

T. Coraghessan Boyle
She's the Bomb

RU OK

QQ

Srsly? ur crying?

I want to kill myself

5 *Dont say that*

I'm saying it

If we had a helicopter or, better yet, a drone, we could hover over Hailey Phegler's shoulder at this juncture and watch her text, but we don't, so we won't. Instead, since fiction allows us to do this, we'll go directly inside her head and attempt to assess the grinding awfulness of this moment, which has stranded her, in cap and gown, among the 332 prospective graduates of the College of Arts and Sciences at Hibernia College in Hibernia, New York, where the trees are just beginning to unfold their leaves after the long winnowing blast of an upstate winter. She is beyond distraught – she is panicking. Breathing in such short gasps that her thumbs actually tremble over the keypad.

15 When she glances up from her phone in a tic of annoyance, the first person she locks eyes with is Stephanie Joiner, who was in her Introduction to Poetry class last spring and who has zero style and a brain the size of a Snickers bar, but who's here nonetheless, in cap and gown and with her hair combed out and sprayed with shellac, all set to graduate.

20 "Hi," Stephanie says, coming right up to her so she has to hide her screen, which produces an awkward moment. Somebody, wasted already, shouts, "Free at last!" and a low undercurrent of giggly laughter washes through the crowd. "Oh my god," Stephanie chirps, and is she actually going to take her hand or, what, hug her? "I mean, it's been like ice ages, right?" Her contacts have a weird tint, too blue by half, but her eyes are like lasers. "I didn't even know you were still –" she starts, but she doesn't want to go there and cuts herself off. There's a moment of self-congratulatory beaming, the lasers slicing right into her, before Stephanie says, "Congrats, you!" And then, after a quick shuffle of her clunky white platforms that only show off how thick her ankles are, she adds the refrain, "We made it! Can you believe it?"

25 Every word is a nail, and this girl, this nobody with her pasted-on smile, is a human nail gun, and this place, the First Niagara Bank Center quad, with its rearing white tent erected by underpaid illegal immigrants, is the worst place Hailey has ever been in her life. [...]

Pls get me out of here!

30 *Wish i could*

I'm desprt

Chill it will work out

No, no, no b/c my mothers here

I thought she wasnt coming?

35 *I have 2 do something*

Like what? like tell her?

I'd rather die

Ur dressed the part ur walking whos going to know?

My mom didnt see my name on the list

40 *So? they make mistakes.*

I'm going 2 like off myself

Stop it

Srsly i never thought i'd wish for a school shooting . . .

???

45 *Srsly*

Her mother, since as long as she could remember, was always harping on her. And what was her main theme? You're a procrastinator, that's what she said. Elementary school, junior high, high school, and now college. *You're a procrastinator*. All right, guilty as charged, but then who isn't? The problem wasn't her, really, it was Nathaniel Hawthorne¹. Back in September, when she couldn't put off her American Lit requirement anymore, she'd signed up for Professor Dugan's course, and the first book was *The Scarlet Letter*², which might as well have been written in Mandarin Chinese for all she could make sense of it. *But there is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghostlike, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime; and still the more irresistibly, the darker the tinge that saddens it.*³

No joke, it was just plain boring and so she procrastinated as far as actually reading it went, and then, even with the help of Write My Paper Here and Best Term-Paper Service, trying to do the paper on it, and then one thing led to another and she stopped going to Professor Dugan's class because of the embarrassment factor, and once she'd stopped she had to pull the plug on her other courses too, even her poetry workshop, because the classes were all in Fenster Hall and she couldn't risk running across Professor Dugan, who would stink-eye her through his Coke-bottle lenses and wonder why she hadn't been to class and when he could expect her Hawthorne paper, if, like, ever? Plus, it was around then that she met Connor Hayes and fell hard and just wanted to be with him through those warm drifting endless Indian summer afternoons when the sun threw the shadows of the trees across the quad in a thousand rippling variations and the two main student bars – Elsie's and The Study Hall – were offering Happy Hour all day every day until further notice. [...]

So i did it

Did what?

Called in a bomb

70 *???*

U there?

Ur joking

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne: 1804-1864, American writer

² *The Scarlet Letter*: novel by Hawthorne, in which an adulterous woman is forced to wear a scarlet "A" stitched to the front of her dress as a sign that she has committed the sin of adultery

³ *But there is ... that saddens it*: a quotation from *The Scarlet Letter*

OMG my heart is like 10000 beats a second

What ru saying?

75 *I'm saying i did it*

Are you serious? i'm like, stunned

Real life

Real life? hail, what are you thinking?

I told you i was desprt

80 That's when things really accelerate, the dean or whoever he is, the president maybe, going to the microphone on the dais and thumping it with one thick finger so the blast of static makes everybody look up, and then he's saying, "Attention, please – seniors, everyone!" [...]

85 "The fact is," the dean says, "somebody called in a bomb threat –" An instant of stunned amazement, and then the tumult breaks out, people gasping, shouting, cursing, as if the whole quad's one big pit filled right to the top with bilgewater and everybody's drowning together. The faces around her are worse than ugly, pathetic, really, people just chewing at the air, flailing their arms, digging out their cell phones to mindlessly record whatever this is or might be. "So what we're going to have to do," the dean goes on, "and I'm sorry, but we have no choice in the matter, is –"

90 *Cancel the ceremony*, she shouts inside the reverberant walls of her own skull, *cancel it and go back to your dorm rooms and your parents and loved ones or whoever –*

95 "– change the venue to the Threlkeld Arena." The dean has to raise his voice now, because even with the microphone the noise under that tent is too much for him to cope with, no matter how much he's fighting to project an aura of calm for the sake of everybody present. "Which means we will convene there in exactly" – she watches in disbelief as he throws back the billowing sleeve of his robe to check his watch – "one hour and fifteen minutes from now. So, everybody" – more shouts, groans, tumult – "the new time will be seven p.m. sharp. Is that clear?" [...]

