

Chapter 1

English 101 The Composition of Life

SKIP LINES . . .

Cadence stared in disbelief at the board's directions, the ones that accompanied her first academic command of college—compose an essay. Where were the inspiring introductions and philosophical lectures that made professors legendary? Alumni promised four remarkable years, but here she was facing a writing sample and the most pressing issue of the moment was remembering to *Skip Lines*? She had not imagined the first day at her dream school would begin like this.

She wasn't certain when she first had fallen for Charleston, but it was many years before the historic haven became a fantasy destination for the world; perhaps it was during field trips in elementary school when the port city's wonders lay open for exploration. The journeys here left her with memories of marshes, museums, gardens, galleries, even graveyards and ghosts; of burly carriage horses, rainbow buildings, beautiful beaches, the Battery, and the beaten hands of black women weaving sweetgrass into artistic marvels on the Market. She recalled two bridges that once jumped the Cooper River: one gliding smoothly into Mt. Pleasant where the stately Yorktown reposed safely in port; the other a rickety rollercoaster where riders clenched fists tightly in fear, sweating the climb to its double crest. Once over, wheels clacked louder and faster, rushing down Grace's aging joints while rusted railings

raced by the windows. Only the courageous dared look down into the water's green-gray ripples. Cadence remembered this speedy thrill into the city and how the affair continued with her acceptance into Charlestowne College.

When the admissions letter arrived, she dismissed the possibility of attending any other school. With its cover picture of the Grand Lawn where a young woman sat cross-legged engrossed in a book, the college's brochure emitted a siren song. Cadence lived vicariously in that photograph and knew that one day she would be nestled beneath the protective oaks, surrounded by the sensualities of Charleston, immersed in the dream of college. Now she was in that photo, but the romantic image to which she clung was cruelly corrupted by a woman wanting written work on day one.

"Fail to skip lines and I will not read your work," the professor reiterated with the tone of a drill sergeant. Her penetrating stare, enhanced by the intense "V" her eyebrows formed, made the students feel they had entered the underworld.

She was scary, so Cadence wrote the instruction—SKIP LINES—on her left hand, underlined it three times, and peered again at the assigned topic: Choose the most important word in the English language and argue its significance. With little thought, the term came easily to her, so she focused on *loyalty* and wrote passionately of it gluing friendships, marriages, and businesses. Ideas flowed effortlessly, but her muscles burned furiously as her hand devoted lines to the word.

With confidence, Cadence exchanged her essay for a syllabus, which the professor reminded all students to read for the next class. Unimpressed with her introduction to higher

education, Cadence quickly forgot this disappointment when she joined the masses flooding outside into the courtyard; under the magnificence of majestic trees and the campus's mesmerizing antebellum architecture, she drew in a deep breath and exhaled it with that particular brand of excitement that marks life in a brave new world. With her first class down and lines skipped, the chronicle of her college life began.

Biology was in the basement of the musty science building; on her way there, Cadence spotted her suitemate Penny with the signature freshman look of being lost. They had the same class, so they found the room together and watched as students filed into the lecture hall. Penny whispered about the number of good-looking guys she had already seen, and the two had fun observing some taking seats around them. At the front, a gray-haired, wiry man shuffled papers while graduate assistants distributed copies of his syllabus.

Precisely at the top of the hour, his dictation began: "This is Biology 110; I am Dr. Kinsdaw. Follow me through the syllabus, as it is imperative that you know the objectives, assignments, and expectations. My listed office hours indicate when I will be available. Otherwise, I am engaged in research, so follow my schedule if you need to speak with me."

He peered over the rim of his spectacles at them. "Next, you will see the required text. If you purchased the wrong one because of incompetence, you'll need to exchange it. Next, are the objectives"

The drone of his voice was like white noise that would lull them into sleep in classes to come. For the full fifty minutes, he drudged through the ten-page document, noting behavior policies, grading percentages, the work, the lab component, and just before releasing them, he called their attention to the

sixty pages of reading on the formation of life for the next class.

With less than an hour for lunch, Cadence and Penny ventured to the cafeteria to begin the force-feeding of required meal plans. The meal hall offered soup, salad, sandwich, and dessert bars, but the oily aroma of Southern fare overpowered most sensory choices. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, macaroni and cheese, and string beans submerged beneath glistening puddles of grease ensured sleepy comfort after consumption.

Grabbing a slice of pizza and fries, Cadence joined Penny and hallmates Madison and Malinda. As locals, they knew the area and each other well, and with their manicured fingers on the pulse of the city, they were quintessential Southern belles complete with accents, monogrammed accessories, and penchants for gossip. They shared a suite with Olivia, who hailed from Tennessee, and Ruthie, a flighty native of The Garden State.

“So have y’all met everyone on our hall?” Madison asked.

“Not everyone,” Penny said.

“Nope. I met the resident advisor, Carrie. She seems pretty nice,” Cadence replied.

“The RA?” Malinda grabbed a fry from Penny’s plate. “Yeah, does seem nice. A bit nosy, maybe.”

“Y’all know who’s not going to be cool?” Madison held out her right hand to inspect her nails. “Those girls who live next to you, Cadence. They’ve already started playing that dreadful rap music. I can’t stand it. And then there’s all this singing and clapping and laughing coming from in there. It’s so noisy already.”

Malinda chimed in, “We’re not going to put up with that. It’s the whole suite isn’t it?”

“Um, I don’t know,” Cadence said. “I haven’t heard anything.”

“Has your roommate?” Madison asked. “Now what’s her name?”

