the same question:

"Where is the family?"

[A nurse walks into the frame and adjusts the sheets on the bed. She glances at the monitors, notes something on a chart hanging from the bed, and leaves without speaking]

I'm back. Anyhow, sorry. Didn't mean to sound crazy there. Dunno what's come over me since ... well, since whatever happened. But I want to help find them. So here goes. I'm telling all of you—the therapist and the police and everyone—what I remember about that night.

I woke in the woods. I don't know how I got there. I could see my hands in front of me in the dark and that was all. I was only sure of one thing—I had to get away from that place.

I got up and I didn't know which way to go. I kept spinning around in circles, but the trees looked the same every way I turned. There was a full moon, I think, and I had the idea that if I kept it on my right, I'd get to where I needed to be, so ... I started to walk. Then I realized I was barefoot. These sharp little bits of stuff dug into my feet and I had to pick my way along on tiptoes. I walked a few steps. Then I heard the sound of twigs cracking. Yeah, uh ...

[Pause]

It sounded like someone was behind me. God. This horrible thought came into my head like there'd been something back there in the dark I was scared of—really scared of. That something terrible had happened to me. I had this thought, *They'll start hunting for me soon*. That thought was like ... well, it was like wooden letters spelled out in my head. Yeah—just a sentence with no explanation.

The footsteps came closer. I hid behind a tree. I tried to think what to do. Then I just started to run. It felt as if I was moving in slow motion, like my mind wasn't really moving my legs. I fell, hard. I can still ... well, it throbs ... The ground punched me in the face, I think.

[Laughs]

Which is how I got these cuts around my lips, I guess. I remember blood in my mouth, getting up, winded. My knees and my tongue stung 'cause I bit them. I was getting more and more stressed. I

wanted to stop somewhere. Prayed someone would come and help me. All I could do was keep going and not look at anything like the dark or the trees. They were pretty scary.

I just knew I *had* to keep running. I ran and ran. I didn't know if anyone was behind me or not. Maybe I should have looked around or something, but I couldn't stop long enough to listen. Then the sun started to rise. I remember thinking it looked like melted metal running down between the trees. Would've been pretty if I hadn't been so terrified. By that time, I couldn't feel my feet anymore. All of a sudden, I heard, um, a river rushing by, I thought.

So I ran towards the sound, but there was a slope I didn't see and I stumbled down it. Then I saw where the noise was from—not a river, but the road. Well, more of a track. I followed it for a while. I don't know how long. My feet really hurt. I was cold, shivering. I kept looking over my shoulder all the time, hoping someone would come.

Then I heard this sound ... tires on the road and I saw a red car coming, so I ran to it, waving my arms and shouting and stuff, but the driver just kept on going and the headlights blinded me. I kind of knew it would hit, but I couldn't move. I just ... froze.

[Quinn laughs softly]

Do you find all of that as hard to make sense of as I do?

Well, you can “ask again later” if you want to.

Molly Swift

JULY 30, 2015

It's two days since they found her. The papers say she was wandering on the road, barefoot and bloodied, her mouth open in a scream the driver couldn't hear. He slammed the brakes but didn't stop in time; he hit her and took off.

As fate would have it, a German tourist couple was parked on the top of a hill along the road, filming a panorama of the sunrise over the lavender fields. In the midst of their early-morning filmmaking, the camera panned towards the road—and caught the whole accident, from the moment she walked out of the woods. She was lucky, I guess. If they hadn't spotted her, who knows how long she would have lain there bleeding.

According to *Le Monde*, the tourists ran to help and rushed the unconscious girl to the hospital here in St. Roch; but by the time the doctors wheeled her into intensive care, she was in a coma. Shaken, the pair returned to their holiday flat and watched their French sunrise video. They were shocked afresh by the sight of the girl lying crumpled in the road, the way the red car sped away, the scene captured as they ran downhill to help her—filming as they went.

That's how the video went viral. The Good Samaritans saw that glimpse of red car, the hint of a plate (a nine? an *E*?), the merest blur of a man's face, hair dark, sunglasses on. They decided the best thing to do was upload the clip to YouTube. It spread to Facebook as one of those long status updates calling on the public: "find this monster," "help the #AmericanGirl."

She wouldn't have made the headlines except it was a slow news week and the story of an American girl abroad for the first time, alone—a mystery girl who walked out of the woods—spread in the way stories do nowadays. In the video, there was that hint of foul play: not just a hit-and-run, after all, but something darker. Otherwise, why would the girl be half naked and screaming before the car ran her down? Soon the clip was trending on Twitter and dominating the insistent worm of text that slithers across the bottom of your TV during the news. It became one of those stories everyone's curious about, one of those mysteries everyone wants to solve.

That's why I'm here, me and the handful of other hacks camped outside the Hôpital Sainte-Thérèse in St. Roch, where the nuns come and go at inhospitable hours, murmuring prayer and giving no sound bites. I'm the most recent arrival, late to the party, crashing in uninvited as usual. Well, not quite uninvited. I was in Paris when I heard the news. First holiday in years, and then this story broke.

I was intrigued. I called Bill to tell him about it and he said, "Why don't you go? Cover it for the program. We'll do an episode on it." Dangling the thought, a whole episode with me at the wheel.

I said, "Go away, Bill, I'm on holiday," but I found myself thinking about that American girl, all the more so because the video was impossible to get away from.

Of course, the other journalists will state the obvious: the facts, the theories, the local gossip. But this is *American Confessional*—"the truths no one wants you to hear"—podcast once a week on iTunes in a series of audio episodes topped and tailed with our melancholy signature music. We're interested in the big themes: police brutality, political corruption, contemporary loneliness in the toxic age of the internet. We've gathered quite a following for unpicking the kind of unsolved mysteries that fascinate the American listener (well, the HBO-loving, *New Yorker*-reading kind). I like to think the show's motif of moral inquiry emerges through the interviews I do. I don't judge or comment. Bill and I let our audience decide the guilt of those involved as if they were investigating each case from the comfort of their armchairs.

So we're going for more of a think piece on this one: a young American girl coming of age, going into the world on her own only to encounter the unkindness of a stranger. Then cue the ominous music, delving into her life via her social media profile and those that encountered her here. I could see how it would work with our show, too: ragging on law enforcement always draws listeners, so we

could condemn the local police, too corrupt or incompetent to find the guy in the car or examine the video before it spawned a legion of online vigilantes.

I was also the only journalist with enough guts to sneak into that hospital and make my way past the nuns. As a former Catholic-school girl, I'm not scared of nuns, which served me well when I encountered the severe-looking nun manning the hospital's reception desk. When I asked what room Quinn Perkins was in, she muttered something dismissive in French. I could see she was tough, probably prides herself on getting rid of people; but then, I pride myself on being a professional liar.

"Could you please repeat that in English?" I said with a smile, holding my ground.

"Family only allowed here," she barked, "no person else." Then she paused, glaring at me over her half-moon specs. "You are a family member of Quinn Perkins?"

What, because we're both blond and American? I thought. It was lucky for me that she made that assumption. A little too lucky perhaps. I fought off the impulse to look over my shoulder when I smiled back at her and answered, "Yes."

Molly Swift

JULY 30, 2015

I felt bold in my lie, but I expected to be found out any moment. I followed the receptionist's directions to the girl's room as quickly as I could without looking as if I was hurrying. I came to the room, and stopped at the threshold.

From the newspaper stories, I'd imagined she would be in a tent of plastic, tangled in tubes and wires, barely visible; but she lay unfettered by machinery, neatly tucked under starched white sheets. Her face was bruised from the accident, her head shaved on one side. A run of stitches tattooed her scalp like railroad tracks: the place the car hit, the blow that knocked her clean from this world into dreamland, some gray space where she couldn't be reached.

It always happens when I'm working on a new story: that moment when the person I've been researching transforms from a news item into a human being. I'm used to it, so I'm not sure why it hit me harder this time. Maybe because I was far from home and she was, too: the girl in the bed, the girl called Quinn Perkins, was all too real to me now. Bill had told me to take some footage with the little hidden camera he bought me years ago for my undercover work. It was pinned to my lapel, switched on and filming. He'd asked me to find a chart if I could and photograph that—to document the room, the nuns, the state the girl was in.

Instead, I found myself turning off the camera and, almost as if in a dream myself, falling into the plastic bucket seat next to her bed. I sat watching the rise and fall of her chest, even and slow, and felt a strange peace descend, like watching a child sleep. With her bruised face, her half-shaven head, and black scabs crusting the stitches, she looked worlds away from the fresh-faced teen in the photographs.

I found myself pondering all over again how she came to be walking out of the woods that gray July morning. I imagined how her legs would have been bare and dirty, her feet cut to shreds when she wandered down the middle of the dirt road, her blond hair stringy with blood. Why? This question intrigued me far more than the driver of the car.

The video footage the German tourists took of her was so shocking it looked like something from a handheld horror movie. That, and the mystery of her identity, seemed to be why the video spread so far so fast. Stills taken from clips ended up on the front pages of French papers. Soon "*La fille Américaine inconnue*" bled through Reuters and Google Translate, becoming "Mysterious American Girl Found."

Eventually her father, on holiday in Tahiti with his very pregnant fiancée, recognized the face of his daughter and called up to claim her. She was given a name: Quinn Perkins of Boston. She had come to St. Roch as part of a study abroad program that placed her with a local family called the Blavettes—a schoolteacher mom, her son and daughter—presumed to be away visiting an ailing relative in some mountain area with no phone reception. Their name came out when the police released details of the case.

The news feed on my phone said Quinn was running out of time, that after the first twenty-four hours of a coma the chances of waking plummet. From the chart at the end of her bed, I could see that this particular coma had been rated a "7." Google told me that made her chances of recovery about fifty-fifty. She should have had relatives there, talking to her, playing her music, stroking her hand. But the visitor list near the door told me she had no one—Professor Perkins hadn't yet rushed to her side, which was odd. Not just odd, heartbreaking. A plane would get him here quickly from anywhere in the world.

They say that sometimes the feeling of touch, the sound of speech, can jolt a person from this dream state, wake them like a kiss in a fairy tale. And so I found myself reaching for her hand, taking it in mine. I touched her hand almost reverently. Time unspooled until I didn't know how long I'd

been in that room with the softly bleeping machines, the sleeping girl, her mystery sealed inside, pristine. All of a sudden, her hand twitched, the fingers wriggling inside mine. I squeezed it again, but this time nothing happened. Still, I couldn't help thinking, *She moved*.

"Only you know how you got here," I said softly.

A hand touched my shoulder. As startled as if I'd been sleeping myself, I looked up to see the habit of a nun, crisp white folds around a surprisingly young face.

The nun's brow was creased. Her pale eyes looked nervously down at me through frameless specs. "Poor thing, she has been alone. We are so glad her family is here finally."

"Yeah." I smiled, hoping she didn't want to know exactly what family I was.

She checked the charts, the machines, making little ticks on a chart as she did. Faintly, I heard her singing a French song under her breath. I sat tensed, wondering if I should make my excuses now and leave before she started asking me questions I couldn't answer.

She was in the middle of adjusting Quinn's sheets when she turned to me and said in very precise English, "Have you heard? It is so terrible. Now they think the family of Blavette is missing."

"The family she was staying with?" I asked, managing to sound genuinely shocked because I was. "I thought they were visiting some relative."

"No indeed. The grandmother has been in touch and has not seen any of them since Christmastime. The police have just searched their house again and found something perhaps, because they are putting out a news bulletin to say this family is missing. It is on the television now."

In the reception area, a crowd had formed around the television. I couldn't see the images except for a flicker of color between their heads, but I understood enough of the rapid French reportage to confirm the nun's story: the Blavettes had been declared missing. The search was on for them as well as the hit-and-run driver. Two mysteries to solve for the price of one. When I walked into the hospital parking lot, I noticed that most of the other hacks had gone, perhaps to the gendarmerie to hear the press release. I had other plans.

Quinn Perkins

JULY 12, 2015

Blog Entry

It's midnight. The family is out. Noémie's at a party in the woods. Madame Blavette is on her date with Monsieur Right. I'm alone in the house in the middle of the French countryside, tucked into my lumpy bed that smells of bleach and jam and sterilized milk. A latchkey kid still, just in a different country. Through the slats of the wooden shutters, I can hear cicadas thrum, a thick carpet of sound, unbroken. It's comforting somehow, though I'm almost too sleepy to work on the blog, sleepy and a bit drunk still, from cider and beer and cheap rosé all swilling together.

