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Reid

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Such a Fun Age*

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I don't want to spend eternity with the lights off. I'll buy the most expensive, longest lasting bulbs, and charge them to my Amex.

—Lucy Biederman, *The Walmart Book of the Dead*

We're all working together: that's the secret.

—Sam Walton, *Sam Walton: Made in America*

# 1.

**A**GATHA PAUL STOOD IN FRONT OF BELGRADE Dormitory at 6:59 p.m. One block down was an ice cream store with outside seating and young women holding paper cups. An Airstream trailer with a colorful pennant banner was selling tacos across the street. Two students with large backpacks walked past her toward the dormitory entrance. One said, “No, I’ve actually had oatmeal every day this week.” The other opened the door with a key fob and said, “See, I need to start doing that, too.”

A moment later, through a partially frosted glass door, Agatha saw brown Birkenstocks hustling across a tile floor. She didn’t know what Millie looked like, but she immediately assumed that these shoes belonged to her.

“Hi, Agatha?” she said. She opened the door with an outstretched hand. On her chest was a lanyard weighted with keys, an ID case, and hand sanitizer.

“Yes. Millie? Hi.” Agatha shook her hand. “Thanks for setting this up.”

“No worries. Come on in.”

Agatha stepped into the dorm. The paneled ceiling lights in the lobby were the kind that made her skin look transparent and

baby pink. There was a front desk behind a glass window. An overloaded bulletin board: kickball sign-up, dining hall menus, and flyers for movie nights (*Beetlejuice*, *Pitch Perfect 2*). The dorm smelled both dirty and artificially clean. There was a faint Febreze scent and something candied in the air. It smelled like perfume purchased from a clothing store, like Victoria's Secret or the Gap.

Millie waved to a Black woman sitting behind the sliding glass. "Can I get the sign-in sheet, please?" she asked. The woman swiveled in her seat and said, "Yes, you can." Agatha signed her name beneath a few others: David. Hailey. Aria. Chase. She hadn't seen this many Black people (Millie and this security guard) in the same room since she arrived in Fayetteville. Millie walked to the elevators and pressed a button, but then she turned around. "Our elevator is super slow," she said. "Are you okay with stairs?"

Millie wore black cotton shorts and an oversized red polo with *University of Arkansas Residence Life* embroidered in white. She had rosy brown skin, a pear-shaped form, and an expanse of dark wavy hair in a lopsided bun at the front of her skull. Millie was cute with bright eyes and large, lightly freckled cheeks. From the neck down, she looked like an adult poking fun at campus life, someone dressing like an RA for Halloween. In one arm she held a clipboard and pen. A dated cell phone was behind her waistband at her hip. In a two-finger hold was the plastic loop on a wide-mouth Nalgene bottle. It was covered in overlapping stickers; one said *Save the Buffalo River . . . Again!* As Agatha followed her up three flights of stairs, she decided that Millie was probably twenty-two years old. She was the type of student that college student service centers swept up for pic-

tures and profiles. Students paid parsimoniously to give brief campus tours.

Millie bent to use the fob on her lanyard to open the stairwell door. She looked back and asked, "So you just moved here for the school year?"

"I did," Agatha said. "Are you from Arkansas?"

"No, I'm from Joplin. But I used to camp here when I was little."

"Did you go to Devil's Den?"

"Yeah. Many times."

"It's lovely over there."

Millie dipped her chin. "You've been camping already? That's impressive."

"No no, long time ago. But I should go again."

Agatha followed her down a long, bright hallway past several doorways that had pool-themed cutouts taped above the peepholes. Written in Sharpie on paper sunglasses and palm trees were names like Sophia, Molly, and Jade. Agatha had lived in a residence hall for her freshman year at Amherst, but then she moved into one of the Amherst Houses, which felt more like a boardinghouse than it did a residence hall. Evidently, aside from her own age and the trend in baby names, everything else had stayed and smelled the same.

"Is this okay?" Millie led Agatha into a tiny room with white walls and a speckled tile floor. Near the door, a tall stool held a landline phone. There was a tilt-and-turn window at the far end, and in the center was a circular table and five chairs. Agatha was certain that whatever website boasted Belgrade Dormitory, and probably Millie herself, referred to this room as something like the Resident Lounge or Media Center. "This is perfect," she

said, and she meant it. There was a gentle tug of wholesomeness, and she liked the lack of pretension. Millie removed a Post-it from the wall. *Reserved from 8-8:45. xo Millie.*

“You’re welcome to sit in,” Agatha said, “if weddings are a thing you’re into.”