“Corrine. Corrine Malloy. She hasn’t mentioned any noise.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. I dropped by to introduce myself, but she was on the phone. Later, I came back by and she *was still* on phone. Imagine that, coming all the way here just to talk on the phone. I swear!” Madison laughed with a shrill not too dissimilar to nails sliding down a chalkboard.

“Well, it’s only a matter of time before that thumping drives you crazy.” Malinda took a long sip of her sweet tea. “Anyway, while we have the blacks representin’ at one end, I think we have the dikes at the other.”

“Really?” Penny leaned in. “How d’you know?”

“Because they’re softball players, and their suitemates are into sports, too,” Madison said.

“Who lives across from them?” Cadence asked.

“This girl named Darla from North Carolina. She wants to be a nurse. Her roommate’s Natalie, from Florida,” Malinda said. “From what we see, she’s really into the gym and exercising, always wearing workout clothes. We haven’t seen her in anything else.”

As the selective social butterflies they were bred to be, Madison and Malinda had already met and assessed most of Albemarle Dorm’s third floor. Following the orientation chat, Cadence left for music, her final class on Wednesdays.

A hundred or so students anxiously awaited the start of a course coveted simply because of the teacher. Their schedules promised Professor Glissan, an internationally recognized star whose specialty was creating music programs in developing countries. The entrance of a towering, dark-haired stranger hushed the buzz of anticipation, and like most instructors, he started with the syllabus, a document of unreasonable expectations, and a predeterminism that most before him would fail miserably.

“Everything you know about music is probably wrong. This is not a class in which you get to listen to what you want. You listen to what I assign. It’s not about lyrics; it’s about the notes. And that means *my notes*, not yours.” His face oozed a smarmy smile.

“And please, over the course of these tiresome weeks, spare me your uninsightful contributions of what music you think we should study. I am *not* interested in the latest alternative rockers, studio-made imposters, or chart-topping talentless contestants. I’m not even interested in enlightening you about the subtleties of the discipline I have commanded for decades, but alas, we all must sometimes submit to the most ignoble of tasks. Such is my lot here. No matter. I will make the best of it.” He easily made tyranny sound like martyrdom.

They waited for the music to make this circle of hell bearable, for tunes that would deliver them from fate’s present cruelty, but despite the obvious subject, no music would be heard, just the humid, sticky breath that spewed from the despot on stage.

“Making the best of this class involves you fulfilling my demands as outlined on the syllabus. This class requires,

among other tasks, your attendance at two musical events this term,” he said.

Instantaneous visions of rock concerts filled their minds, but as if he could read their thoughts, he crushed these fantasies by clarifying that events attended must be from a list he had compiled, and yes, they would have to pay to attend these performances.

“Additionally, you will need to know what is expected of you at all times, so study the syllabus until you have committed my policies to your memory. And don’t neglect to read the material assigned for Friday. That is all, unless any of you people have questions.”

A lone, bold voice spoke up: “I thought Professor Glissan was supposed to teach this course.”

“In the future, I would appreciate being addressed as ‘sir,’ ‘doctor,’ or ‘Professor Brodsky.’ This *is* the South, for those of you unaware of mannerly convention. As to your question, it is painfully obvious Professor Glissan will not bless you with an appearance this semester. For you groupies who wish to hone your skills under his tutelage, I suggest you hop a plane. He felt it more imperative to help indigent Africans with music than to fulfill his obligations as a supposed educator at this institution. You may, however, delay this course until his return in the spring, but alas, if he couldn’t bother showing up this term, why should he in the next?” He paused for a reaction, and in seeing none, he said, “That will be all.”

The misery that was Brodsky had only just begun, but dropping the course did not occur to most students. Changes were to be avoided at all costs since they were just getting routines established.

With three of five classes finished, Cadence could not wait to get started on what was already becoming a mountain of work. She had over a hundred pages of reading to complete by Friday and reports beginning in the second week. The threat of quizzes loomed for every class, and she needed to exchange her textbooks since she had bought the wrong ones. She intended to begin immediately, but a call from her mother arrested her progress.

Beginning with English class, Cadence recounted the day's events and would do so again at nearly the same time tomorrow. The call was a reminder of how much she already missed home, but she was too busy to dwell on the heartache of separation. After hanging up, she headed to the bookstore, a trip about as pleasant as being in the dentist's chair at any semester's start. Standing in an irritatingly long line with a weighty stack was quite uncomfortable, but the real discomfort was in feeling violated by price gouging. The business of book mongering was little more than economic rape as new books became used ones upon the moment of purchase.

While she waited for the exchange, Cadence watched the passing T-shirts and hats advertising every party, product, band, and sport imaginable. Although this unofficial uniform varied, there was a ubiquitous element—the palmetto tree and crescent moon—extracted from the state flag. With its spiky top and slender, jagged trunk, the tree was famed for bouncing cannonballs back at the British during the Revolutionary War, and since the palmetto remains undeterred by the Lowcountry's saltwater and sandy, dry soil, it epitomizes resilience. Citizens with a hubristic history of rebellion plaster the palmetto everywhere, in every color, on coozies, bumper stickers, and clothing.

Two guys standing in front of her bore the iconography on their fraternity hats and T-shirts. They completed the unofficial uniform of Charlestowne College with khaki shorts, flip-flops, and sunglasses, which clung to their necks with rubber cords. Cadence studied them as she waited.

“Dude, what’s up?”

“Hey, bo. What’s up?” the other returned, using the affectionate moniker for all Southern males. A ritual pop from their colliding palms sealed the greeting.

“Nothin.’ Just gettin’ my books. What you takin’ this semester?”

“Same shit I took in summer school.”

The other laughed. “Oh man, that’s rough.”

