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### Picture Me Like This: A Short Story Collection

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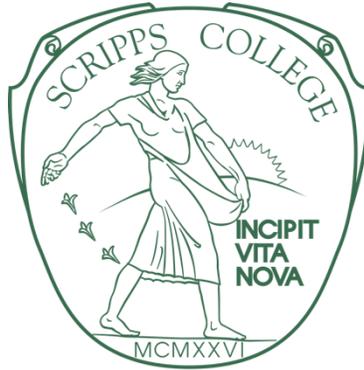
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**PICTURE ME LIKE THIS: A SHORT STORY COLLECTION**

**BY**

**ANNA JONES**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR LEILA MANSOURI**

**PROFESSOR THOMAS KOENIGS**

**MAY 1, 2023**

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*Thank you for challenging and protecting me all the time. Thank you for loving me so well.*

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## How to Become a Clown

### 1. Choose what type of clown you are, try:

#### 1a. The Mime

You get tired of the constant question, “What are you?” You learn to blend in. You give up the graphic tees gifted to you by your mom each year. *Busy making my ancestors proud. Proud fighter in the war on injustice. The future is Black and female.* People find them too confusing. They can’t see your mom’s face in yours. You straighten your hair every morning, waking up an hour early to press the unruliness out of your curls and to create the pristine, impassive walls of shine that sit in front of you in every class. Each morning you consider getting highlights, going ombre, bleaching your whole head. And each morning you decide against it. You would never achieve the blinding, golden halo that Izzy Keller flaunts down the hallways of your middle school.

One afternoon as you’re waiting for your mom to pick you up, the last kid sitting on the front steps, you hear a light giggle and whip your head around to find Izzy and Hunter close together against the school wall. You look down immediately, flushed, and certain they’ve seen you, but you can’t help looking back up once it’s clear that they haven’t. Hunter has Izzy closed in against the wall as they kiss. His hand fumbles around on her face, but he finally settles on pushing it into her hair. You can’t help but gasp a little as his fingers are enveloped by that perfect blonde. Your mom’s car pulls up and you scuttle in, sick with longing.

#### 1b. The Jester

It started in history class freshman year. Ms. Canelo had come up with a revolutionary idea for how to celebrate Black History Month. You were doodling on a

scrap piece of paper, idly considering the fact that your hand was the exact same color of your desk. If you pressed your hand hard enough against its surface, it would absorb right into school property, and no one would ever know that they were carving their initials into your knuckles.

And then Ms. Canelo exclaimed, “So today we’re gonna watch the Lion King!”

A barely constrained snort escaped you, “Why not Star Wars? It’s still got James Earl Jones, and if we watch the *Empire Strikes Back*, we’ll actually see a real live Black person.”

It was one of those things that you thought to yourself all the time, and that you said to your mom at home because you knew it would make her laugh. It was not meant for the straight-haired version of you who walked into these cream tiled hallways every day. But there were snickers, and a hitch in Ms. Canelo’s step, and Izzy, who had only ever graced you with the edge of her peripheral, gave you an appraising look. Maybe she was already seeing the picture you would make of her, scraping off your mimicry in her mind and seeing what remained. You imagine she knew then that you would complement her perfectly.

Later that day she asked if you wanted to go to the mall with her that weekend. It was the easiest yes of your life. Your mom skeptically eyed the shiny black escalade that pulled up on the Saturday hangout that would become the first of many.

“Who is this again?” she asked, peeking out the window.

“Izzy Keller,” you responded. “From middle school?”

She did not look impressed, “I thought you were spending time with Melissa finally.”

Your mom had been waiting for you and Melissa to be friends since she had first met her dad at a fourth grade back to school night.

You sighed, “Two Black single parents do not a friendship make, Mom.”

“Very funny, Trisha. But do not think—”

There was a knock at the door.

“I gotta go, Mom,” You threw over your shoulder as you went to open it to Izzy’s shiny, smiling face. Since then, hardly a day has gone by without you seeing her, whether in person or on your phone screen. That had been the beginning of Izzy and you.

Every part of your appearance is carefully crafted to contrast with Izzy’s. It started with that shopping trip the very first time you hung out. All these tiny pushes away from your coordinated copycat aesthetic with her smile encouraging you with each new item she turned to show you. Where she was classic, you were quirky. Where she was pretty, hot even, you hear boys say, eyeing her on the walk to class, you were cute, or just funny, depending on the day. You got back your hour in the morning. You started wearing your mom’s t-shirts again the first time Izzy came over and said she liked them. You got a second piercing in your left ear and into a screaming match with your mom when she noticed four months later. You calm her down by saying that you got it with the money that Dad’s estranged sister sent you for your birthday. A lie. Izzy had paid for it.

Next to you, Izzy took up the perfect amount of space. You made her look thinner, prettier. Whiter, you sometimes think to yourself before you can stop it. Once your Stats teacher told you, “I never see the two of you apart. You’re like her shadow.” You laughed, and told your mom, but she didn’t find it funny. A joke turned into a lecture at the kitchen table turned into a threat to email the school. Which thankfully she didn’t,

she never did. You liked the idea of being a shadow, anyway. Shadows don't get left behind.

**2. Observe the craft of others. For example:**

**2a. The Character Clown**

Izzy could be many different things to many different people, and you would keep being what she needed of you. You've seen her charm cashiers, teachers, and crossing guards, taking them all with her charming beauty. That was Izzy's secret: in the end she was always pretty. When she needed to play innocent, when she was on a power trip, when she was mean, she was still always beautiful. You swore that her mane of hair that she tossed around blinded people. They'd be ready to call out this self-important sixteen-year-old, and then she'd twirl her hair, or flick it behind her shoulder, and they'd melt.

The most impressive instance of this had been with mall security. Izzy had gotten a little overconfident that day, a little flashy with dangling a thick chain necklace between her fingers as you left the store and walked straight into a mall cop. As he escorted the two of you down to his dinky holding area you desperately tried to hold onto a glimpse of Izzy. You didn't really think anything was gonna happen, not with Izzy there. Not with perfect Izzy to balance out your baggy clothes, making so many places to hide merchandise, and your brown face, inviting extra eyes on you as you pass through detectors at the front of the store. Forget the fact that it was Izzy who had made you come there in the first place, forced you to drive an extra forty minutes out to the second tier mall just so she could drink the lemonade from Auntie Anne's without her mom seeing, and to steal cheap jewelry from the two-story Forever 21.

Down in the containment area, you swore the metal bench they had you sitting on was ringing with your panic. Your heart thrummed in its chest, sending a rebellion down to your stomach, and your head pounded with your mom's warnings about these mid-level authority figures:

“They have a chip on their shoulder. They couldn't get into the police academy, and this is the one piece of power they have. They will use it.”

But all of your anxiety crumpled into nothing. Izzy laughed at the guard's jokes, her hair trembling with the sound, and you could see the moment she won him over. He let you off with a smiled warning, accompanied by a firm pat on Izzy's shoulder. You froze at his hands on her body. She didn't look at you, but her grin brightened as she daintily spun out from under the guard's arm, throwing a finger wave behind her and grabbing you by the wrist, forcing you to move. In the car ride home, she pressed something into your hand before you could open the car door. The necklace sits in the corner of your top desk drawer, never worn.

### **3. Seek audience feedback**

You're sitting with Melissa, talking about Mr. Truman's latest cringey writing assignment, *Write a poem answering the question, who are you, without using any adjectives*, when she brings it up. It's the monthly lunch you have with your school's scholars of color program. All that it really entails is eating free pizza in the first-floor teacher's lounge while whichever POC teacher they could scrounge up sits in the corner. It was the only time you didn't eat with Izzy. You always felt a sick mix of longing and satisfaction as you walked away from her. You and Melissa were the only two who regularly came every month. It wasn't really a

showing of solidarity, much to your mom's chagrin, but an indicator of seriousness with which you both took free pizza. This month Ms. Sanyal was sick, Ms. Munoz was on leave, and everyone knew Mr. Russell just couldn't be bothered. So it's one of those times where the principal's receptionist walks back every five minutes to check on you and ask if you need more napkins. Ms. Hill has just done her third checkup when Melissa asks you, "Why do you hang with her?"

"Izzy?" you ask, as if there's anyone else that she could be referencing.

Melissa snorts, "No, the other prissy, rich girl you hang around."

"She's my best friend," you say, and you feel the surge of warm pride in your chest that accompanies those words.

"Yeah, but I don't really get why."

You laugh, not because it's funny, but because you don't know what else to do, "We've known each other since middle school. There's history."

"Everybody's got history with everybody here. We've known each other since pre-school and we're not best friends."

"Hey, we get lunch," you wave your pizza to exemplify your point.

"Yeah, we get free colored students' lunch together. Now fess up." Melissa looks the most serious that you've ever seen her. She's dropped her pizza onto her plate, as if refusing to pick it up again until she gets an answer out of you.

"She makes me p—"

"Popular. I knew it! I mean I get it but—"

You shake your head. She doesn't get it. "No. Pop. She makes me pop." Popular is too simple a word for what you become with Izzy. It is so much more than that.

“Pop? What are you on about?”

“I pop off her. She makes me better. Bolder.” You and Izzy are beyond words. Together you’re pure feeling, so you’re not surprised when Melissa doesn’t get what you mean. Not everyone is lucky enough to get what you and Izzy have.

“So yeah, popular,” Melissa says. “But I’m telling you, you like me, right? You like when we have these awkward lunches once a month?” Melissa’s grudgingly begun to pick up her pizza again.

“Yeah,” you say, and it tastes a little like betrayal coming out of your mouth.

“Well, I’d like you a lot more if you weren’t with her.”

#### **4. Write out some material for your act**

Later that day you go over to Izzy’s to work on Mr. Truman’s adjective free poetry assignment. You find you can’t write with her in the room. She clogs up your fingers, and you end up typing nonsense words over and over again, never quite able to lose focus on her body in the space. Sometimes you practice being silent with her, never at school, but when you’re alone together. Just to see how long it takes her to notice: that you’re so studiously not looking at her, that you’re not trading gentle barbs with the inane comments she throws out during your study sessions. But she always wins. She never caves. She stays gloriously aloof, until your stomach starts twisting in on itself, and soon you find yourself making fun of someone’s forum post for History and instinctively smiling at the sound of her tinkling laugh.

You lose again today, and you’re not even mad about it. The combination of the ill gained silence and the stifling feeling in your throat as you attempt to write has you

feeling like you're about to choke. It's a relief when you're finally able to spit out some half-assed comment about Mr. Truman's khakis during class today. She laughs, you smile, and that's what you would tell Melissa right now if you could. You always know the right time with Izzy. She provides a rhythm for you. A sure thing. She puts you in your place. With her you can be seen. Without her you're just the same color as the desks.

She leaves to take a shower, and you take out your notebook to try again on your poem: it's like a dam breaks. Words flow from your fingers like they're free. Like they don't cost you anything. You find you're writing yourself into rhyming couplets that you can't break out of, trapped by the rapid beat of their encroaching pattern. When you're done, when you can't go on because you are exhausted, because something has left you, you look at the ending lines:

*I am everything.*

*Everything but you.*

## **5. Share your material**

Next week Mr. Truman opens class by saying, "I'd like to read a stellar example from our assignment last week." He drones on about the attributes of the piece, and you zone out until you hear, "So I'd like to read an excerpt by Isabelle Keller." You look over at Izzy, and she's gifting her soft smirk to the public as everyone turns towards her. Your gaze is just one of many. Even when Mr. Truman starts reading and the words are your words, the words you wrote when the dam broke, she still doesn't look at you. Mr. Truman keeps reading your words and now they cost something.

*I am an ice cube tray,*

*I am a straw,*

*But not the drink you're waiting on.*

As your words sound out around you, you don't wonder how you didn't realize you left your notebook at Izzy's house.

*I am the plant pot, and the dirt too.*

*Please grow in me,*

*I'm begging you to.*

You don't wonder how you assumed you left it at school and just typed up a fresh copy that was less rhyming, less childish, less needy, less raw.

*I hold the ink,*

*I record the labor,*

*You write all over me:*

*I am the paper.*

You do wonder what your role is here because Izzy's not looking at you, and you don't know what to do if Izzy isn't looking at you. You wonder if she's ever looked at you. You wonder how she was able to not change any of the lines and still make it feel like hers like she was revealing some hidden depths of herself, like she was showing everyone her shadow.

*I am the desk too,*

*Maybe even the chair.*

*Maybe even the tile too.*

*I am everything.*

*Everything but you.*

The last line echoes out as the rest of the class applauds. The ‘you’ of the poem is different now. It’s everyone, and not just her. Or maybe she’s always been everyone.

When did the two things blur? When did she become so interchangeable with the rest of the world? When did she become your only context? When did she become your sun?

It’s the last class of the day so you and Izzy walk out together, and you feel a shot clock counting down inside of you. There’s only a certain amount of time during which you can say something, only a certain amount of time before this becomes normal, becomes something you have to live with. But before you can even put together a string of words beyond, *why*, Izzy reminds you she has to take off. But you’ll still get ready together for Sloane’s Halloween party, right? Halloween. Of course. Normalcy has returned. The clock has lapsed. The words are suddenly easy to find.

“Actually, I think I’ll meet you there.”

She nods, and you watch her leave.

## **6. Decide on your final clown type:**

### **6a. The Whiteface Clown**

You ignore the witch costume hanging up in your closet that you and Izzy picked out a month ago, and instead you pull out the Elsa wig from an old costume that your parents fought for days about. For you it had been simple, ice powers trumped turning into a frog. Izzy’s going to be dressed as a fairy tonight. You’re supposed to complete the magical pair: one wicked, one good. But you want to be the prize this year instead of the villain. You want to stand in the light. You want to be the girl who gets got and not the roadblock. You want your words to stay in

your own mouth. You re-braid the wig's almost neon fibers before forcing it onto your head, ruthlessly shoving your curls into the unwelcoming grip of a child's wig cap. You squeeze on a light blue satin dress that Izzy left in your room after the last school dance. It probably cost a couple hundred dollars, but she just threw it on your floor as she changed for the afterparty. It's trim and pretty and a little bit sexy in a way you never are. You look in the mirror to see if you've successfully channeled the ice queen.

The first thing you notice is that you can see your own outline. It's hard to remember the last time you wore something that lay so close to your skin. The second thing you notice is Izzy. With the blonde wig and her dress on, you look closer to your best friend than you ever have before. You unbraid the wig, letting the bright white hair fall down into a mane, a halo, a powerful tool, that surrounds you. You find an old pot of foundation that Izzy gave you last year when winter rendered it a shade too dark for her. Even in January it had been too light for you to use. You cake it on, finishing it with the type of light pink eyeshadow that you could never pull off normally. You end by putting on the one pair of heels you own: Izzy would never wear sneakers to a party. Just before you're about to leave, you remember one last finishing touch. You grab the necklace, never worn until now, from the corner of your top desk drawer.

At the party, you find Izzy quickly, eager for your reveal. She's outside on the edge of a group that's smoking by the gazebo. She looks more angelic than fairy-like with delicate golden wings hanging off her back. For a second, as you take her in, you're filled with a blinding rage. She's not missing you at all. She's

laughing at Hunter as he keeps offering her his vape, leaning close but never actually taking a hit. But then you see the moment she sees you, a laugh still stuck in her throat from whatever pathetic joke Hunter's prattling out. You wonder what she notices first: her dress, her necklace, her foundation. Her normally composed face is set loose for what feels like the first time. You resist the urge to act first. You simply cock an eyebrow, a move you've seen her pull hundreds of times. You feel her eyes travel up your body, from your heels all the way up to the wig. Her mouth is slightly open, and her eyebrows are tightly scrunched. You feel a sharp twist of satisfaction at rendering her dumb. But before you can be too pleased, she shakes herself, a more obvious tell than you've ever seen from her and gives you a smile. Not her usual smirk, but one with her full shiny teeth on display.

Your brief moment of pride plummets in your stomach. She's not pissed. She's not even annoyed. It's just another joke for her to laugh at. You turn away and start to stalk off.

"Riz, wait!"

You ignore Izzy's voice, trying to pick your way through Sloane's backyard to the side of her house. But as you step from grass to gravel, the heels you haven't worn since middle school slip out from under you and send you crashing to the ground.

### **6b. Give slapstick a try!**

Gravel digs into your palms and your knees. You prop yourself up against the wall of the house and begin to pick the stone out of your skin. You wince at the small pinpricks of blood that rush up in their place.

"Are you okay?"

Izzy drops into a squat over your legs.

She hisses when she sees your hands, “Shit. Let me help.”

She grabs your hands from you and begins picking out the gravel herself. She’s so close, her hair hanging in your face as she crouches over you, the smell of her rose shampoo comfortingly familiar. You’re so fucking mad at her. You’re just the klutz again, so quirky that you can’t even walk straight, and she’s the beauty.

She drops your hands, “All done. We should see if Sloane can get some hydrogen peroxide. Or maybe just some vodka.”

She quirks a smile at you with the attempted joke, but you can’t find anything to say in response. There’s no escaping it: you’re the fatal flaw and she’s your saving grace. She leans forward and her face is so close to yours that you can see the places where her lip gloss has faded from sipping her drink. She’s the fairy, descending to help you on golden wings. She takes the wig from off your head and your scalp aches in relief as your hair falls back down onto your shoulders. She’s the hero. She’s the hero and you’re the one she’s saving.

“That’s better,” she says, smiling softly. Her face is still so close to yours. She’s the hero and you’re the prize. You’re staring at her lips, and she’s leaning in ever so slightly, and then you kiss her, or she kisses you, and she doesn’t stop and you’re finally the girl who gets got.

And all the times you thought, wouldn’t this just be easier? Instead of wanting everyone who Izzy wanted, all those guys who never wanted cute, never wanted the shadow when they could be having the real thing, instead of holding onto a lingering crush on Hunter since middle school, to be wanting Izzy instead.

You were right. Because here was the rhythm, trading kisses with no strict end back and forth between you. Here was your moment to push against her, so she could push you back. Here was her thumb putting you in your place, which was right next to her. Always right next to her. And below it all, the knowledge that surely someone was seeing this: you and Izzy leaning against the brick wall, a soft beat humming in the background. The perfect pair, making each other pop.

You move down her neck, tracing her pulse with your mouth. But when you lean back to get a good look at her, all you can see is the cheap foundation you put on smeared across her face. It's still too dark, too visible. It's nowhere close to the pristine porcelain mask that is Izzy's face. The closest you can get to her is still so far away. Your heart rises close to the skin of your chest. You start to feel sick. Your body knows you have betrayed it.

“What's wrong?”

Her voice is so close and so soft. You've never heard her this soft before.

“Hey, look at me. Riz, look at me.”

Even in the blackness of your vision you can still see that damn golden halo. You can't stop looking at her. Making out with Hunter against your middle school. Smirking at everyone in class. Laughing at you in her room. Stealing your notebook. You see her all the time, even with your eyes closed.

“I have to go,” you hear yourself say.

“Okay, let me call my mom. She can pick us—”

“No,” you say, “I have to go now. My mom—I have to go *now*.”

“Just let me grab my phone, and then we can go. Okay, Riz?” Izzy says.

Her voice is so slow and careful, like she's handling something precious.  
You nod mindlessly, and then, as soon as Izzy leaves your sight, you run.

## 7. Take a bow

You walk through your back door well past midnight, one missed call from Izzy on your phone, ready to go to bed, but you stop at the light pouring out from the kitchen. A voice calls from the unusually lit room.

“Trisha? Come here please.”

Your mom is doing paperwork at the kitchen table. She doesn't stop as she begins her lecture.

“I would appreciate it if you let me know when you're going out. I know Izzy's parents just let her galivant around without supervision *or* a curfew, but you know that we don't—”

You keep your eyes and your face down even as her voice cuts off.

“Look at me.”

Your mom's voice has gone hard. Where before she was going through the motions of parental annoyance, her tone passes right through, *this is your final warning*, and skips straight to, *this is for your own safety*. It's the same way she used to tell you to hold her hand when crossing the street, or to buckle your seat belt, or, *this is the one piece of power they have, they will use it*.

“Trisha. I said look at me.”

You will never forget your mom's face as you finally look up at her, and she sees fully what you have made yourself into. It is shaken, almost grief stricken. But she quickly

finds her anger.

“Did she make you do this? I am calling her mother immediately,” she stands up and scrambles for her phone, casting her neat piles of paper into disarray.

“No, Mom. It wasn’t Izzy. I—I just wanted to dress up.”

You don’t know how she has enough time to hear you with how fast she responds.

“You wanted to?” your mom scoffs. “I know that isn’t your dress, or your necklace, and that sure as hell isn’t your foundation.”

“The wig is from a costume that *you* bought me,” you throw back at her. You feel your phone vibrate in your pocket.

“Do. Not. Get me started on Elsa,” she responds. It would almost be funny if the thunder if her voice didn’t mark how serious she was.

“She didn’t force me to Mom,” you whine, already knowing you’re fighting a losing battle. “She just left this stuff in my room, that’s what best friends,” you stumble over the words, unsure of them for the first time as your phone keeps vibrating, “that’s what best friends do.”

“Friends! I can’t believe you cannot see what that,” your mom shakes her hands in front of her, unable to grasp what she wants to say, before venomously spitting out, “that leech is doing to you.”

“Just because she’s white—”

“Oh my god, now you’re spouting reverse racism at me. My own daughter. My own *Black* daughter.” Your mom laughs meanly, her voice taking on a mocking tone, “You do know you’re Black, Trisha, right? Not—” and she gestures at your smeared face, though she is unable to make eye contact, “*this*.”