My phone beeps: one new message. I see the number and the knots of my spine draw closer together. The sweat on my face and chest grows cold. That number. It's the one I mentioned a couple of posts ago, the one you guys all said you were worried about (I remember *loserboy38* suggested adding it to *Contacts* under "Stalker," but that was too creepy, even for me). So anyway, consequently it just comes up as just a series of ones and nines and fours and sevens. Sometimes the number series sends texts, photos like that one I posted up Thursday—the blurry photo of me sunbathing. There was another: my hoodie up, my school bag on my shoulder, and my sneakers kicking up dust on the road back to the schoolhouse. It creeped me out too much to post.

This time, it's just a single emoji, a winking face. I delete the whole message thread, like always, and at that moment, a notification pops up, a Snapchat from *lalicorne*, some random person I only half remember adding a week or so ago because I thought it was a friend of Noémie's. But they haven't chatted me yet and the profile image is one of those gray mystery man icons so you can't even tell if it's a boy or a girl. I open the app and swipe onto the chat thread to see what they've sent.

I tap on the pink square and a video loads. The film is dark, hard to see, but I hear a noise like heavy breathing. A muffled scream startles me. I grip the phone harder. A girl's face appears, too close up to see in detail. The film is choppy and moves so fast it's hard to take in before the timer in the top right corner counts down. The girl's breathing hard and there's something—a plastic bag, maybe—stretched over her face. Three ... two ... one, and the screen goes black, the video vanishing forever as Snapchat deletes it and, with it, the girl.

For a long time after that I sat on the floor. The curtains were open and outside I could hear the constant cricket machine, see star-shine countryside black with no light pollution to reassure me that I was anything other than alone. Mme B says this place is haunted. I don't think I believe in that stuff, but sitting there alone in the middle of the night, I knew what she meant, like I could almost hear the laughter of the people who lived here before trapped in the walls, behind the brick, the ghost of a good time.

I started to make up explanations to comfort myself—that it's Noémie's doing, a practical joke or some really weird junk mail. After a long while, I reached for the phone, half hoping it was all some weird dream, half wanting to see it again and find out that it's really just a clever advertising campaign for a new handheld horror movie. But somehow I know it wasn't a horror flick clip. It was too real for that. When I do pick up the phone, the video's gone. Snapped into an untimely death in the virtual void, because it's Snapchat, of course. All messages are instantaneous, ticking down the moments it takes you to read or watch them like a fuse on a bomb and then they're gone.

She's gone, as if she was never there, and I'm sitting with my back against the door, typing this on my blogging app. And here's a straw poll: What do I do, guys? Who do I tell? Anyhow, I need to go now, to check the house, to lock the door. Something instead of sitting on the floor, feeling scared and alone in the middle of nowhere, waiting for them to come home.

Molly Swift

JULY 30, 2015

As I drove along the dusty main road of St. Roch, my skin still hummed from the excitement at the hospital: being mistaken for a relative, the plot twist with the Blavettes, seeing Quinn. I came to the part of the road she must have walked along, the jagged points of trees looming like arrowheads dug from a riverbed.

In the YouTube clip, right before the accident, Quinn makes no effort to dodge the car hurtling her way. Afterwards, she lies in the road, mumbling words you can't quite catch from the choppy audio as the tourists got close to her, filming all the time, though a number of comment threads have speculated on what she was saying. Heading towards the line of trees, I couldn't visualize the pixelated image of her prone body that was reprinted in all the papers. In my mind's eye, she shimmered as she walked out of the forest, her pale fingers beckoning me on to the dark trees.

My rental car squealed around a turn in the road and towards the house. I wasn't yet used to driving on these kinds of roads; it amazed me that I could be in town one moment and the next in the heart of farmland, driving down little sewage runnels between rows of squat olive trees or lavender or yellow rapeseed flowers. The Blavette house came after a turnoff for just such a nothing little lane. Opposite it was an orchard, where the apples were growing red and dark and glossy as poison fruit. A sprayer moved between trees, dispensing real poison that ran into drainage ditches and misted the air. This was the place where the American girl had been staying, where her vanished host family had lived for generations—it wasn't hard to find. Google, the great democratizer of freelance detective work, told me where to go for a bit of trespassing.

I stopped the car and lit a cigarette, hoping the air around me wouldn't catch fire in the fug of pesticide. I smoked hard, letting the engine idle while I sized up the house. Like Quinn, it was different from the pictures I'd seen, idyllic shots that must have been stolen from some holiday rental catalog. Paler, sadder, more elegant, and more ruined, it peered from between the trees, a witness to who knows what.

From my left came a rhythmic clipping noise. I climbed out of the car, keys clenched between my fingers Boston walk-to-your-door-from-the-bar style, cigarette hanging from my mouth.

An old man ambled from the side of the house carrying a pair of garden shears. He was ancient and white-bearded, clipping away at the leaves of a vine climbing the side of the house, and at first he didn't see me. Like some scene from a French Pathé reel, he was timeless, whistling to himself as if nothing untoward had happened in the village of St. Roch. I got back in my car and crawled over the pebbles of the drive, slowly so I wouldn't give him too much of a fright.

He must have been pretty deaf, because it took him a long time to turn around. But when he did, he looked more scared than I was when I spotted him. I let out a sigh, laughing at myself for succumbing to the gothic fantasy the place suggested. He nodded to me. I got out of the car and walked over and for a moment we stood and looked at each other, caught in the embarrassing free-fall between people who never listened in language class.

Eventually I broke the silence, introducing myself in shaky high-school French. "*Bonjour. Je m'appelle Molly.*"

"*Ah, bonjour.*" The man took off his floppy cloth hat and held out his hand, gnarled and thorn-tracked as my grandpa's were. "*Monsieur Raymond. Enchanté.*" He murmured more words to me in a sweet old man crackle. Their meaning was lost on me, but I gathered from his accompanying gestures that he hammered things here and may have recently cut something with a pair of giant scissors.

"A gardener?" I asked, smiling, "For the family?"

He looked at me blankly with milky blue eyes like sucked sweets. I wondered if maybe he didn't speak English.

And then he intoned in a gentlemanly crackle (twice as charming for being in Franglais), “I take care of school and, as well, this house while the family ...” He thought for a moment, then flapped his hands like birds flying.

“Are away.” I nodded. *Take care of school.* I remembered reading something about a school in the reports on Quinn. “You the caretaker?”

I fished for a cigarette so that he saw no trace of surprise or anything else on my face. “When do you think they’re coming back?” I flicked my lighter wheel, eyeing him through the smoke. From my years of interviewing people, looking for the real stories under their words, I know everyone has little tics, little tells. For most, it’s easier to tell if folks are lying when you know them. But actually, when you’ve been at it a while, you find yourself cold-reading people all the time without meaning to. You had the money for a ticket all along, old lady at the *métro* stop—yeah, you. And, taxi driver, I see you in your rearview, and no, you *don’t* know the way.

But as far as I could make out, Monsieur Raymond was not lying. He shrugged. “They go away often. Are you a friend of theirs? I only live over there, yet I have never seen you.” He pointed to the primeval forest, its dark shapes gathering form and substance as the dusk crept in.

“You live in the woods?” I asked in the hope of distracting him.

He smiled. He liked that question. In my experience, professional weirdos work hard to generate notoriety—locally he is *Raymond, that crazy man living in the woods*. I bet he’s the one who originally spread the rumors about what he gets up to out there all alone.

“On the edge of those,” he said, pointing vaguely, “that very far edge of school field. You look hard you just see my chimney—she’s smoking.”

Straining my eyes, I did see it, though before it seemed like just another dark point in the tree line. I felt an involuntary little shiver of glee rattle up my neck at the idea of a childhood myth made flesh—the creepy old guy in the shack in the woods. I’d finally met him.

As if he could read my mind, he said, “Yes, I am there always. Keeping my eyes in things. I see a lot of things here.”

“Like what?”

Tapping his nose. “Everything.”

I dragged on my cigarette, letting the smoke burn and twirl in my lungs, exhaling. “Did you see her—the American girl—when she came out of the forest?”

He looked at me strangely, cutting his eyes at me under snowy lashes. Very blue eyes, betraying a much sharper mind than he let on.

“*L’Américaine?*” He patted his pockets, pulled out a packet of Drum Gold, took a pinch, and flicked it into a paper, rolling and licking in one seamless gesture so that the cigarette seemed to grow out of his thorn-pricked, nicotine-stained hands like pale elongated fruit. “Sometime I feel sorry for that girl.”

I flicked my lighter and he dragged hard, cheeks puffing out to show the impressive spider veins of a lifelong drinker. “Why’s that?”

He shrugged. “*Sais pas.* Just ... well, there was something about her. How you say? Soft? Like a fruit, that you know.” He gouged his fingers as if he were squeezing a peach. “But then I only met her possibly twice.”

“Sweet girl,” I said, smiling.

“*Ouais.* But then so are all the girls they keep here, aren’t they?”

Molly Swift

JULY 30, 2015

For the first part of my life, I grew up in a family that, to the casual onlooker, resembled a Norman Rockwell painting. Dad was a senior partner in a Boston practice who could afford not only an apartment on Beacon Hill, but the beachfront house in Maine where my sister and I spent the best summers of our childhood. Mom was a part-time paralegal secretary and domestic goddess of Martha Stewart proportions. My sister, Claire, and I were brats: she the mean teen homecoming queen; me the band-camp-loving nerd.

The summer I turned thirteen, a letter arrived. I never knew exactly what it said, but I remember Dad's hands shaking as he read it, Mom's angry nagging curdling the hot August air. I was used to their ups and downs. I think I took my bike out for a ride around the coast instead of worrying. In any case, the malpractice suit that ate up everything we owned took its sweet time. It was another year before we'd gone from living like princes to crowding into my Jewish grandmother's stuffy brownstone, torturing her cats. When she threw us out and we began a stint with my Catholic paternal grandparents in Boston's South End, I began to notice the comments friends and relatives whispered as they sat around the big kitchen table: "Col's losing his way and he needs our prayers"—a Catholic way of saying that my father had gone nuts.

We moved back to Maine, to the northern woods that smell of hemlock and balsam, the setting for Dad's new purpose of refashioning his bankrupt life in the image of Thoreau's. By which I mean that he tumbled, babbling, into Grandpa Swift's old timber cabin on Chesuncook Lake and used what money remained to stockpile AK-47s and all the canned creamed corn you could stand. Out in those woods, while Dad snared rabbits and speared trout, Mom discovered a taste for home-brewed beer and I became a delinquent. It was easy to do since my dad's transformation into a wild-eyed survivalist meant that the materials for mischief—knives, rope, power tools—were all around me. By the time I was Quinn's age, my favorite hobby was stealing weed killer and a bag of sugar and rolling my own fuses from cigarette papers so I could blow the fuck out of the earth that trapped us in that madhouse. My sister—through a rock solid combination of grit and conformity—came out of that life pretty normal. She learned to blend in, to agree, to hide the crazy. I didn't, or couldn't. I've always been the black sheep, though over time, life has sanded the rough edges off me.

On the positive side, Dad's questionable parental supervision taught me three crucial things: how to blaze a trail, how to hot-wire a car, and how to pick the toughest locks. Joyriding in cars, carving arrows in trees, and breaking into barns to scare sheep haven't been all that useful in furthering my journalistic career, but the ability to pick locks? Handier than you might think. Filing cabinets, abandoned warehouses, creepy *Silence of the Lambs* lockups are not a problem as long as you've got a bobby pin, or in my case a little black bag of hook picks, pins, and paper clips. I pulled it out, ready to take a look in the Blavette house.

I needn't have bothered. My evening's trespassing was made a whole lot easier by the fact that either the police or the caretaker had left the back door open. It was pitch outside now, the stars sharp and bright as police spotlights. It didn't quite look like a crime scene yet, but you could tell the police had been poking around from the big-booted footprints scattered around the floors, the occasional coffee cup left to stain surfaces. Once I was sure Monsieur Raymond wasn't still lurking around, I took a deep breath, peeled away from the doorway, and crossed the hallway to the stairs.

At the top of the stairs was a bedroom. The large bed told me it was probably the master, and the matching rose-pattern wallpaper and curtains suggested a woman had decorated it. I tiptoed over the pastel rug towards the bed, as cautious as if I might find someone sleeping there. On the nightstand sat a framed picture of the Blavette family, when the husband was still on the scene. I snapped an iPhone photo and moved on, flicking my torch over the ointments and powders on the

antique dresser, illuminating the dark spots freckling the mirror. Without its people, the house felt frozen in time, like the ballroom of some lost ocean liner.

