

CHARLES BLACKSTONE

VISCOSITY

I liked Jessica from the first second I met her. Julianne introduced us. It was 1992 and I was fifteen. I had been away during the summer and when I came back, Julianne and I kept playing phone tag, but one night we finally talked and decided to do something. And that's when Julianne told me she and Jessica had become friends. I walked over to Julianne's apartment to meet them and in the lobby she presented me to Jessica and that's when it happened. I knew how I felt, how I'd always feel about this girl, in this tiny moment in my small life before I'd had a chance to even think about it. This was the case with most things that I ended up thinking or feeling back then, so it wasn't even that surprising. But, somehow, for the first time, I was too late. Tom Callahan ended up with her. I didn't even have a chance.

One day, toward the end of the summer, Jessica was sitting in a chair in Julianne's room; it was one of those round, puffy circular Crate and Barrel chairs. She had her legs crossed gymnastically, and I was sitting on the floor smoking a cigarette rather listlessly. She was doing homework. Tom Callahan was coming over and Julianne was liling around from room to room. I sat on the floor below her, looking up. I felt sorry that she had to do homework. She went to Parker and started two weeks before we did at Lab.

"I can't believe you're doing homework," I said.

She responded without looking away from the book and papers before her. "Math. It's math." She held up her blue TI-81.

"I can't believe you're doing math then."

She didn't seem at all troubled by the arrangement, she worked, Julianne wandered around outside the room, and I sat on the floor, staring. The TV on softly yet audibly in the background didn't seem to distract her either. The phone rang periodically but neither of us moved to pick up the extension. She could concentrate regardless of circumstance. "The summer's over, Monkey," she said, a note of seriousness in her voice. She rubbed a pink trapezoid of an eraser across her paper in horizontal lines.

"Not mine, not yet," I said proudly.

She threw the eraser at me. "You're such a monkey."

"I'm a monkey?" I laughed. "There's only one monkey I can see around here. And that's you."

"We're both monkeys," she proclaimed.

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe you're right."

After Jessica threw me out of the room because I was smoking too much, I found Julianne in the kitchen talking on the phone. Her eyes looked a little red, her face a bit puffy, as though she'd been crying. I knew that couldn't be possible because Julianne only cried at movies, certain TV commercials. When she finished, she told me, confiding, that she still liked Tom, so I asked her why she set him up with Jessica.

"I don't know why," she said vacantly, eyebrows askew, ashing her cigarette on the floor of the narrow kitchen. "I just felt like it, I guess."

"Tom still coming over?"

"I think so."

Alice told me, two weeks after we had started dating, in a moment of respite after a tedious courtship, about how she had dated Eric and that his father had been in jail. I knew about the dating part already, I had heard about him many times when I was trying to convince her that she should be with me instead of him, but not about his father. The tone of her voice was like an ambient hum, not very emotional and even. It was startling and a little haunting the way she said it to me, "You know, he's in jail. *That's* why Eric is so fucked up. *That's* why he has trouble relating."

The reason Eric's father was in jail, she told me: "Cocaine," she said, leaning in confidentially, not wanting to make a scene in the deli where we were lunching that afternoon.

"Cocaine?" I asked, a handful of chips making its way to my mouth. "Like dealing?"

"Well," she said carefully, "not exactly."

"Well, what then?" I asked, now curious, leaning forward, pulling myself along the edges of the flimsy plastic table.

"He was using the bathroom at KFC," she said. She paused to take a sip of soda from the bottom of her cup, where it's all ice and no drink left.

"And," I said.

"And well, he was blowing lines at the sink, it was one of those one toilet deals, no urinals, the door locked, whatever, and so this cop comes in to use the bathroom and caught him."

"That's... god, that's really, well..." I trailed off, at something of a loss.

She continued. "Sad, I know," she said. "I think the cop had already begun to unzip when he found him."

It was somewhere around that point I started to feel like things had gotten weird. That maybe I didn't really know the person I was sitting with.

Julianne calls. She wants to hang out. I suggest dinner and leave it at that. Alice asks who was on the phone and I don't want to bring up Julianne's name with her because she seems to think that Julianne and I had been together in a previous life or maybe in this one and I just don't admit to it. We had a fight two nights before about her.

"It's not like that," I had said, trying to sound convincing. Even though I was telling her the truth, I felt the corners of my lips curling and my eyelids contorting like I knew I was lying. I felt caught, cornered. But I wasn't lying. "We're just friends."

