

**Sabrina Jasz**  
**They Were Sixteen**

They were sixteen, new friends. How had it happened? Looking back, Hailey would think it was easy to become friends with someone like Kate, who had none.

There must have been a few compliments in the hallway at school (“I like your top.” “I like your skirt.”), some rides to and from school in Hailey’s dad’s stick-shift Saab (in addition to no friends, Kate had no car). They’d stopped at Seven-Eleven where Hailey bought them Slurpees that they ate slowly with the spoon ends of their straws. It was September in D.C. when the afternoons were still hot and every surface, even the concrete, had a tired glass sheen. What did one get out of being friends with someone like Kate? Hailey had the idea that Kate could corrupt her.

In the car they compared weights. Kate’s fluctuated: 106 one week, 98 the next. Hailey’s stayed solid at 105. Hailey hadn’t grown an inch since sixth grade, and had given up on her breasts ever getting any bigger. She’d read too many books by Judy Bloom and seen too many movies about high school. She was ready for her “big transformation,” which never came. Kate, who had two hair colors per week, six boyfriends per month, was built to change.

Mornings, the two girls sat next to each other in Mr. Par’s History class. Kate’s notebook was filled with shapes like nails and staples—“death wish” handwriting, Mr. Par called it. Hailey’s letters were loopy and princessy. She was working on that. She’d stopped dotting her “i”s with circles, but couldn’t pop the bubbles behind them. She’d also quit the track team. At first she hadn’t told her parents. Then she’d told them. “Fine,” they’d said. “That’s your choice.” But the stubborn lines of her abs and biceps stayed.

If they’d smoked a joint before class, the two girls slid from their seats to lie face up on the carpet, where names of defenestrated governors and small French cities prickled their ears. Hailey waited for Mr. Par to tell them to get up. To notice their altered state. But theirs was a liberal private school where most kinds of behavior were tolerated. A poll conducted by the Statistics class had calculated that 74 percent of the student body had come to school high three or more times that year. Hailey was a good student and Kate was on scholarship, a special case. Hailey looked up at Mr. Par’s butt, which was impossibly square in tight, white jeans. There was a rumor that Kate had jerked him off in the computer lab and though she wasn’t sure she believed it, she knew that with Kate, Mr. Par didn’t matter much.

Kate knew every jock in school, every “Mr.,” every theater stud, and stubbly debater. She’d been with all of them, it seemed, by turns. Her locker gasped through their notes in its vents, while Hailey’s across the hall breathed freely. The notes weren’t romantic. “When are we going to hang out?” they said. “I thought we were going to hang out.” Hailey plucked them out and read them, but Kate rolled her eyes. She met men everywhere and hardly needed those high-school boys. At Starbucks she met a man, a stately, braided Rhodesian who made a heart in the foam of her hot soy chai. At the movie theater she met one, a sallow musician who held her hand through the ticket window. Lesbians at the bookstore bought her magazines. In traffic, lawyers and lobbyists passed her business cards through their power windows. Why? Because she was perfect. She was soft without being fat or thick. Unlike Hailey, she’d never done athletics—never even walked when she could ride the bus—so she had no muscle, just “nicely molded fat,” as she said. (She wouldn’t age well, Hailey knew, but that didn’t matter now.) She

met men hitchhiking. “Don’t they ever want sex?” Hailey asked, impressed. Kate rolled her eyes. “Sometimes,” she said. Her eyes—brown, not her best feature—were set in a wide, inviting face with no cheekbones, brushed-looking skin, and silky fine hair that was given to greasiness. Kate complained that little boys stared at her on the street. Perhaps they mistook her for a little girl.

One Friday Hailey and Kate went to Kinko’s to make fake IDs from an Internet template, then to a tattoo shop in Dupont Circle. Kate got her tongue pierced and Hailey got a diamond chip in her nose. The next morning, though, before Hailey’s parents could even see it, the chip was gone, replaced by a little dark circle, like the spot in water where a man jumps in. She pressed the stud back through, but it healed over again. She went back to the tattoo parlor where the woman who’d done it—tall with hips in black jeans that were wide and strange like Mickey Mouse ears—told her to try something bigger, a ring maybe. But her whole nose was bright red. The crust and pain was too much. Hailey told the woman to take it out.