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Opening extract from

Ghostgirl

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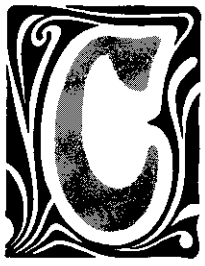
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The only thing worse than being talked about
is not being talked about.
–Oscar Wilde

You never think it will happen to you.

You think about what it would be like. You go through it over and over in your mind, changing the scenario slightly each time, but deep down, you don't really believe it would ever happen, because it's something that happens to someone else, not to you.



across the parking lot to the front doors of Hawthorne High, repeating her positive mantra — "This year is different. This is my year." Instead of being forever etched in her classmates' high school memories as the girl who just took up space, the seat filler, the one who sucked up precious air that could be put to better use, she was going to start off this year on the other foot, a foot with the hottest, most uncomfortable shoes that money could buy.

She'd wasted last year feeling like the unwanted stepchild of the Hawthorne High student body, and she wasn't about to go out like that. This year, the first day of school was going to be the first day of her new life.

Approaching the front steps, she could see the last flashes from the school yearbook staff's cameras sparking in the doorway, as Petula Kensington and her crew strutted farther and

farther down the hallway. They were always the last to arrive and then they'd suck everyone in behind them in some kind of super-popular undertow. With their entrance, the school year had officially begun. And Charlotte was alone outside and falling behind schedule. Same as always. So far.

The janitor manning the doorway peeked outside and looked around to see if anyone was coming. There wasn't. Well, there was, but, as usual, he had overlooked Charlotte, who was picking up speed as he began to close the massive metal door. To her, it looked like the door to a bank vault. But undaunted for a change, Charlotte reached the doors and found just enough room to squeeze in her new shoe and keep it from closing.

"Sorry, I didn't see you," the janitor mumbled indifferently.

She wasn't seen, which was expected, but she did get some acknowledgment and an apology. Her "Popular Plan" — a to-do list that she had meticulously crafted in hopes of snagging the object of her desire, Damen Dylan — must have been working.

Like many of her peers, Charlotte spent all summer working, but, unlike most, she was self-employed. She had pored over last year's yearbook as if her life depended on it.

She'd studied Petula, the most popular girl in school, and her two ass-kissing best friends, the Wendys — Wendy Anderson and Wendy Thomas — the way some fangirls study their favorite celebrity. She wanted to get it perfect. Just like them.

She approached the first destination on her agenda with confidence: the sign-up sheet for cheerleader tryouts. Cheerleader. *The* most prized and exclusive "sorority" of all and her

Golden Ticket to being not only noticed but envied. Charlotte grabbed the old pen that was dangling from the clipboard by a frayed string held together with masking tape and started to sign her name in the last open spot.

As she started writing the "C," she was tapped harshly on the shoulder. Charlotte stopped writing and turned to see who was interrupting her first task of the day — no, of her new life — and then saw a line of girls who had been "camped out" all night waiting to sign up. The gathering resembled less of a tryout than a casting call.

The tapping girl looked her over from head to toe, grabbed the pen, and simultaneously wrote her name in and Charlotte's off. She then opened her hand and let the pen mercilessly drop the length of the string.

Charlotte watched the pen sway against the wall like a hanged man.

She heard the pack of aspiring cheerleaders giggling behind her as she walked away. Charlotte had experienced this kind of cruelty before — to her face and behind her back — and had always tried not to care about what other people thought or said about her. But even in makeover mode, she hadn't developed a skin so thick it could withstand total mortification.

Charlotte shook it off, refusing to lose her temper or her dignity. She consulted her planner and muttered, "Locker Assignments," to herself as she crossed it off the list and headed quickly to her next destination.

As she walked, her mind raced through her itinerary this past summer. If she was being honest, she had to admit that

she had gone to a ridiculous amount of effort to get his attention. Some might say too much. There was no "nipping" or "tucking," nothing that extreme, but the hair, the diet, the wardrobe, the grooming, and the styling had pretty much taken up her entire vacation. After all, she'd taken a chance on herself, and when all was said and done, what real harm could come from a massive dose of self-improvement anyway?