“Yeah, I just couldn’t see doing work during the summer. You feel me, bo? But I got a new prescription this semester, so I can focus on all the new subjects.” He glanced at the lines of tanned legs surrounding him. “Know what I mean?” They laughed like hyenas in the bush.

“I hear you, bo. Anything up for tonight?”

“Yeah. We’re getting together at Big John’s. ‘Round five. Start celebratin’ being back here. Hell, some of us never left.” He smirked at his own stupidity. “You gonna stop by?”

“I will. Catcha later, bo.”

Observing the others standing around, especially girls who dared don heels in statements of outlandish fashion, Cadence was reminded of how many females she had seen stumbling through campus. Clambering over the undulating brick walkways, the fashionistas performed the city’s most famous dance—the Charleston Shuffle, that haphazard movement caused by trips and stubs over broken masonry and cobblestone streets. At some point, everyone does the dance,

whether in heels, flats, flops, or sans shoes, everybody lunges for the ground.

In addition to the accentuated calf muscles their heels forced, these girls were also marked by the glow of their tans which were enhanced by skimpy, strapless dresses. Cadence noticed how her fairer skin appeared a bright shade of white against theirs, and she couldn't wait to make it to the beach. Even though it was "fall" semester, summer's sun beckoned flesh from beneath clothes, and women all over the peninsula responded in worship. Cadence, too, would find her place beneath the scorching orb when she could make time for it.

That night, the buttery smell of popcorn lured Cadence down the hall to the open door of Enna and Myla's room. She joined a gathering of hallmates chatting about their days, tomorrows, and pasts. The advantage of going to school in a place away from home is exactly that—it's not home. No one knows who you are or, for that matter, really cares who you were. Lofty high school status becomes lowly anonymity and unsullied reputations replace soiled ones. Thousands of strangers remain oblivious to the personas of the past. It's a prime place for a renaissance, a reinvention, a remodeling, a *tabula rasa*—college offers them all, so tonight, their conversations steered safely toward mutual likes, dislikes, family details, schedule comparisons, and other feel good, fluffy topics that form the stuff of superficial bonding.

Sophomores Enna, Myla, and Althea were intrepid, intense women who shared deep appreciations for the humanities, especially art and music, and absolute loves for social causes. Signs, posters, advertisements, and propaganda for their political bandwagons plastered the walls of their suite. They chose their crusades carefully, but when they took up a fight, their

fealty was unwavering and their passion, unmatched. Their trio was originally a quartet, but the fourth friend broke her promise of rooming at the last possible moment to move off campus. Unable to cement one of their own to complete the suite, their fortunes were left up to chance, and luckily, the spot remained unfilled.

After getting to know those who would live in closer proximity to her than most of her relatives back home, Cadence returned to her room. Strangely, Corrine was not on the phone but asleep by the time Cadence snuggled into bed. When she did, it was already her second day of college, and Cadence thought she was too excited to sleep—that is, until she heard the first of many fire alarms that would force the dorm’s residents into the streets. Hundreds stood watching for any puff of smoke or flash of flame that could justify standing in their underwear while brawny firefighters secured the premises. The evacuation deprived everyone of an hour or more of sleep, and the pajama mob decided that the alarm-pulling offender should be burned at the stake. When Cadence’s head finally met the pillow again, it was only for a few minutes until her alarm buzzed her into the routine of rising for classes.

She filed into Spanish and took a seat next to the window in the far corner. This class also began with the syllabus—that legal contract binding professors and students in an academic tango of sorts. Mid-way through the class, the guy in front of her passed a sheet back and whispered, “Sorry.”

Cadence thought the apology odd until she saw only one slot left on the sign-up sheet for presentations on countries. She was the last person to receive the paper, so the only time remaining was the first presentation. Reluctantly, she wrote

her name on the vacant line so that in one week she would present a report on Mexico, and during the next, the apologetic guy in front of her, Kirby, would enlighten the class about Chile. When she reached the syllabus's end, Professor Marquez gave a few last words.

"Today, I will speak English for you but thereafter, *no más*. You will learn by immersion. Instructions, directions, readings, and tests will be given in *Español*. Should you have difficulties I would encourage you to visit the language labs for assistance. *¿Comprende?*"

"*Bueno,*" she replied to their nods. "Now, for the next class, remember to read the first three chapters, answer the questions that follow each, and prepare for the weekly vocabulary tests beginning next time. On that day, we will also start presentations on countries. And the first one will be given by . . ." her voice trailed off as she looked for the name. "Let me see . . . Cadence Cooper will present on Mexico. Okay? *Muy bien y adiós.*"

As they got up to leave, Kirby turned to her. "Sorry about leaving you with the last one. I was in Chile this summer, that's why I picked it, but I'll trade if you like."

"That's okay. I'll manage," she muttered. Before leaving, Cadence received an instruction sheet for the trial by speech she would face. Snippets of the requirements nauseated her: a ten-minute oral presentation in English; a two-page written report in Spanish, collectively weighted at twenty percent. Her stomach turned and kept churning all the way to her next course.

No one had the slightest idea what Freshman Seminar would entail, nor was anyone interested in sitting through fourteen weeks of this required course. Professor Elders's in-

roduction and covering of the syllabus fit the pattern Cadence had seen from most of her instructors, except for the English one.

After Professor Elders told them of the assignment for next time, “Describe each class on your schedule, explain what you hope to learn from the courses and how you will achieve your academic goals,” she was about to get down to teaching when a guy asked, “Is there a text in this class?”

The professor softly replied, “No.”