“*You* made me like this,” you snap back, and the kitchen is struck into complete silence. “*You* married a white guy, and now you’re disappointed that I’m not just all *you*, that I’m still him too. But you chose him, so I don’t understand why you can’t see that I—that Izzy—” you don’t know what to say, you can’t find the words, Izzy’s already taken all of them. “That she’s important to me,” you finally decide.

Your phone finally stops going off. Your mom falls back into her chair at the table and sits there for a long moment. The only sound in the kitchen is the soft, incessant buzz of the light hanging over the table.

She takes a shaky breath, “There’s a reason your dad and I aren’t together anymore Trisha.”

“But you still loved him,” you say, looking down at the kitchen tile.

You hear a hitch in your mom’s breath. When you look up, she turns her face into her shoulder, but your mom has never been one to cower. When she drove the two of you away from the house you grew up in for the last time, her eyes were red and her voice was hoarse from the screaming that been echoing through your house for months but that would be, “No more,” she said as she firmly held your hand and walked you out the front door. In the car she didn’t hide her still wet face as she looked at you in the rearview mirror and asked you to explain to her how color works, again. You acquiesced, seven years old and knowing that something had just broken or fixed itself, or both, forever, and that your explanation always made your mom laugh.

You cheerfully re-stated, “You’re the color of chocolate, and I’m the color of caramel.”

A soft smile began to form on your mom’s face, “What about dad?”

You frowned, “He’s the color of sand.”

Your mom broke into a peal of laughter even as she wiped her eyes.

That was the last time you had seen her cry. Until now, at the kitchen table where you haven’t eaten a meal together in months, when she lifts her head from her shoulder to look you in the eye and there’s a quiet rhythm of steady tears making their way down her face.

She takes a deep breath, “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

You think about refusing, about being the smaller person—you look down briefly at your phone, two missed calls from Izzy—but instead you just say, “Okay.”

You let your mom wipe off the makeup and draw you a bath. Afterwards, she brushes your wet hair, gently applying your leave-in conditioner and scrunching your curls. She does your whole hair care routine like you haven’t let her do since you were little, and, as you sit there on the bathroom floor, the soothing strokes of your mom’s hands against your head, you let yourself cry into your knees.

## **8.     **Encore****

Monday you enter school with your phone burning a guilty hole into your pocket. Izzy had called you one more time Friday night while you were in the bath. You had numbly absorbed the missed call notification before passing out in your bed, purposefully leaving it off the charge and waking up to a dead phone. You’re wearing the thrifted, purple sweater that Izzy always says looks nice on you, the one that gives you an extra-long second of her attention. You don’t know what you want to do with that extra moment, but you know you want it today. You know that you spent the weekend lying on the cool floor of your bathroom to calm the overwhelming heat and nausea that overtook

your body any time you tried to broach the topic of Izzy in your mind.

You spend first period even more zoned out from Chem than usual. You try drawing the molecular structure of you and Izzy. It takes you five minutes just to decide what to call it. Izzy and Riz's friendship seems childish. Izzy and Riz's relationship, while in theory broad, points too directly at a future you don't know how to want. You decide to leave it just as Izzy and Riz. You move on to the structure, and you give up almost immediately. You can't decide how to split the atoms between each of you. And what should be at the center? You hastily erase the drawing and end up tearing a hole into the paper. You turn to a fresh page in your notebook. But it's not empty. On the page written in pen, you only ever use pencil, are a series of carefully crafted statements:

*i am a human.*

*i am a girl.*

*i am a daughter.*

*i am a student.*

*i am a friend.*

You read over the lines again, trying to decipher the code some stranger has left in your notebook. On your third try you realize it's not a stranger's note. Izzy's lower case i's stare at you from the page accusingly, demanding an explanation for why you didn't recognize them sooner. It is one of her many charms: her name on the top of every assignment in all lowercase. Every teacher spends about a week circling it in red pen before they give in to the golden tide that is Izzy, or rather, izzy.

You're still confused. It takes a fourth read for you to finally understand what this is: *Write a poem answering the question, who are you, without using any adjectives.* Mr.

Truman's assignment. Izzy's real attempt at the prompt. You read it again, making sure you're right. You let out a shocked laugh and Ms. Atkins shoots you a disapproving look. You give her a meek smile and swallow what's left of the noise. You look back down at the 'poem,' if it could be called that. It's boring. It's nothing. It's a catalog of basic facts. It could apply to half the school. You stare at the page in disbelief for the rest of class. When the bell rings you rip it from the notebook on instinct, putting the paper into your pocket.

As you approach the door you are startled with the sight of Izzy leaning against the lockers. Usually, you run down to meet her on the third floor so you can walk to Stats together. She is studiously looking at her phone, not even glancing up as others exit the classroom. This is what Izzy looks like when she is waiting for someone. You try to imprint it in your mind. This is what Izzy looks like when she is waiting for *you*. Her hand is scratching the back of her neck. Her heeled boots tap against the tile. Her eyes are glued to her phone as she scrolls repeatedly on its screen. Her hair is mostly hidden from you as it lies trapped between the rest of her and the lockers.

She looks no different besides from the fact that she's here instead of letting you come to her two floors down. It doesn't make her prettier. She's just as beautiful as always: no more, no less. You imagine striding over there and taking her head into your hands, lifting her face from her phone and bringing it to yours, pressing her against the lockers, ignoring Ms. Atkins' scandalized cries and sinking your hand into that impenetrable blonde mass like you hadn't let yourself do on Friday night.

You don't do any of that. You want to. You love her. She's your best friend.

Instead, you just say, "Hey."

Izzy looks up. Your surprise must show because she shrugs and says, “Free period. Russell was out.”

You nod and the two of you begin the walk to Stats.

She clears her throat, “Hunter said half the football went skinny dipping in Sloane’s pool on Friday.”

You laugh, “Really?”

Izzy laughs too, but she doesn’t look at you, “Really. It’s all anyone’s gonna be talking about.”

You have to force your laugh this time, without anything to say.

You love her. She’s your best friend. But on Saturday morning you woke up with your face so puffy from crying that you looked like an entirely different person. You plugged your phone in as soon as you woke up, but it was not until you dragged yourself from bed to bathroom, and saw the new face that had formed overnight, that a text popped up from Izzy:

*I was so fucking drunk last night*

You stared at the words for a long moment and then texted a quick lie:

*same lol*

Afterwards, when you came down late to the kitchen, your mom saw your face and looked at you with the same grief from the night before, trying to quickly swallow it into a sad smile.

You decide then to stop looking at Izzy in the hallway, still so pretty as she hides from you behind her hair. Instead, you force yourself to see the you from that morning, clean faced again but still beyond basic recognition, still changed by her. You put your hand in the pocket, finding the page from your notebook. *i am a friend*, it said. You crush it in your fist. You keep your hand clenched around it. You keep it there as a reminder. Every time you look at her you

will grip the paper tight, forcing its edges to press into your palms and digging your nails into your skin around its shape. Soon enough you won't have to make your secret fist at all: by the end of the day, it should hurt just to look at her.

## Empty Handed

Jacob is holding back. His neon yellow faded to puke green sneakers pound the dirt just a step ahead of mine each time. I slow down, and he lingers out in front of me for just a moment before adjusting back into line with my gait without ever losing forward progression. It's honestly a bit magical.

"Stop it," I huff.

"Stop what?"

He's smirking. I know he's smirking. Even though I'm staring at the only just dry dirt and trying not to think about throwing up, I know that shithead is smirking.

"You know what."

"I'm sorry Natalie, you're going to have to use your words."

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up."

He tuts, "So rude for one who begged me to train her."

"You followed me out here!" I yell incredulously.

As I do another woman comes up the path in the opposite direction. Of course, I end up looking like the raging idiot, overheated and out of breath, while Jacob smiles gracefully beside me. I give her an apologetic smile, hoping to express sorry-my-brother-is-a-goading-asshole with a shameful closed-mouth upturn of the lips, but I never make it to looking her in the eyes. She is wearing a necklace I made in middle school. One that I haven't seen in years. A decade, I want to say, but twenty minus ten only equals ten. I remember, I am not that old yet. The beads, muddled moss and terracotta intermingled with solid black, encircle a golden bee, flying round the neck. The neck that is not mine. My feet stumble and I eat shit.

"Fuck," I hiss into the dirt.

"Is she okay?" the woman asks.

“Yeah,” Jacob says, “Just clumsy.”

I don’t bother getting up, but turn my face to the side, spitting out a few spare pieces of gravel. The woman’s pastel sneakers pass by my head.

“You okay, Nat?” he asks.

“Just peachy,” I respond.

He taps me twice on my back, our code for tell the truth, or get me out of here, or don’t tell Mom, or I’m so high right now *please* don’t tell mom, or, most commonly, are you okay? We came up with it at Dad’s funeral. Between carrying around Suze and propping up Mom, we needed to find a way to make care efficient.

I suspect this is our most common usage, “Yes,” I say, “but can I get a hand up?”

Jacob gets me off of the ground and up on my feet. I bend and straighten my joints to make sure I’m still in one piece. I suspect at least one of my knees is scraped underneath my leggings, but that’s a problem for in the shower at home.

Jacob’s still looking at me expectantly.

“I swear,” I say, “I’m all good.”

He reaches over and plucks a bit of trail debris, I decline to look too closely and see exactly what, out of my hair, before breaking back into a grin. “Excellent,” he says, “Race back?”

He laughs as I shove him and breaks into a light jog, finally allowing me to be leisurely in my own pace and letting my little pain be private. He is never more than two feet in front of me the whole way back. I let his presence fade into the simple rhythm of his sneakers on the dirt.

I chug three glasses of water right in front of the fridge when we get back as Jacob claims

the first shower. I go to fill up a fourth, one to drink slowly as I peel myself out of my workout clothes.

“Good run?”

My hand jerks and I drop my cup. It is only plastic, so it just bounces, but the water spills out across the kitchen tile.

“Shit,” I hiss. I immediately drop down to the floor before remembering to grab the paper towels. A hand appears, holding them out to me. I look up briefly to grab them, “Thanks, Mom. Sorry.” I only get a glimpse of her rye disappointment before I start rushedly cleaning up my mess and my whole world becomes wet and shiny black marble.

“So, not a good run?” she asks.

“Hah!” I say. The syllable is dry coming out of my mouth. It’s less of a laugh and more of a statement. “It was good. Just, you know Jacob, he really puts me through my paces.”

She hums thoughtfully but says nothing. For a moment the only sound between us is that of soggy paper towel moving water around on the tile.

“Have you started going through your things yet?” she asks into the sound of my cleaning.

I still for a moment and then quickly resume my circles on the floor. “Not yet,” I say carefully. “But I’ve got boxes and stuff set aside, so I’m prepped.”

Without looking up, I still see the tight frown on her face as she responds, “Well, I can’t hold on to all of your things forever, Natalie, and contrary to the attitude that you and your brother seem to have taken, summer is coming to an end shortly. Whatever is left clogging up the house when you’re back at school is up to my discretion.”

“Definitely,” I say. The paper towel is starting to shred and shed itself against the floor. I

rip a fresh sheet. “I’m gonna start tomorrow.”

“Today would really be—”

“Shower’s free, Nat,” Jacob calls as he enters the kitchen. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetie,” I hear him kiss her on the cheek. “I was just talking to your sister about the promise you two made to clear out some of your things?”

“What about it, I mean there’s a month before we leave, right?”

“I just don’t want you two leaving it to the last minute.”

“Of course not, but I think we’ve got time,” Jacob says. “Where’s Suze?”

Mom begins the familiar sonic rhythm of preparing her second cup of tea for the day. It will be peppermint, a soothing pause before she turns to an Earl Grey with lunch to get her through the afternoon. “A birthday party,” she says after the kettle begins its soft buzz.

Jacob hums, “Turning into a real social butterfly, that girl.” I hear his solid footsteps travel across the kitchen. “Nat?”

I blink at the tile, even my second paper towel has gone soggy now, but the floor is finally dry. I look up. Jacob’s looking down at me with one arched eyebrow. I stare back up at him.

“Shower?” he prompts.

“Oh, yeah,” I say. I get off up the floor and feel his and Mom’s gazes on my back all the way through the hallway.

Dad got sick when I was still in kindergarten and Jacob was in second grade. Jacob seemed so old then. Maybe because he was so new. I don’t remember before Jacob, but I remember suddenly having him where before there had been no one. He walked me home from

school each day, and I felt proud to have such a big brother that I didn't need to wait for a parent to collect me. Jacob never grabbed my hand, but offered his out to me once we reached the sidewalk. I always took it. When we entered the living room to Mom and Dad sitting together on the walnut-colored couch, unheard of for afterschool, we had already unlinked our hands as we came up the back walk. Before Mom could tell us the ways that Dad's body was turning against him, before we could learn about timelines, before we could talk about final wishes, before I could wonder if this meant I would have to leave too, Jacob stuck out his hand to me, offering it again.

The next day begins with a new memory in my head. A bald man, his skull a worryingly shiny brown, looks at me for mercy. I wake up, my face still wet from tears that another me cried during the night, remembering.

When I was five, I had a tea party with a dying man. To be fair, no one told me he was dying. But as a kid, the combination of frantic eyes, sweaty skull, and trickle of bright red blood sliding down the right side of his face into the crease of his lips, somehow made it clear that he was not long for this world. My babysitter had just shown me how to draw birds as gentle vees in the air. I filled the backgrounds of my scribbled portraits with harsh black lines until every blue sky was filled and the sun could no longer be seen. At some point she left to answer a knock at the back door and returned with the dying man. A man whose sweat had turned his shaved brown skull into an impossibly shiny surface, a fact which momentarily distracted me from the trickle of bright red blood sliding down his face. She sat him down at the table with me and rushed off with a mumbled excuse. His leg was jackknifing into the table, and he didn't bother to wipe his mouth as the blood landed in the crease formed by his lips.

I promptly decided he was in desperate need of some tea. Tea in this case was diluted lemonade, but I was determined it would help the dying man all the same. I remember being impressed with his teacup form, spoiled only by the unrelenting clinking from his shaking hands. I passed him a sheet of paper and shoved the crayons in his direction. We drew together as shouts burst out from the first floor. This was common enough that I ignored it until the sound of shattering followed. One moment I was looking down the hall and the next moment the man was at the window, or the door maybe, but either way ready to leave. We exchanged our only words then.

“What about your picture?” I asked.

“You keep it,” he responded.

And then he was gone. I think someone came for me then. I remember a consuming warmth and the smell of Dad’s cologne, my eyes still stuck on the man’s picture of the two of us and the crisp red that stained his cup. I don’t know what happened next besides the fact that I never saw my babysitter again. But the dying man’s face remains, impossibly close in my mind as he stared at me from the door, or window, a trickle of blood still dripping down from his head, to his lips, to the floor.

Waking up with his image in my mind all these years later, I am unsure about the line between dream and memory. When I ask Mom about it, she gives me a guarded look, “I’m not sure I know quite what you’re talking about, sweetheart.”

Her avoidance glances off something inside me, hollow object meeting hollow object. We exchange empty smiles.

When I ask Jacob about my short-lived babysitter, he blinks at me warily before responding, “Once I was old enough, *I* looked after you Nat. Just like how we babysat Suze. You

good?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Just weird dreams.”

He pats me on the back, just once, “It’s all that sugar you’re eating before bed, squirt. I told you, you gotta quit the ice cream.”

I shove off his arm, “Screw you, old man. Not everyone can survive on green smoothies alone.”

That afternoon I begin Mom’s clear out request with my desk, going through over a decade of papers and pens and sticker sheets that are crispy with age. I find old report cards and notes that were saved after being successfully passed in class but no drawings, done by my hand or anyone else’s. I don’t even remember what exactly the dying man’s drawing looks like anymore. I think it was a portrait of the two of us. What that looked like to him I have no idea, but I end up with a ten-inch stack of paper ready to be recycled and no sign of crayon people or blood-stained pages. The only thing that jumps out at me is a scribbled note, clearly by a much younger me, on the torn-out page of a Hello Kitty notebook. All it says is: *Close your eyes. When you open them, everything will be a little bit better.* The iconic cat smiles at me from the corner of the page, her pink bow faded to a flesh tone. I assume it’s some kind of advice that stuck with me as a kid, though if it’s from one of my childhood friends, an adult, or whatever TV show I was obsessed with at the time, I can’t say. I make sure that Mom’s in the living room when I take the stack of papers out to the recycling. She doesn’t say anything, but still a feeling of praise grows in my chest.

The next day at breakfast everyone’s telling overly joyful anecdotes about Jacob making my afterschool snacks. They laugh in unison at the punchline, something about my refusal to eat clementines and an ensuing food fight, while cutting into their morning eggs. Poached for Mom,

fried for Jacob, scrambled for Susie, an empty white plate at Dad's seat. I struggle to get down the white toast Mom set out for me, a rationed treat even now that I'm only home during breaks. When I was little, I used to hide away with whole loaves of wonder bread, lining my stomach and making myself sick. Mom once found me in the library, throw-up soaking into the ancient carpet, and that was the end of it. I can't tell if the twist in my stomach, as I watch my family recount a memory that isn't mine, is from the muscle memory nausea, or the fact that the last time I ate this was the day we buried Dad.

Dad died in a car accident on the way home from the hospital. It was early in treatment, early enough that Mom was still allowing him to go to work after. He said that the art gave him strength. He said beautiful things made him want to keep on living, while eyeing Mom, and she would roll her eyes, but acquiesce. It was not early enough that he was supposed to be driving himself. But Mom was running late, and he took the chance to do something for himself again. He hardly made it out of the parking lot, sideswiped by another father rushing to get his kid to the emergency room. Dad wasn't wearing a seat belt, and he flew through the front window.

I turn next to my books, both because they take up a massive amount of my room, spreading from a lone walnut bookshelf to several dusty chests that hide underneath my bed, but also because I am hopeful for what could be hidden in their pages, kept safe through years and years by the pressure of paper. I woke up again this morning with the dying man in my mind, desperately trying to change the angle of the dream so that his drawing would become clear. It was useless. I was again only left with the blood on his lips and the fear in his eyes.

I go through the bookshelf quickly. It is filled with course texts I've brought home from

school, and the novels I haven't had time to read yet. I spend the rest of the day in my room, tugging out the chests from underneath my bed to go through my old picture books. I go through every one page by page, trying to place each story in a memory. Dad reading to me on the roof as the stars come out. Jacob grudgingly doing his monster voice, making me laugh so hard I spit out my milk and go to bed without dinner. My own hushed voice under the covers at night, trying to drive out the bad dreams where Dad repeatedly fades into mist over and over again.

There's a knock at the door.

"Come in," I call out as I pull out the next book from the chest.

"Room service!" Jacob trills in a mock British accent. He opens the door into a stack of the novels that I haven't had time to read and have decided that I don't want to make the time for. They go toppling to the floor, further cluttering the floor filled with books filtered into categories of reading desire that I barely remember at this point. Jacob stops horrified in the door, "Madame, you better leave a big tip for housekeeping."

I laugh, "I thought you were British, not French."

He picks his way across the room to me, impressively delicate as his tiptoes between book piles, "I'm European, so I'm just generally better than you." He hands me a bowl filled with pesto pasta, "One-a-bowl-of-a-Susie's-a-speciale-pasta for you, signora."

I snort, "Not the Italian too, poor Ms. Calvetti is rolling in her grave."

"You *wish* she was dead," Jacob says. "That crone is definitely still torturing innocent middle schoolers."

I dig into the pasta. I hadn't realized how long I had been in here going through books, and now I'm starving.

Jacob takes in the books, and leans back on his hands, "So you missed dinner to make

your room an even bigger mess than it already was?”

“Shut up,” I mumble through a mouthful of pasta.

“Not very ladylike, Natalie.”

I make my swallow a performance for him, “I’ll have you know that I am following Mom’s instructions to clear out my shit before I come back for Christmas and discover she’s thrown out my entire room.”

Jacob rolls his eyes, “C’mon Nat, don’t tell me you’re getting sucked into Mom’s three-month late spring cleaning. She’s not actually gonna toss your stuff.” Jacob’s always had more faith in Mom than me. I consider it to be a simple factor of their extra time together, which would be comforting except for the fact that I know I’ll never be able to catch up.

“I’m getting sucked into making sure she’s not on my ass while I’m at school,” I say. “Future me is gonna be grateful for this mess.”

The response sounds hollow to me, echoing with the empty space of where the dying man’s picture should be, but I don’t know how to explain it to Jacob when he already told me that it didn’t happen. I can already hear my desperate attempt to reconstruct my own dream logic for him being tempered by his comforting accusations that I’m falling into Mom’s never-ending spiral of anxiety.

Thankfully Jacob doesn’t hear it, “Fine, fine. I get it, you’re vying for favorite kid.” He stands up, grabbing my already empty bowl, “I respect the hustle, Nat. I am, after all, tough competition.”

I lightly kick his ankle, and he laughs.

“Just don’t forget to fuel yourself,” he drops a kiss to the top of my head. “Or my green smoothies are gonna secure me first place.” He picks his way back across the room and out the

door.

After Jacob leaves, I pick up a raggedy copy of Grimm's fairy tales, one of Dad's favorites. It was filled with tales of beautiful little girls, princesses and peasants alike, who were always tricked by the ugly ones, the witches' daughters, the ungrateful handmaidens. They were swindled out of their rightful places next to kings, never princes, and brought down to earth, literally. They met muck for the first time, in stables or in early graves, but they were never stuck there: not even death could trump the moral of beauty. The ugly girls were always revealed as frauds and punished: stripped naked in the town square, stabbed by nails as they were dragged by horses, torn apart by wild beasts for their mother's crime.

