

James Landis

Guilty

March 10, 1997

I used to think you were the kind of girl everyone wants, just a short little blonde who calls every night even if he can't stand the sound of your high voice. They always like the way you act drunk all the time, though it's usually because you don't sleep at night. Instead you stay up with your twenty-three credits and your triple major and your half-cup of lukewarm coffee while they snore on your bed still tangled in the dirty sheets. But you seem friendly enough. It never matters that you haven't eaten for three days and haven't slept for longer; you just keep running to class with your smile and your hunch under the weight of the oversize book bag on your back, letting yourself out quietly so you don't wake them.

But you haven't changed since summer college. The residence hall counselors always had to call your nervous parents at least twice a week when they found you still awake in the lounge at six thirty in the morning. There are no curfews any more, though, so you don't have to run back from the guys' dorm two minutes from a write-up. Instead I could stay most nights in your single bed, waking up to the splotches of late-morning sun on the walls of your empty room. It was easier than walking all the way home every night.

I hadn't seen you for nearly a year when I heard your voice on the other end of my first campus phone call as a freshman. We planned to eat at the barbecue underneath the giant tent behind my dorm, and I told you to meet me at the north end of the dining hall where we ate every meal of the previous summer, though never together (you used to

haunt the third floor upstairs from the cafeteria and carried all of your papers up there with three cups of coffee as soon as it opened at seven in the morning, disturbing the empty silence with your annoying friend). I waited for an hour looking for your blonde hair to come bouncing down the stairs that afternoon, but when you finally called me back that night, you said you were wearing a hat and came with another girl from your dorm. Instead you said we should meet on the bridge over Fall Creek gorge. I spent the last summer down there with a girl that some guy dumped for you.

I approached the bridge near dusk when the cloudless clear blue overhead blended smoothly into the orange above the distant hills. You were on the wrong side of the road. I crossed the street to meet you and still had to reach down to hug you, but you were the first thing familiar about my new life. We walked back to your dorm with the usual how-have-you-been conversation and spent most of the night in your room as the people on your floor ran in and out to meet you. I didn't sleep there the first night, though. The clock tower sounded its sad bells across the silent campus as I plodded deliberately down the hill to my dorm.

I had my first crew practice that week. I lay on my stomach on your bed as you tried to work the soreness from my muscles with your tiny nervous hands. I went through the box of old letters that I had sent to you after summer college. They were meaningless and shallow, the kind of letters I would write to a pen pal I had in fifth grade that I never even met. You read them over my shoulder, and remembered to me all the things I wrote about in each one as I read. I barely even recognized the handwriting.

Suddenly it had been two months and I lay awake thinking about the plane trip home in the sober October frost the next morning. Your smooth leg wrapped itself around

mine, and your hand rested lightly on my chest. You never sleep while others are awake, but you were exhausted that night. I was glad you couldn't look into my eyes and see what I felt about you then. I watched the red digits on the clock change for ten minutes until I was sure you were asleep, then I carefully slipped out from under you and onto the piles of clothes on the cold tile floor. I dressed slowly, quietly so as not to wake you, and slipped out the door into the night air so cold that it burned my lungs.

A miserable commuter jet with deafening propeller engines took me most of the way home. I was glad you were still asleep when I crept out the door, or at least pretended to be. I wanted you to be comfortable as I left you. I thought about the nights I played cards for fifty dollars a hand and you patiently watched with the one can of beer you needed to get drunk and pretended to know what was going on. Sometimes you would ask to play a hand for me, pleading with that annoying whine. I would grate my teeth and try to answer without anger, but not always successfully. I thought about the Saturday you called at three in the morning complaining of how lonely you were in your giant single dorm room. You whimpered that your friends had all gone home after they drank the vodka in your refrigerator and spilled the popcorn on your new rug as they tried to pop it with the machine they stole from the grocery store after the party earlier. You pretended to be sober as you slurred the big words you always use, and I couldn't convince you to sleep it off. I noisily threw on my windbreaker and slammed the door as I stormed out of my room. My roommate was stumbling down the hall, just coming home for the night, and cracked his imaginary whip when he saw me writing the message to him on the dry erase board. I tried to sleep on the floor, but you just pretended to fall off your bed on top of me wearing only your smiley-face boxer shorts and a sickly smile. I was angry that

night, but you liked it even better that way, and I walked home disgusted and desperate for a shower early Sunday afternoon.

I knew you would find someone new. You never had any trouble with that. It happened to be one of my friends, but I met you through one of my friends, too, and probably under the same circumstances. Except that he knew all about you. You let me believe that you were innocent and naïve and that you needed to be taken care of. The third night of school you perched on top of me and told me it was your first time, too. I just kept believing though you were calm and smiled as I fumbled with the zipper of your jeans.

You have been with him for three months now. He told me your mother called you a slut the other day and you cried to him later that night as he held you in his arms. I didn't believe a word of it. But then he told me you had an actual fight the next night and you talked for two hours and worked everything out afterwards. He made you make an appointment with the psychologist and he didn't remember what day it was so he didn't ask you how it went. So I think about the useless letters I would write to you and how I didn't talk to you for a full month after I left you lying there asleep at the beginning of October break, and somehow I wish you had fought with me instead.