I crept out into the dark well of the hallway and walked on, identifying the various bedrooms, all with objects and clothes left strewn across beds and floors. First was what I decided was the son's room, the door decorated with a photo of twenties Paris and a map of the stars; inside, a guitar, a basketball hoop, and thick textbooks. Save the French titles of the books, it could have been the room of any American college-age boy. Next was a young girl's innocent bedroom: a world map dotted with photos of pen pals decorated one baby-pink wall and the shelves were crowded with pony figurines and books about ballerinas.

The guest room was bigger but had less character, its floral walls and drapes echoing the master. It smelled of lavender and cigarettes. Weirdly, the wardrobe and desk were clean; where had Quinn's clothes and things gone? I snapped a few pictures but found nothing more useful than some old book about the history of the local caves and a half-written postcard addressed to someone called Kennedy. "Hey, dude!" it began. "Missing your face. So awesome ..." My heart sank a little at the way it tailed off mid-awesome, as if something had interrupted the writer. On impulse, I stuffed both the book and the card in my bag.

At the end of the hallway was another door I hadn't tried yet. I twisted the handle. It moved, but the door didn't open. I had just knelt down to look through the lock when there was a noise downstairs, like the scrape of a chair. My hand fumbled my keys from my pocket. I pushed my sharp little front door key between my forefinger and middle finger, straining my ears towards the stairs. As I tiptoed down them, I heard a noise from outside, a sharp bark, like a fox. Maybe it was that I'd heard. In a place like this, it wasn't surprising my mind was playing tricks on me.

I was just creeping back into the front room when I heard tires gobbling up gravel and saw the lights of a car. It pulled to a halt. The thrum of an engine stopped and the headlights went out. A door slammed. I stopped in the hallway, just listening. A ring tone sounded outside, then stopped and a man's voice began speaking rapid and low in French.

I turned around in a slow circle, thinking about the house, the windows, the doors, the ways out. The only option was that back door. I tiptoed to it, trying to keep my steps light, my breathing calm. Outside, the voice stopped talking and the man cleared his throat. I glanced behind me to see the front door handle beginning to turn.

Quinn Perkins

JULY 13, 2015

Blog Entry

Back home in Boston, this blog is all about coming up with creative ways to make my boring life seem interesting. I:

tell weird stories that are semibased on my antics
post bloodthirsty stories about zombies and hell beasts
quote lines from classic horror movies of the '80s
write trashy tabloid headlines to caption my most awkward moments

I guess it's how I met you all, horror fan friends, who always write bloodthirsty comments on my Monsters of New England posts: *My Rockport Devil Sighting*, *What Mothman?* and my most popular post ever, *Lizzie Borden and the Fall River Witches!* Earlier in the year, I had so many great chats with talented writer friends like *PoeBoy13* and *dreamswithghosts* that I got up the nerve to send some of my horror stories out to zines and even got "Lila on the Ceiling" published in *Splatterpunk!* (It's that one you all said reminded you of early Stephen King—oh, how I would *love* to be Stephen King one day!) I thought my travels in France would give me the perfect chance to develop my skills with some travel writing, and find some new spooky places to do a little urban exploring, dig into the local legends.

Turns out I didn't need to leave this house to find the darkness. It found me. It's weird to think that this blog used to be all about a wannabe writer with no life experience to write about. Now that life in France has taken a dark turn and real stuff has happened, I should be unblocked, but I'm not. Now for once I find myself wishing my life was more ordinary.

It's almost dawn and I've given up on trying to sleep. I've taken my meds early—clonazepam, Wellbutrin, Depakote, lorazepam—hoping to calm down, but they didn't make me any less anxious or depressed, so now I feel drowsy *and* stressed.

In the cold light of day, it will seem less scary, I guess, but I still have that papery feeling. Like something's about to go wrong. I've turned around and around and around in the starched sheets all night and haven't actually slept. That video thing freaked me out way too much.

Any suggestions, people? Maybe y'all are asleep.

At least Noémie's home now. I heard the noises of her door creaking open, the whisper of her clothes falling to the floor, the rusty metal groan of her climbing into bed. I felt such relief to hear those familiar sounds, so much that I almost went in to tell her about what happened ... but I didn't know what to say. The video is gone. I put the text message into Google Translate. It said, *This is real*. That's all. Pretty weird, huh? And I don't know her well enough to guess how she would react.

Though after three months here, I should, right? I came here just after Easter, hoping to complete my very last quarter of high school speaking fluent French. Since then, I've walked with Noémie each day to the shiny new lycée for fast-talking French lessons and head-spinning economics lessons (not sure if the latter is useful preparation for being an English major at Bryn Mawr in a couple of months, but Noé's studying it for her baccalaureate so I'm tagging along). Each weekend—as stipulated by my study abroad program—we've gone on an odyssey of cultural discovery in Charente-Maritime: exploring the Vieux Port, the amphitheater and the big old church in La Rochelle, the museums of commerce and automata and the *son et lumière* at the castle (that place about a hundred times!). The Sacred Heart Travel Scholarship promised a chance to "soak in the French way of life through full cultural immersion, expanding academic horizons as much as comprehension."

If anything, I have less comprehension. Noé is more of a mystery to me than when I arrived. Back in April she seemed excited to have an American friend, giving me friendship bracelets and mixtapes, throwing me parties. Since the holiday started, she's been quieter, staying in her bedroom a

lot ... *sang-froid*, maybe, or plain old-fashioned dislike. We were hurled together by the freak weather conditions of cultural exchange, matched by an educational eHarmony through a database of hobbies that couldn't possibly tell if we had much in common. Secretly, though, I think we have too much in common—living in our heads, not being, as the French say, *bien dans sa peau*. It makes for a lot of awkward silences at dinner, that's for sure.

It makes for being lonely. I even tried to phone my dad, but I think he's too busy getting ready for the trip to Tahiti with Meghan. They're superbusy, anyway, preparing for the new baby, the tiny half sister or brother who's arriving just in time to fill in for me when I go off to college. Pity that kid! I mean, Meghan's nice enough. I'm sure she'll make a good mom. She turns twenty-five in a few weeks, so she'll be exactly half Dad's age by the time she goes into labor. He was supervising her PhD when they started sneaking around, and I think she thought he was a catch.

She came to dinner once before they knew I knew and after a bottle of wine she told me "your dad is such a good listener, even when I talk about my feelings." Then I *really* knew. Though I still didn't know whether to hug her or warn her to get out while she could. So I just topped up her glass and later, in my room, I looked at some old photos Mom took of me and Dad for some photography project or other and tried to see if he listened to me back then, if we were close. But how can you tell? Just because people smile for photos doesn't mean they're happy.

Poor Meghan's learning the hard way now. Postmarriage, prebaby Dad is an absent presence, working late, drinking hard, teaching summer school so he doesn't have to spend time with anyone who's not an adoring student. I remember feeling bitter when they got engaged and thinking, *One day he'll blame you for everything like he blames me*. Like he blames me for Mom dying and for losing it after she did. Now that it's come true, though, I just feel sad for her.

Anyhow ... to make a long story short, I didn't talk about the stalker/message situation with Dad or Meghan or Noé or anybody. In the end, I just spent the whole night feeling totally paranoid, making a bullet-point list of suspects (in other words, a list of all the people I've met here so far):

Noémie Blavette
her mom, Émilie
Marlene who works at the café
Émilie's British friend Stella
the school caretaker, Monsieur Raymond
the local kids who hang around the pool

Seriously, though, I can't think of any reason any of them would send me snuff movie texts. After all, I'm just an ordinary girl who happens to be a long, long way from home.

Molly Swift

JULY 30, 2015

Halfway back to the hotel, a pair of headlights glared in my rearview mirror, burning full blaze. I shielded my eyes. The car came closer, going faster. I craned around, blinded by the lights. Behind me, the car was almost touching. I braced for impact, squeezed my eyes half shut. I heard the engine rev, the rubber squeal of the tires swerving around me. As it flew past, it swiped the side of my rental, jolting the car.

I almost steered into a ditch but I didn't stop. I kept on driving, forcing the little car back on course. I could feel the sweat streaming down my collar. By the time I was straight and steady again, the red taillights of the other car were just visible in the distance like the eyes of a demon dog. Then they left me in darkness.

Everything around—the white moths shivering in the headlights, the treetops soughing in the wind, the bats, the night noises—fucking everything gave me the creeps. I drove on instinct alone. No higher brain function available. Just getting towards people, lights, civilization as fast as I could, away from the silent house and whoever was in there with me. Twice I drove into one of the loose-dirt ditches that run the length of the narrow roads, once out of sheer nerves, once because a car came straight at me around a bend, headlights blazing, radio blaring. We almost crashed. I swerved. It was only sitting in the ditch, the other car's horn blaring angrily into the distance, that I realized I was on the wrong side of the road. I sat, took a deep breath, took out a cigarette.

I pride myself on my stoic nature. I always have, from my tree-climbing, bottle-rocket-building childhood onward. I talk straight. I swear loud. I honor promises. Like John Wayne, but female and much less right wing. If you asked me to describe myself in a word it would be *tough*. Or *bitch*. Or maybe *tough bitch*, but after the scrabble out of the Blavette house, the headlights on the way home, it took a full ten minutes until my hands stopped shaking enough that I could light that cigarette.

I couldn't help wondering if it was Monsieur Raymond who had opened the door at the house, followed me along the dark road. Take it from your unreliable narrator: there was something creepy about that creepy caretaker. No way of knowing for sure, though.

My phone binged at me from its plastic rest on the dash. A message popped up—Bill asking if I was still alive.

I tapped to call him. He picked up after two rings but didn't say anything. "Hey, Bill. You good?"

"Who wants to know?" He sounded cranky. A couple of days without checking in, and already the sarcasm had begun.

"Me, Molly," I said with a laugh, taking a drag of my cigarette, my eyes flicking nervously to the rearview to see if anyone was there. "You losing the plot without me there?"

"Flattery will get you everywhere, you know," he said in the deadpan tone I knew and loved.

"That how I ended up working for you for peanuts?"

"Ha. You got anything on this girl yet?"

"Yeah. But listen, I gotta go," I said, turning the ignition.

"You okay? You sound ..."

"Call you later." I hung up and turned out into the road.

I knew St. Roch was a short drive from the Blavette house, but nonetheless it seemed like a very long while before my poor car juddered to a halt outside the Overlook—the seen-better-days hotel Bill had booked me a room in. Actually, the only hotel in town, a grand old turn-of-the-century building with a comfy three-star hotel inside. Its original name, Le Napoléon, better befit its air of seedy hubris.

But I love a fleapit, and the Orwellian level of journalistic commitment it implies. I love that you meet people from all walks of life, that you can drink out of a paper bag or eat pizza or smoke

cigarettes (hell, probably even crack) in your room. Most of all, I love that there are people inside and the lights are always on.

After the trauma at the Blavette house, I felt that life owed me a pack of Gauloises and a whiskey. My room in the Napoléon can just about sustain a guest edging around the single bed to turn on the TV or open the door, and the pissoir is so closely situated that you can practically use it from the bed if you've got good aim. You can also turn the TV on with one toe as you smoke out the window. So instead of going straight to my room, I walked past the bored desk clerk playing Angry Birds, past the wolf pack of journalists decamped from the hospital to the hotel bar. As soon as I reached that comforting oasis of wood and free peanuts, I ordered a double JD.

I stared into the drink, my pale, freckly face suspended in the dark liquid like a bad moon rising, my hair wild. Not a good look. Turning to my phone, I checked for messages, pretending to myself that I wasn't still shaking. There were two: one from my mom and another from Bill. I texted Mom that I was really fine, and left Bill for later.

Playing silently on the TV over the bar was a news bulletin about the missing Blavettes, showing the faces of the mother, the son, the daughter. Pictures harvested from their Facebook accounts just as Quinn's have been. Photos showing smiling faces, glowing tans, people with places to go and everything to live for.

Back in Paris, when the #AmericanGirl story broke, I did as much Googling around as I could on my phone. News about Quinn was easy to find. Deeper searches led me to a dedicated subreddit as well as a concerned group of Facebook well-wishers, online supporters for this viral heroine having sprung up overnight like chanterelles. The main theory of the subreddit armchair detectives (the very same sweetly fanatical cellar-dwellers who tune in to my show each week) is that the family went to visit a relative, to get away for a weekend. They've been roundly criticized as irresponsible for leaving a foreign exchange student in their care to wander and wash up broken. Now the police have declared them officially missing, the clock will begin ticking, as it is already ticking for the girl.

