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Drought Measures and The Coffee Girl: A Creative Writing Thesis

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DROUGHT MEASURES AND THE COFFEE GIRL:
A CREATIVE WRITING THESIS

SUBMITTED TO
Professor Kevin Moffett
AND
Dean Nicholas Warner
BY
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ABSTRACT

Based in the modern day San Francisco Bay Area, these two stories intend to utilize “outsider”-labeled protagonists to portray de-familiarized accounts of two specific Bay Area realities.

“Drought Measures” depicts a new student at a diverse and de-facto segregated public high school, following her as she learns to navigate the unspoken status quo of a long-entrenched racial divide. This story is neither a commentary on nor a critique of contemporary racial issues, but rather a portrayal of some of the many ways in which socioeconomic status and race inform day-to-day interactions. Half-Spanish, the protagonist is confronted with the paradox of being too white-passing in certain contexts, and not white-passing enough in others.

“The Coffee Girl” strives to explore the way in which various trivialities of status – appearance, dress, the perceived value of one’s job – become toxic and inflated once deemed important. Though the issue of status is certainly not unique to the Bay Area, the influence of Silicon Valley, Sand Hill Road, (etc.) can lead to a narrow definition of what it means to be successful. Occupying a perceived “menial” job, the protagonist serves to provide an outsider perspective on a white-collar event, and to illustrate how this disparity of status can breed insecurity within a relationship, limiting its ability to function. As a café employee, she finds it particularly difficult to navigate the vague norms and boundaries of modern-day dating from a position of lower occupational status.
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Drought Measures

It was almost 9 in the morning when Mila began to suspect she had missed the bus. She scanned the road behind her, the heat of the September morning flowing from tar-streets to sky in a stream of haze, painting her horizon with nebulous car-shapes, all indiscernible from the bus she sought. She looked at her watch. 8:50. The morning mist had burned off and the sky was already pristine in its blueness – unembellished by cloud or vapor, dazzling the sleep-laced eyes of the commuters passing the sullen little girl at the bus stop. 8:50. It was almost second period.

It was fall but everything around Mila was brown. Swatches of dead grass painted sad pictures of former lawns, and flower-corpses lay shriveled in their pots – casualties in the fruitless battle against the California drought. She missed the verdancy of Pennsylvania, the humidity and the cicadas and the fireflies at night. For months now she had woken up to an expanse of brown – dry heat, cloudless skies.

Before they had left, Mila’s mother had promised her beaches and vineyards and trips every weekend – the glittery, shallow promises of a parent who works too much. And, to her credit, since arriving her mother had been to Napa for a conference, and another in San Diego. She texted Mila pictures of the grapes – little green bulbs glittering like Christmas lights along the vines. But this was Mila’s California: dead grass and unreliable buses. Even the surrounding hills were dead – coined “golden” for their acres of sun-bleached grasses, far too rain-deprived to ever seem green. With slow,
deliberate movements, she turned and gathered up her backpack. She knew a long time
ago she’d missed the bus. She didn’t know why she’d waited.

Mila walked a short ways before stopping at the intersection of Santa Cruz and
Olive, turning to face the now tantalizingly familiar side-street. *Olive that leads to
Magnolia that leads to home.* How easily she could just walk back, crawl under her
covers, let her unmade sheets swallow her like a mouth, so that she could wake up the
next day, a Saturday, and there would be no buses to miss, the morning heat a mirage to
be viewed from behind her window, and never a reality. But today was Friday – a school
day, a football game day, and, though she didn’t know it yet, the day that Taylor would
be beat up. Mila’s shoulders rolled forward against the weight of her backpack as some
unknown force resigned her to the walk to school, steering her away from Olive, and
back down Santa Cruz.

The sun rose higher in the sky as Mila walked the three miles to school, the light
of day spilling from a summer sun that refused to die, painting the sky in a blue so thick it
was as if it might stain her skin, her clothes. She had never looked at the sky in
Pennsylvania, and yet here she felt it against her like the heat on her back, engulfing her.
Looking back on this day, Mila would remember thinking that, had she worn such a
shade of blue to school, security would have sent her home. Taylor probably would
come to remember a lot of things too, but Mila was sure that she would not remember the
sky. How it felt to walk under something so oppressive and vibrant, that horizon-long
reminder that you are both plain and small. But Taylor was never one to be reminded of
the possibility that she might be either plain or small.
The lawns got steadily greener as she neared the city’s downtown – the houses larger, the fences taller. The wealthy had bought out the town’s suburban epicenter and left the periphery for those unwilling or unable to pay inflated water bills. She caught glimpses of white balconies, black cars, and brown day laborers behind wrought-iron gates. Pristine grass.

A blonde woman in yoga gear stood chatting on her phone inside one of the gates, her salon-quality hair and thick layer of makeup suggesting that she would not, in fact, be doing any yoga that day. Gleaming a little in the heat, her taut, lineless face evoked a carefully-constructed youthfulness, betrayed only by the hint of sun-spotted, leathery chest peeking out from under her dri-fit jacket. She cast a beady blue eye on Mila’s approaching figure.

“One sec, Cindy,” she said, holding her phone away from her face. Mila quickly looked down.

“Are you one of Blanca’s girls?” she called. And then, tapping the address on the gatepost – “Are you looking for esta casa? Para limpiar?”

The woman gestured at the address again, a set of manicured nails catching the sunlight as she continued to wiggle her fingers under the sign. Mila kept walking, balling her hands into fists around her backpack straps, her face set resolutely forward. These people thought themselves god-like behind their wrought-iron.
“Sorry Cindy,” crooned the woman, holding her phone back up, “Oh god, I know. No response, completely disrespectful. I’m not sure what she’s doing, she’s not one of Blanca’s…” Her voice faded into the distance.

The little city’s downtown sprawled before Mila, storefront windowpanes winking at her as she ambled along. Women armed with post-carpool coffee flitted in and out of boutiques, clutching small children and occasionally a well-groomed dog. A homeless woman sat outside a café, carefully braiding her long hair and chatting with a regular who always bought her coffee. She smiled at Mila as she passed – the only one to do so. Rounding the corner, Mila saw her high school in the distance, looking gray and sad outlined against radiant blue. A faded yellow sign bore the school’s motto: Strength in Diversity. She waited across the street until she heard the distant chime of a bell signaling the end of second period, and then slipped into the current of students, trickling through the veins of the school in a slow, indistinguishable mass. Allowing herself to be swept up in the tide, she caught a glimpse of the athletic fields in the distance. Dead, brown grass.

The hallway was barely moving when Mila entered it, and a Tongan boy triple her size pushed past her, knocking her into the girl in front of her.

The girl whipped around. “Don’t touch me, white girl,” she snapped.

“Sorry,” Mila stammered, taking a quick step back.

The girl’s expression softened. “Aw, it’s okay,” she said, turning back to her group of girlfriends, “You didn’t mean it, huh?” They walked away.
Mila sighed, wondering if it was really that obvious that she didn’t have friends.

