

Twenty

She's twenty years old, and she's been vaping a lot. At least five times a day. She wonders if that's why her face is breaking out, but she searched online and there's no scientific evidence on vaping causing acne. It might be because of stress from school and work and her two roommates, or her skin is just shit. She should probably see a dermatologist, maybe buy one of those fancy facial cleansers at Walmart that are locked up behind plexiglass, so you have to press a nearby button to call an employee over. They're probably not worth the price, but still.

She wakes up at 1 PM on a Sunday with blisters on her feet. At least most of them are big; small blisters are harder to get rid of. She pops them one by one like bubble wrap, and fluid leaks down her feet. Some of it gets on her fingertips. Her eyes water from smudged eyeliner and dry clumps of mascara, and she starts to claw off the foundation on her face. It tingles and itches and burns a little, but that's because she's scratched a couple pimples. She has to pee. The bathroom is so far away though, she crosses her legs. She can wait, she thinks. The straps of her camisole dig into her shoulders. The whole thing just feels tight on her--she shouldn't have bought a size small--so she peels it off over her head, arms up. *Click*. The air conditioner automatically turns on. Goosebumps rise on her thighs, as do the hairs around her belly button, and her tits get hard. Harder than stale licorice bites that you have to pry out of your back teeth. She rubs circles into whatever part of her body her hands can reach, before an alarm on her phone rings. She has to get to work in less than thirty minutes. Sometimes she thinks about how if she could have any superpower, it would be to control time. She could pause her life and take a fat nap whenever she wanted, for however long until she felt alright. That would be nice.

In the bathroom, she brushes her teeth rough and fast. It's ugly--foam coming out of her mouth like she's got rabies. Someone forgot to wipe their toothpaste from the sink. Disgusting. She washes her face then leans into the mirror to do her make-up. She takes an eyebrow razor from a cup of beauty stuff and shaves the mustache hairs above her lips. Peach fuzz and white-grey fluff gather on the razor blade. She plucks her eyebrows, and she plucks too much. They end up real thin. She draws over them with a brow pencil, again and again. Her right eye is bigger than her left. She hates it and lifts her left upper eyelid to see what she'd look like with same-size eyes. She stares at herself like she's a different person before squinting to apply eyeliner. Her eyebrow hairs scatter the bottom of the sink. She turns on the faucet, and they follow the water down to the sewers. Thirteen minutes left.

She hits the radio button on her drive to work. She switches from FM to AM then back to FM again. She turns the dial until she gets to K-Earth 101.1 and sinks into her headrest at a red light. They play a PSA on lead poisoning, then an ad about great auto deals in Van Nuys, which gets cut off by a DJ who's so enthusiastic, he sounds fake. *Hey folks, it's "Say It and Win!" Just say "K-EARTH 101" as many times as you can in ten seconds and win \$100 every time you do!* She thinks it's so easy until she tries it. She gets really into it; the light turns green but she's too busy shouting fuck ... fuck! because she keeps on messing up, slurring the words. She stops trying though when the car behind her starts honking, and drives off quiet.

She's a part-time cashier at Village Supermarket. The store sign's light has been flickering for a month now, and she wonders if today's the day it'll finally die. She works most shifts in Register 9, where she reads the headlines of tabloid papers placed across from her. *Destroyed By Greed! Who's Pregnant Next? Lies, Cheating, and Abuse!* Someone says over the speaker that the store is having a 10% sale on all kitchen appliances and if you have any questions, just ask an

employee. An old Maroon 5 song resumes playing. She prays no one comes up to her and asks, because she had no idea there was even a sale going on. A customer holds up the entire line, because they can't choose between two shampoos. Lavender Lilac or Ocean Breeze? She tells them Lavender Lilac is more popular. She doesn't actually know if it is or not, but they buy it so it's fine.