That was all, so they sat with notebooks opened as the lights dimmed. Despite their readiness, no notes were taken, as what followed was so shocking that hands remained paralyzed above pages. Splayed before them was a series of photographs depicting anatomy marred by sexually transmitted diseases. Gone untreated, genital warts form masses that look much like fungi clinging to tree trunks, although Professor Elders described them as “cauliflower-shaped lumps.” The photos of the ulcers hanging from white and black crotches, male and female, made her vegetable simile barely digestible. The fact that these lumps may be the result of HPV, the human papillomavirus, which can also cause cancer—even of the throat—was also difficult to swallow.

“Syphilis can wait years before it produces sores called ‘chancres,’ and a milky discharge begins creeping from the penis or vagina. Left untreated, the disease may progress into dementia.” To illustrate the point, she showed a video of one deranged man writhing against restraints holding him to a hospital bed.

With eyes wide open to match their mouths, the students learned how silently developing gonorrhea and chlamydia often produce no symptoms. If they do, the diseases appear as

nondescript conditions: urinary infection, abdominal pain, or discharge. The discharge from one patient's exposure made legs cross tighter and lips purse in disgust. Both blights can also hide in the warm, moist darkness of the throat and be transmitted orally. Gone undetected, they can lead to infertility in men and sterility in women, as a lonely woman devoid of children testified.

Just when they thought the lesson was over, another segment documenting life with HIV shattered the illusion that AIDS was no longer a threat. The disease's dangers had been largely forgotten thanks to the supposed cure created by drug cocktails, but people of all ages, especially young adults, with their medicines spread out before them spoke of the prescription schedules that make up their daily planners. When the drugs no longer work, the final stages of AIDS are horrific—the pathogen destroys tissues and organs, the body sucks itself in, replacing healthy forms with haunting, skeletal reminders of its awesome power. Heads turned away with each new image, but like the irresistible magnetism of a car crash, they couldn't help but look at the collision of disease and flesh.

Dr. Elders's presentation quelled horniness instantaneously. Clearly disturbed by the intrusion of documented risk on the possibility of fun, the freshmen were even more bothered by her follow-up statistics. She began with the national numbers. Young people aged 15-24 have five times the reported chlamydia rate and four times more for gonorrhea than the general population. One in five people living with HIV carries the virus unknowingly and numbers are rising. For a moment, the students were glad they had chosen a college in a smaller city until their instructor revealed the homegrown reality.

“You reside in the state that ranks among the highest in the nation for chlamydia and gonorrhea infections. Most people who have one have the other, so it’s a double whammy after the ‘wham bam.’”

She gave the rankings for HIV and AIDS, which again placed the Palmetto State in the national top ten. “Oh, and remember: diseases aren’t only passed through sexual activity. Sharing needles or even rolled up bills when snorting drugs can lead to HIV or hepatitis C infections. Watch yourselves. We’ll discuss what you’ve seen today in the next class.”

She released them with a tart: “Welcome to the Holy City.” As if emerging from war trenches, the shell-shocked freshmen were speechless. In their departing silence, one student broke the trauma: “Damn! That sure as hell wasn’t in the brochure!”

Cadence thought of the photo that lured her here, of the girl sitting next to the tree—a tree without fungus, a student seemingly without worry.

The images of Freshman Seminar lingered with the coincidental presence of Petri dishes, microscopes, and test tubes that decorated the charcoal-colored tables of Cadence’s next class. In a smaller room attached to a large, corpse-colored one were a few rows of desks to which the biology students were directed. Dressed in the signature white coat of all scientists, Alex, the lab director, detailed rules, procedures, and expectations. A student in her early twenties, she was pursuing her master’s degree in microbiology while working as a teaching assistant. Cadence noticed the excitement in Alex’s voice as she gave the introduction, which was a striking contrast to Dr. Kinsdaw’s monotonous tone.

Before leaving, someone asked about the mix-up with the biology books, so Alex clarified the confusion, adding some of her own advice.

“If you’re like me, you’re probably a starving, poor student. If you’re not, just wait; you’ll figure out a hundred ways to cook Ramen noodles before you graduate. Be smart. Buy good, used books when you can, check the library for copies to borrow, and shop around for bargains. No sense in going bankrupt over the books since you’re probably already in debt.” A select few appreciated her lesson in economic Darwinism.

Already they needed a break, so when Cadence’s suitemate Saida mentioned a stroll around town after dinner, the thought of work evaporated. Cadence reasoned it was only the first week, and her professors could not expect too much from them, so she quickly finished her reading and joined the jaunt.

Their tour took them onto King Street, that central path cutting a swath of luxury through the city. Perfectly displayed merchandise glittered, especially through the glass at Bob Ellis, where the group gazed longingly at shoes in colors that rivaled those in a box of crayons. Each pair reposed on its platform, like fairy-tale slippers awaiting feet to step into the expensive fantasy. The girls left the dream in their wake, along with the jewelry, clothes, handbags, lingerie, and other treasures each new window dangled. Interspersed between the stores were the bars and restaurants, of which they noticed upperclassmen reclaiming familiar territory and the buzzing business professionals who had never left.

Following the curve of King brought them to the Charleston Place Hotel where they licked their lipglosses at the ever-present lure of Godiva’s chocolate-covered strawberries,

glimpsed the shiny sophistication of Gucci goods, and peered into the dark elegance of the Grill. They sniffed the aromas that floated from its interiors and couldn't help but let their mouths drop at the colossal chandelier in the hotel's lobby. Soothing sounds of jazz from a café followed them as they glided across the white marble floor out of the hotel. In the famous market, vendors loaded their unsold wares into vans while more music floated from places where diners clinked wine glasses in the elegant establishments that made Charleston a culinary Mecca.