She inched along the congested hallway, pinned between the basketball team and the Tongan boy who had pushed her. People pressed against her on all sides – a deafening roar of yelling and laughing and shoving as students pulsed through the hallway – a chorus of what’s ups and fuck yous and the occasional touch me again and I will break your shit off. Little blonde girls chattered away to each other, their eyeliner too black and their hair fried straight; a group of Polys roared with laughter at some joke; somewhere above the crowd a loud soo wooo rang out, and was quickly chorused back by various kids throughout the hallway, some of them actually wearing red, the others maybe just joking – it was hard to tell. In front of Mila stood a massive water polo player, the sleeves of his letterman jacket barely reaching mid-forearm, a curvy redhead girl glued to his mouth. Their bodies thrashed around each other like eels out of water. Massive and unmoving, the two of them parted the crowd as a boulder would a stream, impervious to surrounding cries of get a room, and yo can you tongue ya girl somewhere else? Next to Mila, a little skate rat hugged his board to his chest, big deer eyes poking out over peeling grip tape while security yelled out over the cacophony: GET TO CLASS, GET TO CLASS. This transition period between classes was always like this – turbulent, loud, grating on the ears and body – but for Mila, this was the one part of the school day she felt accepted. There was something inclusive about the crowd, faces blending into an anonymous stream. In it, everyone was just another jostled body.

It must have been a slow day, because real music soon infiltrated the hallways, Frank Sinatra’s Fly Me to the Moon blaring over the loudspeakers, mingled with
crackling pops of static. The mob dispersed, throngs of students forcing their way into
the classroom wings as Frank continued to croon over the speaker, his voice occasionally
joined by that of a severe-sounding administrator over the intercom. *HALL SWEEP*, he
would bark into the loudspeaker, *THIS IS A HALL SWEEP*. Mila picked up the pace; by
now she understood that if she wasn’t in a classroom when the music shut off, the
teachers would lock their doors and she would be left outside to the mercy of security.
She had learned this the hard way, swept up by security the week before, and forced into
“campus beautification” — a whole period’s worth of digging Hi-Chew wrappers out of
the mud and peeling used condoms off the baseball field.

One of the security guards stared her down: “Hurry it up now, girl, *let’s go, let’s
go, let’s go.*” Mila glared back — it was incredible how the guards yelled at students; she
could have been sprinting and they would’ve shouted her down with a *PICK UP THE
PACE* anyway.

Frank was still warbling across the grounds as she reached her history classroom,
and she slowed down to a normal clip, cheeks flushed from the heat. A white girl stood
outside the classroom, leaning against the door. Brown-haired and a little plump, she had
a pleasant face, and Mila tried to remember if she was in history with her.

Mila smiled at her, “You going in?”

The girl laughed. “God, no. You in a hurry or something?”

“Well, it’s a hall sweep.”
The girl looked around at the bands of milling students, seemingly impervious to the threat of the music.

“Yeah but don’t have a fit about it,” she said. Still chuckling, she pushed herself off the door and strolled away from the classroom – another quashed friendship. If possible Mila’s cheeks flushed an even deeper red, and she slid into the classroom, doing everything she could to meld into the wall.

As always, the classroom interior bothered her – empty except for a few desks and chairs, with posters of sunsets and inspirational quotes and photos of black people and white people holding hands erupting like gaudy flowers from the otherwise cadaverous gray of the walls. The chalkboard was empty except for a lone bulletin in the corner: *book report extra credit due Monday*. It wasn’t even a real classroom, but a “portable” – a kind of temporary room that she normally only saw used for offices on construction sites. The regular classes were held in the portables – Mila soon discovered – while the honors classes, taught by tenured teachers, were in the actual school building.

Mila found her desk in the back of the class, positioned in the middle of a row of all girls – Melee, Silvia, Rosa, Taylor, and her – all seated under the watchful gaze of a kitten with its paws raised, imploring them to *Shoot for the Moon!*

Melee, the only other girl already seated, didn’t look up as Mila approached. A stunning Tongan girl, hair dyed with streaks of red, Melee draped herself out over her chair, completely at ease, one leg propped up on her desk. Mila had several classes with her, but she never seemed bothered to acknowledge her, often engrossed in her phone. She was beautiful and tough-looking and Mila was terrified of her.
“Hi Melee!” she said, inwardly cringing at the unnatural pitch her voice had taken on. Slowly raising her head from her phone, Melee looked up at Mila for a full ten seconds. It struck Mila that it was entirely possible Melee had no idea who she was.

“Hey,” she said, then looked back down at her phone.

Soon after, Silvia plopped down in the desk to Mila’s right, slamming her books down with a loud *crack*. Mila smiled at her. Silvia gave her a nod, not smiling. A formidable Mexican girl – unique not in beauty but in size – what Silvia lacked in attractiveness she made up for with a sharp wit and volatile temper. She kept no opinion or feeling contained, as if it would scratch against her insides, beat against her body until she let it burst out of her unfiltered.

Mila tried Silvia this time, her voice still strangely shrill. “Did I miss anything in Ceramics this morning?”

Silvia shrugged. “Same shit, Dominic got in trouble, tried to put textbooks in the kiln, and I made a vase shaped like a pineapple.”

“Useful.”

She let out a derisive laugh, rummaging around her backpack for a pencil, “All part of the education process you know – reading, writing, pineapple vases – important shit like that.”

It was quiet for a moment, then Silvia looked up one more time, twirling a black curl around her manicured fingers. “What’s your name again?”
“Mila – Mila Alvarez ”

“Huh, that’s a Spanish-ass name, Mila Alvarez. You don’t look Mexican.”

“My dad is Manuel Alvarez; he’s Spanish, actually. Like from Spain,” she added.

“Your mom too?”

It was Mila’s turn to laugh. “My mom is Shannon Thompson from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.” And Silvia agreed that that was the whitest-sounding name she had ever heard. The classroom began to fill up, the arriving students bringing the pungent odors of sweaty adolescents – sugary perfume and flaming hot Cheetos and a tinge of weed – the sounds of Spanish and English and high school gossip dancing around the portable. A group of boys had started throwing dice at the corner desks, occasionally crying out, lamenting unfavorable throws or accusing their friends of cheating.

Miraculously, Silvia turned back to Mila. “So you speak Spanish then?”

“A little bit – I can understand a lot, but I don’t really speak that well.”

“Cool, well I’m Silvia.”

Mila smiled nervously. “I know.”

She didn’t offer her a last name, but Mila was too intimidated to ask – too pleased with herself for surviving a whole conversation with another human in this strange place.

Rosa arrived shortly after, sitting down next to Silvia, who immediately began chattering with her in rapid Spanish. Rosa looked over and smiled feebly at the other two
Girls, but Silvia appeared to have no inclination of pausing her agitated venting, snapping her fingers at Rosa to cut short any further attempts at pleasantries. None of this was surprising to Mila, who daily observed the way in which the doe-eyed, sweet-looking Rosa bore the torrential outpouring of either anger or elation or (often) irritability common to Silvia’s day-to-day. Mila picked up bits and pieces of their conversation—she thought it must be about a boy, or maybe a class. Silvia, so calm just a moment ago, sounded angry, and Rosa, timid. The latter kept fidgeting with a packet of what looked like forms on her desk. When Mila looked up at the two girls, she was surprised to find Rosa’s face a little swollen—tinged with red, like she’d just been crying. Spotting Mila’s eyes on her, Rosa snatched the packet up off her desk and stuffed it in her bag. Mila just managed to catch part of the heading before it disappeared into the backpack: Release of a Minor: G.E.D.

