

Chapter 1: Attic Floor (or, when it hurts so bad)

Lisa Sprinker. I stared at my new roommate's name and tapped on the computer table with my pencil, considering whether or not I should call her now or wait until I had outlined a more detailed script. The packet from the Registrar's Office provided two clues about my freshman year roommate: her name, and her hometown. Everything else about her was left to my imagination. *Lisa: definitely long brown hair. An environmentalist. A peace-nick, perhaps. Long Island: Well, I figured, people who live on islands love to ride their bikes up and down the coast, so Lisa must be awfully proud of her top-of-the-line composite bike frame, wear brown a lot, and love trees.* I planned to ask her about her opinion on global warming and natural hair-care products. I jotted these ideas down on a blank piece of printer paper and figured I had enough ideas to get a good conversation rolling.

I dialed the number next to her name.

"Hello?" a perky nasal voice asked.

"Hi!" I answered, wishing I had at least planned out my first sentence. "Is this Lisa Sprinker from Long Island who is going to the University of Richmond next year?" I asked nervously realizing that I had just used every last detail that I knew about her.

"Yeah, this is Lisa Sprinker. Who's there?" she replied, unveiling a New York accent that made me look down at my list and cross out "environmentalist" and scribble down "Fran Drescher's stunt double."

"Hi! This is Laura. We're roommates next year!"

"How you doin'?" She exclaimed. "Ma!" she hollered, "It's Lora, my roommate!"

I quickly jotted down, "Possibly Joey Tribbiani's wife" in the margin of my paper.

"So, how's Long Island?" I asked.

"You mean *Wrong* Island," Lisa replied laughing. She launched into a diatribe about her hometown and her annoying brotha'; how she was bored with the Soaps and couldn't wait to meet all of the

cute boys in Richmond (I silently crossed out my imaginative "bikes around the island as the early morning dew rises from the water"). We gabbed effortlessly about who would bring the vacuum cleaner (me), the ironing board (me), the Stereo System, television, posters of Tweety Bird, and the crate of Ramen Noodles (all her). We planned our matching comforters and what we'd do the first week of classes, all the while Lisa frequently shouting to the background things like, "MA! I know! I told Lora awl about how we should get matching comfortas!"

By the time we hung up the phone, I had written down two pages of notes. I thought we had covered all of the essential issues that came with sharing a 10 x 10 dorm room, however, I would realize later all of the things I had forgotten to ask her like, "Do you dowse your feet with baby powder two times a day and leave that pile of baby powder in the middle of the room?" and "When it's midnight and we are sitting at our desks quietly studying for exams, will you suddenly jump up, screaming, and run around the halls like a crazy person?" and "Will your accent get even worse when you're on the phone with your "MA!?" and, most importantly, "Will you hook up with some frat boy the first night we move in and surprise me with a glimpse of a strange guy's buttocks when I return to our room?" But, as they say, hindsight is 20-20.

As soon as I hung up the phone with my new roommate, it rang again. I picked up the warm receiver, "Hello?" I asked, making sure not to use Lisa's contagious New York accent.

"Hey, Nazimek," a familiar voice spoke into the phone. Jason Strug. My heart skipped.

"Hey, Strug," I returned his greeting.

"Come over here in an hour. We're going swimming at Beckman's house. Wear your purple bathing suit."

I raised me eyebrows and dropped my pencil on the table. *Wear my purple bathing suit?*

"Okay," I answered, trying to hide my insecurity and my one million questions.

"See ya then." Jason said followed by a click as he hung up the

phone.

"See ya then," I replied to the dead line. I slowly placed the receiver in the cradle. I walked over to the window, pulled the curtain to the side and stared out the window, wondering nervously if this would be the day Jason defined our budding relationship.

Usually, summers in Lansdale, Pennsylvania flew by; a refreshing blur of early morning swim practice, several hours scooping ice cream and swatting flies at Freddy Hill Farms, and warm evenings of reading books about young women who fall in love, solve mysteries, and organize social movements. This summer, though, seemed to plod along. *Surely I'll die before experiencing college. I just know I'll never really get there.* My pending relationship with Jason at least provided some excitement to pass the time.

