



NIGHTLIGHT
by The Harvard Lampoon

Excerpt

Chapter 1
FIRST LOOK

The hot Phoenix sun glared down on the car windowsill where my bare, pallid arm dangled shamelessly. My mom and I were both going to the airport, but only I had a ticket waiting for me, and that ticket was one-way.

I had a dejected, brooding expression on my face, and I could tell from the reflection in the window that it was also an intriguing expression. It seemed out of place, coming from a girl in a sleeveless, lacy top and bell-bottom jeans (stars on the back pockets). But I was that kind of girl—out of place. Then I shifted from that place on the dashboard to a normal position in the seat. Much better.

I was exiling myself from my mom's home in Phoenix to my dad's home in Switchblade. As a self-exiled exile, I would know the pain of Diaspora and the pleasure of imposing it, callously disregarding my own pleas to say one last good-bye to the potted fungus I was cultivating. I had to coarsen my skin if I was going to be a refugee in Switchblade, a town in northwest Oregon that no one knows about. Don't try to look it up on a map—it's not *important* enough for *mapmakers* to care about. And don't even think about looking me up on that map—apparently, I'm not important enough either.

"Belle," my mom pouted in the terminal. I felt a pang of guilt, leaving her to fend for herself in this huge, friendless airport. But, as the pediatrician said, I couldn't let her separation anxiety prevent me from getting out of the house for eight or so years.

I got down on my knees and held her hands. "Belle is only going to be gone for *the rest of high school*, okay? You're going to have a lot of fun with Bill, right Bill?"

Bill nodded. He was my new stepdad and the only other person available to take care of her while I was gone. I can't say I trusted him, but he was cheaper than a sitter.

I straightened up and crossed my arms. It was time to cut the crap. "The emergency numbers are above the phone in the kitchen," I told him. "If she gets hurt, skip the first two—they're your cell phone and Domino's. I've cooked enough meals to last you both the first month if you split one-third of a Stouffer's Lasagna a day."

My mom smiled at the thought of lasagna.

"You don't have to go, Belle," said Bill. "Sure, my street-hockey team is going on tour, but only around the neighborhood. There's plenty of space in the car for you, your mom and me to live."

"It's no big deal. I want to go. I want to leave all of my friends and the sunlight for a small, rainy town. Making you happy makes me happy."

"Please stay—who will pay the bills when you leave?"

I could hear my boarding number being called. "I bet Bill can run faster than Mom to the nice Jamba Juice man!"

"I am the fastest!" my mom shouted. As they ran off, Bill pulling her shirt to get ahead, I slowly backed away into the gate, through the jet bridge, and onto the plane. None of us were very good at saying good-bye. For some reason, it always came out good-BUH.

I was nervous about reuniting with my dad. He could be distant. Twenty-seven years of being the only window-wiper in Switchblade had forced him to distance himself from others by at least a windowpane. I recall my mom breaking down crying on the sofa after one of their rows and him just watching her stoically, right outside the window, wiping in powerful, circular motions.

When I saw him waiting for me outside the terminal, I walked towards him shyly, tripping over a toddler and soaring into a keychain display. Embarrassed, I straightened up and fell down the escalator, somersaulting over the roller luggage inconsiderately placed on the left side. I get my

lack of coordination from my dad, who always used to push me down when I was learning how to walk.

“Are you all right?” my dad laughed, steadying me as I got off. “That’s my clumsy old Belle!” he added, pointing to another girl.

“It’s me! I’m your Belle,” I cried, covering my face with my hair like I normally wear it.

“Oh! Hello! It’s good to see you, Belle.” He gave me a firm, gripping hug.

“It’s good to see you, too, *Dad*.” How strange it felt to use that moniker. At home in Phoenix, I called him Jim and my mom called him Dad.

“You’ve grown so big—I didn’t recognize you without the umbilical cord, I suppose.”

Had it really been that long? Had I really not seen my dad since I was thirteen and going through my pet umbilical cord phase? I realized we had a lot of catching up to do.

I hadn’t brought all of my clothes from Phoenix, so I only had twelve bags. My dad and I took them in shifts to his Viper.

