Prep

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Published by Picador

Extract

1. Thieves

FRESHMAN FALL

I think that everything, or at least the part of everything that happened to me, started with the Roman architecture mix-up. Ancient History was my first class of the day, occurring after morning chapel and roll call, which was not actually roll call but a series of announcements that took place in an enormous room with twenty-foot-high Palladian windows, rows and rows of desks with hinged tops that you lifted to store your books inside, and mahogany panels on the walls—one for each class since Ault's founding in 1882—engraved with the name of every person who had graduated from the school. The two senior prefects led roll call, standing at a desk on a platform and calling on the people who'd signed up ahead of time to make announcements. My own desk, assigned alphabetically, was near the platform, and because I didn't talk to my classmates who sat around me, I spent the lull before roll call listening to the prefects' exchanges with teachers or other students or each other. The prefects' names were Henry Thorpe and Gates Medkowski. It was my fourth week at the school, and I didn't know much about Ault, but I did know that Gates was the first girl in Ault's history to have been elected prefect.

The teachers' announcements were straightforward and succinct: *Please remember that your adviser request forms are due by noon on Thursday.* The students' announcements were lengthy—the longer roll call was, the shorter first period would be—and filled with double entendres: *Boys'*

soccer is practicing on Coates Field today, which, if you don't know where it is, is behind the headmaster's house, and if you still don't know where it is, ask Fred. Where are you, Fred? You wanna raise your hand, man? There's Fred, everyone see Fred? Okay, so Coates Field. And remember—bring your balls.

When the announcements were finished, Henry or Gates pressed a button on the side of the desk, like a doorbell, there was a ringing throughout the schoolhouse, and we all shuffled off to class. In Ancient History, we were making presentations on different topics, and I was one of the students presenting that day. From a library book, I had copied pictures of the Colosseum, the Pantheon, and the Baths of Diocletian, then glued the pictures onto a piece of poster board and outlined the edges with green and yellow markers. The night before, I'd stood in front of the mirror in the dorm bathroom practicing what I'd say, but then someone had come in, and I'd pretended I was washing my hands and left.

I was third; right before me was Jamie Lorison. Mrs. Van der Hoef had set a lectern in the front of the classroom, and Jamie stood behind it, clutching index cards. "It is a tribute to the genius of Roman architects," he began, "that many of the buildings they designed more than two thousand years ago still exist today for modern peoples to visit and enjoy."

My heart lurched. The genius of Roman architects was my topic, not Jamie's. I had difficulty listening as he continued, though certain familiar phrases emerged: *the aqueducts, which were built to transport water . . . the Colosseum, originally called the Flavian Amphitheater . . .*

Mrs. Van der Hoef was standing to my left, and I leaned toward her and whispered, "Excuse me."

She seemed not to have heard me.

"Mrs. Van der Hoef?" Then—later, this gesture seemed particularly humiliating—I reached out to touch her forearm. She was wearing a maroon silk dress with a collar and a skinny maroon belt, and I only brushed my fingers against the silk, but she drew back as if I'd pinched her. She glared at me, shook her head, and took several steps away.

"I'd like to pass around some pictures," I heard Jamie say. He lifted a stack of books from the floor. When he opened them, I saw colored pictures of the same buildings I had copied in black-and-white and stuck to poster board.

Then his presentation ended. Until that day, I had never felt anything about Jamie Lorison, who was red-haired and skinny and breathed loudly, but as I watched him take his seat, a mild, contented expression on his face, I loathed him.

"Lee Fiora, I believe you're next," Mrs. Van der Hoef said.

"See, the thing is," I began, "maybe there's a problem."

I could feel my classmates looking at me with growing interest. Ault prided itself on, among other things, its teacher-student ratio, and there were only twelve of us in the class. When all their eyes were on me at once, however, that did not seem like such a small number.

"I just can't go," I finally said.

"I beg your pardon?" Mrs. Van der Hoef was in her late fifties, a tall, thin woman with a bony nose. I'd heard that she was the widow of a famous archaeologist, not that any archaeologists were famous to me.

"See, my presentation is—or it was going to be—I thought I was supposed to talk about—but maybe, now that Jamie—"

"You're not making sense, Miss Fiora," Mrs. Van der Hoef said. "You need to speak clearly."

"If I go, I'll be saying the same thing as Jamie."

"But you're presenting on a different topic."

"Actually, I'm talking about architecture, too."

