Hi, my name is Kate Reed Petty, and I am here to read an excerpt from my debut novel, which is called *True Story*. By way of introduction, *True Story* is about a toxic high school rumor—a rumor of a sexual assault—that radiates through four people’s lives for fifteen years. The novel switches between different characters’ perspectives and voices and also changes genres as it goes.

And the section that I’m going to read tonight is in the voice of one of the lacrosse players who was at that fateful party. He’s now in his early twenties, and, while he doesn’t exactly know the truth behind the rumor, he’s still haunted by guilt of what happened. And in this section, you don’t really need to know much background, but Nick is on his way to a cabin in the woods, basically, to kind of spend drinking and feeling sorry for himself.

Nick was parked at one of those backwoods gas stations that haven’t even installed credit card readers on the pumps, it was Thursday, two hours into the drive and he was already bored, so when the *check engine* light had clicked on he’d stopped at this gas station to check the oil on his mom’s car, pretending he knew how, saying to himself in his head *See, Lindsey, I’m responsible*, but then apparently he didn’t properly latch the bar that holds the hood open, and it lost its grip and slammed down on the fingers of his left hand.

He anticipated the pain before he felt it, a sharp tingling and then a numb ache, and he knew it was going to be bad, and then, *jesus*, he felt it, suddenly bad and getting worse, he jumped up and down a little bit, trying to push through the pain to its peak and out the other side, trying to tackle it head-on, because the whole point of this weekend was to build up the discipline to look at pain straight in its ugly face.

Still, his fingers hurt, but it was too early in the drive to start drinking, he’d never make it all the way to Lindsey’s cousin’s cabin if he started drinking now, so instead he grabbed his backpack out of the backseat and pulled out the $70 bottle of bourbon he’d bought special for this trip and just held it against his left hand to see if the proximity made the pain better, and when it didn’t, he opened the bottle and sniffed, which didn’t really help either, except in the way that pregnant women learn to breathe.

He thought about taking a little sip, just to get his brain to slow down a bit and stop chattering like this, on and on and on, but it really was too early to start drinking, and there were people around, so he tucked the bottle into his backpack, congratulating himself on his discipline, and went inside the gas station and bought a pack of
cigarettes and a lighter and a package of cookies and a big waxed paper cup of Mountain Dew as reward for not drinking. He stood just outside the door with the sun in his face, set the soda and the cookies on the lid of a big red trashcan and unwrapped the plastic from the cigarette pack. Using his right hand to flick the lighter, holding the cigarette between his left thumb and pinky (because all his other fingers were still hurting), he lit up and inhaled.

A beefy man with leathery skin walked past and gave Nick a look, like Nick was wearing a clown suit or something, even though he was just wearing jeans and an old Metallica t-shirt. Maybe the man was frowning because of the way Nick was holding his cigarette, or maybe it was because of the way his hair was cut, or maybe it was some essential thing about Nick, an air of a comfortable white suburban middle-class upbringing that Nick would never be able to hide. Nick tried not to let it bother him, what did he care what that redneck thought, all he cared about was how good this cigarette felt and how great this trip was going to be, how great this trip already was. He pretended that his bender had already started, that the journey was the reward, that the drinking he was getting ready to do was just an excuse to be alone in the woods, instead of the other way around, and he switched the cigarette to his right hand and held it with his first two fingers like all good Americans, looking at the road ahead of him, and at the sparse woods beyond the gas station, where old cans and piles of trash were scattered all around. When his cigarette was almost gone he pulled out another and lit it with the first, and it was delicious as he inhaled, but then he realized that if he didn’t stop himself now, he was going to smoke this whole pack of cigarettes in the next half-hour, and he was seized by an impulse to be good, to be better, to be strict with himself, and also to be wild: He started throwing cigarettes away, three or four at a time, enjoying the recklessness of it, the discipline and masochism, plus the sheer wastefulness, he really was such an asshole, wasn’t he, yes you’re right about that, Lindsey, and this was truly going to be a weekend of nonsense and chaos, a personal-pan-pizza-sized performance art piece.

“Hey. Asshole.”

Nick froze, the nearly empty packet of cigarettes in his left hand and four cigarettes in his right, holding the lid of the trashcan open, and the lit cigarette balanced on his lip, the ash lengthening delicately off the burning end, and Nick looked over his shoulder and saw the beefy man again, walking out of the store, leading with his belly, which was pronounced and firm, and he walked up and stood, his belly uncomfortably close to Nick, and said, “That’s not how you smoke a pack of cigarettes.”

Nick pulled the four cigarettes away from the can and held them in front of his chest in a closed fist and wondered if this was the start of a fight, he had never been in a fight with a stranger (especially not such a large and leathery stranger) and he felt terrified, and wondered if he could give this man one of his pints of cheap whiskey as a peace offering, which was totally fine, he could stop by another liquor store on the way, and so he smiled at the man with all of his teeth, telegraphing how little of a threat he was, and tucked the four cigarettes back in the pack. “I’m trying to quit,” he said. “So I can’t keep
these all, I’m throwing most of them away, but I’m going to keep just one, and I’m going on a trip to the woods, this way I can only have one more.”

The man, squinting at him, asked “What woods you going to?” and Nick wondered, was there something in the guy’s mouth, was he chewing something?

“Just outside State Park, over yonder in Youngs County,” he said, embarrassed that he had said yonder, worried the man had noticed the affectation, and also worried that he was wrong about his landmarks, because he had only been to this cabin once, with Lindsey, more than a year ago, and he didn’t know which state park it was close to, he just knew the state park was a thing they had talked about visiting.

“Well, you should be careful,” the man said, his eyebrows up, real serious, “There’s killers in the woods.” Then his face changed as he laughed to let Nick in on the joke, a deep laugh that stretched his mouth open wide, and Nick smiled again with all of his nonthreatening teeth and kind of went hah, in a way he hoped was noncommittal. The man was still shaking his head to himself, laughing at his own joke, as he pulled a cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket and opened it to show Nick the single cigarette left inside, then closed it and held it out, an offering.

“Here, I’ll trade your sins away,” he said. Nick struggled to understand the deal for an embarrassing second, but pulled himself together and took the man’s pack with the single cigarette and traded it for his own pack which was now half-empty (or half-full, depending on the man’s outlook on life). The man said, “I usually don’t smoke Camels, but a little experimentation never hurt anyone,” and then, honest-to-god, the man winked, and kind of raised an eyebrow, and Nick smiled and made a gesture like he was tipping an imaginary hat and then turned and walked quickly back to his mom’s car, trying to commit the line to memory, knowing he would tell this story over beers for years to come, maybe not to Lindsey, but maybe yes to Lindsey, maybe she would laugh if she heard, Oh, Nick, she might say, shaking her head but smiling at his story about the time this redneck propositioned Nick at a gas station in the backwoods that he only in that moment realized was actually one of those gay cruising spots that, for the most part, had been rendered obsolete by the internet. Nick felt the man’s eyes on his back but just kept walking, walked purposefully to his car, keeping his back straight, trying not to look like he was rushing.

When he had opened his cookies and his Mountain Dew and pulled back onto the narrow highway it was just after noon, so if he drove ten miles an hour over the speed limit he’d get to the cabin with a couple of hours of daylight left to build a warm fire and a good buzz, but almost immediately he realized the flaw in his plan, which was that he was going to have to drive for three more hours, and it was already boring, and he’d already eaten all of the cookies.

[Author speaking]

I’ll stop there. Thank you so much for your time today. Again, I’m Kate Reed Petty, and I hope you enjoy my debut novel. It’s called True Story. Bye!