As Rosa fell into an agitated silence, Mila asked Silvia, “So what’s going to happen to the kid who put the books in the kiln? He’s not suspended is he?”

“Dominic? Nah, I don’t think so. Detention, maybe.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“Honestly, Mila Alvarez, some of those textbooks still say ‘current president Ronald Regan,’ maybe it’s time someone burned them.”

Fifteen minutes later and the class had fallen into an unusual silence. One Mr. Humphrey Walch, an old and balding history teacher, had handed out a worksheet on ancient Mesopotamia that was both difficult and tedious, and the class had set about
drowsily filling it out, the ticking of the second-hand tauntingly slow. Mr. Walch reclined at his desk, perusing a magazine, his neck spilling out over his collar like a turkey gobble. Mila had been idly doodling flowers on her desk when a shout of laughter from the door shattered the sleepy silence. A tall girl stood in the doorway, laughing along with what must have been a football player, judging by the game-day jersey he wore over his school clothes. From what Mila knew of Taylor, she had always been like this: loud, bold, inconsiderate. She was the type of girl who couldn’t pass a mirror without looking into it, who openly reveled in the many small and large flaws of others, and who wouldn’t leave a room before knowing that each person in it had taken notice of her. Her striking beauty and penchant for cruelty had built her a throne on the backs of what she deemed to be lesser high school mortals, and she accepted this as if it were a birthright.

And yet Mila could not help but stare at her as she flounced into the room, dismissing the football player with a brief flutter of her fingers. Tall – and too skinny – with jutting cheekbones and large dark eyes, Taylor exuded the sunken, almost sickly glamour of a runway model, and the poise of someone much older than her 16 years. Yet it was not this fashionable demeanor that drew eyes, so much as her hair – so striking and full that it appeared not to catch the light but to create it. No one could find fault with it; it was like sunshine and marigolds and everything golden, falling almost to her waist in great spirals.

Taylor didn’t want to be pretty, she wanted to be prettier than everyone else, and consequently she was abrasive and aggressive, ready to subtly lash out and humiliate
others, eager to call attention to herself and to the flaws of her peers. She was the kind of
girl who would do anything to stand in the spotlight, even if it set her on fire.

Mr. Walch had finally noticed her, and his voice rang out sharply: “Taylor. You’re very tardy.”

“Sorry,” she said, with the air of someone dismissing a waiter. Swiveling around, she turned her back to him and flounced over to her desk, golden hair like ripples down her back as she moved.

The ladies of the back row had watched their fifth and final desk-mate from the moment she arrived, some unabashedly, some, like Mila, surreptitiously. There was a twisted power to the way Taylor controlled the room – presiding easily over the football player, evading Mr. Walch’s reprimand, even calmly avoiding hall sweep consequences, trusting to the fact that she was rich-looking enough for security not to stop her.

Silvia openly glared at Taylor as she sat down, not bothering to mask the pointed dislike etched across her face. “Ok, what,” she said, suddenly switching back to English, “Think you’re too good for hall sweeps now?”

Taylor stared back, as if surprised someone had addressed her, and then shrugged her off.

“Who cares about it? I just keep walking, nobody ever stops me.”

Though Mila had not yet fully grasped the whole of this dynamic, it was common knowledge among the other students that if you walked with a purpose through the halls,
as if a teacher had sent you on an errand, you could get away with wandering around, with walking away from hall sweep consequences, even with leaving campus. As far as Mila could guess, this was a tactic that worked exclusively for white students. Anyone less white or wealthy than Taylor probably would’ve been stopped – but it was not like Taylor to consider these things.

Silvia started to say something, but Taylor cut her off, noticing Rosa for the first time.

“Whoa. What happened to your face? You look like shit, you know that, right?”

Silvia seethed in her chair. Mila thought that, had she been a cartoon, she’d have steam pouring from her ears at this point. Rosa said nothing.

“Seriously,” Taylor pressed on, the corners of her mouth twitching up a little, “What did you do last night, neck a bottle of Smirnoff and cry over The Notebook? You look like the tail-end of a bender.”

“Jesus, leave her alone,” Melee cut in, an edge to her voice, “There’s nothing wrong with her face. Rosa, there’s nothing wrong with your face.”

Taylor let out a tinkling laugh. “Oh my god, I’m kidding,” she said, looking over at Rosa – “You know I’m kidding right?”

Rosa shrugged, her voice tiny. “It’s whatever.”

The girls of the back row were all silent for a while, then eventually Silvia and Rosa picked up their conversation again, still in Spanish. Mila was by now unsurprised
by the little squabble. Taylor’s sort of lazy, almost unintentional cruelty was nothing out
of the ordinary, and Silvia often lashed back at her – bolstered by her size or her anger –
the only one to confront the otherwise un-confrontable Taylor. Mila again caught
snatches of their exchange – Silvia’s heated ranting – *gringa, gringa, gringa* rose out
from otherwise incoherently rapid Spanish. Slowly, she scanned the room, knowing
already that out of everyone in the class, *gringa* could only apply to Taylor or herself.
Inwardly praying that her race did nothing to associate herself with the blonde sitting next
to her, Mila edged her desk a little bit away from her.

Taylor often tried to chat with her, and Mila hated this. She was sure that in any
other circumstance, someone like Taylor wouldn’t bother to give her the time of day. In
fact, she *knew* this, having frequently passed Taylor in the hallway, surrounded by a crew
of more blondes, a few brunettes, her eyes sliding over Mila as if she were part of the
wall. But she seemed to make an exception for 3rd period history, which, incidentally,
was the one time Mila truly wanted distance from the popular, white princess.

“Hey,” Taylor said, looking over onto Mila’s desk, “Lemme see your worksheet.”

Mila stared. “Uh, you don’t really need to. It’s pretty straightforward.”

“Calm down,” she said, sliding Mila’s sheet toward her, “I just wanna look.”

Mila said nothing; she could feel Silvia watching her.

“God,” Taylor said, handing back Mila’s worksheet, “This class is such a fucking
joke, you know?”
A snort came somewhere from Mila’s right, and both girls turned to look at Silvia, still chuckling derisively as she filled out her worksheet.

“What?” said Taylor, addressing Silvia now.

Taking her time first to write out her last answer, Silvia looked up at Taylor, not a drop of mirth left in her face.

“You think you’re better than us?” she said, cocking her head challengingly at Taylor, “Think you’re too good to be here?”

“You’re kidding, right?” said Taylor easily, and Mila couldn’t help but admire her utter lack of concern. Personally, she thought she would probably be sick, had Silvia spoken to her with that tone.

Taylor continued: “Do you know how hard it is to fail this class? That stupid extra credit report is worth two grades. You could literally go from an F to a C by doing one book report. What part of this are you not understanding?”

Mila, staring resolutely at her worksheet, pretended not to notice that the girls on either side of her were snarling at each other. But a faint sniff to her right caught her off guard, and she looked up to see Rosa hurriedly wiping away fresh tears – she, too, determinedly absorbed in the completion of her worksheet. She suddenly realized why Rosa might be upset, and she prayed for Taylor to stop talking.

Meanwhile, Taylor and Silvia were still sniping at each other across Mila’s desk.
“Why don’t you go back then?” Silvia raged, “Go back to your honors classes and—”

The rest of her sentence faded into a stream of Spanglish that even Mila couldn’t parcel through. Taylor please shut up, she thought desperately.