She walked to her desk and ran her finger down a piece of paper. I had been looking at her while we spoke, and now that she had turned away, I didn't know what to do with my eyes. My classmates were still watching me. During the school year so far, I'd spoken in classes only when I was called on, which was not often; the other kids at Ault were enthusiastic about participating. Back in my junior high in South Bend, Indiana, many classes had felt like one-on-one discussions between the teacher and me, while the rest of the students daydreamed or doodled. Here, the fact that I did the reading didn't distinguish me. In fact, nothing distinguished me. And now, in my most lengthy discourse to date, I was revealing myself to be strange and stupid.

"You're not presenting on architecture," Mrs. Van der Hoef said. "You're presenting on athletics."

"Athletics?" I repeated. There was no way I'd have volunteered for such a topic.

She thrust the sheet of paper at me, and there was my name, *Lee Fiora—Athletics,* in her writing, just below *James Lorison—Architecture.* We'd signed up for topics by raising our hands in class; clearly, she had misunderstood me.

"I could do athletics," I said uncertainly. "Tomorrow I could do them."

"Are you suggesting that the students presenting tomorrow have their time reduced on your behalf?"

"No, no, of course not. But maybe a different day, or maybe—I could do it whenever. Just not today. All I'd be able to talk about today is architecture."

"Then you'll be talking about architecture. Please use the lectern."

I stared at her. "But Jamie just went."

"Miss Fiora, you are wasting class time."

As I stood and gathered my notebook and poster board, I thought about how coming to Ault had been an enormous error. I would never have friends; the best I'd be able to hope for from my classmates would be pity. It had already been obvious to me that I was different from them, but I'd imagined that I could lie low for a while, getting a sense of them, then reinvent myself in their image. Now I'd been uncovered.

I gripped either side of the lectern and looked down at my notes. "One of the most famous examples of Roman architecture is the Colosseum," I began. "Historians believe that the Colosseum was called the Colosseum because of a large statue of the Colossus of Nero which was located nearby." I looked up from my notes. The faces of my classmates were neither kind nor unkind, sympathetic nor unsympathetic, engaged nor bored.

"The Colosseum was the site of shows held by the emperor or other aristocrats. The most famous of these shows was—" I paused. Ever since childhood, I have felt the onset of tears in my chin, and, at this moment, it was shaking. But I was not going to cry in front of strangers. "Excuse me," I said, and I left the classroom.

There was a girls' bathroom across the hall, but I knew not to go in there because I would be too easy to find. I ducked into the stairwell and hurried down the steps to the first floor and out a side door. Outside it was sunny and cool, and with almost everyone in class, the campus felt pleasantly empty. I jogged toward my dorm. Maybe I would leave altogether: hitchhike to Boston, catch a bus, ride back home to Indiana. Fall in the

Midwest would be pretty but not overly pretty—not like in New England, where they called the leaves *foliage*. Back in South Bend, my younger brothers would be spending the evenings kicking the soccer ball in the backyard and coming in for dinner smelling like boy-sweat; they'd be deciding on their Halloween costumes, and when my father carved the pumpkin, he would hold the knife over his head and stagger toward my brothers with a maniacal expression on his face, and as they ran shrieking into the other room, my mother would say, "Terry, quit scaring them."

I reached the courtyard. Broussard's dorm was one of eight on the east side of campus, four boys' dorms and four girls' dorms forming a square, with granite benches in the middle. When I looked out the window of my room, I often saw couples using the benches, the boy sitting with his legs spread in front of him, the girl standing between his legs, her hands perhaps set on his shoulders briefly, before she laughed and lifted them. At this moment, only one of the benches was occupied. A girl in cowboy boots and a long skirt lay on her back, one knee propped up in a triangle, one arm slung over her eyes.

As I passed, she lifted her arm. It was Gates Medkowski. "Hey," she said.

We almost made eye contact, but then we didn't. It made me unsure of whether she was addressing me, which was an uncertainty I often felt when spoken to. I kept walking.

"Hey," she said again. "Who do you think I'm talking to? We're the only ones here." But her voice was kind; she wasn't making fun of me.

"Sorry," I said.

"Are you a freshman?"

I nodded.

"Are you going to your dorm right now?"

I nodded again.

"I assume you don't know this, but you're not allowed in the dorm during classes." She swung her legs around, righting herself. "None of us are," she said. "For Byzantine reasons that I wouldn't even try to guess at. Seniors are allowed to roam, but roaming only means outside, the library, or the mail room, so that's a joke."

I said nothing.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yes," I said and began to cry.

