

ETHOS

I was thirteen when I left my mother. We were in Nordstrom. God, I wanted to smell like Nordstrom—not only the amalgam of all the perfume samples spritzed onto creamy rectangles of cardstock, or the faint aromas rising from the powder compacts and lotions at the makeup counter, but also the formaldehyde in the leather goods and the sighs of vapor from potted trees. It was agony to be in the midst of so much beauty.

“I don’t see what’s so special about Nordstrom,” my mother said. “Macy’s has the same things for half the price.” Was there anything my mother could have said at that moment—leering at large, crystal-encrusted watch faces, her stomach pressed so hard against the edge of the glass jewelry case I thought she’d be bisected—that wouldn’t have humiliated me?

Gawd, I thought, why don’t you just make an announcement that we’re poor?

I was in a particularly bitter mood because that week I had received rejection notices from the three boarding schools I had applied to for admission into the 9th grade. My mother offered to buy me something special to cheer me up. Now, she toyed with a display of small leather coin purses. From the way she turned them over and squinted her eyes, I could tell she was seeking the fine print of the price tag.

We weren’t actually poor, but in comparison to the girls in the young adult novels I read set at equestrian camps or wealthy areas of Manhattan, we were destitute. I felt excited while reading them, but like garbage when I finished. I should have put down the books and developed an interest in something less superficial, but instead I decided to aspire to the lifestyle they portrayed. From Martinelli’s and Tang, I mixed mimosas (which my favorite character liked to drink at brunch while her hungover frenemy sucked down Bloody Marys), and drank them out of big plastic cups while I completed the applications for three East Coast boarding schools. The forms were printed from the schools’ websites. I had to use large handwriting to fill the sections for extracurriculars because I had quit most after-school activities in sixth grade, and I thought too much white space would look bad. I wrote “Girl Scout” and “Soup Kitchen Volunteer” in sixteen-point font, even though I hadn’t attended a troop meeting in eight months and only went to the soup kitchen once, on Thanksgiving, when so many people had volunteered—and volunteered

their families—that the director told me the most helpful thing I could do was leave the kitchen and sit quietly in the dining hall.

Weaving through racks of diaphanous pool cover-ups and sherbet-bright dresses, I drifted from my mother and arrived at the picked-over rows of spring apparel. I pulled an olive green, canvas-weight dress with brass buttons and pockets on the hips. In truth, it was somewhat drab, but at the time, when every day I disguised my boyishly slender body with P.E. sweatpants and an oversized hoodie, the dress seemed as showy as a sequined leotard.

Even though I knew I was rejected, I couldn't help but fantasize about wearing this dress on my first day of boarding school. In this daydream, my hair was long and pin straight, the acne that pocked my cheeks and upward toward my temples, vanished, my breasts a full B-cup and my hips flared to make an hourglass. I would befriend an older clique and a misunderstood, ideally orphaned senior boy would fall in love with me. "Natalia is smart, but she's also really, really cool," I would overhear the most popular—but sort of slutty—girl in school say as she applied makeup in front of a bathroom mirror. "I hope she comes to my party."

My mother trotted to my side. With the agility of a hunter catching a fish with bare hands, she snatched the price-tag from the interior of the dress. Discounted, it was \$210. "I think," she pursed her lips for a moment, "that this is a little too grown up for you." She placed the dress back on the rack. I reached to touch it one last time. My hand brushed down the front, settling on the bulky, anti-theft ink cartridge affixed to the hem.



In Ethics class, I learned that stores price merchandise anticipating that a certain percentage of it will be shoplifted. My mother and I sat in Wolfgang Puck Bistro, which had a fancy name but served the same \$12 entrees as any other restaurant in the mall. Beside me in the vinyl booth sat a bag from Macy's containing two lightly-padded Maidenform bras, a gray plastic belt, and a black, extra-large T-shirt from the boys' section. My mother popped gold ringlets of calamari into her mouth while I waited for my personal pizza to cool.

"Here, try it," my mother said, and edged her plate toward me. I shook my head no and folded my arms against my torso, feeling the pilfered canvas dress bundled inside my hoodie.

"You know, if you really want to put on that weight, you're going to have to start eating meat again." My mother sipped from a glass of white wine.

"Protein," she said, and paused, letting the wisdom settle. Cheese and oil dripped from the pizza as I raised it to my mouth.