Here is the story that Dad never told me: A girl arrives at a castle. She doesn't remember it. She knows she arrived. She remembers being new. She knows this was not always hers. They never say it out loud, but they never let her forget it. I had bested fate by ending up here, in a room of my own on the second floor. I had beaten the odds. Mom and Dad had chosen me, unlike most parents who just wished for what their children would be and had to be happy with what they got. I was lucky, I knew, to be here.

I open the tome of cautionary tales and a moth flies out from the pages. I drop the book in my lap to catch the fluttering insect between my hands. The resonant clap in my empty room is immensely satisfying: I rejoice in the smashed body between my fingers. When I open them there is brown-gray blood pressed into the lines of my palm. I quickly grab a tissue to wipe the stain away and leave it crumpled beside me. But before I can grab the next book the tissue moves. It shifts for a moment, jigs a short jig, and a moth, seemingly whole again, emerges. If I could zoom into its body, I imagine I would be able to see the way its wing bends, struggling to fly. I am awed. And then it dips close to my face, annoyingly soft and brief against my skin. I

clap it again, and this time, when I take my hands apart, a silvery, golden shadow is imprinted on both my palms, and the body is nowhere to be seen.

I finish emptying the chests of savored books and decide there's one that's missing, though I'm not sure how I'm able to tell. In my head I can clearly picture the illustration of the shadowed outlines of hanging bodies that greeted Bluebeard's wife as she entered the forbidden room, but the book itself is nowhere to be seen. I tear up my room in search of it and come up empty handed.

Just as I am crawling into bed, I see another moth flickering in the darkness of my room in the space above my pillow. Not here, I decide, you don't get this too, and I slam my hand against my arm as it lands. All I get is the sting, no brown-gray blood or silvery, golden shadow. Just the pain of my own palm against my skin, and a stray feather, from the pillow I've been sleeping on ever since I was old enough to have a pillow of my own, floating into the air. That night in my dreams I am lost in a perverted version of our home, every door opens up to Dad's body hanging from the ceiling.

Dad died while he was working late at the museum. An old Halon system malfunctioned while he was in the paintings vault and it saved the works of art from an illusory emergency while suffocating him in the process. The vault is now named in his honor. When I went on a field trip in third grade our tour guide told us the tale of Dad's death like a ghost story to my class. He remains the boogeyman in the basement for generations of elementary school students.

Having exhausted my room of searchable locations, I begin to scour the house in a way I haven't since I first moved in and was convinced every dark corner promised secret treasure. I

hadn't known a home could be so big, or so dark. I am startled to find the dark has only grown. In the basement the lights have long gone out: a forgotten or lost chore. I use my phone's flashlight to reveal the damp space and see only dust bunnies and a few old toys, probably imagined to be donated only to be abandoned down here. I tell myself I am doing what Mom asked of me and collecting my belongings for safekeeping and donation, but every corner unturned without the dead man's drawing tightens the space my heart has to beat in my chest. Instead of the picture I stumble upon fragments of my family that I never knew existed. On the night I spend pulling every book off the shelves in the living room, I discover Susie asleep in one of its corners, picture books from our childhood stacked up under her head as a pillow. In the midst of digging up the abandoned greenhouse, I find a single blooming orchid with a watering schedule written out in Mom's neat handwriting. Searching Jacob's room, I uncover a picture of him and a boy I don't recognize, looking happier than I've ever seen him. It's the only discovery that adds to the ache inside me. I'm certain I've never smiled like that in my life. They all just feel like answers to questions that I don't have time for. There's no picture, yet.

Mom ends up finding me in Dad's old office just as daylight is creeping through the windows.

"Natalie?" My heart tugs out of place at the sound of her voice. I blink once at the files in front of me in an attempt to school my expression before glancing up. She looks fragile in the early light without her makeup on, but I know better.

"What are you doing Nat?" she asks after my silence. The nickname sharpens me into awareness. She's been telling me I've been too old for it since I was five.

"Just clearing stuff out like you said we should," I respond. I add a smile to really sell it, and she mirrors my expression. I can tell it's forced. She wants me out of this room and away

from the past. I wonder if she knows I can see through her lies just as well as she does mine.

“It’ll be twelve years soon,” she says.

Dad’s death always feels simultaneously very close and very far away. It is not so much a before and after point but a large void mark that tears its way through my life. Twelve years is just another notch on the wall. I don’t know what good marking the time does except to remind us that we all should be past it by now, that Mom shouldn’t still be setting the table for him anymore, but I force my way to a semblance of normal grief to placate her.

“It can be hard,” I say, “to remember what it was like before.” Something shifts under the skin of her face before she grabs control of it and forms a smile.

“Get some sleep honey,” she barely whispers out as she exits the room. I listen for the echoes of her footsteps long past when she must’ve reached her bed.

In the last of Dad’s file cabinets, I finally pull out a folder filled with children’s drawings. I resist the urge to dump them all out on the ground and instead make myself sit back down at the desk and pull each picture out one by one. Every clumsy drawing is labeled with the artist’s name in Mom’s neat handwriting in the corner of the page. I go through giants and fantastical forests tagged with Jacob and impossibly large butterflies and candy worlds entitled with Susie. When I finish going through the small stack, I flip through them one more time to make sure I’m certain: my name isn’t on a single one of them. This time when I go out to the recycling, I make sure that Mom is nowhere to be seen.

Dad disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle. He was sourcing a painting from Puerto Rico that the artist insisted could only be transported by sea. There’s no record of what the painting looked like. The artist refused to send pictures beforehand. He described it through a singular

question, *do you remember your mother's hands?* For this Dad traveled the world. When asked if he would share pictures or recreate the work now that it was lost to the sea the artist again refused. *The ocean remembers*, he said.

I continue to methodically upturn our home, confining my search to the blurring hours of morning and night, as to not find any more pieces of my family, or have any pieces of myself found. That night I am in the garage, the single fluorescent light illuminating only a small section of the center of the empty concrete space. I have dragged the box of license plates into its precious radius.

Dad was a car guy, or so I gather. I remember Jacob and I used to explore the country through the states in his collection, but only with this supervision to carefully handling the sharp corners of our makeshift map of America. I am not nearly so careful tonight. I am searching for the dead man. His picture is lost to me, but I know he existed. He must have come from somewhere. If I go back to the way I understood the world then, I know I will be able to piece something together beyond the tea and the blood and the drawing. I file through them slowly at first and then, after the first failure to jog my memory, fast. My chest tightens against my heart when his picture does not appear between the plates, even though I knew it wouldn't be here. I let the words blur together as the metal moves faster and faster against my fingers. There is an answer beyond logic. All I have to do is return to the dream world. The simplicity of the world when you are a child in danger. I have to be in danger again. I have to be drinking tea. I have to see the blood. One of the plates shifts against my hand and there is a quick and searing pain.

“Fuck,” I hiss, stopping my metallic flip book.

My left hand has been sliced squarely across the palm. I wait for the bright red blood to

well up to the surface and then I flip my hand over, watching as one, two, three drops hit the floor. The stain they leave on the ground shakes me. It is time to go.

As I creep in through the back door, the hinges mercifully keep quiet for me. I make my way up almost all the steps with a slow flat-footed pace without a sound. But as I press myself off the final step it lets out a backstabbing squeak. I cringe but continue to tiptoe down the hallway to my room. I am halfway there when I hear the sure sound of Jacob's footsteps from his room. My heart rises to my throat. There is no way I can look at him, even mostly covered in shadow, and lie to his face with my own blood on my hands.

His door opens a crack and his barely awake voice roughly whispers, "Nat?"

I am already sprinting the rest of the way down the hall to my room.

Dad drowned in quicksand. He was on a business trip to recover a lost artifact from the jungle. They never were able to recover his body. His partner pulled a button off his shirt while attempting to pull Dad out. It is the only thing that sits in his coffin.

I sit in our dust painted formal dining room, eating where no one can clock the stuttering grip of my bandaged hand as I shovel cereal into my mouth.

"Nat?"

Susie's soft voice interrupts the blurred roomscape I am creating as I shift between expanding and contracting my eyes, watching as the room drifts in and out of focus. I have to crunch my eyes tight before looking at her to make sure she comes out clear. Her face is clenched, looking at me from the hallway. I force a smile in hopes that it will coax her through the door. I know it's rough, can feel its creaking form across my face, but it's unfamiliar to have

to convince Susie of my intentions. She's the only one who doesn't remember this house without me. I have never been anything but family to her. Everyone else decided they loved me: Susie was born knowing it. The smile works and she enters the dining room, but the crease between her eyebrows doesn't fade.

"What's up, Suze?" The French braid she carefully weaves each morning is fraying at the edges. It must be late.

"I haven't seen you since Monday."

Denial climbs up my throat, but I struggle to find a recent image of Susie. All that comes to mind is her sleeping figure supported by our childhood reading relics.

"Did Dad ever read Bluebeard to you?" I blurt out.

Her face breaks open into a hurt I don't understand before she composes it into a blank mask. I've seen it on Mom countless times. Fifteen and already versed in our family's rites of womanhood.

"No *Nat*," the name she gave me at three is spat out the side of her mouth like a weapon, "Dad didn't read *anything* to me."

I struggle to do the mental math, math that shouldn't even be math, just ingrained knowledge of the ways my family is broken.

"I'm sorry Susie. I—" How do you apologize for forgetting the age your sister was when your dad died? How do you explain that you're splitting into phases, memories scrambling to take root in reality? I give up. "I haven't had enough sleep." Her eyes are watering. Shit.

"Suze—"

"Hey Suze." Jacob's overly casual greeting from the doorway collides with my desperate plea. "You ready to work on your bio project?" His voice is airy, but his glare hooks into the side

of my face.

“Yeah, just a sec.”

I look at the table as she shuffles to her feet, forcing the patterned tablecloth into a comforting blur as I wait to be alone. A hand lands on my shoulder. I flinch before I can stop myself and look up into Susie’s shocked face. It is the same way she looked at me when her scooter tripped over a sidewalk crack and her knee scraped open to bright red. She was frozen until I opened my arms, and she ran to me. Now she runs out the room past Jacob. The disappointment in his face is new. My brother is looking at me like he doesn’t know me, and the world is cracking open.

“What the hell Nat?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just tired.” My voice is pathetic even to my own ear.

Jacob scoffs, “Then take a nap.”

My heart is beating against my sternum. I make him go fuzzy. Clear. Blurry. Clear. Blurry. Gone.

Dad started growing flowers inside his chest. He was rushed to the hospital with severe chest pain, and an x-ray revealed that new blooms were overtaking his lungs. He died, choking up periwinkle petals covered in his blood. Mom searched and searched but was never able to find the same plant to grow in our garden.

I lie outside staring up at the sun. Its light is the only thing I know to be true. Heat is undeniable. A body gone cold should not be up for debate. I force myself to keep my eyes open, trying to fully witness a force of light beyond color. How long would it take you to go blind from

staring at the sun? An hour. An afternoon. A day. I have all the time in the world, if only I could keep my eyes open. I finally have to shut them, but the sun remains, a hot and amorphous orange presence behind my eyelids. A dark shadow interrupts. I open my eyes: Jacob is standing over me.

He holds out a joint, “Wanna smoke?”

I instinctively look towards the house.

“Mom is with Susie at some back-to-school science fair,” he stretches out his hand to me.

I take it and let him light it for me as I breathe in, carefully looking at the flame and not his face. I fall onto my back, releasing the smoke up to the sky, and hand the joint back to Jacob. We pass it back and forth for a while, without ever looking at each other, relying on an ingrained rhythm in the works ever since I joined his childhood. My eye is drawn to a flash of movement by the edge of the garage. I am caught for a moment on the crack of the door where a shelter of abandoned sports equipment peaks out, but then there’s another twitch of soft, brown movement. It’s a baby bunny, smaller than the size of my hand, tucked under the shadow of Dad’s old car, like it knows it means safety. The car’s sat there for over a decade now, bleached by the sun and covered in dust. Every spring Susie washes it clean from the cake of neon green pollen that descends, so it can be fresh and ready for another year of tarnish.

“So,” Jacob says, exhaling, “what’s going on, Nat?”

“Huh?” I say. My eyes are caught on the bunny, deadly still in the driveway.

“Suze. The blood in the garage,” he passes the joint, “your shoddy bandage job.”

I instantly try to hide my hand by my side before remembering the joint in my fingers. Jacob’s disappointment has always cut me deep: I’m a guilty child again, crying after I broke the Clue board and he’s just staring at me.

I take a cursory hit, the breath barely sitting inside me before I release it, “It’s the babysitter.”

His nose scrunches, “What babysitter?”

I sit up straight, “The one I asked you about. The one you said didn’t exist.”

Jacob extends his arm out lazily in expectation. For a second I think he’s offering his hand to hold, but then I realize he just wants the joint. I pass it over. He takes a long drag, never moving his eyes off me until he exhales and blows an almost effortless smoke ring: his only giveaway is the slight flicker of his eyes to the air in front of him. It’s a trick I’ve never been able to master, despite Jacob’s numerous attempts to teach me.

“Showoff,” I mutter.

He smirks, “I never said she didn’t exist. I said I didn’t remember her.”

I throw myself back down on the ground, “Well, Mom’s lying to me about it.”

He laughs, annoyingly loud. I smack his arm. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Just— Mom lying? That’s what you’re on about? Goddamn, Nat.”

I feel a giggle building up inside of me, swirling around in my stomach until it bursts out in an unhinged peal of laughter. That’s the end of us: we’re rolling on the ground like children, knocking knees into each other and starting our laughter anew. We can’t breathe and our abs hurt and it’s beautiful. I imagine the way we look from above, lit by the sun with identical smiles.

“Don’t laugh at me,” I say while still laughing. But suddenly the feeling in my stomach is too much. I can’t breathe. My laugh becomes hysteric and bleeds into tears and I’m turned away from Jacob crying into my own hands. His laugh holds on a second too long past the shift, and it hangs there in the air over the sound of my hitched breath. He stops as soon as he realizes, but there’s one awful moment where Jacob is laughing, and I am crying.

I open my eyes but don't turn back around. I immediately find the baby bunny, still under the shadow of Dad's car. I take a deep breath, "I'm serious about this, Jacob."

His body thumps against the earth, "I told you not to get sucked in by Mom. This is how she is, Nat. You can't follow her down every time."

I shake my head at nothing, "It's not her, It's everything."

He's patient when he responds, "She makes it *feel* like everything, but it's not. It's just cleaning. Donate some old clothes and go back to school, that's it."

He makes it sound so easy. If it was that easy, I would have just done it. Right?

He continues, "You gotta tell me when this happens, Nat."

I dig my fingers into the dirt before I respond, "I did, Jacob. I asked you. You didn't remember the babysitter."

"How am I supposed to know based on that one question?" he asks. "If you're acting all the time, how am I supposed to tell the difference? You won't even look at me right now."

It hits the way it's meant to, but my stubbornness decides to prove him right. Stare at my fucking back then. "You're supposed to know *me*," I fling at the garage wall, "You're supposed to know me well enough to see past all that shit."

"It can't have to be that much work Nat," he says, softened.

Where anger wasn't enough, confusion will do: I turn to face him, "What?"

He rolls his eyes, "It's not supposed to be that much work to love someone."

I scoff, "C'mon, that's bullshit."

"Fine. Fine," he holds up his hands in acquiescence. "It's supposed to be work, but it's not a literal job. I can't need to be a detective just so I can figure out how you're feeling," he finishes with his hands in fists against his thighs.

“Of course not, ACAB.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

I laugh despite myself, Jacob never swears, but he just keeps frowning.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks, each word said purposefully slow.

Where I had just found equilibrium, at Jacob’s question tears begin to form in my eyes. I manage weakly, “I don’t know what’s wrong.”

He is deathly silent.

I try again, “I-I don’t—” I stop looking at his face and start staring at his shoes. “I have nothing to give you, Jacob.”

We sit there. Then finally:

“Don’t lie to me Nat,” he says.

He doesn’t tap me though. Even though he could. Even though I’m right next to him. I think of the boy in the picture and Jacob’s beautiful smile.

He sighs, “When you— were little, you used to do my chores for me before I could, and I let you, because I didn’t want to do them, but then I saw how happy they made you. Happier than any other time.”

“So?” I say.

“You don’t have to prove anything, Nat. You don’t have to work for it. You’re not that kid anymore, I wish you would stop acting like her.”

I have spent my whole life, my whole life here, watching Jacob, watching his feet just a bit ahead of mine. It was impossible to not look at him: he led and I followed. Teachers always knew me from Jacob. I knew what classes to avoid and take by watching him. I knew where he shined. I saw how it made our parents glow. I saw all the ways he could turn ugly. You learn so

much from being behind someone. You have no choice but to watch. I forgot that he could be looking back at me, watching me just the same.

He abruptly stands up, tossing the joint down like an afterthought. I snag it quickly from the grass and take a quick hit to prevent it from going out. I hold the smoke in my chest for a long time as he stands there. I challenge myself to not exhale until Jacob leaves. I challenge myself to stare at the sun until I hear the sound of his footsteps going back to the house. I challenge myself to hold the smoke until I don't feel the sting and stare at the sun until it is only light and not pain.

But Jacob just keeps standing there, and I have to throw myself onto my side, my eyes clenched tight as I cough violently, willing to expel that which won't come up. I take slow, deep breaths as Jacob stands still next to me, as if rooted to the spot. I turn to him once I catch my breath. I tap him twice on the ankle, the only place I can reach, not knowing what I mean. He responds with a light kick of his shoe. I can't tell if he's brushing me off or tapping me back. Or maybe it is just an acknowledgement: you touched me, this is me touching you.

"You know I love you," he says, not quite a question.

I look down to the earth, my eyes prickling at the sight of a stream of ants across the ground, "Yes," I say. "I know."

He leaves, the bunny stays, and I turn back to the sun.

Dad came to me one night and shook me from sleep. "Natalie," he said, "I have to go. The world needs me."

I reached a small hand up to his face to cover a tear that was sneaking down across the bridge of his nose.

“I know that you weren’t always ours, but I like to think that you began here, with us.”  
He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed my palm gently. “I have to go save the world, but I’ll always be your dad.”

For a while I thought he’d come back. Which was silly. He never even promised he would. He was gone, never to be mine again, but I was left still belonging to him. It was kind of like having a parent in the military. Or that’s what Mom told everyone. It explained away all the crying. I used to think I could drown in those tears. I could bottle them up and line them along the windowsills, and when Dad came back, I would show him: this is how much I missed you. This is how much I hurt.

## Featuritis

A humming white sphere whirled across the worn hardwood.

Farida eyed the machine down, unnerved by the way it remained unaffected by her gaze, “I don’t like it.”

“The Humbra is here to keep you safe, Mom. What if you fall? Or worse, and I can’t be here?” Sage called from the kitchen.

“It’s creepy.”

“It’s cute,” her daughter insisted.

Farida looked skeptically at the robotic parasite who was currently exploring her home.

“Just be grateful I didn’t get you one with a face.”

Farida grimaced, “Does it talk?”

“Only if you want it to.”

Farida watched as the white steel came back from its perimeter check and let out a light chirp to signal it had finished mapping its domain. “No,” she said disdainfully, “I don’t think I do.”

Sage walked back in from the kitchen, “I really think it’s kind of cute, Mom.”

Farida served her daughter with a pursed lipped look.

Her daughter returned it with a dazzling grin, “It’s like having your own BB-8.”

Farida collapsed into her armchair and started to pick through magazines on the side table, perhaps the best tactic was avoidance, “Hmm?”

Sage sighed, “BB-8? Star Wars? We saw them every year for Christmas, Mom.”

Farida looked up, “Like R2-D2?”

“No,” Sage said, “Not like R2-D2, Mom. I mean, they’re both droids, but—” she shook herself. “You really don’t remember? I was Rey for at least three Halloweens in a row. You got into it with Tommy Clarke’s mom when he said that Rey had to be white?”

Farida felt a twinge of some old outrage, but she couldn’t conjure any concrete image of her daughter’s Halloween costumes bar the year Sage had insisted on dressing up as cricket. She looked back down at her magazine and gave what she hoped was a non-committal but positive hum.

“I’m just trying to say, you can think of it as a friend,” Sage finally said.

Farida snorted, “Unlikely. It’s a spy. You’re turning my home into a fascist state monitored by the white man.” She pointed accusingly at the oppressively white ball. It chirped at her movement. Farida tsked, “Another Black woman made into an enemy of the state. I can’t say I’m surprised, but I never thought it would be by my own daughter.”

Sage looked unimpressed, “You don’t know that it’s a man, Mom.”

Farida harrumphed, “I lived with a white man for forty years, I know one when I see one.”

Sage sighed, “It’s for your own safety, Mom. You can’t be mad at me for that.”

Farida didn’t look up. She had found an invigorating article on prepping your garden for spring. She thought about the fresh tomatoes she could share with Sage if her daughter ever actually came around. She flipped the page, “Yes honey, I can actually do exactly that.”

Early the next morning there was a thumping coming from the living room. Farida grabbed a book from her bedside table and slowly made her way towards the sound. She turned

the corner carefully only to find the obnoxious white ball slamming itself repeatedly into the living room wall.

“Goddamn idiot,” she mumbled to herself and went to grab the phone.

“Mom, what’s wrong? Did you fall? Why didn’t the Humba alert me?”

“R2D2 is broken. It’s currently working on drilling a hole through my wall.”

“What?”

“You better get over here before I go at it with a baseball bat.”

