I went home the summer between freshman and sophomore years with two goals: to learn how to smoke so that I’d appear worldly to the rich girls in my school (they never noticed); and to learn how to kiss so I could get Harper back (which I did). My grandmother took care of the first goal, and a midshipman named Bruce, who, as it happens, will never appear in this story again, took care of the second.

Mom Mom, lit Chesterfield in hand: Hold it like this, Molly, that’s right, now take a little drag, be careful—oh! (as I predictably coughed up half a lung) poor sweetheart.

I was smoking like her, a veteran, by the end of July, up to a pack of Marlboros a week by Labor Day.

I have no idea where or how I met Bruce. He might have been an errant angel, he was so unsubstantial and swathed in light. He had no last name that I knew of and apparently no parents. He was beautiful
yet asked nothing of me. He picked me up in his Impala and we went to the Buckboard Inn somewhere on Long Island once or twice a week for two months. He ordered pitchers of rye and ginger ale, and he never ever tried to get to whatever base the breasts are. We simply slow-danced and kissed.

And kissed. I told him I didn’t know how and he just took me on.

The Buckboard Inn, Johnny Mathis, Bruce: that’s it. That’s the whole memory, complete as a novena, quiet as smoke coming out of a nose.