"Cheese has protein," I said.

I had spent a lot of time fantasizing about boarding school in the previous months, worrying about whether I'd get a double or triple dorm and what would happen if the other students found out I wasn't as wealthy as them. Throughout lunch I kept lapsing into these daydreams, until I remembered that, along with the rest of my middle school classmates, I would attend public school in the fall. The boarding school fixation had ferried me through the last days of eighth grade, a psychic retreat in the moments before a teacher distributed an exam I hadn't studied for, a buffer from the popular kids' laughter when I dropped my lunch tray in the cafeteria and taco salad spilled everywhere. How many times did I fight with my mother about whether I would be admitted into these schools, and, if so, whether we could pay for it? Did we even have anything to say to each other when we weren't arguing?

In the midst of our arguments, she told me how ludicrous my plan to go to boarding school was, how flawed my belief that the strength of my supplementary materials—a letter of recommendation from my Ethics teacher, a photorealistic drawing of an elk that my art teacher asked if she could keep as an example for next year's class—would compensate for my "D" in Introduction to Pre-Algebra and the fact that the salary she made as an adjunct professor amounted to less than a year's tuition. I started to view her as an opponent, then an enemy, and now, in the face of my rejections, I couldn't help but see her as the gloating victorious party.

"Last chance," she said when she had devoured all but four pieces of her calamari. Once again, she pushed the plate toward me. I tried to push it back toward her, but instead it toppled over. Fried squid spilled onto the ground and onto my front.



"Oh, Natalia, look." With one hand on the steering wheel, my mother reached over to brush the front of my sweatshirt, which was stained with two dark circles of grease. I leaned away, fearful that she would detect the dress.

"Why don't I pull over at that gas station and you can change into your new blouse?"

“Like Aaron cares if my shirt is dirty, Mom. He basically sleeps in a pile of garbage.”

“That’s a very cruel thing to say.”

“I’m not being cruel. I’m just not ignoring it like you.” Annoyed, I leaned my head against the interior of the car window. My skull rattled gently as we drove over stretches of asphalt eroded by last winter’s rock salt. Half a mile ahead, orange cones blocked the right-hand lane, and a dozen construction workers in reflective vests stood beside an asphalt roller parked at the edge of a stretch of fresh tar. One man jabbed his shovel like a sword at another man, who leapt back, startled. Another man laughed.

I wasn’t close to my brother Aaron, for which I blamed my mother. When he was sixteen, she sent him to live in Waynesville with our father and his second wife after he got caught with pot. A few weeks later, our father called to say Aaron had gone missing, but he showed up at our house that night. I remember my mother screaming as he beat on the sliding glass door leading to the kitchen. I was seven, and from my open window I overheard him talking about secret signals as police zip-tied his hands behind his back. My mother extended his temporary ban from our house into a permanent one, and he refused to live with our father because he didn’t get along with his second wife. After that, it was like I was an only child, except for the times I’d overhear my mother on the phone with my father, sighing about Aaron’s latest probation violation or his inability to keep a job for more than a few months.

“Natalia, I know you’re disappointed, but you don’t have to sulk,” my mother said. Traffic slowed as the three lanes merged into two. It was about an hour’s drive north to Marion. Aaron had moved there after the social worker at the sober living facility he was staying at deemed him “disruptive to the group dynamic,” or at least that’s what he said over the phone while begging our mother to sleep on the couch for a week or two while he tried to find a new place to live.

“If affordability is an issue, maybe you need to look at your options outside of Columbus—”

Great, I had thought, she kicked him out of the house and now she’s trying to chase him out of Ohio.

—

“Oh, I don’t know if I like this,” my mother said as she lifted two large paper grocery bags filled with food for Aaron’s pantry from the car’s

backseat. This was our first visit to the house he lived in. It was almost a parody of squalor. Wooden shingles from the second-story roof had fallen, collecting in a pile on the porch awning. The attic window was cracked, and yellow paint peeled from the wood paneling. A red and white "NO TRESPASSING" sign was barely visible through the weeds that overgrew the front lawn. Aaron's pickup, painted the iridescent green of a beetle's shell, was parked in the driveway, and looked misplaced next to the rotting, sagging house.

When I knocked, Aaron opened the door as wide as the chain lock would allow. His face was rounder than when I saw him last, but in an unwholesome, bloated way. His mouth upturned in a small "u," but his eyes were inexpressive.