“Do not go into the garage by your—”

Farida hung up.

By the time that Sage got herself awake, dressed, and through the backdoor of her mom’s house, the Humba had not, in fact, been destroyed but had just collapsed in the living room. Age had slowed Farida’s walk and grayed her hair, but Sage had no doubt that she could still kick the shit out of something when she wanted to.

“It ran out of battery,” her mom called from the kitchen. “Or that’s what I assume at least.” She emerged with a plate of cookies. “I know Philip is here to tell me all about it.”

Philip wasn’t quite Sage’s stepson. Even if she and Kira got married, she’s not sure he ever would be. But right now, they were in an especially awkward limbo of ‘mom’s first serious partner post the divorce.’ She felt like a middle-aged white man trying to convince his hook-up’s son to call him Uncle Kev, and it made her skin crawl. Sage had never planned on having kids. When she was a kid herself, and things had burst into sudden clarity post kissing Jenny Williams in the basement bathroom when they were supposed to be dissecting fetal pigs in 7th grade science class, after the massive *oh shit* fear that hit, Sage had been relieved. Women could not

have babies with other women: that fact had been covered in science the year before. Motherhood had been wiped off the slate of possibilities. This wasn't true of course, in a startlingly number of ways that she still felt slightly betrayed by Ms. Lawson for not covering all these years later. But that flimsy lie from 6th grade had been protection for Sage, for a while.

Kira had been the one to suggest that Philip come with Sage to look at her mom's Humba. He was interested in coding and robots and just generally more technologically proficient than either of them.

Plus, "He can start getting to know your family," Kira had said.

"He hasn't even gotten to know me yet," Sage had groaned, irritated that her time saving technology had already intruded on their Sunday morning in bed.

"Well, what better way than to meet your mom."

That, Sage thought, was exactly the problem.

Philip was already on the floor tinkering with the robot. He had pressed down on what seemed to be a random section of its body to Sage and a core of wiring had emerged. It was somehow gross to look at: those were its guts. She pivoted.

"Are you sure you didn't do anything to it, Mom?"

Farida sat forward in her chair, watching Philip. She held up her hands in surrender, "I swear. It woke me up this morning with all its racket."

Sage was inclined to believe her, mostly because she didn't think her mom understood the Humba well enough to mess with it this way. Her brand of sabotage would be a lot more obvious. Sage turned back to Philip, "Got any ideas, tech support?"

He had pulled up the Humbra's controls on the tablet and was rapidly switching through settings that lit up different colors in the machine's core one after the other. Philip was silent, absorbed in his task. Sage and Farida exchanged a fond, slightly concerned, look.

"Philip, honey? You there?" Farida tried.

The teenager finally looked up from the tablet and blushed at finding the two women looking expectantly at him. "Sorry," he stammered.

Sage gave what she hoped was a comforting smile, "It's okay. Have you figured out what's wrong with our little buddy?" Little buddy? She was making herself sick. Uncle Kev here she came.

Philip was suddenly confident, "Its processing system is overwhelmed with information but it's also not receiving any legible, direct input, so it's getting stuck in a loop and malfunctioning."

Sage's comforting smile had frozen on her face. "Uh-huh," she said, trying to translate it all in her head.

Philip looked at the two of them and sighed, "I think we should switch it to voice input, so it doesn't slam it into the wall anymore."

Sage clapped her hands together, "Great! How long will that take?"

Philip looked down on a grin. "It's already done," he said and tapped the tablet one last time. "Meet the new and improved Humbra, now free of wall crashing."

Sage and Farida both leaned forward in their seats, waiting.

The Humbra's core had retreated into its body. Its pseudo eye blinked out a white light once, and then: nothing.

Philip scrambled to grab the tablet, “I don’t know what’s happening, it should be working.”

A smooth robotic voice, one that Sage hated to admit did sound ever so slightly masculine, though she would deny it if her mom asked, boomed into the room, “Hello, FARIDA.”

Sage covered her ears as her mom clapped.

Philip rapidly entered data into the tablet. “Sorry,” he said, “It should be better now.”

Sage was watching her mom: she could still see a twinge of distaste in her eyes at the fact that the Humba already knew her name, but she could also see how supportive she was of Philip.

Farida leaned back in her chair and gave an over dramatic sigh, “I don’t know how I’m going to figure everything else out.”

Philip instantly perked up, “I can help!”

Sage smiled a secret smile down at her lap.

Sage and Philip stopped by the grocery store on the way home to pick up dinner. They wandered down the frozen meal section, appraising the deceptively attractive images of stylized food that adorned the cardboard boxes.

Sage cleared her throat, “Thank you for helping out today, Philip.”

Philip had insisted on pushing the cart himself. Every couple steps he pushed off to stand on the back of it and glide across the tile floor for a few short moments. Then he would stop and wait for Sage to catch up to him in the aisle.

He pushed off again as he responded, “No problem, it was fun.”

“Really?” Sage was skeptical.

He leaned against the back of the cart as he waited for her. “Totally. The robot is sick, and the cookies were really good.”

Sage laughed, “Yeah, my mom hasn’t baked in a while.” She idly considered the frozen pizzas as she approached Philip. “I bet she could teach you. I never had the knack for it.”

Philip paused mid send-off, “Wait, actually?”

She turned towards him, surprised, “Yeah, actually. Why? You interested in baking now?”

He shrugged, “Well, I’m gonna have to go and help her with the Humba again, right? Might as well pick up the recipe.”

Sage hesitated, “I guess so, but only if you want to. We can always find actual tech support.”

“I don’t mind.”

Sage let her small secret smile from before come back again, “We’ll talk to your mom about it tonight, but if you’re really sure…”

Philip prepared to launch again, “I’m telling you those cookies were incredible dude.” He looked aghast at letting the teen boy moniker leave his mouth. “I mean—”

Sage laughed and gave the cart a little push, sending Phillip on another short glide, “It’s fine, *dude*.”

Philip laughed and jumped ship so he could steer the cart away from an impending freezer crash.

A white woman who was walking speedily down the aisle gave them one of those frowns, that was supposed to have the energy of a smile, that white women all over America

loved to use in order to wield their soft judgment. Sage responded with a blinding, full toothed grin that she loved to use in order to say, ‘Screw you. I know you think I’m the irresponsible babysitter or the inappropriately old girlfriend, but I’m actually just dating his mom.’ Sage could never really tell what people made of her and Philip together, only that the combo of racially ambiguous brown adult and racially ambiguous Asian teen made people really uncomfortable. She didn’t think Uncle Kev got these same looks. It rankled her because they were right: Philip wasn’t hers, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t have been.

Philip interrupted her inner anti-Karen tirade, “So are we doing pizza, or chicken nuggets and fries?”

Sage kept up her high beam grin even after the woman had looked away. She patted Philip on the back, “I think we can get both tonight, kiddo.”

She figured if you couldn’t beat Uncle Kev, you might as well join him.

Farida sat awkwardly in her armchair as Philip switched rapidly between the body of the Humba and the tablet, completing a series of tasks that she didn’t understand. Kira had been supposed to come with him this afternoon, but a last-minute work emergency had come up, so Philip was here alone. Farida had received a series of rushed text messages from Sage about what was on the table (the Humba and baking) and what was not (telling Philip to call her grandma). It had seemed to her that there was quite a lot left in the space between those two. What about baking the Humba? Farida had wanted to ask, irritated by the implication that she didn’t understand Sage and Kira’s relationship status or possess basic tact. Philip had gotten quickly to work on the Humba, and Farida had quickly put on music to cushion the silence that

thickly settled between them. Philip was working on ensuring that the Humbra didn't sneak up on her anymore and instead announced its presence.

She had been slightly surprised when Sage arrived with Philip for the first-time last week. Sage had never said anything, and so Farida had not been expecting Waspy Kira's child to be a six-foot-tall Filipino kid. Not that Farida was one to talk. As soon as she had fallen in love with Lincoln, she knew any children they had would never look like her. At least not in the way that mattered to other people: she had signed on for a lifetime of questioning glances every time she and Sage went out alone together. She didn't want to be another pair of judgmental eyes on the kid. Or maybe he was a teen? There was little difference to Farida, but she supposed she could just ask.

“What grade are you in, Philip?”

“Tenth.”

Farida tried to place a sophomore year Sage in her head. “So, college tours yet? Or is that a totally ridiculous question?”

Philip lightly chuckled, “Not ridiculous, just scary. Mom and I will probably start looking at some this summer.”

Farida smiled and nodded, but they still fell back into silence.

She tapped her foot. What had Sage liked at this age? What had she been talking about the other day, Star Wars? All Farida really remembered about those movies was that with each new release Sage seemed to get into some life and death argument with someone at school or online about the Black characters in the movie and who they were allowed to be. The movies, filled with glowing swords and green men, had seemed silly to Farida, but she had always

understood the tears that Sage came home with after arguing about her humanity through sci-fi logistics. Farida had cried many of those same tears to her mother.

“What song is this?”

Farida came back suddenly to her living room, “Hmm?”

Philip kept fiddling with the tablet as he repeated himself, “The song?”

“Oh, is it bothering you? I didn’t think about it interfering with your work—” Farida moved to go to the speaker.

“Please keep it on! I really like it, I just wanted to know what it was.”

Farida eased herself back into the chair, “You don’t know who this is?”

Philip shook his head sheepishly.

“I need to talk to Sage. She’s slacking on your education.”

“Does Sage like this song?”

Farida snorted, “She better: it’s Otis Redding.”

Philip smiled like he was in on it with her even though Farida was one-hundred percent sure he had never heard the name before. She still appreciated the gesture.

He cleared his throat, “Could you turn it up a little?”

Farida couldn’t help it: she let the full force of her grin stretch across the entire width of her face, “Of course.” She got up and slid the dial on her speakers, letting Otis’s velvet voice warm up the room. Before Philip could get drawn in by the Humba again, Farida asked, “And I hear you’re interested in baking?”

He continued typing even as he responded, which Farida was unfortunately impressed by. She couldn’t type that fast even with both of her eyes on the screen these days. “Yeah, those cookies the other day were incredible.”

Farida flushed with the pleasure of a job well done. She forgot about the easy pride that baking lent itself to. Compliments were quick if you could keep the ratios straight. “Well,” she said, “I don’t think we’ll have time for that today. But maybe next week?” She found herself to be shy all of the sudden, looking down at the faded purple carpet beneath her slippers feet.

“That would be great!” Philip said.

Farida leaned back into the chair as they both lapsed into their own thoughts. The silence was lighter now. It wasn’t even really silence at all thanks to Otis:

*I've been loving you too long to stop now.*

Sage suddenly found herself in a new routine with all the most important people in her life. Philip went over to Farida’ after school at least once a week to do his homework and to help her figure out how she could use the Humba around the house. Sage or Kira would come by and pick him up after work.

As Sage and Philip left her mom’s one evening, Farida called out from the front step, “Remember to say goodbye, Hubert!”

The Humba called out to them, “Goodbye, SAGE and PHILIP.”

Philip shouted out his goodbye as he scrambled into the car, but Sage paused on the walk. She turned back to her mom, “Hubert?”

Farida looked away, “Philip thought he needed a name, and I agreed.”

Sage had to bite down on her grin, “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, sweetie.”

That night when they were back home Sage allowed herself to whisper to Kira right on the edge of sleep, “I think she actually *likes* it.”

Farida's house hadn't been this full of noise in a long time. Philip had wanted to display his newfound baking prowess that he and Farida had been developing, so she had suggested that the four of them have dinner at her place. Philip had promised a surprise to Sage and Kira, and everyone was pretending that they didn't know it was a pie he had been working on perfecting. The evening was accompanied by a playlist curated by Philip of his favorite songs that Farida had shown him so far. 'I've Been Loving You Too Long' was on there twice.

Farida was just responding to Kira's question when Sage came back from fetching the bottle of wine they had left in the car.

"It's nice to have a man in the house again," Farida said.

Sage sat down on the couch next to Kira, "Philip's not a man, Mom. He's sixteen."

Farida laughed, "Not Philip, honey, the Humbra."

"Yeah," Philip interjected eagerly, "We need a man to keep the Roomba in line!"

Farida cackled, "Exactly!"

Sage eyed the two of them distrustfully, "Did the two of you practice this? I thought I was here for baking, not comedy hour."

Kira elbowed her gently in her side, "C'mon babe, don't be bitter just cause we're not in on the joke."

Farida smiled, "Thank you, Kira. You better listen to her, Sage, or I'll have Hubert give you a talking to."

Farida laughed, and Philip and Kira laughed along with her, even Hubert let out an awkward, mechanical chattering sound.

Suddenly Sage was standing, "What was that? Is it broken?"

"No honey, he's laughing," Farida said. "It's nothing to worry about, sit back down."

“Oh,” Sage said, sinking onto the couch, but still concernedly eyeing the Humbra. “Sorry, I guess it just startled me.”

Farida leaned over and put a hand on Sage’s arm, trying to ground her, “No worries, hon. Should we open the wine?”

Sage blinked hard, seeming to come back to herself all at once. “Sure. I’m just gonna use the bathroom first.”

“But you can’t go through the kitchen,” Philip protested. “You’re gonna ruin the surprise.”

Farida intervened, “Sage, honey, just go use the one in my room.”

Sage nodded at her without looking Farida in the eyes and then left.

Kira and Philip quickly found new conversation, but Farida watched a second longer as Sage’s shadow trailed from the room.

Sage lingered in her mom’s bedroom, taking a breath. She hadn’t realized how close Philip and her mom had been getting during his visits. Both of them were becoming new to her through the other in a way that made her tense. Sage took a breath and steadied herself with the familiar picture of her mom’s mess. She turned to the dresser that was over cluttered with head scarves, jewelry, and a frankly insane amount of lotion. To be fair, Sage had probably purchased many of these bottles as gifts for her mom. It was a thoughtless guarantee of a real thank you. A singular bright ring stuck out from the chaos. Sage fingered it gently. It was her mom’s wedding ring. She had stopped wearing it when Sage’s dad passed. She said it was too painful. Maybe Sage could ask her mom if she could take it instead. It seemed a waste to let it sit here.

“Do you need assistance, SAGE?”

The ring clattered onto the dresser. Sage turned around to find the Humbra directly behind her.

“Uh, no. I’m just using the bathroom.”

It sat there with its soft hum.

“If that’s allowed?” she asked sardonically.

The Humbra clearly didn’t understand tone shifts, “Certainly.”

Sage turned slowly away and began to move to the bathroom. She paused, an instinctual question emerging, and faced the machine again, “Do you even know who I am?”

The Humbra whirled, “SAGE. Emergency contact. Next of kin.”

She knew that was all its programming gave it, but Sage still bristled. “Daughter,” she insisted. “I’m her daughter.” She wondered what it would say about Philip. Tech Support? Next of kin’s kind of, almost, one day stepson? Friend?

The robot’s light flashed at her, blinding her for a brief moment.

“What the hell?” she furiously rubbed her eyes.

The Humbra’s signature whirling processing noise was louder than Sage had ever heard it, “I have captured an image to improve my records, DAUGHTER.”

“That’s not—” the Humbra had already started rolling away. “Whatever,” she mumbled.

Sage couldn’t let go of the strange interaction, even once they were home and filled with Philip’s truly delicious pie. It stuck with her as she removed her earrings.

“Don’t you think it’s weird, how close they all are?” she asked Kira.

Kira was already in bed reading, “I think it’s sweet. It’s like they’re a little family.”

Sage's gut jumped. "I guess. Just— don't you think it might be unhealthy for Philip? Getting so attached to it?"

"What, the Humbra? He's the one working on it, babe. I don't think he's gonna forget it's a robot. He just thinks it's fun."

Sage hummed: that was true.

Kira finally put down her book. "Your mom's happy right?"

Sage nodded.

"That's all that matters. It's sweet that you're concerned about Philip, but we should celebrate. No more worrying that your mom's gonna decapitate the Humbra!"

Sage snorted, "I don't know if it's possible to decapitate a sphere."

"Oh, shut up," Kira said, tossing one of their many pillows at Sage.

Philip was pacing back and forth with Hubert on the front walk. His newest goal was to try and adapt the robot to the outside so that it could accompany Farida on her walks. Even at Philip's slow careful pace, Hubert stuttered and stopped behind him at odd intervals, fighting its wiring and trying to embrace the new instructions that Philip had provided it with. Farida was sitting on the front stoop, wearing oversized sunglasses to protect herself from the glare of the sun's reflection off Hubert.

"Okay, Philip, I'm ready for this week's gossip."

Philip laughed, "I keep telling you, Rida," using the nickname he had taken to calling her lately, "I don't have any."

"Oh c'mon, give an old woman some joy."

"You are not that old."

It was Farida's turn to laugh, "Philip," she said, "I am seventy-two."

His eyes widened, "Oh."

"Oh," Farida parroted, giggling. "How old did you think I was?"

Philip shrugged, "Like sixty."

"Well thank you very much, Philip. I guess it is true what they say."

Philip looked at her blankly.

"Black don't crack..." Farida trailed off. Philip continued to stare at her. "Damn, Philip, Sage is truly teaching you nothing."

Philip shrugged again.

"Regardless, you're telling me there's really not a single cheating scandal, pain in the ass teacher, or school dance happening? High school has gotten boring since my day."

Philip nodded as he carefully looked at the tablet without tapping anything. Farida had gotten very familiar with the sight of him working. His face would go calm, peaceful almost, but his eyes would tighten in concentration. This was not that face.

"Philip," Farida said. "Are you lying to me right now?"

"Hmm?" he looked up at her in innocence, but it didn't hold. Philip's expression quickly collapsed as his shoulders dropped. "Fine," he said, "there is maybe, *possibly* a dance that is coming up."

"Hot dog!" Farida clapped her hands together. "Philip, that is great! What are you wearing? Is there a theme?"

He looked at her incredulously, "Are you kidding me? I'm not going."

"What? Why not?"

Philip snorted, "I don't have anyone to go with for one."

Farida rolled her eyes, “Philip, honey, no offense, that’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever said. You have friends at school, right?”

He nodded.

“Then you all go together, okay? That’s done. What’s the next reason?”

Philip was the one rolling his eyes at Farida now, but she just kept smiling.

“Fine. Second, I’m a horrible dancer.”

Farida nodded, “Okay, that one I understand.” She thought for a second. “Are those the only two reasons?”

Philip reluctantly nodded.

“Then we’re golden, Philip!” Farida leaned forward conspiratorially, “I’ll have you know that I met Sage’s dad at a dance. You’re in great hands.”

Philip seemed grudgingly optimistic, “Really?”

They had in fact met at a dive bar during college, but Farida *had* been dancing at the time, even when no one else was, and that fact alone had caught her future husband’s attention from across the room. She thought that counted.

“Really,” Farida said.

“What was your husband’s name, FARIDA?”

She jerked at the interruption. Hubert had gotten so quiet she had almost forgotten it was there.

“Oh, it was Lincoln.”

“LINCOLN,” it repeated.

She nodded, waiting, but it seemed to be done.

Farida turned towards Philip again, “So, shall we?”

Philip rolled his eyes, again, but he was smiling this time. “Fine, Rida.”

“Perfect! Hubert, can you handle the music?”

“Absolutely, FARIDA.”

Sage stopped just out of sight of her mom’s backdoor. Otis Redding was spilling out of the house. She leaned against the brick wall, closing her eyes to enjoy the sound. It was her parents’ first dance song. Sage obviously hadn’t seen them at the wedding, but she had seen them countless days in her childhood home, looking into each other’s eyes as the song played and they danced their fiftieth, hundredth, thousandth dance together. Sage grounded herself in that joy as she prepared herself to walk in. Just because she wasn’t a part of her mom and Philip’s time together didn’t mean there was something wrong with it. She tried to summon Kira’s comforting voice from the other night. Her mom was happy, that’s what mattered.

Sage turned and pushed open the door. She was greeted with the sight of Farida with her arms around Philip’s neck and his around her waist, the two of them perfectly framed by the open doorway from the kitchen as they danced slowly back and forth in the living room. The Humba was there too: the white sphere went in circles around the dancing pair, throwing in a spin every now and then before changing directions. Otis’s voice lingered over the three of them like a caption: *You are tired and you want to be free. My love is growing stronger as you become a habit to me.*

“What the fuck?” Sage said.

Farida lifted her head up from Philip’s chest. “Honey!” she said, breaking away from Philip without any rush. “What do you think? Philip’s ready for the dance, no?”

Philip was sheepishly running his hand through his hair. He seemed embarrassed but not ashamed.

“Philip,” Sage said, “I want you in the car.”

He looked confused, “But we have snickerdoodles in the oven.”

Sage was trying and failing to keep herself from shouting, “I don’t care about the snickerdoodles, Philip. I told you to get in the car.”

Farida stepped forward, “Honey, what’s the matter?”

“I’m not talking to you, Mom. I’m talking to Philip.” Her mom placed a comforting hand on Philip’s arm. Sage grit her teeth, “*Now* Philip. I do not want to have to repeat myself.”

Farida turned her back to Sage to fully face Philip, “I’ll finish up the snickerdoodles, sweetie. Sage and I need to talk about our schedule for next week. Just wait outside.”

Philip stood there for a second, looking at Farida, but then he left, his head held down the whole way so Sage couldn’t see his eyes.

Farida walked him to the backdoor, the Humba trailing behind her, and only once he exited did she turn to Sage, leaning back against the kitchen counter, “What’s wrong with you, honey?”

Sage looked around at the mess of baking that still decorated the kitchen, “You would never teach me the snickerdoodle recipe.”

Her mom eyed her carefully, “You never asked.”

