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### Onion Baby: Stories of Hungry Women

Zoe Wellik

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**ONION BABY: STORIES OF HUNGRY WOMEN**

by

**ZOE LEAH WELLIK**

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

**PROFESSOR MANSOURI**

**PROFESSOR DECKER**

**FRIDAY, MAY 5, 2023**



artwork by Emma Wellik

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## In between his teeth

I noticed him on the first day of fall semester. He was wearing jeans and sneakers with rubbed down soles. I could tell just by looking at him that he rode a longboard. I sat behind him, looking at his big head blocking the chalkboard. I was determined to do well in that class, but it was hopeless. His neck is all that I remember. He would sit for the whole hour, hunched over his desk. His notes were neat and written on thin loose-leaf paper. My notebook was chaotic with its half-finished pages and scribbled-in borders. He didn't seem like an Econ major like the rest of the class. Maybe he was like me and just trying to get his math credit out of the way. Maybe we had a lot in common. Maybe he was also from a faraway state. Maybe he also hated all the east coast kids, but at the same time he was desperate for their approval. Maybe he wanted to be everything at the same time.

Every freshman wanted to be in the Bell Davis Society. Named after one of the original founders of the college whose poetry gained a small cult following more than 100 years after his death, the group was elite and secretive. Freshmen talked about the members like gods. Thomas Something, a senior, was the unofficial leader. He wore round wire glasses and was always carrying a book. His boyfriend and their henchmen followed him closely around campus. I honestly can't remember ever seeing any of them alone. They were respected more than athletes. They were exclusive and pretentious; they were everything I hated and wanted so, so bad.

The only way of applying to the Society was to hear from someone who knows someone who knows something about it. At midnight on the last Friday of September, I slipped a sealed

envelope with my portfolio in it under the door of the art library. Previously, I didn't have a portfolio because I didn't think I was important enough to. I scrounged up poems from senior year of high school and copied them into one long document. If the members liked your writing, they would contact you to let you know that you got in. How, I'll never know.

If I hated the members before I applied, I loathed them after. I cried to my mom on the phone. She told me to ask them why they didn't accept my application. "Feedback is good. You'll need that when you're looking for a job." I told her I'd rather die.

I dreamt that night that the boy from stats told me he liked the smell of my deodorant. In the dream, we were laying down together in one of our small dorm beds, so close I could smell the coffee and toothpaste on his breath. His incisors were pointy and sharp. Just as he raised his hand to move the hair out of my face, I woke up.

I woke up that morning and thought about how I could save it: the hair, the eyes, the worn in sneakers, the ring around his thumb. I thought about cutting his hair off in his sleep, leaving it on his pillow like a halo around his head, then slipping out the window with shears poking a hole in my back pocket. Life is so short and love is so much shorter. I have to settle for writing it down.

I want what every girl wants; a boy that's nice to her, which that seems like too much to ask. I don't need someone with muscles or perfect teeth. College boys are monsters. Countless times, I have bobbed and weaved around their hulking bodies in the dining hall, saying, "Sorry,

sorry, ‘scuse me, sorry!” When I was brave enough to look up into their square faces, they looked like how I imagined the giant at the top of the bean stock. *Fee, fi, fo, fom, I smell the blood of...you!* They split crowds. They crack skulls. When I looked at them, trying to decide if I thought they were cute or terrifying, I realized that I didn’t even have a role in this fairytale. I wasn’t the chicken they ate whole. I wasn’t a magic bean or a gold coin or a tasty little human for them to snack on. If they could read my mind, they’d run me over with their electric scooters.

In the days after the deodorant dream, the world suddenly became very clear. The boy from stats was an exception to the rule. Forget about the stupid Society. After all, *he* isn’t in it. How great could it be?

The boy ate lunch by himself today. He didn’t look like how I imagined he would while eating. I think dining halls are barbaric. I like eating alone; we are most vulnerable while we eat. He looked vulnerable, too, like a fox trying to scan the periphery with his jaw is wrapped around an unfortunate rodent. He shook his leg violently like he was trying to stamp something out with his heel. His other foot, resting on the opposite knee, wagged back and forth. I picked at the thin, red skin around the nail on my thumb until a layer peeled off. I wanted to show him and say, *Look! We all have our things.*

The boy was late to class today. He had to pass my desk on the way in. We looked at each other in what felt like slow motion. I think that this could be a love story.

The leader of the Bell Davis Society, Thomas Something, and I have a lit class together about poetry during wars throughout history. It's held in a lecture hall that's too big for the amount of students taking the course. Everyone sits in the back where the lights are dim and you can get away with going on your phone. Thomas Something was two seats away from me and holding his phone down in between his legs. I swear I saw him pick his nose. Once in a while, he used both his hands to type out a message. I was seeing something no one else could see. At the end of class, he dropped a pen and I picked it up for him. He said, "Thanks, um...", trying to remember the feeling of my name which had never been in his mouth.

"Yeah. Whatever," I replied.

Mom called me to talk about plans for Thanksgiving. It was more than a month away, but she is a compulsive planner. I lay in bed with my phone on my chest and muted myself while she rambled. Staring at a crack in my ceiling, I listened to her talk about who was coming to stay, who was staying home this year, what she would be cooking. When I talk to her, I have the feeling that I haven't grown up at all.

It is surprisingly easy to follow someone home. No one suspects an 18-year-old girl wearing a backpack on a college campus of something malicious. After class, I followed him across the quad, observing from a safe distance. He put on his headphones. What was he listening to? He seems like the kind of guy to love a band that only girls like. I couldn't decide if that was annoying or sweet, whether I hated or loved him for it. We walked about twelve minutes before he got to his room on the first floor of a dorm building I had never seen before.



I'm trying to convince myself that things are different this time. That I can get what I want.

2 missed calls from mom. *Just checking in.* My silence was loud and she knew something was off. When I was 9 years old, I put a keychain in the shape of a tube of lipstick in my pocket at a gas station while she was in the bathroom. When we got to the car, she looked in my eyes and asked, calmly, "What did you take?" Her psychic abilities have haunted me ever since.

*All's well :) I replied.*

I could barely eat at dinner. I scanned the dining hall, but the boy from stats was nowhere to be found. A girl at the table behind me was talking about the ethics of shaving your legs. In front of me, a group of athletes ate mountains of food in silence. The only sound they made was when they slurped down their overcooked pasta. I wanted to pull my eyes out and swap them for new ones. Thomas Something and the rest of the members of the Society were eating together, laughing. I wish they would do that in private. It's embarrassing to be so happy in public.

I wish Thomas would give me back the writing I submitted because I don't like the idea that they can read it whenever they want. I don't like the idea of any of this.

