

A Sweet Trifle

Kara hadn't told anyone that Mary Louise carried a handgun in the cell phone pocket of her backpack: not her mother, who called Kara for how's-life-in-the-Bible-Belt? details daily; not her high school friends from the Freaky Geeky gifted program in Burlington. She'd told no one.

"It's our secret," Kara reminded her college roommate as they watched raindrops stream down their skinny window.

They were supposed to be studying for finals, but Mary Louise was worked up.

"Swear?" Mary Louise asked her. "Swear on your stack of Frommer's travel guides."

"Done," said Kara.

Nor had Kara told anyone—including Mary Louise—that she believed she was falling in love with her first-year roomie, whom she occasionally addressed as Mare-Lou, a childhood nickname only Kara knew about.

But both things—the gun and the love—had to come out sooner or later, or Kara would get a mouth ulcer like she always did when she failed to tell the truth.

In the early days of this first semester at Clemson, Kara *had* texted old friends how Mary Louise Hastings was a bleach-blond bulimic with magnetic eyelashes (an actual thing she'd paid for) and a hugely thick hick accent. But that was before she'd had any lasting conversation with the delicately built girl from Mississippi—who wasn't bulimic but hypoglycemic, who'd eaten too little and drunk too much at her first mixer

and then barfed all over Kara's corkboard pinned with antique postcards of Italy and Greece, her top two study-abroad destinations.

Kara had driven her decades-old Camry all alone from Vermont straight through to Clemson University, the massive public institution that had offered her not only a full scholarship but a small stipend she could set aside that would enable her to save enough money to fly anywhere she liked next summer—far enough that her clingy mom, currently between boyfriends, would find it frustrating to Skype with their low-speed Wi-Fi connection more than once a week.

“Are you frightened?” her mother had asked as they said goodbye. “Be *honest*.”

Kara worked hard not to roll her eyes: “Frightened of what?”

She was more anxious than frightened.

“You're such a trouper, doll. Sure you want to go? We can take out loans.”

Kara drove in tears for the first half-hour of her journey, then decided she was being silly—she had no idea what to expect of this school, or this new world, and she might as well remain neutral until ugly evidence made such openness impossible.

As she stomped onto campus, all five feet nine inches of her—long brown hair in a ponytail but totally buzzed beneath, strong bare biceps glistening with sweat—she caught stares from a multitude of preppy-looking coeds who had absolutely no idea that gender binaries were not mandatory.

“You do you,” she pep-talked herself, but found she kind of liked the new attention.

“What's it like?” texted Melissa, her lesbian friend at Amherst.

“Pretty OK,” Kara texted back. “Indian kid two doors down—plenty of POCs—and no one trying to save me—yet.”

“Keep me in the know, ho,” Melissa texted back.

“But I don’t *want* people knowing my business,” Mary Louise shouted when she found Kara’s diary on that wet November night and read all about an unnamed female who carried a gun in her flower-printed Candie’s backpack.

“No one at this school knows you own a fucking pink gun with your initials monogrammed on it,” Kara said. Mary Louise always listened closer if Kara said the f-word. “Except me.”

Meanwhile, Mary Louise cradled Kara’s thick diary in her tiny hands.

“The gun was a graduation gift from my daddy, and it’s important for that reason,” Mary Louise explained for maybe the fifth time. “I’ve never fired it. It’s not even loaded. I don’t want it to fall into the wrong hands—so, *yes*, I logically keep it in my bag at all times.”

“I just made some notes about the g-u-n, and the whole thing, because I thought I could put it in a short story. I want to write what I know, as you know. International Studies is my major. But fiction is going to be my minor, *officially*.”

“Okay, but what you wrote here makes me sound like the kind of scary conservative who’d live in an all-girls’ dorm and wait till marriage to have sex.”

“You mean how I describe the teeny gold cross earrings and crisp white blouse?” she asked. “That’s texture.”