“Before you start making jabs about me being divorced, middle-aged, and going through a midlife crisis,” he said as we put on our seat belts, ankle straps, and helmets, “allow me to explain that I *need* a very aerodynamic car as a window-wiper. My customers are judgmental people—if I don’t drag race to those windows, they’re going to question whether I’m the right kind of guy to hang off of their roofs. Push that button, hon—it raises the giant snake head.”

I hoped he wasn’t thinking of driving me to school in that car. Every other kid probably rode a donkey.

“I got you your own car,” my dad said, after I counted down and said “blast off!” He started the car after turning the key in the ignition several times.

“What kind of car?” My Dad really loved me, so I was pretty sure it was an airplane-car.

“A truck car. A U-HAUL, to be exact. I got it pretty cheap. Free, to be exact.”

“Where did you get it from?” I asked, hoping he wouldn’t say the dump.

“The street.”

Phew. “Who sold it to you?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s a gift.”

I couldn’t believe it. A huge truck to store all of the bottle caps I’ve always wanted to start collecting.

I turned my attention to the window, which was reflecting a flushed, pleased expression. Beyond that the rain poured hard on the green town of Switchblade. The too green town. In Phoenix, the only green things are traffic lights and alien flesh. Here, nature was green.

The house was a two-story Tudor, cream with chocolate timbering, like a miniature éclair that makes you fat for days. It was almost completely blocked from view by my truck, which had a large graphic on the side of a lumberjack sawing a tree, with “U-HAUL” written above.

“The truck is beautiful.” I breathed. I exhaled. Then I breathed again.

“Beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it, because it’s all yours.”

I looked at my huge, unwieldy truck and pictured it in the school parking lot surrounded by flashy sports cars. Then I pictured it eating those other cars. I could not stop smiling.

I knew my dad would insist on carrying my twelve bags into the house all by himself, so I ran ahead to my room. It looked familiar. Four walls and a ceiling, just like my old room in Phoenix! Leave it to my dad to find little ways to make me feel at home.

One nice thing about my dad is, as an old person, his hearing isn't too great. So when I closed the door to my room, unpacked, cried uncontrollably, slammed the door, and threw my clothes around my room in a fit of dejected rage, he didn't notice. It was a relief to let some of my steam out, but I wasn't ready to let all of it out yet. That would come later, when my dad was asleep and I was lying awake thinking about how ordinary kids my age are. If only one of them were extraordinary, then I'd be rid of this insomnia.

I picked at my breakfast the next morning. The only cereal dad had in his cupboard was fish flakes. After getting dressed, I looked in the mirror. Staring back was a sallow-cheeked girl with long, dark hair, pale skin and dark eyes. Just kidding! That would be so scary. Staring back was me. I quickly combed my hair and picked up my backpack, sighing as I shimmied up the rope into my U-HAUL. I hoped there wouldn't be any vampires at this school.

In the school parking lot, I parked my truck in the only place it would fit: the principal's space and the vice principal's space. Besides my truck, the only other car that stood out was a racecar with antennas stuck all over the top. *What kind of a human would drive such a posh vehicle?* I wondered as I walked through the heavy front doors. Not any kind of human I'd ever met.

A red-haired woman sat at the desk in the administration office. "What can I do for you?" she asked, eyeing me through her spectacles, trying to judge me by my looks. As a deeply mysterious person, however, I defy such judgments. She was pale, like me, but in a large, obese way.

"You don't recognize me—I'm new here," I said strategically. The last thing the mayor needed right now was for the window-wiper's daughter to be kidnapped. But sure enough, she kept looking at me. My fame had preceded me.

"And what can I do for you?" she repeated.

I knew that she probably only wanted to help me because I was the window-wiper's daughter, the girl everyone had been talking about since my plane got in yesterday. And I knew what they must say about me:

“Belle Goose: queen, warrior, chapter-book reader.” I cleverly decided to play into their preconception.

“Salut! Comment allez-vous s’il vous plait . . . Oh, I’m sorry. How embarrassing. I took French at my old high school in Phoenix—sometimes I just slip into it. Anyway, to put it in English, can you direct me to my next class?”

“Sure. Let’s take a look at your schedule . . .”

I pulled it from my bag and released it into her pallid, chubby fingers, one of which was squeezed through a diamond ring like a sausage through a slipknot. I smiled at her. She looked like she would make a grateful wife.

“It looks like your first class is English.”

“But I’ve already taken English. A few semesters of it, actually.”