Something about my senior year and the slow days of summer reminded me of an itchy sweater that I couldn't wait to strip off. High school had concluded with the unraveling of what had been a beautiful relationship with my first real boyfriend, Keith. The guy was a blast. With U2 blaring in his maroon station wagon, we'd ride home together after school talking about the pranks Keith had played with his friend, Joey; like the time they snuck into the main office to make a "Special Announcement about Cheese" on the P.A. system or wrote poems about feet during Algebra II, which ended up winning the teacher's heart and guaranteeing them both "A's" for the marking period. A total romantic, Keith turned the average date on its head: think jagged cardboard cut-outs of feet taped to the floor, leading to a dinner served by a younger brother who wore white band gloves and looked longingly at each course since he was forbidden to taste any of the food until we were finished. At the time, it seemed like every girl's dream come true.

Every once in a while, I'd go to Catholic Mass with him, where he led the worship music with a husky voice and a beat-up guitar. I remember sitting in the pew on Ash Wednesday, watching women, men, teenagers and children walk down the aisle with black crosses on their foreheads, hands clasped before them, eyes focused on

the ground in front of them. I longed to join them in wearing the symbol of the cross, but because I wasn't Catholic, I simply watched and thought about the countless people throughout the world who humbly relied on the cross. I remember when Keith scooted into the pew and sat down beside me. I turned to face him, looking first at the ashes that were smeared over his skin. Up close, I could see his slightly sweaty forehead, the color of his Polish skin, his pores, his hairline. I could see the individual grains of ash that clung to one another in a misshapen cross; the priest's fingerprint preserved at each corner of the cross. My eyes moved slowly down to his eyes, "It's a beautiful thing," I said quietly. "All of these people in jeans and sweaters, work shirts, baseball caps, wearing this profound symbol... needing something more than themselves."

Keith looked around the room and nodded, "Yeah, I know what you mean." Neither of us truly grasped what that cross would mean throughout our lives; but in that moment we sat in awe of the beauty of Christ, who was God and man, extending His love to us with his own fingerprints and a misshapen cross.

Despite our appreciation for all things spiritual, we spent many an evening appreciating all things physical, if you know what I mean. After most of our dates, instead of turning right into my driveway, we'd turn left into the unfinished development across the street, park in the dark col-de-sac and make out until my curfew glared at us on the dashboard digital clock. Call me a helpless romantic, but it must have been something about the air around the silent Bacco tractors, the freshly dug foundations and the wet cement that filled us with exhilaration and longing. We dreaded our unspoken stopping-point, dreaded my midnight curfew, dreaded a cop shining his flashlight in the window, and we dreaded that the cop would be my parents' friend, Pat the Cop.

We sometimes talked about getting married. Everyone agreed that we were a dynamic couple. And anyway, how could 800 high school seniors who voted us "The Cutest Couple of the Year" be wrong? But, despite our schmaltzy photograph in the yearbook and our even schmaltzier yearbook entries ("Keith, ONLY YOU!"),

our relationship did indeed come to an end. I knew it was over when, during the fall of our senior year, Keith went to a youth conference and returned as a noticeably different guy.

In the car ride home from play practice, I blurted out, "Something's different; you're not in love with me anymore."

"Well," Keith replied, turning right into my driveway, "I realize I've been looking for happiness in you and I have to look for happiness in God."

For a moment, I sat in his car, staring at our 6-foot high basketball hoop in disbelief. That was his break-up line: He had to look for happiness in God. *God*. I had heard of guys breaking up with their girlfriends in order to go out with other girls, but to go out with *God*? "Oh," I said, as I got out of the car. There was nothing else I could say.

That night, a close friend of mine said, "God has big plans for you. You'll find a man who will love you." I appreciated her support and all, but I shuttered at her words. God had just stolen my boyfriend; chances of me trusting God with my love life again were slim.

I left school early the next day, brought my radio outside and threw a basketball against the backboard over and over again. I simply couldn't bear to tell one more person about the breakup. Lee Joon had actually *cried* in homeroom, saying that if Keith and I couldn't make it, his hope for any relationship was dashed. Girls raised their eyebrows at the news, scheming about how much time Keith needed to recover before they could move in on him. As I walked to my first period class, the hallways looked different because I wasn't holding his arm or smelling his cologne. I pictured him on the other side of the school giving God high fives and writing poetry to the girl who'd *never* let him turn left into an unfinished development, but instead would insist that he sit in the family room with her father and mother and 15 siblings and read to them from Leviticus.