“Oh, no. I can’t,” Millie said. She swiped at the table, pushed crumbs down onto the floor. “I have to do rounds in a minute. Oh wow, that’s so nice of you.”

She was referring to the items Agatha removed from her bag. A six-pack of lemon La Croix. A cutting board and knife in a gallon Ziploc bag. Two blocks of Manchego cheese. Raw almonds. A red apple and a flecked orange.

“Yeah? You think this will be okay?”

“Oh, for sure. They like anything free. I’m gonna grab them unless you need a minute.”

Agatha pushed a chair toward the window. “No, that’s fine. I’m ready now.”

Millie left the room, but very quickly, she was back. The crumpled reservation Post-it was still in her hand. “Do you mind what they call you?”

Agatha leaned forward on her arms.

“Do you prefer Miss Agatha? Or—sorry. Professor?”

“Oh. No no,” she laughed. “Agatha is just fine.”

Agatha’s first real writing assignment had been a campsite review, when, at twenty-five years old, she drove a rental car to six different states. In Georgia, she started a fire without matches. In Louisiana she was bitten by a dog on her lower thigh (she gave herself two temporary stitches to hold the wound closed). And here, in the Ozarks, she started writing her first book. She spent two nights each in Devil’s Den, Tyler Bend, and Mount Magazine State Park. Perhaps it was silly to feel a connection toward a state



she'd spent only six nights in, where she'd talked to fewer than four people, but this appreciation, however dormant it had been for thirteen years, was considerable enough to make her submit a recent change of address.

Fayetteville, Arkansas, had a screen-saver, campus-visit, Scholastic Book Fair beauty to it. There was a thirty-six-mile bike trail called the Frisco Trailway that crossed a stream not too far from Agatha's home. It was spotted with overly courteous biking couples ("On your right, ma'am. Thanks so much"). Every Saturday morning in the town square was quite possibly the cutest farmers market Agatha had ever seen. She walked with a weekend pace, drank iced coffee, and bought eggs the color of wet sand. One Saturday, she spotted a little bakery that said *Stop in for a bloody* on a chalkboard outside. The young man behind the counter said, "Would you like a to-go cup?" Agatha smiled under her sunglasses. "Yes. That would be great."

She lived rent-free in a two-story, three-bedroom house that belonged to a professor on sabbatical. The house sat on a grassy hill at Wilson Park: a large block of green with a basketball court, tennis courts, two playgrounds, and a winding walking path. The park, and Fayetteville in general, was teeming with hills and trees. In many of the latter were thick webs stitched into the branches with Gothic little worms that writhed in the shade. Agatha's street was filled with enchanting homes and people much like her: academics, liberal-seeming couples, families affiliated with the university. Two blocks behind her home was sorority row. Brassy-looking houses with porches, columns, and stairs, all created with group photos in mind. There were often cars parked along her street with bumper stickers of Greek letters in white. Inside, through the windows, Agatha saw Target bags and paisley duffels. Tangled leggings in back seats. Diet Dr Pepper cans.

Agatha's previous trip to Arkansas came with the realization that she was very good at being alone. But this time, after three years in a relationship—now broken up in practice yet still married on paper—the act of experiencing a new place, however bucolic and convenient, was mostly grim and sobering. Agatha poured the almonds into a small glass bowl and laid two wedding magazines on the table. She sliced the orange into eight slivers. She took one of the La Croixs, wished it was colder, and popped it open. Being alone in a new college town was kind of like watching the local news in a hotel room. With someone else it could be amusing and fun. By yourself, it was a little depressing.

Millie returned to the room with three young women behind her. "So this is Agatha," she said.

Agatha stood. "Hi. Thanks for coming."

The shortest one wore sneakers and looked to be coming or going to the gym. "Oh," she said of the cutting board. "I love that. How cute is this."