They took pictures on the stone steps of the towering Customs House, smiled at valets awaiting chances to park, and savored samples of fudge from the candy store. Eventually, they headed back toward campus, overshooting home to the supposed site of some parties. Turning the corner onto a narrow street, they saw the truth of the rumors. People were leaning over the rickety piazzas' bannisters, cramming into narrow yards, and drifting from house to house in what had become a block party.

Apprehensively, the group approached the first house, where a boisterous figure clutching an oversized red cup welcomed them to the party: "Helloooo ladies!" Flinging his arms widely, he indicated that the liveliest of houses, the one featuring the most kegs, was his kingdom.

"I'm Stu. Welcome to my humble party." He puffed out his chest like a peacock would its plumage. "Let's get you all some drinks." Slipping his arm around Corrine, he led them through a gauntlet of attendees, a motley group of no particular sorts that had one goal in common—celebrating the momentous accomplishment of a whole two days of classes completed.

When the opportunity to catch a buzz presented itself via a cup from the keg, Cadence indulged. Beer was a quickly acquired taste, and it felt right. On the porch, the girls toasted this rite of passage and the many occasions to come. With every half hour, the crowd grew larger, the music louder, and the binging more pressured.

Eventually, the drinks forced the need for a bathroom, so Cadence and Penny searched inside. Within the walls of that well-worn house, the thumping bass bumped bodies together on a makeshift dance floor. The alcohol-fueled ritual of hooking up intensified as hands explored haunches and tongues traded tastes. Strangers became vertical lovers in the blur of buzzes. As the night's steamy humidity forced skin from clothes, every grind of hips and pump of the keg ushered in the new era.

Directed upstairs by a partier who told them to go through the door at the end of the hall, Cadence was surprised to find no line for the bathroom, but when she turned the knob and walked inside, different kinds of lines met her sight.

“Come on in, and shut the door, will you?”

Cadence and Penny shuffled in as the guy who made the request dropped his face to a coffee table where a mirror reflected the ghostly powder disappearing into his nostrils. He threw his head back and inhaled every particle while the girl next to him tapped the glass with a razor and followed his lead. While she did, he grabbed a rolled up bill and held it out to the guests.

“Join us. Let's get this year started off right,” the ringleader said to the approval of the group in the round.

“Yeah,” the girl said in between snorts, “it'll make you so ready for classes.”

“What is it?” Penny asked.

“Oxy, baby, oxy.” The way the drug rolled off his tongue was seductive and a perfect accessory to his good looks.

Penny glanced at Cadence then to the users. “Um, what’s that?”

Laughter sang from the circle. “Oh, I love the new ones. Oxycodone, sweetheart. Come on, try a line.”

“That’s okay. We thought this was the bathroom.” Cadence reached for Penny’s hand and pulled her out of the room.

No sooner had they exited when someone said, “I see you found the oxy den.” A figure in a long, clingy black dress and combat boots leaned coolly against the wall. “If you’re looking for the bathroom, it’s here.” She motioned to the door across from her.

“Yeah, we are.” Cadence said, taking her place behind the fashion contradiction.

“So you two don’t look like you’re high on that shit,” she said.

“No, not my scene,” Cadence replied.

“What’s the deal with them, anyway?” Penny asked.

“The deal is that they steal mommy’s and daddy’s prescription drugs. They’re always looking to add to their ring. They want kids whose parents have stashes. Makes getting high much easier and cheaper.”

“I knew kids who sold their Ritalin and Adderall in high school,” Cadence said.

“Yeah, you get that here, too. Some will snort anything to get high, and then there are the Robotrippers. They drink bottles of Robitussin to get stupid.”

Penny screwed up her face. “The cough syrup?”

“Yep. I’d rather take my chances with what’s in the red cup.” She tilted hers back just as the door opened and a pair of girls emerged. “Have a good time,” she said.

Before midnight, the men in blue arrived in black and white coaches to end the good time by whisking some revelers away. As the partygoers learned of the law’s arrival, the distinct thuds of plastic cups echoed over the landscape, their foamy losses flooding the ground. Those underage absconded in the dark while legal drinkers stood their ground triumphantly, flashing their IDs in defiance at officers.

When the cops asked permission to enter the house, Stu and his roommates resisted, constructing half-baked arguments with feeble knowledge gathered from TV legal dramas and some experience. Officers entertained their supercilious lecture about needing warrants then lambasted them with plain view cause, imminent danger situations, and other legalese that silenced the offenders. Minutes after officers went in, the increasing wail of sirens announced the arrival of an ambulance. Cadence and her curious companions hung back in the shadows as the paramedics disappeared into the house and emerged a short while later with an unconscious body buckled on a stretcher. Chunks of vomit clung to his brown hair and pale, bluish skin.

Stu and his buddies were already in handcuffs, looking dejected and in need of a real lawyer, when an officer told them: “If he dies, it won’t be good for you.”

“How’s this my fault?” Stu’s roommate argued.

“Because he’s probably underage. Since it’s your residence and you’re of legal age, you’ve contributed to the delinquency of a minor. Son, you may want to refrain from making any more statements.”

But the officer felt the need to make one more point: “Besides, if this is fatal, it won’t be us you’ll have to worry about. When his parents file a wrongful death lawsuit against you, they’ll take you and *your* parents for everything. If you aren’t in the habit of praying, I suggest you get on your knees and start.”

With their patient balancing so precariously at life’s edge, the medics drove away. The sight of near death killed buzzes, and with the flow of beer halted, everyone faded into the night. Although they were thinking of his fate, no one in Cadence’s group spoke of it. They occupied themselves with meaningless chatter about what tomorrow would bring, while silently wondering if his life would end here before it had even begun. Their “good nights” were more sincerely expressed than they would have been on an otherwise uneventful evening. As Cadence lay down to sleep, she thought of the guy with the ghostly face and vomit-laced hair and mouthed a silent prayer in hopes that he would live to celebrate again.