But Taylor just laughed. “Why would I? This is like a free period.”

*   *   *

At 11:30 the bell let out its familiar wail, the loudspeakers yet again starting up the Frank Sinatra, blaring “HALL SWEEP, HALL SWEEP.” This time, Mila dawdled with her books and bag, watching through the window as students seeped from doorways out into the already oppressive heat, eyes scrunched up against the sun. Melee paused at the door of the classroom and glanced back at Mila, giving her a once-over.

“Hey,” she said, indicating Taylor’s retreating back, “You don’t like her either, huh?”

“I guess not.”

Melee seemed to think about that. “Most of you do, though.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mila said, “I think maybe most of them just kind of use her, right?”

Melee shrugged, turning to leave. “Maybe you’re right.” A long swoop of red-streaked hair followed her out the door, Sinatra just audible over the hum of students outside – “in other words, pleaseee be true...”
Mila had barely stepped out of Mr. Walch’s room when Silvia pushed past her, striding with a purposeful clip – a rare pace in a school full of the aimless and meandering. Taylor was a little farther up, the back of her head a bright dot among a gray hallway crowd. Mila mindlessly pushed forward in Silvia’s wake, thinking only of not getting caught in the hall-sweep, of how her 4th period teacher always locked his door. She knew something was off only after Taylor had screamed – a pitiful sound, strangled with shock and fear, ringing out over the crowd like the wrong chord in a well-practiced symphony. The scream silenced them. Quietly, from behind, Silvia had gathered up all of Taylor’s bouncing, twirling hair, and for a moment, maybe, she was dazzled by it – this radiant thing she held in her hand – how tender it was to touch, all scooped up like that. Then she had pulled and Taylor had screamed and it had silenced the crowd – silenced them enough to hear the swish of air as Taylor was yanked backward – silenced them enough to mark forever in their minds the unmistakable, hollow crack of flesh and skull hitting concrete – the dull moan of a semi-conscious girl. Unmoving, Mila and those around her watched as Silvia walked methodically around Taylor’s crumpled body, mounted her, and calmly began to beat her face. Over and over again she drove fists into flesh, her own face curiously blank. Little flecks of blood sprayed up with each blow, painting Silvia’s cheeks and forehead with a galaxy of little red droplets. Only Frank sang on, suddenly the lone voice in the slew of soundless onlookers. *Fly me to the moon, let me play among the stars...*

For the time it took for eight, full blows, Mila watched as Taylor’s beautiful face turned to pulp. Often in the past, girl fights at school had been a social occurrence, widely attended by the student body, and more unifying than any misguided attempt at a pep
rally. They were something to be filmed on camera phones, with hair and nails and scratching and cursing – cries like wounded cats that were both comical and a little sad. This was not like that. No one circled around, no one intervened. They just watched, standing sentinel at wherever they had happened to be when Taylor went down.

Mila began to tremble; she felt as if she was intruding on something fiercely private, like a child that walks in on his parents entwined in bed. No one moved. Taylor’s face had been bloodied almost into anonymity – it could have been anyone’s face. It struck her how incredibly violent it looked, this calm, mechanical beating – how lifeless Taylor was, like a tossed-away doll, her features masked by blood and matted hair. Why was no one moving? Why wasn’t anyone doing anything? Yet she couldn’t move either – bound to where she stood by an overwhelming desire to never be seen – to exist only as part of the crowd.

The screech of golf cart brakes broke the silence as security arrived on the scene. Mila expected a struggle, but Silvia let them pull her up off Taylor without resisting, her expression oddly smooth, impassive. She would be expelled – that was the punishment for getting caught fighting – and yet her face bore no consternation, or anger. She allowed herself to be steered away by two security guards, her knuckles and cheeks still painted with blood. The remaining guards scooped up Taylor and placed her in the cart, her willowy limbs limp like a marionette, swaying slightly as the cart began to speed forward. Talk and movement broke out again after security’s departure; students picked up their things and made their way to class.
“Wait,” Mila said, crying out to a lingering security guard, “Wait, is she going to be okay?”

The guard just stared at her and shook her head, as if she thought Mila was prying.

“Get to class,” she said, “Hall sweep.”

Mila shuffled her way to 4th period, dragging her feet through sheets of brown grass – so trampled and downtrodden that only little patches remained, like so many clots of matted hair on a raw and bleeding scalp. She took her seat and anonymous high school chatter rose and fell around her like tides, and her math teacher handed out a worksheet on geometry, and the boy behind her was laughing at a joke he’d made, and she didn’t pick up her pencil but sat on her hands, trying to stop them from shaking.

She grabbed the bathroom pass and stumbled outside, looking out onto the portables and fences and houses beyond, searching through brown-landscape horizons for the type of green that didn’t exist in a drought.
Lena’s shift had a little over an hour left when a man in pale blue scrubs sidled into the café, fluttering the paper lanterns that laced the windows with an influx of hot, afternoon air. She had caught enough of a glimpse of the man to know it was Gabriel, but she didn’t look up right away, letting long swaths of dirty-blonde hair swing in front of her face, absorbing herself in the creation of an iced soy macchiato. She could hear him wending his way through the maze of mismatched chairs and little coiled-wire tables, the *thwap* of old sneakers on Spanish tile mixing with the low rumble of workday gossip, the clacking of laptop keyboards, and two ancient ladies tapping out a chess game in the back booth.

“Lena?” he called.

Her eyes snapped up. Gabriel stood in front of her, large hands placed firmly on the countertop in a characteristic pose. He grinned at her from beneath black tufts of beard, his eyes crinkling up into happy slits as he smiled. Lena liked this about him – he could look at her and make it seem as if he had woken up that morning just to see her and smile at her. It also embarrassed her. She met his eyes quickly, then glanced back down.

“Hi Gabriel,” she said, still fiddling with the macchiato, “You need another coffee already?”

Gabriel laughed – he’d already stopped in earlier for his usual blended mocha.

“Oh, does the mocha count as coffee now?”

“It’s probably closer to milkshake – I’m not sure someone in your line of work could justify getting a second one.”
He chuckled again, stepping aside as a small, older man fidgeted his way in front of him, scooping up the poorly made macchiato.

“Shockingly, I’m not here for diabetes right now,” he said, stepping back up to the counter, “A buddy of mine is having a few people over tonight – nothing fancy, pretty low-key – and I was wondering, you know – if you aren’t busy – if maybe you’d want to come?”

He tugged nervously at his beard as he spoke, focusing on a spot just beyond her head, not quite meeting her eye.

“Oh,” said Lena, genuinely sorry for the answer she had to give, “Oh, well, I would love to but I actually do have dinner plans tonight.

“Right, of course you do, I should’ve asked sooner.”

He looked like he wanted to say something else, but two women had lined up behind him, and he had to edge out of their way. Lena looked up from the register just in time to see him place something on the countertop; he caught her eye, gave her a quick wave, and retreated.

She eyed the counter – he’d left her a note. *In case dinner ends early*, written above a phone number. He was still visible outside the window – a speck of blue melting into the car-streaked, sun-bleached horizon.

A voice drawled from behind the employees-only curtain.

“Was that your nurse-friend?”

“He’s not a nurse, Gayle.”
The curtain whipped back and a wiry, blonde woman emerged in a clatter of earrings and bangles, bemused and clutching a sketchpad. Originally a brunette, Gayle had chopped off most of her hair and bleached the rest, framing her face with wisps of white-blonde that somehow made her look both sweet and sinister.