“Those things are totally *made up*—yes, my dad’s a Republican with a gambling addiction. Yeah, I keep my first Build-a-Bear on my dorm bed. But my parents are

separated, not to mention I'm doing it with an Indian guy who looks like Zayn Malik.

Your story just makes me sound kind of...cartoony."

"Does that mean you'd *want* me to write about you, if I got it right?"

"That's a big if."

"I'm open to criticism." But Kara's cheeks and neck burned with shame.

She eased her journal from Mary Louise's French-manicured fingers, ripped out the offensive page, and handed it over—as a kind of offering.

"Apologies," Kara told her friend from beneath the fabric of the orange Clemson sweatshirt she was pulling over her head. She mouthed the words "I love you" before she popped her face through. Their room was cold as a Vermont campout that evening, the unreliable heating system leaving the entire dorm icy several nights a week.

The only toasty zones were the community bathrooms. Hallway residents had voted to make the bathrooms coed on day one. The idea seemed progressive, so Kara was all for it. But she knew that Mary Louise—who'd voted against the plan—preferred to poop in a bathroom on another floor to avoid running into her boyfriend, Arun Patel.

Sometimes Kara saw Arun in the coed bathroom when she brushed her teeth—they both had early classes—and it was always a little awkward for them both.

"How are you doing, Kara?" Arun would ask, while combing his perfect hair or shaving his movie-star face. He always used her name.

"What's up?" Kara would say. Neither answered the other's question.

On the rainy evening of the girls' argument, just as Kara was about to settle in with her math book, their R.A., Kenneth, opened their unlocked door. A wiry redhead with the bluest eyes imaginable and a voice as deep as a trombone that he applied to his a

cappella club, the Footnotes, Kenneth had been an outspoken advocate for the coed bathroom.

“Yo, ladies, you all good here—wearing your layers?”

“Kenneth, please knock,” said Mary Louise.

“My bad,” said Kenneth. “I’m making my frostbite rounds.”

Whenever Kara saw Kenneth she flashed on their awkward kiss the first week of school, and felt like an asshole. That Friday night, the official end of week one of classes, she’d played Truth or Dare—she and some of the random people at the other end of the hall whom she never even spoke to anymore—and one girl, Allie or Abby or something, dared her to “plant one on Kenneth—on the lips.” During the last round, Kara had taken Truth and confessed she found him oddly sexy. After a couple more shots of tequila, she found it easy to knock on Kenneth’s half-open door and tell him she was homesick and needed a hug.

“It gets better,” he said, presumptuously referencing the whole gay-is-okay campaign, and with that, she threw her strong arms around him hard. As he pulled away, she gave him the lightest peck on the lips. Immediately, he kissed her back with passion, his tongue glazed in toothpaste she faintly recognized.

“Whoa,” he’d said when *she* jerked away, “I’m spoken for. I’m flattered--”

“Sorry,” said Kara, disoriented.

This had been her first kiss, and it felt akin to having gentle dental work done.

Allie/Abby had tiptoed up behind them both to verify the kiss, and she started giggling hysterically.

“You girls have been drinking, haven’t you?” Kenneth said, trying to change the subject, fingering the cross around his neck.

Allie/Abby nodded yes somberly—then she sprinted through the emergency exit, causing a harsh alarm to sound.

“Fuck,” Kenneth said, restraining Kara by the t-shirt sleeve so she couldn’t escape punishment or traipse away to spread rumors. “I have to deal with this!”

Meanwhile, Mary Louise, sitting on the hallway floor sending texts to Arun at the library, had overheard the entire exchange. She leapt to her bare feet like an adorable little ninja, Kara thought. Her huge eyelashes made her look like an anime character.

“Kara, did you *invite* Kenneth to kiss you...so deeply?”

“Nope,” Kara said, realizing Mary Louise’s strategy. “I should probably stop by the counseling center and talk it through.”

“I’ll walk you there tomorrow,” said Mary Louise.

“Look!” Kenneth shouted, then lowered his voice—“listen, listen”—the alarm having brought everyone on the hall out of their rooms.