"Oh God," Gates said. "I didn't mean to upset you. Here, come sit down." She was patting the bench beside her, and then she stood, walked toward me, set one arm around my back—my shoulders were heaving—and guided me toward the bench. When we were sitting, she passed me a blue bandanna that smelled of incense; even through the blur of my tears, I was interested by the fact that she carried this accessory. I hesitated to blow my nose—my snot would be on Gates Medkowski's bandanna—but my whole face seemed to be leaking.

"What's your name?" she said.

"Lee." My voice was high and shaky.

"So what's wrong? Why aren't you in class or study hall?"

"Nothing's wrong."

She laughed. "For some reason, I don't think that's true."

When I told her what had happened, she said, "Van der Hoef likes to come off like the dragon lady. God knows why. Maybe it's menopause. But she's actually pretty nice most of the time."

"I don't think she likes me."

"Oh, don't worry. It's still so early in the school year. She'll have forgotten all about this by November."

"But I left in the middle of class," I said.

Gates waved one hand through the air. "Don't even think about it," she said. "The teachers here have seen everything. We imagine ourselves as distinct entities, but in their eyes, we merge into a great mass of adolescent neediness. You know what I mean?"

I nodded, though I was pretty sure I had no idea; I'd never heard someone close to my own age talk the way she was talking.

"Ault can be a tough place," she said. "Especially at first."

At this, I felt a new rush of tears. She *knew*. I blinked several times.

"It's like that for everyone," she said.

I looked at her, and, as I did, I realized for the first time that she was very attractive: not pretty exactly, but striking, or maybe handsome. She was nearly six feet tall and had pale skin, fine features, eyes of such a washed-out blue they were almost gray, and a massive amount of long light brown hair that was a rough texture and unevenly cut; in places, in the sunlight, there were glints of gold in it. As we'd been talking, she'd

pulled it into a high, loose bun with shorter pieces of hair falling around her face. In my own experience, creating such a perfectly messy bun required a good fifteen minutes of maneuvering before a mirror. But everything about Gates seemed effortless. "I'm from Idaho, and I was the biggest hayseed when I got here," she was saying. "I practically arrived on a tractor."

"I'm from Indiana," I said.

"See, you must be way cooler than I was because at least Indiana is closer to the East Coast than Idaho."

"But people here have been to Idaho. They ski there." I knew this because Dede Schwartz, one of my two roommates, kept on her desk a framed picture of her family standing on a snowy slope, wearing sunglasses and holding poles. When I'd asked her where it was taken, she'd said Sun Valley, and when I'd looked up Sun Valley in my atlas, I'd learned it was in Idaho.

"True," Gates said. "But I'm not from the mountains. Anyway, the important thing to remember about Ault is why you applied in the first place. It was for the academics, right? I don't know where you were before, but Ault beats the hell out of the public high school in my town. As for the politics here, what can you do? There's a lot of posturing, but it's all kind of meaningless."

I wasn't certain what she meant by *posturing*—it made me think of a row of girls in long white nightgowns, standing up very straight and balancing hardcover books on their heads.

Gates looked at her watch, a man's sports watch with black plastic straps. "Listen," she said. "I better get going. I have Greek second period. What's your next class?"

"Algebra. But I left my backpack in Ancient History."

"Just grab it when the bell rings. Don't worry about talking to Van der Hoef. You can sort things out with her later, after you've both cooled off."

She stood, and I stood, too. We started walking back toward the schoolhouse—it seemed I was not returning to South Bend after all, at least not today. We passed the roll call room, which during the school day functioned as the study hall. I wondered if any of the students were looking out the window, watching me walk with Gates Medkowski.

It was nighttime, after curfew, when Dede made the discovery. She had just finished laying out her clothes for the next morning. Every night, she set them on the floor in the shape of an actual person: shoes, then pants or else tights and a skirt, then shirt, then sweater or jacket on top of the shirt. Our room was not large—though three of us shared it, I'd heard that in other years it had been used as a double—and Dede made no concession to this fact. For me and our other roommate, Sin-Jun Kim, the arrangement of Dede's clothes necessitated as much stepping around as if a real body were on the floor. But we had not objected during the first few days of school and now Dede's pattern was established.