Sure, she knew it was mainly . . . okay, *totally,* surface stuff, but so what. If her life so far was any indication, all that pat "inner beauty" sermonizing was a load of crap anyway. "Inner Beauty" does not get you invited to the greatest parties with the coolest people. It certainly doesn't get you invited to the Fall Ball with Damen Dylan.

Bottom line, Damen was a priority, and deadlines like the dance had a way of motivating Charlotte. Life was a series of choices, and she'd made hers.

She was able to justify her detour into superficiality as a strategic move. The way she saw it, there were only two ways to Damen. One was through Petula and her posse. But given Charlotte's reputation, or lack of one, the odds were not good. Those girls had always been popular. They always would be. In fact, the whole essence of popularity was its very unattainability. It wasn't something to be worked at or achieved. It was conferred — by what or whom, Charlotte thought, remained a mystery.

But — and this is where Charlotte's game plan took a much more subtle turn — if she could manage to *look* enough like Petula and the Wendys, *act* enough like them, *think* like them, "fit in" with the people Damen fit in with, she just might have

a chance with him. There was a lot to be said for looking the part, and she thought she had gotten at least that much right.

This led her to the other way to Damen. The better option. Her preferred option: bypass the girls completely and go straight for Damen himself. This was a risky move, for sure, since she wasn't much of a flirt. The makeover was the necessary first step, but the next phase was make or break. She'd signed up for classes she knew he would be in and planned to hang around his locker, which she was on her way to locate now.

Like everyone else, Damen never had given Charlotte a moment's notice before, and some makeup and a professional blowout were unlikely to change that. Still, Charlotte held out hope. Hope that if she could just spend some quality time with him, especially now that she had upgraded her exterior, things might yet work out.

This wasn't just wishful thinking on her part but rather a conclusion Charlotte had drawn from intensive observation of Damen. In the hundreds of pictures she had secretly taken of him during the years, Charlotte believed that she had detected a certain, well, decency in him. It was in his eyes, in his smile.

Damen was gorgeous and athletic and behaved exactly as an authentically handsome guy was supposed to behave — superior — but he was nice about it. Unsurprisingly, his decency was the thing about Damen that Petula liked the least. Maybe it was the quality she most disliked because it was the one she and all her friends lacked the most.

With the laughter from the cheerleading candidates still echoing in her ears, Charlotte was needing a little luck as she

approached the gym. The locker assignments were posted on the double doors, and Charlotte made a beeline for them. She ran her finger slowly down the alphabetized column of students, the P–Z page, glancing at their locker numbers as she searched for her own.

Each name was familiar; they were kids she'd grown up with, known since preschool or from elementary school or middle school. Their faces flashed through her mind like a slide show. Then she came to her name:

USHER, CHARLES. LOCKER: 7

"Seven is a lucky number!" she said, taking it as a good omen. "Biblical, in fact." She reached into her backpack and took out a pencil, threw it back in, and fished out a pen. She changed her name permanently from "Charles" to "Charlotte." She wanted it to be right — especially today.

Another finger-hunt down the list revealed that Damen's locker was on the other side of the building. She headed to her locker, giving herself a pep talk the whole way.

"No big deal," Charlotte reassured herself as she tested the combination on her lock a few times, opening and closing the door, before setting off to find Damen's.

She continued to walk and talk to herself, gesturing like some theater geek rehearsing a monologue, when she suddenly started to choke.

Preoccupied, she'd come to the skywalk, which was filled with smokers taking their last drags before class. The synchronous exhaling of carbon monoxide produced a dense, acrid fog, and it was already too late to hold her breath. So she walked faster. Conversations ended one by one as Charlotte passed

through. Lit cigarette butts were drowned in venti coffee cups or pounded out into the concrete as swirly traces of smoke escaped upward all around her.

As she emerged from the haze and approached the doors at the other end of the walkway, Charlotte could see a bunch of kids gathering and backing their way down the hall like autograph hounds at the stage door of a sold-out show.

"Damen!" she gasped with awe.

Above the throng, all she could see was his thick, beautiful hair, but that was all she needed. She knew it was *his* hair. No shapers, no wax, no putty, no gum, gel, volumizer, goop, or hint of metrosexuality of any kind. Just a simply gorgeous head of wavy hair. Charlotte kept her eyes on the prize as she broke into that weirdly desperate kind of run-walk that she'd used to get to the bus stop earlier, and sped breathlessly toward the locker next to his. She arrived just before Damen and the adoring crowd that had parted to let him through.