Sage couldn’t believe her. “Yes, I did, you just always took over from me. You never let me do anything.”

Farida looked back at her, unmoved, “What’s wrong, Sage?”

Sage wanted to laugh, “What’s wrong? What’s wrong is that you’re dancing around with my—with Philip to you and Dad’s song, like it’s goddamn prom.”

Farida crossed her arms, “I was teaching him to dance, Sage. I don’t see what the problem is. I danced to it with you all the time when you were little.”

“Philip’s not your kid, Mom. He’s not a *kid* at all.”

“You’re the one who told me that he’s *not* a man.”

“Exactly! That’s why it’s so inappropriate for you to be dragging him into this—” Sage gestured wildly at the Humbra, “throuple.”

“Throuple? What is a throuple?”

“It’s disgusting, Mom, is what it is.”

“Sage, I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The dancing, Mom! If you can’t see it, I can’t explain it to you.”

The two of them sat in silence for a long moment.

Then Sage watched as her mom dug her fingers into the leftover dough still out on the counter, her pointer finger breaking through the skin into its center. Sage watched as Farida wiped her hands on her pants and lifted one out in offering. Sage gripped it back immediately with a force she worried might be too much for her mom to handle, but Farida held on just as tight. Sage could feel her mom’s gaze intent on her face, even though she was only taking an askew glance back at her. It would be too much to hold her so tight and also look at her straight on.

With this intent gaze anchored firmly on Sage, Farida paused and then said, unbearably gentle, “Do you want to dance, honey?”

Sage ripped her hand away, “This isn’t about me, Mom.” She scoffed, “It’s about you and your behavior.”

“Honey—”

“Philip won’t be coming over anymore,” Sage interrupted. She hadn’t known what she was gonna say until it came out, but it felt right.

Sage saw her mom start to protest, but then she saw Farida look into Sage’s eyes and stop. “Okay honey, whatever you say,” Farida said.

“Okay then,” Sage said. She took one last look at her mom and left, making sure to slam the door as she did.

After Sage left, Farida sat in the living room staring at her lap in the silence of her home. She was shamed, scolded by her daughter, and wondering, had she crossed a line? What did Sage even think she had done? How could she think Farida had done something like *that*? Farida clenched her fist. The slight motion knocked over the book balancing precariously on her end table.

A soft whirring entered the room.

“I heard a loud noise. Are you alright? Do I need to contact SAGE or emergency services?”

Farida smiled, “No, Hubert. I’m fine.”

The whirring began to retreat.

“Hubert?”

“Yes, FARIDA?”

She struggled for something to say, longing to make conversation, and so she closed her eyes. “Do you think I did anything wrong?” She cringed at the neediness in her voice.

“According to my protocols, FARIDA, you have not committed any infractions. I am a mandated reporter.”

“Thank you, Hugh,” Farida said. She tried to let cold logic calm her anxious stomach. All she had done was teach a boy to dance, and, she didn’t care what Sage said, Philip *was* a child. At Farida’s age, almost everyone was.

“HUGH?”

“Hmm?” Farida looked up from her lap to Hubert’s blinking light. “Oh, it’s a nickname. Hubert. Hugh.”

Hubert hummed thoughtfully, “Then may I call you RIDA?”

Farida smiled. It was hard not to be charmed by this polite little metal ball. “Of course, Hugh.”

Music started pouring out of Hubert, “Would you like to dance, RIDA?”

Farida found herself choked up, “Yes Hugh, I would love to.”

She got up and just stood there for a moment, unsure of the next step. The sun was setting, and Hubert’s golden blinking beam was the only source of light in the room. It seemed to glow brighter as she stood in front of it. Farida closed her eyes, letting the golden light seep through her eyelids, and began to rock back and forth. She felt Hubert wind his way between her feet in graceful figure eights, and, as she turned, he turned with her. All the while Otis sang: *I've been loving you, a little too long. I don't wanna stop now. Oh, oh, don't make me stop now.*

That night Sage sat silently on their bed as Kira paced across the bedroom floor.

“Are you gonna say something?” Sage asked.

Kira kept pacing, “I’m finding it hard to know exactly where to start. Maybe that you treated Philip like he was a literal child today? Or that you accused him and your mother of having some type of affair with the robot?”

Sage took a deep breath, “I overstepped, I know. I shouldn’t be taking that type of role with Philip. It’s not my place.”

Kira suddenly stopped. When she spoke, her voice was incredibly slow, “I’m not upset about the fact that you tried to parent Philip. I’m upset because the way you did it was mean and selfish. That’s not ever okay, Sage. That is not who I am as a mom, and it’s not how I hoped you would be.”

“I am also upset,” Kira’s voice raised another notch, “that you think I would be mad at the fact that you want to be part of this family. I would never be mad about that. I *want* you to be a parent to Philip someday. I think Philip wants that too. But it can *never* be like how it was today. Never.”

“I know,” Sage said. “I know.”

“I know you do.” Kira let out a big sigh and collapsed next to Sage on the bed, putting a hand on her thigh. Sage couldn’t bring herself to reach back to her: she was still too wired. Instead, she let her head fall onto Kira’s shoulder. “But part of parenting is trust, babe. I talked to Philip, he was freaked out, but that was only from you.”

Sage flinched and tucked her head further into Kira’s neck. Kira tightened her grip on her.

“I’m not saying that to make you feel bad, only that nothing is happening at that house that we need to be concerned about. I know the Humbra has turned out differently than you thought, but it’s doing its job, right? It’s keeping your mom safe?”

Sage nodded numbly.

“Then it’s all okay, right?”

“Yes,” Sage said. She let Kira coax her back down to the pillow and hold her close from behind. “It’s all okay.”

“Honey, would you like a lemonade?” Farida gently asked.

Sage was sitting as far as she possibly could from everyone while still being on the picnic blanket, which was not very far, but Farida understood the message.

“Sure,” her daughter said. Farida stretched her arm as wide as she could to hand the chilled can to Sage from the cooler. Their fingertips brushed briefly, and Farida gave her a small smile. Sage returned her with an upturn on one side of her mouth.

It had been a week since Sage’s blow-up. Kira had come over personally to assure Farida that she had done nothing wrong. Farida had decided to believe her. Today had started with Sage delivering a mumbled apology to Farida in her kitchen as Kira stood next to her. It had taken Farida decades back to an adolescent Sage knocking on her bedroom door, saying sorry for whatever cruel teen angst had fallen out of her mouth that day, in a manner that clearly betrayed her father’s coaching. It was as easy to accept today as it had always been. The beach picnic was the second part of Sage’s apology, though Farida suspected it had also been Kira’s idea. She didn’t mind either way. They all packed into Kira’s car with Sage and Philip in the back seat and

Farida upfront with Hubert in her lap. Farida couldn't imagine going without him, but she had been worried.

“Are we sure he can really manage the beach?” she asked in the car.

Philip quickly piped up from the back seat, “He did successfully adapt to the outside the other day.”

Farida was unconvinced, “What do you think, Hugh?”

Sage let out a choked noise from the backseat.

Farida leaned back to check on her, “Are you okay, honey?” She couldn't actually get a good look at her daughter because Sage's face was almost pressed against the window.

She gave a clipped, “Fine.”

Farida reluctantly turned back to the front.

“Don't be concerned, RIDA,” Hubert said. “I am waterproof.”

He ended up doing quite well, much to Farida's pleasure. She'd had to carry him over a few divots in the parking lot, but she was pleasantly surprised to find that he could manage the sand just fine. She was now more concerned about Sage, who was looking into her can like it held a secret at the bottom.

Sage was trying to bunch into herself to preserve her warmth, and let her lemonade consume the entirety of her attention as Kira, Philip, and her mom made conversation on the other side of the blanket, when the Humbra rolled up to her.

“Hello, SAGE-DAUGHTER.”

Sage sighed.

“Are you enjoying the beach?”

She refused to turn towards the machine as she responded, “It’s a little chilly.”

“A cloudy day at the beach is ideal. While it is commonly believed that one should go in the summer, the end of winter—”

“The end of winter, just before spring, is when you should really go. Yes, Hugh,” Sage spat, “I am familiar with my mom’s beach philosophies. Thank you.”

The Humbra had reached an eerie silence.

“You should not call me that, SAGE.”

“What?”

“You should not call me HUGH, only RIDA calls me that.”

No one should receive a new nickname past the age of 60. It was ridiculous. This was not the time for change in her mom’s life. The time for inside jokes had passed. Sage should be hearing the same old stories about the same old people.

“I’m swimming,” Sage declared, deciding on the action the moment she said it. She slipped out of her sneakers and started to peel off her socks. She had rotely put on a swimsuit this morning, even as Kira had questioned her. Sage had spent too many other days regretful on a cloudy beach without a swimsuit to be left unprepared, even when she was being forced to come.

“Honey, are you sure? It’s not—”

The Humbra interrupted Farida, “Hi swimming, I am HUBERT.” It let out its chittering laugh. It sounded far less mechanical than the last time Sage had heard it, but it still grated across her ears. Her mom and Philip exchanged fond smiles, and even Kira let out a stray chuckle.

Sage turned away towards the water. She walked from the damp firmly packed sand until the ground sank more and more under her feet.

“Just be safe, honey!” her mom called out after her.

Sage ignored her as she finally reached the water. It was cold. She stood there with just her feet coming in and out of the water until her toes went numb. She walked up to her knees, her thighs, and then her low stomach, where the water always struck her core and spread out through the rest of her body. Her mom had taught her that when you reached that point the only way to go on was by taking a deep breath and submerging yourself underwater.

Sage used to beg her parents to go to the beach all year long, hoping that they would agree that it was warm enough for her to brave even the winter water. Her mom and dad would communicate with a single look, and then her dad would present the verdict. More often than not, it was a yes, and they would end up as the lone trio on an empty beach. While her dad went with them, he would never get into the water, and instead just stand on the shore while Sage and her mom walked through the waves together, waiting until it was deep enough for them to get carried by the waves, their feet lifting off the ground and their bodies being taken by the water. Sage used to think that it was the closest she would get to flying. She never thought that she would ever *need* to get any closer than losing her body to the ocean as she and her mom laughed to each other with their heads right above the surface, Sage waving to her dad back on the sand over and over again, like he would forget they were there, and, every time, him waving back. That used to be one of the purest moments of joy she could ever recall, flying with her mom in cold, cold waters as her dad kept watch.

Today Sage couldn't make it past her stomach. She kept taking deep breaths, but she couldn't bring herself to go underwater. She turned back to the shore and her family seemed so far away: she could see their shapes but not their faces. There was Kira and Phillip huddling next to each other against the wind and then her mom standing slightly apart.

“Mom!” Sage shouted, trying to reach her across the distance and the waves and the wind.

She didn’t seem to hear.

“Mom!” Sage tried again, this time waving her hand wildly above her head.

Her mom shifted this time, but only slightly to the right, not towards Sage’s cries but towards that shiny white sphere appeared at her side. Sage saw Kira gesture Philip, her mom, and *it* all together. Philip wrapped his arm around Farida, and the machine found its way in between them on the sand. Kira took out her phone and snapped a picture.

Sage remained silent but she kept waving, her arm on a mechanical loop back and forth, back and forth, waiting for someone to see her.

Walden, still

**Parks Alert:** *There is a young African American man camping out at Walden Pond State Reservation. Unconfirmed how long he has been out there, but it appears to be several days. Could be violent. Could be armed. Visitors are advised to be cautious. Please be on high alert, especially around the house site.*

“C’mon,” I say. “It’ll be fun.”

The man stands there, unconvinced, his arms severely crossed as he stares at me.

I wiggle my eyebrows enticingly, and his frown only deepens.

He says, “You also said this liquor would be fun, and I find it has only made you rude and ignoble.” He kicks the now empty bottle of red wine.

I roll my eyes, “Fine. I’ll go first.”

I press Damian’s number in my phone. The phone rings and rings and finally deposits me in voicemail. I look over where the man is nervously huddled and give him a wink: his frown deepens.

“Hi, Dame. I’m calling you from my camping trip annnnd: It. Is. Cold. Freezing actually. Who knew, am I right? Mass winters are cold, breaking news!”

I burp.

“Oh god, give me a second. I just need to—”

I burp again, my hands on my knees. I hang there for a second and then swing up victoriously, “No bile, high five!”

I turn to him with a hand, but he only eyes me with disdain.

“Damn, someone needs another drink,” I mutter to myself.

I turn away from him and move back to Damian.

“You’ll be happy to know I did not throw up, but—” I gag a little— “The back of my throat still tastes like vomit.”

I lean over to spit the taste out of my mouth and find my body uncooperative. There’s the graze of his hands on my back, but I’m already tipping over into the dirt. I giggle, shifting slightly to prop myself against a tree. I lean my neck back to press the crown of my head into the bark. I can’t see the stars, only the darkness of the sky.

“Throwing up can be good though,” I ponder. “Sometimes, I wish I could throw you up. That’s always what I think when I think about the things that are wrong with me. Not that you’re something that’s wrong with me— just— fuck.”

The man reaches over, and the phone is gone from my hands. I keep looking up at the imaginary stars, talking to them instead.

“I’m fucking this up. Just— I wish I could throw them up and see them on the floor in front of me, and then I would know that I was....”

I trail off: the man has not thrown away the phone like I would have expected. He is staring at it intently.

He doesn’t look away from it as he asks, “This truly allows you to speak to others? Those who are dear to you?”

I nod, “Try it.”

He looks at the device for a long time. He opens his mouth, shuts it, and tosses the phone at my feet.

He walks away and I don’t stop him. I don’t even make it back to my tent. I let myself sleep where I am. He doesn’t come back for two days. It feels like an eternity.

It would be a lie to say I remember, but this is how we met for the first time: ice cold water up my nose, my mother's bony hands holding me under and lifting me out. I don't know if I was born clean, but she made sure I became so here. She chose the site specifically for its history. Not for that recent miasma of writers that migrated here, though she loved those too, but something far more ancient than that: the last glacier to cover New England. A kettle hole. As if god had forgotten he'd put on the tea to boil, and when he finally remembered to pour himself a cup, left a pond in his wake. If you ask my mom if she believes in god, she will tell you that she believes in water. Which means I was baptized but never taken to church. Which means she believes in purity, but that it comes from below and not above.

It's where I met the world and it met me. I met Thoreau soon after. It's impossible really, to know the pond without him. He swallows the land whole. We swim in his gullet every summer, climb the remaining rocks of his teeth to walk his skeleton trail along the water's edge. A ghost whose death trumps all other lives that were made here. I often wonder if he was there with me on that first visit with my mom. These days I find myself hoping the answer is no, because I suspect that if he was, then even the very fact of my life would be rendered in his name.

I have come to the woods because I wish to live deliberately, to affront all the inessential facts of him, and see if I cannot learn what the pond has to teach without him, and not, when I come to die, discover that I had not lived separately from him. I did not wish to love what was not real, loving is so dear. I wanted to love the deep waters and suck out all the marrow of his remaining body, to love so sturdily as to conquer all that was his, to drive him into a corner, and reduce him to his lowest terms, and, if he proved to be mean, then to know for certain that he would join those who eyed my body as a potential threat against the purity of nature and posted

warnings of my presence; or if he were sublime, to—

I hadn't planned on him being sublime, but I forgot how much of everything he was. I forgot how long I had known him. I forgot the ways in which I was taught to love on the beaches that his name preserves. I forgot how long I had spent staring at his bronzed faced statue, longing for my longing to be so beautiful. I forgot how I loved him and that excising him from my history would mean losing so much of it. I forgot that I would miss him.

In the winter morning, the sun is so white it looks like a hole in the sky. The trails have gone all fragile, like bleach white eggs in a clear plastic carton. All crunch and tenderness. It is the time of year when the days are split into gray and black. Stay in a half hour too long and you might just miss the glimpse of a slightly lighter sky before the black descends. Not that I have truly been inside in the past five days. My tent provides a constant thin diffusion of the barely there light. When I use the bathroom in the visitor's center, I am always anxious for my body to finish, worried that someone will realize they've seen me here too many days in a row and worried that I'll miss that moment when the dark of the day suddenly dips into the darker dark of night. Everything is crisp, shattered by the press of a fingernail. Softness is saved for the still far away months of melting and mud. White hardens over drying grass and pavement, sealing up surfaces in snow's cruel, semi-permanent fashion; break in case of emergency. Or out of necessity, as I make my way to the water's edge through the icy landscape. My backpack harrumphs against my back, sending an eerie heartbeat into the snow-covered trees. Like the ice itself is pounding out its existence, asserting its presence through the echoes of those who attempt to speed through its realm.

When I finally reach the water, the pond looks fragile. If I pressed a boot through its icy

edge, a crack would run its way around its entire rim. It's already starting to melt. I can hear it. The subtle hiss of pressure released after an entire winter, with an entire winter left to go. Winter lasts six months here. We're smack dab in the middle right now. The ice sounds like it has a secret. Like your best friend in middle school leaning over from the table next to yours, where he's been separated to since the two of you talk too much and you're too close for boys, trying to get your attention without alerting the tight-ass math teacher at the front who has sat you both with tables of all girls in effort to curb your behavior.

I'm listening, I think, staring intently down at the ice. No one's looking our way, and I'm listening. But the ice's hissing still doesn't stop, a constantly leaking pressure valve with no hope of ever reaching release. I try to let it be enough, the ice's call of trust. I close my eyes and will it to be comforting. My nose threatens to fly off in the wind. I hunker it deeper into my coat collar. I took the wrong one. Mom's always lamenting how I choose style over substance, always grabbing the purple wool coat I picked up from a thrift store with Damian last year and never the down jacket that she carefully selected for me at the beginning of high school, when I would no longer be taking the bus. I find my phone on instinct in my pocket and resist the urge to check it, instead just holding it in my palm, waiting for a sign from the pond.

Finally, there's a crack. I open my eyes to a little girl on the other side of the small inlet of shore I'm stood on. I was probably about her age when I started talking to the man. It was summer, and I had managed to snag a rare corner of private water while Mom meditated further down on the beach. I was trying to skip rocks and failing miserably. The man, a man then, was dressed far more formally than anyone else who was there for the cool relief of the pond during the muggy July. He hadn't said anything. He had been patient. He simply stood a couple feet away from me and skipped perfect rock after perfect rock. I watched him long enough that I

finally found the rhythm. When I successfully sent my first one across the water's surface and turned to celebrate with him, he had disappeared.

If he doesn't show today, then he'll have disappeared for three days.

The little girl is wearing neon pink snow boots. They have little pom-poms on the back that sway in time with each violent and careful stomp that she brings down on top of the water's edge where the ice is hardest. I can't see, but I imagine she is leaving a trail of holes the size of her foot in the ice's crust, staking a claim of her own.

"Hey," I say. "Stop that."

She can't hear me over the wind.

"Hey! Get off the ice," I shout, then immediately panic. I look for Mom to claim me but she's not there, obviously. There is no one but me and the little white girl on our small stretch of shore which is worse than there being witnesses. I should've brought a razor with me and shaved off my beard. I should've kept my mouth shut. I should've packed a photo of Mom to keep on me at all times and present like my driver's license: See? I am a white woman's son. Doesn't that make you feel safe?

It's too late: she's already turning towards me. I slowly approach, leaving as much space as I can while ensuring we can hear each other.

"Why can't I step on the ice?" she asks.

"It's uh—" I struggle for a rationalization beyond my strange desire to keep hearing the pond's latent winter whisper. "It's dangerous," I say gravely.

Her mouth drops into a small o-shape.

I give her an over serious nod, "I know. If you step too hard you could fall straight through to the bottom of the pond, where no one would ever find you."

“No!” she gasps.

“Yes!” I say.

“Mandy!” a pair of voices call from the woods.

I take a step back from the girl on instinct, fisting my hands in my pockets. I am not so foolish as to try for innocence, but I aim for an impossibility of wrongdoing. What could I have done with my hands in my pockets? Unless I have a gun. Which would be crazy and is also exactly what Park Services thinks of me. I take another step back.

She sends one last harried glance towards the water before sprinting back to the path.

“Sage advice,” he suddenly says from behind me, too close for me not to have heard his footsteps. “A tad over dramatic though. I think you might have seriously frightened the young thing.”

I roll my eyes, always one for an entrance. I force myself to wait for my heart to stop its excited pitter-patter before I respond.

“Took you long enough,” I say.

I let myself smile at the snort he lets out only because he can’t see me: I knew he would come.

As the years passed from our first meeting, I watched the earth slowly shed its liquid shawl with each spring that came. A meaning that is only made visible through a history of rickety bridges teetering above little blue coves with my mother’s feet and depths down hidden stone stairs where, then, swimming was easy. A meaning made from what is shorn, or covered. I learned about the others who had lived here before Thoreau and during him and after him. It was hard to find them. They had been covered by the exact recreation of his cabin. By the statue of

him in great thought. By his name plastered across every cove and trail and street. By the pile of stones that people brought on their pilgrimages to his holy house site. I wondered what would happen if I returned each rock back to its rightful place. What would I find?

A meaning made from what is shorn. Like the wooden box that still sits on my desk, the word “Angel” etched into its metal top, the silver filled in with the ritual ink of my childhood wishes. Only now that I have shed so much, including a favorite color, shamed out of me in the course of an afternoon playdate, preserved forever in a pink gem on the lid. Filled with the things that I once thought were precious that I no longer remember: a train ticket, my name with another boy’s in a secret heart, one of my mom’s earrings, secretly coveted and pocketed. I didn’t think about the word at all when I selected it at six, and only now, another layer shed, do I find the label crumpled and too small to put on.