I never thought I would be the kind of person that watches someone from outside their window. I'm sure everyone thinks that the first time they do it. The boy from stats sits at his desk in the same way he does in class, like he's trying to break his back. His face was so close to his notebook that I wonder if he needs glasses. His roommate played a video game on his bed. Is this

where we would fall in love? On his extra-long twin bed that his feet probably dangle off of? I admire his work ethic. I can tell he makes his bed every day. I can almost smell his detergent from out here. I imagine his mom buys him the all-natural kind with a scent like lavender or citrus and mint. I imagine he uses too much because she didn't teach him how to do laundry properly, so his shirts are always stiff until the second or third wear. I assume boys think they can get away with wearing a t-shirt twice. I wish I had that confidence. Every morning, I lather on all-natural baking soda deodorant and rub it in with each hand knowing I'll find clumps of it stuck in my armpits at the end of the day. My shirts are always stained with the stuff. The shirt will be washed, and the stains will sink in. I will rinse and repeat this process until the day I die.

When I was younger, my mom would fast forward through sex scenes in movies. All I remember is two second clips of bare backs and arms flailing around in bed, one struggling to get on top of the other. I wanted to watch them wrestle to the death. Watching this boy kind of feels like that.

The boy wasn't in class today. Could he have seen me? I started to grieve by skipping meals and eating nothing but soup crackers.

I have always admired saints and their dedication to the cause. I went through a phase as a child where I was set on becoming a nun because I wanted to be married to a man I could not see and to believe so deeply in a cause I could not prove. I would lay in bed and pray that God was real.

Above my bed, the crack in the ceiling bulges outward. Something on the other side is trying to get out. If I was brave, I would stand on my bed and pick away at the chips of paint keeping it all together.

I found the writing I submitted to the Society on my laptop last night. It's about getting swallowed up by the world or something. I got sad and slammed the computer shut. I can't do homework after reading something embarrassing like that.

I woke up in the dirt. It was early morning; the sun was still rising. I saw a man with a leaf blower on the dewy lawn and understood that I was under the boy from stats's window. When the man's back was turned, I crawled out of the bushes on my hands and knees and ran for my dorm.

Back in my room, my phone was buzzing. Four missed calls from mom. Things could be a lot worse. I could actually cut his hair off!

He was back in class today. Thank God! I couldn't live on crackers forever. We were starting group projects. I thought this would be my chance to get to know him. But before I could ask, he was talking to two girls in front of him about partnering up. I know what it's like to die now. I talked to my professor after class about doing the project on my own because I'd rather have to write a twenty-page paper all by myself than ask to join someone's group. I'd rather do anything other than that.

I keep missing my mom's calls. I texted her saying I'm busy. Technically, I'm not lying.  
Love is a lot of work!

As soon as the weather turned from chilly to cold, the heat stopped working in my room. The cold radiated from the window onto me in bed. I woke up shivering. Who can live like this?

I have been going to the Student Union most days so that I don't freeze to death in my room. Facilities assured me it was fixed, but my heater continues to puff out cold air. Thomas Something was in the Union reading *Naked Lunch* today. Note to self: assholes read *Naked Lunch*. I write it down and circle it twice, strengthening my curse on him. I looked at him too long and he noticed. Making eye contact initiates fight or flight. I flew to the bathroom and looked in the bathroom mirror; I looked scary. My nose had turned pink. The scarf around my neck was tied tight like I was trying to strangle myself. My nails were short and dirty. I was becoming something new.

I impulsively wrote on my wall yesterday with black marker: *Can you really be alive without loving someone?* I wish I could write poetry for this boy. I have tried, and I have failed. Maybe I would have gotten into the stupid Society if my poetry was about him and not about something I made up.

Maybe I need to go to the ER and tell them I'm living in *The Truman Show*. I need to touch moss. I need to decay awhile. I need to fall asleep on a plane and wake up across the world.

The October dirt is black. I heard that sometimes pregnant women crave eating it. I understand why. At this time of the year, it looks soft and like it tastes of salt and rocks and love. I ate mud once as a child on a dare. There is something stopping me now. *What would your mother think?*

I haven't touched anyone in centuries. Perhaps I never will. I have given up on picking out the dirt from under my fingernails. This is me now, wild and dirty and out for blood. If I cannot be touched, I will touch the earth. I will touch her until we are tangled together.

I've taken to sleeping in the bush under the boy's window every night. Around 1 am, I burrow into my spot outside his room. The dirt molds itself around my body. I feel welcome. When I close my eyes and put my hand on the cool stucco, I can imagine him doing the same thing on the other side. I wake up every morning as the sun rises, and I crawl back to my room. Ever since I started doing this, I have never slept so well in my life.

I want him to know we've been sleeping just a few feet apart every night this week. I want him to know I have seen the version of him that no one else sees, the one he is when he thinks he's alone. I want him to know that I would really do anything for him if he asked.

Our classes together come and go. We still have no reason to talk, at least not from his perspective. I overhear him talking to his project partners about meeting over the weekend to work on it. I haven't started mine. I can't bring myself to care.

One missed call from mom. One voicemail: *Hi sweetie, please call me back. I'd like to check in. Love you bye.* I feel like I'm coming to the end of something.

I couldn't wait for nighttime, so I skipped dinner and followed the boy back from class to his dorm. I waited—for how long, I'm not sure—on a bench on the lawn outside the building. When he left for dinner, I stayed in my spot and nearly froze to death in my puffer jacket. It's almost Halloween and the ground felt older beneath my sneakers. Everything is rotting and returning to the earth again. The cold must have gotten to me because I got impatient and crawled into the bush before the sun went down. It had rained all day, so the mud sank beneath my hands and knees. I rubbed my wet, dirty hands together. Laying down, I felt twigs sink into the mud under my head. I felt drunk on the smell of dirt. I could hear laughs coming towards me. I could see the day turn to night.

When the boy finally saw me, laying on the ground outside his room, covered in dirt, I realized that this was the second time we had looked at each other, and for a moment, I was happy. Maybe he would look at this messed up scene, and maybe he would love me for it.

He didn't. He asked me what I was doing, and while I tried to come up with an answer, his friends came up from behind him, their smiles fading when they saw what he was looking at.

I don't remember getting back to my dorm, but once I was inside, I passed a girl leaving the shower. She looked at me, disgusted, surprised, and overwhelmed. I had twigs in my hair and the knees of my jeans were soaked in mud. My hands were almost black with wet soil. I wanted

to fall asleep, get my white sheets dirty, roll up in a blanket so tight I mistake it for an embrace. But I still had some dignity left. I was out of laundry detergent, so I got in the shower with my clothes still on. I pressed a dirty hand to the shower wall, making a perfect print. Black water pooled around my ankles.

I woke up looking at the words on my wall. *Can you really be alive without loving someone?* I get up, grab a marker, and cross it out. *Can you really be alive without someone loving you?*

## If you can see me, I can see you

Maya's was behind a movie theater in the 8th grade. The word that came to mind was "sticky". His tiny mustache itched her upper lip and he told her she had sweaty hands. Emmy was drunk, 19, and a freshman in college. She chose "regretful". She puked on his shoes and he tried to make her feel better by saying, "It was that bad, huh?" Charlotte was 14. She was with the boyfriend she dated all four years of high school until he broke up with her in the first week of college saying that long distance just "wasn't his thing". In reality he was sleeping with a girl from Florida named Charity. She called it "tragic". Ava lied and said hers was at lunch in 6th grade. She said it was "sweet".