“Don’t be smart with me, young lady.”

So, she knew I was smart. Flattered, I conceded.

“You know what?” I said. “I’ll go. What the heck, right?”

“Down the hall to your right,” she told me. “Room 201.”

“Thank you,” I said. It wasn’t even noon yet, and I’d already made a friend. Was I some kind of people-magnet? Granted, she was a middle-aged woman, but that made sense. My mom always told me I was mature for my age, especially because I *enjoy* the taste of coffee with hot chocolate and sugar and milk. I sauntered maturely over to Room 201, flung open the door and peered at the students with my chin out. The whole class could tell I was friends with older people.

The teacher scanned his attendance list. “And you must be . . . Belle Goose.”

All of this attention was getting a little embarrassing.

“Take a seat,” he said.

Unfortunately, the class was too basic to hold my interest: *Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Oblivion*, and *Atlas Shrugged*, supplemented with the various lenses of Derrida, Foucault, Freud, Dr. Phil, Dr. Dre, and Dr. Seuss. I groaned loudly as the teacher droned on, introducing everyone's name. I'd have to ask my mom to send me some interesting literature, like those essays I wrote last year.

When the bell rang, the boy next to me predictably turned to me and started talking.

"Excuse me," he said, hoping I would fall in love with him or something. "Your bag is in my way."

I knew it. He was totally the "your-bag-is-in-my-way" type.

"My name is Belle," I said. I wondered which was the more surprising part about me—my elbows, which are naturally pointy, or my demeanor, which is apathetic to popularity, even though I've read all the popularity handbooks so I could be popular if I tried." You can walk me to my next class."

"Um, sure," he said, wanting me. He made small talk on the way about how he was abandoned as a child and will only rest easy once he is avenged. His name was Tom. I could tell people passing by were listening in, hoping that I would reveal the mystery of my past.

"So what's Phoenix like?" he beseeched.

"It's hot there. And sunny all the time."

"Really? Wow."

"You sound surprised. You must be surprised by how fair-skinned I am, coming from such a hot climate."

"Hmm. I suppose you are pale."

“Yeah—I’m half dead,” I joked, very humorously. He didn’t laugh. I should have known no one would get my sense of humor in Switchblade. It was like no one here had ever told a sarcasm before.

“Here’s your class,” he said when we reached the Trigonometry classroom. “Good luck!”

“Thanks. Maybe we’ll have another class together,” I said, giving him something to live for.

Trigonometry was all blah-blah formulas that we’d just save on our calculators anyway and Government was all blah-blah tomorrow we’re crossing the border to attack Canada. Nothing I hadn’t done at my old school.

One girl walked with me to the cafeteria for lunch. She had brown bushy hair in a ponytail that was more like a squirrel tail in the context of her beady squirrel eyes. I thought I recognized her from somewhere, but I couldn’t place it.

“Hi,” she said. “I think I’m in all your classes.” So *that’s* why I recognized her. She reminded me of a squirrel I hung out with in Phoenix.

“I’m Belle.”

“I know. We’ve introduced ourselves already. Like, four times.”

“Oh, sorry. I have a hard time remembering things that won’t be useful to me later.”

She told me her name again. Lululu? Zagraziea? It was one of those forgettable names. She asked if I wanted to eat with her. I stopped in the hallway, opened up my date book, and looked at Monday, 12:00.

“Blank!” I exclaimed. I penciled in “Lunch with classmate” then checked it off while we stood in line. This was the year I would become organized.

We sat at a table with Tom and some other ordinaries. They kept asking me probing questions about what my interests were. I gently explained that that was between me and my potential friends.

It was then that I saw him. He was sitting at a table all by himself, not even eating. He had an entire tray of baked potatoes in front of him and still he did not touch a single one. How could a human have his pick of baked potatoes and resist them all? Even odder, he hadn't noticed me, Belle Goose, future Academy Award winner.

A computer sat before him on the table. He stared intently at the screen, narrowing his eyes into slits and concentrating those slits on the screen as if the only thing that mattered to him was physically dominating that screen. He was muscular, like a man who could pin you up against the wall as easily as a poster, yet lean, like a man who would rather cradle you in his arms. He had reddish, blonde-brown hair that was groomed heterosexually. He looked older than the other boys in the room—maybe not as old as God or my father, but certainly a viable replacement. Imagine if you took every woman's idea of a hot guy and averaged it out into one man. This was that man.