The night of Dede's discovery, our room was quiet except for the low sound of her stereo and the clicking open and shut of her dresser drawers. Sin-Jun was reading at her desk, and I was in bed already. I always climbed into bed when I got sick of studying—I wasn't sure what else to do—and lay there under the sheets, facing the wall, my eyes shut. If someone came by to see Dede, they'd enter the room speaking in a normal voice, then see me and whisper, "Oh, sorry," or else, "Whoops," and I would feel strangely flattered. I sometimes pretended I was in my bed in South Bend and that the sounds of the dorm were the sounds of my family—the flushing toilet was my brother Joseph, the laughter in the hallway was my mother talking on the telephone to her sister.

Since our meeting the previous week, I'd often found myself thinking of Gates Medkowski. Before roll call, I watched her, and a few times, she'd looked right at me. When we made eye contact, she smiled or said, "Hey, Lee," before turning away, and I usually blushed, feeling caught. I didn't necessarily want to talk to her again because I would probably be awkward, but I wanted to know things about her. I was considering whether or not Gates had a boyfriend when Dede exclaimed, "What the fuck!"

Neither Sin-Jun nor I said anything.

"Okay, I had forty dollars in my top drawer this morning, and it is *not* there right now," Dede said. "One of you guys didn't take it, did you?"

"Of course not." I rolled over. "Did you check your pockets?"

"It was definitely in my drawer. Someone stole money from me. I can't believe it."

"Is not in drawer?" Sin-Jun said. Sin-Jun was from Korea and I was still

unable to gauge exactly how much English she understood. Like me, Sin-Jun had no friends, and also like me, she was generally ignored by Dede. Sometimes the two of us walked together to the dining hall, which was preferable to walking alone.

Though Dede took pains to separate herself from Sin-Jun and me, leaving earlier than we did for morning chapel or for meals, she herself was not exactly cool. At my junior high she would have been royalty, but here she was, apparently, neither rich enough nor pretty enough to be truly popular. Even I recognized that if you compared Dede to the best-looking girls at Ault, her nose was a bit round, her calves a bit stocky, her hair a bit, well, brown. She was a follower, literally a follower—I often saw her scurrying behind two or three other girls. The strenuousness of her efforts made me feel embarrassed for her.

"I already told you it's not in my drawer," Dede said. "You didn't borrow it, did you, Sin-Jun? Like take it and plan on paying me back later? It's okay if you did." This was a notably kind remark on Dede's part.

But Sin-Jun shook her head. "No borrow," she said.

Dede exhaled disgustedly. "Great," she said. "There's a thief in the dorm."

"Maybe someone else borrowed the money," I said. "Ask Aspeth." Aspeth Montgomery was the girl Dede followed most enthusiastically. She lived down the hall, and I assumed Dede considered it a stroke of singular misfortune that she had been assigned to live with Sin-Jun and me instead of with Aspeth.

"Aspeth would never borrow money without asking," Dede said. "I need to tell Madame what's happened."

This was the moment when I actually believed that the money had been stolen, or at least I believed that Dede believed it. The next night at curfew, after calling out our names and checking them off the dorm list, Madame Broussard said, "It is with great displeasure that I must tell you there has been a theft." Madame—our dorm head, the head of the French department, and a native of Paris—peered around the room through her cat's-eye glasses, which were either (I wasn't sure which) outdated or retro-hip. She was in her early forties, and she also wore stockings with seams, tan leather high heels with an ankle strap fastened by one leather-covered button, and skirts and blouses that emphasized her small waist and not-

small backside. "I will not say how much money it was, nor will I say from whom it was taken," she continued. "If you know anything about this incident, I request that you step forward. I remind you that stealing is a major disciplinary violation and as such is punishable by expulsion."

"How much money was it?" asked Amy Dennaker. Amy was a junior with a hoarse voice, curly red hair, and broad shoulders, and she scared me. I had spoken to her only once, when I was waiting in the common room to use the pay phone and she walked in, opened the refrigerator, and said, "Whose Diet Cokes are these?" I had said, "I don't know," and Amy had taken one and walked up the stairs. Maybe, I thought, she was the thief.

"The amount of money is not pertinent," Madame said. "I am telling you of the incident only so you may take precautions."

"What, you mean like locking our doors?" Amy said and people laughed. None of the doors had locks on them.

"I urge you not to keep large sums of money in your rooms," Madame said. "If you have ten or fifteen dollars, that is enough." She was right about this—you didn't need cash at Ault. Money was everywhere on campus, but it was usually invisible. You caught a glimpse of it sometimes in things that were shiny, like the hood of the headmaster's Mercedes, or the gold dome of the schoolhouse, or a girl's long, straight blond hair. But nobody carried wallets. When you had to pay for a notebook or a pair of sweatpants at the campus store, you wrote your student ID number on a form and, later on, your parents got the bill. "If you see any unfamiliar persons in the dorm," Madame continued, "you may report it to me. Are there other announcements?"