The four of them were driving west on the highway going 75 miles per hour. Maya's 18-year-old station wagon groaned in the dry August sun, begging them to turn back. They had been driving for 4 hours. Maya had insisted that they wake up early so that they wouldn't have to put up tents in the dark. Months ago, Maya proposed that they go camping at Theodore Roosevelt to kick off their senior year of college. Maya spent the summer after their freshman year in western North Dakota looking at sediment or something with a geology professor. Passed Fargo and the oil rigs and fading billboards of pro-life babies saying, "I'm glad my mommy chose life!" flat plains turned into buttes. Long, golden grass rippled across fields like the white fingers of a wave rolling towards the shore. In that part of the country, there were roads so long and straight they had to be redirected so that drivers wouldn't fall asleep at the wheel.

Charlotte sat in the front passenger seat with her bare feet on the dash and her head out the window. It was already 82 degrees and the car's A/C just made it hotter. Maya, holding the steering wheel with one hand, pointed a tiny, gas-station battery-powered fan down the front of



her shirt. Emmy and Ava were in the backseat with their backs up against the doors. Ava fanned Emmy's face with a road map. Emmy toyed with the opening of a brown paper bag, her blonde hair lifting like dandelion fluff in the wind.

They had just stopped for gas. Maya filled the tank. Ava and Emmy looked at the postcards and souvenirs by the cash register while Charlotte was in the bathroom.

"Ava, look!" Emmy said. She was standing near a rotating stand of magnets and keychains.

"Look at these cute little pins," Emmy said. "Should we get them? To commemorate the trip? We need to buy *something*."

The pins were metal and the shape of North Dakota. In curly letters, they said "North Dakota: Liberty and union, now and forever, one and inseparable."

Emmy gasped, "We should surprise Charlotte and Maya with them!"

Charlotte had come out of the bathroom by the time Emmy was getting change from the gas station attendant. Emmy decided that she had to use the bathroom too, so Charlotte and Ava went out to wait with Maya by the car. Maya scowled when she didn't see Emmy with them. Emmy's care-free whimsy clashed with Maya's calculated theory of life. Emmy was late to things; Maya was early. Charlotte gave Maya a look of solidarity that she too was annoyed that Emmy hadn't just used the bathroom when she did. Ava tried to look neutral.

Emmy was the one who brought up the kisses. Emmy's head was full of questions: *What's your least favorite color? If you murdered someone, how would you do it? Do you believe in ghosts? Would you rather have fur or scales? What's your deepest secret?* This was how they got to know each other.

Ava felt bad lying to her friends. As Charlotte talked about how her high school boyfriend would pick at dead skin on his feet and not wash his hands afterwards, Ava watched Maya and Emmy scream in protest. Charlotte laughed. “Imagine how he took care of his mouth!”

Ava felt bad about a lot of things. She felt bad because her first kiss was with her older sister Chelsea’s boyfriend in the basement of her childhood home, under a quilt that smelled like mildew. She felt bad that she was 12 years old and he was a sophomore in high school. She felt ashamed that when her sister came down she didn’t say anything because he said he would kill her if she told. She felt bad crying quietly, her eyes glued to the TV screen so that Chelsea, sitting in her boyfriend’s arms, wouldn’t see. She felt disgusted when his foot found hers under the quilt and she just sat there, broken. Ava watched her friends make disgusted faces about boys and she thought about how some things are supposed to feel bad.

The town in Northern Wisconsin that Ava grew up in was tiny. She was happy to leave. She thought that in college she would meet people from interesting places and that she would become someone that’s interesting enough to be friends with them. But freshmen orientation came and went, and Ava had no friends. Her new classmates clung to each other like they’d been friends since the womb, like their moms were best friends and their grandmothers were before them and each generation of these women decided to get pregnant at the same time in a sort of *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* blood pact that bound them together for eternity. Ava spent her first semester eating granola bars and doing homework in bed. The only other student she interacted with was her roommate, Kim, a Jesus freak from Iowa, who couldn’t have hated her more. She made that clear by sighing loudly and making up excuses to leave their room. Ava took to hiding under the blanket when she heard a key in the door. That way, they could both

pretend she wasn't there and that Kim was a good person who invited Ava to do things instead of hating her.

The first cool thing Ava did at college was at the beginning of the spring semester. She worked up the courage to go to a birthday party for a girl in her poetry class; this is where she met Charlotte. She was from a big Scandinavian family who were all blond and tan and good at sports. Charlotte had a boyfriend, Tristan, who she started dating first semester almost immediately after her high school boyfriend broke up with her. He was a senior and the most beautiful man Ava had ever met. They broke up about a year before the road trip when he decided to join the Peace Corps. While Charlotte and Ava talked, Emmy was having her first kiss with someone much more sober than she was. Charlotte introduced Ava to Maya, who was comforting Emmy, who looked like she was being electrocuted, the way she convulsed and sobbed.

The four of them started hanging out almost every day. Emmy was work-study and a tutor at the Student Union. No one ever came by to be tutored, so they would all go and do homework there until the early morning. The first night they did this, Ava learned that Emmy grew up in a house full of ghosts. They were not groaning pipes, moving furniture kinds of ghosts. The apparitions that lived in her house tormented her by slamming her bedroom door closed over and over until she finally went upstairs, and then they'd stop and start slamming the door to the back yard. She saw people who weren't there and heard things no one else could. Her parents wrote it off as childish pleas for attention. But when she was 16, she saw a shadow crawl under her parents' bed. A few nights later, she sat up in bed, looking down the hallway at her parents' open door, and she saw a blue woman in a dress that disappeared into the floor was standing over her dad's sleeping body. The woman's head turned to Emmy, her eyes large and

sad, and she disappeared across the room. Emmy begged her parents to move multiple times, but they didn't believe her story. They weren't the only ones. Ava leaned across the table, engrossed in Emmy's story, while Maya and Charlotte ignored her and continued to do homework. The novelty of Emmy's ghosts had worn off on them a long time ago. But Ava walked Emmy back to her room that night so that she didn't have to be alone. Emmy gave her a hug goodnight and said, "I'm glad we know each other, Ava."

That year, they went to Charlotte's family's cabin for Spring Break. Ava felt awkward and out of place, even though Emmy and Maya had never been there before either. But Charlotte's cabin, Ava drank her first beer. Maya taught her how to build a campfire. They woke up at 6 am almost every morning and jumped into the freezing lake and huddled around fires on the beach at night. Ava got a UTI, but she didn't care because the joy of belonging burned brighter than any pain she could ever endure. Ava belonged somewhere, somewhere with no borderlines or haunted houses or the burden of knowing who she was, who she had always been.

For lunch, Maya turned off the highway to find a ghost town she had visited the last time she was in North Dakota. She took a county road going south, and in fifteen minutes they were at the crossroad:

## SIMS 2 MILES

Maya liked scary movies and jogging across campus at night. In high school, she got a concussion after she went cliff jumping at a quarry. Once she recovered, she turned around and did it again. Sometimes, it seemed like the only thing keeping her alive were her friends. At the same time, she was keeping them alive. She was a survivor. She was a counselor at a place up

north where campers lived like French voyageurs for two weeks. This included portaging canoes through the woods, bathing in the lake, and making fires with nothing but flint and sticks.