“What is that?” I asked, knowing that whatever it was it wasn't avian.

“That's Edwart Mullen,” Lululu said.

Edwart. I had never met a boy named Edwart before. Actually, I had never met any human named Edwart before. It was a funny sounding name. *Much* funnier than Edward.

As we sat there, gazing at him for what seemed like hours but couldn't have been more than the entire lunch period, his eyes suddenly flicked towards me, slithering over my face and boring into my heart like fangs. Then in a flash they went back to glowering at that screen.

“He moved here two years ago from Alaska,” she said.

So not only was he pale like me, but he was also an outsider from a state that begins with an “A.” I felt a surge of empathy. I had never felt a connection like this before.

“That boy's not worth your time,” she said, wrongly. “Edwart doesn't date.”

I smirked inwardly and snorted outwardly, tucking the soda-mucous that flew out into my pocket. So, I would be his first girlfriend.

She got up to leave. “Coming to Bio, Belle?”

“Duh, Lululu,” I said.

“Lucy. My name is Lucy—As in *I Love Lucy*.”

“All right. Lucy— As in *I Love Edwart*.” Maybe I’m special, but I’ve always had a knack for remembering mnemonics. “Trash to the left,” I bellowed, throwing out my leftovers—a *half*-eaten cake. I looked back at Edwart to see if he had noticed that I, too, am a disciplined eater. But strangely, he was gone. In the ten minutes since I had last looked at him, he had vanished into thin air.

I turned around just in time to see that I’d missed the trashcan by a lot, and my *half*-eaten cake was flying towards the back of a girl sitting at a nearby table.

“HEY!” she said, as the cake made impact. “Who did that?”

“Let’s go,” I said to Lucy, grabbing her arm and running out of the cafeteria as the food fight began.

When Lucy and I got to class she went to sit with her lab partner and I looked around for an empty seat. There were two left: one near the front of the room and one next to Edwart. Since the front chair had a wobbly leg after I walked past and kicked it in, there was no choice. I had to sit next to the hottest boy in the room.

I walked towards the seat, circling my hips and raising my eyebrows rhythmically like an attractive person. Suddenly I was falling forwards, sliding down the aisle from the momentous force of my plunge. Luckily, a computer wire wrapped around my ankle and stopped me from slamming into Mr. Franklin’s desk. I quickly pulled it from the wall to untangle myself, stood up, and looked around casually to see if anyone had seen. The whole class was looking at me, but probably for a different reason—I had a hologram patch on my backpack. From one angle it was an eggplant, from another it was an aubergine.

Edwart was looking at me, too. Maybe it was the fluorescent lighting, but his eyes seemed darker—soulless. He was seething furiously. His computer was open in front of him, and the synthesized melody from before had ceased. He raised his fist at me in anger.

I wiped the chemical dust off my clothes and sat down. Without looking at Edwart, I pulled out my textbook and notepad. Then, without looking at Edwart, I looked at the board and wrote down the terms Mr. Franklin had written. I don't think other people in my situation could do quite so many things without looking at Edwart.

Facing straight ahead, I let my eyes sort of slide to the side and study him peripherally, which doesn't count as looking. He had moved his computer to his lap and resumed playing his game. We were sitting side by side at the lab counter, yet he hadn't started a conversation with me. It was as though I hadn't applied deodorant or something when in reality I had applied deodorant, perfume, and Febreze. Was my lip gloss smudged or something? I took out my compact mirror to check. Nope, but I did have a few developing pimples up by the hairline. I picked up a pencil on Edwart's desk and pressed it against the soft, supple flesh of my face. They were the projectile kind. Satisfaction attained.

I turned to thank him kindly for the use of his pencil, but he was looking at me in horror, his mouth agape, an open invitation to all sorts of airborne organisms like birds. He grabbed the pencil and started wiping his hands with baby-wipes and rubbing the pencil with Purell. Then he drew a circle around himself in chalk and returned to copying notes from the board, singing this jingle amiably to himself:

“Germs contagious. Contagion alert. But Edwart and Purell are stronger than dirt.”

I reached out to borrow the pencil again for my notes, but the moment my hand breached the chalk line he screamed. It was an unnaturally high pitch for a boy. The right pitch for a superhero, though.

