

THE FLIGHT FROM SAIGON

Thomas Beller

LET'S START in the present, more or less, and with this woman I know, Cynthia. She wears sweatpants and there is a pimple on her nose more often than not. She has trouble getting out of bed. I once sat on the second-floor balcony of my house and watched her get out of the backseat of a car. I thought, Oh, there is Cynthia my old friend's friend's niece and she has gotten a ride to my place with a friend.

I watched her close the car door, take a step away, and then stop. She waved at the driver, opened the door she had just closed, reached in, and plucked out her cell phone. She showed it to the driver, a gesture that said, "I almost forgot my phone on the floor of your car but I got it now and everything is OK."

It was a balmy day and Cynthia was wearing sweatpants and slippers and white socks. She looked a bit like someone who was on too much medication. Anyone could see it. The body language. The extra weight. But she was attractive, a placidity registered on her features, which would have been sharp if it weren't for the weight. It had been flattering to get the call about her—that she was having a hard time in college, could I check in on her, try and keep her in view. Of course, I'd said.

Only when the car, a silver sedan, made a U-turn could I see that the driver was a black woman of middle age; she was an Uber driver, and the "I almost lost my phone" gesture, which had a hint of the personal, was not directed at a friend but a stranger. Though who knows, maybe she made friends with the driver. Which in a way would be even worse. I don't know why. Something about the intimacy of that "I almost left my phone on the floor of the backseat of your car but now I have it and all is well" just upset me and made me feel bad, which made me think about Will, whose face now and then registered a beleaguered expression that suggested that fate was working against him, like the time he scalped tickets for a Rangers game on his birthday and made it to the seats with Lacey, only to be informed that he had bought fake tickets and would have to leave. I met Will and Lacey for drinks at Buffy's later that night and we laughed about it, and then some-

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thing passed across Will's face that made me sad. But maybe this isn't a good example of what I mean, since there was a straightforward reason for sadness in that moment, being tossed from the Rangers game on your birthday just when you got comfy in the seats with your girlfriend.

But this is withholding. The key detail about Cynthia is that she has a famous, wealthy father who is dead. He wasn't famous for being wealthy, exactly, but his success had made him rich, and it was all bound up together. She didn't use his last name. In that sense she had something on Will, who was rather burdened by his well-known last name.

I like this young woman. She comes over to my house now and then to study. She just sits at the dining room table. It was my idea. She should use my place as a study hall. It's right near the college. From here, she can walk. Of course we chatted now and then.

When I found out who she was, I realized her father had died when she was still a child. I wondered if this biographical detail should have been included when my friend called to say he had a friend who had a niece. But I understand why it was not. I only found out when she mentioned a winter holiday in Little B.

"What's little B?" I said.

"St. Barthes," she said in a casual, tossed-off manner that almost offended me, as though it were a commonly used acronym. "As opposed to Barbados."

"What were you doing over in St. Barthes?"

"I was on a boat. With my whole family. For two weeks. Which, if you can imagine, was taxing. You can't really leave a boat."

"It sounds rough. Do you get along with them?"

"There was a crew member I liked. Herman. From Trinidad."

"What about your family," I said. "You know, them?"

"Some more than others."

"And who do you get along with less?"

"I guess my cousin. She thinks she's a writer."

"And that's a problem why?"

"She hasn't written anything."

"So it's undeserved," I said.

"Yeah. She just likes to give advice like she knows what she is talking about, and she doesn't, it's annoying."

“Is that the worst of it?”

“I have this other cousin who is annoying, too.”

“What’s annoying about her?”

“She is very tidy. She says she doesn’t like New Orleans because it’s dirty.”

“And what did you say to that?”

“I said I love New Orleans because it’s dirty. And I also said New Orleans isn’t even dirty. If you wear brand-new white Converse sneakers to Jazz Fest after it rains, they are going to get muddy, OK? That’s not a basis to cast aspersions. It’s one of the things about New Orleans I love. Tidy people hate it.”

I laughed at “aspersions.”

Later I started mulling over the way she said, “Little B.” Who spends two weeks on a boat? Rugged, outdoor types who rough it on the high seas in a jalopy of a sailboat. Or...