“My bad,” Kenneth said to Kara very quietly. “Look, I’ll let you off on the drinking just this once, okay?”

Mary Louise winked at Kara—that’s when Kara first knew she was far more attracted to her cute, conniving roommate than she was to Kenneth. The epiphany made the inside of her bottom lip start to ache, quietly but irrefutably, an ulcer on its warpath.

She knew her entire high school crowd, many of whom had ended up at Yale and Stanford and smaller but nearly equally prestigious places with “ford” and “shire” at the ends of their names, would have eaten up the news of the pink handgun like cotton

candy, begging her for more incriminating information about Mary Louise. Was she a racist? A Baptist? A right-to-life loon? Encouraging Kara, yet again, to transfer. At rare times of loneliness she felt tempted to drop the gun bomb, but she wanted to tell the whole story—somehow. She wanted to be the one to make Mary Louise real to people from the north, and maybe even parts of Europe.

“Why do you find me interesting?” Mary Louise asked Kara somewhat flirtatiously, rain humming in the background—meanwhile, Mary Louise watched herself in the mirror.

“I’m not sure,” Kara blurted. But she checked herself; she was sure: Mary Louise had soft, perpetually tan skin like a Kraft caramel that Kara longed to taste; Mary Louise also said what she was thinking—when she wasn’t twisting people around her finger.

Almost three months into the fall semester, the fact of her roommate’s handgun seemed much less disturbing than it had on day one when Mary Louise tumbled into their stuffy room with her two coffin-wide, Louis-Vuitton-tattooed bags that took up every inch of space between the iron cots. As Mary Louise shook her backpack off her shoulder, her gun thudded to the floor. It was the size of a stapler, the shiny pink of a Barbie Corvette—M.L.H. engraved in silver on the handle—and Kara wondered at first if it might not be a cigarette lighter.

“Christ, that looks kind of real,” she said.

“It is! Close the door!” Mary Louise shrieked, scooping up the weapon.

In case Kara was being threatened, she did shut the door—but also because she liked the way this new acquaintance was already suggesting their solidarity. Mary Louise replaced the pistol in her backpack and dropped the bag on the bed.

And then, this slip of a girl with the world's most enormous eyelashes hoisted Kara's heavy duffel and set it atop her suitcase, going, "Is this vintage or repurposed?"

"Good afternoon, Mary Louise," came a male voice from the hallway.

"It's *you*!" Mary Louise said to the handsome boy with dark skin. "You get that can of tuna open?"

"The can opener confirmed as much—verbally."

Arun, with whom Mary Louise would begin an intimate relationship before that first weekend, was returning a high-end can opener that talked.

That first evening, Kara, Mary Louise, and Arun would find themselves dining in the cafeteria together, catching up on one another's recent childhoods, Mary Louise lustily feeding her boyfriend-to-be her lukewarm ravioli and frozen yogurt with sprinkles.

A couple of sophomore frat boys would refer to Arun as a crazy Muslim and a terrorist.

"Makes me sick: 9/11 is only a week away, and we're in school—in *God's country*—with that guy," the boy with curly hair said.

An enraged Mary Louise got to her feet—"Don't bother," Arun counseled her. But she sashayed to the boys' table and placed her hand on her hip.

The guys elbowed each other: hotness on the scene.

"What's up?" they asked in unison.

"I just thought you sounded..." she trailed off in a sexy voice.

"What?" pleaded the boy with straight hair.

“Totally racist. Arun is an Indian,” Mary Louise told them. “And he’s more Christian than you two combined. So shut up. But—also—shut up anyway. About everything.”

“Dude, he’s Native American,” curly boy told the other. “Show some respect.”

As she and Arun eavesdropped from their table, Kara watched his growing interest in Mary Louise come on like a spotlight in the woods.

His sexual encounter with Mary Louise would mark his first time, not hers. For Arun, a born-again Christian from South Carolina, the sex, as much as he liked it, would prove guilt-making and distract him from his heavy course load. That’s why he never let Mary Louise linger long or fall sleep in his room, even when his roommate was M.I.A.