Agatha guessed they were around twenty years old. Each young woman had a thin layer of matte-finish makeup, cotton shorts like Millie's, and long, straight hair that didn't look necessarily straightened. The most compelling correlation was the fact that each of them wore an oversized T-shirt, the colors of which were faded but deep: a butter yellow, lacinato kale blue. Seeing them, Agatha was reminded of what the dog owner had yelled back in Louisiana, just before she was bitten. *Hi!* she'd said, cupping a hand to her mouth. *Don't worry. They're friendly.*

"Hah there," the blond one said. "So nice to meet you. Ah'm Casey."

There weren't many on faculty or in her classes, but accents

this strong could still derail her train of thought. Agatha fought that innate instinct to mimic the songlike sounds. “Hi, Casey,” she said flatly. “Nice to meet you, too.”

“Hi, I’m Jenna,” the tall one said. Jenna did not have a discernible southern accent, but she did have a dark and even tan that looked deliberate. Her hair was dark brown with light sweeps of chestnut highlights. Agatha said hello, thinking, Jenna, tall, tan. Casey, blond, accent.

“I’m Tyler,” the last one said. “Ohmygod, I love cheese like this.” She took up a piece that was impressive and big. Tyler wore a muted-blue baseball cap with a thick brown braid hanging out the back. Beneath her heather teal T-shirt she wore black biking shorts that ended a few inches above her knees. Tyler was the type of person Agatha could picture holding her phone for the entire duration of a painfully slow, high-resistance elliptical ride. There was a familiar, greedy, adolescent edge about her. It implied that she was accustomed to getting her way. Perhaps she was wrong, but pressed for time, Agatha categorized the residents like this: Jenna: tall. Casey: southern. Tyler: mean.

“So I’ll be doing rounds,” Millie said. “But text me if you need anything.”

“Thanks so much, Millie. Ladies, are you ready?”

The three young women pulled out chairs and took a seat. Agatha pushed her hair behind her ears.

“So I’m sure Millie told you the basics, but I’m Agatha Paul. I’m a visiting professor this year and I’m teaching nonfiction as well as culture and media studies in the graduate nonfiction program. I’m also doing some research on weddings and I’m really excited to ask you a bunch of questions.”

Jenna placed an apple slice in her mouth. “Is this like, for your own wedding?”

Agatha looked up and saw that her question was in earnest. “No no. My first book centered around funerals and grief. The second was about birthday celebrations. And this one will be about weddings. All of them focus on money and culture and traditions. And you’re all big wedding fans, yes?”

Jenna nodded. “That’s like, all we do.”

“What’s that?”

“We just like . . .” Casey laughed a bit. “We watch a lot of the highlight videos. Or we send each other things we find on Instagram or whatever.”

“Okay, great. But let’s back up. I want to make sure we start properly.”

Agatha took out her phone, switched the setting to airplane mode, and then began to record. Next, she retrieved her small, black tape recorder, pressed the recording buttons, and placed the device between the cutting board and the young women. “As I said in the email, your names and your likenesses won’t appear anywhere in the book. So speak freely and honestly. There are no right answers.”

Casey folded her arms on the table and said, “Why did Ah just get nervous?”

“I know, me too,” Tyler said.

“There’s no need to be nervous, I promise.”

“Actually?” Jenna stood up. “Can I grab my sweatshirt? My room is like . . . right there.”

“Oh, of course.”

Jenna left and silence took the room. This moment was familiar: the sudden dread that it would be a struggle to pass the next forty-five minutes, let alone with something inspiring. But after hundreds of interviews in the last ten years, Agatha’s brief

apprehension was eclipsed with the firsthand knowledge that, for the most part, people liked talking about themselves.

Casey pointed at a La Croix. "Do you mind if Ah take one?" Agatha said, "No, please. Help yourself."

Casey opened the can with both hands. "May Ah ask what type of stone that is?"

Agatha looked down at her ring. "Oh, sure. It's called a sunstone." She thought twice about it, then slipped the ring off her finger. She reached and handed it to Casey.

Casey held the ring up to her line of sight. "A sunstone," she said. "That's so neat."

Tyler leaned into Casey. "I love that. It kind of matches your hair."

"Huh," Agatha said. "You're right. I guess it does."

Casey carefully handed the ring back. "It's real pretty," she said.

Agatha said, "Thank you," and slipped it back onto her hand. When she looked back up, she found that Tyler's brown eyes had centered on Agatha's neck and chest.

"So this is a weird thing to say?" Tyler said. "But you dress how I want to dress when I'm older."