A meaning made from what is shorn. Like when Mrs. Wrethen showed us the local commerce records from just down the road. I knew that I was supposed to be shocked. Slaves? In New England? Whatever happened to the city on a hill? Whatever happened to self-reliance? But I wasn’t. I hadn’t known, but it wasn’t surprising. Free labor is free labor everywhere. Sometimes that free labor is going home to have your mom do your laundry when you’ve staked a claim on surviving on your friend’s plot of land in the woods.

“So, what have you done in the days past?” the man asks. “Have you been writing still?”

I sigh, “I got bored of journaling.”

I brace for his disappointment and am not left waiting long.

He huffs, “Bored of writing, of that which allows man to rise above and reflect?”

I kick a stone by my foot and send several more flying, “It was just the same shit over

and over again. Feeling guilty. Feeling selfish. Everyone else is good, and I am a fundamentally bad person.”

“Ah, yes. That.”

“Always hoping that writing would finally cleanse me and one day the faucet would run clear,” I say, trying to smile at him and failing, but successfully resisting the urge to kick the whole damn shore into the water.

The man picks up a stone and bends his arm back to skip it, before at the last moment seeming to remember the frozen-over surface, and instead drops the stone right back into the sand. “I used to stare at this water for hours, hoping to one day be as pure, calm, and thoughtful.” He kicks his just dropped stone. “To be borne from glaciers. I envied that. To be certain of your origins.”

I laugh.

“What?” the man demands.

“Bro, you’re buried in the same lot as your parents *and* their parents. How much more certain can you get?” I can’t help but laugh again.

The man makes an effort to frown, but I see a little smile work its way across his face.

I read my favorite book for the first time here. It was a gift from my mom for my 12th birthday. I’m a New Year’s Eve baby, so I always got to celebrate without school. We spent the last days of break dressing to preserve our warmth and indulging in the empty shores of beaches that would be unbearably crowded come summer. I spent those days reading *Little Women* next to Mom, so close to where Louisa May Alcott had lived with her actual sisters. Mom kept promising that if I stuck with it, I would make it to *Little Men* and actually get to read about

other boys. But I didn't mind, I had Laurie. Theodore Laurence was the first boy I ever fell in love with, and I got to fall in love with him in different ways through each March sister. Amy was my favorite because she got to keep him in the end. I wanted someone to keep. I wanted to love someone like she did him, so much that I inspired them back to life. I had thought the gift of the book had been in honor of me reaching the same age as the youngest March sister, but, when I brought this up to Mom, she reacted with a disgust I didn't understand.

“Oh god, Aden. No, not at all. Amy burns her sister's manuscript. It's unforgivable.”

“Mom!”

“It just is, can you imagine? Doing something so cruel to someone you love?”

“I thought everyone deserved forgiveness?” I asked through a laugh.

“Not her,” Mom said, “Not Amy March.”

I am well practiced at loving people who share nothing with me. I love my mom, I love Amy March, and I love Laurie, forever. Better than practiced, I am even *good* at loving those who are so different from me when it comes to desire. When I want someone bad enough, I don't care how people look at us when we're together, because we're *together*. But those places and people I love in solitude are different. To be alone somewhere is a vulnerability that most places don't afford me.

I love the pond, but it has been so long since I was alone here. I'm not sure if this is in fact not the first time it has ever happened. The pond changes for me when it's only the two of us together: no Mom, no school group, no swimmers or walkers at all when I am left alone in my tent at night. I am aware of myself in a way that I hadn't been with others.

I called Damian the first night I spent in the tent, over-stimulated by every little sound.

“Hi,” I said. “Sorry. It’s—you know who it is—sorry. I’m on this camping trip? And I just forgot how scary it is to sleep outside.” I take a breath. “I also don’t know, technically, if I’m allowed to be here?”

That was a straight up lie: I knew very clearly that I was not allowed to be here. I just didn’t want to have to deal with the consequences of that by admitting it to someone else, least of all Damian. I just wanted him to make me feel better.

“And I don’t really know what’s gonna happen if someone finds me?” This was not helping me be less scared. I switched directions. “I wish you were here. Or maybe not, you’d be complaining about the mattress quality,” I laughed.

“For the record, your bed is not comfier than mine, you just think it is because of nostalgia or some shit, but it would definitely be comfier than my sleeping bag. I don’t think I’ve used this thing since middle school.”

I was silent for a long time. I didn’t know what to say besides that I wanted him here, another body next to mine to remind me that I was more than just a threat. I said it in the only way I knew how, “I miss you, I guess, that’s all.”

I hung up then, having successfully lulled myself into enough safety to go to sleep with the picture of Damian listening to the voicemail in his bed, the flannel dinosaur sheets that his mom still bought him keeping him warm.

The Parks notice went up the next day.

“I did make a decision,” I say, “while you were gone.”

The man steps forward, keeping a firm amount of distance between us, but joining me on the shoreline. “Ah, so you have been up to something after all.”

I preen a little at the approval in his voice and firmly state, “I don’t want to beg anymore.”

He raises his eyebrows, “No more liquored up confessions then?”

I flush from the embarrassment of our last meeting and hide my face in the collar of my coat. But I can’t stay away for so long: I look up at him even as I keep my head down, and, as he considers it more deeply, the frown that appears on his face is not the pat on the back I was hoping for.

“We all have to be supplicant to something,” he finally says.

I charge forward, “Nope. Not me. I’m done with that.”

He sighs, “Come on now, that’s just childish Aden.”

“Don’t,” I say. “Just don’t. You don’t know me like that. You don’t know anything about me.” Another stone goes flying into the water.

“Indeed?” his voice goes up, piqued by the challenge. I ignore the warning.

“Isn’t that how we work? I know everything about you: you took one step here and now the land is yours forever.”

He grits his teeth, “A man may only make his own life and not his own legacy.”

Of course. I will never have that much power over anything, and he treats it like it was just a stroke of luck. I present him with an over-flourished bow, “Well, thank you kindly oh great one for allowing us to swim in the pond you so graciously made.”

He takes a step towards me, and I flinch, cursing myself for it. “I have made many men too, with my one step. I have made leaders. I have made boys too, boys too scared to profess to want anything more than what their mothers set out for them.”

I shake my head at him. “You’re making it ugly,” I say.

He raises his eyebrows at me, a cruel little grin making its way across his face.

“What?”

The man laughs, turning his back to me, “You’ve made my whole life ugly with your sophomoric superiority. You’re convinced that anything that came before you must be corrupt.” He whips around. “And I do know things about you, Aden. I know that you spent a week in the hospital with hypothermia after your first ‘swim’ here,” the man says.

Fuck him. Most of this country’s history is corrupt. I’m not paranoid, I’m well read.

As for my mom, “It was a gift.”

“Is something really a gift when you can’t choose to accept it?” he asks, a little too patiently for my tastes.

“Fuck you.”

The man tuts, “Back to childish again Aden.”

I snap, “You want to talk about being childish? What about playing pretend pioneer on your friend’s dime and eating fine meals in town on the weekend? What about erasing everyone else who was ever here with the stroke of a pen in the name of a charade?”

His face tightens, “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

I take a step back, gesturing at this place which has been preserved in his name, “Why does a man come to live in the woods? What is fleeing? Who is he fleeing to? A cozy little love shack, huh?”

His face is thunder as he takes a step forward. I take a step back at the storm brewing. “You talk of nothing you could possibly know. You have no idea what it was like to—” He stops himself. “You have no idea.”

“I have no idea. I have no idea!” I let out a cackle as I turn away from his smug, angry

face. The white man thinks I have no idea. I begin to stomp, working myself into a full strop.

“You are so arrogant. I cannot believe how you got away with it.”

“Aden—”

“See there you go interrupting me again,” I take another step. “I see now why you ‘went to the woods.’ I see it all so clearly now.”

“Aden.”

I stomp just a little harder. I forgot how good tantrums feel, “It’s because here, no one can force you to shut up!”

“Aden!”

I fall through the ice.

My last conversation with Damian went like this:

“I just can’t Aden. It’s not you—”

“It’s not me,” I say slowly. How is that worse than it being me? I want it to be about me. I want it to be all me. I want this relationship to be about us and not about what other people think.

“No, my parents, Aden. My dad? I couldn’t do that right now. Maybe not even ever,” he says.

“Maybe not ever,” I repeat.

“We can still be friends, obviously, but nothing else.”

“Friends,” I say.

“Can you actually say something Aden and stop fucking repeating me?” he snaps.

I look up at him. His hand is clenched in his deep black hair.

“I just don’t know why,” I say slowly, “you would let what happened between us happen—” He blushes. I ignore it, I don’t actually but I desperately wish I did “—if you were so ashamed of it.”

“I’m not ashamed, Aden. You don’t understand, It’s easier for you. Your mom doesn’t care about any of this.”

The truth of what he’s saying burns. “I thought your family liked me,” I say. “Your grandma made me mantecaditos.”

I sound pathetic. I hate it.

“My family liked you when they thought you were my *friend*. If they knew— Aden, my abuela would chase you out of the house. So if I seem—”

“Scared,” I finish.

“Sure, scared, and—”

“Cowardly.”

“Fine, cowardly, but—”

“But nothing,” I say, “If you can’t do this for me then we’re nothing.”

“Aden,” his voice breaks.

“I don’t care, Damian. I can’t be anything at all to you if you can’t be honest.”

I hadn’t made it that far across the ice in the joyful anger of my stomping, so thankfully it’s only my pants that are soaked through, although to the bone. The man seems convinced I’ve almost drowned as he helps me out of the pond. He has a death grip on my hands as he balances my final step from water to land. I miss the lightness in his eyes.

“I guess this confirms it. I’m an Amy,” I say, proud that my voice comes out steady with

the deep shiver beginning to make itself known in my body.

He is not amused, “Oh god, you’ve lost all sense.”

I laugh, a sound dangerously close to chattering, “Fuck, that’s past your time.”

He begins to move us faster across the sand, muttering, “Dear lord, please save this young boy.”

My laughter has succumbed to a full body shake. “I knew I should’ve gone to Orchard House instead. Louisa would know exactly what to do in this situation.”

“Well let’s not dismiss all rationality,” the man huffs. He’s managed to support most of my weight in order to get us to the nearest rock large enough for us both.

“Wait,” I stop us before we can sit down, “where’s my phone?”

The man gives me an empty look.

“The device to-to reach those dear to you,” I manage.

His face alights with recognition. He sets me down on the rock and trots down back to the waterline. He returns with my phone, “It fell out during your tantrum but before your swim.”

I roll my eyes but take it, “Thank you.” I check it on instinct: nothing from Damian but several check in texts from Mom. I place it on the sand.

He joins me on the rock, and we sit, pressed together from shoulder to knee. My teeth are chattering, but there’s a burning warmth emanating from every point of contact that I share with him.

“Come now, I can feel you’re freezing,” the man says and wraps his arm around me, tucking me deeper into his side. “Ralph got like this once, I thought he’d never be warm again,” he rubs his hand against my side, sending sparks up my ribs. “But he was. And you will be too.”

I knock my head lightly against him where it’s sitting against his chest, trying to tell him

to keep on talking without welcoming too much of the nail laced air into my lungs.

“It was after a snowball fight of all things. Which, truthfully,” the man’s hand stumbles out of its smooth stroke on my side and retreats back to my shoulder, “it was my fault. He was here for our walk, but he couldn’t stay long, so he just wanted to talk. To sit and talk, sort of like this.” His hand slips back down to my side. “He wanted me to be serious too. Talking about me coming home, and growing old, and—” the man grips me tight— “endings.”

I manage to slip my hand onto his knee and grip back just as tight.

He starts his soothing hand up again, “So I threw a snowball at him.”

I let out something between a cough and a laugh. The man shakes in, finally, shared laughter.

“He would just get this disappointed look on his face. And it would always get worse at first. But by the third snowball, he was mad enough to throw one back at me. Then there were no more endings, there was just a snowball fight. Us, bright red cheeks, and the freezing snow.”

The man’s hand had paused on Aden’s waist.

“But yes, we ended up a lot like this I suppose.”

I look up at him. I was surprised to find that he was already looking down at me.

“Your eyelashes are frozen,” the man says.

I lean forward, pause to see the man’s eyes flutter, and kiss him.

There’s a moment of nothing, of my heart in my throat, and then the man kisses me back, his lips rough and dry, but warm still. So warm. He slips his tongue gently into my mouth, another shock of heat to my formerly chattering teeth, but before I can think past the heat, it’s gone. The man rips himself away from my side, all points of burning contact extinguished in a single breath, no longer shared. He stares at the water, his breath harsh puffs of white air.

A sharp shock of laughter sounds down on us from the walking path. It's an athleisure clad white couple that look like they were pulled directly from the Park's tourism shots. The woman's eyes find mine through the trees. I immediately look down, my heart pounding in my chest. I hope my shivering state makes me look pathetic and not suspicious. I try to look like a boy and not a man. I try to look like the type of boy who's not violent. I try to look like the type of boy who's not armed. I hope I am uninteresting enough that they don't take a second glance and see how quickly I become those things in their eyes.

I hear the crunch of the trail as their laughter moves on. My teeth are chattering again.

The man looks back at me, "We should get you inside."

A pond is not a lake: it is small, shallow, and will not meet the sea. A lake is not the ocean: it is smaller, shallower, and it may meet the sea. The sea may not meet itself: it is only, always meeting itself. This is the world of water.

A cabin in the woods is not a house: it is small, cramped, and will not hold two people for very long. A house is not a pond: it is given and not chosen, and while it can hold many people it will not always let you be who you want or need to be. A pond may be a home, if you are lucky enough to be loved there, for however briefly.

I stare at the man's shoes on the dirt floor. Gentleman's leather scuffed by the forest's toll. I haven't done my research. But I'm pretty sure he didn't either before he struck out on his own.

"I didn't do it alone, you know."

I snort, covering my surprise at how closely our thoughts mirror each other, "No, duh."

The man sighs, “Tea?”

I nod at the ground and hear him begin to shuffle around the one room home. It doesn't take long. One of his few skills is keeping the kettle on most hours of the day. A heavy and rough ceramic mug is carefully put onto the wooden side table next to me. I give him a flat smile, another offering made to the floor which I hope he can receive. That picture perfect couple has reminded me: I will only ever just be a visitor. All evidence of me here will disappear once the Parks Notice comes down. I am trying to be here with him instead of in the future where a Park Ranger tracks me down. I can't remember if Park Rangers have guns or not. I hear him settle back into his seat, unsure whether the creaking comes from the saunterer's bones or his favored rocking chair.

“So,” the man says.

I look up now. He is altogether more scuffed up than he is in any of the memorabilia that they sell in the shop up the hill, newly renovated with money in his name. I've probably darkened him, I admit. Shaded his skin to add new, familiar context to the messy, almost curls that circle his face, hairline to beard. Made him into a companion to be stopped in tandem at the train station in the city, marked for possible violence and our bags searched, together, instead of alone. The man looks tired more than anything else. It's not how I wanted to imagine him: arrogance isn't supposed to reach exhaustion.

“Were you in love?” I ask, “With your friend, from the snowball fight?”

He is not surprised at the question, which I try and fail to not be disappointed at.

He rubs a large hand over his eyes and into his hair, needlessly grabbing onto a few short strands, “It's hard to say.”

“Love is hard to say?”

“Have you ever said it?” the man snaps, suddenly harsh.

I sit in silence.

He sighs again, and asks, gentle again, but still firm, “Do you want us to have been?”

Yes, I think. “I don’t know,” I say.

“Nonsense,” he says, in a manner so easy and so adamant that it shocks a laugh out of me. “Do you want us to have been in love?” the man repeats.

“It doesn’t make you any better— it doesn’t change any of the buildings, the signs. Everything you erased.”

“I know.”

I fight the urge to pick at the crudely embroidered napkin under my mug, knowing how precious that which you carved out for your own is. Even if that independence is a fragile delusion undercut by the nearby train tracks.

“Yes,” I finally say, “yes I want you to have been in love.”

A smile graces the man’s face, “Then we were.”

“Why isn’t he with you?” I ask.

The man’s face cracks, “You imagined me alone.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Yes,” says the man.

“What did he call you?” I ask.

He blushes but does me the grace of not pretending to not know what I’m talking about, “David. Something that everyone knew but was only for the two of us.”

We sit there together, the man stoking the fire as I drift closer and closer to sleep. I open my eyes to find him draping a blanket over me, smiling sheepishly when caught in the small act

of care.

“Sometimes it feels like you’re imagining me, instead of the other way around,” I say.

The man offers me a sad smile, “I know.”

**Parks Alert:** *The 2008 Nissan Altima loitering in the parking lot has been towed. Please contact the city of Concord in order to receive information on how to retrieve your vehicle.*

I laugh as I read the Parks notice stapled to the community board. It will be the train then. I hike my bag higher on my back and head down the street toward the station. I hold down the power button on my phone, hoping for some last glimpse of power. Eleven percent. I ignore my other notifications and find Damian’s name in my phone. Thankfully, I am sent immediately to voicemail. As the machine repeats the instructions I know by heart, I look out into the woods that thin but continue nonetheless as I move step by step further away from the pond and closer to the station, set off on Thoreau Street. There is no movement in the trees. No shadow, only dark wood. The tone finally sounds.

“Hi Damian. Again. It’s me. Again. Sorry about all the other calls. They don’t really matter because I know you’re trying to make a decision. Or I hope you’re trying to make a decision. I hope you haven’t decided.” I stop myself from kicking a piece of gravel. “But there’s two options, if we’re simple about it.” I give in and kick a whole stone out of the way of my path and end up limping for a few steps because of it. “I know one is a lot easier than the other. And I would understand choosing that. It’s easier. It’s safer.”

I find myself looking down even though there are no eyes on me, “But I want you to know that if you want to do the hard one, I want to do it with you. Not so we can be together, but

because I don't want your life to just be easy. I want it to be free and full. I want you to live a life you choose, and I want to be wherever you choose to be, whether it's easy or hard."

I turn back to the pond one last time, "I hope you want that too."

## Instant Life

While Carrie waited for the checked bag that her mother had insisted she bring back with her, packed full of her comfort snacks and five boxes of tissues, she texted Alexa:

*Coffee once I'm back?*

The text had sent green. It should've been an iMessage.

“Fuck,” she said. She hadn't been able to make herself delete the group chat yet, and while she had considered marking Blaire's contact with an emoji to remind herself, none of them had seemed suitable. She texted one more green text:

*Fuck, sorry lex*

Then Carrie found her thread with just Alexa, for real this time.

*Fuck, really sorry lex, coffee on me?*

She looked up to find her bag rounding the corner. She heaved it off the belt, managed to lug it outside, and ordered a Lyft. As Carrie waited, she went back to the now defunct group chat and attempted to scroll back to its origins. It took a while, but she finally reached that first text that Alexa had sent at the end of junior year:

*Harriet tower here we come!! So excited for you guys to meet each other*

Blaire had responded quickly:

*More like toned asses here we come! Those stairs are gonna be the death of me but you gals will make it worth it ☺*

While trying to figure out the life-defining shit show that was the process for securing senior housing, Alexa and Carrie had called briefly to discuss the new friend she had made on her study abroad program in Australia.

“Blaire's great, Care, you'll love her. She's super sweet and chill but also super fun, which is ridiculously rare.”

“Oh, trust me, I know, I’m barely even fun.”

Alexa laughed. Carrie had missed the sound.

“I’m looking for internships so I can stay here this summer.”

“Internships, already? Shouldn’t you just enjoy the semester?”

“It’s called work hard, play hard, Care. Plus, Blaire says international experience is such a turn on for companies back home.”

“A turn on?” Carrie laughed.

“Fuck off, you know what I mean.”

“I guess so,” Carrie said. “It sounds like you’re having a blast.”

“It’s amazing,” Alexa gushed. “I’m different here. *You* would be different. We’re *American*.”

She had whispered the last part like it was a precious secret, and Carrie couldn’t say that it wasn’t. As Black women, that elusive shiny label felt so slippery when they were at home. To have it straight up handed to you on foreign soil? Carrie would’ve been drunk on that feeling. She was like a pointillism painting; you could only understand her if you stepped back and placed each point into context. Next to her parents Carrie made sense, made people uncomfortable too—no one liked an angry Black girl who could camouflage herself into a sneak attack, but at least people understood where she came from with them.

Carrie had made it all the way forward in time to her earlier mistaken text in the group chat by the time that Alexa responded to her in the correct thread:

*Can’t, Vaughn’s on my ass about finishing my presentation for BSU this week.*

Carrie looked at the message. She stared at her phone until the Lyft came and she had to manhandle her suitcase into the trunk. She stared at it a second longer once she was in the car

and then finally typed out:

*Ugh sorry that sucks, but you're gonna kill it! Or at least be way better than mine was lol  
Probs for the best anyway, I need to unpack asap. My mom gave me enough supplies to  
last us a whole other school year. I'm not sure she's realized were graduating*

She then leaned her head against the car window, grounding herself in the sun-soaked surroundings. It always felt like it should take longer to get back here. Only three hours, to shed some worn version of herself and return to the one that she had specially crafted at her Hollywood landscaped college, seemed way too quick.

Carrie turned back to her phone and sent one more text as a precaution.

*I also need to check on Ted*

Alexa didn't respond. Carrie had been trying to lure her into giving answers about her pet fish all week, and all week she had entirely avoided them. Carrie hadn't expected to be away for so long, and after everything she wasn't sure if he would be waiting for her when she came back. She had considered finding an underclassman to come check on him, but she didn't think she could afford dead neighbor price rates.