There was nothing to celebrate in her first class the following morning, and prayer was no help. The quiz was a painful, sobering reminder of the instructor’s earnestness. Blank pages, save for the hastily scribbled names of their owners, reached the professor. Although Cadence had read the thirty assigned pages, she guessed only one answer and swore she must have gone over the wrong material.

After the quiz, the woman introduced herself. “I am Professor Mirabilis,” she said, “Crys Mirabilis. In case you need the full name.” She discussed the syllabus and completed the set of obligations that would map the semester. In hearkening back to the challenge given only forty-eight hours ago, she

elaborated that *SKIP LINES* was merely a lesson within a lesson.

“It’s a metaphor to live by. I am, after all, an English teacher, and metaphors are the modes by which we frame life’s lessons. For you, ‘SKIP LINES’ may be no more than petty directions for a writing assignment, but for me, the words are a maxim. Skipping lines leaves room for thoughts between the lines. Those thoughts often have the most value, are the ones worthy of pursuit. Go for what’s in between the lines—that’s where the deeper thinking awaits.” She paused to see if they were following her lines.

“Skipping lines makes space for what will come. It’s often what we need in our overly crowded lives. Leave room between classes, events, and relationships. Leave time to reflect.” She honed in on their haggard expressions. “Leave space even between drinks for those of you suffering the effects of gluttony this morning.”

Cadence looked around to see the sly smiles of those who had ventured out last night. They appeared surprised that their professor would recognize the tell-tale signs of their hangers-on. The memory of the alcohol poisoning episode flashed into Cadence’s mind, and she wondered if the guy had made it.

“Otherwise, your life will be one crammed, chaotic, suffocating section on the daily page of life, and if you want many pages to come, well, learn to leave space. Part of that space comes from establishing one of your own, just as Virginia Woolf reminds us of the importance of a woman having ‘a room of one’s own.’ Of course, it’s vital for everyone to have this space. I know this concept may be escaping you since

you're sharing your space with strangers." She let the words sink in before giving them the mental assignment.

"For the next few classes, I would like you to think about the concept of your 'space.' How would you define it? What are its dimensions? How have you come to occupy this place? Contemplate these questions as you begin our semester's first major reading: Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, and keep in mind that space is not only physical. That's why you are here—to explore your intellectual space."

Although she still wasn't sure about Professor Mirabilis, Cadence thought this class was certainly much better than the first. While walking to biology, she pondered the place that stretched out from the Grand Lawn and its reflecting pool, that rippling water feature that seemed to feed the college's growth across the city. The campus boasted many monuments: not the stone statues that dot the landscapes of so many schools, but the aged houses, wrought-iron gates, and the haunting beauty of oaks offering shelter from the sultry southern sun. These were its best features. Its old beauty was magical, and in strolling beneath the historic canopy, Cadence realized that this was just one of many settings to consider, for back in the dorm, she shared a room with Corrine.

Cadence was not quite certain what to make of the person who now lived closer to her than anyone else in her eighteen years. At home, she had the liberty of roaming acres of space on her family's farm, and she had never shared a room with someone and certainly not a bathroom with three strangers.

What she could make of Corrine was limited to brief facts shared: she hailed from a small town in Georgia, liked country music, and spent most of her time talking to one person. Corrine came to college with a most cumbersome piece of

baggage—a boyfriend named Jed, who would be coming to stay next weekend.

Even though Corrine had gone out with them last night, she spent most of the time on the fringes of conversation, her attention occupied by a continuous string of messages and calls. The boyfriend was none too happy that she was out and especially upset when the police and ambulance arrived.

When the group returned to the dorm, Corrine immediately slipped on Jed's old flannel shirt and dedicated hours to placating him with promises of not going out, not even on weekends. Cadence drifted in and out of sleep over the apologies and love declarations and awoke feeling foggy, a state that did nothing to help with Friday's challenges.

A case of *déjà vu* followed in Dr. Kinsdaw's class with most of the blanks remaining unfilled on another impossible quiz. Why did she really need to know the geologic time scale? After papers were collected, Cadence found solidarity in others' failing faces, except for one person whose countenance bespoke the pleasure of not only passing but of doing so with perfection. The girl's long, dark hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail. Her red T-shirt was the brightest in the class, and its left sleeve announced in white letters, *ALWAYS*. Blue jeans, a pair of running shoes, and a black backpack with a silver water bottle tucked into the pocket, completed her look.

Cadence's examination of her classmate's style was interrupted by the professor's inquiry: "Miss Cooper, do you know the answer to number three?"

Regrettably, her attention was refocused. "Sir?"

"Question three. What hypothesis posits that life was formed from chemical reactions to inorganic molecules?"

Her unopened book clearly spoke for her. “Um, I’m sorry. I, I don’t know.”

His expression dismissed her as if she were sediment, and he moved to the next target, the one who just held Cadence’s attention.

“It’s the primordial soup theory,” the girl answered.

“Correct,” he said, but before he could get to the next question, someone had a query of her own.

“Professor?” a voice in the front row began, “are we going to study creationism in this class?”

He stared at her as if she had spit in the soup recipe. “No, this is biology, not mythology. If you want stories about life’s beginnings, I suggest classes in the religious studies department.” His eyes brushed over a tattered black bible mockingly perched atop her textbooks before focusing his interrogation on a young man who had rolled from bed still sporting plaid pajama bottoms, slippers, and a T-shirt.