After messages, I flipped through the photographs I'd taken with my iPhone, glancing at dark and poorly composed images of the woods, the house, the bedrooms in darkness. The one that made me pause longest was the photo of the photo on Émilie Blavette's nightstand, so different from the fake-smiley Facebook ones issued by the police. In the picture from the nightstand, Émilie looks happy. She hugs her husband close, though he stands more aloof, all French and cool in his sunglasses and crisp shirt. Young Raphael leans his head on her shoulder, a gangly fourteen-year-old momma's boy. Noémie at twelve is a chubby little thing, cute in her pigtails and halter top, hugging Daddy tight.

How does a whole family disappear? Leave the face of the earth without a trace? From reading the news and snooping at the house, I know this: one minute the Blavettes were a normal(ish) happy(ish) family—the son a star athlete, just beginning his university career in film-making, the daughter a shy girl who loved ballet and ponies and boy bands, the mom a former head teacher. One minute they were going to the beach, posing for smiling photos, the next, gone. And what of the American girl, who they'd invited to be part of their family for a summer? How did she fit into this picture?

I took advantage of the better standard of Wi-Fi in the bar to check out Twitter (#AmericanGirl still trending, video still viral) and Facebook. I'd already had a brief look at Quinn's page, but now I looked again, noting her relationship status: "it's complicated." Her privacy settings meant you couldn't see much: a profile picture of her with the Blavette boy and girl arm in arm on the beach with the sea behind them, tanned, grinning happily, Quinn in the middle, squeezed between the siblings. They must have been pretty buddy-buddy to get to the profile pic stage. Behind them lies Quinn's cover image of herself standing in the middle distance on a Boston lake in winter, black-clad against the snow and ice, serious-faced, a forlorn contrast to her seeming happiness in France. The only other thing I could find is a little clip of her waving pom-poms at some high-school football game, blond hair bouncing. A different Quinn again. This version seems like the sort of popular airhead whose

high-school yearbook reads like the story of her, whose bed would be surrounded by get-well cards. The “Mean Girl” type. I found myself wondering which image is the real her, or if any of them were.

Thinking back, I didn’t see one get-well card; and that fact only deepened the mystery surrounding her. The American news had said a lot about her father, Professor Leo Perkins, head of classics at Harvard. It also mentioned that she was an only child whose mother had died years before. A fresh Google search revealed a Spotify with a bunch of playlists and an Instagram with more pictures. I looked at her snaps of a pool, a beach, the woods, a club full of young people partying, trying to make sense of the captions—*Picnic at the beach*, *Noé*, *Raffi and Freddie*, *Adventure at Les Yeux* and the hashtags #funtimes, #selfie, #thuglife.

By two in the morning, the barman was yawning and giving me a weary look as he polished beer glasses and swept peanut shells off the bar and into my lap. Finally, even this exquisitely polite individual lost patience and asked me to go. I was about to head upstairs when I remembered that in my fearful rush, I’d forgotten my notes in the car. Good time to nip out for a smoke, anyway.

In the parking lot, I teetered along, suddenly realizing how drunk I was. It had been raining and the streets were gleaming. As I came closer to my car, I saw that the passenger door was ajar. Had I forgotten to close it? Kicking myself, I tottered closer, hoping that wasn’t where I’d left my file of clippings on the case.

It was only when I reached the car that my eyes adjusted to the dark and I saw that I hadn’t forgotten to close the door at all. Someone had jimmied it open with a piece of metal, or something—you could see it from the tiny scratches in the paint job around the handle. Pulling it open, I saw my file was gone.

Quinn Perkins

JULY 13, 2015

Blog Entry

Today we went to the pool. Again. Noémie took her bike and I borrowed her brother Raphael's. He's been studying film in Paris at the Sorbonne, so doesn't really live in the house anymore, but is coming home for the summer. He's kind of the local hero in St. Roch, the all-star football player, the guy that got the scholarship. Some days he's all you hear about, especially from Noémie's mom, who's fond of getting the family albums out. Noémie must get sick of it—I mean, I've only been here a few months and I'm already a bit sick of hearing how amazing and handsome and smart and athletic he is. At the same time, after looking at about a million photos of him over the last few months, I'm not sure I don't have a bit of a crush on him. After all, I practically know him already.

So I borrowed the all-star's bike and we cycled along the dusty country road dodging Vespas and farm trucks, the boy saddle punching my girl butt with each pedal stroke. And then we were there: the pool, with its rusted green fence, its siren song of blue, its golden boy flesh pulling us through the rose-tangled gates.

In St. Roch, the pool is the place to be. There aren't many teens in this town, maybe twenty or so around my age and a little bit older. There aren't any jobs either: some really big scandal happened years ago from what I've heard, and it almost shut the place down. Now it's the southern French equivalent of one of those American ghost towns that used to rely on coal mining and then the mine shut and the people left. You might think that in a rural town surrounded by idyllic beaches, teens would tan there every day, but no jobs means no transport. You need a car to get to the beach and almost no one has one.

Plus, no adults go to the pool, so it's like this secret clubhouse where kids can smoke and get up to mischief. When I saw the photos on the study abroad site, the town seemed so picturesque and "so French." Over the past few months, I've come to find those advertising-perfect images funny in a sad way: they're such blatant lies. In reality, this place is dying, everything around fading and breaking as residents abandon it and tourists find better places to go.

The kids I've met here feel trapped, as if they'll never go anywhere else or find anything better to do, so they make things worse by vandalizing everything, even the pool, where, unless it's raining, they all come after lunch and lounge on the burned grass around that little rectangle of blue. Surrounded by the looping hate speech of their graffiti, they smoke and gossip and flirt and play guitar, and they swim, dive, dunk, splash, all day every day, all summer long. I guess it's okay, if you're good at flirting and swimming and tanning, if you're not feeling totally paranoid about who's stalking you.

(I know, I know. You all said to chill out and relax, and if it happens again to tell an adult. But wouldn't you be just a **tiny** bit freaked?)

We strolled in, not greeting anyone too enthusiastically, not letting our eyes fix on anyone beautiful, boy or girl. To me, the one outsider, they all look so at home there—as if they sprang up in the night, flesh fresh from the wrapper. Twenty pairs of fake Ray-Bans turning to watch us walk in before losing interest.

This early, the pool is empty except for two acid green noodles and a busted pink inflatable raft. We reach our usual spot under the olive tree and kick off our flip-flops, shake out our towels, ditch the baguettes Émilie made us take in the nearest bin. "Get Lucky" is playing on somebody's minispeakers as we strip off, stretch out, already breaking out the tanning oil. As usual, a knot of sinewy guys is looking our way, their eyes popping like the Photoshopped colors of a soda ad because their skin is so brown. They're hot, but all I can think is: *Is it one of them?*

One is offering his hands up to the service of our un-sun-creamed backs, grinning straight-white-toothed, eager and horny. This is Noémie's doing, not mine. Berated at home and by her own

account hated at school, she is Queen Bee at the pool. And it's not hard to see why: she totally has that French chick thing going on: the smooth tanned skin, cool, short-cropped hair, beestings of tits (French titties, I call them). Lounging by the pool in her bikini, smoking American Spirit and shooting the shit, she's all *sang-froid*.

The guy with the hands—Freddie is his name—takes pride in his work. It's a weird feeling, but not a bad one. When he undoes my bikini top, though, and gestures that I should turn over so he can do my front, I shake my head, feel my face flush. Noémie rolls her eyes at me as if to say, *Prude*, or whatever the French is for that, and beckons him over. I want to tell him to tuck his tongue back in. He's her flunky. Neither of us would ever date him.

After an hour of sunbathing—and you could set your watch by this—Noémie says, “Let's play the game.”

So we obey her, playing the daily game of dunking each other in the pool, seeing who can hold their breath the longest. The St. Roch boys *love* these games of dunking. Me, not so much. But Noémie eggs me on, shooting me a disappointed look every time I try to drift towards the sidelines. She's a pro at the old peer pressure.

I'm holding my own until Freddie comes up behind me and dunks me hard and for a long, long time. I start panicking. Chlorine burns my throat and eyes. Starts stripping out my sinuses.

Alone down there where no one can hear me scream, I flail, kicking his leg, clawing his arms. I start to think—no, I start to *know* I am drowning.

Molly Swift

JULY 31, 2015

The only things taken were my notes on the case, though actually, it was that choice that worried me. Why would anyone break into a car, not to steal it, not even to take the GPS—still sitting brazenly on the dash—but to take my lousy papers? I thought about the noise in the house, the headlights following me home. Maybe whoever was behind me on the road had followed me here.

“It looks to me that someone has cracked up your car,” said a French-accented voice at my elbow. “Have they also taken your things?”

I turned around, poised to take a swing, and saw a man in a panama hat and a crisp white suit, smoking a purple Sobranie and looking pretty pleased with himself for his observation.

“Computer printouts,” I said, “which were worth nothing. It’s more just ...”

“... stressing, I know,” he said, his eyes twinkling sympathetically. “There have been a few break-ins around here. The hotel should have warned you.”

“That would’ve been good,” I said, slamming the door. It bounced open again.

“It would seem the locking parts are broken,” said the man. “I may have something that will be of use in this.”

“I’m fine, really,” I said.

“It’s not a problem,” he said, lifting his hat briefly to reveal thinning blond curls.

It seemed rude to say no twice. He walked a few feet, opened the trunk of a green Figaro, and pulled out some cardboard and gaffer tape. *How convenient*, I thought. It just so happened that he was out here when I found my car and that he had the very things I need to fix it. I squinted at the Figaro, trying to see if the headlights looked familiar from the road to St. Roch. I was still a bit bleary from the Jack Daniel’s and it was hard to tell. I got my keys ready between my fingers to be on the safe side.

When he came back, grinning with DIY man-pride, I said, “So how come you were here in the parking lot? It’s nearly three A.M.”

By way of answer, he took a drag of his cigarette. “We are both working on catching the lung cancer, I think. Here ...” He handed me the tape.

I accepted it, not completely convinced, and bit off a length of silver tape. Together, we forced the door to stay closed with one of the most haphazard repair jobs of all time.

“Looks like a pirate with a shitty eye patch,” I said.

“Of course it is.” He smiled glassily, looking like he hadn’t a clue what I was saying. “Are you staying at the Napoléon?”

I nodded. “You, too?”

Mr. Panama Hat smiled charmingly with one side of his mouth, and I felt surer than ever that he was either my stalker or a journalistic rival. Still, he seemed harmless enough for the moment, so I waited while he put his tape back, and walked back to the Napoléon with him. A few steps from the door, the rain started coming down hard. Before I knew it, my knight in shining armor was sweeping his coat off, holding it out to protect me like something out of a Robert Doisneau photograph.

When we were safely inside the doorway, he laid his hand on my arm. “I can see you are shaking.” With a little bow he pulled the door open for me.

“I’m fine,” I snapped. Chivalry frightens me.

“Really? It might do you good to drink one more Jack Daniel’s for the road, to steady your nerves?” He smiled his charming smile, his face moving too close to mine.

“What do you mean ‘one more’? How do you know what I’ve been drinking?”

“You’ve been in the bar for a while,” he said with a laugh. “I did see you before, and now you are weaving a little. It is part of the reason I helped you.”

“Well, don’t,” I said. “I can hold my drink and I don’t need some two-bit Jean-Paul Belmondo impersonator holding doors open for me.”

I strode through the door to the old-fashioned brass elevator and jackhammered the button. It was stuck.

Monsieur Tremblé, the concierge, walked up. “All is well, mademoiselle?”

“No,” I said. “That gentleman over there has been bothering me. He—”

“That gentleman—” Tremblé gently released the button “—is Monsieur Valentin. I’m sure he would only be meaning to help.”

The elevator arrived and he pulled open the delicate birdcage.

“Thank you, Tremblé.” I smiled weakly and stepped inside, thinking that I knew that name from somewhere.

Monsieur Valentin. Inspector Valentin. I’d just missed a golden opportunity to have a drink with the detective in charge of the case. I could have drunk him under the table, charmed him, pumped him for information, and captured it all on video. Instead, I verbally kneed him in the balls. Typical.

Quinn Perkins

JULY 13, 2015

Blog Entry

Hands burrow into my armpits, close on my upper arms, strong as a vise, pressing into me. Hurting me so I want to yell. But I can't because my mouth is full of water, my lungs burning, chest, flesh heavy as lead. The hands squeeze me, wrench my flesh, and I am fighting tooth and nail, fighting for all I am worth, sucking the water deeper and deeper, my nose, my throat on fire.

And then the hands haul me to land and I flop on the concrete oven shelf at the side of the pool, its grit raking my flesh, then I lie still, weirdly still, no longer fighting at all.