I googled her name. Then I tried it with the word *yacht* next to her name. There it all was.

She came over a week later. That was the deal, Wednesday afternoons at 3:30 for an hour before her 5 p.m. class. I wanted to bring it up. But I couldn’t think of how to do so, other than saying I had googled her. Instead I put her tea and cookies down and, taking my customary seat opposite her, asked about her grades.

“If I were doing all right, would I have an arrangement to come over to your house every week to study?”

“I don’t know, I thought this was just a good way of getting oriented before class.”

“It is. Don’t get me wrong, I’m really grateful for the tea and cookies and everything. But it’s the sort of support you get when you are not doing well in school.”

“And have you always not done well?”

“I’ve had ups and downs.”

“Where are you now?”

“Let’s just say I hear from the Dean a lot.”

“The Dean? Why do you hear from the Dean?”

“Let’s just say the school really, really wants me to graduate. So they have a special person on the case for this purpose.”

“What purpose?”

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“Keeping me from failing out.”

“And how is that going?”

“So-so.”

“And why does the school want you to graduate so badly?”

“Because of my family,” she said. We had the habit of only intermittent eye contact when we spoke. Now she looked at me and said the name of her father. “So, you see,” she said.

“So you are the daughter of...”

She said his name again.

“But you use your mother’s name because...”

“It just makes everything simpler.”

She was nine when her father died. The age I was when my father died. The next week I said something to her about it. I’d hesitated about bringing the matter up because a slight self-consciousness had entered into my thoughts about Cynthia. Previously I had offered her tea, cookies, a table, the comfort of a house silent in the absence of little children, which is its own kind of silence. When we spoke I was kiddingly impatient.

Once, apropos of her grades, I repeated a line my family lawyer had offered me a few years after my father died, when I was in danger of failing out of ninth grade. “Right now you only have to meet a specific standard to succeed,” he said. “That is a situation unique to school. Later on in life, there is no specific standard. You can’t know that your effort will pay off. Now, all you have to do is try.”

Herbert, who took me to play tennis with him at the Midtown Tennis Club, who looked so handsome and strong in his tennis whites, skidding back and forth on the clay behind the baseline while I lobbed my moonballs at him and cut dink shots that died dishonorably at the service line. He received them all with a smile and then took me out to lunch. These games must have happened every few months when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen. Later on he would take me to lunch at the Oyster Bar when the herring were in season. Not every year. But often enough to make it feel like a tradition.

Herbert was so unfailingly graceful, so attentive to my mother when she had a problem or concern about something, so patient with me. Only once, when I was an adult and on the way to my shrink, did I see another

side of him—he was walking down Park Avenue a couple of blocks away. I recognized him, was excited to greet him. Then he passed a window in which he could see his reflection. He turned to it, his figure erect, handsome, and touched the middle button on his immaculately tailored suit. It shocked me for some reason. Looking at your reflection in the window as you pass by on the street is a natural gesture. But the way he did it betrayed a slight vanity. It had never occurred to me he would have this as part of his personality. Maybe I was able to sustain this fantasy because I knew him in such a narrow context—he was more than a family friend, but also less. We didn't know his wife, his children. In a way, he took care of us. I felt flustered and crossed the street.

Vanity has, within it, sexuality, and Herbert was not a sexual person for me—he was a man, a strong, smart man who was helping my mother and me navigate the world the way a husband would, or a father. He had sat in my father's hospital room and listened to what my father had to say about his will. I needed him to be pure beneficence. Vanity, even a little, complicated this. An unreasonable, intolerant position. But little kids are fascists, and grieving little kids are especially severe fascists.

"I'm sorry about your father," I said on Cynthia's next visit. "My father died when I was nine. So I kind of know what it's like."

"Oh, but I'm fine," she said abruptly. "It's fine."

That she was so vehement about being fine, while also so conspicuously not fine, interested me. It made me think of Will. Which may be a clue to my long-lasting, almost obsessive reviewing of the Will episode in my life—shouldn't this woman make me think of myself, of my own father's death? When I got fat, and slumped around in a daze, and forgot things, and did badly at school? Maybe thinking about Will was just a way of working out my own experience of the death of my father. Or maybe the death of Will reminded me of the death of my father, which would be why I can't seem to get over it. Maybe I felt a similar triumphant thump in my chest upon hearing of both deaths—not joy, but an adrenalin bump of, "I'm still alive." Maybe my distress at the idiotic, mostly accidental death of Will was all wound up in the similar feeling of oedipal survivor guilt that I experienced with my dad.

