

Sorority

It was right after Thanksgiving that the news editor at the school paper, Sara, said to me, "Oh, you'll never see your roommate once rush starts."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she'll be totally caught up in that. And then, if she pledges, forget it. I knew lots of girls freshman year who stopped being friends after bid day. Sometimes the girls who got in just dropped the ones who didn't—that's it, friendship over." Sara picked up a stack of papers, already losing interest in the conversation. "One of the many delightful things about sisterhood," she said.

Back in our room that night I asked Sonia, "Do you think we'll still hang out once you start rush?"

"Of course," she said. "Are you crazy?"

I shrugged. I wanted to believe her, but I didn't. "Maybe I should rush," I said.

"Oh my God!" Sonia clapped her hands. "Would you, please? I mean, I would feel so much less nervous if you were with me."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not sure I want to."

"Please, oh please," she said. "Just try it. You don't have to pledge if you don't like it."

"Okay, okay," I said.

Rush started in January. I told everyone that I was only rushing for Sonia, which was, in a way, true. I said that even if I were offered a bid I wouldn't take it, and when I said this I meant it. But I let Sonia fuss over my hair on the first night of round one. I let her select a skirt and shirt from the back of my closet. "This is an important night," she said. "Jack says everyone will be friendly, but this is when they're deciding who to cut and who to ask back for round two."

Jack stuck her head in our room. "Y'all look beautiful," she said. She stepped all the way in and pirouetted to show us her outfit.

"You too," Sonia said.

"I'm going to Theta tonight," she said. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," I said.

She smiled at me. "I'd wish you luck too," she said. "But I know you don't want it."

"I guess I don't," I said.

But as I stood in the line of girls that night, waiting to go inside the first sorority house, something strange happened to me. I started to want that luck. I had seen too many bid day photographs. I could picture myself in a letter

sweatshirt, my arm around Sonia, the two of us laughing at the center of a crowd of other laughing girls in letter sweatshirts, every one of us so close to being the same girl that I wouldn't stand out at all.

As we passed through the door into the house--I have an impression of pastel furniture and majestic drapes--Sonia reached back and gave my hand a quick squeeze. She let go, and I watched from above and behind as her posture straightened. She tossed her hair back. I wondered why she had needed me at all. Odd, how it was somehow easier for her to appear confident when I was there, knowing that she wasn't. I thought of her up in the air at football games, nothing keeping her up but a boy's two hands on her foot, and her legs not shaking at all.

Sorority girls advanced on us. Later I would learn that this was all part of a carefully choreographed system. A girl was assigned to you before you walked in the door. She had studied your picture in the face book, or seen it in a slide show. She knew where you were from. She took you to a prearranged location and talked to you briefly. Then another of the girls in her rotation group would "bump" her. In this way you would talk to three or four girls. There were also floaters, girls whose job it was to circulate, to rescue their sisters from painful conversations. After you left, they all gathered and made notes on your outfit, your attitude, your size. It all looked natural, when really it was as complicated and deliberate as the movements of bees.

I didn't know any of this at the time. All I knew was that a girl in a white button-down shirt and a red skirt led me over to a spot in front of a bay window. She wore an Alice-in-Wonderland headband. She looked almost prim. This sorority had a religious reputation. The girl introduced herself as Christie. She barely topped five feet. I was so nervous I found it hard to look at her. I had to resist the urge to stare out the window over her head.

"So Cameron," Christie said, startling me. I had no idea, yet, how much they already knew about us. "Tell me about New Mexico."

"It's fine," I said. I wracked my brain for something else to say. All I could retrieve was the state pledge we had recited every morning and at assemblies, the part about the Zia symbol of perfect harmony between cultures. "It's the Land of Enchantment," I said.

She laughed like an actress. "I'm sure it's beautiful," she said. "Did you play basketball there?"

I shook my head. "I don't like sports."

"What a shame, when you're so tall," she said. "How tall are you?"

I told her.

“Well, my goodness, that’s wonderful,” she said. “I’m so jealous. I’ve always wanted to be taller.”

I smiled weakly. She was lying. She had the perfect proportions of a doll. I would see her later, many times, running the circuit around campus known as the Loop, her whole body tight and straining, as though she took no pleasure in the exercise. Now she fingered her pearls in a way that told me she had no idea what to say next. I couldn’t help her. I was paralyzed by a fear of saying the wrong thing. I had taken an instant dislike to Christie. Strange, then, how badly I wanted her to like me. All around the room the rest of the freshman girls smiled and made small talk about our hometowns, when really all we wanted to say was, please like me. Please like me. Please.

I heard Sonia’s laugh from across the room. I looked over at her. She was standing with three girls, all of them watching her as she told a story I couldn’t hear. I saw one of the sorority girls look at another and smile. I like her, the smile said.

For three nights, every single girl in every single house asked me how tall I was. At least that’s the way I remember it. Without fail they said my height was wonderful or enviable or, once, bizarrely, adorable. By the third night I was so tired of it. At the first two houses I had to resist the urge to answer the question before it was even asked.

By now we had all heard the rumors about what was happening behind the scenes. If a girl put her hands behind her back, it was a signal for one of the floaters to come rescue her from you. If the first girl said, “This is Cameron. We’re having a very enjoyable conversation,” it was a signal that she would rather die than spend one more minute in your company.