The field of my bright-light-spotted burning blur vision darkens. Something is over me, on me, blocking out the sun. Someone. Vaguely, I see a tanned face, dark eyes, lips. Then the lips are on mine, blowing, and strong hands pump my ribs. I cough, splutter up water, choking, wheezing for air. Lips press mine again, soft and hot against my freezing lips, breathing harsh life into me. I cough harder. More water comes out. The man moves, turns me on my side. It strikes me that he is fully clothed in black and I have the surreal thought that the ghost of Johnny Cash just saved me from drowning.

My ears pop and the world shrieks again. Voices crash against my eardrums, angry, cacophonous. Waves of sound, argument, some angry exchange in French happening over my head that I am way too out of it to translate. The squall of words ends as suddenly as it started. The hands are on me again, under me, lifting my waterlogged floppy fish body. Johnny Cash cradles me against his black-clad chest. I blink and stare up like a baby. His face is all I can see and he is beautiful ... and familiar somehow.

He frowns down at me and I hear my voice all high and dreamy. "Am I dead?" My own voice betraying me.

He grins and says, "That's terrible."

"What?"

He's laying me down on a towel at this point, my own towel under the olive tree. Other faces jostle behind him to look at me. Noémie, Freddie, Sophie, Romuald. They are blurry, out of focus. Then I see Freddie, who nearly drowned me, and I look away, look back at Johnny Cash. Less Johnny Cash now that I'm gazing up into his dreamy brown eyes, more James Franco. He has the tousled dark hair, a stubbly beard, and cute crinkles in the corners of his eyes.

"Terrible," he murmurs, leaning close to my face so only I can hear, "to almost drown and then the first words you come out with are cliché."

I smile up at him, even though my ribs ache and my eyes sting and my throat burns. "So the next time I have a near-death experience I should—" cough "—stop watching my life flash in front of my eyes and take a minute to come up with a better line?"

"Ah, irony. You must be feeling better. I am officially no longer needed here." He pretends to get up and then kneels down closer, grinning again. He smooths strands of hair from my forehead, then turns to Noémie and says something brusquely in French I don't catch.

"*Mais non!*" says Noémie angrily, her pouty lips twisting in disgust. "I hate you." She turns away, her arms folded.

The boy frowns. "Forgive my sister," he says. "She has not taken care of you."

"Noémie's your sister?" I say, surprised. And then I realize why he looks so familiar: it's Raphael, the Sorbonne student whose photos I've been admiring for months.

"But of course." That charming smile again. "Didn't she say I was coming today?"

"No."

Noémie turns around just far enough to interject. "You are an asshole, Raffi. Maman is expecting you Sunday. She will lose her mind."

He smiles back sweetly at her. “But, dearest sister, my college term has ended, and I heard from Maman there was a nice new American exchange staying all summer, so I thought I’d come entertain her.” He winks at me.

We ignore Noémie as she pretends to vomit.

“Are *you* staying all summer?” I want to kick myself for my obviousness.

He shrugs. “Well, maybe, if I find something fun to do. Otherwise, I will go back to Paris. It can get quite boring here, you know?”

“Yeah, really.”

When Raphael tells me that he is nineteen and at college in Paris studying film, I try to pretend I don’t already know everything about him. He finds out where I’m from in the States and seems really interested, asking about Boston and my college plans and what music I like. All the while, just at the edge of my vision, I see where Noémie sits scowling. Freddie is sitting next to her on her towel and every so often he just stares in my direction.

It makes me shiver under the shade of the olive tree, so that I find it hard to focus on what Raphael’s saying, about how he’s seen everything by Tarkovsky ever, and loves the Beastie Boys for their irony, and worships Tom Waits because he is God. I try to hold up my end of the conversation, but my mind keeps circling back to the bad things that have happened. I mean, come on. The texts have been weird. The video was megaweird and scary. But this near-drowning incident makes three.

Three weird, scary things in two days. And Freddie is starting to seem like he just might be stalker suspect number one. Maybe he dunked me like that because he wanted to scare me? Well, he’s succeeded.

Molly Swift

JULY 31, 2015

Back in my room, I dragged off my wet clothes with a sigh, lay back on the bed in my underwear, and looked at my phone. Three A.M. *Jesus*. There was a message from Bill that just said, *Call me*. I texted him back saying I had pay dirt for him and tried to send him some of the photos. When I couldn't get them to send with the spotty Wi-Fi, I threw my phone down in disgust and lit another cigarette. Hanging out the window, I looked down at the street below, its potholes and drift of trash, the occasional tourist or bum shuffling by.

I held my phone all the way out the window, as far out as I could manage, attempting to catch a few rays of their three-star internet. As if Bill sensed my moment of vulnerability through the transatlantic airwaves, my phone burred into life, "Jolene" playing on the ring tone. My partner-in-crime's raddled face smiled at me under his name and number. I answered, immediately noticing a shifty tone to his voice when he said hello.

Bill was a journalistic giant in his day, a hero of the Watergate era, and he likes a good exposé as much as he did when he was my media studies lecturer. I was in night school then, a last-ditch attempt to salvage an education after years of expulsions and reform schools and ultimately dropping out of college to attend the School of Life. Bill was one of that institution's most curmudgeonly alumni, so we hit it off. I wanted to be him; he saw a chance to work again by using me as his eyes and ears, his proxy out in the world. He'd be right at home in this era of whistle blowers and WikiLeaks if his wife would ever let him out of the house; but he has strict instructions from both his old lady and his doctor to cut back on work, booze, and cigarettes. The fact that he's done none of these might escape his doctor, but not his eagle-eyed wife, Nina, who by the sound of his voice when he spoke to me was sitting in the room.

"What's up, Swift?" he asked, trying to sound jovial.

"Nothing much. Enjoying the red wine and all that jazz."

But just as I know Bill's voice, he knows mine. Knows for certain when I'm holding something back. It's not just the journalist in him—it's the dad.

"Rough day at work?"

"Well ..." I took a swig of whiskey, toyed with a cigarette. "There's good news and bad news. First the good: I went to see the girl in the hospital, like you said. While I was there, I found out some stuff about the Blavettes ..."

I started telling him about the police putting a bulletin out on the Blavette family, about going to their house, meeting Valentin. I could tell I'd grabbed his interest by the way he tip-tapped on his laptop as I spoke, probably Googling the news item.

You see, the main idea for *American Confessional* is that we take on stories of police incompetence or just general corruption, and find the real story. One day after he was retired and I'd just lost a job, we met for a drink and came up with the idea of a talking heads show based on old-fashioned undercover work and pavement-pounding. Our first series was a long haul and probably the hardest work we ever did on a case: a miscarriage-of-justice story about Manatee Mack, a poor, black guy from Florida who we argued had been framed by the police for his white teenage girlfriend's murder. We came close to clearing his name, got the Innocence Project on board, garnered support from millions of listeners, only to see the story end in the death chamber at Florida State. Both of us wanted to quit after that and did for a while. It was just too sad.

Maybe that was the reason the second series dealt with the opposite kind of injustice: Mindy Kaufman, a wealthy old lady who rented apartments on the Upper East Side and who everyone knew had poisoned her husband and housekeeper after she caught them together. Most of what we pulled together was gossip and hearsay, but we had a theory Mindy had used a slow-acting pesticide called

Victor Cockroach Gel. The police had either been paid off or scared off, though: they wouldn't pursue it. In a marvelous piece of dumb luck, we got Mindy on tape chatting about the murder to her pet mynah bird. Our listeners devoured that one.

In the end, what started out as a nostalgia piece became a popular show, not to mention a good earner because of paid ads and keen fans. I'm the anonymous roving ear who records the footage and sends it to Bill. He shapes and edits cleverly and generally protects my secret identity. He really knows how to pitch a story.

Finally, I told him about the whole mistaken-for-a-relative thing.

"You mean, they think you're the aunt or something?"

"I guess. At first I only said that to the receptionist to get in for a minute, then when I was sitting in the girl's room ... a nun came. She was so thrilled that a family member had visited I started to feel pretty weird."

"So you haven't 'fessed up?"

In the background of the call, like echolalia, I heard Nina's commentary. " 'Fessed up,' Bill? What has she gotten into this time? Should you be involved, in your condition?"

"Yeah, I guess I should, really," I said, talking more to myself than Bill, who was now busy bickering, "though I don't have to go back to the hospital, since—"

"Don't you have a casserole to heat up, Nina? Leave me alone," Bill shouted, "and, Molly, for God's sake. You meet the inspector in charge of the case in a parking lot. He opens a goddamn door for you and I'm sure you all but castrated the guy. You have an in with the Holy Sisters at the hospital and you're too moral to play aunt all of a sudden?"

"Not too moral, but ... I mean, would it be fair to the girl?"

"Fair to her? She's in a goddamn coma and none of her own family is straining themselves. Buy her some flowers if you feel guilty, but use it, Molly. Use it to find the story here. Use Valentin, too. Go to the police station and find something real."

"Okay, okay. I'll do what I can. You don't need to shout."

"Oh, don't mind me. Nina's getting on my case and my sciatica's raging and my prostate ... never mind. All I'm saying is you have a talent, Molly, if only the one, and that's getting people to open up to you. Your vocation is to pry under the carpet of life and find the goddamn dirt underneath. Don't get—"

"—squeamish. I know. The story comes first. I attended all of your lectures."

"So you're gonna use it?"

I took a deep breath, already feeling guilty. "They'll be onto me in seconds, but yeah ..."

"I'm not saying you should become a sociopath, Molly," he said in a kinder voice. "I'm just saying, do what those other journalists don't have the balls to do. Make a difference."

Molly Swift

JULY 31, 2015

I crossed the road to the gendarmerie, pulling my baseball cap down over my eyes. I was abreast with the flagpole that marked the entrance, the tricolor on top fluttering serenely in the breeze, when I remembered Bill's words. If I was going to make this work, there was no point being shamefaced about it. I pulled off my cap and shook my hair out, checking it in the glass on the door. A pair of uniformed officers walked past me just as I was licking lipstick off my teeth. I flashed them my most wholesome girl-next-door grin. I was now Molly Perkins, a single continuing education teacher from Connecticut, who loved cats and yarn bombing and, most of all, her favorite niece, Quinn.

Inside the gendarmerie, I took a moment to size up the shabby front desk, the bedraggled receptionist sitting behind it, and the general air of ennui. Behind her a gendarme poured coffee from a percolator into a chipped cup.

"May I speak with Inspector Valentin?" I didn't even bother with French.

"He is over there," the woman said, frowning uncertainly, "eating his breakfast." She pointed to the café across the road, La Grande Bouche.

"I can see why he's solving this case so quickly," I said.

"*Comment?*" asked the receptionist in puzzlement, while the gendarme behind her glared at me over his coffee.

IF ST. ROCH were some place in the Midwest instead of the South of France, it would be what you'd call a one-horse town. One gas station. One supermarket. One clinic. One of everything. What it has lots of, though, is cafés. La Grande Bouche was a smaller and friendlier affair than the boho tourist cafés I'd visited so far. Since it was packed with gendarmes drinking black coffee, keeping an eye on crime from a distance, I gathered that it was a police café. I couldn't see Valentin through the crowd of uniforms eating fried beignets and bacon sandwiches, so I sat at a table near the door and picked up the plastic menu.

Within seconds, a woman with whitish hair tied in a loose bun came to take my order. The badge pinned to her baby blue cardigan told me that her name was Marlene Weiss, the manager.

"Wow, the service is fast in here," I said.

"Keeping a low profile from all these ... *journalists*, are you?" Marlene tapped her nose.

For a minute I thought she'd guessed my profession. Then I realized that she'd picked up the gossip from the hospital and, hearing my American accent, must have assumed I was Quinn's aunt. Ironically, she now imagined me in flight from the press.

"Just waiting for visiting hours so I can go see my niece," I said with a sigh.

"Well, if there's anything I can do for the dear auntie, please do let me know."

"A coffee would be nice."

"I'm sure we could rustle up a coffee. Georges!" Like a Sherman tank rumbling over a battlefield, she charged towards the cowering kitchen boy.

She brought the coffee back herself and settled into the opposite side of the booth, sliding her intimidating bosom across the Formica tabletop and resting her chin on her hands. "Mind if I join you?"

"I think you already have," I said, smiling a little too brightly.

Marlene leaned over confidentially. "This place is a hellhole, no?"

"Are you kidding?" I said, surprised. "It seems like paradise here. The beach. The mountains. The wine. I love it ... I mean, I would if I weren't busy worrying about my niece."

"You are mistaking me," she said with a disgruntled frown. "The landscape is satisfactory. But the people ..." With that, she plunged into all the local gossip. I listened happily enough for a while,

hoping she would drop a nugget or two about the Blavettes in there, but no such luck. As she talked, I peered around her, hoping that Valentin hadn't left yet.