There is one more detail about Cynthia I want to report, it's almost the

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main detail. Once, she told me that she had been attacked by a guy while she sat alone in a theater.

“Why were you sitting alone in a theater?”

“I was an apprentice lights person. I was practicing the different lighting cues for this dance performance. And this guy walks in. I’m like, Can I help you? And the next thing I know...”

He put a knife to her throat. The lighting console was at the back of the auditorium. She was alone in the auditorium with all the seats, the empty stage. She spent a long time trying to talk him down, humor him, waiting for an opportunity to scream. Then two men in walked in. Dancers. The guy brought the knife down to her stomach. He wasn’t college-age. He was older. But, she said, “there was this ambiguous scruffiness to him.”

But surely these two guys could see the knife.

They didn’t. They asked where everybody was, and she said rehearsal didn’t start for another fifteen minutes, even though there was no rehearsal that day.

They just stood there at the back, near the entrance, for a minute and then they left. The knife wielder let the knife down. It was like the close call had exhausted him. She shoved him and ran, screaming, out through the lobby, out the doors. The first people she saw were the guys who had walked in a few moments earlier. They were the ones who talked her down, who helped call the police, who waited with her until they arrived, all of them wondering if the knife wielder was still in the auditorium. He wasn’t, it turned out, having left through the emergency exit. When it was all over she gave them her name and number and she said to me, “I told them if there’s anything I could do for them, let me know. I owed them a major favor.”

“You could also have been pissed at them,” I said. “I mean they walked in, stared at you alone with this strange guy who is holding a knife to you, and didn’t notice?”

“I heard from one of them a while later. He asked if I could write him a recommendation to medical school.”

Back when I was obsessed with tennis at sailing camp—I was obsessed with tennis because I was very tall and fat, and it was a nightmare out in the dinghy with the life preserver up against your neck having to rapidly duck

whenever someone yelled, “Tack!” so I did a lot of tennis instead of sailing—I once saw a counselor come out of the riflery range and look down at the steps. Just a few wooden steps. This guy was of no importance to me, except he was good at tennis. A slight build, dark features, black hair, always wore a watch, even when he played. A young guy but a counselor, an adult in my twelve-year-old eyes. And very good at tennis. And when he looked down there was something vulnerable in his expression that sent a shiver through me. Not exactly sad. More like pensive. Usually he was a bit of a jerk. I never said a word to him. He was totally unimportant in my life. Except I shivered when I saw that expression. And I have always remembered it.

Cynthia, when she looked away from me nervously after telling me that she was fine, it’s *fine*, so insistent, had a bit of that quality to her face. Except it made sense that she would have moment of pensiveness in such a moment, while what had so fascinated me about the camp counselor was how out of context it was that this flash of humanity or whatever it was should suddenly be visible to me.

Which brings me, in a roundabout way, to Will. There are certain obsessions that transcend the unhealthy and simply become part of who you are, in the way that an injured leg or arm might remain functional but with some strange quality to the motion of its use. You can run and throw, but it looks a little funny. At some point it stops being an injury or an aberration and becomes an identity, the way a tree, confronted with a metal fence or some other unnatural obstacle, will grow around it, encompass the obstacle into its very marrow. This is how I feel about Will. It’s not even a source of pain anymore. He has been dead for seventeen years, which is twice as long as I even knew him. He’s not there and yet he is sort of there, part of how I see things.

2

NOT LONG AFTER WILL BOUGHT his loft in Tribeca, I got a key to the place. My own key. Handed to me by Will. A trinket. A little shiny thing. I let it lie flat in his palm for a moment, regarding it as though it were some attractive, sinister thing. It was the key to a loft apartment within which was the office of my magazine. It was also, in a roundabout way, the key to Phnom Penh.

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And from there, to Saigon.