“If he’s not a nurse, and he’s not a doctor, then what is he?”

“A nurse practitioner.”

Gayle snorted. “Sounds like a nurse to me.”

She plopped her sketchpad down on the counter, perched on a stool and kept drawing, humming tunelessly to herself. A talented artist and good with computers, her latest get-rich-quick scheme was to design and code a video game – something to preoccupy her until her next big idea came along. Lena, who had been a Studio Art major at Stanford, first met Gayle at the showing of her senior thesis – a series of paintings of the female body (Gayle had been there to try to poach artists for her project).

A Bay Area native, Gayle had dropped out of college and gone back home to “pursue her own path.” She liked to admonish customers for using poor grammar and intentionally wrote their names wrong on cups – she lived mostly off her parents’ dollar and was conceited and lazy and brilliant. She had a slew of carefully disheveled-looking friends, and Lena was always surprised and a little grateful to find herself in their company.

A man walked in and Gayle sprang up to take his order. As he rifled through his pockets, looking for change, she threw Lena a quizzical look.

“You’re blowing off the nurse for this ‘special dinner’ with your boyfriend?”

“Sorry, what’s the name?” she added to the customer.

“John.”
“Got it.” She scribbled Jawhn on the cup and turned back to Lena.

Lena scowled. “Tommy’s not my boyfriend, we’re friends.”

“Are you still friends now that he boinked you?”

At this, the customer gave a slight cough, but Gayle ignored him.

“Did you just say boinked?” Lena said.

“It was a stylistic choice – the question stands.”

“We’re friends,” she repeated.

As the sun dropped lower in the sky, painting the back walls with a warm, orange light, the café seemed to come to life around her, inundated with the happy chatter of Friday customers finding themselves suddenly unburdened by the heat of the day and the woes of their workweek. Lena’s mind wandered to the little brown backpack she had placed in the back room; she’d filled it that morning with her makeup, a curling iron, and a brand new white sundress that she had bought solely for her dinner date (though this she would never admit). Date – she dwelled on the word – was it a date? Lena had known Tommy for a long time; they had been friends at Stanford, and both stayed in the area post-graduation – Tommy to work as an overpaid investment banker, Lena to take odd jobs and generally flail about in her search for a better opportunity. They had been great as friends – like Gayle, Tommy had grown up in the area, so he had shown her around in college, and helped her settle in Palo Alto after graduation. Together, they liked to brown-bag Coors at random Little League games, smoke weed and watch Spanish telenovelas, sneak into movies, and meet up before dawn to try to see the Aquariids – things that Tommy often still managed to make time for, in spite of his new
job. But a few months prior, they had been drunk at a party – in the backyard, with strings of lights crisscrossed overhead like stars, a fire-pit crackling sparks up into the sky, the same heat permeating the night with wood-smoke and jasmine-fumes, and everything was beautiful in the flickering light of the fire and the out-of-season Christmas lights – and Tommy had kissed her – kissed her in a way that their once-easy friendship probably couldn’t recover from.

“So this can’t actually be a date, right?” Gayle asked from her perch on the stool, interrupting Lena’s reverie.

“Why can’t it be a date?”

“He’s banging other girls,” Gayle offered.

Lena took her time washing out a poorly-thrown, oversize mug, and placed it back on the shelf among other carefully mismatched mugs. She could see the ceiling lantern-lights reflected back at her in their gleaming surfaces, fluttering softly with the opening and closing of the door.

“You don’t know that,” she said, finally.

“What about the South Bay girl?”

Lena didn’t say anything. Tommy was almost certainly just as involved with a girl from Fremont as he was with Lena, but the idea of that made her feel small, and strangely brittle. Gayle seemed to correctly read her silence.

“It’s okay,” she said, “she’s not that pretty.”

“She’s got big tits and a job at Goldman, what else does she need?”
Gayle let out a cackle of laughter that caused the woman closest to the counter to slop a little latte on the sports section.

“You know, you come across as all quiet and shy, but you’re actually kind of hilarious when no one’s looking,” she said, “You should let that out more, it’s a good look on you”

When Lena didn’t reply, Gayle stood back up and rolled her eyes. “Turtle returns to her shell.”

Darkness had already settled around the café when Lena left the register to go change into her new white dress, and she was just untying her apron in the back room when Gayle’s voice rang out from the front.

“Lenaaa,” she cooed, “There’s someone here for you.”

From the sing-song, almost mocking tone of her voice, Lena thought she knew who it must be. She pushed back the curtain, running her fingers through the scraggled ends of her un-brushed hair. Tommy was striding through the door – tall and boyish and smiling – and Lena quickly dropped her fingers from her hair. She clenched her hands in her pockets, feeling her pulse in her fingertips. Jesus, she thought to herself, it’s just Tommy.

He greeted Gayle first, loosening his tie and glancing down at her sketchpad.

“Hey Gayle,” he said, “How are the rabbits coming along?” Gayle’s sketchbook was filled with drawings of personified rabbits, all in various combative poses, some of them wielding swords or nun chucks or ninja-stars.

“They’re bunnies,” Gayle corrected him.
“Your video game’s on bunnies?” Lena asked. Tommy caught her eye and stifled a laugh.

“Yes,” said Gayle, a little indignantly. “It’s like Ninja Turtles but with bunnies – an attempt to instill a general badassery in the female population at an early age.

“I didn’t realize ‘badassery’ was a word now,” Tommy said.

Gayle snapped her sketchbook shut. “Obviously my artistic vision isn’t for everyone.” She flounced off to the back room, disappearing in a swish of curtains.

Looking up at Lena now, Tommy placed his palms flat on the countertop – much like Gabriel had done just an hour earlier – and leaned over the register toward her.

“You’re early,” she said reproachfully – all too aware of the way her hair fell in greasy strands down her back, the partially-rubbed-off makeup she had meant to redo, and her sweat-laced tank top, painted with coffee stains in the places her apron didn’t cover.

“I’m still at work,” he said, nodding his head in the direction of a stately building in the distance, “And listen, how would you feel about skipping dinner? Remember Jack? From work?”

Lena nodded. She’d met Jack on several drunken occasions, often at various debaucherous young banker events.

“He’s having a party of sorts at his place tonight, and I was wondering if you maybe wanted to go to that with me instead.”

Lena looked into his face and wondered if he could see hers falling. The son of a rich white chiropractor and the former Miss Philippines, Tommy had always been the kind of good-lookiing that seemed to be everyone’s type. He struck an impressive figure
at the counter, bedazzled in his workday finest – crisp button-down, designer tie, a twinkling watch peeking out of navy sleeves – how strange he looked. Lena’s protests died in her throat. She picked at her apron’s browning edges, feeling the ends fray in her hands; she could never say no to this person in front of her – this important-looking adult that resembled her friend. Claiming that she wasn’t hungry anyway, Lena agreed to the party, smiling in a way she hoped made her look nonchalant – indifferent, even.

“I should get back,” he said after a few minutes.

“You want anything before you go? The usual?”

“Why not,” he said, pulling a five out of his wallet.