By October, the lack of spooning in her life was causing Mary Louise angst.

“If there is a god, I’m sure he wants us to cuddle with each other, and that’s what I tell Arun again and again—I mean it’s been weeks of coupledness,” Mary Louise whispered at Kara from her cot. Kara sat hunched at her built-in desk studying beneath a reading lamp, so that Mary Louise could rest.

“I could hold you,” Kara offered, very quietly.

“Really? That would be great,” Mary Louise said. “I’m so freaking cold.”

“I know you’re bi, by the way,” Mary Louise added.

“I’m more, like, fluid,” Kara replied, somewhat hurt for some reason.

“Arun thought lesbian,” Mary Louise told her, sitting up, making room for her roommate. “Whatever. Let’s warm up as friends.”

Kara cut the lamp and bolted into Mare-Lou’s bed.

Holding Mary Louise was the best thing Kara had experienced to date—kind of like hugging a life-size Build-a-Bear coated in silk, a beautiful Build-a-Bear that smelled like coconut shampoo. But how exactly was she *supposed* to hold the girl whose torso, once Kara linked her long arms around it, left ample room for Kara to crack her knuckles, read a book, or even caress Mary Louise’s face, her stomach, her breasts? This was supposed to be a platonic favor. Kara clasped her own hands and tried not to breathe too hard, but she was holding herself so rigidly that her back started to hurt.

“Excuse me,” Kara said, extracting herself, leaving to pee, and returning.

“I’m so cold—get over here!” said her roommate.

Kara climbed back into Mary Louise’s bed, placed her arms around her yawning friend, and tried to play dead.

“Thanks, roomie,” Mary Louise whispered and fell asleep.

For something to do, as she tried not to fidget her fingers and disturb Mary Louise, Kara tried to work out what had made Arun pigeonhole her sexual orientation. Maybe it was her muscular build mixed with her large blue eyes.

Maybe he just liked to pigeonhole.

She pressed her pelvis a little closer to Mare-Lou’s bottom to avoid falling off the twin bed. Then she thought back to her crush on a new kid named Providence (from Providence, Rhode Island) who attended her high school senior year. Providence became drum major on the spot. Providence had terrifically thick eyelashes, too, but they were real. And no one knew Providence’s birth gender or sexual orientation because they (Providence) said—to the school paper—that such answers did not exist, not for them.

Just before five a.m., Kara was still wide-awake—still on sensory overload.

Suddenly, Mary Louise turned and placed her arms around her.

“It’s too early to be awake,” Mary Louise whispered.

But Kara would never be able to sleep face-to-face, so she turned over and let Mary Louise do the holding.

Now the two were in sync, woven, and somehow afloat—at last, Kara did sleep.

These days, the girls were tight during the daytime as well. Mary Louise had confided in Kara that she’d got into Clemson off the waitlist and needed to pull a three-oh to stay. Now that finals were on their radar, Kara proofed Mary Louise’s Theater homework and offered pointers for memorization—“*Stage right* is where the performer stands and thinks, ‘I’m in the *right*.’” But if someone in the audience is looking at the same actor, they say, ‘That’s a fucking leftist asshole.’”

Mary Louise laughed darkly: “I’ve got it.”

Once, Mary Louise shared a quirky idea for how Kara could better grasp advanced algebra: “Write the concepts on index cards just before you go to sleep—use a Sharpie—then put the cards under your pillow and *dream them*.” One night after the girls had done a few shots in Russ and Arun’s room—Arun abstained—Kara tried the index card trick, got a perfect score on her 8 a.m. quiz the next day, and decided Mary Louise was intelligent in ways that weren’t acknowledged by the real world.

Feeling somewhat pumped, Kara patted herself on the back for being in love with a woman who could be in love with a born-again Christian like Arun. Maybe she was exoticizing her roommate to a degree, but she didn’t really think Mary Louise would mind. Besides, wasn’t the fetishizing possibly a two-way street?