“When you say a ghost town...” Charlotte trailed off.

“Yeah,” Maya said, “Like, capital *G* ghost town.”

Charlotte was playing with the frayed end of a handmade, woven bracelet around her ankle. She shot a quick look over her shoulder at Emmy. “Really, Maya?”

Emmy looked at Ava. Ava gave her comforting smile.

“No, not like, *ghost* ghosts. That’s just what they call towns that don’t really exist anymore. People stopped living there.” Emmy sighed just loud enough for Ava to hear it.

You would miss Sims if you blinked. One road split the place in two. On one side of it there was an abandoned bar, on the other, a bright, white church. Maya parked on the gravel in front of the bar, and they unpacked the trunk to set up a picnic on the grass outside the church.

The church stood out. It’s paint was new and uniform. The red doors gleamed and looked sticky. There was a large white marquee outside the church with dark red letters spelling

### Sims Lutheran Church

Oldest active church west of the Missouri

Charlotte walked around the marquee with her shoes off. She was the only one of them that grew up going to church. She couldn’t remember sitting through services growing up. She did remember the pot lucks they had where moms made lefse in the kitchen while the dads socialized and the kids ran around the church basement. The basement had a bin of old toys that had been donated to the church. There were lots of plastic boats missing a crew and princess castles with

no furniture. She felt bad for the toys that had been discarded by their families and left in this basement. Would her toys end up there? If so, when? The smell of a church basement was something stuck in Charlotte's brain like an infection. Once in a while, she smelled burnt coffee and wooden stir sticks and felt very, very lonely.

"This is nice," Emmy said to no one in particular. They were sat down on the picnic blanket Charlotte had brought. A breeze blew pine needles on them from a nearby tree. Maya pulled at some of the grass, uprooting the dry dirt. Behind the church, a flax field bloomed with yellow and blue flowers. In the breeze, they looked soft to the touch. The stocks were at least 3 feet tall. Ava pictured a man standing out there, looking at them, and she gave herself chills.

"Is this what your town is like, Ava?" Emmy asked, gesturing towards the field.

"Kind of," Ava replied.

Emmy smiled. "That's so cute. I bet it was fun growing up there."

"Sometimes," Ava said. The sounds you can't hear in the city, the wind whistling between branches or a bird chirruping at nothing, seemed to get louder. Ava remembered that sound from summer days when she and Chelsea got kicked out of the house, when there were no games to play or other kids to play with, and they lay down in their yard in a bed of soft, unmowed grass and listened to the violent sound of nature.

"That field reminds me of the backyards," Ava said. "They were all connected. All the kids were allowed to roam around as we pleased."

"That's lovely," Emmy said, watching Ava like she was watching a grandparent talk about the ye olde days. Ava started braiding together dead pine needles that fell on the picnic blanket.

Ava used to play free range hide and seek with her sister and her sister's friends. They took full advantage of the breadth of the neighbors' collective yards. Only one house was off limits. It belonged to a local Boo Radley character; a mythical man named Leroy who apparently only came out at night. Chelsea told Ava that Leroy survived on a diet of rats and little girls. His yard was full of tires and old car parts. There was the skeleton of a tractor covered in thick, bumpy layers of rust. Supposedly, that wasn't the only skeleton back there. One good summer day, when it was warm enough to run around with no shoes, the kids decided to play hide and seek. Chelsea would be "it" first. She covered her eyes and started counting down from 30. Ava ran barefoot through the yards, but the other kids were taking her usual spots. Everywhere she turned, another kid was crouched down and shooing her away. She didn't realize where she was until it was too late. Chelsea was screaming, "Ready or not, here I come!" Ava crouched barefoot in the shadows between the back of Leroy's house and the rusty tractor. The grass was damp and cold. A pile of ply wood covered her on one side. Soon, a scream and a laugh erupted nearby. Chelsea helped her friend Martha out of a bush. Ava remembered her sisters words: "If you can see me, I can see you." She crouched lower. One of her feet slipped in dog shit; she held onto the tractor for balance. Chelsea and Martha disappeared from view.

A noise like scratching came from behind her. Leroy's house was groaning. The whole house was splintered, chipped and dented and tempted to fall over. Looking up at the roofline, the house could have tumbled and crushed Ava right there in her spot behind the tractor. She could smell the cold, the rust and the mildew, like licking a penny that had turned green.

This was before the kiss, before Ava understood real monsters.

Hours could have gone by, but Ava couldn't remember what happened between when Martha got out of the bush and when Chelsea finally found her. The sun was low in the sky when

Chelsea appeared on the other side of the plywood and grabbed Ava's skinny arm. "Where have you been?" she yelled, looking more frightened than she did angry.

"I couldn't see you," Ava said, feeling her arm begin to bruise, "I couldn't see you."

"You stood in dog shit?" Maya asked, looking grossed out. Emmy and Charlotte were looking at Ava's hands, concerned. The dead pine needles were snapped into pieces.

Ava hadn't meant for the story to be sad. But the truth was that she couldn't explain it without some of the darkness seeping through. How her friends looked at her, melancholy and a little confused, was scarier than Leroy or the house or being left alone for hours in a place you were never supposed to be in.

Ava had lied to Emmy; her town wasn't cute or fun. It was old and scary and haunted, like Emmy's house. Maybe that was why she felt a way around Emmy that she felt around Maya or Charlotte.

"Well?" said Charlotte.

"What?" said Ava, coming back from a deep sleep.

"Was the guy a creep or not?" That wasn't really the point.

Ava shook her head. "I don't think so. I think he died and got eaten by his cat or something."

Maya laughed. Ava picked up the pieces of pine needles and sprinkled them in the grass.

Emmy wasn't interested in the story anymore. She had taken out her phone and was searching "Sims ND". The first recommended site was a blogpost from four years ago:



*42 miles west of Bismarck and 16 miles south of Interstate 94, there is a ghost town called Sims, North Dakota. A once promising mining town, all that remains of Sims is its Scandinavian Lutheran Church, a bar, and one freestanding house which formerly served as the parsonage. Other attractions include a concrete bridge over Sims Creek and a flax field that blooms in the summer. There is only one road in town, Sims Road, which will take you to the nearby town of Almont in both directions.*

*Most travelers across North Dakota would miss Sims. Maps will tell you that its church is in Almont, not Sims. But the town is kept alive by something more powerful than commerce or a bustling population. It is kept alive by a ghost story.*

*If you go to Buddy's bar in nearby Almont, locals will eagerly tell you about the Lady in Gray. Rumored to be the wife of a former church pastor, the story goes that she fell ill and her sister came from out of town to take care of her. After she died, the pastor married her sister and moved away with the children.*

*Sightings of the Lady in Gray date back to the 1900s. Sims had already passed its heyday when locals began circulating stories about the mysterious figure. Some said they saw her in the parsonage's second floor windows. A young woman staying at the parsonage in the 1930s said that someone placed an extra blanket over her in the night despite her staying in the house alone. Subsequent pastors and their families have lived alongside the figure and generally considered her friendly. Windows opened and closed on their own. Volunteers*

*doing renovations to the church 10 years ago heard heavy footsteps coming from the house at night.*

*The Lady in Gray is a haunting reminder of how quickly a town is born and then abandoned. In 1884, Sims had a population of 1,000. The coal mine attracted many new citizens looking for work. However, in less than a decade, only 500 people lived there.*

Emmy read the post to her friends. “Guys, this is so sad.” Across the lawn, the haunted parsonage looked like it was being sucked into the ground.