I must have been more obvious than I imagined, because the flood of words stopped and, as if she could read my mind, Marlene said, "Yes, that's him. That's Inspector Valentin. He is in charge of your niece's accident and the missing-persons case. I'll introduce you because we're old friends. Ever since his wife left him he is always happy to meet new women."

Before I had time to answer, she was halfway across the room, sliding her arm through Valentin's and steering him over, cup and saucer in hand. He sat down across from me and Marlene squeezed into the seat after him.

Valentin looked me up and down across the table and, after a moment, appeared to recognize me. "Ah, the woman who told me I was ... what did you call me? A look-alike of Jean-Paul Belmondo?"

"It was a compliment," I said. In the daylight, I saw that, in fact, he was not quite Belmondoesque, but a debonair blown dandelion of a man, the kind who would once have made an angelic choirboy. "If you'd radioed in about my car like a normal policeman, perhaps I would have known who you were."

"I saw you go inside the gendarmerie earlier," he said mischievously. "Have you reported it?"

"Not yet—" I began.

"Give her some break at least, Bertrand," said Marlene, nudging Valentin with her elbow. "The poor woman has a niece in a coma. Where's your bedside manner?"

"You are the aunt of Quinn Perkins?" Valentin's blue eyes widened. I couldn't help but think he seemed a little skeptical.

"Molly Perkins," I said hurriedly, and then to distract him, I added, "Any leads on what happened to my niece?"

"We searched the woods near the house last night," he said wearily, "and we have been making a list of anyone who might have had a grudge with the family."

"Such a list would be very long," Marlene tutted, "beginning with Stella Birch and ending with the parents of that poor pupil of Émilie's who died—"

Valentin dropped his cup abruptly, spilling most of the coffee into the saucer. "Marlene, I've told you before about spreading these rumors!"

Marlene didn't even flinch. She just raised a sardonic eyebrow and, when he got up to leave, said, "See you tomorrow, Bertrand."

After he'd gone, she wiped the table absentmindedly with the sleeve of her cardigan, which seemed to double as a dishcloth.

"Someone died at the school? How awful." I sipped my tepid coffee to hide my curiosity.

"Before it closed down, yes. The poor girl suffocated. They said it was some sort of game that went wrong. The other staff were busy teaching classes to the younger pupils and Émilie was the only one in charge of that unfortunate school trip. She became diverted and did not see who was responsible, so—" she drew her finger across her throat "—fired."

"All I heard was that there'd been 'an incident involving a student' that made them close the old schoolhouse," I said, casting my mind back to my stolen printouts.

"Ah, well," she said, looking at me shrewdly. "Some things happen in St. Roch that are not shared with the rest of the world."

Quinn Perkins

JULY 14, 2015

Blog Entry

There's a weird feature to this house that I'm both creeped out by and obsessing over: out in the hallway is a locked door that once led to the dilapidated building adjoining this place, and I'm not allowed to open it.

The Old Schoolhouse—so called because it was built in the nineteenth century or whatever—*was* the St. Roch school until it shut down a couple years ago. Momma Blavette was the headmistress there (convenient since she lived next door). There's an old photo downstairs from when it opened in 1882: the pupils are lined up in front of the newly built school in a stiff row, unsmiling in their clean white smocks and shiny boots and suspenders, an austere schoolmarm keeping the boys and girls separate.

Not much has changed about the building since those stern and sepia-tinted days, from the outside at least. But on the inside? I'm guessing p-r-e-t-t-y-d-a-r-n-c-r-e-e-p-y, especially since there've been quite a few break-ins there in the meantime. Not to mention the reason it shut down: some incident with the death of a student. Émilie was suspiciously vague on the exact circumstances, but on one subject she was very firm: I am *never* to open the door and go in there.

Naturally this makes me want to see inside there even more. *Who knows?* I thought when she told me. *Maybe one day when they're all out, I'll go take some pics for the blog.*

Today I woke to an empty house. I saw that hussy of a day through half-open shutters, stretching out coily in front of me, purring its delicious summertime possibility. I thought today could just be the day for urb-exing like I do back home in search of the Rockport Devil, the Fall River Witch. But my plan was derailed by a weird little episode, involving ... you guessed it: the hot older brother.

The silence of the house tells me nobody's home, so I pad downstairs in my underwear. On the kitchen table I find a piece of baguette with butter and jam in it, a mug of cold coffee, and a Post-it saying Émilie and Noémie have gone to the weekday market in the village. Being an ex-headmistress, Émilie is the kind of mom who makes your food three days ahead, plastic-wraps it, and then writes you instructions on how to eat it, plus some career advice and a mini guilt trip. Kinda nice, though, being mommed like that again.

I mooch onto the patio, where Mme B's violets are slowly wilting. The paving stones burn the soles of my feet so much they freeze. I jump, treading cartoon water in the thick air before racing onto the sharp bed of nails that's the fried-out grass and doing a little *Sound of Music* spin, taking in the blue, blue cloudless sky, the woods stretching out for miles, cloaking the house in mysterious silence. There's a David Lynch vibe to the creaking swing set the children used to play on, the sand pit, the empty football field. But the house, with its robin's egg shutters and white trellis wound with dog roses, is so perfect it looks like something out of an insurance ad.

A noise behind me makes me jump. Turning around, I see Raphael on the shady side of the patio. I do a little double take, a triple take actually, since I'm now acutely aware that I'm wearing nothing more than a T-shirt and underwear. No bra even. Meanwhile, Raphael's lying on a yoga mat in nothing but a kind of Indian yogi loincloth folded around his groin like a man-diaper. He's doing stomach crunches, his stomach glistening with sweat. Now he's rising from his yoga mat like a gleaming god and he's beckoning to me and smiling, not that blinding Colgate grin of his, but a subtle half smile, inviting me over.

And so I go, crossing hot patio stones to get to him and feeling a little freaked to be walking towards a near-naked man I barely know, in the brazen light of day. As soon as I reach him, he lies back down on his mat, beckoning me to some weird exercise headspace he's in where our near nudity is in no way embarrassing.

“Come,” he pants.

I stand over him shyly. “Where?”

“Here.” He gestures to his exquisitely muscled thighs and grins the Colgate grin.

“Um, you’re kidding, right?” A blush creeps over my throat, along my breastbone, making my skin glow—I imagine—the red of irradiated apples.

He shakes his head, grinning away. “I’ve been working so hard, my *abdos* are nothing. I look female almost. No *muscles de l’estomac* at all. It’s disgusting, no?”

“Oh yeah, totally gross.” I avoid looking down at his perfect six-pack in case I get vertigo. “Um, so how am I, um ...”

“I need a little weight on my quads to stop me tipping up when I crunch, *tu sais*? It would be a big help for me.” He leans up on his elbows. I find myself thinking he is too cute, too obviously gorgeous, and he knows it. I don’t even *like* guys like this. I’m from the East Coast. I like dark and wounded. And clothed.

But I don’t want to be rude, so I sit down obediently on his thighs, trying not to let my whole weight fall on him, holding myself taut as he pulls his torso up easily and silently, an oiled piston pumping away in the heat. Sweat drips from his neck, runs down his smooth chest. It pools under my butt, forming a salty film that joins us together. Is this a way of flirting?

Stop it. Stop it, I tell myself. *Don’t think. Don’t try to work out what’s going on. Just imagine it’s some surreal carnival ride.* I do, just letting him rock me, watching the clouds. Even still, I keep thinking the ride will stop, that Raphael will tire, or at least take a break. But he doesn’t even get out of breath. A butterfly goes past, a huge blue one with tattered wings, seeking out a blown golden poppy inches from Raphael’s face. I smile at the weirdness of my life.

The weirdness makes me think of yesterday, of Freddie, the text. “Hey, you know that Freddie guy. Is he kind of a weirdo?”

Raphael doesn’t break from his sit-ups. He just says, “Oh no, he’s a great guy, not very cool with the girls. But you know, I’ve known him since I was two.”

“It’s just that yesterday he nearly drowned me.”

He laughs. “No, it was not serious. He only meant fun ... to play.”

“It didn’t feel like playing,” I say.

He says nothing, keeps going, and I suddenly have this weird sensation that we’re being watched. Seconds more and something catches at the corner of my vision. I look up to see a dark shape flit behind an upstairs window, then turn, pale face to the glass. Noémie. She scowls down as if she wishes we would die. I almost tumble off my precarious flesh-perch. I mean, she’s been bitchy before, but I’ve never seen that look on her face. That kind of homicidal look ... who knew she was even here?

I stumble up, sweat slick, mumbling an apology to Raphael, who stops all of a sudden and grunts some reply. Later, as I shower, I hear voices raised in anger and can’t tell whose, though I’m sure one is a man. They echo through the rickety pipes, gurgle up from the green-stained plughole as if some dark well hidden under the house has just begun to erupt.

Molly Swift

JULY 31, 2015

After the announcement about the Blavettes, the hacks camped outside the Hôpital Sainte-Thérèse seemed to breed. I arrived in the parking lot to see new little ones had popped through the tarmac like mushrooms, including a glamorous Italian foreign correspondent with long, red hair like something out of an infomercial, and a bored-looking British tabloid news crew. I parked my broken car and locked it—though this seemed a bit futile, since the passenger door was now held on with gaffer tape—slipped on my aviators, and prepared to run the gauntlet.

The Italian reporter took me at a gallop, mike in hand, sound and lights trailing behind her. “Aurelia Perla, *La Stampa*. How do you feel about what is happening to your niece?”

I held up my hand to shield my face and made a run for the reception area.

Aurelia ran after me. “Was Quinn enjoying her exchange before the accident?”

Desperate not to be filmed, I flung myself through the doors and didn’t stop until I got to reception. There Sister Agnès, the receptionist who had gazed at me so cynically over half-moon specs the day before, was all sympathy.

“Really these journalists should not do that, but—” she sighed, patting my hand “—the best we can do is to keep them outside of here.”

Sister Agnès introduced me to Sister Eglantine, the other nun from the previous day. Ever since the conversation with Bill, I’d been dreading the inevitable moment of discovery: a tap on the shoulder, an unmarked police car pulling up alongside me, a rogue tweet trending, Quinn’s real family showing up. The nuns were so kind to me, so pleased that I was there for Quinn, that I began to feel something I hadn’t anticipated: guilty. Their faith in me made me uneasy. Maybe in this world of paranoia and Google, unquestioning acceptance was the weirdest experience of all.

In her little room, Quinn lay unmoving, tucked under starched sheets, looking more than ever like a fairy tale princess under a curse. Sister Eglantine bustled around, opening the blinds, placing a stack of cardboard bedpans in a drawer. I held Quinn’s hand and kept half an eye on Eglantine. One of the drawers she opened contained a plastic tray full of personal effects: a scatter of coins, a hair band, and a pair of earrings shaped like bats. An iPhone with a broken screen.

She must have felt me watching her, because she turned to me and explained in her usual delicate English, “The things she had with her, when ...” As if the thought of this had upset her, she abruptly left the room.

I sat for a while, staring at the pale arms of birches waving in the hospital grounds, pure blue sky spilling between their branches like paint. I wondered how these nuns got to be so nice, when the ones in my high school were witches. Turning my attention to the bed, I looked at Quinn’s hand lying in mine, the groove of her lifeline casting a faint shadow. Her skin felt so new, as if it had just been made. If she never woke and the truth never came to light, what would happen? Would the nuns just keep her here sleeping forever, like Snow White in her glass case?

Make a difference, Bill had said. That’s what all this was about. It was why I let Quinn’s hand rest on the sheets and crossed the room to the chest of drawers. It was why I reached into the plastic tray until my fingertips found the rough lifeline in the glass of the broken phone. It was why I slipped it into my purse.

Molly Swift

JULY 31, 2015

The phone was charging, the battery percentage nudging slowly up. I'd found an outlet under Quinn's bed and plugged it in with my charger, arranging my bag and feet on the floor to hide it from view. Every time a trolley squeaked past the doorway, I twitched around, trying not to look too suspicious and reasoning that if someone did come in I would just say the phone was mine.

As soon as the battery looked more green than red, I unplugged it and went to the bathroom, latching the door with unsteady hands. I sat on the toilet and clicked the phone on, feeling a passing moment of triumph that there was no passcode. I studied the wallpaper photo, of Quinn and Raphael Blavette huddled under a towel. They were beaded with water, grinning, his arm slung over her shoulders, her head half on his chest. They looked more than close—intimate. I wondered if they'd been an item, before whatever went wrong went wrong.