When Mary Louise offered (begged, more like) to shave Kara's entire head to match the undercut she hid beneath a ponytail, Kara agreed, because it meant Mary Louise would be running her hands all over Kara's scalp, following the trails of Kara's own electric razor.

"You look like Sinéad O'Connor," Mary Louise said.

"Who's that?" asked Kara.

"An old folk singer with big hypnotic eyes."

That night, when her mom called, Kara asked her if she knew Sinéad O'Connor.

"Of course, doll."

"Was she pretty—when she was bald?"

"Oh, *beyond*."

Kara felt pretty. But when she found herself brushing her teeth next to Arun in the stuffy bathroom, she felt his eyes all over her baldhead in a less than admiring way. He didn't ask after her health this evening. Toothbrush in mouth, he didn't even say hello. And when he spit, he spit angrily—or in disgust—that's what Kara thought.

"What's wrong?" asked Mary Louise when Kara got back to their room.

"Nothing."

"Someone hurt your feelings. Me?"

"It wasn't you, Mare-Lou."

"Want me to beat them up for you?"

"No." Kara laughed. "I'm probably just PMS-ing."

The female roommates also found themselves on the same cycle—in fact, they’d been in period sync since September, and Kara watched the calendar for Mary Louise’s mood to dip about two days before the blood would show for them both.

When her mood fell, Mary Louise wanted to be left alone; she wouldn’t go to class. Kara felt vicariously blue, but then they started bleeding and Mary Louise was contrite and wanted to walk to the snack bar for chocolate donuts.

“Where is my I.D. at?” Mary Louise asked out loud. “I’m buying!”

Of course, the happiness was brief because Mary Louise also craved sex.

Just before Halloween, Mary Louise sauntered down the hall in a headband with horns to find Arun and seduce him (despite her medium-flow period) out of his corduroys. Lip aching, Kara took out her journal and wrote about life with M.L.H.—she couldn’t resist. She wanted to capture the truth of her love, to identify the difference between the cartoon version of Mary Louise Hastings that came to her mind when she felt peeved or ignored—that accent *was* thick and her grades were low—and the pretty waifish creature who told it like it was more directly than anyone she knew back home.

That November, Mary Louise should have experienced PMS no later than the twentieth of the month—Kara had calculated it—but come the morning of the twenty-second, Mary Louise was as giddy as a sugarplum fairy as she danced to a techno song in nothing but a t-shirt and undies on Kara’s unmade bed. Kara returned from her algebra class to find Mary Louise in mid-booty-shake. “Howdy,” Mary Louise exclaimed, then she fell to her knees and started barfing all over the gigantic math textbook that would have cost Kara three hundred dollars if she hadn’t been on scholarship.

“You’re pregnant,” Kara told her friend. After Mary Louise laughed her head off and washed her face, Kara repeated her point: “You’re fucking pregnant, Mare.” Mary Louise started to cry—“Fuck me, you might be right.”

Getting an abortion was easily doable—Mary Louise, having taken a gap year to prove to her mother she could correct her party-person ways and earn the right to go to college, was already nineteen—but they’d need more cash than Mary Louise had if she was to avoid using her mother’s insurance coverage for the procedure.

While Mary Louise disappeared to another floor to take her pregnancy test in a discreet single-sex bathroom, Kara paced their room.

“Did you, I don’t know, *pass*?” Kara asked her when she returned.

“My first A this term,” Mary Louise wailed.

“You can get the procedure in ten days,” Kara said, Googling later.

“Ten days? That’s a lifetime!”

“What are you two up to?” Arun stood in the doorway in loose sweatpants, pale blue oxford un-tucked, one sock torn at the toe, uncharacteristically disheveled—he’d never entered their room despite Mary Louise’s downright begging. He sounded serious.

“Hi, baby,” she said. His face brightened.

Distracted by looming finals, Mary Louise hadn’t visited Arun’s room in more than twenty-four hours. Clearly he’d panicked.