She poured him two black coffees, and he picked them up off the counter, brushing the top of her hand with the tips of his fingers before leaving. His work shoes left a decisive drum of oxford soles on marble as he walked out. She watched him pause outside, bending over to hand the second coffee to a homeless woman. Her long, unwashed braids shook behind her as she squinted up at him with her usual thank-you.

Gayle came out to watch this exchange as well.

She rolled her eyes. “Tommy the saint.”

“He’s a good guy.”

Slipping off her apron, Gayle punched out her timecard as the next crew of employees traipsed in.

“He’s fucking with you.”
Two hours later and Lena was strolling alongside Tommy, climbing a steep four blocks up to Jack’s house, which was at the top of one of the Ladera hills. Nervous that his car – a tortured Jetta – couldn’t quite crest the hill, the two of them had opted to make the climb themselves. Lena had gone home before Tommy picked her up, deciding to wear her new white dress anyway. She had showered and carefully applied just enough makeup to make it look like she had barely bothered with it – curled her hair just enough so the waves could pass as natural. The street was residential and silent, and she found herself mimicking them – unusually quiet. It struck her that the only people she would know at the party would be Tommy and Jack.

“You okay?”

She hadn’t noticed Tommy glancing at her; his voice sounded lonely in the quiet, and the dark.

Lena shrugged. If she was being fair, Tommy had never specified that their dinner plans were meant to be a date, so she felt like she wasn’t allowed to be upset with him. But she had wanted dinner – looked forward to it, planned for it, set store in it. For the past few days she had foamed cappuccinos and washed dishes and walked to and from work wondering about things like whether Tommy would pick up the check, how nice of a place he would take her to, what she should wear, whether he would still kiss her, want her, in this conventional, dinner-date context, and not just as someone to drunkenly end the night with. Of course, they had gone out for meals together hundreds of times – the manager at Tacos El Grullense knew their orders by heart, down to the last “no sour cream,” and “extra guacamole.” But this had felt different – the way he had asked, the intention to make a deliberate plan. “We should go out for a real dinner,” he
had said. “Let’s go on Friday. I can pick you up from work.” It had felt different, and the more she dwelled on this new development, the more she discovered that maybe she had liked it.

Her thoughts were cut short by a series of loud growls from her stomach, piercing the silence that had settled between the two of them. In all her endeavors to look put-together for the party, she had eaten almost nothing since that afternoon.

Tommy’s shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. “Are you serious with that, Lena? What did you eat for dinner, crumbs?”

“….fruit roll-up?” she admitted.

He shook his head; he was a firm believer that girls didn’t eat enough. “Ok,” he said, “All right. This is my fault. I’m a dick; I owe you food.”

“Oh stop, I’m fine.”

Tommy placed his hands on both of her shoulders and steered her back down the hill in the direction of the car. “No!” he cried, “I promised the lady dinner, so dinner she shall receive.”

She grinned in spite of herself, climbing back into the car. “You’re an idiot. And we’re going to be super late.”

“Don’t you worry, m’lady,” he said, shutting the door behind her, “I know a cozy little local spot, very romantic. Should be quick.”

A few minutes later found them still in the car, Tommy poking his head out the window.

“Your finest Doritos Locos tacos, my good sir,” he yelled into the Taco Bell drive-thru speaker. “I’ll take the nacho cheese, and the young lady will have cool ranch.”
He scrounged in his pockets for his wallet as the steely-faced drive-thru attendant handed over a plastic bag of Doritos-shell tacos, filling the car with a pungent, steamy warmth. The bill came out to be eight dollars. Tommy paid the whole thing.

The uphill climb to Jack’s house felt distinctly steeper the second time around, their bellies crying out in a chorus of grumblings, laden with Doritos and fire sauce and questionable beef. They approached the house, which was large and Spanish-style. The size of it struck Lena as intimidating; while they weren’t in Palo Alto anymore, Ladera was still in the Bay Area, and housing wasn’t cheap. Though the night was warm, Lena stopped and pulled on a sweater over her dress. She had thought the dress, woven and backless, was pretty when she bought it, but approaching this formidable house she suddenly felt childish in it, like it was something a teenager would wear to Easter brunch. They pushed forward the already partway open door and slipped inside, Tommy leading her towards the cacophony of voices and music, the clink of glasses on countertop and the throb of a deep bass.

The main part of the house was packed – a flock of about fifty twenty-somethings lined the various inlets of the rooms, many of them faces Lena recognized from Tommy’s work (though she couldn’t quite attach a name to any of them). Everyone was dressed well – the understated, minimalist chic of lavish brands. The women wore well-made denim, leather jackets, and T-shirts that somehow still looked like a day’s paycheck, or else they donned simple, impeccably-tailored dresses, all of this carefully contoured to the slim, wiry body-type that comes of working too much, eating too little, and top-notch personal training. All of them seemed to have the same trendy, shoulder-length hair cut –
work-appropriate hair length, Lena realized, suddenly conscious of the ends of her own hair, tickling her lower-back.

Similarly, the men all seemed to subscribe to the same uniform – button-downs and slacks – sleeves rolled up to reveal the shining faces of dark watches – sometimes the occasional bad polo, a company logo emblazoned on the breast. All of them struck her as oddly adult, with their carefully-crafted identities and neatly-pressed clothing. She glanced down at the worn edges of her sandals – the blue copper marks on her fingers where her rings had stained them. She pulled her sweater farther around herself; no one else had worn a sundress.

Catching sight of Tommy in the doorway, Jack extracted himself from the crowd, slapping his friend on the back, and then smothering Lena in an unexpected – though not entirely unpleasant – hug.

“Lena!” he cried, “Tom told me you might be coming.”

Lena threw Tommy a glance from over Jack’s shoulder.

“Tom..?” she mouthed, eyebrows raised. He just shrugged.

White-blond, with wide eyes and a broad mouth, Jack reminded Lena of a wasp with a moderate coke problem – an image not undone by his affinity for pastel sweaters, Xanax, and boat shoes. He flitted around all over the house, pulling Lena and Tommy along with him. He introduced Lena to various friends and colleagues, forced tequila shots on anyone in proximity, and snapped photos, mostly of women.

“It keeps the girls coming back,” he admitted to Lena, snapping a group shot of four meticulously-posed women, “It’s like a ‘see and be seen thing,’ especially since they know I’m going to upload them.”
“You’re unbelievable,” Tommy said, shaking his head as he scrolled through Instagram, showing Lena the fifteen or so photos from that night that Jack had already uploaded. While he had mostly inundated the newsfeed with photos of female attendees, a few of them were candid shots from the party, and they were, Lena thought, surprisingly well composed.

Tommy seemed to agree. “Hey, you know some of these aren’t bad, Jack-y.”

Jack brushed off the compliment, engrossed in uploading a selfie of himself and two women. “I thought I was going to be a photographer in high school,” he said, not looking up from his phone, “So I took a few classes.”

“Wait, go back,” Lena said to Tommy, as he continued to scroll absentmindedly through Jack’s Instagram feed, “Go back two photos.”

Two pictures back, Jack had uploaded a photo of a strikingly handsome Filipino man, bent over and whispering into the ear of a thin white girl, her hair falling down her shoulders in long tendrils – dirty blonde and a little scraggly – her face lit up with what could only be described as delight. Lena looked down on herself and Tommy and marveled at the joy in her face – how intimate they looked. There was something validating in this image on the internet – posted online for anyone to see – and some small, petty part of her subconscious wished that any of Tommy’s other girls would see it – see it and realize that, at the end of the day, he surely must prefer Lena.