The professor tried summoning the bedhead from the sleep he had not left. “Mr. Rears, do you know the epoch in which we currently live?”

Mentally, the student was hitting the snooze button. “Uh, what’s an epoch?”

Dr. Kinsdaw shot a look as stony as the rock layers the students were drilling through in study.

“Oh yeah, I got this. Biology!” pajama pants replied, rather pleased with himself.

Dr. Kinsdaw was unamused. Methodically, he found another student who answered, “the Holocene epoch,” recognized it as the time since the last ice age, and clarified an epoch as longer than an age but shorter than a period. His stu-

dents were quickly discovering that time in biology seemed more akin to an eon.

The doctor's lack of reaction to anything other than his research was aptly confirmed on the website "Evaluate My Educator," a fairly useful, albeit extreme tool for class selection. Cadence read about her professors after she signed up for them, and although some had scathing criticisms, she was more afraid of altering her schedule than of facing them. Come to think of it, some of the harshest comments had been about her English teacher, who had earned the title "Demon of Darkness." Cadence had laughed when she read it but now recalled the possible truth of one posted opinion: *Will make you work until you cry*. Cadence had not cried—yet.

When biology was dismissed, Cadence found herself to the right of the dark-haired oracle. She saw the word *RUNNING* on the other sleeve and rolled her eyes at the slogan. Cadence hated running but watched her classmate pull ahead in the pack moving down the hallway. The shirt's back boasted a 10K: Run against Racism in some place called Deland, Florida. Cadence was still reading the sponsors' logos when the shirt faded into the crowd.

The same group met again for lunch, but when they became lost in details of the night before, Cadence arrived late to music. A glare of disapproval escorted her to a seat. Dr. Brodsky seized the opportunity for humiliation.

"Note the beat, on-time, precise, unlike that of this one—Miss . . . ?" He waited for Cadence's unwilling incorporation into his lecture.

"Cooper," she said, slouching low into the seat.

“Miss Cooper, you *will* be on time for my classes. If you are not, don’t bother coming. This also applies to anyone who wishes to follow her preposterously poor example.”

Cadence wished the chair would open up and suck her into oblivion. Just this day, she had managed to become the model student of incompetency: the daydreamer, the latecomer, the ill-prepared moron making Fs. The weight of the academic world was piling on faster than the freshman fifteen.

No quiz began the hour in music; Professor Brodsky had better torture for the hordes of hungover students before him. He blared the chants of Gregorian monks to decibels so barely tolerable that several excused themselves. In less than an hour, he surveyed centuries of sound from the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical periods. He stopped the montage with the latter, giving his subjects extra doses of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven and with every change in music, he gave verbose descriptions of defining characteristics in a tempo faster than those listening could write, but the clock could not tick fast enough to release them from this fresh hell. Just as they thought the period was about to end, he topped the pain with a review quiz, beginning with their mastery of his policies. Cadence had skimmed the syllabus, so she failed to answer how many absences they could incur without penalty, what percentage of the final grade their exam comprised, and other nitpicky details of his doctrine.

He also questioned them on the past hour, but heads aching from deafness rendered it impossible to recall his points. With regurgitation not forthcoming, Cadence again turned in a nearly blank sheet of paper, as did a majority of her peers. She was going to offer an apology to her professor but didn’t want to remind him of her lateness.

“Don’t let him get to you. He’s a jerk to everybody,” a voice said on the way out.

Cadence turned to see a stranger with dark eyes smiling at her. “How d’you know?”

“I have friends who’ve had him. He’s just trying to get rid of us—get the number of students down, so he’ll have less to teach. Makes less work for him. Nice, huh?”

“Yeah.” Cadence felt some dread lift.

“His intimidation makes students drop. Seems to work. Looks like half the class is gone already. Hang in there, unless there’s another class you can get into.”

“Don’t know. I haven’t looked. My advisor told me to take this, and my schedule is so fixed everywhere else. Guess I’ll stick it out.” She extended her hand. “I’m Cadence.”

“Reena. Look for me next time. I’ll save you a seat.”

Cadence’s depression from the day’s failures evaporated with news from Saida of not-to-be-missed parties. Little did they know that there was always a party, always a buzz to be caught somewhere, but as moderation was not yet a lesson fully absorbed, they crammed their calendars with social activities. After all, freedom felt too good to pass up. They made the rounds Friday, but it was a bash thrown by the rugby team on Saturday night that went down in collegiate history.

The ladies arrived late to an already rocking party. It was a collection of cliques, but despite social affiliations, the greatest concentration of partiers was not in the house, but around the beer truck the team had skillfully driven into the backyard. Lines for the taps moved quickly, and with beer securely in hand, the freshmen began to enjoy the release incited by the foamy goodness. They surveyed the hook-up prospects, made seductive moves to the music, and Cadence amused herself

when she realized she was listening for the songs' nuances. Briefly, she wondered if Brodsky would be impressed; she knew he wouldn't be.

After a while of making eye contact with various hookup potentials, Saida said, "Well ladies, I see what I want. I'll be back later." Like a lioness, she crept purposefully toward a pride of juniors to begin her game. Cadence and Penny watched her work for a while before returning to the truck for another round. As they walked through a gauntlet of guys to an open spot, they felt the sensation of elevator eyes. The attention lifted their spirits, and they talked flirtingly with a few who passed. They met more people than they could keep up with and answered the same questions of hometowns, classes, and hobbies. The time was great, and the euphoria of simply being in college—and at a party—was a high from which they did not think it possible to come down. It was an elevation to be outdone only by the party's hosts.