100 Thanksgiving break had been the worst, till now, anyway, going home and having to act as if everything was okay and listen to her mother go on about how proud she was of her, the first one in their family to graduate college and could she possibly know how much that meant to her? She actually brought a bunch of books home with her and locked herself in her room with her laptop to keep up the pretense, when she wasn't out making the rounds with her girlfriends from high school and some of the guys too, who were all home from their various schools, and she kept up the pretense with them too. Her mother kept asking if she had enough money for books, tuition, housing, and she kept saying she was okay, living off-campus now with these two other girls and telling her how much she appreciated the checks, which were fine, they really were. Did she like lying to her mother's face? No. But she kept meaning to make up the class work, at least that first semester, but then, after winter break, Connor unceremoniously dumped her to go out with Chrissie Fortgang, a blonde stuck-up bitch whose father owned half the building-supply stores in upstate New York and Vermont too, and she went into a depression that just kept spiraling down till she hated herself and couldn't get out of bed and for a while there (in February, February was the low point) even stopped going out to Elsie's and The Study Hall. [...]

110

U there?

I'm here but i'm afraid to ask – u ok?

Not

U really called in again?

115 *What else was i supposed to do?*

Thats crazy

They dont, i mean they're not, like nothings happening & my moms in the stands

Dont panic

You know what, i wish i did have a bomb [...]

120 At first she didn't notice the two men in uniform, not public safety, but cops, real cops, making their way up the row in the opposite direction of the dignitaries, heightened security, that's what it is, and still she doesn't get it. Not yet. Not until they keep on coming, walking abreast, their heads up and eyes alert, as if they're looking for something, and they finally stop at the aisle where she's sitting, six seats in from the left.

125 In the days of Connor, the first days and weeks especially, she felt freer than she ever had in her whole life, because she was in love, yes, but not just with him, with the idea of him too. School had been the one constant in her life since the dawn of consciousness, preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, junior high, senior high, college, on and on till she hit the wall in Dugan's class, and Connor – who'd dropped out junior year to sail through the Panama Canal to Puerto Vallarta and back around again and never did bother to reenroll, or at least he was taking his time about it – was contra all that. He gave her those slow syrupy days, gave her the wind in her face and the smell of the grass and the flowers and the wild rocket ride of a beer and shot for breakfast, though of course he was a bastard and had been all along and she hated him. But back then? There was this one outfit she used to wear – black Topshop jeans, suede ankle boots, and a tight tee that read *HOMEMADE* across her tits – and every time he saw her in it he'd give her a slow smile and say, "Hey, Hail, you're the bomb, you know it?"

135 If there's irony in that, she's not the one to appreciate it. You can't afford irony when your mother looks at you like she wants to cut you up into small pieces and feed you to the sharks, when you have a lawyer and have to go to court and when the memory of that night at graduation when they traced her calls and came up the aisle and took her away in handcuffs is like a slow drip of acid every minute of every day she has her eyes open.

140 The good news? She's not getting any jail time, or any more than the one night she already served before her Aunt Ceecie bailed her out because her mother wouldn't. She's currently working as a sales clerk at Nordstrom Rack in Poughquasic Falls to pay down the \$10,000 fine the judge imposed on her and she's got two and a half years left of the three years' probation they gave her, with community service thrown in for good measure. Nobody at Hibernia will ever speak to her again, not that that's a bad thing, especially. And Poughquasic Falls, which is fifteen miles south of Hibernia, is just far enough away that she doesn't have to really see any of them. [...]

150 So there's this one day, maybe ten days before Christmas, the store a madhouse, and she glances up from the cash register, and who does she see standing there in back of her current customer but Stephanie Joiner. [...] Stephanie looks even worse than in college, her hair cut short as if she's the penitent and not Hailey, and she's wearing a white parka that makes her look like the Doughboy. That helps. But still, once the woman in front of her – middle-aged, dandruff like sleet in her hair, taking forever to dig out her credit card and ID – bundles up her packages and steps aside, there's Stephanie, looking as if she's in *Saw II*¹ or something.

155 "Jingle Bell Rock" rattles out of hidden speakers. The whole store smells of that Christmasy cinnamon deodorizer the floor manager likes to go around spraying every fifteen minutes and the overhead lights are harsh, blunting everybody's eyes and making death masks of their faces. For a long moment Stephanie just stands there, clinging to her armful of ugly skirts and uglier sweaters, then, without a word, she marches

¹ *Saw II*: American horror film

over to the next cash register and gets in the back of the line. And then it's the next customer and the next one after that.

160 *Guess who i saw in the store like ten minutes ago?*
 Who?
 Stephanie joiner
 Who's that?
 Like really i might as well have a letter A stitched on my sweater
165 *What ru talking about?*
 Or a B, maybe a B
 ??? who's stephanie?
 I don't know just some girl
 So who is she?
170 *Actually?*
 Yeah
 She's nobody
 So why mention her?
 I dont know maybe b/c i'm nobody too
175 *Dont say that*
 I'm saying it

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