Agatha wished she could fight the impulse, but her face pouted at Tyler's words. She looked down at her outfit with a "This old thing?" expression. Light blue chino pants. A white boatneck top. Gold bar necklace. A chambray vest that went past her knees.

Agatha leaned forward and pulled up on the waistband of her pants. "That's very nice, Tyler. Thank you."

"Mm-hmm," Casey agreed. "Ah see what you mean. Mah goal is to have really solid pieces that all kind of go together."

“Exactly, same,” Tyler said. “Okay, also? I have a random question. Do you get to write about whatever you want?”

“For the most part.”

“That’s so neat. So you’re like, a journalist?”

“I am.”

“Ohh,” Casey said. “Ah didn’t realize. That’s so neat.”

Jenna came back into the room, but this time with a large adornment. A gray knitted throw blanket was wrapped around her shoulders.

Tyler snorted. “Jenna, what are you *doing*?”

“I couldn’t find my sweatshirt,” Jenna said. Holding the blanket in place, she sat back down.

As Casey laughed and said, “Ohmahlord,” Tyler held up a questioning hand. “Jenna’s like, ‘What? I couldn’t find my sweatshirt.’”

“Okay,” Agatha cut in. “Ladies, are you ready?” But as it seemed, Jenna’s blanket scarf was still incredibly funny.

“That actually looks kind of good,” Casey said.

“I’m gonna be so mad if I lost my sweatshirt, though.”

Tyler patted down a piece of the blanket so she could see Jenna’s face. “Awwww, look at her. Little Mexican bebe,” she said.

“I know,” Jenna said. “I’m just a cute little refugee over here.” She adjusted the blanket and crossed her legs. “Sorry,” she said to Agatha. “Okay, I’m ready now.”

Agatha blinked and closed her mouth. She experienced a warm rush of blood to the face. The residents’ eyes sat ready and patient; they were waiting for her to begin. Wow, Agatha thought. Robin will absolutely lose it. But then she blinked again. Crossed her legs on the other side. For just half a second, she’d forgotten the two of them were no longer together.

“Let’s start with some introductions. Just tell me your name, your age, where you grew up, and your major. Tyler, do you want to start us off?”

“Sure. I’m Tyler Hanna . . . I’m a junior and I’m twenty-one. I’m from Dallas, Texas. I’m a hospitality management major with a minor in marketing and . . . yeah. I think that’s it.”

“Great. Jenna?”

“I’m Jenna.” She adjusted her blanket. “I’m nineteen. Do you need my last name?”

“No, that’s fine.”

“Okay. It’s Saddler in case you do. I’m a sophomore. I’m from Waco, Texas. My major is exercise science, and . . . I’m nineteen. I said that already. Sorry.”

In her lap Agatha took pointless notes. *Waco. 19.* “Alright, Casey?”

“Okay. Hah there.” Casey bent toward the recorder. She introduced herself as if she were leaving a voice mail. “Ah’m Casey. Ah’m a senior at the University of Arkansas. Ah grew up in Clarke County, Alabama. Mah major is birth through kinder, and Ah’ll be twenty-one this Saturday.”

“Happy early birthday.”

“Ohthankyousomuch.”

“So,” Agatha said, hands in her lap. “Who here wants to have a wedding?”

The girls, all of them, raised their hands in a similar way. They weakly held their arms up next to their shoulders, all their fingers slightly curved. It was as if Agatha had asked three children how old they were, and they were shyly answering “Four.”

“Do you have friends who don’t want a wedding?”

“Ah don’t think so . . .”

“Me neither,” Tyler said.

Jenna placed a handful of almonds into the pouch that she’d made with the bottom of her shirt. “We have friends who want to travel,” she said, “and be more independent before they settle down. And I’m kind of the same way. I went to Amsterdam and Italy last summer and it was so fun. So yeah, I want to get married but I’d do it late. Like . . . thirty-one, thirty-two.”

Tyler smiled. “Ohmygod. No thank you.”

“Tyler, why isn’t that ideal for you?” Agatha asked.

Tyler stretched her forearms out on the table; they were slightly freckled with a surprising amount of brown hair. “I’d just rather travel with someone,” she said. “And I think it’s hard to have a good wedding later. Because then some people have kids and things, or they don’t know how to have fun anymore when they’re all old and thirty-eight or whatever. You know what I mean?”