Tommy gave the photo half a nod.

“Nice picture,” he said, and then took back his phone. He exited out of Instagram, and made to send someone a text. Seconds later, Jack’s phone buzzed, but Lena didn’t think much of it.
For a while, she meandered around by herself, not wanting to cling to Tommy the whole night. A couple of women that he seemed to know or maybe work with had come over to chat, and Lena had no desire to stand there and observe these proceedings. They would fawn all over him and he would indulge it; she knew this process well, having engaged in it herself many a time. She popped the top off a beer bottle and found herself downing it pretty quickly, if only to have something to do with her hands. She didn’t recognize the brand, but the beer was dark and buttery in her mouth, and she soon reached for another one, savoring the taste. Her phone vibrated in her bag so she pulled it out, desperate to appear to be doing something. Hunched over her beer at the kitchen table, Lena watched as a text from Gayle lit up the little screen: “It’s not too late,” it read.

It’s not too late? What did that mean? Lena was about to respond when another text from Gayle vibrated in her hands: a picture of Gabriel’s note on the café counter, and what must have been Gayle’s finger pointing to the number at the bottom.

One more text: call him!!

Ignoring Gayle, Lena perused her phone idly, eventually opening up Instagram again. It was a few minutes before she realized the photo of Tommy and her was gone, deleted out of Jack’s most recent upload. Despite herself, Lena could feel her heart sink – comically, like a cartoon. Maybe it was an accident, she thought dully, but she was sure it wasn’t, sure that Tommy had slyly texted Jack to delete it. Was it so bad for him for people to see that he might like her? A horrible thought struck her: is he ashamed of me? But then she realized that no, that wasn’t it – it was because he didn’t want the other girls to see. The thought of this did nothing to cheer her up. She felt like a mistress.
She could still see Tommy through the kitchen door, his watch catching the overhead lighting, gleaming on his wrist. He smiled down on the group of women, and a bitter resentment swept through her – acrid, and burning, like acid. Lena pulled out her phone again, found the photo of Gabriel’s number, and texted him. Then she stood up, grabbed another beer, and walked straight back into the party. She paused at the kitchen door and, after a moment’s deliberation, peeled off her sweater, leaving it behind in a pile on the floor.

She found Jack first, and Tommy, spotting Lena, went to join them. Wishing to appear aloof, Lena did not immediately acknowledge his restored presence.

“Wow,” Jack said, holding Lena at arm’s length and giving her dress a once-over, “You look so…so bohemian!”

From behind her, Lena could hear Tommy start to giggle.

“Thanks,” she said shyly to Jack, ignoring Tommy. “Only I don’t think that’s saying much in a room full of bankers.”

Jack contemplated the sea of neutral-colored button-downs around him.

“Point taken.”

As Tommy continued to laugh, another man approached the group and placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder, grayish eyes peering out from a handsome and prematurely lined face.

“I’m guessing this one here isn’t a banker, then?” he asked with a wink at Lena, “I thought we don’t consort with non-finance types.”

He then eyed Lena in mock suspicion. “You’re not a consultant, are you?”
Chuckling a little at his own joke, he shook hands with Jack and Tommy, and they chatted idly about work for a few minutes. The other man looked a bit older than them, but not by much. He had a bad habit of running his hand through his hair as he spoke, and in doing so revealed graying patches of otherwise dark hair. It made him look tired – an effect only heightened by his uniformly colorless attire. He, like Jack, referred to Tommy as “Tom.”

Lena tuned them out as they spoke, preferring to survey the rest of the party. The usual late-night detritus littered the area – flurries of red cups and half-drunk forty bottles, with a beer pong table set up on the back porch. Large paper lanterns illuminated the outside spaces, spilling their warm colors onto everything the light reached, casting a tropical glow over an otherwise all-too-serious game of beer pong. Less familiar items caught her eye too – the arsenal of glittering alcohols composed of strictly top-shelf bar material, the sprigs of rosemary, bottles of bitters, and jars of olives sprinkled between liters of soda and orange juice. She caught snatches of conversation in between the music – finance jargon and college reminisces and somewhere in the corner, the obligatory debate over the Steve Jobs leadership style. From the kitchen she could hear the rattle of a cocktail shaker.

Eventually, the gray man turned back to Lena –“So if you’re not a banker, then what do you do?”

And then, after a moment’s pause, “Oh god, sorry, are you a consultant? I don’t actually have anything against consultants.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Lena thought she saw Tommy shuffle his feet a little “I work at Cardon,” she admitted finally, looking anywhere but at Tommy.
“Cardon…Cardon…” he pondered the name. Part of her hoped that it sounded enough like some obscure software that he wouldn’t question it.

“As in Cardon Café?”

“That’s the one.”

“Ah.” He nodded slowly, “Very interesting.”

A pregnant pause spread between the four of them as the man continued to nod. Etiquette would dictate that he now ask Lena various questions about her job, to appear both polite and interested. The man, however, seemed unsure of how to proceed.

“So,” he began, furiously running his hand through his hair, “you’re one of the coffee girls?”

Tommy interjected, “She’s selling herself short. Tell him what you really do, Lena.”

She shot him a quizzical look, which only seemed to exasperate him.

“She’s a painter,” he said, giving the top of her shoulder a squeeze, “And a good one, too – top of the Studio Art major at Stanford.”

“Fascinating,” the gray man said, and he began to grill her on the various elements of her style, where she drew her inspiration from, and which materials she preferred.

It took Tommy the better part of twenty minutes to successfully extricate Lena from the conversation, by which point the gray man had begun to praise her for her attempt at a counter-culture lifestyle. They retreated to the kitchen, which was mercifully empty, and Tommy began to rummage through the various alcohols, assessing his options.
“You want a gin and tonic?” he asked, examining a bottle of Tanqueray, “They only have diet tonic, though.”

Lena sat at the kitchen countertop, pulling one of her rings back and forth up her finger. “Why did you do that?”

“Huh?” he said, not really listening. And then: “Or we could do vodka-soda, white girls like that, right?”

“Why did you tell that guy I’m a painter?” she said, more forcefully.

Tommy, who had been examining the label on the diet tonic, set the bottle down with a clink on the marble countertop, finally looking her full in the face.

“Lens, you are a painter.”

“Bullshit. I haven’t painted one thing since graduation.”

“That’s my fault?” he snapped.

He turned his back to her and resumed making drinks, filling the silence with the clattering of bottles. She wished he would look at her.

Lena could feel her chest swelling or aching with something that she couldn’t quite place – a creeping, insidious disappointment, and, more powerfully, a crippling shame. He really is embarrassed by me, she thought.

“I’m a barista,” she said evenly, “not a drug addict.”

This, for whatever reason, seemed to hurt him.

“Lena…” He bowed his head.

Before he could say anything more, a tall brunette burst through the kitchen door, the chunky heels of leather boots hitting the floor with staccato clops as she strode up to Tommy.
“Hey,” she said. “Jack sent me to tell you to stop hiding in the kitchen and be social. He wanted me to come fetch you.”

Tommy smiled at her, and the girl looked back at him – a little greedily, Lena thought.

“Tell him I’ll be out in a little bit.”

