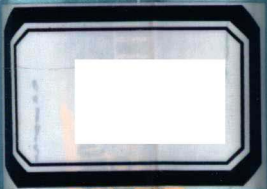


COMMENCEMENT

J. Courtney S.



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ALFRED A. KNOPF



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents
either are the product of the author's imagination or are used
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or locales is entirely coincidental.

Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition

*For my parents,
Eugene F. Sullivan Jr. and Joyce Gallagher Sullivan*

PART ONE

SMITH ALUMNAE QUARTERLY

Spring 2006 Class Notes

CLASS OF '02

Robin Hughes graduates from Northwestern this May with a master's in public health. She lives in Chicago with fellow Hopkins House alum Gretchen (Gretch) Anderson . . . Natalie Goldberg (Emerson House) and her partner, Gina Black (class of '99), have finally realized their dream of moving to Finland and opening a karaoke bar! So far, they say, Emersonians Emma Bramley-Hawke and Joy Watkins have already stopped in for several verses of "Total Eclipse of the Heart". . . After four years of working in a health clinic in her native Malaysia, Jia-Yi Moa has been accepted to NYU Medical School! . . . And now, news from my own darling group of girls: Sally Werner, who works as a researcher in a medical lab at Harvard, is getting married (on the Smith campus!) this May to longtime boyfriend Jake Brown. Fellow King House alums Bree Miller (Stanford Law '05), April Adams (intrepid research assistant for Women in Peril, Inc.), and yours truly will be serving as bridesmaids. Look out for the embarrassing drunken photos in the next issue. Until then, happy spring to all and keep sending me those updates.

Your class secretary,
Celia Donnelly
(celiad@alumnae.smith.edu)

CELIA

Celia woke with a gasp.

Her head was throbbing, her throat was dry, and it was already nine o'clock. She was late for Sally's wedding or, at least, for the bus that would take her there. She silently cursed herself for going out the night before. What the hell kind of a bridesmaid showed up late to the wedding of a dear friend, and hungover at that?

Sun streamed through the windows of her little alcove studio. From her spot in bed, Celia could see two beer bottles and an open bag of tortilla chips on the coffee table by the couch, and, oh Jesus, there was a condom wrapper on the floor. Well then, that answered that.

The guy lying next to her was named either Brian or Ryan; that much she remembered. Everything else was a bit of a blur. She vaguely recollected kissing him on the front stoop of her building, fumbling for the keys, his hand already moving up her leg and under her skirt. She did not recall having sex or, for that matter, eating tortilla chips.

She was lucky not to have been chopped up into little bits. Her sober self needed to somehow get the message to her drunk self that it was entirely unadvisable to bring strange men home. You saw it in the papers all the time—*They met at a party, he asked her to go for a stroll, two days later the police found her torso in a dumpster in*

Queens. She wished that casual sex wasn't so intimately connected to the possibility of being murdered, but there you had it.

Celia leaned toward him now and kissed his cheek, trying to affect an air of calm.

"I've got to leave soon," she said softly. "Do you want to hop in the shower?"

He shook his head. "I don't have to go into the office today," he said. "Got a golf date with some clients this afternoon. Mind if I sleep in?"

"Umm, no," she said. "That's fine."

Celia looked him over. Blond hair, perfect skin, chiseled arms, dimples. He was cute, suspiciously cute. Too attractive for his own good, as her mother would say.

Before she left, she kissed him again. "The door will lock automatically behind you. And there's coffee on the counter if you want it."

"Thanks," he said. "So I'll call you?"

"Good. Well, see you later, then."

From his tone, she figured the odds of his actually calling were about fifty-fifty, not bad for a drunken hookup.

Celia headed toward the subway. Was it weird that he had asked to stay in her apartment? Should she have demanded that he leave with her? He looked clean-cut, and he said he worked in finance. He didn't seem like the type who would go home with a girl just to rob her, but what did she really know about him anyway? Celia was twenty-six years old. Now into what she considered her late twenties, she had begun compiling a mental inventory of men she should not sleep with. As she stepped onto the A train, she added *Guys who might be suspected of stealing my belongings* to the list.

Twenty minutes later, she was sprinting through Port Authority, praying for the bus to be five minutes late. Just five extra minutes, that was all she needed.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women," she muttered. "Come on, come on."