She sits outside with Paul, her co-worker, on a bench during their 15-minute break. She doesn't know his last name. Paul works at the back of the market in the ready-to-go hot foods station. The food's honestly not that great and kinda overpriced, but sometimes she'll buy a beef kebab to eat in her car if she's starving. The two of them watch customers stand in front of the broken automatic sliding doors--waiting for them to open, only to awkwardly look around when they don't. Some grannie in a visor and floral vest gargles with a cup of coffee then spats on the sidewalk. She crinkles the paper cup and shoves it in her vest pocket. A guy tries to carry seven 2-liter soda bottles in his arms, because he won't pay ten cents for a plastic bag. He drops them in the parking lot and freezes instead of chasing after them. A pickup truck backing up almost hits him. She sucks on her vape pen while Paul sticks a cigarette between his lips and cups his lighter from the wind. Paul has lung cancer but smokes a pack every day, because it apparently helps shrink his tumor. The first time he told her this, she couldn't tell if he was joking. She still can't.

She vapes again in her car after she gets off from work. Someone abandons their shopping cart in the open parking spot next to hers and runs off. Her windows are rolled down halfway, so she can hear their slippers slapping the concrete. Her left hand pats the side of her seat to find the lever that lets her recline back all the way. Lying down, she holds up a pack of Pop Rocks she found in the staff break room next to the microwave. They're cotton candy-flavored. She tears off the top then dumps them all into her mouth. They dissolve on her

tongue and go snap, crackle, pop, like the cereal you use to make Rice Krispie treats. They feel funny.

She should probably go home now. She needs to finish her seven-page essay, double-spaced, on Walt Whitman. The deadline's already passed--it was due last night--but her professor only knocks five points off a late assignment. She should've still worked on her essay yesterday. She knows that. It's just her roommates, Anna and Christine, asked her to go to a party with them, and she didn't want to miss out. They hadn't really hung out together in weeks, even if they were living together. Everyone was so busy. The three of them got drunk in their apartment before they left. They took turns taking shots from a bottle of cranberry vodka. She poured into the cap, and some of it spilled down her chin. Cranberry vodka is disgusting. Tastes nothing like cranberries. She had to chug half a can of Mello Yello for it to be okay. They walked to the house the party was being held at, which might've been a mistake. Christine tripped at a curb and lost one hoop earring. The house was so crowded inside. Squeezing past bodies, she felt like she was walking in an alleyway that kept getting narrower and narrower. Anna didn't help, sticking her hands in her armpits and waving them at strangers. *Wanna smell my sweat?!* She doesn't remember when they arrived home, but she knows Anna threw up in the Uber they took. There was a fine of \$150 added to Christine's account and a one-star review from the driver. Not a great ending.

It's 2:19 AM when she gets back to the apartment. She prefers showering late at night, because both her roommates shower in the morning. She unhooks her bra straps then unbuttons her jeans--pushing them down to her ankles before kicking them off. She sticks one hand under the showerhead to check the water temp before stepping in the tub. The drain's clogged, so water sloshes around her toes. She squeezes an almost empty bottle of body wash over her loofah and

doesn't care if it makes a fart sound, because who's awake? She lathers herself with the loofah and tries to scrub as much of her back as she can. Soap fizzes from behind her ears. She's supposed to smell like honeydew and cucumbers, but she doesn't. She just smells clean, if that even makes sense, and it makes her sleepy.

She puts on pajamas and walks to the kitchen because she's kinda hungry. They need to empty their trash can. It's filled to the brim with peeled mandarin skins and expired Taco Bell coupons, leftover alfredo and squashed to-go boxes, gooey egg shells and chunks of rotisserie chicken. Even if she tries to flatten the milk carton piled on top, there's still no room. She'll have to throw out the trash tomorrow. The fridge light is so fucking bright, she has to squint while rummaging through the food. There's a Saran-wrapped plate of pork chive gyoza, but they're burnt at the bottom. She grabs a 2-liter bottle of 7-Up and pours it in a mug. It goes glug, glug, glug, and she chugs the soda down in one gulp. She holds in a burp bringing back an open bag of Lime Hot Cheetos to her room. She lies on her bed sideways with her laptop playing an early season of *America's Next Top Model*. It's bad to eat lying down, her ex said once. Not good for digestion. That's why they broke up. Just kidding, he cheated on her twice, but whatever. It was over a year and a half ago. She watches an episode where the aspiring models get makeovers. Jay Manuel teaches a contestant how to apply blush, and they end up looking like they've been slapped in the face with a brick. Another contestant cries as they get their eyebrows bleached. Tyra Banks is not that great at comforting people.