"Guys and girls aren't friends," she said. Her mantra. "I think you're fucking her."

"I'm not fucking her," I said gently, silently chanting myself into a tranquil state.

"But you *were*," she returned, looking away.

"Hey," Julianne says, pulling back the glass door. I'm out of breath from the three flights of stairs and she notices. "Have you started smoking again?" she teases.

"No," I say, accepting a hug. "No, I'm not smoking again."

"I just don't know how you did it," she says, reaching for her purse and taking out a flattened pack of cigarettes. She lights one, shielding the tip with her hand. A rattling box fan ambivalently whirs away beside her. "I will never quit."

"I admire that," I say, and I mean it.

"So what do you want to do," she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I made reservations at Trio."

"You did not," she laughs. "I'm not *dressed* for Trio. I can't *afford* Trio."

"Well, fuck Trio," I offer indignantly.

"I'm surprised Alice let you out tonight," she says, equally as indignant. A contemptuous snort follows.

"She didn't," I say, brushing cat hair off my leg. Even though my jeans are light blue and my shirt old and faded, I can still see the faint transparent hairs attaching themselves to my clothes and I haven't even sat down yet. I pluck a single tiny hair from a seam. "I hate sitting in your room. I always get covered in these things."

"We're not sitting," she says, reaching for her jacket. "We're leaving."

The second time I knew Jessica Emerson was 1997. There was an afternoon in May at her apartment when I looked at her intently and fell in love again. That day she looked the same: fortunately she hadn't cut her hair, as most of the girls I knew were given to do their first two years of college; it still flowed behind her, straight and brown, entirely even and buoyant. She wore a faded Syracuse sweatshirt so casually it seemed vibrant despite its dimness. I felt out of body. Maybe she was excited to see me. Like we'd lost no time. Outside the sky was so blue and the summer so bright and full of possibilities. She'd recently broken up with a long-term boyfriend, and was sad about it, but I felt like that added to my attraction because now she was slightly vulnerable, persuadable. I thought about that summer when we were fifteen with Julianne and Tom Callahan and how I couldn't have her. I suspected she thought about it too. The last e-mail she sent from college before coming home ended with a query: "Talk to Tom Callahan?" She asked about him later that summer, many times later, sometimes even

without saying it: after a movie, over dinner at Heaven on Seven; strolling down Halsted to the White Hen to get jelly beans for her and Powerbars for me after tapas at Café Ba-Ba-Reeba!; on a line we didn't have to wait in; stopped at a crowded street corner, not minding.

That summer we drove around the marina listening to "Sixth Avenue Heartache" and that Hanson song. We shared jokes, orders of fries, Chap-Stick. I wanted so badly to kiss her, to make up for all those years then, to try and make her forget about him. It didn't work, though. When we watched TV, surrounded by cats, in her apartment, she was still thinking about him, why he hadn't loved her, why he didn't think about her.

I just started to enjoy her friendship, maybe resigning to the fact that it wasn't going to happen for us. She seemed to like having me around, called incessantly. We had plans at least three nights a week, always ending up on her couch at the end, a remote for each of us. Sometimes all of this made me feel like George on *Seinfeld*, never really getting the girl, always ending up settling for someone else, and I'd have to change the channel. I thought about taking her hand, just holding it, one time when we were watching *Taxicab Confessions* on HBO and she affected an English accent to say, "Such awful, witty trash" and clapped her hands at some of the show's more risqué moments. I held her on her birthday, the night after Cunanan killed Versace, and she felt unimportant and scared and alone. I couldn't stop falling for her, couldn't make myself let go of what was never mine in the first place.

There were these beautiful unguarded moments when I felt like maybe she wanted something too but she always quickly caught on, seemed to realize what she was doing, and tacitly rescinded, so I didn't try anything. Sometimes I stared at her for so long and so ardently I started not to recognize her. It confused me. She looked older then, different—at once herself and a mature, sedate cousin—wary—but a mirror image of the personality, the laughter, the huge brown eyes and all the smiling. Nothing happened that summer. She left for fall semester abroad. First London, then Paris, then back to London. She sent me postcards of L'Arc de Triomphe, Big Ben; little ads in pastel shades for phone sex with twenty digit numbers that she found lying discarded in the streets. I ordered two promotional posters for *Taxicab Confessions* from a catalog, one for her and one for me. I hung mine on a wall in my room, above my bed. I wanted to send hers to Syracuse but I never did.