On the table in the living room, an ashtray paper-weighted a blood test form. A small oscillating fan lifted the paper's corners each time it passed. Two empty bowls were placed next to the door, but I didn't see any other indication that Aaron kept a pet. If he had roommates, they were out. My mother went from window to window, opening the blinds. The sunlight revealed the dust motes suspended in the air and the stains soaked into the paisley upholstery of Aaron's couch.

In a gesture of hospitality, Aaron brought me a lukewarm cup of tap water from the kitchen. The interior of the glass was coated with a gray film. Without taking a sip, I set it on the coffee table.

"So, Mom tells me you're applying to private schools," Aaron said.

I felt a painful pang in my chest. I hadn't told anyone at school of my plan, hadn't heard it spoken aloud by anyone except my mother. She was in the kitchen, unpacking one of the grocery bags.

"Actually, I got rejected," I said. My voice cracked on the last word, and tears started to well in my eyes. I bit my tongue and forced my breaths into a steady rhythm. It was how I stopped myself from crying at school when girls called me anorexic and boys dared each other to ask me out as a prank.

"I told her," my mother called from the kitchen, "don't get your hopes up. I'm sorry, but all B's and C's doesn't cut it, especially not for a scholarship student." I heard a cabinet open and shut. Her words made it more difficult to control the crying. I had a scratchy, constricted feeling in my throat and the welling tears blurred my vision. I knew from experience that as long as I didn't blink, they wouldn't roll down my face, at least not

in the time it took me to get to somewhere private, where other people wouldn't see me cry.

"Uh," Aaron said, "I don't think high schools...are allowed to do discriminatory practices. Like, they have to let girls play sports, and also let a certain number of kids with bad grades go there."

I knew what Aaron said wasn't true, but I wasn't going to argue with someone on my side. I darted into the bathroom and shut the door behind me with more force than I intended. I cringed, fearing the door slamming had spoiled my innocuous escape, but Aaron and my mother continued their conversation uninterrupted.

"Do you not have cooking oil, Aaron? Oh, shoot, I'd better run back to the grocery."

"There's a corner store around the block, Mom."

Leaning against the sink, I blinked the tears from my eyes until my reflection in the mirror no longer appeared wobbly. My hatred for my mother intensified as the sadness waned. From under my sweatshirt, I pulled the stolen dress.

In Ethics, I learned that criminals often feel compelled to confess to their crimes, and unconsciously do things that will get them caught. For instance, a murderer might call a family member of his victim, then hang up. I wanted to get caught when I walked into the living room with the dress bundled in my outstretched arms, but my mother was already at the door and left without glancing back toward me. I needed a more drastic way to incriminate myself.

"Aaron," I said, "the cashier forgot to take off the ink tag. Do you know how to do it?" He nodded and led me to the kitchen. I already knew that he could remove the tag without the ink exploding, because he had once been arrested for conspiracy to shoplift after uploading a video tutorial demonstrating how it was done. It involved using the tip of the knife to dislodge the magnetized ball bearings that kept the two sides of the device together through the cloth, but, like any skilled manual task, remained mysterious unless you performed it yourself.

After a few seconds of jimmying the knife, the tag popped off. He handed me the dress. In the bathroom, I pulled it on. How would my mother react when she saw I'd stolen the dress?

"Well, that's thrifty," I imagined her saying in the same tone of voice she used when another mom explained how she sewed her children's Halloween costumes from scrap fabric or made stew from leftovers.

But I also knew what I had done was wrong, and a part of me didn't want my mother to endorse the theft, but instead to scream and yell and drag me around by my hair in punishment. I wanted her to cast me out like she cast out Aaron. I wanted my rage and loathing to be justified.

When she returned from the store, I sat on the couch and folded my hands in my lap, wearing the dress. She looked me over, and I smiled involuntarily—the same way I smiled when, as a child, I was caught biting another child or saying a naughty word—and, just like back then, she now demanded to know what exactly I found so funny.



With a trembling hand, Aaron scooped the instant potatoes from the saucepan onto plates with a fork. My mother and I sat on the same side of the kitchen table, which was actually two card tables pushed together, but at opposite ends. We faced the small boxy TV on the counter, which was so old that it had an antenna sticking out the top and a picture distorted by static bands. I considered muting it but envisioned spending the next hour or so at a dinner table silent except for utensils scraping against plates and teeth and changed my mind. The news started. "Good evening," the anchorwoman said, tapping a stack of papers on her desk. "Our top story tonight, six people reported missing as mudslides devastate parts of...."