Kara killed the Google page.

“What do you want, sweetie?” Mary Louise asked Arun. “*Me*?”

He nodded sheepishly—“Actually, Russ is sleeping at Heather’s dorm, and I wondered: Do you want to stay over just this once? I aced my mock bio exam.”

After Mary Louise left for Arun's love nest—she got her things together and didn't even say goodbye—Kara located her journal.

"I can't talk, Mom, I'm working," she snapped when her mother's text came in.

"You okay, doll?"

"Sorry to be short—I'm on my period."

Kara wrote about Mary Louise's sexy panty dance—how she teased Kara when she felt like it, because she lived for attention; she wrote about the way M.L.H. had seduced Arun so quickly, no doubt scarring him, possibly alienating him from his faith; she created a character who'd got pregnant without seeming to understand how a pregnancy occurred and now planned to have her *third* abortion, not that this last bit was true, of course not, but this was like a cautionary tale. Kara liked to write fiction best when she was mad or sad. It was, to put a Greek word to good use, *cathartic*.

"Mare-Lou doesn't have money for bullets let alone an abortion," Kara wrote in blunt block print. "Her heart is breaking that she may have to give up her gun to pay for the procedure, not only because her father gave it to her, but because she feels unsafe walking the immense campus unarmed. A ninety-pound blond temptress ought to have a way to protect herself—even if she isn't going to use condoms when she fucks someone. Too bad sex education is so primitively controversial in the South."

But when she read the writing through, she realized how bad it was, how narrow—and she felt worse. Her lip had erupted and her period was a bitch.

Twenty-four hours later, Mary Louise returned to their room without her eyelashes on, looking un-slept and bloated, Kara thought—chomping on a mini-donut, M.L.H. looked downright ordinary.

And yet this ordinariness seemed so singular—it only made Kara crush harder.

“Missed you,” Mary Louise said, kissing Kara’s cheek. “I’ve been thinking maybe I should call my dad and just let him know what I’m doing. Maybe he’s flush.”

“Will your dad tell your mom?” Kara said. “And won’t she pull you out of school?”

Mary Louise nodded: “I suspect so. But I’m barely passing anyway.”

“Have you talked to Arun about the pregnancy?”

“I can’t—he’ll fall apart, you know?”

“Listen, I have some savings,” Kara told her. “I have just enough.”

“I don’t want to take your dinky travel money—no way.”

“You could pawn your luggage.”

“Not that!”

“Another idea occurred to me,” Kara said.

The winter ice was at its worst. They got in Kara’s Camry and traded in the pink gun at the Win, Lose or Pawn Shop out on ugly strip-mall-strewn Schaeffer Terrace Road, the store plastered with signs offering to buy your gold “24 HOURS!”

“If I really had gold cross earrings, maybe I could keep my gun,” said Mary Louise. Good line, Kara thought. Mary Louise’s hair was dirty and she reminded Kara of a stray cat in need of shelter—even now, especially now, she made Kara swoon.

“You’d get more if this thing weren’t monogrammed,” a frowning clerk name-tagged Ginger told Mary Louise. “But it’s a sweet little trifle.”

Mary Louise accepted the two hundred dollars and linked Kara’s arm.

“Are you a boy or a girl, honey?” Ginger, who smelled of cigarettes, asked Kara.

“She’s my bi Buddha,” Mary Louise said with so much good intention Kara gushed. And then the two sailed away in Kara’s groaning car, a soft, feathery snow falling. The night sky was as black-blue as a deep, placid lake in a perfect land far, far away—much farther than Vermont.

Arun waited for the girls to return that evening. Because he’d spent a full night holding Mary Louise in his dorm bed, he figured it would be okay to enter her unlocked room and recline on *her* bed, just this once. While he waited, he closed his eyes—half-asleep, he slid his long hand beneath her pillow only to find a hidden notebook. But this was Kara’s notebook—*her* blocky script. Was he in the wrong bed?