Mr. Franklin was talking about flow cytometry, immunoprecipitation and DNA microarrays, but I already knew that stuff from the audiotape I listened to in my truck that morning on my way to school. I moved my

eyes in circles, like they were on a Ferris wheel. This is the best way I know of to keep myself from falling asleep. Every time my eyes moved towards the right, though, they kind of hovered there for a little bit. I couldn't help it—they wanted to see Edwart. Then my eyes would go to the top of the sockets towards the ceiling and stop because, hey, nice view.

Edwart continued to jab at his computer. With each pounding finger I could see the blood surging through the bulging veins on his forearms to his biceps, straining against the tight-fitted, white Oxford shirt pushed cavalierly to his elbows as though he had a lot of manual labor to do. Why was he typing so loudly? Was he trying to tell me something? Was he trying to prove how easy it would be for him to fling me up into the sky and then catch me tightly in his arms, whispering that he would never share me with anyone else in the entire world? I shuddered and smiled coyly, terrified.

When the bell rang I stole another glance at him and shrank into a deeper sense of worthlessness. He was now staring furiously up at the bell, shaking all the muscles in his fist at it, glowering at it with his dark, heated eyes and loathing lashes. He clenched his hair in exasperation, clinging to the tussled tufts as he raised his head to the ceiling. Then he slowly turned to me. Looking into his eyes I felt waves of electricity, currents of electrons charging towards me. Was this how it felt to be in love, I wondered, for robots? Caught in his ionized hypnosis, the old adage came to mind: *Beautiful enough to kill, gut, stuff, and frame above your fireplace.*

Suddenly, he jerked out of his daze and sprinted for the door. As he ran, I noticed how tall he was, his long legs leaping in strides the size of my entire body, his arms so firm the impact didn't make a ripple. My eyes welled. I hadn't seen something this beautiful since I was a kid and the Skittles in my sweaty fist turned my hand rainbow. His shoulder blades jutted against his shirt as he ran. They looked like white wings beating majestically before takeoff. Demonic white wings.

“Wait!” I called after him. He had left his computer at his seat. “Game Over,” the screen read. Game over, indeed, I thought, using a metaphor.

“Can I copy your notes?” asked a regular human male. I looked up and saw a boy of medium height, with dark hair and a lean but muscular frame. I felt drawn to him. He smiled at me. I lost interest.

“Sure, whatever,” I said, handing him my notepad and suddenly noticing that I had doodled a picture of Edwart. In the drawing he had fangs, dripping with a dark substance. Soy sauce.

“I’m going to need that back,” I said. That drawing was going on my wall.

“Thanks, Lindsey,” he said, mistaking me for Lindsey Lohan. He smiled again. What a nice boy. He had nice neat hair and nice clear eyes. We were going to be great friends. Great Just Friends.

“Walk me to the administration office,” I said. We all had gym next, but I needed my wheelchair. I have a condition which makes my legs become paralyzed every time I think about gyms.

“Okay,” he said, letting me put my weight on him. “I’m Adam, by the way. I think I saw you in my English class. That’ll be great! As long as one of us takes notes, the other one—me—doesn’t have to go to class.” He was getting kind of out of breath as he dragged me along. Being close to me makes some guys nervous.

“Did you notice anything funny about Edwart in class? I think I love him,” I said nonchalantly.

“Well, he did look kind of angry when you fell and disconnected his computer charger.”

So it wasn’t all in my mind; others had noticed Edwart’s awareness of me. There was something about me that evoked very strong feelings in Edwart.

“Hmm,” I said scientifically. “How interesting.”

“Here we are.” After propping me upright against the wall, Adam staggered backwards, huffing and puffing.

I dismissed him and stepped inside the office.

“I’m paralyzed for the next hour,” I announced to the secretary.

“Go sit in your car, dear,” she said, looking up from her copy of *Daylight*.

I skipped outside to my car, trying to daydream about its powers as king of the cars, but I was too disturbed. First of all, if I had gotten my car for free, that meant that everyone else had paid *more* money for *tinier* cars. Secondly, I was pretty sure there was something supernatural about Edwart—something beyond rational speculation.

So I stopped speculating about him and watched a procession of ants go by. Life would be much easier if I could carry things twenty times my body weight.

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