“It’s not real, Emmy,” Maya said.

They were all too busy looking at the parsonage to notice the clouds had gathered over Sims. “Fuck!” Maya yelled. Everything was quickly packed into the car. They headed back to the highway.

The rain had come and gone quickly before they reached the on highway. The open blue sky ahead had Maya pressing harder on the gas pedal. It was only 2 hours from Sims to the entrance to the park in Medora. But the icebreakers and the car radio had been forgotten. They all sat quietly and looked out their windows. The fields on either side of the highway went on forever. Rolled up straw bales decorated certain fields like a chessboard. They were taller than the cows grazing. Suddenly, signs on the side of the road advertising the park were appearing in rapid succession.

They got to the park entrance just before sunset. On the road to their campsite, a slowdown of tourist vehicles signaled that a herd of bison were crossing. They emerged like

dark, furry cows from the trees, taking their time to make it to the other side of the road. Calves stuck by their mothers who led the way. “Will they hurt us?” Emmy said. In preparation for this trip, she had read articles about tourists getting mauled by bears or stomped on by bison.

Maya tried not to roll her eyes. “Not if we stay in the car.”

Their campsite was at the edge of a field of blue and yellow flowers, just like the one in Sims, but this time they were overlooking blue buttes behind which the sun was setting. A single tree stood in the middle of the field pointing its finger-like branches towards them accusingly. It looked like it had been struck by lightning, petrified. Ava thought that if she ran across the field and pushed with all her strength, it would fall over.

Maya and Charlotte argued while putting up the tent over which poles went in which corners. “I was a Girl Scout. I got this,” Charlotte said.

“That was over 10 years ago. ”

“Shut up.”

“I’m a camp counselor!”

Ava started the fire while Emmy got out the camping food. In a sauce pan, they cooked cans of soup that Emmy sniffed and gagged at. While Ava stirred that, Emmy scrambled cake mix and water in a skillet. Ava brought bags of peppermint tea, which they drank in tin cups while wrapped in blankets around the fire. The sun was almost gone and the food packed away when Emmy spoke again.

“I don’t know how you do this, Maya,” she said.

“What? Camping?” Maya said, using a stick to poke the embers.

“Yes camping,” Emmy said. “It’s kind of scary, you know. Like, *anybody* could be out here.

“Don’t think like that” Charlotte said. She set her cup down to put on a pair of thick wool socks.

“Sorry,” Emmy replied, “I’m a little spooked.”

They hadn’t seen a single person in Sims. Even on the county road they took back to the highway, the only sign of life were some sprinklers in a barren field. They had barely seen any people since the gas station.

Ava and Emmy sat on one log, Charlotte and Maya on the other. Ava scooped up closer to Emmy, saying to her, but also to everyone, “It is kind of spooky out here.”

Emmy turned her whole body towards Ava. “Right! Like—”

But Maya jumped up from her spot by the fire before Emmy could continue. “It’s fucking freezing! Let’s get in the tent.”

The tent was cozy. Even though it was made for 6, the four of them filled it with sleeping bags and pillows and blankets. Emmy tried to hang a flashlight at the top of the tent, but they ended up changing into pajamas in the dark. Charlotte fell over and bonked her head on Maya’s knee, making them all laugh. Emmy refused to sleep on the end, so Charlotte volunteered. Emmy squished herself between Maya and Ava. Ava faced Emmy with her back against the tent wall.

“Have you done this before?” Emmy asked. Ava shook her head no.

“Yeah, me neither. Some old ladies got murdered in a state park in Illinois in the 60s. Kind of put me off of camping. This is nice, though.”

Maya elbowed Emmy, making her turn towards her. “Stop talking about creepy things, Emmy. You won’t sleep.”

Emmy said nothing and rolled back over to Ava. In the dark, her expression was illegible, but Ava sensed that she looked sad. She asked her, “When should we give them the pins?”

Emmy reached out and rubbed Ava's arm up and down like she was drying her off with a towel. "We can do it tomorrow." Ava nodded. Enough had been said.

Emmy gave her arm a little squeeze. "Roll over to me if you get cold."

Maya and Charlotte were rustling and giggling, pushing one another out of their space. Maya kicked Charlotte with her heel. "Stop!"

Emmy had turned over so that Ava was looking at the back of her head, slipping off of the edge of a word. Which one, she couldn't tell.

Ava had one good opportunity to tell her sister about the kiss with her boyfriend. She was 14 and Chelsea was 17. Chelsea and her boyfriend had broken up after 3 years together. One afternoon, she was sitting on her bed, crying.

Ava watched her from the half-opened door. "Chelsea?"

There was a beat of silence. Laying in the tent, Ava felt it in her ribs. Chelsea took a deep breath, and with her back still to her said, "What, Ava?"

Time slowed down. A dried corsage might have fallen from the dresser. Ava didn't know anymore. The images of that time—prom photos, sidewalk chalk on the front steps, temporary tattoos, crying in dressing rooms at the mall—collapsed in on each other. Maybe if she had said something, if she had told her sister who her boyfriend really was, the crying would have stopped. Maybe Ava would finally have an answer.

Ava cleared her throat. "Mom wants to know if you need anything."

Chelsea prepared herself to sound grateful. "I'm okay. Thank you."

Charlotte and Maya eventually settled down on their side of the tent. It was so dark that Ava could no longer see the back of Emmy's head. "I'm glad we did this, you guys," Charlotte said. "I love you all so much."

Maya groaned and turned over towards Emmy. “Goodnight, weirdo.”

The rest of them hummed “goodnight” back. Ava wondered what their faces looked like in the dark. She could remember a far off look in her mom’s eyes when she thought no one was looking. Her grandma got it sometimes too. She saw it when her mom cried and cursed her grandpa for dying and leaving her behind. Even Chelsea did. Ava thought about Chelsea crying over a boy she didn’t really know. She saw a look in all of their eyes that could only mean one thing: what swam to the surface of their selves wasn’t even the half of it.

Ava wanted to scream, to yell and chant and cry synchronously with her friends. She wanted to go back to Charlotte’s cabin, undress on the shoreline, make a blood oath to never leave each other, dance around the fire, and revel in the magic that brought them together. She wanted to say, “I KNOW I KNOW AND YOU HAVE TO TRUST ME BECAUSE WORDS AREN’T ENOUGH WORDS ARE NEVER ENOUGH BUT YOU FEEL LIKE I DO I SEE IT AND I KNOW ITS THERE AND I DIDN’T KNOW BEFORE BUT I KNOW NOW AND YET SOMEHOW I’VE ALWAYS KNOWN....” Instead, she turned her back to Emmy and looked at the tent wall. Frogs leapt at her face all night.