When he left their room, he took the book with him.

The next day was Saturday and cold as a warlock’s balls, as Kara and her Freaky Geekies used to say—Burlington-cold. Kara and Mary Louise had come home late, scarfed pizza, and slept in an easy embrace, Kara with her warm hand on Mary Louise’s tummy, telling her when she woke now and then, “It’ll be okay,” imagining that this polka-dot-sized fetus was hers, too. Imagining she was the co-parent. Once she almost said, “I love you,” but that was probably apparent.

Come six a.m. they both woke with a gun in their faces.

“What the fuck! Fuck me!” Kara shouted so loudly she surprised herself.

“I got this back for you, *Mare-Lou*,” Arun said, tracing it along his girlfriend’s shoulders. “It’s loaded up and everything, like you want it to feel safe. If you’ll trust me, I can keep you safe.”

Whoa, Kara realized he’d read her creative writing—quite closely, too.

Fuck.

“What’s going on here?” Kenneth shrieked, flipping the light on, his red hair in bedhead spikes, his reindeer pajama pants a surreal addition.

“You can’t just come in here anytime you fucking please,” Mary Louise told Kenneth, her face hot pink, her voice on high speed. “Arun, you’ve got to get a grip.”

Kenneth—freaked at the sight of the gun—walked a few steps backward, exited, and closed the door.

What the local media hastily reported two hours later is what many continue to believe around the country, but the truth is that the man brandishing the gun was *not* a Middle Easterner intent on terrorizing the campus, but a mixed-up seventeen-year-old Indian guy from Simpsonville, South Carolina, raised by devout Pentecostals.

“Are you actually pregnant?” Arun, still holding the gun, asked Mary Louise.

“Yes—you’re the one who wanted to skip the condom, remember?”

Kayla pinched Mary Louise’s leg—now wasn’t the time to keep it real.

“And will you keep this child—if I stand by you?”

“Sure, yes,” Mary Louise answered. “Sounds like a plan.”

Kara slid the gun from Arun’s hands easily. Its weight surprised her.

And now Arun—still unidentified in the press—lies unconscious after taking a bullet to the shoulder. Kara had no intention of shooting anyone, even though she did. When Arun came toward her and reached for the weapon, she panicked. He stepped on her foot by mistake and she fired by mistake. She hated the acrid smell of gunpowder in her face. Worse, she hated the bright red blood on the bedding and the wall, the blood coming from this boy she barely knew.

Arun's mother and father hover over his hospital bed—which is being guarded by police and F.B.I.—his dad now and then speaking in tongues. Mary Louise Hastings remains unscathed. In fact, at this moment, she sits curled in a plastic armchair in Arun's hospital room, skimming schoolbooks and ignoring apology texts from Kara.

"I'm so sorry, but you know it was an accident," Kara has texted innumerable times. And most recently: "It was a *fucking* accident, Mare-Lou."

Her friend's unplanned pregnancy is scheduled to be terminated in one week and two days. (Kara will gladly drive her to the appointment and back, provided her Camry will start in the midst of this extra-cold snap. The fact that Mary Louise has finally texted her a kiss-blowing emoji gives her some reasonable hope their friendship is still intact.)

Despite Kara's having talked to an editor at length and offered the Real Truth, Kenneth's pretty face is the one on the front page of the school paper. He told the reporter: "You know, there's going to be risk when you take on the R.A. job. I'm just happy I could save my kids' lives this weekend by acting quickly and alerting authorities to this terrorism. God bless the U.S.A."

Whatever. Kara, she's writing all of this down without making shit up. Once she submits these pages you just read to her advisor, she's going to minor in nonfiction writing, officially. She would like to apologize respectfully to Arun and his entire family. She would also like to apologize to Mary Louise Hastings for outing her pink gun, her nickname, and all the rest, but she wants the world to know her new friend is a real person. And she's okay with Mary Louise knowing out loud just how much she loves her, too—even if that information sounds reductive or simplistic—because it's absolutely true.