Dede's friend Aspeth raised her hand. "I just want to say that whoever is leaving pubic hair in the bathroom sink, could you please clean it up? It's really gross."

Aspeth made this announcement every few days. It was true there were often short wiry black hairs in one of the sinks, but, clearly, Aspeth's complaints were achieving nothing. It seemed like maybe she just liked to make them because they established her firmly in opposition to pubic hair.

"If that is it," Madame said, "then curfew is complete." Everyone rose

from the couches and chairs and the floor to shake her hand, which was by then a ritual I had become used to.

"If we started a vigilante group, would the student activities committee give us funding?" Amy asked in a loud voice.

"I do not know," Madame said wearily.

"Don't worry," Amy said. "We'd be peaceful vigilantes." I had seen Amy in action before—she did imitations of Madame that consisted of clutching her chest and crying out something like *Zut alors! Someone has sat upon my croissant!*—but I was still surprised by her joking. In chapel, the headmaster and the chaplain spoke of citizenship and integrity and the price we had to pay for the privileges we enjoyed. At Ault, it wasn't just that we weren't supposed to be bad or unethical; we weren't even supposed to be ordinary, and stealing was worse than ordinary. It was unseemly, lacking subtlety, revealing a wish for things you did not already have.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor, I wondered if it was possible that *I* was the thief. What if I had opened Dede's drawer in my sleep? Or what if I had amnesia, or schizophrenia, and couldn't even account for my own behavior? I didn't think I had stolen the money, yet it also did not seem impossible.

"We'll get to the bottom of this *tout de suite*," I heard Amy say as I reached the top step, and then someone else, someone standing much closer to me, said, "That bitch is crazy."

I turned. Little Washington was on the steps behind me. I made a noncommittal noise, to acknowledge her comment, though I wasn't even sure if she meant Amy or Madame.

"The mouth on her," Little added, and then I knew she was referring to Amy.

"Amy likes to kid around," I said. I wouldn't have minded sharing a moment with Little at Amy's expense, but I feared doing so in the hallway, where we could be overheard.

"She ain't funny," Little said.

I wanted to agree—less because I actually did agree than because I'd recently been considering trying to become friends with Little. I had first noticed her one night when we returned from formal dinner at the same

time; just inside the common room, she said to no one in particular, "I gotta get these shoes off because my dogs are *barking*." Little was from Pittsburgh, the only black girl in the dorm, and I'd heard that she was the daughter of a doctor and a lawyer. She was a star in cross-country and was supposed to be even better at basketball. As a sophomore, she lived in a single, which normally carried a stigma—a single implied you didn't have any friends close enough to share a room with—but Little's blackness made her exist outside of Ault's social strata. Not automatically, though, not in a negative way. More like, it gave her the choice of opting out without seeming like a loser.

"The stealing is weird, huh?" I said.

Little made a dismissive noise. "I bet she's glad it happened. Now she gets to be the center of attention."

"Who?"

"What do you mean who? Your roommate."

"You know it was Dede's money? I guess there aren't any secrets in the dorm."

Little was quiet for a few seconds. "There aren't any secrets in the whole school," she said.

I felt a flip of uneasiness in my stomach; I hoped she wasn't right. We were standing outside her room, and it crossed my mind that she might invite me in.

"Do you like it here?" I asked. This was the problem with me—I didn't know how to talk to people without asking them questions. Some people seemed to find me peculiar and some people were so happy to discuss themselves that they didn't even notice, but either way, it made conversation draining. While the other person's mouth moved, I'd try to think of the next thing to ask.

"There's good parts about the school," Little said. "But I'm telling you that everyone's in each other's business."

"I like your name," I said. "Is it your real name?"

"You can find that out yourself," Little said. "Prove my theory."

"Okay," I said. "And then I'll report back to you."

She didn't object; it was like permission to talk to her again, something to look forward to. Though, apparently, she would not be inviting me in—she had opened her door and was about to step inside.

"Don't forget to hide your money," I said.

"Yeah, really." She shook her head. "Folks are messed up."