## Pus-sy!

This morning, I sat on the bathroom counter and drained the pus from my big toe. A few days ago, I got bored and cut my toenails too short. The rest of the day, certain steps I took felt painful. My toe had begun to swell. When I got home, I took off my shoes and realized that it had turned green. I did what my mom told me to do: run a sewing needle under boiling water, puncture, and squeeze. When I was done, I took a picture and sent it to her. She replied, “Pussy!”

The lighting in my bathroom is perfect for hating yourself. Every morning before work, I like to get close up to the mirror to look at the blackheads around my nose. I notice that my hair looks flatter; it has been since Christopher moved out. I think there are minerals in the water that make it look dirty even after I wash it. I bought a hairbrush even though my mom always says that it’s bad for the natural curl in my hair. It’s really only mom who has curly hair; Sadie and I got stuck somewhere in-between hers and the thick, blond, toothbrush bristles on our dad’s side. It occurred to me recently that I have spent the last twelve years trying to persuade my hair to be curly like mom’s. I dragged the brush through my hair. Maybe this time, it will turn out amazing.

I have to lather lotion all over my body nowadays. This process is tedious but important. The autumn air is so dry that the skin on my knuckles will crack unless I put on lotion seven thousand times a day. I find dry patches on the tops of my feet, my elbows, knees, neck and forehead. My mom told me to see a dermatologist but I don’t understand my health insurance. I wouldn’t even know who to call. I took too long putting lotion on, and all I had time to eat before work was a rice cake with peanut butter smeared on it.

There was a guy outside work today with a sign that said, “HAVE FAITH—NEED MONEY FOR PENIS ENHANCEMENT SURGERY”. It was so weird I almost went to an ATM to take out some cash, but then I remembered that I don’t have any savings or even enough money for a new bra and I still haven’t bought my ticket for Chicago even though I told Sadie I would be there tomorrow. Sadie texted me a few days ago, saying “Hey! Do you have your ticket yet? Otherwise I can buy it for you :)” I replied, “Nah I got it”. I want to stop sounding so excited in my texts because dishonesty makes me uncomfortable. I got no reply. Maybe she thinks I’m annoyed with her. At work, I buy my ticket on my phone and text her, “Got it! See you tomorrow <3” The penis surgery will have to wait.

I work at an insurance company. I just do menial stuff like filing and printing, and then I go home. I don’t have an office, so I sit on a fold-out chair in the filing room. My desk is basically a card table where I sit and use an electric typewriter from the 80s to write new labels for files and copy letters for our older clients who don’t understand email. I answer phone calls and redirect them to people that can actually help. Sometimes, if no one is around to bother me, I listen to music on my headphones and alphabetize files. When I can’t, I think about friends from college living in Europe and going to grad school and think, *it’s a rite of passage to have a boring job at 24*. Soon enough it will be 5 pm and the world will be mine to do with as I like.

The syndrome of thinking you will meet a new lover in the laundry room of your apartment building should have a name. There is something so chic about laundry, even if it’s full of your ex-boyfriend’s socks. Holding the basket on one hip, closing the dryer door with your foot,



clipping your hair up without looking in the mirror. Makes you feel like a woman in a movie.  
Like a real-life woman.

When I get done with laundry, it's half past 7. I'm too hungry to cook. I bought a train ticket and did laundry all by myself today. I've done more today than I have all week. I can't expect that much more from myself. I pack my suitcase with unfolded clean clothes and make miso soup (I bowl water in the kettle and mix in miso paste). I sit and read a self-help book mom bought me. I feel like it's something that I should have given to her. Ever since we were little, she has given Sadie and I things that she just secretly wanted for herself. Sometimes, she'd come home from the grocery store with a bag of candy from her childhood for us to try. It was never the good stuff, just Turkish Taffy and Chick-O-Stick, but I pretended to like it because I didn't want to seem ungrateful. We didn't have to ask to get McDonald's because she was the one who suggested that we go. We would get kids meals and she would get a Diet Coke and we sat on a bench behind the McDonald's to soak in the smells. One time, in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, a girl in my class stood over her slice of pizza at lunch and smelled it because, according to her, smelling was like "eating without the calories." It's interesting what stays with you and what you forget.

I have this idea that I am an idiot and everyone is just afraid to tell me. It's hard to find where to start; The world is beautiful and I'm too small. Or am I too big? Everyone feels like they are the ugliest, dumbest person in the world. Even the person that wrote this self-help book. Maybe we are all running for *The Biggest Ugliest Dumbest Bitch on Earth 2023*.

Minneapolis looks the same at 5 am as it does during the day, like it has been forgotten. Like Gotham in lockdown. Chicago is always busy. There's always someone asking for something.

My sister Sadie has lived there for three years with her husband Dan and their two cats, Angelo and Phoebus. I'm allergic to cats, so I had to go to the pharmacy and get the really strong allergy meds that make you drowsy. I packed the essentials: toothpaste, meds, wool socks, a wrap dress my mom wore in the 80s, three shirts and an office skirt I bought at Goodwill and cut the bottom off of. On the train, I wear my duffle coat that makes me feel like a cartoon bear and a knit hat pulled down over my ears. I accidentally bought a ticket facing the back of the train, so I can't read the self-help book from mom or I will get nauseous and get grumpy and I'll get to Chicago and feel like a burden. Instead of reading, I take an allergy pill and fall asleep.

Sometimes, I don't start watching or reading or listening to something because I know I'll be overwhelmed by how good it is. Sometimes I give up before I try.

The woman sitting across from me wakes me up when we get to Milwaukee and then again when we get to Chicago. Sadie is waiting for me at the station with a surprise bag of deli sandwiches. "Your hair!" is the first thing she says. It's up to my earlobes now, a last-ditch effort to combat the flatness. The last time I saw her, my hair was so long I could put it in milkmaid braids.

Sadie is three years older than me and a painter. We didn't really become friends until I went to college, at which time we started talking a few times a week on the phone about our parents' flaws and whether or not I should start smoking to fit in. They moved to Chicago because her husband Dan got a job at the Barack Obama Presidential Library. That was how I found out that presidents have their own libraries.

We have to take the train and then walk a few blocks to get to her place. She tells me Dan is still at work. “Is Obama coming to town?” I ask. Sadie forces a laugh and talks about something else.

I eat my sandwich while we walk. Sadie carries my bag. The streets are wet and the wind is hurting my ears despite the knit hat I’m wearing. Sadie is telling me about a commission she got from an old woman in Oak Park. She started doing pet portraits after our aunt paid her to do one of her dachshunds. The woman in Oak Park has six cats, and she wants a portrait of each. Our dad doesn’t like that Sadie chose to be an artist rather than a corporate professional, but they have always butted heads. Sadie was always very subversive, very alternative and against the grain. She was always picking fights with our dad—a conservative baby boomer from the cookie cutter suburbs west of Minneapolis—about hot topics: socialism and gentrification and the wage gap and mass incarceration. I would sit at the kitchen table and watched them debate. It always ended with Sadie crying and mom giving dad a stern talk.