The big discovery was her blog on the Blogger app, which I glanced at with the same blushing fascination with which I read my older sister's diary when I was a nerdy middle schooler and she was a popular senior, navigating the world of crushes and boys and Shakespearean friendship dramas. The blog's title—*Sympathy for the Devil*—revealed an unexpected side to Quinn Perkins, one kept invisible in her Facebook account.

I made a note of the url and flicked through the phone's other apps, cryptic emblems of the mysterious life of the teenager—Tumblr and Spotify, Tinder and Snapchat. The photos were much like her Instagram account—snaps of the sunny beach and hunks at the pool, though there were quite a few more of Raphael, including some glowing selfies of the two of them together that only confirmed my sense that they were involved.

The time caught my eye—I'd been in the cubicle for nearly twenty minutes, though it had felt like five. I hurried out of the cubicle and back to the room, glancing up and down the corridor before I went in. I didn't see anyone, so it seemed safe to go to the chest of drawers and slip the phone back into the plastic tray. As I did, I noticed a pink iPod shuffle lying tangled in the hair band. I remembered reading an article about how familiar music stimulates the brains of comatose patients. Some patients who were thought beyond hope had woken after hearing their favorite songs.

No sooner had I taken the shuffle out than I heard Sister Eglantine's voice from behind me. "I'm afraid visiting time is almost over," she said apologetically.

"No worries," I said, turning around slowly and trying not to look guilty.

"Look at her sleeping," she said, putting her head to one side. "The poor angel. Anything you need—truly—you must inform us. We are here to hold you up in your necessity."

"Well, there is one thing," I said.

Eglantine hovered nervously while I pushed the earbuds into her patient's ears, noting how their delicate folds looked translucent in the light streaming in from the window. As if she was carved from wax, not flesh. I tried to explain the coma theory. Embarrassed at not understanding me, she smiled and nodded and drifted away, reminding me one last time about visiting hours.

I pressed Play on the shuffle. Some Tom Waits song or other started up, sounding tinny and warped. I don't know how long I stood over her, but my strongest impression from the whisper of the songs was that she had music taste a lot like my dad.

After a while, I had to sit down because my legs were shaking. I'd been standing so still, worried that she would move and I'd miss it. I don't know if it was because I'd looked through her photos, her blog, but something had changed. I felt as if I belonged there somehow, with her. I noticed new things about her—the pale purple shadows under her eyes, the scars on her face knitting together, the new growth of hair on the shaved part of her head. I held her hand, and this time it wasn't a lie.

I was just unplugging the charge from under the bed when I saw something out of the corner of my eye: a tiny movement, just like before. I looked up. Nothing. She was as still as a waxen effigy or a statue carved on a tomb. Perhaps it was wishful thinking or a trick of the mind or something. I dropped the charger in my bag.

As soon as I did, there it was again. And this time I saw it clearly: a twitch of her littlest finger, tiny, but definitely a movement. And then a twitch of all of her fingers, as if she were clutching at the sheets.

“Sister Eglantine,” I called.

She didn’t answer, so I called louder, my voice hoarse with excitement. It had worked. Her P300 wave or whatever was responding to meaningful stimulus, which meant she could wake up.

Sister Eglantine came in and I hurriedly explained. She summoned the doctor. They prodded and poked and checked the machines, but when they saw nothing, the mood turned into one of vague disappointment. Eglantine smiled apologetically. The doctor cautioned me not to feel too hopeful.

Like all relatives, of course I did secretly feel hopeful: that she would wake. And unlike relatives, I secretly worried: that she would wake.

Quinn Perkins

JULY 15, 2015

Blog Entry

This morning Émilie announced that it was a beautiful day and we were going to the beach. All fine and well, except that Noémie hadn't spoken a word to me since she saw me with her brother yesterday. That, and I got to the car to find that Freddie was coming, too. Far from being considered a creep by everyone, he turns out to be some sort of universal family favorite, like the sex-pest equivalent of a Disney movie. Needless to say, it was the car trip from hell.

It wasn't just that Freddie's thigh was pressed into mine the whole time. His actual breathing made me to want to barf. I refused to look at him, even when he asked me something nice like did I want the window open or closed. I kept trying to move further across the seat, but how could I when beach towels and sun cream and plastic-wrapped sandwiches were packed in around us like Styrofoam peanuts? And despite how I felt, I didn't want to seem or even be a bitch. So the whole time I just played nervously with my phone, avoiding the Snapchat app, but at the same time wanting to ward off anything that might've crept up behind me while I wasn't looking, virtually speaking.

"Merde, Quinn. You look at it every one second," says Noémie in disgust.

"I'm checking for messages," I say lamely, ashamed to be caught out.

"Why? Nobody ever calls you. Do you have friends at home?" She wipes away pretend crybaby tears with her fists.

"Noé! Leave her alone," says Raphael, sitting shotgun next to his mom. He smiles into the little mirror on his sunshade, catching my eye.

I smile back. At least he's on my side.

"Maman, tell him to stop picking on me," Noémie whines.

"Noé. Raffi. Quinn. All of you can stop it," says Mme B brightly. "I need to focus, children." She launches into a cheery round of "Joe le Taxi" and insists that we all sing along.

A graphic image of Émilie chaperoning a zillion saggy school bus trips fills my head. I crane my neck, trying to look out the window, embarrassed to have caused more conflict. When I look past Freddie to get a view of the white-powder-dust road, the blue zipper of sea just out of reach, Freddie grins goofily and blocks my view. I stare straight ahead to where Raphael is playing air guitar to "Hotel California" and I notice some new things about him—the little silver scar on the tanned nape of his neck, how he smiles to himself sometimes and his cheeks dimple. I tell myself to pack it in. Of all people to have a crush on, my French exchange's brother is clearly the worst.

Madame Blavette swerves into the half-empty parking lot of a river beach we've been to before. She disapproves of sandy beaches, with their turning tide of tanned flesh—"like a roasted chicken on a spit," she says. A pebble-filled clamshell at the foot of an aqueduct, this beach has pretensions, is within a hollering distance of culture. People read on it, quote Latin on it. Noémie hates it. She throws open the door with a disgusted sigh and steps out. I un-peel my bare thigh from Freddie's and head out after her, standing for a dazed moment in the pure midmorning light to taste the salt air and let the heat drench me in a new slick of sweat.

Mme B fusses around happily, singing under her breath, flapping the beach towels out in a neat square of faded tropical colors, laying out her picnic of crackers and homemade pâté and cold 7UP and petits fours. When she unfolds her deck chair, a paperback falls out.

She picks it up, smiling fondly. "Have you read this, Quinn?"

I shrug. "What is it?"

"It is a romance novel by my dear friend Stella, racy in places," she says with a giggle. "It's written so simply, though. It is not so interesting. I could lend it to you later if you want to practice your French comprehension?" She hands me the book.

I look at the illustration on the well-thumbed cover: a kneeling woman, naked save for a choke collar. “Um, my mom always said romance novels were the opium of the domestic slam-hound, one of the tools of patriarchal subjugation. I’m pretty sure it’s one of the few issues my parents agreed on, so, um, no thanks.”

Frowning, Émilie strips off her floral halter dress, revealing a pink one-piece. “You know, Quinn, I may be in my forties, but I still get looks from guys, very young men sometimes, younger than Raphael. Probably more than you do, in actuality. Ah, what a beautiful day at the beach with my babies!” Smiling, she settles into her deck chair and puts the book over her face.

Okay, well ... awkward. Her kids seem to think so, too. In order to avoid the moment, Freddie and Raphael break the volleyball out and start punting it around. Noémie, having basted every inch of herself, lies facedown to roast where no familial eye contact can harm her. In the midst of everything, I am alone, like Camus or something. I find myself missing Mom, who couldn’t have been more different from Émilie.

When I was little, Mom was always aiming her old Leica at me, calling me into the under-stairs cupboard she’d fitted with two big Belfast sinks for developing photos to watch ghostly reflections of myself appear under the flicker of red lights. Or she’d be baking bread, her hands callused with drying dough. When I hugged her, she’d smell of garlic and thyme from the garden and her long hair and fragile features reminded me of the pictures of Joni Mitchell on the vinyl albums she always played. Dad wasn’t there much and I didn’t like it when he was. He made fun of her photographs, her cooking, never letting her forget he was the important one. I know she wanted to get back to selling her art, maybe after I went to college.

I wish I could have a final memory of her happy at the opening of her very own exhibition instead of the one I do have: my dad’s book launch, the glasses of champagne clinking, the New England literati circulating. Mom in the corner with bandaged wrists, avoiding talking to any of Dad’s guests because he’d already made her feel ashamed of what she’d tried to do.

My nostalgia soured, I snap back to the present. Freddie’s phone is lying on the towel right next to my hand. I pick it up, all sleight of hand. I mean, wouldn’t you look? Come on. Be honest. It’s a fucking BlackBerry. God, I hate those things. No password, though. I look at his apps. Snapchat? Bingo! Username? Hmm, *Lapinchaude*. Well, that could still come up as “unknown” if he hid it somehow, some clever little hack. I have that feeling again—someone watching. Looking up, I see him staring straight at me. He even misses the ball because of it.

I drop the phone and walk to the water to hide my blushes. In the shallows, my feet slap angrily on the soft, sucking sand under the blue, walking faster, harder against the weight of water. It pushes me towards the beach. I push back, fingers skimming the playful licks of wavelets angrily. And when I’m deep enough, I dive, swim hard and fast for the aqueduct, wanting to get away from all of them, have some space for once.

I swim butterfly, half underwater. As it deepens, it changes from the color of pale sea glass to a murky, dark green. One time I surface inches from the orange fiberglass prow of a canoe that speeds past my head, the canoeist never seeing me at all. Today, I don’t give a fuck. I just plunge back into the cool green murk and head for the aqueduct, coming up for air at the rocky base of the middle foot. Rolling on my back, I scull idly between clumps of white rock, watching water shadows dance on the concave belly of the bridge. My sulk ebbs away. Everything falls away. I am nothing more than the fierce blood in my ears.

Something touches my hand. Not just touches. Grabs hold of. I panic, lurching upright, swallowing about a pint of water, choking. Through the red haze, I see Freddie’s pale face, smirking.

“I gave you a shock, *hein?*”

“Fuck!” I splutter.

“It is time *pour manger*.”

He scoops his hand to his mouth, miming eating. “Émilie she has made *le petit déjeuner*.”

He keeps grinning widely. I've decided that his face annoys me. "Couldn't you just have called me instead of ... creeping up on me?" The last words come out with a splutter of river bile. My chest burns. I don't even bother trying to hide my annoyance. It's the imbecile way he keeps smiling. It's the fact that he came to get me for lunch instead of Raphael.

As we swim back, I keep my distance, but he keeps swimming into me. It's like he's bumping into me on purpose. And there's no reason for it, because he's a strong swimmer, a swim-team-type swimmer. He can only be doing it on purpose, the big stalker. The more I try to wriggle away from him, the more he torpedoes me, knocking into my ribs one time so hard I know I'll bruise.

"Stop it!" I hiss.

He just grins wider than ever until all I can see is the gap in his teeth and the gleaming wet pallor of his high forehead, his bony nose. And then when we're just near enough to shore to stand, he grabs my waist.

"Get off!" I shriek, slapping him, kicking him.

"I know you like me because you check my phone. Are you stalking me a bit, Quinn?"

"Are you fucking serious? Put me down," I say in the voice I use on bad dogs and pollsters.

"If you say so." He does, but in the same movement, he whips me around to face him and kisses me, his tongue squirming between my lips.

I push him away and run to shore. My face pulses. I want to be sick. I expect everyone to be staring, to look horrified and tell Freddie off. But no one seems to care. Noémie's just lying with her sunglasses on, plugged into her iPod. Émilie is fanning flies from her sunbaked picnic. Only Raphael is looking at the water, his arms crossed over his sinewy chest, eyes studiously unfocused.

I've begun to think Freddie is some kind of sociopath, who kissed me for no other reason than to humiliate me. Who tried to drown me. Who's definitely the person text-stalking me. When he walks up and kneels in front of me and pinches my cheek, I slap his face, hard.

He falls back into the sand with a surprised little cry.

"*Mon Dieu!*" says Émilie. "Quinn, what have you done?" She stands up suddenly, glaring down at me.

Her anger is shocking. I've only seen her face look passive and happy. Now it is dark. Crumpled next to her, Freddie sobs like a child while Noémie and Raphael stay right where they are, staring as the scene unfolds.

"He pinched my cheek," I say. "He shouldn't do that. And before, he grabbed me in the water and kissed me. And I think that he's—"

"What do you expect when you dress like that?" she says, looking me up and down. "You are asking for it *un petit peu, n'est-ce pas?*"

"Are you kidding? Everyone's in a bikini ..."