Casey said, “Ah know what you mean.”

Agatha pressed her lips into a smile. In her lap, on her legal pad, she wrote, *all old and thirty-eight or whatever*. This was the age she would be in a little less than a month.

“Let’s talk about paying for a wedding.”

Jenna did a sharp intake. “Ohmygod. So expensive. It’s crazy.”

“What do you think of the tradition of brides’ families bearing the cost?”

“My parents expect it,” Jenna said. “But also, they have certain expectations. Like, I get an allowance from them that comes with them expecting me to save up. So if I was getting married, and there was something insane that I wanted, they’d be like, ‘Okay. You’re gonna pay at least half.’”



“My mom is the same,” Tyler said. “And even though my mom will pay, there’s an understanding that I’m not gonna be all, ‘Oh, I want this ten-thousand-dollar dress’ or whatever.”

“I see,” Agatha said. “Casey, what about you?”

“The short answer is yes, mah parents will pay. But sometimes it depends on mah mom’s moods. Like when mah sister got married mah mom was like, ‘You need to pay for your shoes,’ out of nowhere. And mah sister was like, ‘Ummm okay?’ But yeah. They know that we know that they saved for our weddings, but if something was too much, or if Ah wasn’t pullin’ the grades they expect me to, they’d definitely be like, ‘Hay. You need to calm down.’”

Agatha looked down at her next question, which touched on dream wedding locations. But she was stuck on Tyler saying that she wouldn’t ask for a ten-thousand-dollar dress. Now she was wondering if five thousand was too much, if three was a better number. She reached up and, with a pen in hand, she gently touched the back of her neck. “Can I ask what your parents do for a living?” she said.

Jenna swiveled an aluminum can between her hands. “My mom manages the Airbnb for this little add-on to our property during Baylor’s football season. And my dad is an orthodontist. Technically, I work for him.”

“What’s that?”

“So, me and my brothers get our allowance from his payroll. Even though we don’t do anything, obviously. But that’s how I save for things. So I can be more independent later. He made it so it’s like a practice paycheck.”

Agatha scribbled *practice paycheck* into her notebook. As she did, she thought, Hmm. That sounds a lot like fraud but sure.

“But I also have a job,” Jenna corrected. “Ohmygod, sorry. I’m talking so much. But yeah, I work in the alumni services office twice a week. And that’s like . . . my fun money.”

Agatha thought, Hm, and, That’s cute. She wrote *Fun Money* in cursive script.

“Alright, Casey?”

“So mah mom is a title guarantee claims attorney. And mah dad is the payroll director for a medical supply factory back in Mobile.”

“And Tyler?”

“My mom is the office manager at this sandblasting and powder-coating place. Annnndddd my dad is currently incarcerated so his job is just like . . . being in prison.”

Tyler’s delivery, the way she rolled her eyes, and the fact that she’d clearly made this joke before, it all made Agatha flattered and embarrassed.

“And no, I do not visit him,” Tyler laughed. “People always ask me that. And my mom and me are still close with his parents. But yeah, that’s why I’m here.”

“What’s that? That’s why you’re here?”

“Oh, yeah,” Tyler said. “There’s a housing scholarship thing that we have.” Her thumb went back and forth between herself and Casey. “This is like, the scholarship and transfer student dorm.”

“Yeah, we don’t live here on purpose,” Casey said.

“Jenna has a scholarship, too,” Tyler explained. “But not housing. It’s tuition.”

“So you have a scholarship because of your father?”

“Yeah. Casey’s scholarship is the only real one. She actually gets good grades.”

“Jenna, can I ask what your scholarship is for?”

Jenna had picked up a piece of her hair and she was inspecting the ends. “Mine is an ethnic/diversity scholarship, but I’m here because my parents just think dorms are more safe.”

Agatha looked up, took Jenna in, her straight hair, her tan that looked intentional. She said, “Okay,” and looked back to her notes. Slid the clasp of her necklace behind her neck.

There was something thrilling about the young women. The sensation they gave her was one of intrigue and revulsion, and it reminded her of Robin. Robin coming into Agatha’s office to say, I’m watching the worst movie and I need you to see it. Or Robin putting her nose to sweaty clothes from rehearsal. Oh God, she’d say. You have to smell this. Or she’d use the bathroom while Agatha brushed her teeth. I’m so dehydrated, look at my pee. Agatha would say, That’s disgusting, and she’d spit into the sink. But then she’d come over and say, Don’t flush. Lemme see.