The flight to Saigon was present, as an idea, from the moment I decided to go to Phnom Penh. It happened in the other office, Will's office, which was adjacent to our office—the office of the magazine. Why the literary magazine I had started had an office in Will's loft is another story. He wanted to be part of the magazine. I guess he wanted to be part of my life. He had admired my writing, he told me when we first met, and I had admired his writing. We had read one story of each other's, exactly, at that point. Both were either about or made mention of a dead father. And neither of us ever brought this biographical fact up to one another for the duration of our friendship, which turned out to be the rest of his life.

For this story, the important detail is that we were alone in the loft, in the office, which was our office beside which, like snake eyes, was his office. I had been fired from a job I had really wanted and been glad to have. I was at loose ends. Will had made a push for me to go to Phnom Penh to work on the *Daily*. A splash of sunshine was coming through the grimy window looking out onto the street. I said yes. It came out in a jumbling rush. I said yes, he said, "Come on! It will be great!" as though he hadn't heard. There was a dam-breaking feeling, a giving up, a plunging, falling feeling. "Yes, I'll do it!" I said. And then we were on our knees looking at a map.

It was an old map of Vietnam and Cambodia. Only now, in memory, does its provenance come to seem conspicuous, spooky—a hand-painted map with everything written in French. Topographical notations. The blue of the sea off the coast of Vietnam. The landscape in green and white.

"Here is Phnom Penh, and here is Saigon," he said, putting a finger on one and then the other.

It was a military map. Something Will had picked up during his souvenir hunting expeditions in Saigon. He had been among that first generation of travelers to wash into the country when it opened to tourists in 1991.

"And it is a twenty-five minute flight from one to the other," he continued.

"Now wait a second, I just got my head around Phnom Penh and now you are shipping me off to Saigon? Why?"

"Because it is such a great town. You have to see it. A twenty-five minute

flight. And then we will, we will have the best time. I'll bring a wad of hundreds and we will..."

I forget the rest. He had never before said something like that. He had never before brandished the idea of money or cash, or giving it, or sharing it. I was sad to feel my own excitement at his benefaction. Sad to know that in agreeing to go to Phnom Penh something had changed between us. My unemployment was a kind of orphanhood. I didn't like it. But I was excited now for this trip. This map. A map of a landscape where many people died fighting a war, for what?

Our first real conversation took place in the apartment of Christine, the girlfriend with whom he had taken a long, drunken, self-funded journalistic expedition to Saigon. Will invited me for dinner. She was there but wandered in and out of our sphere like a mom checking in on a boy's playdate, a concept foreign to me then but familiar to me now. They seemed to not be getting along. She had "a low center of gravity." I wasn't looking at her ass, wasn't thinking of her like that. It only occurred to me later when he got together with Lacey, who also had a low center of gravity.

Will had a young man's body and an older man's face. Heavy jowls even though the face was still so youthful. I saw a picture of him at the age of three or four, once, and he had heavy jowls then, too. The baby fat morphed into that decadent, wolfish look, even as the rest of his body was outrageously lean, muscular, and athletic. This jowly, confused, sneering, anxious, tender face looming among the shops of Saigon, buying things for what must have been astonishing sums from the seller's point of view. Though I know Will negotiated. Not so much to get a better deal but for the experience. Something to spice the story. We shared this tendency to spice the story, to adjust the life to the future version of the life that will one day be told. Our methods were generally different. For example I was stupid, daring, willing to go without a plan, but I didn't want to die. I was not brave. I thought the idea of Vietnam was frightening, but Cambodia was its own entity. The idea of Cambodia terrified me.

And yet, with the exquisite sense of provocation that only children and those who remain childish possess, it was in Phnom Penh that Will acquired his most valuable souvenir—a project. Having a project in Cambodia was

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no accomplishment. Everywhere you looked in that country there was a screaming humanitarian crisis. Will's project was a newspaper. Four pieces of paper stapled together, in those early days, but still. He stumbled onto it when looking for a printer while staying at the Renakse Hotel. They did not have a printer, he was told. But upstairs, in the attic, were some Americans who could perhaps help.

And so he went upstairs. I heard this story from Bill, who was one of the two people working in that attic space, but I see it from Will's point of view, perhaps because a year later it was me winding my way up the spiral staircase, the cool, open space of the lobby's tiled floor dropping away as I rose—it felt like *Hansel and Gretel* when I did it, complete with a view of a magical castle when I got to the top. The royal palace was directly across the street. An impossible steep roof. A fairy tale.