I'd be lying to say that I wasn't keeping my eyes open for any guys who were interested in me. *Are the guys raising their*

eyebrows just like the girls are? I'd wonder expectantly. I couldn't help but consider my friend Jason as a strong possibility. During our 10-month long relationship, Keith talked about how our friend Jason was constantly trying to lure me away. I'd laugh off his concern, convinced that Jason flirted with everyone. Besides, Jason only dated older women who were photographers, actresses, and mountain climbers from South Dakota. "I'm just saying, be careful around him," Keith warned.

A few days after the breakup, Jason appeared at my front door with a new Bob Dylan album and a pack of cigarettes.

"Come on, Nazimek, let's go for a ride."

We hopped in his car, rolled the windows down, and drove around Lansdale with the early November air chilling our noses. Jason drove and smoked as I talked all about the breakup; how, come to think of it, I was actually kind of glad about it because Keith was being a jerk and couldn't go anywhere without his friend Joey and my guesses were that he'd become a gay priest anyway. We picked up an early dinner at Taco Bell and sat on the hood of Jason's off-white Volvo in the parking lot at the mall and watched the sun set.

"It's all good, Nazimek." Jason said as he inhaled. "Just take a look at all those colors." He nodded towards the horizon.

I stared ahead, not noticing the colors at all. "Besides," I added, "I'm ready to go, you know? We'll all be leaving home soon anyway and I need to start fresh. I'm tired of being known as the good-girl. I just want to do my own thing, ya know?" Still staring ahead at the sun, Jason reached into his pack of cigarettes and held one out to me. I looked sideways at the cigarette for a moment before taking it from his hand and putting it to my lips. He reached over with his lighter and held the flame next to the end of the cigarette.

"Just put your lips around the end and inhale," he explained.

We leaned against the windshield as the sun sunk down, puffs of smoke rising from our mouths. For a moment I wondered what Keith would say if he saw me there. *He probably wouldn't even care,*

I thought and closed my eyes as a buzz slowly moved through my brain.

Jason was the perfect partner for a whimsical and carefree Senior year and summer. Together, we lay on our stomachs on the back of a flat-bed truck, gripping the sides with white-knuckles and flew through town; we drove down country roads with the breeze wafting in through the windows as the folk singer of the week crooned in the background. We watched beautiful films, snuck into "Closed at Sundown" parks after dark, talked about poetry and people and music. God was becoming more of an artistic concept that we created and less of my personal Lord and friend. Meanwhile, Keith seemed more and more like a stranger, growing his hair out like Jesus and looking at me cautiously as I sat with Jason at lunch, laughing at his witty comments and impressing him with mine. Who was Keith to tell me who I should or shouldn't hang out with? Besides, I loved who I was when I was with Jason: I was a photographer, an actress, a mountain climber from South Dakota.

My purple bathing suit, huh? I let the curtain drop back to cover up the window and gathered my papers. *I guess I should shave my legs then*, I thought as I glanced at the clock and headed towards the bathroom to get ready. I didn't mention the invitation to my parents; they'd just ask questions that I didn't want to answer. 'Better to slip out the door without them noticing or to gloss over the details about what I'd be doing for the afternoon. They might not understand the deep longing I had to explore this fascinating relationship. The last thing I wanted was for them to interfere.

When I arrived at Jason's house, I knocked at the front door. He opened the door with a sweeping gesture, "Madame, Hello." He said dramatically.

"Hey," I replied, following his gesture and entering the foyer. We stood by the door awkwardly for a moment. The house seemed to echo with silence.

"Where is everybody?" I asked nervously.

"Everybody?" He asked, raising his eyebrow. He took my hands,

"Nazimek, it's just me and you today." He stepped closer to me and kissed my cheek.

"Oh!" I said, quickly trying to process what it meant that we were in this huge home alone and that he had just kissed my cheek. "So, your parents aren't home?"