“So what’s the worst wedding you’ve ever been to?” Agatha asked.

“You know what’s funny?” Tyler said. “I feel like I haven’t been to that many.”

“Me neither,” Jenna said. “Except for family friends, but those don’t count.”

“Well, we did go to Tessa’s last summer,” Casey said.

“Oh yeah,” Jenna said. “That was fun.”

“Meh. It was fine,” Tyler said.

“Say more on that, Tyler. Why was it just fine?”

Tyler looked at the others. “Am I wrong? I feel like it was just kind of tacky.”

“No, I see that,” Jenna said.

“What does ‘tacky’ mean in terms of a wedding?”

Tyler wavered her head back and forth. “Well, it was in this

big old rope factory, which would have been really pretty. But there was more than one venue inside of it. And there was another event right next door. And I just feel like it would have been better if they'd rented out the entire thing, because if you went out in the hallway or something, you'd be like, umm . . . who are these people?"

Agatha said, "I see." She wrote down the word *Tacky*. It was something her late mother would have said about someone using a gift card at a lunch they'd invited you to. There was something about this word and Tyler's example that made Agatha sit up in her seat. She was coming to understand two very important things. The first was that she didn't really care about weddings, not enough to write a book about them. The second was that she was completely enraptured by these young women, their relationship to money, what they said, and how they said it. For now, it seemed, she could ask them about money as much as she wanted. As long as the proposition was framed around weddings.

"So what's the opposite of a tacky wedding?"

"The opposite of tacky is classy," Jenna said.

"Mm-hmm. Ah agree."

"What does 'classy' mean to you?"

"Oh, Ah love that question," Casey said. "Classy is when you're bein' respectful, not just of others but of yourself. And to have a classy wedding . . . it doesn't have to do with how much anything costs. It's about the whole experience bein' intentional and fun."

"Well?" Tyler's eyes went up to the corner of the room. "Okay, I agree, but at the same time . . . I don't know. You do have to accommodate your guests and like, sorry but that costs money."

“Can you give me an example of that? What’s a way of not accommodating your guests?” In her journal Agatha wrote down *Sorry but that costs money*.

“Actually yes. And this is a hot take but I don’t care. You cannot not have an open bar.”

“Ohhh,” Jenna said. “I agree with that.”

“I’m sorry but at a certain point it’s just rude. Like, I just flew to your wedding and got a dress and hotel, and you’re gonna give me a drink ticket? No, you need to grow up.”

Casey said, “Tah-ler.”

“I’m sorry but it’s true!”

Jenna looked up from a new piece of hair. “Remember when Amber said she wanted a *Soul Train* line at her wedding?”

“No, she did not,” Tyler said.

When Jenna confirmed with a look that Amber in fact did, Tyler shook her head. “Why would you want that? So friggin’ ghetto.”

Agatha placed the top of her pen at her chin. “Is ‘ghetto’ a word you use often?”

Jenna snorted and said, “Yes.”

“What does that word mean to you?”

Casey smiled. “Mah mom is always askin’ me things like this. Ah’ll say somethin’ and she’ll be like, ‘Casey, what does that *mean*?’ And Ah have to be like, ‘Uhh, wait a minute . . .’”

“Actually? No, here’s an example of what’s ghetto,” Jenna said. “So the glass on my phone is all smashed, but I can’t get another one till my upgrade. So whenever I can’t click on something, I’ll be like, ‘Ugh, my phone is so ghetto right now.’”

“Exactly,” Tyler said. “Jenna, that’s really good.”

Agatha scribbled in her notebook. “So what would a ghetto wedding look like?”

For a moment, the girls said nothing.

“That’s like . . .” Tyler proceeded to move her hands in a circle. “That’s when it stops being fun-wedding-dancing, and it’s more like, ‘Oh hey, I’m at spring break’ or whatever.”

“But also?” Jenna said. “Just to be super clear? Being ‘ghetto’ or whatever isn’t necessarily bad. It just depends on the person.”

“Can you say more on that?”

“It’s hard to explain. You could be totally normal but maybe it’s how you walk or how you sound . . .”