After Jessica went away, and the summer went away, and I had started to miss both of them a little less, Julianne and I were having wine at her apartment. She was drinking away the remnants of a failed affair, while I was just happy to have an off night from work. She said, "You should have made a move on Jessica."

I was startled.

"I'm just saying that you could have."

"She didn't like me," I said. "She was hung up on this guy from her office."

"Your problem," she said before pausing to swallow a gulp of thick Chardonnay, "is that you're too analytical."

"You're right," I replied somewhat bitterly. My words were edged with disdain. Hearing myself made me uncomfortable. This conversation was suffocating; I couldn't breathe beneath the clouds of smoke and the condescending attitude. "I'm probably just—"

"You know I never thought much of Jessica Emerson," she proclaimed. "In fact," she paused for effect, "I thought she was a bitch."

I wanted to point out to Julianne that she never approved of any girl I liked but she had already picked up her phone to make some calls. By the time she finished ordering take-out Chinese—yu-shan beef for me, Szechuan chicken and vegetables for her—we were both drunk and she'd already forgotten all about it.

The third time I will know Jessica is in the summer of 1998, when she comes back from school. I've been dating Alice for a couple of weeks. I'm not sure how I'm going to deal with the both of them being in my life at the same time. I think about the topic over and over. I'm contemplating ways to explain Jessica to Alice while I drive. Alice will probably feel certain that Jessica wants me, regardless of the fact that nothing's ever led me to believe this. The other issue is, how am I going to tell Jessica, who's probably expecting us to be best friends again, that I have a girlfriend? Inevitably, I won't be able to spend as much time with her as I did last summer, and that's going to make her mad. It might separate us forever. I can't let that happen.

The next night, Jessica pages me. She's home.

"So, when am I going to see you," she asks wistfully, probably twirling her hair.
"What are you doing?"

"We could meet tomorrow," I offer. "Have lunch or something. Before I have to go to work."

"What is this about you having a girlfriend," she asks. Then she seems distracted. It sounds like someone asks her something and she has to hold the phone away to respond.

"She's not really my girlfriend," I reply, once I am reasonably sure she's listening again. "We only started going out a week ago."

"Well, you can tell me about it tomorrow. I have to go to bed. I'm still in the Eastern Time Zone, you know."

The next day I'm in my car, parked outside Nookies, holding a poster mailing tube. I left Alice a message telling her where I was going since she's in class. I roll up my long sleeves and turn on the air-conditioning. The cold air blasts out of the circular vents but I'm still sweltering. Construction crews across the street juggle beams and maneuver forklifts. I hear banging sounds. Girls walk down the block, and I fall in love with some of them briefly before they pass by and completely out of memory. Men with boxy crewcuts, sleeveless t-shirts, and indifferent eyes walk into and out of Nookies. I alternatively think about Alice and Jessica, and tug at a hangnail. I'm antsy. I play music loudly, then softly. I sing along with songs I don't particularly like, and blast my favorites full volume. Five more minutes and Jessica is still not here. I read a wrinkled flyer about a meditation seminar that was stuffed under my windshield wiper this morning. None of the words and nothing about the message mean anything to me. I can't find peace by thinking. She's twenty minutes late now so I try calling her house. She's not there but I leave a message on her machine. During "Out of Touch," I tilt my seat back and inhale deeply.

I envision a white room. At first it is Julianne's bedroom six years ago. I see Jessica in a close-up shot sitting on the trundle bed. She smiles at me. Then, I see myself, reverse shot, sitting on the floor in a contorted position. She comes down and sits beside me. It's completely silent around us until I hear her heartbeats. A logical rhythmic pattern. I'm nervous and my breathing is impossibly erratic. I want to stand up and kiss her and soon enough she asks me to do just that, but I can't move. The room fills with purple light, like

a nebula. She leans into me. Neither of us opens our eyes as I unbutton her white silk top. I can barely breathe but I don't want this to stop. When we're in our underwear, I open my eyes a little, just to make sure she's still there. It seems so real. I get hard.

She stays beside me until a noise jolts me awake. A parallel parker has bumped my car and pantomimes an apology through the glass, which I ignore. I check the time again; she's thirty minutes late now. Though I wait an extra two minutes for good measure, it's obvious she's not coming. I feel guilty even though nothing has happened. I get out of the car and climb the three stairs to enter Nookies. I order corned beef hash, two eggs poached, with white toast, and coffee but I can't hear myself speaking. I gulp the coffee immediately after it arrives, hoping to burn my throat, feel something, but I don't. I'm not here.