"No, they're in France this week. Come on." Jason led me through the downstairs, showing me pictures of his father's award-winning fishing trips, his mother's bohemian decorations, and his sister's paper-mache' refrigerator art. We pattered around with the dog, listened to a newly discovered Joni Mitchell album, and paged through some photos of a play he had produced. I watched the clock, wondering when we'd be going swimming but was afraid to say anything about the time. *Maybe he planned all of this. Maybe he really wants to ask me to be his girlfriend, but he just can't get up the courage.* I was sure the big question was going to come when he asked me if I wanted a tour of the upstairs. We sat in his bedroom, looking at the playbills and poetry pinned to the wall.

"This is really beautiful stuff, Jason," I said, admiring his beat-nick use of words.

He took out his guitar and asked me what I thought of his newest song. As he played, I stared out the window wondering if he had written the song for me. I couldn't quite tell because the girl in the song was from Minnesota and had brown hair, which didn't fit me at all, but I was sure there were phrases in the chorus that sounded just like me... symbolically, at least.

Time ticked by. I glanced casually at the clock, realizing that I'd have to leave in half an hour. "Um, I have to leave soon... Are we... going to go to Beckman's house?" "Oh, no, we're not going." Jason replied confidently. Then, he looked me in the eye and said, "Come up to the attic with me; I want to show you one more thing before you leave." I followed him up the narrow staircase. Each wooden step creaked beneath my feet as we climbed higher and higher. I felt as if I was moving further and further away from all other people, as if we were disappearing from the house, from his guitar, his dog, even from the paper-mache artwork.

"I just wanted to show you this one movie up here..." Jason's voice echoed in front of me. I followed him onto the landing and looked around at the little room with the slanted ceiling. A couch, an area rug, and a television filled the room. "You can sit right there," he pointed to the floor. I tugged on my uncomfortable bathing suit bottom and sat down. Jason sat next to me. He leaned over and kissed my mouth. Instinctively, I kissed him back. *What does this mean?* I wondered, enjoying the affection but wondering if I should stop things before they went too far. *I don't really know how he feels about me and didn't he just sing me a song about a girl in Montana?* My thoughts swirled as he reached around and pinned me awkwardly to the floor. *What is he doing?* I began to panic as he forced himself against me. I tried to push him away, but I couldn't keep him from hurting me. *What is he doing?* I tried to scream, to say something – anything – but I felt silent and powerless.

In my memory, I got up and ran home. I remember my heart racing and my legs pumping up and down all the way to Keeler Road where I locked myself in my bedroom to cry. I remember running faster than I had ever run before; running far away from this awful confusing painful attic room. But, I didn't run home. I drove my parent's blue Oldsmobile fifteen minutes through Lansdale, passing the high school, the ice cream parlor where my sisters and I had worked for the past three summers, and my old church. They say that sometimes when a person experiences something so shocking, her memory reflects her *emotions* in that moment instead of what truly happened. I must have felt so devastated that, in my heart, I ran and ran and ran.

When I got home, I didn't tell a soul. I didn't know how to. After all, I had made all of the fool-hearty choices to hang out with him all summer, to fall in love with his music, to smoke his cigarettes, and to follow him in a direction I should never have gone. Besides, which words would I use to describe what happened? According to *my New Oxford Dictionary*, Jason didn't technically *rape* me. Did he *molest* me? *Abuse* me? *Assault* me? I felt dirty as I scanned the

dictionary pages for the definitions, reading them as quickly as possible so I could shut the book before someone walked in. My heart pumped wildly. The words I was looking up seemed so ugly and foreign. Surely those words only happened in a dark alley when an unsuspecting girl was attacked by a big evil stranger who never had a mother. Surely those words wouldn't happen to a self-confident soon-to-be college freshman in a nicely decorated home in the middle of suburbia by a scrawny high school friend. I closed the dictionary. I couldn't find any answers. I didn't know what to call it. So, I didn't call it anything.

As it turned out, the next morning, my mom brought me to my first gynecology exam. The intrusiveness of the exam felt so similar to what Jason had done, that I began to cry and couldn't stop. The doctor gently asked if she could speak with me alone. She asked if I was sexually active, if anything had ever happened to me. My mind was racing. Was I sexually active? I wasn't sure. Had something happened to me? I didn't know. I said, "no." She said that it's normal for young women to feel uncomfortable at their first exam; that I'd get used to it in time. As we drove home, my mom looked at me out of the corner of her eye and encouraged me to talk about it. I shut my mouth, stared out the window, and cried. *How did I get here?* I asked myself. *This wasn't supposed to happen to me.*

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