Her laptop dies, so she goes on her phone. She had Tinder for less than a day. Christine made her download the app one afternoon when they were lying on the carpet, trying to guess how much dust was on the ceiling fan. Seeing the pictures strangers chose for their profiles was funny at first. A lot more photos than she'd expect of guys grabbing their cars' steering wheels

and wearing aviator sunglasses. She accidentally swiped right though on a couple who was looking for "someone special" to make them the perfect throuple. They even added winking emojis after the "someone special" part. She got a notification fifteen minutes later saying she and the couple were a perfect match, and Christine almost died laughing. She deleted her account and the app immediately.

She licks the Cheetos powder off her fingers while stalking former high school classmates on Instagram. One dude she took Honors Astronomy with is currently in a screamo band. He uploaded a clip of them performing at Vincenzo's Pizzeria, and from the reactions in the video, it looks like they won't ever be invited back again. This girl who was a huge K-Pop fan is now really into Communism. Makes sense. The marching band couple is still strong, still long distance, still doing too much PDA for no good reason. Why she cares about these people she barely talked to in high school, she's not sure. She just wants to know what they've been doing since then, if they're the same people she remembers. Is that bad?

She met up with a high school friend over summer break. Her name's Jasmine. They watched ducks swim in a pond near their local California Pizza Kitchen. Some kid showered a handful of Lucky Charms over the ducks. His mom laughed and took a video of her son while his dad held onto the cereal box. One duck gobbled up a little rainbow-shaped marshmallow and bent its head back to swallow. She wasn't sure if Lucky Charms were safe for ducks to eat but didn't say anything. Jasmine said her mom was making her complete a certificate program to become a paralegal, in case she couldn't find a job once she graduated. Graduation. Two more years until then. *Do you feel like college is going by really fast?* She asked. *High school felt so slow.* Jasmine sighed yeah then laughed. *I can't believe we're already twenty.*

She has one missed call from Bakersfield, CA. She never answers unknown numbers but plays their voicemails on speakerphone, because they might be from one of the hundred internships she's applied for. Maybe they're calling to say she's been accepted, and they didn't want to tell her through a lousy email. She doubts it though. *Renew your warranty before we close your file. If you're interested in renewing your auto warranty, please press 5 now.* Yeah, it's this shit. She holds her phone under her chin, the voicemail still going on. It's so warm from all the battery usage, she forgets how many germs are on a phone screen.

4 AM. She's sleepy but can't fall asleep. She's popped her jaw and played with her split ends, gnawed on the skin inside her mouth and stared at the red dot on the smoke alarm blink. Nothing seems to work though, so she stuffs her hand down her sweatpants. Her fingers slip under her underwear past the elastic waistband and scratch hairs she hasn't shaved since September. They go lower, and she begins to fuck herself. She tries to make herself wet by thinking of all the low-budget porn she's watched, the badly-written romance eroticas Facebook moms seem to love, every dirty, nasty name she's ever heard of. Cunt. Slut. Butt? She tries to think of what she wants. What does she want so, so much? Her toes curl, and her ankles throb. What she wants, she guesses, is some room to breathe. She wants to be at peace. To feel complete and not have to worry about anything. Her other hand grazes her collarbone then caresses her breasts before massaging her ribs. When will she get what she wants? Is it when she graduates from school? Is it when she gets into a good company? Is it when she makes enough money to support her family? Is it when she retires at age sixty? Seventy? Eighty? Her fingers pump faster and harder. When will she be able to have peace? Her pelvis swells and she feels it coming. Birds flapping their wings furiously, trying to burst out of her body. She writhes in the dark then stills. Her thighs itch from sweat, so she kicks off her pajama pants and rests both legs

over the sheets. She wipes her hand on the mattress cover. Swallows spit and breathes again and again. She turns sideways on the bed, and she thinks she can feel her heartbeat in her ear.

Ba-dump, ba-dump. Ba-dump, ba-dump. Slowly then does she fall asleep.