Angelo is meowing at the door when we get there. Phoebus doesn’t move from his spot on the couch. Angelo presses his body into my shin like he has an itch. I set down my stuff and take another allergy pill. Sadie has some of her paintings hanging on the bumpy wall, covering up cracks and spots where paint had peeled off. Their couch, where I’ll be sleeping for the next few nights, is from Dan’s bachelor days when he had four roommates and no money. Sadie covered it in a big linen duvet cover that didn’t fit their bed. I think about sleeping and I feel relieved.

Sadie and I navigate her space like people with too much time on their hands. She looks like she means to show me around but has just remembered that I’ve been here before. She shows me what’s in the fridge and says I can have anything.

We end up sitting in front of the big living room window on some pillows meant for meditation. Dan got Sadie into it after they got married. She brought me to a class once when I visited last summer; my stomach growled so loud the teacher opened her eyes, thinking someone had vomited. They don't meditate anymore. The pillows are a relic of one of Dan's health crises. Every few months, he gets obsessed with a new cure for immortality. We sit cross-legged with our jackets on and smoke out the cracked window. Sadie has been smoking in secret for almost a year.

We talk about jobs. Sadie has become a penny pincher since getting married. She listens to a finance podcast by two Mormons who want you to "take back control over your spending." She pays for the podcast's budgeting app, which she has connected to her and Dan's joint bank account to keep track of how they spend their money every week.

"I was spending so much money on coffee, Ella. *So* much. It just gets away from you, you know?"

Self-reflection sends me into fight or flight. Every month, I repeat the same cycle. I buy about \$100 worth of groceries. I buy vegetables I think I will cook with. Half of them start to rot and are thrown away. I start getting coffee on the first of the month just as a treat to myself. I get coffee every day for the rest of the week. I go out with friends, where I order an expensive cocktail. That and dinner and my share of the appetizers and the tip and I've spent \$80. I act surprised during the second week of the month when the money disappears. I order a book I read a review of in *The New Yorker* online because I'm too lazy to go to the bookstore. I buy a new lipstick that I don't wear. I come up with an elaborate lie to ask my parents for money even

though they will give it to me no matter the reason. I get an overdraft fee because of some subscription I forgot to cancel after a free trial. I wait for the next month to start.

Sadie doesn't know this. Sometimes, I don't want to talk about adult things because they remind me that I'll never be 17 years old again. Sometimes, I get nostalgic for a time that I was just as confused as I am now. Sometimes, I don't want advice; I want money.

We talk about whether or not I should move to Chicago when my lease is up. It seems like we are always talking about whether or not I should do something. Somewhere in between the words of that conversation, Sadie asks about Christopher.

Christopher and I met at a Halloween party. He was dressed as Luigi and I was a cat. He said he liked my costume. I yelled back, "Thanks! I'm allergic!" Our first date was at a showing of *White Christmas*. After the movie, we sat in his car in the parking lot and talked for hours. He told me he was from Wisconsin, his parents were divorced, he played lacrosse in high school, etc. He held onto my hand on the way to my apartment like it was a privilege. When it was time for me to leave, I panicked and gave him an awkward hug from the passenger seat instead of kissing him like I wanted to. Two months into us dating, he moved in. I stopped going out so that I would have more time to think about him. Has he eaten? Did he call his mom back? Is it too cold in here? My parents liked him, or at least they liked the idea of me not being so alone. Sadie hated him, but she never said so. Not even now, months after the breakup, would she tell me that.

Outside the apartment window, the street stretched out evenly. I went to a therapist in college who said that the Midwest was flat because we don't like to express our emotions. I wouldn't say I'm emotionally repressed. Sadie's face and tone are genuine. "How have you been?" she asks.

"It's a lot better now. It took a while, but I'm feeling pretty good. I don't feel like killing myself anymore."

"That's wonderful," she says. I can't tell if she thinks I'm joking or not.

I feel the need to defend him, to say something like "It's probably better that we're not together" to make it seem like this was a mutual decision. But I don't have the energy to lie to Sadie. I never do.

Christopher was clear with me from the start that he didn't want anything serious. But then he moved in and he started sleeping in my bed every night, and I started playing pretend that we were a real-life couple. It's not his fault I stopped answering my phone when Sadie called or that I lay in bed until my sheets smelled like crotch rot. It's not his fault I liked him a lot more than he liked me.

Outside, the sky is getting dark. We've been smoking and talking for almost an hour. The apartment across from us is lit up like a diorama. I'm surprised when I see real people moving inside. A woman comes into the living room with a coat on, holding lots of grocery bags. Two small kids and a dog run up and jump around her. She brings the groceries into the kitchen like she's going to start dinner, but instead, she sits down on the couch with them. The dog leaps

between his three owners, trying to decide who to love most tonight. When Sadie and I were kids, we usually just ate dinner with our mom. While she made dinner, dad sat in his office on a work call. Once in a while, I got bored and hungry and went into his office to lay down by his feet. Looking up at him through his glass desk, I would scratch at the carpet or play with his shoelaces until dinner was ready. It occurs to me now, watching the diorama family across the street, that we have never talked about this. Our mom usually brought him food to eat at his desk while the three of us ate on the couch, watching something on the VCR like *The Secret Garden*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Pollyanna*; something whimsical about sensitive girls. After we finished eating, mom and Sadie started the dishes and I walked down the hall to dad's office to get his plate. When I think about him, I think of him on those nights; the shiny cap of his bald head gleaming from the overhead light, sleeves rolled up, fingers rubbing circles around his drooping eyes.

"I resent him sometimes," I tell her, talking about Christopher. "For everything he did. Everything he didn't do."

I think I see relief wash over her eyes. Finally, she can say *I told you so*. Instead, she says, "You deserve so much more. *So much more.*"

Saying anything to that welcome a pep talk which is something I don't want or need. A bit of smoke gets in my face and my eyes start to well up.

"Anyway, let's stop talking about men," Sadie says. We laugh.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm really a feminist because I don't really like the Bechdel test. Sometimes talking about men is how women learn life's deepest truths. However, in this situation, I agree with Sadie.

"Oh shit!" Sadie says, jumping up from her pillow and putting out her cigarette on the windowsill. "We were supposed to start dinner."

Dan insisted on making dinner for us tonight even though he works 9 to 5 and always wants to make something that needs to simmer for 6 hours. He asked that Sadie and I prepare all of the ingredients before he got home. Him making us dinner didn't feel very special anymore. Sadie already had everything laid out on the counter: tomatoes, garlic, red peppers, russet potatoes, paprika, red wine, onions, veggie stock. She opened all the drawers and cabinets looking for knives and cutting boards for us both.

On special nights, typically in winter, our mom made us goulash. Our great grandmother, Yvonne, was born in Czechoslovakia. She immigrated to rural Minnesota when she was only 15. As a kid, I would imagine Yvonne and her mother and her mother's mother stirring a cauldron of the stew, babushkas tied tightly under their chins to keep the cold at bay. The goulash was a mix of spices and magic that helped them stay warm in the winter. It's the only family tradition we have. Somehow, standing in Sadie and Dan's apartment, sleepy and a little teary eyed, it feels appropriate to be making soup.

Sadie gives me the onions because they don't make my eyes water as much as they do hers. "I'm so bad at chopping them, though," I said.



“It’s fine,” she said, “They don’t have to look good.”