It had been a while since she had been this close to him in person, and it affected her more than she thought it would. She'd viewed him, or at least pictures of him, all summer, but this was the real thing.

She was starstruck. As he approached, the crowd converged. The closer he got, the less of him she could actually see. She stepped into the whirl of activity around him, trying to get closer still, but she was drowned in the vortex each time. On this, her first day, Charlotte found herself in an all-too-familiar place — on the outside looking in.

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Quiet as Forever

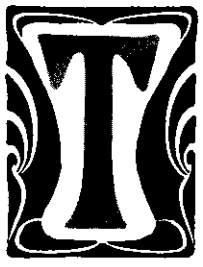


I was one to the world,
But my dream was to be the world to one.

-BB

If it's meant to be, then it will be.

Believing this can be a good or not-so-good thing. "Meant to be" can comfort you if something happens that is hard to deal with or understand. But it can also take away all your power by relieving you of responsibility. If things do work out, then all your hard work was for nothing because it was bound to happen with or without your intervention. Charlotte was trying to decide if she had more faith in herself than she had in Fate.



he morning bell for first period rang, and the crowd around Damen dispersed. The hallway chatter thinned as students headed for class, and the only sound to be heard was the metallic echo of slamming lockers and the marching band tuning up with a ridiculous arrangement of what sounded like The Cure's "Why Can't I Be You?"

Despite the morning's setbacks, Charlotte tried to remain positive. Her first class, after all, was Physics with Mr. Widget. And Damen. And Petula too, for that matter. Physics would be like an episode of Wild Kingdom for Charlotte. She could get to study the exotic behavior of the popular girls like Petula, the Wendys and their friends and embark on the big game hunt to bag Damen.

Charlotte slipped through the classroom doorway and looked left at the students circling their preferred seats, dropping book

bags, zipping and unzipping backpacks searching for notebooks, pens, pencils, calculators. She could tell it was the first day of school because everybody was so . . . prepared, if not totally happy to be there.

The only empty seats she could see were in the back, behind Petula and the Wendys. One of them was probably being saved for Damen, she thought. How cool was that! She'd be spending first period for the whole year in really close proximity to the Hawthorne A-List. Perfect placement. But as she walked back, Charlotte realized that she was not exactly welcome.

There were no hi-fives, "how was your summer?" or even hellos from the other kids she passed. No acknowledgment of all her hard work or even the barest modicum of courtesy whatsoever. Just a disapproving scowl from both Wendys and a "who farted?" face from Petula as she approached the open desk behind them.

Charlotte sat down and stared blankly toward the front of the room counting heads. No Damen! Maybe he wasn't in this class after all! But he had to be. At least that's what it said when she steamed open his pre-registration envelope. Securing that little piece of intelligence had been the entire goal of her summer internship in the principal's office. She found herself feeling a little sick.

"BONDING AND MAGNETISM" was written on the blackboard in huge block letters and beneath was the comb-over of the seemingly decrepit and balding Mr. Widget. He was hunched over, wearing the PHYSICS IS PHUN tee that he wore to begin each year.

"Good Morning, people. I'm Mr. Widget," he said, jumping to his feet in response to the bell. His demeanor had

changed entirely. From decaying mad scientist to game-show host. Widget's name never failed to produce a few snickers when he introduced himself, and this year was no exception. Just as quickly, however, the chuckles gave way to squinty eyes and tilted heads. Everyone had heard the rumors, but few had actually seen him this close before.

It wasn't totally obvious at first, but as Mr. Widget continued to speak, his gaze wandered without his head turning. In fact, he seemed able to stare at all of the students at the same time. Quite a useful tool for a teacher, Charlotte thought, except it wasn't a skill at all. He had a glass eye.

"You've all had some basic grounding in biology, chemistry, and science or you wouldn't be here, would you?" he said somewhat sarcastically.

"So, our first topic for the semester will be" — and for this he turned sideways with unexpected flair and gestured, palm up, to the blackboard — "bonding and magnetism — the laws of attraction.

"You all are interested in 'attraction,' *correct*?" he continued, rolling his *r*'s. Charlotte had to hold her right arm down to keep from raising it in agreement.