“That’s interesting,” Agatha said. She looked at her watch. Twenty minutes left. “So what does being ghetto sound like?”

Casey held her hands up and said, “Ah’m not even gonna try.”

“I know. Me neither,” Jenna laughed.

“Okay, actually . . .” Tyler touched Jenna’s arm. Her voice went down as she pointed toward the door. “You know Millie? The RA?”

Agatha sat up. Carefully, she said, “Sure.”

“Okay, sometimes—just being honest—Millie can be . . . a little ghetto.” On the word *little*, Tyler held two fingers an inch apart.

“Nooo. Don’t say that. Ah love Millie.”

“But I’m not saying it like it’s a bad thing.”

“No, I see what you mean,” Jenna said. “Sometimes she’ll be all like . . .” She pushed her hair behind her ears. She looked as if it were her turn in a game of charades and she was considering how well she knew the reference. “Ohmygod, I can’t even do it,” she laughed. “Okay, if we’re being too loud or something? She’ll be like, ‘Gurl, you know iss quiet hours!’” Then she poked her lips out. She put a hand on her hip and she shifted her head from side to side.

“Ohmahlord, yes,” Casey laughed.

Tyler agreed. “Yes. That was good.”

Jenna sat back, satisfied. She placed a piece of cheese in her mouth. “Ohmygod, ugh,” she said of the cutting board. “Get this thing away from me.”

One of the more frequent arguments that Agatha and Robin partook in, especially near the end, was what Agatha considered an unfair assertion: that Agatha didn’t like anything. And sure, there were many things that she did not enjoy. Like zoos. And musicals. And photo booths at weddings. Burlesque was another one. Any type of parade. She hated Little Free Libraries in wealthy neighborhoods. (Just use your public library? Which is also free because that’s the point?) She hated when restaurants and stores offered human food to dogs. “I’m going to scream,” she once told Robin, watching a dog receive a puppuccino. Of course there were things that she did enjoy, like reading, but that didn’t mean she found it easy to find the right things to read. Once, Agatha said that she’d hated the last four books she’d read. Robin responded, rather cruelly, “Well. Maybe you just don’t like books.”

Agatha actively rejected the claim that she didn’t like things, partially because it came from a person who owned thirty pairs of high-end leggings and subsisted on iced coffee, but she mostly rejected it because of moments like this: sitting inside a dormitory in Arkansas, feeling wildly inspired and obsessed. There was something about Tyler, Jenna, and Casey. She didn’t want to be friends with them, but she liked listening to them. She *liked* sitting there. Even when they were at their worst, she liked letting their vernacular wash over her. Weddings had seemed like such a natural next subject, but did *she* like weddings? Not particularly, no. Now that she considered it, the weddings she’d

been to had all felt relatively the same. This conversation, however. This felt like something. Agatha crossed her legs at the sensation. How can I use this?

With fifteen minutes left, Agatha bent down into her bag. She stood up and handed out three sheets of paper. It suddenly felt like she was a child playing school. “I’m going to ask you a few more wedding questions . . . but I want to go off on something Jenna said. I want you to write down what you spend your *fun* money on? And try to be specific.”

Casey accepted her sheet of paper. “Ah love things like this,” she said.

“Guys, I’m so sore.” Tyler massaged her right hip. “I need to get one of those butt pads.”

“My grandma has like, four of those,” Jenna said.

“Y’all,” Casey said. “She’s still recording this.”

Tyler exhaled into the back of her hand. “Whoops,” she said. “Can you take that part out?” Before Agatha could answer, Tyler looked up and took her in. “Ohmygoodness,” she said. “Wow, you’re really tall.”

WHEN THE SESSION ended, Agatha gave each resident a white envelope with a ten-dollar bill inside. Tyler began to clap with the envelope in her hands. “Fro-yo. Fro-yo.”

Casey said yes but it had to be quick because she had to study; she was serious this time. As they pushed in their chairs and said their goodbyes, Millie appeared at the door. The phone was still in Millie’s waistband and her lanyard keys made a lot of noise. She told Agatha that she could walk her out. A minute later they were in the elevator; a recycling bin filled with aluminum cans and glass bottles sat in the space between them.



“Oh—” Agatha reached to her purse. “This is for you.”