It was a habit of hers, a remnant of a time when she actually believed in God and would say a Hail Mary whenever she was in trouble. Celia realized now that what she had once thought of as

prayers were in fact just wishes. She didn't expect the Virgin to actually *do* anything—even if she did exist, she probably wouldn't be in the business of controlling buses running express from Manhattan to Northampton, Mass. All the same, the familiar words calmed Celia down. She tried to use them sparingly so as not to offend the Mother of God, a woman she didn't believe in, but even so.

Her mother revered the Virgin Mary, saying the rosary in her car on the way to work each morning, keeping a statue of the Madonna in the front garden for years, until a Presbyterian family moved in across the street (not wanting to offend them, she dug up the statue and put it out back). She believed that Mary had all the power, that Jesus was secondary to her, because he had come from her womb. Celia often marveled at how her mother was perhaps the only person on earth to perceive Catholicism as matriarchal.

She reached the gate just as the bus driver was collecting the last of the tickets and closing the door.

"Wait!" she shouted. "Wait! Please!"

The driver looked up in sleepy-eyed surprise. She hoped he wasn't as hungover as she was.

"Please! I have to get on that bus!" she said.

"Hurry up, then," he said. "There's one seat left."

It wasn't like Celia to draw attention to herself in public, but the thought of Sally's disappointment if she had to call and say she was running late was just too much to bear. Besides, Celia had been looking forward to this weekend for months. She did not want to miss a moment with the girls.

She pushed through the aisle, past mothers bouncing crying babies on their laps, teenagers with their headphones blaring, and twenty-somethings having loud cell phone conversations about insanely private matters. *Bringing new meaning to hell on wheels*, that ought to be Greyhound's slogan. She was desperate for more coffee and as much Advil as she could take without killing herself.

Despite the four-and-a-half-hour bus ride that lay ahead, Celia smiled. Soon she would be with them again—Sally, impeccable and impulsive, a twenty-five-year-old millionaire in a thrift-store wedding gown; April, brave and opinionated, with that sometimes

reckless air that worried them all; and Bree, beautiful and bright eyed and mired in a doomed love affair—she was still Celia's favorite, despite all the changes and distance between them.

Celia sat down beside a pimply teenager reading a comic book. She closed her eyes and breathed in deep.

Eight years earlier, on Orientation Day, Celia wept in the backseat of her father's Lincoln Town Car all the way out to Smith. The family had to pull over in a Taco Bell parking lot so she could get herself together before meeting her housemates. By the time she arrived at the front door of Franklin King House, she was fixed with a big fake smile and half a tube of her sister's Maybelline concealer. (Celia had always prided herself on being a girl who didn't wear makeup, but she realized at that moment that she did in fact apply powder and mascara and eye shadow most mornings, she just never bought any of it herself.) She held back tears for hours as they carried boxes upstairs and mingled with other new students and their families on the lawn of the science quad. Then, at last, it was time for the family to go, and there was an embarrassing, agonizing moment in which the four of them—Celia, Violet, and their parents—stood in a circle and embraced, everyone crying except for Violet, who was fifteen and eager to get back home in time to see her boyfriend's ska band play at the Knights of Columbus Hall. (The band was called For Christ's Sake, and Celia's mother thought they were a Christian rock group. She didn't know that the last word was pronounced with an emphasis on the *e*, like the Japanese wine.)

After they left, Celia cried until she felt as hollow as a jack-o'-lantern. College had snuck up on her, and unlike so many of her friends, who had been dying to leave home, Celia liked her life just fine as it was. She couldn't imagine going to sleep at night without first creeping into her parents' room, curling up with the dogs at the foot of their bed as her father watched Letterman and her mother read some trashy novel. She couldn't picture herself sharing a bathroom with anyone but Violet—you couldn't yell at a dorm mate for using up all the hot water the way you could your sister. You

couldn't squeeze your blackheads in front of the mirror, wrapped in a towel and dripping wet from a shower while she sat on the edge of the tub and clipped her toenails.

At Smith, Celia worried that she would never again feel truly comfortable.

Along with a month's worth of groceries for a family of five, her mother had given her a prayer card with a picture of the Virgin printed on the front and her great-grandmother's golden wall cross.

"You know this isn't a convent, right?" her father teased his wife.