All of this was still in the beginning of the year, the beginning of my time at Ault, when I was exhausted all the time by both my vigilance and my wish to be inconspicuous. At soccer practice, I worried that I would miss the ball, when we boarded the bus for games at other schools, I worried that I would take a seat by someone who didn't want to sit next to me, in class I worried I would say a wrong or foolish thing. I worried that I took too much food at meals, or that I did not disdain the food you were supposed to disdain—Tater Tots, key lime pie—and at night, I worried that Dede or Sin-Jun would hear me snore. I always worried someone would notice me, and then when no one did, I felt lonely.

Ault had been my idea. I'd researched boarding schools at the public library and written away for catalogs myself. Their glossy pages showed photographs of teenagers in wool sweaters singing hymns in the chapel, gripping lacrosse sticks, intently regarding a math equation written across the chalkboard. I had traded away my family for this glossiness. I'd pretended it was about academics, but it never had been. Marvin Thompson High School, the school I would have attended in South Bend, had hallways of pale green linoleum and grimy lockers and stringy-haired boys who wrote the names of heavy metal bands across the backs of their denim jackets in black marker. But boarding school boys, at least the ones in the catalogs who held lacrosse sticks and grinned over their mouth guards, were so handsome. And they had to be smart, too, by virtue of the fact that they attended boarding school. I imagined that if I left South Bend, I would meet a melancholy, athletic boy who liked to read as much as I did and on overcast Sundays we would take walks together wearing wool sweaters.

During the application process, my parents were mystified. The only person my family knew who had gone to boarding school was the son of one of the insurance agents in the office where my mother was a bookkeeper, and this kid's boarding school had been a fenced-in mountaintop in Colorado, a place for screwups. My parents suspected, in a way that was only honest, not unsupportive, that I would never be accepted to the places I'd applied; besides, they saw my interest in boarding school as

comparable to other short-lived hobbies, like knitting (in sixth grade, I'd completed one third of a hat). When I got in, they explained how proud they were, and how sorry that they wouldn't be able to pay for it. The day a letter arrived from Ault offering me the Eloise Fielding Foster scholarship, which would cover more than three quarters of my tuition, I cried because I knew for certain that I was leaving home, and abruptly, I did not know if it was such a good idea—I realized that I, like my parents, had never believed I'd actually go.

In mid-September, weeks after school had started in South Bend for my brothers and my former classmates, my father drove me from Indiana to Massachusetts. When we turned in the wrought-iron gates of the campus, I recognized the buildings from photographs—eight brick structures plus a Gothic chapel surrounding a circle of grass which I already knew was fifty yards in diameter and which I also knew you were not supposed to walk on. Everywhere there were cars with the trunks open, kids greeting each other, fathers carrying boxes. I was wearing a long dress with peach and lavender flowers and a lace collar, and I noticed immediately that most of the students had on faded T-shirts and loose khaki shorts and flip-flops. I realized then how much work Ault would be for me.

After we found my dorm, my father started talking to Dede's father, who said, "South Bend, eh? I take it you teach at Notre Dame?" and my father cheerfully said, "No, sir, I'm in the mattress business." I was embarrassed that my father called Dede's father sir, embarrassed by his job, embarrassed by our rusty white Datsun. I wanted my father gone from campus as soon as possible, so I could try to miss him.

In the mornings, when I stood under the shower, I would think, *I have been at Ault for twenty-four hours. I have been at Ault for three days. I have been at Ault for a month.* I talked to myself as I imagined my mother would talk to me if she actually thought boarding school was a good idea: *You're doing great. I'm proud of you, LeeLee.* Sometimes I would cry while I washed my hair, but this was the thing, this was always the thing about Ault—in some ways, my fantasies about it had not been wrong. The campus really was beautiful: the low, distant, fuzzy mountains that turned blue in the evenings, the perfectly rectangular fields, the Gothic cathedral (it was only Yankee modesty that made them call it a chapel) with its

stained glass windows. This beauty gave a tinge of nobility and glamour to even the most pedestrian kind of homesickness.

Several times, I recognized a student from a photograph in the catalog. It was disorienting, the way I imagined it might be to see a celebrity on the streets of New York or Los Angeles. These people moved and breathed, they ate bagels in the dining hall, carried books through the hallways, wore clothes other than the ones I'd memorized. They belonged to the real, physical world; previously, it had seemed as if they belonged to me.

In big letters across the top, the signs said, *Drag yourself out of the dorm!!!* In smaller letters, they said, *Where? The dining hall! When? This Saturday! Why? To dance!* The paper was red and featured a copied photograph of Mr. Byden, the headmaster, wearing a dress.

"It's a drag dance," I heard Dede explain to Sin-Jun one night. "You go in drag."