“Oh, thank you. I—”

The elevator opened. “Sorry, I’m not following you,” Millie said. “I just have to take this out.”

Agatha said, “Yes, of course.”

She signed out at the front desk. Outside, the sky was dark with delicate pinpoints of stars. Millie walked the wheelchair ramp. She dumped her recycling into an even bigger receptacle.

“Do you need help with that?” Agatha asked.

“No no, don’t touch it. It’s gross.”

Millie brushed one hand on her shorts. She carried the bin back to the sidewalk.

“Here you go,” Agatha said.

Once again, Millie hesitated. “Are you sure? I just made a sign-up. It only took two seconds.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s a huge help.”

Millie took the envelope in her hands. “So this is your job? Interviewing people?”

“That and reading and writing. And teaching, of course.”

“That’s cool.”

“Do you write, too? What’s your major?”

“I write papers when I have to. I’m a hospitality management major. And I minor in Spanish.”

“That’s interesting. Good for you.”

“Yeah, no. I’m definitely not a writer.” Millie set the recycling bin down, and curiously, she crossed her arms. “I’m probably just like . . . way too ghetto for that?” she said.

A small part formed between Agatha’s lips.

Millie laughed. She reached out with one hand. “Ohmygod, I’m sorry. I had to! And I wasn’t spying, I swear. But I keep my

door open and my room is right there. Ohmygod, your face. I'm so sorry."

Agatha let out a surprised little cough, feeling complicit and relieved. "Well, now I'm dying to know what you thought of that comment."

Millie lifted her shoulders and lips. "I mean, I don't think I talk like that. But even if I did it wouldn't . . . I don't know. And I know why Tyler said that and it's so dumb. The other day I was trying to get paper towels from this storage closet? And she was right there and I had the wrong key. And I think I said like . . . I don't even know. I said, 'That's not the right one,' or something like that. And then she was like, Ha ha ha, Millie's all, '*Girl*, this ain't the right one.' And yeah . . . I did *not* say it like that."

Agatha nodded. There was that feeling again. Oh, that's interesting. How can I use this?

"But whatever." Millie waved a hand. "People hear what they wanna hear. Also, I feel like that was really mean what I just did."

"No no no. That was very funny." Agatha could feel it—her face was still terrifically red. "I'm just curious. Do most students speak that way?"

"My friends don't. And I definitely don't think most students have practice paychecks . . ."

Agatha smiled and said, "Right."

"Which, by the way"—Millie held up a finger—"Jenna's job definitely does not cover her 'fun money.' She works at the alumni office, which pays like nine dollars an hour and the shifts are like, three hours long. *But*, she also has a weekly appointment to get her nails done at this place that does the fancy art-

work? It's like, sixty dollars for a set. And . . . ohmygod. It's so dumb that I know this. She does balayage hair? Do you know what that is?"

Agatha reached for the pen in her bag. "Balayage?"

"Yeah. It's like, super expensive Christian girl hair."

In her journal, Agatha spelled the word as best she could.

"And I've also heard her say that she gets seven hundred dollars a month from her parents. So yeah," Millie said. "Her job does not cover her like . . . fun, spending money."

Agatha considered this number out loud. "Seven hundred dollars?" she asked.

"I know. Which . . ." Millie squinted. "Sorry . . . yeah. It's just funny to hear her take."

Agatha looked back at the dormitory door. The residents would be exiting soon, if they were still getting fro-yo.

"And she . . . she mentioned a diversity scholarship?"

Millie smiled. "It's the same as mine. Her grandma is from Mexico."

Agatha turned her head. "Is it a lot of money?"

"It is for me. Six thousand dollars a year."

Agatha made a face of baffled intrigue.

Millie said, "I know."

Agatha laughed and said, "Okay."

A group of residents came from the front door carrying buckets, poster boards, and folded towels. Agatha and Millie looked back to each other. They started to speak at the same time.

"Well, thank you again—" "But yeah, you have my number."

Millie picked up the recycling bin with her fingers under the ledge. "Sorry . . ." she said. "I don't know why I just told you all that." She shook her head, laughing at herself.

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Agatha found this admission strangely charming and adult. “No no, that’s okay,” she said. “It was nice meeting you. Thanks again.” She walked up the hill toward her home. She listened to the sound of Millie’s lanyard tapping gently against her chest.