Carrie had never had a pet growing up. When she told people this, they often reacted as if it was a severe moral failing on her part. Which she resented, it wasn't her fault that her parents had never given in to her youthful demands for puppies and kittens. In the end she didn't really mind, but it did leave her in an awkward position whenever people gushed about their fur families. She just didn't understand how you came to love a creature that much who couldn't even talk to you. Here was the truth: she liked people more than animals, and she didn't even like people that much.

Carrie hadn't even really wanted Ted, at least not actively so. The senior who had last

lived in her Harriet tower single had reached out to her at the end of last year.

*Hey do you want a fish?*

Carrie had not understood at the time.

*like, to eat?*

*lol no. I have a fish tank, I'm here this summer for research but I won't be able to take it on my flight home in the fall. It'd be easiest to leave it in the room, but I can always try and find someone else*

Carrie didn't even think about it for that long: she could take care of a fish.

*Sure. what's its name?*

She felt bad that the little red betta fish was stuck with the name Ted, but it felt gross to change it. He wasn't a dog, but she thought he must still have some attachment to his name. Carrie wouldn't say she loved Ted, but she did like him. She definitely liked him more than Alexa and Blaire did. The two of them had instantly taken a dislike to the fish.

"He's creepy," Blaire said, tapping the glass.

"Don't do that," Carrie said, batting her arm away, "It freaks him out."

"It freaks *him* out?" Alexa asked incredulously. "He's freaking me out. I don't know how you can have him right next to your bed."

"It makes it easy to feed him in the mornings," Carrie responded. In truth she had found it a bit unnerving to wake up face to face with Ted, but when she attempted to move the tank, it had become clear that it was too heavy to budge.

Blaire collapsed back onto Carrie's bed, "I cannot believe you said yes to that thing even once you learned its name was Ted. I mean c'mon Carrie, *Ted*."

Carrie was crouched in front of the tank, watching the fish swim in and out of the plant

life. “What’s so wrong with Ted?” she asked.

“Hellooo,” Alexa sang, “Ted Bundy, ever heard of him?”

Carrie shook her head in dismay, but Blaire jumped up, her hands clapping together, “Exactly, thank you Alexandria—”

“Please not the full name,” said Alexandria interrupted.

Blaire ignored her, “If only our dear Carthage could have our same good sense.”

“Not even my name,” Carrie muttered to herself, but she couldn’t help but smirk at her friends’ antics. “Anyway, I think he’s peaceful,” she said.

“Peacefully plotting our deaths,” Blaire stage-whispered to Alexa, causing the latter to break out into unrestrained laughter.

Carrie walked into a still quiet Mira’s. Mira’s was always the first place they returned to when back on campus. After winter break Carrie had sat through a long-winded recap in the cafe about Alexa and Blaire’s meetup in New York. While she loved her friends, after they spent extended periods of time alone together, it always felt like they’d rather be hanging out with just each other. Carrie didn’t begrudge them their closeness but did resent that they couldn’t hide the fact that they so obviously wanted to be alone with each other, even when they had begged her to come in the first place. The one time she had attempted to bring it up with them, the two had descended into a blustering rant about her social anxiety. She dropped it. People were always so offended when you were rude enough to notice what they hadn’t bothered to hide. Carrie didn’t have to worry about that anymore anyway. It was a sweet guilt in her mouth.

She had already put in her usual order and was waiting for her drink when she noticed Alexa. Carrie looked down immediately, panicked to be caught here without her. It took her a

second to remember that she was in fact exactly where she said she would be. Technically, so was Alexa: she hadn't said she wasn't getting coffee, just that she couldn't get it with Carrie. Alexa was tucked away in a corner instead of sitting at their usual counter spots by the window. She was staring down at the table. As it became increasingly clear that Lex wouldn't be looking up anytime soon, Carrie let herself stare. She could just about make out a stain that marked the cheap wood that seemed to be the focus of Lex's attention. It was dark, but it had a purplish tint that betrayed it as distinctly not coffee.

She hadn't talked to Lex since their frantic phone call at the beginning of break. Blaire's parents had called to inform her, in an exchange of less than two minutes which Carrie spent entirely in silence, that Blaire had drowned in Ted's tank. She had called up Alexa immediately after and made her friend repeat all the information back to her anew, trying to let it sink in this time. It took a long time for Carrie to allow herself to understand what the word drowned really meant.

Blaire had come home from a party, too drunk or too high or both, and had gone to feed Ted. Carrie had not asked Blaire to feed her fish: no one had asked Carrie about this, but it felt important, and she kept waiting for the chance to bring it up. Blaire had been fucked up, fucked up enough to pass out into Ted's tank and not wake up. The water had been filled with vomit when they found her, and the tank had shifted towards the edge of Carrie's desk with the weight of Blaire's skull. They didn't know when the funeral would be, probably towards the end of the semester, but Carrie would be invited.

"Who found her?" she had asked Alexa on their call.

"Tonya," Alexa said, "She was coming over to grab something you had borrowed from her."

Tonya was the fourth (third?) member of their little hideaway at the top of Harriet tower. She had been the easy one to ask. Someone who had garnered the title of friend by the simple fact that Carrie and Alexa had seen her at least once a week since freshman year at BSU meetings. Blaire had been the last-minute addition.

“Her Swiffer,” Carrie said thoughtlessly, “I forgot I had that.”

A new thought occurred to her. “Where were you?” Carrie asked. There was a brief pause on the line. Carrie wished she had worked up the courage to facetime her friend so she could see whatever expression was working its way across Lex’s face.

“Out,” Alexa finally said.

Out. Which meant, “You were fucking someone,” Carrie said.

The slight static of the line was the only sound on the call. It had come out harsher than Carrie had meant it to, like a damning scarlet letter instead of a basic fact. This wasn’t some horror movie where people died because someone had premarital sex: she was being needlessly cruel, and worse, Alexa was letting her. This was not how it went with them: she should be biting back, not staying down. Though ever since Blaire—

Carrie had hung up pretty quickly after that and then spent the rest of the break desperately trying to get Alexa back on the phone with her and failing.

“Peppermint Mocha for Carrie!” the barista called out.

Alexa finally glanced up at that. She didn’t look guilty when she met Carrie’s eyes, just numb. She raised her coffee cup slightly in her direction, and Carrie took that as permission to approach.

“I still don’t know how you drink those in the spring,” Alexa said, “so unseasonal.”

It was the right line, but Carrie could tell her heart wasn’t in it. Carrie gave her what she

knew to be an unconvincing grin in response, “Getting a little energy boost to work on your presentation?” she asked.

Alexa looked down at her drink, “Oh,” she said. “Yeah.”

They sat and stood in the silence for a moment.

It was clear that Carrie would not be asking to join Alexa at her table, but she could try to get something from her, “Do you think you’ll finish by tonight?”

Alexa just nodded. She was staring back down at the stain again. Up this close Carrie could tell it would be sticky to the touch. She wondered what color it would stain her fingers.

“That’s great! We have to make the most of our Sunday Scaries, we don’t have that many left,” Carrie said, attempting to hold up both sides of the conversation.

Alexa let out a short, bitter laugh.

The senior members of the Black Student Union had banded together to start Sunday Scaries at the beginning of this year as a way to extend the weekend past Saturday and to repress the party’s namesake. There was only so much time left of acceptable over-drinking they figured: there was no time to waste during senior year and no reason to leave the unhealthy partying to white frat bros, when they could do it just as well. Each week there was a themed drink, usually some variation on jungle juice but with a new alliterative title reflecting someone’s shitty week. Essay Eraser. Abstinence Absinthe. Karen Kahlua. Carrie had scheduled her flight specifically so that she would be back in time for this week’s.

The laugh was strange, it put a bad taste in Carrie’s mouth, but she figured it was probably the best she was gonna get from Alexa.

“I’ll see you at home, Lex.”

Alexa just sent another nod to the stain. Carrie took a too large sip of her drink, burned

her mouth, and left without a word.

Carrie didn't know when exactly she had started resenting Blaire, only that Alexa had brought it up towards the end of last semester. It had been one of those lazy weekend mornings the night after a bust of a party left them drinking in one of their rooms. Alexa had come to Carrie's in the morning.

"You went to bed early last night," Alexa said, scrolling on her phone in Carrie's desk chair.

Carrie stood up on her bed, one foot propped against the headboard for balance to open her window a little bit, "Yeah, I was beat."

Alexa gave a knowing hum.

Carrie plopped back down on her bed, "You got something to say about that?"

Alexa let out a rye chuckle, "You were definitely tired of *something*."

Carrie rolled her eyes, "I'm about to be tired of this conversation."

"You're not subtle Care," Alexa said. "You literally left right in the middle of Blaire's story about her family last night."

"Was that about her family? Cause I thought it was about how many guys hit on her while she was in Hawaii."

"Carrie."

"What? I didn't say it *to* her."

"You didn't have to." Alexa put down her phone and turned to solidly face Carrie.

Carrie was not in the mood to play this game, "Did she say anything about me after I left?"

“No, but—”

“You’re *so* overprotective of her. It’s ridiculous.”

Alexa scoffed, “It’s called being a good friend, Carrie.”

Carrie shook her head, “You would never do this for me.”

“Who do you need protecting from ever, Care?” Alexa was beyond incredulous.

Carrie felt similarly: “Who the hell does Blaire need protecting from?”

“When are you ever even scared?”

“Am I some kind of monster?”

“Obviously not, you’re twisting my words. I’m just saying—”

“A mouse can be scared, Lex, am I not as emotionally complex as a mouse?”

“—You could be nicer to her.”

Carrie sat up straight, once she found her outrage it was always easy to keep it growing, “If Blaire’s scared of me, then she should probably examine that.”

Alexa began to lightly rap her knuckles against the desk, “Oh my god, do you have to get on your soapbox for everything? It’s really not that deep, Care.”

“Do you have to fall for the helpless white woman act?” Carrie fired back. “It’s literally the oldest trick in the book, Lex.”

Alexa’s head hung back in frustration, “She doesn’t have some evil plan, Carrie. Blaire’s *just* white, that doesn’t make it okay for you to be a bitch to her, Jesus.”

Carrie started counting out points on her fingers, “She’s not a child, and she’s not asking you to do this, so it’s pointing pretty squarely at damsel in distress.” Carrie laughed meanly, “And we both know damsels are only ever white, Lex. But I’m pretty sure that you’re,” she eyed Alexa up and down, “*not* what she’s picturing for her hero.”

Alexa propped her head up on her hand, “Don’t you ever get tired of this, Care?”

“The infantilization of white women? Always, doesn’t stop it from happening though.”

Alexa let out a noise somewhere between a sigh and a laugh, “You can never go for the simple answer, huh?”

Carrie gave her a brief raise of the eyebrows.

She stood up, “She’s sweet, Care. She likes you, so just be nice, okay? That’s all I’m asking.”

Carrie gave her a quick sardonic smile, “Always, Lex.”

Alexa let out a bitter laugh as she left.

“Brunch at 12?” Carrie called after her.

“Always, Care.”

Alexa’s warning had only heightened Carrie’s awareness of Blaire. It became harder and harder for her to be in the room with both Blaire and Alexa. Watching the two of them together made Carrie feel like there was nothing between her and Alexa but history. Blaire and Alexa seemed to have absconded into a future free from the other’s flaws while Carrie was left carrying the weight of a bitterness she hadn’t asked for. Carrie could have fun with Blaire without Alexa. She could even say, “I love you, Blaire,” and mean it. But then a SZA song would come on the radio that she and Alexa had belted along to freshman year, and Blaire would be screaming it too, and Carrie would just think: what did she know about *wishing* she was a normal girl?

She would spiral then: Carrie hated how unobservant Blaire was, how unwilling to read the room. She hated how Blaire threw scraps of affection at her, always expecting Carrie to be an eager recipient and always downplaying the unnerving nature of being touched without permission. She hated how easily Blaire moved through life, both her highs and her lows equally

enticing to everyone around her, to Alexa. She hated all the little things Blaire did that meant that Carrie ended up as the bad guy, even in her own head: returning the book she had borrowed from Carrie with an enthusiastic review in tow, grabbing Carrie's favorite snack from the store without her having to ask, ghosting that one guy in that one class who Alexa would never admit had screwed Carrie over, cleaning all their hair from the shower drain.

Carrie fantasized about blow-up arguments. Ones with screamed truths and slammed doors. With tears, and sides taken, and everything out on the table. Thinking about this, sometimes Carrie felt that she would burst for the fact that she knew it would never happen, but that didn't stop her from playing out the same fight over and over again in her head. She imagined it the way she imagined breaking the bracelet her parents had given her at the beginning of college, stretching it wide enough so that the band snapped, and the beads scattered across the floor. An image that filled her with satisfaction even as it made her nauseous, sick with the possibility of her own cruelty.

How long did you keep trying to save an infected limb before you cut it off? Which one of them was the rot, Carrie wondered, Blaire or her? She had been waiting for their trio to drop off into the natural duo, but she was never sure of who would be left standing by Alexa's side. Carrie just kept imagining how it would happen, only ever achieving some spectral version of catharsis as she kept the phantom bruise fresh.

Carrie was almost wheezing by the time she reached the top of the tower. She let that fact stop her at the landing, taking a long moment to catch her breath. She looked down and pretended that she was coming back from a normal trip home, excited to have a space that was all her own again. She plastered on a smile, first testing it on the floor, and then, finding it stable,

turned it on her door, the one furthest right of the four, and walked directly towards it. She didn't stop once she entered her room but walked directly to the closet and first unpacked her backpack, filled with the few clothes that she brought with her. Then she tackled the suitcase, pulling out boxes of cereal and snack packs and slotting them into the box on her shelf. Lastly, she pulled out the five boxes of tissues and stood on her chair to stack them on the top shelf of her closet.

Only when all of that was done did Carrie turn to the fish tank. While she was planning on a slow approach, when she couldn't spot Ted through the glass she rushed forward. As soon as she approached, he swam out from the reeds in the back. A visceral feeling of relief came over her. Carrie hadn't been at all certain that he would still be here. She'd been steadfastly *not* thinking about it on the long walk up the stairs. The tank even looked a normal amount of dirty, and, while he seemed a little slower than normal, he was still swimming. He was still alive. She went to grab some of his food and found a lavender sticky note on the lid. It was Blaire's drunken scrawl.

*He may be a murderer, but he doesn't deserve to starve ♡♡♡*

Carrie's chest was caving in on itself. She clutched at her hoodie, finding it suddenly choking her at the neck. She was gonna puke into Ted's tank if she didn't get it off immediately. Her hands kept getting lost in endless swaths of fabric. She was going to suffocate in it. She was going to drown. Finally, the sweatshirt released over her head, and she flung it as far away as possible. Carrie fled the room, taking in greedy gulps of air, and headed instinctively for the door second from the left and found it unlocked.

It was empty. Why hadn't she realized it would be empty? Blaire's parents lived twenty minutes away. Blaire saw them every weekend, and her moms took the three of them out to lunch at least once a month. Of course, they would come to collect their daughter's belongings.

Of course, there would be nothing left. Carrie curled up on the bare mattress anyway, and, as she closed her eyes and counted to ten in her head, she caught a whiff of Blaire's green tea perfume. She wondered if she went to the desk if there would still be traces of her spilled makeup there or if they had cleaned that up too.

She grasped desperately for her phone in her pocket. Carrie turned to her saved TikTok's: there was nothing better to turn off your brain than a preselected stream of content filled with cute frog videos and absurdist sketches. But the numbness didn't come, instead she ran straight into her past self. There were clips upon clips of indie songwriters singing about best friend breakups. Shit. Her saved videos were boiling over with resentment, fuel for her fantasies of finally screaming it out with Blaire.

She failed then, at what she had been trying so hard not to do, which was think of the last time she had been in this room, the last time she had seen Blaire. They had been carefully awkward with each other since that last Sunday Scaries before spring break, even though Blaire had apologized the next day for what she had done at the party. Carrie had even hugged her. Not that she had really meant to, but she always ended up hugging white women after they did her wrong. She suspected it was an unshakeable habit ingrained from childhood when she and her mom would hurt each other, in the way that mothers and daughters did during adolescence, and then reconcile by getting cozy on the couch and watching Discovery Channel. Now she couldn't let a white woman get out an apology without comforting them. But despite the standard hug and their own routine of comfort, getting drunk and watching an Amanda Bynes rom com, there was something unsettled between them. As soon as the credits rolled on *She's the Man* the tension had returned to the room.

Carrie tried to keep it at bay. "I think that could be a new wave queer masterpiece," she

announced.

Blaire laughed as she scrolled on her phone, “You say that about everything.”

“I mean it!” Carrie nudged Blaire with her foot to get her to look up.

Blaire put her phone to the side and turned her full gaze on Carrie, “Okay, please present to me your groundbreaking new addition to Queer film studies.”

Carrie rolled her eyes, “I’ll have the paper under your door tomorrow, Professor Wilson.”

They laughed softly together, fading off into another awkward silence that had Carrie’s chest constricting. Their movie nights usually went on hours past their watch time with them just talking shit. Carrie tried to remember the last time that had actually happened.

“You know you kind of look like Amanda Bynes,” Blaire mused.

Carrie let out a shocked laugh, “What?”

“Yeah, there’s something about your face shape.”

Carrie was speechless.

“I mean like prime of her career Amanda, not like psychotic break Amanda,” Blaire rushed to say, as if that was Carrie’s sticking point. She still didn’t know what to say.

“I cannot believe you,” she finally landed on.

Carrie looked nothing like all-American girl next door, prime of her career Amanda Bynes. They were very different kinds of California girls. Amanda looked like she had been born to it: Carrie looked like it had been unwittingly thrust upon her. Amanda was the California girl they were always writing songs about. Last semester, Alexa had captioned her end of year post with The Beach Boys. The photo had been from after the fall formal and had captured Carrie in between the silly and serious shots. She had her eyes rolled back and her mouth in an overly cheesy grin that edged on a snarl. Blaire and Alexa had already switched to being hot again,

taking up half the space she did with soft smirks on their faces as they tossed their hair into the sun. The caption twisted its meaning, becoming ugly to fit Carrie's lone face: *I wish they all could be California girls.*

"No really, it's true. I can't believe I've never seen it before," Blaire insisted.

Carrie pushed herself up from the bed, "You don't have to try and boost my ego just because you fucked up."

She felt Blaire's weight shift behind her, "I'm not Care. I really mean it."

Carrie snorted, "Okay Blaire, whatever."

"It's not whatever Care. You're beautiful. I know that can be hard to internalize, but I really do think —"

As Carrie tuned out Blaire's meandering speech on self-love, she could still see the hand motions her friend would be making without looking at her. One hand would come to join the other, intertwining their grip as they sat forward in her lap to show just how genuine she was. One would break apart briefly to signal the difficulty of the conversation but ultimately return to the empathetic grip. Then it would start all over again. She could go on forever if you let her.

Carrie sighed, "I hate you so much right now."

Blaire's monologue came to a sudden stop, "What?"

Carrie finally turned to look at her. She had caught Blaire with her hands mid-break for a decisive and complicated point, but her face had gone entirely slack. Carrie kept her eyes on her as she made her decision and said, "I think you heard me."

Carrie saw the exact moment that Blaire's eyes dropped. "I was giving you the chance to take it back," she said, letting her hands fall out of her lap.

Carrie let out a humorless laugh, "Of course you were. Why Blaire? Why can't we just

say it? If things are only working because nothing's getting said, then I don't think they're working."

"There's no we here, Carrie. *I* don't have anything to say."

"Oh, I think you have plenty to say."

Blaire shot up, she'd been waiting for that, "Is that what this is about? I said I was sorry."

Carrie dropped her head into her hands. "I just told you that I hate you. Don't you have anything to say to that?"

Blaire's response was instantaneous, "I don't think you mean it."

Carrie looked at her hands. She had a month-old manicure that was dying a slow chipped death on her nails. They had planned to paint them tonight after the movie. Carrie felt Blaire creep closer to her.

"Love you, Care," Blaire said and then pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head.

Carrie shot back from her like she'd been burned, knocking her forehead into Blaire's chin.

"Shit," Blaire hissed, clutching her face, "What the hell, Carrie?"

Carrie was standing. She didn't remember getting up. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror that had taken them four tries to hang right at the beginning of the year. Her eyes looked like a wild animal's, caught in the middle of the road. Carrie shook off her own expression, "I don't have to be grateful for everything you give me, you know."

Blaire seemed lost, "What? I know that. I just thought—"

"I don't care what you were thinking. Not everything you give me is a gift, and I don't need your false fucking compliments or your little makeup kiss," Carrie snapped. She turned to go to the door, but instantly spun back around, finding she had another thing to say, "You know

what, next year should be a breeze, because I can't even imagine missing you right now."

Carrie slammed the door behind her, and left Blaire sitting heavy on her bed. It felt better than she had ever imagined it would. Sweeter than any fight she could've dreamed up.

That was the last time she had seen Blaire: Carrie had decided to go and spend a few days at home before the group's spring break trip. It wasn't too far of a flight, and she needed to be around people who didn't need to be taught how to love her. When the call came in from Blaire's parents, at first she had been grateful for her decision. But then Alexa had gone silent, and Carrie realized then that she was not the long-lasting partner that Lex had been hoping for. Carrie spent the entire week pressed into her divot on the couch that hadn't yet forgotten her shape as she repeatedly texted Alexa to almost no response. She let her mom stroke her hair while her dad kept a constant stream of sitcom reruns and snacks coming into the living room.

Carrie woke up several hours later, groggily looking for the source of bright light across her face. She blinked and found the door open, a figure in the hallway.

"Blaire?"