She leans over me and takes the skin of my wrist and pinches it with her nails. "There," she says, her eyes mean and narrow. "Now you know how it feels."

Behind her, Freddie smiles through his tears.

Molly Swift

JULY 31, 2015

I sipped my Jack Daniel's, my reflection vanishing by degrees as I eked out the last drops. I needed every last drop after my phone call to Quinn's father, the great Professor Perkins. I'd called him to head off someone else telling him that there was an aunt type hanging around his daughter. To cover my ass, I'd pretended to be one Mademoiselle le Mesurier, the local contact for Quinn's study abroad program, crossing my fingers that no one from the program had been in touch with him already.

"*Bonjour*, Professor Perkins," I began in my best impression of a French accent. I explained my "role" and expressed my condolences for what had happened as well as my assurance that we were providing all the support we could.

"While I thank you for your call, I must inquire as to what it pertains?" he asked, his voice charmingly polite and yet so unconcerned it sent a chill through me.

Surely he must be devastated about all this, I thought; even if Quinn wasn't a daddy's girl, she was his daughter.

"And what day do you plan to come for Quinn, monsieur? I ask because, of course, we shall send someone to ze *aéroport*."

Huffy silence on the other end of the line. Then—

"Well, of course ... ahem ... I'm grateful for the offer. So helpful of you. I just don't know when I can be there, because, you see, my wife is very pregnant, so not until after the baby's born at the least and even then ..."

I put him out of his misery by thanking him for his time and expressing my hope that he would contact the program if he needed anything. I even gave him Mademoiselle le Mesurier's real phone number, because by now I was sure he wouldn't bother. I'd been worried about Leo flying to his daughter's side and blowing my cover in the process, but I needn't have been. He was a cold fish, that much was clear—one that wouldn't swim over here anytime soon. But instead of being relieved, I just felt sad for Quinn, so lonely in her hospital bed. I wished I could go back to the hospital to sit with her.

I comforted myself with the company of Mr. Daniel's and the contents of Quinn's blog. There I read about the ups and downs you might expect on a teenager's first stay far from home: tension with her host; a rocky relationship with her French exchange; unwelcome advances from the local lothario, a kid named Freddie. And then there was something darker: threatening messages from an anonymous stranger, apparently including footage of someone being suffocated.

I'd taken a look at her Snapchat app and found zip, just as she said. The messages erased themselves, hence the appeal to teens. Reading further on in the blog, it was clear she'd had her own suspicions about whoever might be stalking her. These seemed to circle around Freddie, beginning on a day at the pool. As I looked through the comments section, her online friends seemed to agree:

Update: Just looked at my blog and saw that all you guys came to the rescue on the stalking front!

loserguy38: That guy Freddie has got to be the stalker. Sounds like a loser. Avoid.

gothgurl: Maybe he did send you that snuff text, Q, then try to snuff you, too, but fight back: refuse to be scared.

malady_g: Just checked this, the law can't help with stalkers. Unless he threatens you explicitly, police can't do jack. Sorry, Q 🙄

dr_kennedy: Noémie's brother sounds supercute. Pics please!

Qriosity_cat: Thank you, wonderful people 😊. I'll do my best.

Qriosity_cat was Quinn apparently. Her reply to the comments made me sad. She'd put so much trust in these virtual acquaintances and not one of them had thought to call the police or do much of anything when she vanished.

Her story—what I'd read of it so far—gave me an uneasy sense that there was an awful lot going on under the surface of life in the Blavette household, and none of it had made it into the papers. Reading the description of the girl being smothered in the video, I remembered what Marlene had told me about why the school shut down. *The poor girl suffocated. They said it was some sort of game that went wrong.* It was too much of a coincidence. I had to go talk to Marlene again, and find this Freddie, too.

The chair next to me screeched. "How's the aunt?" Aurelia Perla asked sweetly as she sat down and handed me her business card. Up close, I could see that she was very pretty in a put-together sort of way, her beige suit crisply dry-cleaned, the outline of her lipstick so neatly applied it looked machine-tooled.

"Holding up." I smiled awkwardly.

I looked around the bar for a companion, but saw only the same journalists as when I came in, slouching on tables in groups of fours, smoking e-cigarettes and blending into the surroundings like oil blends into water. One table held a couple of hacks and a photographer. Judging from the amount of gear the cameraman was carrying, he was one of those mercenary mutant paparazzi that feed off of stories like this. I wondered if I'd missed a press release or something, if new details were about to emerge. Else why would the meat flies be swarming around me? It freaked me out.

"Excuse me." Pushing my chair back, I started to get up.

"How are you coping?" Aurelia asked, the American word *coping* sounding labored in her accent. "It must be so hard."

"Do you want something?" I asked, trying to sound naive and bewildered.

"It must be a very hard time waiting for your niece to be well again, not knowing ..." She frowned sadly. "But the sisters say she has every chance of being well. If she ... when she wakes, what will be your first words to her?" She smiled expectantly.

I sat half on, half off the chair. I couldn't believe I was so slow to see what was going on—she had an audio recorder hidden on her somewhere and she was baiting me for a quote. Once I knew that, looking sideways at her was like looking at some weird, ghoulish, really well-dressed reflection of myself. This is what I did, sneaking up on people, asking sympathetic questions designed to pry revelations from them. Being on the other side of the questions made me realize how icky it felt to be soft-soaped. *Jeez, I thought, I hope I'm more convincing than this woman.*

"Look ..." I began in a firmer voice.

"Stop that!" A man stepped between us. He was beautifully dressed, in a dark suit and fedora. Inspector Valentin. He glared at our reflections in the mirror. "Get out."

"Sorry," I said, stumbling up. I knew it was only a matter of time before I would be rumbled. And here it was, flung from the hotel, never to be allowed back in the hospital.

"No, not you, Mademoiselle Perkins," said Valentin. He turned to the journalist, glowering, and said something angry in French.

She retorted just as angrily, her glossy red lips spread in a defiant grin. Valentin took out a piece of paper and flashed it at her. Whatever it said made Aurelia get up and move at speed from the bar. She hurried back to the table where the other hacks slumped with their beers, almost breaking a kitten heel. When she was out of earshot, Valentin climbed into the chair she'd vacated.

He took off his hat and laid it on the bar. "I am sorry about that." He smiled apologetically.

"Don't worry, I'm getting used to it," I said, gulping down the last few drops of whiskey, suspicious that he had changed his tune so much since we met in the café.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Journalists in the case are behaving reprehensibly—sneaking into the hospital, telling lies to the nuns to get information, and worse, sneaking in here to bother

the girl's relatives. I have told this woman she will face jail time if she pushes this further. *Terrible, n'est-ce pas?*"

"The worst," I said, gulping. There was something about him that made me nervous. I didn't know if it was my justified fear that he was onto me, or his annoying gallantry.

As if to underscore that point, he summoned the barman and ordered two more whiskeys.

"Is one of those for me?" I asked.

"It's the least I can do," he said, patting my arm.

Back to that again. I just wanted to go up to my room and take a shower and dream up my next move on the case, but I remembered Bill saying I should press my advantage wherever I could. When the Jack Daniel's came, I chinked my glass on his.

"To ... this place," I said, for want of a better toast.

He stopped midchink. "The Napoléon? St. Roch? Be more specific."

"To St. Roch, your beautiful town."

He rolled his eyes and downed the whiskey in one. "*Mon Dieu*. If you only knew the reality. This town is nothing but trouble."

Quinn Perkins

JULY 16, 2015

Blog Entry

There's a sense of dread that settles on a house; not just houses with creaking roof beams and forbidden Bluebeard doors, or even houses where you get pinched on the wrist for sticking up for yourself with guys. You know what I mean. *The fear*: that weird foreboding, the *plinky-plink* of horror movie sound effects, the camera zooming out giddily as you realize how bad things are.

I remember it from the days after Dad left, watching my mom drift around with her bandaged wrists, her eyes blank as the windows of a derelict house. She tried to protect me, never crying where I could see. She reorganized the things in their bedroom over and over as if it would bring Dad back, or hide him away. Later, in group therapy, I found that was one of the signs that someone was planning to kill themselves: putting their affairs in order. She gave Dad's suits away to a neighbor and, in a moment of sheer eccentricity, repotted all our houseplants in the park across the street with his Louis Vuitton shoes buried underneath.

I'd ask if she was okay; she'd say she was *so tired*. I knew what she meant, even if I didn't yet know the word to explain the endless creep of her fatigue, or mine, or our shared need to sleep hours into the day; the secret cutting we both resorted to, a little slice on the inner thigh to relieve the pain inside and a SpongeBob SquarePants Band-Aid to cover our tracks.

If I blamed my dad for leaving us, he blamed me for inheriting the shame of Mom's illness. Worse than that: he blamed me for watching her slide down into the darkness and doing nothing to stop it. Or maybe he was just projecting his guilt onto me—at least, that's what the therapist said to make me feel better. The day Mom died, the air was so thick with fear I couldn't see straight, and every moment leading up to the one in which I found her was a little car crash: the world slowing down for the collision as if it wants to watch just a bit more carefully. The shards of glass hitting you so gradually you don't notice that you are bleeding until later. Like when your guilt-stricken dad has slung you in the nuthouse for six months to "get well." If there's one thing you get in a psychiatric hospital, it's time to dwell.

Whether because of the weird texts, or what happened yesterday (and the day before and the day before that), or just my meds not working, the fear has come to visit me once more, falling fine and plentiful as dust in an abandoned building. I lie in bed. It settles on me. I get up in the morning and it clouds my vision.

Today someone left a book on my bed. A weird kind of bloodthirsty guidebook about some local caves called Les Yeux. When I went to take my turn in the bathroom, there was nothing on my bed except for rumpled-up covers, my iPod, and earbuds. When I came back, there was the book.

Flipping through it, I don't really grasp a lot of the French. But I get the gist. There were murders there long ago. Witches walled into the rock. All the illustrations inside are really disturbing. I mean, I know I watch horror movies by the fuck-ton, but this is like a how-to guide for Spanish Inquisition wannabes. I stand spellbound for I don't know how long, clutching the book with sweaty hands, hearing the *plinky-plink* music, feeling the shaky zoom-out camera.

A knock on my door. I drop the book. Noémie pokes her head around.

I bite it off. "You put this here?" I hold up the book.

She shrugs. "No."

I take a step towards her, hands shaking. "Know who did?"

"No. Are you ... okay?" She swallows nervously.

"Yeah ... I just feel like. I don't know. Someone put this here to freak me out or something."

She closes the door behind her. "Listen. What happened yesterday—"

“You going to tell me off, too? Because Freddie’s an ass-hat and I’m glad I slapped him. I mean, you know that creep sent me texts and this awful video. And then he kissed me and the other day he almost drowned me ...”

Noémie puts her hand on my arm. Her eyes are soft. “Hey. I know. I know. He is always like that with every exchange that comes here,” she says, shaking her head, and rubs her hands over her face. “Like touching them in the pool, *quoi*. It’s gross. I have no reason why Maman is not stopping him.”

I swipe angrily at a tear running down my cheek. “Then why do you invite him along to everything?”

She shrugs. “St. Roch is small small. Everyone knows everyone and there are not always other young people to hang with. Maman asks someone like Freddie so there will be young people for you to meet.”

“You serious? He’s—”

“Hey, look, let’s have fun today. Just us!” She smiles wide, suddenly throwing everything into being cheerful. “We may take the bus to the town and go shop.”

It melts my heart a little to see her work so hard to distract me. Maybe she feels like we got off on the wrong foot, too, though I still have my doubts. “Won’t your mom mind? She seems pretty strict ...”

Noémie rolls her eyes. “She’s the worst. I know. But she’s not here today and tonight she’s staying with her boyfriend. Raffi is in charge, *en fait*. And he is not here either. So I say we do what we want. Go wild, *quoi*!”

It turns out Noémie doesn’t go wild by halves. In St. Roch, we shop and we eat ice cream. We tie up our T-shirts to show our midriffs and compete to see who gets the most wolf whistles. We take in zero tourist attractions and many bars where guys keep buying us beer. I never do this back home. I mean, I’ve maybe used a fake ID once, but it didn’t look like me, and the second a doorman confronted me, I freaked and ran away. Somehow Noé makes me bold and I no longer care if what I’m doing is wrong. Boys ask for our numbers and names and we give them fake ones, laughing behind our hands. We drink demand shots. Red Bull and vodka, Jägermeister, Sambuca. Every time I slow down or get sleepy, Noé starts her Little Miss Crazy routine again.

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