Will, the lost son of a lost newspaper dynasty, walks up a spiralling staircase and into an open air hallway with a clear view of the palace roof. The palace! I can't believe I can write such a word with a straight face, but there it was, its steeped roof, the color, a magical canary-yellow orange, the shapes of the *apsaras* so perfectly foreign, sinister, and exquisite. He would have walked along that outdoor hallway, knocked on the door. Been greeted by a handsome deadpan man his own age. A man wearing a Brooks Brothers shirt. Or maybe a T-shirt. But Bill was a guy who even in a T-shirt exuded a quality that suggested that he had worn a Brooks Brothers shirt, or had been expected to wear it, or would one day wear it, or would continue to not wear it but in defiance of this expectation. Up in the attic of the Renakse Will found his printer, and his project. A newspaper.

It was a project that translated into a perverse provocation back in New York. Among his friends, the ones adrift or miserable, he could now dangle an opportunity. People in Will's position—people with proximity to fairy tale sums—are familiar with the beseeching gaze of those in need. They approach, asking in essence to be saved. Even if they never say the words. I called it the Third Penis. It sat on Will's shoulder, and everyone could see it. To make matters worse, it would sometimes become erect for no apparent reason. It was a mortifying fact of Will's life, the Third Penis. And I don't know why I called it that. What would the second penis have been? No matter, the penis

on his shoulder was the cause of much bizarre behavior, drunken getting-out-of-your-own-skin behavior, acts of bitterness, cleverness, cruelty. The paper in Phnom Penh was, in a subtle way, a game changer for Will in New York.

Now he could offer something that had a story attached to it—his philanthropy, his act of charity, would be poison to a friendship if administered directly. But laundered by the newspaper, it lost its poison and became a gift. Though a poisoned gift. Because what kind of gift was it to send someone to Phnom Penh in 1993?

The first person who took him up on this offer was Teddy. I had come to know Teddy in uneasy circumstances, when he appeared one day in Will's loft. There was a suitcase nestled next to the couch. Such a handsome guy, I thought. A strong jaw, the tight crop of curly hair. Yet something about the depths with which the blue eyes were set beneath his brow suggested something unbalanced, strung too tight. You see this among men with no body fat sometimes. Sanity requires a small percentage of body fat. Without it, the soul becomes unmoored.

I got to know Teddy quickly and slowly: He was Will's best friend at a very young age—thirteen. They both landed at boarding school at the same time. Now Teddy was an actor. He would be sleeping on Will's couch in the living room. For how long? I didn't ask. I don't think Will did, either. It is understood that there is a statute of limitations of sleeping on someone's couch. But no one knows exactly what it is. Both the sleeper and the owner of the couch will feel some invisible pressure gauge rising. When it comes to a certain point, something will be said. Usually by the owner, unless the sleeper makes a preemptive confession, apology, request. And though the couch was ordinary, if overstuffed, the living room was not. It wasn't even a living room. It was a swath of land at one end of the loft's main space. Teddy had a key to the place. And I had a key to the place.

I didn't like that he was always there, surely because it made me feel like the freeloader he was, as opposed to...to what? I had a magazine and an office for the magazine. That Will had given me that office and a key to the place felt like something I had earned. But what does that say about my feelings about old friends, that I felt different than Teddy, the handsome couch surfer?

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Part of my problem with Teddy was that I had developed a taste for being alone in the loft. It didn't happen often. I was still unsure if I could just drop by. But apparently I could. Sometimes Will was there with friends. Or he was there alone. Sometimes no one was there. I would roam around, look at things. The TV, for example, sat atop a hideous black cabinet of some kind. I mention it because all the furniture felt like a hand-me-down from Will's college years, or someone else's college years. Or else he had bought it from a supply company that seemed to specialize in the offices of bail bondsmen, or private detectives, or some down-market operation seeking to project a legalistic bearing. There was a printing shop up the block that specialized in business printing—the neighborhood was one deep breath away from the financial district, and it still had that seediness, that grime. There was a stash of tape cassettes in the black cabinet. I examined them one day. A homemade recording of a Rangers' game. A homemade recording of a Nirvana concert. A copy of *MASH*, the movie. Several cassettes of pornography.

