

At my dad's dealership...

"Where's Lizzie? I thought she was going to be home from college for the company Christmas party this year."

"Oh, she's running late because she's going to Booneville's Department of Corrections Christmas party first with her friend Tyler. His mom works there."

"Wow, it's too bad she's going to miss Tammie's food. Maybe we should make her a plate..."

Meanwhile at the Department of Correction's Christmas party...

I sit in a plastic folding chair at the long white tables beside my friend Tyler inside of the Booneville Knights of Columbus. The tables have a mixture of different hard candies that you'd find at your grandma's house and mini chocolates scattered down the middle. Rubbing my thumbs back and forth on the napkin in my lap, I'm concerned that I'm a bit overdressed. It is the night of the dealership's company Christmas party, and it's the one night of the year that I go all out: full face of makeup, hair styled, heels, a nice gown and a big coat to keep me warm. I left the bright red high heels in the car so that I wouldn't stand out as much, but my dark green sequenced dress makes me look like a Christmas tree disco-ball while surrounded by the other girls dressed in jeans, the kind with sequins on the butt, and t-shirts. As more people come inside, I notice they're carrying coolers. I make small talk with Tyler's mom.

"Why are people bringing coolers in here?" I ask. "Well, the whole Christmas party is funded by us. There is a small group of women that take donations throughout the year, and they spend all of the money they collect to buy stuff for the raffle..." she motions to the front of the room where a heaping miscellaneous pile of televisions, Kitchen Aid appliances, Xboxes, and more lie. "so, we have to bring our own drinks if we want alcohol. Do you want any wine,

honey? I've got three more bottles in the car, so you can have as much as you'd like." I respectfully decline, mentioning that I'd maybe take her up on it when we had dinner.

Since the entire event is a grass roots operation, all of the food is homemade and delicious; Tyler's mom mentioned that they talked one of their coworkers into smoking brisket for the event. "We should build a smokehouse," says Tyler, "it would be really easy to build a little shack behind the house, and we'd have more ways to prepare our venison after the season." This statement devolves into a seemingly endless conversation about smoking meats: how to do it, what wood is the most effective for building the proper flavor, and their general desire to build a smoke house. As they carry on, I shovel the food in my mouth, partly because it's so delicious, and mostly because Tyler told me we could leave to go to my Christmas party after we finished dinner.

Once everyone is finished eating and Tyler notices that his mother is onto another bottle of rosé after singlehandedly finishing the first, we leave the party to go to the Dealership's Christmas party in Columbia. During the car ride, I put my bright red heels on and think about how I wish I'd eaten less at the first Christmas party so that I could feast myself on my comfort food favorites that Tammie only makes once a year. Nevertheless, we're almost there, and I couldn't be more excited.

As we pull up on the lot and Tyler looks around for parking, my face is glued to the car window, looking intently at the show floor packed with people. "Just park anywhere. The lot is so full, somebody will come tell us if they need us to move it." He just smiles and shakes his head at me as he watches my eyes grow at the prospects of what and who's inside. We get out of the car and I speedily strut towards the door in my heels. "Come on Tyler, hurry." "What are we in a rush for?" he says while continuing to meander behind me. I keep reminding myself to wait

up for him, so that I don't lose him somewhere. I later decide he's a big boy and can take care of himself.

I rush up to the side door to the service department and yank on the handle. It's locked. I wait for a moment, as I see a few people coming outside to take a smoke break. As soon as the door opens, music, laughter, and smells of great food come pouring outside. I can't wait to get in. Tyler and I walk out on the show floor to find two hundred people. Tyler looks at me with raised eyebrows and a "here we go" sort of look, while I return back to him a beaming smile that says, "I'm home!"

We don't make it 20 feet away from the door before my adopted family members start greeting me. Tyler, after meeting just a few people, grew tired of introductions and opted to go relax somewhere. "Lizzie! Where have you been? Who's that I saw you walk in with? Is he from Denver? Is he your boyfriend?" "I've been at Booneville's Department of Corrections Christmas party with my friend Tyler. No, he's from Columbia, and *he's just a friend*. His mom bought tickets for him and his girlfriend to go to her Christmas party, but they broke up. So, he just needed a date and we decided to make an evening out of it since it was the same night as our party. It's not a big deal." "Sure, okay, just friends," said with a smirk, which I promptly follow with an eye roll. "How long have you been home? Why haven't I seen you yet? Oh we just miss you so much when you're away at school. When are you going to move back to Columbia?" After this set of questions, I have to re-explain that the University of Denver is on the quarter system, and therefore our breaks are different. "I'm not sure if or when I'll move back to Columbia, but I miss you guys a lot too."

I have innumerable conversations like this, and I treasure every one of them. The conversations do vary slightly depending on who I'm talking to and how long they've been at the

dealership. I do have a sort of mental checklist of those that I especially want to talk to, one of which is Sonja. “Did you get my letter?” I ask my self-proclaimed black mom Sonja, to which I am her affectionately known, white baby girl. “Yes baby, I got your letter. That was so sweet. You’re such a beautiful woman on the inside and out.” “Thanks mamma.” I blush. “I just can’t believe I remember you running around this party when you were six years old. Remember when Sunday [my dad’s girlfriend] would always tell your daddy that it wasn’t any place for a six year old?” I roll my eyes in disgust, in the same way I did when I was six, at the idea that I belonged anywhere else.

Other friends recall different details. “How old were you when you won \$50 at the blackjack tables? I think you were eight, but your dad made you give the money back,” one asks laughingly. “Yes, I remember, and he still owes me \$50.” The DJ asks me if I’d like him to play ‘Crank That’ by Soulja Boy, a popular song when I was in middle school, which everyone pressured me into doing the dance for one year. My eyes widen, “no, never again.” We laugh, and I decide to walk around to find Tyler, who’d sat down long ago.

He’s safely at a table with my dad; safe in the way that my dad knows that we are *just friends*, whereas there’s still uncertainty in the crowd because they can’t help but get riled up if I bring a boy around. In fact, I can’t dress up without being asked if I need help kicking some poor boy’s ass, based on the risen suspicion that I might be going out on a date. Logically, a boy’s ass will need to be kicked soon. I join Tyler, my dad and my brother at the table. My brother is a black mini-poodle named Tango; he is also the dealership mascot, as he accompanies my dad to work everyday. Tango has also been working the crowd tonight. “I think fatty ate too much,” my dad says referring to Tango’s distended stomach, which he notices as he leans down to pick him up to place him on his lap. As Tango lounges fat and happy in his rightful place, dad looks over

at me, then down at my cup, then back up at me and asks a question I've heard on multiple occasions tonight, "whatcha got in that cup there?" "Cranberry vodka with a splash of 7-Up," one of my dad's go-to drinks. "Oh," he says with raised eyebrows and a slight smirk in his eyes, "just checking." I raise my glass, "cheers." Both of us know full well that this isn't the first time I've had an adult beverage or two at this annual party. He picks my brother up off his lap and stands, "well kids, I have to go MC the raffle, so have a good night, and if I don't see you later on, I'll catch up with you at home." He places Tango on my lap before leaving, "oh, and take your brother with you when you go."

As I look around and think about how much I miss this place, I'm slightly saddened knowing that I'm detained from them in Denver, somewhere I was so eager to move to. I take a deep breath to refocus my thoughts on how blessed I am to have them in my life in the first place. Tyler asks, "Want to leave when you finish your drink?" "Sure," I say blissfully as I pet my brother to sleep while watching my family dance out on the show floor.