As we waited to go into our last house on the last night, one of the girls in line ahead of me sobbed. “I had nothing to say to them,” she gasped out. “Nothing, nothing.” Her friend patted her on the shoulder, but she was distracted, staring at the closed door of the house we were about to enter. We had just been to one of the top three houses, and some of the girls who had thought they might be admitted to it had lost hope. I looked back and saw, a few places behind me, a girl whose face remained blank as a stone, even as I caught her eye. She looked as though she had just witnessed the whole world vanishing into smoke. I turned away. I shivered in my sundress, goosebumps rising along my bare arms. It was chilly, but we were dressed as though for spring. Behind me I heard one girl say to another, “I just loved that house. I felt so connected to those girls.”

“Shhhh,” her friend said. Just ahead of us the crying girl’s sobs were still audible.

“I was talking to Sarah,” the first girl went on. “She’s from a town two over from mine, and well, we both went to this thing called the Honey Ball. I just felt so connected to her.”

The crying girl said, “I had nothing to say to them. Oh God. It’s all over for me.”

“So the Honey Ball...”

I turned around. The speaker was a blond in a designer dress. “Will you shut up,” I said. Gazing up at me, she looked startled and frightened. I stared her down. Sonia had been standing quietly beside me. She tugged on my arm until I turned toward her. I expected her to reprimand me but she just gave me a small smile. “Almost done,” she said.

Something gave way in me that night as I watched the front door finally open. I was exhausted, tired of waiting for admittance, tired of begging, with my false smile and fixed gaze, to be let in. When the first girl asked how tall I was I said, “I’m so sick of talking about that.”

Immediately she put her hands, loosely clasped, behind her back. “What do you want to talk about?” she said.

Over her head I saw another girl note the signal, make a beeline for us. “Tell me what you’re looking for in a pledge,” I said.

The rescuer had heard this. “We want girls who are committed to sisterhood,” she said. “Girls who will take part in our philanthropy.”

“Yeah, I just don’t really believe that,” I said. “Why are all sorority girls so thin?”

The second girl now clasped her hands behind her back too.

“We like to keep in shape,” the first girl said coldly.

“We like to look our best,” the second girl said.

I looked around the room. Every girl in this sorority was slender, with the exception of one or two I thought must be legacies. Many of my hallmates had been on diets the last few months in preparation for rush. I had heard that pledges would be required to spend a certain number of hours per week at the gym. “Why do women do this to each other?” I asked.

A third girl had joined us. “Do what?” she asked pleasantly. The other two looked at her in warning.

“Make each other be thin,” I said.

“Oh, our sorority doesn’t do that,” the third girl said. “Others might.” She clasped her hands behind her back.

“You know,” I said. Suddenly I felt my throat caving in. I couldn’t keep the tears out of my voice. “Girls cry in the lines between houses.”

“Yes,” a fourth girl said, suddenly appearing. “I remember that.” She gave me a sympathetic smile. Then she clasped her hands behind her back.

Across the room I saw the girl who had been sobbing in line. Her face was still red, her eyes puffy, but she was smiling bravely at the sorority sister across from her. Maybe it wasn’t all over for her, but it was for me.

Because Sonia didn’t want to go alone, I went with her the next day down to the basement of the dorm to collect her list for round two. I could hear the sobs as we hit the bottom of the stairs. A girl from my Intro to Poetry class was hysterical in the corner. A rush counselor had her arm around her, speaking quietly into her ear. In one hand the girl clutched a white piece of paper. She kept shaking her head. “But I wanted to be a Tri Delt,” she wailed. Other girls looked blankly at their lists, folded them again and hurried from the room. One girl said, “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” and hugged her friend.

I hung back while Sonia went to collect her list. She came back with it still folded in her hand. “You’re really not going to get yours?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“You’re not curious?”

“Oh, Sonia.” I sighed. “I’m sure they all cut me.”

“I’m sure they didn’t.” She extended her hand and I saw that she held two pieces of paper. “I got yours too,” she said. I stared at the white paper. This was a test. I couldn’t decide. She let me postpone the decision. “Let’s go upstairs and look,” she said.

We didn’t speak on the way back to our room. Inside she turned to me with a determined air and offered me my list. I backed away and sat on the edge of my bed. “You can look at it for me,” I said. “But first yours.”

She nodded. She sat on her own bed, took a deep breath, and opened her list. I watched as relief washed over her face.

“It’s good,” I said.

“It’s good. But the worst sorority cut me.” She frowned. “What could I have possibly done?”

“You didn’t want to go back there,” I said.

“Well, no. But still. I must have made someone mad.” She said, with a kind of innocent wonderment, “Someone doesn’t like me.”

I laughed. “They probably just figured you wouldn’t choose them,” I said. “Everybody likes you.”

She grinned. "Not everybody, clearly," she said. "I'm okay with that. Really."

"Whatever you say."

Sonia set her list on the bed and picked up mine from her lap. "Can I look?" she asked.

"If you must." I tried to sound like I thought the whole thing was a joke. I watched her, my heart skittering, as she unfolded the paper. I watched her eyes move down the page. She kept her face blank. It took her a long moment to lift her gaze from the list to my face. "You'd go back lots of places," she said. She smiled at me. She folded up the paper again.

"Tear it up," I said. I didn't want to know if she was lying. She didn't deserve to get caught.

She tore the paper once, then again, methodically, and then suddenly she began to rip at it. She tore each piece into smaller and smaller pieces and threw them all in the air like confetti. Some of them caught in her hair. "That's what I think of rush," she said to me.

I didn't ask her, then, why she was going to keep doing it.

Jack, as it turned out, was cut from Theta. Her mother and older sister came to pick her up. They packed her things while she sat cross-legged on her bed and cried with her face in her hands. She was gone by the end of the day.