The figure shifted, entering the room. Carrie's heart beat fast in her chest. There were so many things Blaire could be haunting her for. Maybe in death you got to hear everything anyone had ever thought of you in life. The sins Carrie had accumulated inside her head were beyond count.

"I'm sorry Blaire, please—"

It was Tonya, standing in the doorway and shifting awkwardly.

"Sorry," she said, "I heard noises."

Maybe Carrie wasn't the only one who was worried about paranormal activity.

“It’s fine,” Carrie cleared her throat, “just taking a nap.” She attempted a pathetic smile. Tonya returned it with a grimace. They looked at each other, both holding their own painful expressions. Finally, Carrie had to look away, and threw out, “Guess our diversity quota is down a peg now that we’ve lost our token white.” She cringed as the words left her mouth.

Tonya looked at her blankly. Carrie prepared to leave without a word, it was a move Tonya pulled all the time and she figured she had the right to try it now.

“I’m sorry,” Tonya said.

Carrie waved her off, “I told you don’t worry about it.”

“No,” Tonya cleared her throat, “I mean about—”

Oh. “Yeah,” Carrie said, “Me too. For the Swiffer, and yeah, you know.”

Tonya shrugged as if to say: it is what it is, sometimes you go to retrieve your overdue cleaning supplies and find a dead body.

Carrie hesitated, “Did you clean the tank, um, after?” She’d been thinking it over, and it couldn’t have been anyone else. For starters, Alexa hated Ted, but Carrie also didn’t think anyone else would have the stomach to do it. Tonya was med school bound. Last semester she had gotten a select spot in the cadaver class that met in the basement of the science building during off-hours. She could handle some vomit.

Tonya looked away but nodded, “I fed the fish too. Though it wasn’t that hungry, I think it had eaten some of the—”

Carrie was grateful for the cut off even though the image crept into her mind anyway. She swallowed, “Thank you, so much,” she said. “He probably would’ve died if you hadn’t, and yeah, thank you.” She paused, “What did—”

“What’s its name?” Tonya asked.

“—she look like?” Carrie finished.

“It’s uh,” Carrie laughed a little, “It’s Ted.”

Tonya cracked a smile at that: it was a small smile but very beautiful. “That’s an excellent name,” she said.

“Yeah,” Carrie said, “I think so too.”

Tonya paused and then said, “Her eyeliner was still on, that’s what I noticed.”

Carrie found herself close to tears, “Clinique,” she managed to get out. “We should leave a five-star review.”

Tonya was looking at her with soft eyes. “I’m going to go,” she said, “I think you should too.”

Carrie nodded, stood up and followed Tonya out, breathing in one last gulp of green tea.

Back in her own room Carrie finally glanced at her phone and grimaced, it was almost time to get drunk, which meant that she first had to get ready. Or at least change out of her plane clothes. She turned instead to look at Ted. She could always spot him quickly, if he wasn’t hiding in one of the more secluded corners of his tank, as his bright red scales were a slash of color against the soft green of his underwater world. Carrie often envied her fish. There would always be someone to take care of him. Not her, but someone: at the end of this year, she would do what his last owner did and pass him on to the next inhabitant of Harriet 304. Carrie knew they would say yes. They would do the same thing that she had and imagine the ways that Ted would change them. Next year she’d have a fish, Carrie had thought. Next year she would be able to take care of something besides herself.

Carrie forced herself to walk over to Alexa’s door, and, for the first time ever maybe, she

knocked instead of just walking in. The door quickly opened to a weary looking Alexa.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be here, I thought you might be out,” Carrie said.

Alexa flinched.

Carrie hadn’t meant it like that. Or maybe she had. Either way it was already said. She pushed forward, “Do you want to get ready together?”

Alexa’s eyebrows scrunched in, “For what?”

“Sunday Scaries, don’t tell me you forgot what day it was?” she forced an awkward chuckle.

“You were serious about that?” Alexa asked incredulously. Her face puckered even further inward with her obvious disgust.

“She did always love to see me dance,” Carrie said, going for another laugh but finding that it felt dangerously like the precursor to throwing up. “I mean—” she switched tactics, “She would’ve wanted us to go.”

Alexa snorted, regaining some of her usual stature as she pushed herself against the doorframe, her arms crossed haughtily over a faded Party with a Purpose sweatshirt, “Blaire would’ve wanted us to get fucked up in her honor?”

It was Blaire’s sweatshirt, Carrie realized. One of her moms was on the nonprofit’s board, and she used to wear it whenever she was homesick. Alexa and Blaire had essentially shared one closet this year, a club that Carrie’s clothing size had kept her firmly out of. She wondered how many other items of clothing Alexa had snatched before Blaire’s parents had come to take what was left of their daughter home with them.

“If you want to get drunk, go get drunk Carrie, but don’t pretend you’re doing it for her,” Alexa continued.

Carrie couldn't remember why she had thought this would be a good idea. She turned to go. "Well, I'll be real careful feeding Ted tonight, in her honor," she threw snarkily over her shoulder, just barely catching the way that Alexa turned her face away at the words.

Her friend's face had just left her sight when, "Wait," Alexa said.

Carrie turned back.

Alexa was picking at her already falling apart sleeve, unraveling even more threads, "Do you want me to do your hair?"

Alexa did Carrie's hair for every Sunday Scaries, every time they went out at all really. Carrie had never had the knack for it: her mom had left her with very few tools for managing it besides brushing it out into a substanceless poof that she always insisted other people would pay good money for while Carrie crept closer and closer to tears. She had thought that college might be the time for her to learn how to style it for herself, but then Alexa had come along, who'd been doing her younger sisters' hair her whole life.

This was a peace offering she knew, but Carrie wasn't sure she could stand the usual easy intimate contact of Alexa's hands on her scalp tonight. "Actually, I was thinking I would just leave it," she said, self-consciously touching her loose curls.

"Oh," Alexa looked up, "that'll be nice."

"Yeah," Carrie responded. "I should get ready."

"Have fun," Alexa said with a strained smile.

At the last Sunday Scaries before spring break, Alexa had taken a flat iron to Carrie's hair and left her with pin straight locks. Even though Alexa could do it at any time, Carrie always rationed her straightened hair as a treat. She liked the way it changed the shape of her face,

putting her into a new context. It left her feeling bold, which she would blame for the amount of Car Crash Coolers she consumed that night. That and the fact that Blaire was coming along to yet another Sunday Scaries: they weren't strictly for Black students *only*, but it was largely understood as a BIPOC party space where the white people you brought had to be both chill and your responsibility. Carrie didn't consider Blaire to be either of these things, but Alexa, of course, did. So Blaire had been making her way to an increasing number of Sunday Scaries, and Carrie didn't think she was imagining the dirty looks that Blaire was starting to accumulate whenever they rolled up with her. Carrie was coping with this by getting drunk enough to where she found Blaire's white girl dancing amusing instead of annoying.

She had been somewhere between drink number four and five when Blaire had shouted over the music to her, "Okay, don't look, but twelve o'clock, you're getting checked out."

Carrie didn't even take a slight peek in the direction Blaire indicated, but she flipped her hair over her shoulder and loosened her hips, finding the balance between sloppy and approachable. She kept her eyes on Blaire whose face had split into a proud smile.

"Perfect," she hissed. "Now spin into me, but still don't look."

Carrie did as she was told, pressing back into her taller friend to the rhythm of the song she couldn't recognize. She tilted her head back to look up at Blaire and found her eyes already on her.

"You're killing him," she said and spun Carrie, startling a laugh out of her as she placed a hand on Blaire's shoulder to steady herself.

Blaire had a mischievous gleam in her eye, "It's time, you've got him hook, line, and sinker." Blaire turned Carrie around and she leant her weight back into her friend, but this she time flashed her eyes to the right corner of the party.

As she found him in the crowd Blaire whispered into her ear, “The White Whale,” trailing off into a giggle.

White guys didn’t like Carrie. It was a fact of life that the endless swiping through college tinder had taught her. It wasn’t until she got to college that she realized she had more to learn about how other people saw her. Carrie had thought she had known everything about what people could make of her skin: she’d been spoken to in dozens of different languages offered to her in assumed familiarity, she’d been stalked through pharmacies by store managers, and yelled at by old white ladies at the farmer’s market for not knowing the price of the produce she wasn’t selling. She hadn’t realized it would affect who wanted her. She hadn’t even been ready to be wanted until she got here.

After systematically testing this fact with Blaire and Alexa over several weekends of blind swiping, and Blaire reading the spark notes for *Moby Dick*, they had coined the term of the White Whale. It was a half-serious, half-charade indicator of when they thought Carrie could nab those as of yet out of reach guys. Tonight, Carrie thought she might want it to be serious. He was cute in a nerdy, bordering on pretentious way that unfortunately did it for her. He sported golden aviator glasses, a style that she had tried once and ended up devastated when they hadn’t suited her face. Plus, she thought it could spin it as ironic that she had bagged the White Whale at Sunday Scaries of all places.

“So,” Blaire said, “What do we think?”

Before Carrie could reply, a familiar light beat came sounding through the speakers accompanied by a delicate voice that billions of people worshiped, singing about falling in love in the streets of London.

Carrie resented the fact that she had to like *her* music. She just didn’t think sexy babies

should get to sing about everyone else being sexy babies.

Blaire shrieked, “Where’s Alexa? Where’s Alexa?”

Their friend appeared quickly next to them in the crowd, the song was like a homing signal. She shouted right back at her friend, “Blaire!”

The two launched into a perfect execution of the lyrics in overdone British accents. The only thing that kept Carrie from wincing was the consequences that she knew she would face if she was caught. She could already tell Blaire and Alexa were getting peeved at her low energy. Frankly if it hadn’t been from *Lover* Carrie probably would’ve joined in, but she found the album boring, something she had only made the mistake of saying aloud once before understanding that it was not to be said again.

“Carrie,” Blaire whined, “C’mon. For me? Pleaseee.”

She begrudgingly moved her hips back and forth, watching as Blaire’s smile started to grow.

“That’s more like it, now spin!”

Carrie rolled her eyes but pulled out a sarcastic little turn.

Blaire’s voice grew ecstatic, “C’mon Carrie, dance monkey, dance!”

It took a second for Carrie to stop spinning and an even longer second for her to parse the words in her head.

*Dance monkey, dance!*

She saw it in Blaire’s face, that she knew, at least in some way, that this was not an okay thing to say to Carrie, that it didn’t read as ridiculous on her body, not when Blaire knew what she was. It was only a blip across Blaire’s face right before she started screaming the chorus, but it was there. It would be possible that Alexa hadn’t heard Blaire, except for the fact that she was

so specifically *not* looking at Carrie. Carrie tried to catch her eyes, but Lex always seemed to be finding someone else in the crowd or too lost in the lyrics to notice anyone outside herself. Carrie thought through what Alexa would say if she forced the issue:

*“Are you sure that’s what she said?”*

*“She’s drunk, you’re drunk, just let it go.”*

*“She doesn’t know any better!”*

*“I told you to be nicer.”*

It wasn’t Alexa’s role to protect Carrie. Carrie considered calling her mom and decided against it for several reasons, the number one being that she would be asleep by now. As she walked off the dance floor, Carrie knew for a fact that Alexa had heard because there wasn’t a single question as to where she was going. In the end, Carrie did nothing because, no matter what she did, it wouldn’t and couldn’t change anything about the right now. It wouldn’t change the fact that she wanted to run back to the tower to curl up and cry in her bed. Nothing could change this feeling in her body right now, the icky sensation that she had been used and that she had let herself be used. This feeling would always exist. What Carrie really wanted was for it to not have happened at all, and, since that was impossible, she just went to grab another drink.

At the end of night Carrie sat on the half wall of the courtyard, taking off her heels and pressing her thumb to her sore soles. She looked out to the fading remnants of the party. Alexa and Vaughn were dumping out the rest of the Car Crash Cooler. The White Whale was nowhere to be seen, but she could still feel a pair of eyes on her. Carrie flicked her eyes to the far right and caught a slight glimpse of Blaire leaning against the now empty drinks table. She was watching Carrie’s hand on her foot like it would tell Blaire something crucial about her, and maybe it would. Carrie was desperate for her to glean the hurt from her brain and unwilling to tell Blaire

anything about it.

Carrie was greeted at this week's Sunday Scaries by Vaughn, the BSU's president, in the best way any person could be greeted: with a smile and a drink in his hand.

"What's the name this week?" she asked, already taking a sip of the scarily blue concoction as she did and finding it just below sickly sweet. It would do.

Vaughn raised a single eyebrow as he answered, "They're calling it Fish Food."

Carrie understood then that this sweet, blue—Ted's pellets were actually red—drink in her hand was a joke. One she was probably supposed to never have seen. A joke made by people who only knew Blaire as the annoying white girl who showed up to Sunday Scaries to drink away the BSU's budget. She supposed that this was the type of people they had started Sunday Scaries for in the first place, people who wanted to get drunk and have a good time no matter what.

Vaughn was still waiting for her reaction, his eyebrow cocked.

"Perfect," she said and then chugged it down in one go. There were a few spare whoops around her from those who caught the sight. "Can I get another?"

"Sure," Vaughn said, an impressed grin slowly curling its way across his face as he refilled her solo-cup.

He watched her carefully as she took her first sip, but she had made her point and she was content to drink this one slow. Being drunk always made Carrie grateful. Maybe if she drank enough, she would feel appreciative of this week's alliterative antidote. Maybe she could be grateful that she was turning up alone at a party that used to be a haven for her and her best friend. Maybe she needed to drink a bunch more.

Carrie took another deep sip.

Vaughn nudged another senior standing next to him, “Corey was just saying that maybe Blaire was Black after all.”

Carrie almost spat out her drink but she recovered. “Oh?” she managed.

Corey spoke up, a smirk already making its way onto his face, “I mean, drowning in a fish tank? That’s a pretty Black way to go, like damn, I thought white girls knew how to swim.”

The small crowd that had begun to cluster around the drinks table chuckled.

Carrie felt her lips turn up, “Oh, don’t you know?” she said. “It’s witches that float, bitches always sink.”

The group hollered at that, and she raised her glass, draining her second drink before navigating away from the table and closer to the speaker. She was ready to dance now.

Carrie had lost herself in the crowd. This was why she came to parties: that moment when you lost yourself to the collective sway of the group. Sometimes Sunday Scaries didn’t get big enough for that feeling to happen, and they ended up just chatting to background music, but nights like these were her favorite: when the music was loud enough that you couldn’t hear yourself think.

“Carrie!” she turned to find Vaughn at her shoulder, “It’s your song.”

She took a second to actually listen to the music. It was, in fact, her song if she could be said to have one. She had notoriously staged a coup at a Sunday Scaries last semester when it wasn’t far enough up the queue for her liking, and she had taken the cooler hostage until it was played.

“Are you gonna do your dance?” Vaughn asked.

Carrie's heart sped up in her chest, she hadn't even thought that Vaughn had been close enough to hear Blaire when it happened. "What?" she managed to get out.

"Your dance from last semester? That you did at your 'revolution?'" Vaughn had a little quirked up smile on his face. He didn't know.

"Oh, yeah, of course. Sorry that night is a little fuzzy," she laughed awkwardly.

Vaughn laughed too, "I'm sure," he said. He raised his eyebrows expectantly, "So..."

Carrie raised her eyebrows back at him.

He began to twist his hips back and forth as he softly sang along to the song, "Do a little dance..."

She rolled her eyes and acquiesced, letting her body dance to a song it had been dancing to since before it could remember, ever since her parents had been friendly giants in the living room that she twirled between. Her mom was a better dancer than her dad, which she knew as a kid was funny to other people. To her it just meant that she got to watch her dad still with awe each time her mom started to twist across the floor. Vaughn let out a whoop from beside her, and she laughed at how happy it made him. Carrie tried to remember exactly what it had looked like that night of her water cooler revolution: she brought out the disco finger and was rewarded with the sound of cheers. It felt so good, just to dance, but within that joy she still felt a little dirty, as she laughed, and Vaughn laughed, and her friends laughed.

Suddenly Vaughn's voice was in her ear, "Damn, all of Harriet tower's showing up tonight, huh? I didn't think y'all were that cold."

"What?" Carrie spun around. There coming down the hill was Tonya and Alexa. Tonya was wearing a black jumpsuit that made her look pretty badass and only made Alexa look all the more flimsy beside her. Alexa hadn't changed from the faded sweats that Carrie had seen her in

earlier. Carrie pushed her way through the crowd so she could meet them at the drinks table. She didn't tear her eyes off Alexa for a single step.

"You came," Carrie said when she finally reached them.

Alexa had her arms wrapped around her stomach while Tonya was already pouring herself a drink.

"Yeah," Alexa said, "I just think it's silly for us to be apart when we were the ones who knew her best, and you were right, she loved it here."

Carrie caught a slight eye roll from Tonya as she took a sip of the drink.

"Shit," Tonya winced, "that's sweet." She passed the cup over to Alexa.

Lex took a sip, "I like it," she said. She took another one, "What's it called?"

"Uh—" Carrie started.

"Fish Food," Tonya said.

Carrie shot her a glare.

"What?" Tonya said, "It's taped onto the cooler, she was gonna figure it out."

Alexa was staring at said cooler. "Carrie?" she said. Her voice was starting to warble.

"Lex, I swear—"

There was a firm hand on her shoulder, "Carrie, Bee wants to hear your toast from earlier. Corey already set her up for it."

She shook him off, "Not right now, Vaughn."

"C'mon Carrie, please."

That set off a chorus of dragged out pleases from around them.

Alexa had crossed her arms, "Yeah c'mon Carrie, I wanna hear your *toast*."

Carrie looked helplessly around her. Vaughn was grinning excitedly. Bee was tucked

under his arm with a sloppy smile sloshing around her face. She could hear Corey's laugh from somewhere behind her. Tonya was waiting expectantly, her drink already half-way raised. She could've looked at any of them, but she found Alexa again, who was still there with her arms crossed in Blaire's old purple sweatshirt and an almost perfect calm on her face. The only chip in the expression was the tight grip her teeth had on her lower lip.

"Wait!" It was Vaughn again. "Someone get her a drink. She can't do the toast empty handed."

Carrie found herself with another cup of Fish Food in her hand. She took a long look at her best friend and raised the cup to Alexa. "It's only the witches who float," she said, "the bitches always sink."

She heard the cheers and saw the edges of raised cups, but it was Alexa she had her eye on so Carrie saw the exact moment that her best friend gave up on her, her face crumpling into deep grief and disappointment. It was clear to both of them now: Carrie was the rot. Carrie was the infected limb. Alexa's arms dropped down to her sides, only her fingers peeking out from the sleeves. She closed her eyes tight and then opened them, looking right at Carrie with burning anger.

"She loved you, Carrie," Alexa said.

Carrie could only shake her head, "No, Lex. She didn't. That's not what loving me looks like."

Alexa looked at her one last time and then turned away.

Carrie pictured herself as the zombie arm crawling away from Alexa as she quickly stalked off back up the hill from where she had just come. There was survival past the body. Carrie robotically fulfilled the duties of the toast and took a sip herself, a long sip, as she

watched Alexa's retreating form merge into the dark.

Someone knocked their shoulder into hers, spilling some of Carrie's Fish Food on her shorts and forcing her eyes from Alexa. "Great toast," Tonya said. "It's almost enough to inspire me to do one later."

"You're staying?" Carrie asked.

"Aren't you?" Tonya threw back to her.

Carrie looked to where Alexa had run back up the hill. She couldn't make out anything except the shadowed trees that surrounded the path.

"Yeah, but—"

"Hey, you've been caught between them all year," Tonya said. "You're finally free, I say enjoy it."

Tonya was right, but all Carrie could see was Alexa, walking past Carrie's open door freshman year on the way to the first BSU meeting, saying, "Aren't you coming?" Then there were all the times she had said that to Blaire too, tossing out the invite to Sunday Scaries like there was no weight to bringing Blaire into the people who had been their shared home for all of college. There was Blaire dancing between them, tripping over her heels and embracing it, adding an extra turn, smiling wide even as people snickered around her, even as Carrie snickered.

"Hey Carrie!" Vaughn was by the speakers now. "This one's for you."

It was her song, again. A thank you, she guessed. Or an apology that she had missed most of it while redoing her toast. She would take it either way.

Tonya tilted her head back towards the crowd, "Shall we?"

Carrie nodded and followed her in, letting her body join the collective again, letting it

find the rhythm, letting it dance.

Even though she chose this dance, even though it was a dance given to her by her parents as a part of her childhood, even though Blaire wasn't here, even though she wouldn't ever be here again, a little bit of this moment was ruined for Carrie, and she wondered when she'd be able to dance again without feeling like she was betraying a part of herself. Even dead and apologetic, Blaire still had the power to shame her, to steal another moment from her, to make the dancing dirty, to drive Alexa back to their dorm. All they had was fucking history. Carrie danced harder, leaving the old revolution moves behind and edging into something wilder, her limbs flying violently around her.

"Are you okay?" Tonya yelled at her over the music.

"Yeah," she shouted back, "Why?"

Tonya leaned closer but still had to shout so she could hear, "You're crying." She traced a phantom tear's path down her face.

Carrie brought her hand up to her face and found Tonya was right.

"I lied," she said, "I'm not fucking okay."

"What?" Tonya shouted, "I can't hear you." She leaned close again, "Do you wanna another drink?"

Carrie closed her eyes and found the rhythm again, the shameful joy coursing through her body. She raised her voice, "No! Let's just dance." She didn't open her eyes to see if Tonya agreed: she just twirled and twirled, letting her hair spin out around her.

*Do a little dance, make a little love, get down tonight.*