"In drag," Sin-Jun said.

"Girls dress as boys, and boys dress as girls," I said.

"Ohhh," Sin-Jun said. "Very good!"

"I'm borrowing a tie from Devin," Dede said. "And a baseball cap."

Good for you, I thought.

"Dev is so funny," she said. Sometimes, just because I was there and because, unlike Sin-Jun, I was fluent in English, Dede told me things about her life. "Who are you borrowing clothes from?" she asked.

"I haven't decided." I wasn't borrowing clothes from anyone because I wasn't going. I could hardly talk to my classmates, and I definitely couldn't dance. I had tried it once at a cousin's wedding and I had not been able to stop thinking, *Is this the part where I throw my arms in the air?*

The day of the dance—roll call and classes occurred even on Saturday mornings, which was, I soon learned, a good detail to break out for people from home, to affirm their suspicion that boarding school was only slightly different from prison—neither Gates nor Henry Thorpe was at the desk when the bell went off announcing the start of roll call. Someone else, a senior girl whose name I didn't know, rang the bell, then stepped down from the platform. Music became audible and students stopped murmuring. It was disco. I didn't recognize the song, but a lot of other

people seemed to, and there was a rise of collective laughter. Turning in my seat, I realized the source of the music was two stereo speakers, each being held in the air by a different senior guy—there weren't enough desks for everyone in roll call, so juniors and seniors stood in the back of the room. The seniors seemed to be looking out the rear doorway. A few seconds passed before Henry Thorpe made his entrance. He wore a short black satin nightgown, fishnet stockings, and black high heels, and he was dancing as he approached the desk where he and Gates usually stood. Many students, especially the seniors, cheered, cupping their hands around their mouths. Some sang and clapped in time to the music.

Henry pointed a finger out, then curled it back toward his chest. I looked to see where he'd pointed. From another door at the opposite end of the room, the doorway near which the faculty stood, Gates had appeared. She was dressed in a football uniform, shoulder pads beneath the jersey and eye-black across her cheekbones. But no one would have mistaken her for a guy: Her hair was down, and her calves—she wasn't wearing socks—looked smooth and slender. She, too, was dancing, holding her arms up and shaking her head. By the time she and Henry climbed on top of the prefects' desk, the room was in an uproar. They came together, gyrating. I glanced toward the faculty; most of them stood with their arms folded, looking impatient. Gates and Henry pulled apart and turned so they were facing opposite directions, Gates swiveling her hips and snapping her fingers. Her unself-consciousness astonished me. Here she was before a room of more than three hundred people, it was the bright light of day, it was *morning*, and she was dancing.

She gestured toward the back of the room, and the music stopped. She and Henry jumped down from the desk, and three seniors, two girls and a guy, climbed the three steps to the platform. "Tonight at eight o'clock in the dining hall . . ." one of the girls said.

". . . it's the eleventh annual drag extravaganza," said the other.

"So get ready to party!" shouted the guy.

The room erupted again into wild cheers and applause. Someone turned on the music, and Gates grinned and shook her head. The music went off. "Sorry, but the show's over," she said, and students booed, but even the booing had an affectionate sound to it. Gates turned to the three seniors next to her. "Thanks, guys." She picked up the clipboard where

the names of the people who'd signed up to make announcements were listed, and said, "Mr. Archibald?"

Mr. Archibald stepped onto the platform. Just before he spoke, a guy from the back of the room yelled, "Gates, will you dance with me?"

Gates smiled a closed-mouth smile. "Go ahead, Mr. Archibald," she said.

His announcement was about soda cans being left in the math wing.

Gates passed the clipboard to Henry.

"Dory Rogers," Henry called, and Dory said the Amnesty International meeting had been switched from Sunday at six to Sunday at seven. During the five or six other announcements, I found myself waiting for more theatrics—I wanted to see Gates dance again—but it appeared the show really was over.

After Henry had rung the bell, I approached the platform. "Gates," I said. She was putting a notebook in her bag and didn't look up. "Gates," I said again.

This time, she looked at me.

"Your dancing was really good," I said.

She rolled her eyes. "It's always fun to see people make fools of themselves."

"Oh, no, you weren't making a fool of yourself. Not at all. Everyone loved it."

She smiled, and I understood that she had already known everyone loved it. But she hadn't been asking for a compliment, as I myself was whenever I said something self-effacing. It was more like—this dawned on me as I looked at her—she was pretending to be regular. Even though she was special, she was pretending to be like the rest of us.