“No, he says right now.” She placed a hand at the small of his back, and made to lead him out, to which he seemed to resign himself. He paused beside Lena, “Wait for me, okay? I’ll be right back.”

The girl paused with him but didn’t introduce herself to Lena, instead eyeing the untouched drink he had left for Lena on the counter. “Ooh, is that a vodka soda?”

“Take it,” Lena said, not looking at either of them.

As Tommy left with the girl, Lena’s phone buzzed again – a text from a number she didn’t know. It took her a moment to realize it must be Gabriel.

“Hey,” he had replied, “Good to hear from you! We’re going to be hanging out for a while longer, so there’s still time to join if you want!”

A photo then appeared under it – a grinning Gabriel and what must have been his friends, all of them sitting around a bonfire and sipping PBRs. The yard they sat in was not particularly pretty – there were odd bits of junk strewn around in the background, and the grass looked matted and dead, and there were no colorful lights or martini shakers or jars of olives. But they had covered the yard with blankets and pillows, and some of them were roasting marshmallows, and the fire made their faces glow with a smoky, hazy light. Someone was wearing a Wu-Tang Clan t-shirt, and Gabriel had rolled up the
sleeves of his flannel, and Lena thought he looked nice in normal clothes. She cast an eye around the chic partygoers outside the kitchen. What she would not give for a fucking flannel right now.

The night wore on and Tommy had not returned, so Lena amused herself mostly in the kitchen, trying all the fancy beers, or else taking shots with a group of girls that screamed shrilly while doing so. Strings of people ebbed in and out of the kitchen, mostly to rail lines of coke off the counter. They were polite, and chatted with her, and Lena, though never altogether friendly, was less shy with all the alcohol. They offered her lines so she did one, but then declined a second. She thought of Gabriel and his fire, and of marshmallows and flannels and PBR.

By the time Tommy managed to make his way back to her, a dense fog had settled over her mind, spinning the room and distorting furniture outlines as she tripped down the hallway. The house around her shimmered with an unreality she normally associated with dreams. She was trying to slip out the front door.

“Lena, where are you going?” he asked, catching her arm. She glared back at him with glassy eyes, trying to weasel her way out of his grasp.

“Home,” she said.

“You steal my keys or something?”

Wrenching her arm from his grip, she teetered down the porch stairs and onto the sidewalk. The air felt crisp against her face after the crowded rooms of the house, and she breathed in deep gulps of it, trying to steady herself.

“I’m walking.”
Tommy groaned, dashing back inside to grab her sweater, then chasing after her in the dark. He caught up easily, slowing down to walk behind her.

“Lena, stop.”

She walked on, arms crossed against her chest and weaving a little.

“Lena, come on.”

“No,” she said, refusing to turn around.

“Fine.”

And he fell into step with her, loping alongside her in the darkness.

She felt better outside – the night clear but not cold, the sky brimming with pearl-sheen galaxies – starlight like diamonds. Her anger already beginning to ebb, Lena reveled in the way the 2am air hugged her bare legs, rippling gently through her dress in velvety breaths of darkness. They didn’t speak, but the street didn’t feel quiet anymore – it buzzed with cricket-songs and the hum of traffic in the distance – late-night revelers and the nightshift weary trying to get home. The stooped, weeping figure of an aging orange tree materialized ahead of them as they continued to walk, infusing the dark with the sweet nectar of citrus fumes, and then the sidewalk cracked with magnolia roots, and Tommy plucked a flower from the branches above them and wove it into the strand of hair behind Lena’s ear. He let his fingers linger on her neck, but then pulled them away, as if she had reprimanded him. He looked apologetic, and sad. They strolled in silence for a while longer, until, finally, as they neared his parked car, he spoke.

“I got something for you,” he said, rummaging in his pocket, and pulling out what looked like a slip of paper. He held it out to her – small, and glossy, even in the darkness.
It was Jack’s photo of them – deleted off the internet, but now here – a little crumpled – in her hands.

“I thought you might like it, so I had Jack print it out. He made one for me, too,” he said, extracting another crumpled photo. “You look really pretty in it.”

She stared down at it and was silent. It was as if the delight in the photo could seep from its surface and into the pads of her fingers where she held it, coursing through her like little sparks in her veins. How perfect they looked. She folded it delicately, then placed it in her purse.

“I’m really sorry I upset you tonight, Lens,” Tommy said quietly. And then: “But you have to know I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t give a shit what your job is, you should never let people make you feel bad about it.”

Lena searched her mind for vestiges of anger that weren’t there. She had been so upset before, but now her head was hazy and she felt confused. How much of it had really been Tommy’s fault? How much had been her fault? Was it even a real problem? Or had she distorted it in her head?

“It’s okay, I believe you. It’s fine.”

And it really was fine – at least right then. He had followed her, chased after her, printed her this photo and she didn’t care that he had gotten it deleted because the night air was heavy with orange fumes and her head swam in star-strewn, tequila-laced skies – the lusty night-blackness entwining itself around her like vines. How easily he fell back into her good graces.

“Do you want to come back with me?” He looked nervous asking.
“I don’t know yet,” she said, moving away from the car. She plopped down on a stone ledge bordering one of the yards, the smooth rock like an anchor as the rest of the world swayed dizzily before her. She let her head droop. “I can’t decide.”

A wind fluttered the flower in her hair while she perched on the wall, quivering petals tickling the front of her ear. She tried to force herself to not think of that night, but of the next morning – how she’d wake up with her head aching, her heart tied in knots. She wanted more than this, but she also wanted this. She could never refuse Tommy.

He sat down next to her on the ledge, and held out his hand.

“Do you want to?” he repeated.

Lena looked at the hand and paused – an infinitesimal pause, a second long – so small only she could feel it, fleeting enough that he didn’t feel it at all. But she did – a moment’s worth of hesitation, pregnant with blurred concepts like ego, trust, dignity, naïveté, and she could feel them starting to swallow her – electric and suffocating, and big. Suspended out in front of her, his hand called to her, black and slippery in the darkness, imploring her give in to me. She suddenly felt attacked; how easy this was for him. I am a product of your whims, she thought. And for that second, all of her anger flooded back. She thought of Gabriel – of how other people wanted her, wanted just her, and didn’t need to mix her into a slew of other women, placate her with sporadic affection and remnants of a former friendship. How repugnant this person was in front of her, with his expensive clothes and his expensive friends – this person who tiptoed her around like a shameful secret, who spoiled her with affection then pulled it away, picking her up and putting her down like a book he couldn’t quite get into. We were friends, she thought desperately, we used to be friends.
But then it was over, and she placed her hand in his, and her ego clattered to the floor as she realized that she loved him anyway. It swept over her like a dull wave, something that felt like defeat, or surrender. Or maybe shame. Or maybe relief. And it didn’t really matter, because in this moment he wanted her, and she always wanted him. That was the most she would ever asked for, a moment and a moment and a moment, and then maybe one day he might string them all together and find that they looked better like that, without the spaces between them.

So she took his hand, there, on the stone wall. He looked younger in the dark, legs crossed over sheaths of flat granite.

He moved his face closer and closer, and it was as if the night sky had seeped through her pores, like liquid, like velvet – his breath on her skin, his hand folded around hers. His palm was so big it consumed her entire hand – it could have fit her whole heart in it, and, in that moment, she thought that maybe they both knew that.