When I finally talk to Jessica again, she's pissed off.

"I was there," I say. "I'm serious. Why would I blow you off?"

"I was there. You weren't."

"When, what time? I waited outside for you."

"Outside?"

"Yes," I sigh. "In my car."

"The Nookies?" she asks dubiously.

"Yes."

"On Halsted?"

"Yes."

"Close to Webster?"

"No," I say. "I was at the other one. Roscoe."

"The other one!" she shrieks. "Why would you think I'd go to *that* one? I told you I was coming from downtown. Jesus."

"I'm sorry," I eke out. My eyes turn glassy, my throat constricts, and I almost choke.

"You're such an asshole," she whispers. Then, after sneezing, her voice grows increasingly louder. "I wrote to you while I was in London, I fucking *called* you for god sakes and you're so rude to me."

At a pause, I consider telling her about the poster I bought for her but decide that mentioning it would be too anti-climactic. I just wait for her to start up again and am relieved when she doesn't.

Another dream. I'm sitting in front of a huge mound of cocaine and the music that plays, Counting Crows, "August and Everything After," helps to fill in the questions that I have, justifies my surroundings, what the date is, if there even is a time. I'm aware of the fact that I don't do drugs anymore when I Hoover the first line. It hits me with such an exacting force that I'm scared I'm going to die because of not being used to it. After I settle into the meta-reality, I reach for a cigarette that Julianne, who has now materialized into the frame, holds out for me. I remember that along with cocaine, I've also given up cigarettes, but it doesn't seem to matter. I have to clear my head of the whomp-whomp sounds, as Tom Callahan once so poignantly christened them, since they're upstaging everything else, so I light the cigarette in a feeble attempt to quiet them down. I'm concerned that I'll cough or choke since it's been so long since I've smoked, but it comes back to me like a bright flashing light. I continue blowing lines and smoking and laughing with Julianne, who starts off the dream wearing a halter-top and a tight, uncompromising skirt but midway through switches to a denim shirt, barely buttoned, and a pair of Victoria's Secret black satin underwear, that either shimmer or beckon. I can't tell for sure which.

The phone shocks me awake. It's Alice.

"How was lunch the other day with Jessica?" she asks with a tinge of bitterness.

"We didn't actually meet. She didn't show up."

"Oh, why not?"

"I don't know why, she just didn't. Maybe she had something better to do."

"You used to like this girl, didn't you?" she asks in a voice that sounds like it's on loan from a gossipy high schooler.

"No. She was just a friend. Tom Callahan went out with her."

"Tom Callahan went out with everybody."

"Yeah, so?" I ask. Then, after a beat, "Do you think you'll ever trust me?"

She doesn't respond. I guess I didn't really expect her to. Instead, she asks, "Why do you want to be with me?"

“Why? How can you ask that?”

“Just answer the question. *Why?*”

“I wanted to be happy, I guess,” I say. “I thought being with you would make me happy.”

“And you’re not?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe I was once. Maybe I am now. I can’t tell anymore.”

“I don’t think you’ll ever be truly happy,” she says, almost whispering. It goes right through me.

“Maybe you’re right,” I mumble back.

The next night, I’m in the back of the Bop Shop at a tiny dimly lit, wobbly table. Julianne is crying into my flannel shirt, leaning against my shoulder. I closely eye her cigarette, making sure she doesn't burn the thin gauzy cloth draped across the table or set me on fire. Her sobs penetrate at moments when the music doesn't shake the floor. Alice thinks that I’m at my father's house for dinner.

It's the middle of June and Julianne's birthday is tomorrow, exactly nine months before mine. I’m worried that the Marlboro Light that Julianne grips between her fingers is going to burn right through me. It will start slowly, first putting a hole through my J. Crew flannel shirt, then another through my t-shirt, and finally burrowing into my skin, through fat and muscle and tendon and bone. Until there’s nowhere else to go. I feel as though even if I rinse my clothes in cold water five hundred times, Alice will find out about tonight because of something ironic like a fucking cat hair, and I’ll have to explain and apologize away things that I don’t understand. She’ll find a blonde hair, even though she, Julianne, and Jessica all have brown hair, or detect a smell, perhaps a ribbon of Heredity or Germany or whatever Julianne’s fragrance is called. In high school, she wore Liz Claiborne. I remember the name but not the scent. It would have been hard to detect with any certainty from underneath all the smoke. But then again, none of us could smell anything back then anyway.