When the music stopped, all attention turned to the top of the beer truck where members of the rugby team, bearing only cups of beer, loin cloths, and bongos, took their positions. Eight guys carried the beat makers, except for one who stood in the center and commanded the attention.

"Who *is* that?" a voice purred.

"You mean Mr. Abs?" The guy oozed jealousy over what appeared to be a developing beer gut. "That's Adon, the team's captain. The rest of the Chippendales are players."

"I bet they are," another girl quipped.

"Oh my God. I'd love to wash my lingerie on his abs." She seemed to sway with derision while Cadence and Penny laughed.

It was as if some overzealous sculptor had chiseled beyond a mere six pack and endowed this special subject with eight. His muscles gleamed in the light and tightened as he spoke. Ladies swooned while boys glanced down in pitiful comparison.

Like a descendant of Dionysius, Adon began his ritual of waxing Whitman's poetry to the throngs below: "I celebrate MYSELF, and what I assume you shall assume; for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you!"

The followers roared while his chorus repeated, "Celebrate! Celebrate! Celebrate!" and beat time on their bongos to the rhythm of this voice.

"I will go to the bank by the Cooper and become undisguised and naked, I am mad for the PLUFF MUD to be in contact with me . . ."

"Wooooo! I'll get naked in that stuff with you!" a drunk worshiper shouted to echoing laughter.

"Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all the peninsula's treasures . . ."

"I'll stop with you anywhere!" said the one in need of laundering her lingerie.

He directed the next lines to her: "You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me; you shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself."

"I drink filtered beer!" some buffoon boasted.

The crowd groaned while Adon held his focus on the coed: "Do you guess I have some intricate purpose? This hour I tell things in confidence, I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you." He pointed his finger at her, and she froze as if she had been turned to stone.

“I am the poet of the body, and I am the poet of the soul. The pleasures of the Holy City are with me, and the pains of hell are with me . . .”

“Poet! Body! Poet! Soul! Pleasures! Holy! Pains! Hell!” the chorus atop the truck chanted and pounded their instruments.

“Press close bare-bosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night! Night of the SOUTH winds! Night of the large few stars in this SOUTHERN sky!” In exaggerated fashion, he shot his hands into the air, and red cups everywhere followed, their contents spilling over white rims to anoint the masses.

“Still nodding night! MAD NAKED SUMMER NIGHT!” The crowd went wild.

“Smile, for your lovers come!” The performers moved in a circle on the truck’s roof, beating and repeating the words in a whirl of excitement. Pockets of people below clapped to the pounding and danced with frenzy.

The captain brought them to a hush. “I know I have the best of time and space—and that I was never measured, and never will be measured.”

“It’d *that big*?” someone yelled.

Adon grinned. “I tramp a perpetual journey . . . Not I, not anyone else can travel those milestones for you; you must travel them for yourself.”

They hung in hushed silence on the words echoed from Papa Walt, but the quiet was not to be for long as Adon brought the revelers to a climax: “I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable, I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of CHARLESTONNNNNN!”

The roars shook eardrums, music fired from the stereo, and the beer truck dancers tore off their loin cloths, dancing in intrepid abandonment. Gyration drew wild applause and with every rebel yell of approval, their pelvic thrusts grew more pronounced. With arms around each other, Cadence and Penny raised their drinks to the madness and to the first of many memories marking their freshman days of college.

“It’s not a rugby party ‘til somebody gets naked!” a supporter announced.

But a guy within earshot of Cadence and Penny proved that not everyone was impressed with the lyrical lesson. “Bunch of goddamn faggots if you ask me,” someone said. “Spoutin’ poetry and shit. How fuckin’ gay can you get?” The words were meant to be heard only by his friends, but in his drunken state, this critic was unaware of how loudly he had spoken.

Turning to see the insulter, Cadence noticed the familiar emblems of the palmetto tree clones and heard his buddy say, “You got that right, bo.”

“Come on, let’s go get another beer,” the bo instructed, but just as they moved forward, a wall of muscle blocked their path.

The biggest of the rugby players crossed his gargantuan arms. “So, you think my friends are fuckin’ faggots?”

With humility long drowned in cheap beer, the bo laughed. “Yep, I sure do.” His chest rose to meet his foe’s. “What’n the fuck you gone do ‘bout it?”

A wide grin and a few head shakes accompanied the rugby giant player’s reply: “Kick your ass.”

Inches apart they stood, nostrils flaring, rib cages rubbing, testosterone poisoning the atmosphere. But no one moved—

that is, until some violence-craving primate let a cup of foam fly. The anointment was followed by a deluge. Bystanders soaked in the keg-fueled crossfire quickly moved to safety. Beer mixed with blood splattered from shattered noses, and guys anxious to prove their loyalties surrendered to primordial urges, attacking enemies made in an instant. When a full beer bottle grazed Cadence's face, she grabbed Penny, and they ran against the pushes and shoves of males built like bulldozers.

In the exodus, they spotted Saida against a car with some guy in a full-on saliva swap.

"Come on, Saida, Let's get outta here!" Cadence pried her suitemate from the hookup and the girls quickly followed the horde moving in the direction opposite from the blue lights and sirens closing in on the mayhem.

It was well after midnight when the trio headed home. Energized by the cheap beer of charity and the expensive freedom of college, Cadence and her newly found friends practiced the week's lessons. Falling into a childhood game of motherly protection, they skipped lines on the sidewalk, careful of cracks undoubtedly formed in the Holocene epoch, a time when STDs grew like fungi on trees in the nether regions of humanity. Like the unskilled performers they were thanks to many *cervezas*, they chanted ditties, ever unmindful of their pitches and tones, frolicking upon an old peninsula, in their very new space of living.

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