After a lifetime of Catholic school, Celia considered herself an atheist, but she was still terrified to throw these things in the trash—it seemed like a surefire way to get struck by lightning. Instead, she shoved them in the back of her top drawer and covered them over with underwear and socks.

Celia pulled two bottles of vodka from her suitcase, where they lay wrapped in a Snoopy bath towel that she'd had since she was eight. As she placed them in her mini-fridge, she realized with some delight that she didn't have to hide them from anyone.

She unpacked the rest of her clothes and filled the closet. The room was small, with plain white wallpaper, a single bed, an oak dresser, a nightstand, and a dingy little mirror with a faded CLINTON/CORE '96 sticker stuck to the bottom. Having seen friends' rooms at Holy Cross and BC, Celia knew that this one was cozy and clean by comparison. Smith had free cable TV in every room, and private phones for each student, and huge windows with thick sills you could sit on, reading for hours. Her parents were going into crazy debt so she could be here. ("We'll be paying the loans off until *your* kids are in college," her father had said the previous spring, in one final attempt to make her go to a state school.) She knew she ought to feel grateful. Still, Celia got a little hysterical, imagining living the next four years between these walls.

She tried to go as long as she could without calling her mother. She lasted three hours.

"I started to drive on the way back here so your father could rest his eyes," her mother said. "I didn't even make it to exit eighteen

before I was crying so hard that I had to pull over and switch seats with Daddy.”

Celia laughed. “I miss you guys so much already.”

Just then, a girl appeared outside the open door to her room. She looked like a middle-aged man, with a huge beer gut hanging over her khakis and a small brown stain on her white T-shirt. Her hair was slicked back, and she held a clipboard in her hand.

Celia hoped she hadn’t heard her blubbering away to her mother like a five-year-old.

“I gotta go,” she said into the phone.

“Celia Donnelly?” the girl said, looking down at her list. Her voice was deep and gravelly. “Pleased to meet you. I’m your HP—that’s house president—Jenna the Monster Truck Collins. First-year meeting in the living room in five.”

Downstairs in the living room a few minutes later, they sat in a circle on the floor, and Celia took stock of the other new girls. There were fifteen of them in all, and they mostly looked like the girls she’d known in high school. They wore jeans or cotton sundresses; they had touches of lip gloss and mascara on their faces, and smooth, long hair. Then there were the girls leading the meeting: Jenna the Monster Truck; two other seniors about her size, both named Lisa, both with cropped boy haircuts; and a junior named Becky, who looked like she might be positively gorgeous if only she gave a damn about her appearance. Her shoulder-length hair lay flat, clumped with grease, and her face was so shiny that, for the first time ever, Celia envisioned herself taking a little witch hazel to a stranger’s skin. With the exception of Jenna, they all wore flannel pajamas.

Is this what she and the others would become? Celia wondered. Did attending a women’s college make you relinquish all grooming products and embrace carbohydrates like you only had a week left to live? (Later she would learn that if you weren’t careful, the answers to these questions were yes and yes. After one semester, about a quarter of the girls would be going crazy, filling out transfer applications to Wesleyan or Swarthmore or any coed school that would take them midway through the year.)

Jenna the Monster Truck started the meeting off by making introductions. She was HP, the Lisas were HONS (heads of new students), and Becky was an SAA (student academic adviser). Everything had an acronym, even in cases where it probably would have been easier to just use the words. Jenna ran down the list of new names, pointing out after she did so, "You're the *first years* by the way. Never let me hear you calling yourself freshmen—there are clearly no men here."

A thin girl with a sleek brown ponytail and a Lilly Pulitzer dress raised her hand. Celia recognized her from earlier in the day. Her room was just three doors down from Celia's, and she had arrived alone, lugging an oversize trunk, which Celia's father had quickly swooped in to help her carry.

"You didn't call my name," the girl said. "It's Sally Werner."

Jenna the Monster Truck checked her sheet. "It says here you withdrew."

"I did, but then I unwithdrew," Sally said, with a sad smile. "It's a long story."

Celia wanted to know it immediately. Her mother always said she had a novelist's fascination with other people's tragic tales. A year earlier, she had had to stop accompanying her family to the soup kitchen where they volunteered because with each person who walked by, she would imagine a more terrible and heartbreaking scenario: A man in a tattered Ralph Lauren jacket was a former banker who had lost his family and his fortune in a house fire (in fact, her mother said, he was just a mean old drunk). A young woman with a sorrowful smile had a sick child somewhere out there, whom she supported by selling her body (no, her mother said, that was *Les Misérables*).