"And since I've always believed that the best way to learn anything is to *experiment* . . . our first order of business will be to choose lab partners. Everybody please stand and pair up."

The classmates turned toward each other, pointing to friends across the room, some were screaming and jumping up and down as if they'd "made it through to Hollywood" on *American Idol.* The Wendys were already a combo and Petula surely would want Damen, but not enough to wait for him for

very long. After just a few impatient seconds, she yanked the closest Wendy — Wendy Thomas — to her side, not wanting to get stuck with a loser.

Likewise, Wendy Anderson snapped up the last jock she could find with lightning speed while the other kids frantically made their choices. Charlotte was left standing solo, the only one not chosen. She'd been so distracted by Damen's absence that she really hadn't been paying attention to anyone. But now, standing knee-deep in humiliation, her entire school career came flooding back.

Is it really possible to feel so alone in a crowded room? she wondered as she felt her ears getting hot.

Widget scanned the room and caught a few last-minute stragglers arriving late, and made a halfhearted plea on Charlotte's behalf.

"C'mon people, she seems quite . . . capable."

Charlotte was waiting for him to bust out in an auctioneer voice, but he didn't, thank the Lord.

"Nobody for . . . ," Widget pointed and fumbled for Charlotte's name, but couldn't recall it, "ah . . . her?"

Before he could even get the words out, everyone had paired up. The sounds of the marching band rehearsal outside seemed much louder to Charlotte now. And the laughs that she'd left at the cheerleader sign-ups made a roaring comeback.

Just when it couldn't get any more embarrassing, the door flung open.

"Sorry I'm late," Damen said hurriedly to Mr. Widget.

There he was! The clouds had parted and the sun was shining through.

"Ah, you're just the *somebody* we were looking for," Widget responded, knowing that being paired up with Charlotte would be sufficient punishment for his tardiness. He continued, "Meet your lab partner for the semester."

"I have a note," Damen pleaded, wide-eyed.

Charlotte looked like she wanted to burst. She was happy enough that he was in her class, let alone her very own lab partner. Was this happening? She somehow managed to maintain her composure as Damen walked over, resignedly.

Mr. Widget approached them for a word with Damen, but, given his glass eye, Charlotte thought he might be addressing her. They were both unsure and neither wanted to get off on the wrong foot, so they both paid attention.

"I think you should take advantage of this coupling. It looks like Fate to me," Widget said with a wink of his real eye.

Charlotte was over the moon and in total agreement, while Damen looked somewhat miserable and a little confused, both by the statement and by Widget's glass eye, which he was getting a good look at for the first time. Mr. Widget then leaned into Damen, as was his habit.

"You know, they're really cracking down on student athletes this year. There's a new policy. You have to maintain a C average in all of your subjects or you'll be kicked off the team," he warned.

Charlotte, seeing an opening to advance her strategy, smiled and blurted out, "I love physics!"

Mr. Widget and Damen looked at Charlotte oddly, as if they were studying a trained parakeet screeching out nonsense words from a cage. Widget walked away with a slight smirk

on his face as he packed up his things. Damen leaned into Charlotte, trying to be discreet.

"Hey . . . ," Damen whispered, "uh . . ." He stuttered, fumbling for her name.

". . . Charlotte," she responded helpfully, pointing to herself.

"You're smart . . . ," he continued, matter-of-factly.

"Thank you," she replied, clasping her hands behind her back modestly, as if he were paying her a flirtatious compliment.

"I was wondering . . . ," he continued.

"Yes???" Charlotte eagerly responded, as if he were going to ask her out right then and there!

"Would you maybe be into, you know, tutoring me or whatever?" he asked.

Charlotte wasn't so naïve to believe this was a romantic gesture, or even a friendly one. She knew he had a major ulterior motive. Still, she dismissed all that and put the best spin on it. It wasn't an invitation to the dance, but it was an opportunity to spend time alone with him, and she couldn't have been more thrilled.

She stifled the quiver in her voice and consciously tightened up her knees, which had been slowly buckling ever since Damen walked in the classroom. She tried to play it cool for a second as she kept him waiting for a response to his offer. Her wish was coming true, not the way she had intended, but coming true just the same. It was Fate, like Widget said. It had to be.

Just as she was about to agree, Petula, with one Wendy on each side, walked over to Damen and interrupted.