"Thanks," she said. "That's nice of you, Lee."

In the evening, a giddy energy swirled in the courtyard and inside the dorm itself. Boys from the nearby dorms appeared in our common room—boys weren't allowed upstairs except during visitation—and summoned certain girls. Aspeth, I was not surprised to see, was a popular choice, and Dede often trotted downstairs along with her. They brought purses and nail polish and bras that they fastened, amid lots of shouts and laughter, right over the boys' T-shirts. I was doing laundry, and as I traipsed between

the basement and the second floor of the dorm, I observed the progress of the festivities. The thought of a boy wearing my bra over his T-shirt was horrifying—the empty cups sagging, the fabric straining, or, even worse, not straining, around his rib cage, the fact that when he removed it he'd be able to see the exact size and might leave it on the floor of his room, stepping on it as he climbed into bed. But perhaps my horror stemmed from the fact that, as I was fast realizing, I did not own particularly pretty bras. Mine were beige cotton with a beige bow between the cups; my mother and I had bought them over the summer at JCPenney. These other bras that emerged were satin or lace, black or red or leopard-spotted, bras of the sort that I had thought only adult women wore.

After the dorm cleared out—even Sin-Jun went to the dance with a mascara mustache—I studied Spanish vocabulary words for a while, then went downstairs to the common room to read the old yearbooks that lined one shelf. I loved the yearbooks; they were like an atlas for the school. The ones in our common room went back as far as 1973, and in the past few weeks, I'd nearly worked my way to the present. Over the years, the format hadn't changed: candid shots in the front, then clubs, sports teams, dorms, entire classes. For, say, that year's tenth grade, there was a general write-up of the notable events that had occurred between September and June and a little joke about every person: "Can you imagine Lindsay without her curling iron?" Then came the best part, the seniors, each of them with their own page. In addition to the standard expressions of gratitude to family members, teachers, and friends, and the sometimes-nostalgic, sometimes-literary, sometimes-incomprehensible quotations, they were filled with pictures. Many of the boys' pictures were action shots from games; many of the girls' showed them with their arms around each other, sitting on a bed or standing on a beach. Girls also had a fondness for including photos from childhood.

You could figure out, if you had the inclination and the time, who in a given year was friends with whom and who had dated whom, and who had been popular, or athletic, or weird and fringy. The graduated students began to feel like distant cousins—I learned their nicknames, their sports of choice, which sweater or hairstyle they'd worn on repeated occasions.

In the three most recent yearbooks, I found several photos of Gates. She played field hockey, basketball, and lacrosse, and she'd lived her

freshman and sophomore years in Elwyn's dorm and her junior year in Jackson's. Her sophomore year, the little joke about her was, "The crystal ball predicts that Henry and Gates will buy a house with a white picket fence and have twelve kids." The only Henry at Ault was Henry Thorpe, who I knew was currently going out with a prissy-seeming sophomore named Molly. I wondered if Henry and Gates had really dated and, if so, whether any tension of either the good or bad sort lingered between them. When they danced together at roll call, it had not seemed like it.

It was at the end of the yearbook from Gates's junior year, which was the newest one, that I came across the picture. The final section, after the seniors' pages, contained photos of graduation: the senior girls in white dresses, the boys in white pants and navy blazers and boaters. There were pictures of them sitting in rows at the ceremony, a picture of the graduation speaker (a Supreme Court justice), pictures of the seniors hugging each other. Among these—I was not looking for her here and might easily have missed it—was one of Gates by herself. It showed her from the waist up, in a white short-sleeved button-down. She wore a cowboy hat, and her glinting hair fell out from under the brim and spilled over her shoulders. The picture would have been in profile, but it appeared that the photographer, whoever it was, had called her name just before snapping the shutter and she'd turned her head. She might have been simultaneously laughing and protesting, saying something like, *Oh, come on!* But saying it to a person she liked very much.

I stared at the picture for so long that when I looked up again, I was surprised to see the nubbly orange couches and cream-colored walls of the common room. I had forgotten myself, and I had forgotten Ault, at least the real, three-dimensional version in which I, too, was a presence. It was a little after ten. I decided to check in early with Madame and go to bed, and I put the yearbooks away.

In the upstairs bathroom, Little stood before one of the sinks in a pink bathrobe, rubbing oil through her hair.

"Hey," I said. "How was the dance?"

She made a face. "I wouldn't go to no drag dance."

"Why not?"

"Why didn't *you* go?"

I smiled, and then she smiled, too.