These old industrial buildings of Soho were not built in any harmony or logic. The windows, when there were any, all looked out at each other at odd angles. For example from where I stood holding a homemade VHS cassette of pornography, I had a view of four windows—two looked more or less directly into, and down into, a kitchen about twenty yards away. One looked out onto a sliver of space through which you could see Church Street. And one more was exposed to a window a few feet above it—I think that was an apartment but it wasn't clear. Anyone who came to that window would have a clear view of me, of the living room. Of whoever was on the couch. Such as Teddy. For this reason, among others, I put that cassette tape away. But I would go back now and then, and think about it—what the odds were of Will's returning home, how long it would take to lower the blinds on all the windows, how much time I would have when I heard the key in the door. How conspicuous it would be if Will, or someone else, came home and found me standing up, all dressed, as though walking back from the bathroom to the office at the other end of the loft, and saw that all the blinds were drawn?

All this was put on hold during the time Teddy spent living on Will's couch. Now I was never alone, it seemed. I started to resent Teddy, in part because the tendrils of contempt, once it established itself, was so self-incriminating. Every condescending thought I had towards Teddy could be turned

directly back at me, who had no more right to the place than he did. And then it was declared that Teddy would be flying to Phnom Penh to begin working at the paper as a photographer. Had he any experience as a photojournalist? It would turn out to be a career for a while, at several different papers. Teddy was a natural: fearless, a bit unhinged, an athlete. But at the time I thought he was some sacrificial figure. Will threw a party for his departure. I stood around muttering, "This is crazy. He is going to die in Cambodia because of this whim. It's not right."

That feeling never left me. But six months later it was me and Will and a splash of sunshine hitting the wood floor in his office, which was adjacent to my office. Two rooms facing the street, and the rest of the loft sprawling back toward the inward space of the block. It was all so nineteenth-century. There was even a strip club on the corner, one of the last of its kind, unreconstructed. The giant hotel that would be erected wasn't yet on that strange triangle on Church Street, which was then still occupied by a nursery whose sprinklers would come on in the middle of summer nights. The floor has been renovated, it was a pleasant warm color; we were on our knees making whooping sounds. Looking at a map. Yelling. It was cathartic.

This is not a story, it's a psychoanalytic session. It's aimless, driven by association, the guilt functioning like yeast in a cake, just enough to make it rise. Too much ruins the taste. It's because of Cynthia, her remark about those two guys who didn't save her but then helped her, the look on her face when she reported her remark at the end, "You guys did me a solid, let me know if I can ever do anything for you."

How had they figured it out? Same way I had. You get a name, you type it in.

"“Why would they want you to write a recommendation?” I asked. “You mean like a testimony to their virtue?” She gave me a deadpan stare and it occurred to me. Her other name. The Dean trying to make sure she graduated.

“I don't know how much pull I would have with medical school admissions.”

That father of hers, a workaholic. I had thought about him now and then when spending what should have been blissful and unencumbered time with my own children. I was one of those dads diving into his cell phone at the playground. I always pulled out. I knew not to vanish down there. But I felt

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the pull. Will died in the era of the clamshell. His big technology experience was seeing a food service truck with the company name on the side, Sysco, go by so often he decided they must be doing great business, and calling his family's lawyer to demand they buy the stock. He was always demanding these obscure trades. It was a source of friction. In this case he got his way, somewhat. He spelled it wrong, giving the lawyer not the food service company, Sysco, but Cisco, the technology stock. A huge success. But he never got to tell his side of the story.

"What did you do?" I asked her.

"Nothing. I never got back to him."

She shot me this look. It wasn't the heartbreaker look. But it was, in its own way, vulnerable, distressed. As she gathered her things, the usual fumbblings of possessions suggesting an anxiety beneath the placid heaviness, it occurred to me that there was something about her departures that always suggested that this would end up being her last visit. The last time I saw her. For the first time, I felt a pang of grief about this.

I looked at her and said, "I think you did the right thing."

"Thanks," she said with a tight little smile.

Everyone is so hard on themselves, it's exhausting.