"The thing is," Sally said, "my mom died, so my plans sort of changed at the last minute."

"When did it happen?" Celia blurted out.

Everyone turned to look at her for a moment, and then all eyes were on Sally.

"Almost four months ago. May seventeenth. That's why I withdrew. She was sick, and we thought she had about nine more

months, so I decided I'd just start college a year late. But then she died, and there really wasn't anything for me to do at home, so . . ." she trailed off.

"I'm so sorry," Jenna the Monster Truck said, and several girls in the circle echoed her.

"Thanks," Sally said meekly, and Celia wondered what on earth one was supposed to say at a time like this that didn't sound completely stupid.

Celia wished she were brave enough to stand up and give this stranger a hug. She should go to Sally later, sit beside her on her narrow bed, and become her friend, a shoulder to cry on.

The meeting went on, with a discussion of dining hall hours and information on where to get the morning-after pill and birth control and dental dams. (What the hell were dental dams? Celia wondered. She made a mental note to look them up online when she got back to her room.) Jenna distributed what seemed like hundreds of brightly colored pamphlets for campus clubs and teams and stores and publications, all of which Celia knew she would throw away as soon as she went back upstairs.

Her legs began to fall asleep beneath her. She stretched them out and glanced around the room. It was full of ritzy-looking couches and a huge Oriental rug, with a real working fireplace and an enormous chandelier. It looked like one of the mansions in Newport that her mother loved to tour, oohing and aahing over ottomans and armoires, before returning to their modest suburban house, where the beat-up Crate and Barrel couches were covered in paw prints and the oily traces of decade-old peanut-butter stains.

"Oh, I forgot to mention shower hours," Jenna said, just as it seemed things were drawing to an end. "Basically, don't shower with your significant other during prime traffic flow—usually about eight to ten a.m. It's really disrespectful, and, honestly, who wants to hear two dykes going at it first thing in the morning?"

Some of the first years began to squirm a little, and Celia wondered if this was just a seniority tactic—they'd all heard the lore about Smith lesbians, but was girl-on-girl shower sex really such an issue that it necessitated a house rule?

A beautiful, movie-star blonde across the circle seemed star-

tled, her body jolting upright. Celia looked her over and noticed a small, sparkly diamond ring wrapped around one of her delicate fingers. Jesus, what was she, some sort of child bride? An eighteen-year-old girl, engaged. That was going to work out great.

The girl caught Celia's eye, and Celia shot her a huge smile and even, regrettably, gave her a little wave. She always overcompensated when she got nervous or had just been caught snooping.

As they climbed the stairs back up to their rooms after the meeting, Celia watched the three girls with whom she'd be sharing a hallway: Bree, the beautiful engaged blonde; Sally, whose mother had just died; and a third girl named April, with an eyebrow ring and a T-shirt that said RIOT: DON'T DIET across the front.

The four of them were assigned to the worst rooms in King House—third-floor maids' quarters. Everyone in King had a single, and most of the rooms were huge, big enough for a king-size bed, with two or three windows each. But a few unlucky first years had to sleep in the dim corridors of four rooms off the main floors, where students had once housed their live-in servants.

That first night, each of them went to her room and closed the door, a mystery.

Later, around eleven o'clock, Celia could hear Bree sobbing through the wall that separated their rooms. She put on an Indigo Girls CD to block out the noise and told herself not to be nosy, but halfway through the first song, she could no longer take the sound of a stranger in pain, and also, she was dying to know if Bree and her fiancé had broken up. She scribbled a note on the back of one of the house meeting flyers (*Join the Radical Cheerleaders and Pummel the Patriarchy with Pep!*) and slid it under Bree's door: *I feel your pain. Want to come next door for vodka and Oreos? —Celia B. Room 323*

The crying stopped. Ten minutes later, there was a knock at Celia's door.

Bree poked her blonde head in and waved Celia's note in the air. "Thanks for this," she said in a sweet Southern drawl. "Is the offer still good?"

Celia smiled. "Of course."

She wondered whether Bree felt the same way she did about the house meeting. Celia had stayed dressed in her dark jeans and