"I can't imagine why they build mansions on cliffs year after year," my mother said. We watched a shaky, six-second clip of a hunk of mountain buckling and falling into the ocean, the large, beautiful house built on the land toppling with it. "How much of a dum-dum can you be?" Even though it wasn't directed toward me, the insult provoked the stomach-plummeting, skin-crawling sensation I knew to be shame. I felt like a dum-dum. On the counter, nestled between the TV and a miniature mountain range of Aaron's orange prescription bottles, sat a plastic bag with the dress folded inside.

"What about the rednecks who park their trailers in Tornado Alley?" I said as Aaron set the plates on the card-table in the center of the kitchen. "Are they dum-dums?"

"It's not the same," my mother said. "When you don't have money, sometimes you have to do things you wouldn't normally."

I snorted with laughter. "And that is the moral of today's story."

"Don't be smart," my mother said. "Tomorrow we're going back to Nordstrom and you're apologizing for what you did."

"It's a big store, Mom." Aaron said. He sat across the table from me. "Not a mom and pop shop. They aren't gonna make her sweep the floors, or even wash the dishes. They'll arrest her."

"I know you put her up to this."

"I didn't put her up to anything."

"Well, she got the idea from you, at least."

"Oh my god, Mom. This isn't Aaron's fault. I don't even see him ever."

"Don't use that rotten tone of voice with me. You're out of control, missy."

"Oh no," I said sarcastically, "what are you going to do? Kick me out?"

"That's hardly punishment," my mother said, her voice gravelly with anger, "for someone who wants to leave."

The defiance drained from my body and I wilted in my chair. Our boarding school arguments hadn't been about money or grades at all. She had asked me why I had to leave now, considering I would go away for college in a few years anyway, or, if I had to go to private school, why it couldn't be the parochial day school two towns over. I'd argued against her without ever realizing the question that she was really asking.

I mushed my steamed carrots into the mashed potatoes. "What if I just donate the dress to the Goodwill? At least then I won't have a rap sheet."

"How do you know what a rap sheet is?" Aaron said, the corner of his mouth upturning.

"I read a lot," I said. I learned the term when a minor character in one of my novels was arrested for starting a catfight at New York Fashion Week.

"Fine, Natalia. But remember the next time you're tempted, you'll get caught," my mother said.

"Psst, under \$500, misdemeanor, over \$500, felony," Aaron said under his breath but still loud enough for our mother to overhear. I laughed.

“Thanks, but I think my criminal days are behind me.”

That evening, I pulled the rejection letters from my bedside table, and read them repeatedly in an act of self-flagellation. The letter from the hippie-ish school with need-blind admissions took pains to mention how “talented,” “qualified,” and “unique,” every student in their application pool was. They wanted to accept everyone, but there was simply no way it could be done were they to maintain their 6:1 student-to-teacher ratio. In contrast, the letters from the two more established schools were less evasive. We have rejected your application for freshman admission in fall 2005.... I ran my fingertips over the embossed letterheads, the crests, and the Latin mottos. *It's real*, I thought. *The door is closed*. I laid my head on my pillow and willed myself to fall asleep, to stop crying.

A few hours later I was awoken by my mother stroking my hair in the same way she had woken me up for school when I was little. She told me that a few weeks ago her colleague recommended a boarding school in California with rolling admissions. It was a school for “non-traditional learners” that had no grades and Yoga instead of P.E. and was called Halbrook. She had the application in a drawer downstairs.

“I’m not even sure I want to go to boarding school anymore,” I said.

“Why not?” she asked in a gentle, inquisitive voice.

When I put on the canvas dress, nothing happened. My cheeks were still blotchy and my chest still flat, my bangs crooked and my knees knobbly. The dress was too big, even when I cinched the waist with the belt my Mom had bought that afternoon.

“Going to boarding school can never be as good as wanting to go to boarding school,” I said.

“Just think it over, sweetheart,” she said. She turned off the lamp and left.

The door is closed, I thought again. But the feeling was more like when, at night, the gate shuts in front of an upscale department store in a mall, when the electronic pop music stops and the florescent lights go out, and you suddenly remember that it’s just rooms, filled with things.