I knew things with Chris were over before he did; I just didn’t want to be the one to end it. At a New Year’s party last year, I saw him zoning out with a glass of champagne in his hand. I wish that had been the first time I saw him because he looked wonderful. From across the room, he looked like someone I could love. The new year began and something shifted between us. For four long months, we tiptoed around our dysfunction. He got a cold; I made him soup. He put on music; I rearranged picture frames on the wall.

Angelo walks over to the door; Dan is home. When he comes in, he says my name in his booming voice. “What’s up, El?”, something no one ever calls me. We hug and his jacket smells like gasoline. After we part, Sadie comes over and kisses him on one scratchy, rosy cheek.

“We got everything ready for you in the kitchen,” Sadie says.

Sadie pours us wine while Dan takes over. It tastes bad to me, like all alcohol does. I think of rotting fruit and the smell of the water in a vase of week-old flowers. Dan talks about work. He’s always stressed about work. He talks about it like it’s the end of the world, like he’s on the verge of death. He always ends these spiels by saying, “Things could be a lot worse.”

“Are you still thinking about moving to Chicago?” He asks, throwing a towel over his shoulder like a chef on a TV show.

Every time I called Sadie after the breakup, she mentioned me moving. Her enthusiasm made me suspect she had had a plan for my life for a while. “Yeah, I think so.”

“I think you would love it here,” Sadie says, sitting on the couch, petting Phoebus. I know that I would.

“I think so, too. I haven’t figured anything out yet, but my lease is ending soon.”

“That’s what Sadie told me,” Dan says. “You are welcome to stay here while you get things figured out.”

“Aw, thank you,” I say, trying to sound grateful.

“We mean it,” Sadie says.

“I know you do,” I say.

“We really do,” Dan says, pouring the vegetable stock into a big silver pot. A drop splashes onto the electric stove and sizzles.

Dan met Sadie at a party. He was a grad student studying philosophy and she had just started art school. Back then, he had a pony tail that Sadie and I laughed about. Luckily, she got him to cut it off before their wedding photos were taken. He was older than her and very polite. He was close with his mother and much more serious than the guys Sadie’s age. He was a vegan and he

didn't drink. He rode a bike to class to reduce his carbon footprint. He read books about Buddhism and Marxism and other isms. He made Sadie feel good about the path she was on.

Even though he's a know-it-all, I like Dan. We both like knowing things. When Sadie brought him to our parents' house for dinner for the first time, he and I bonded over being debate champions in high school. We are the same person in different outfits.

"You'd love it, Ella," Dan says, bringing me back to reality. "Every day, I hear at least three different languages being spoken. *Three*. There is so much more diversity, more culture."

"How do you know?" I ask, more harsh than I intended. Dan has only been to Minneapolis once and that was when Sadie brought him to meet our parents. Since Sadie and dad's falling out, they decided to spend the holidays with Dan's family.

"No, no, that's not what I meant. I just mean that it's so much bigger," Dan said. "You'd have a lot more opportunities to branch out."

I recently found an old journal from high school while cleaning out Christopher's stuff that he'd left behind. It was almost completely empty except for some scribbles and to-do lists. On the last page, I had written down, in red pen, "Let the world surround you with her humid mouth. Life is about finding the safety we felt inside the womb." I don't think I've ever written anything in a journal that I actually believed.

I read this book about two women who are talking about a well-meaning man they know when one of them says, “He’s just another man that wants to teach me something.” Anyways, that kind of sums up Dan.

Dan started talking about a podcast he’s listening to. Something about economics. I zone out and watch the steam rise from the silver pot. The soup is taking forever. All I have in my stomach is the remnants of an allergy pill and the sandwich. Everyone who wants to make soup has no idea how long it takes.

We stand around the kitchen counter and talk for what feels like forever. Sadie and Dan’s is a No Overhead Light household, so they have about fifteen lamps across the apartment. Each of them got turned on at some point. I tell myself that I left the stove on at home and burnt down the apartment complex. Twice while Christopher and I lived together, I had come home to a kettle over an open flame. The water had all evaporated, and he was lying on the couch on his phone. Both times, I turned off the flame, filled the kettle, and poured him a new cup.

Maybe I need to run away like Sadie says I do. One summer in college, I studied in France, and for a while I was sure that I would go back. Mom encouraged me to. She wanted to move to Europe as a teenager, but then she met dad and life started moving really quickly and somehow she forgot. She sent me and Sadie to French immersion school in kindergarten, but Sadie hated it so much that she convinced her to switch to the normal elementary school for 1<sup>st</sup> grade. She was so excited when I got a 4 on the AP test in high. She also wanted to learn, so she started taking classes over the summer at a community center. Sadly, the language didn’t stick and the classes

took up a lot of time and our dad started working longer hours even though he was getting paid the same amount of money. She has always wanted what was best for everyone.

After graduating from college, I decided to renew my lease on my apartment with Christopher. She acted happy about me staying in Minnesota, but when I called, she didn't pick up, and I knew that she was doing it on purpose. She was hoping that I would get sick of her and the Midwest and that I would move on to better things. There was no world in which my life in Minnesota was the better thing.

Sadie thanks Dan for making dinner. His love language is words of affirmation. "Anything for you, my love," he says. I instinctively bite the edge of the wine glass.

The night Christopher and I broke up, I was also making soup. I stood over the stove while he was cutting the stems off of flowers in the kitchen sink. He put the flowers in a vase on our table and told me about his day. My eyes watered from the shallots in the pot. He asked if I was okay. I told him of course. This is what we do. This is how we love each other.

Sadie puts her head on my shoulder. Before I could talk, this was how we communicated, with head butts and nudges. This was her way of checking in. When I got older, I realized there was no word for her head on my shoulder or for the smell of her hair. She reaches her arm around and scratches my head. I reach over and hold her cheek before we separate. We must look like a painting of angels. "Hungry?"

Sadie and I set out utensils on the dining table while Dan ladles the soup into bowls. “Use the big bowls,” Sadie had said. Soup nights call for big bowls.

We’re sitting and blowing on the first spoonful of soup. Dan is talking about a new supplement he’s taking. Some “antioxidant” that filters your blood. “It lifts the brain fog, helps me focus more. I really notice a difference.”

“Don’t your kidneys filter your blood?” Sadie jokes.

The soup turned out delicious. “This is great, Dan,” I say, hoping I don’t sound as annoyed as I feel. I don’t know why I can’t let Dan have the satisfaction of a compliment. Is there something deeply wrong with me? Tonight, I feel very mean. I need to excuse myself, say sorry for whatever it is that hurts inside. Instead, I keep eating the soup.

Later, I watch Sadie and Dan do the dishes together while I sit at a stool at the counter. They pass by each other in their tiny kitchen with small touches on shoulders or lower backs. I feel tender. There’s a bruise on my knee; I can feel it through my jeans. Angelo wraps his tail around one of the legs of my stool.

Dan is still talking about the podcast. Sadie listens while she lights a stick of incense. The smell reminds me of the office of the therapist I saw in college. This was before I met Christopher, before Sadie was married, and before I knew that I know nothing at all. There was a poster on the wall that I used to look at when I didn’t know what to talk to him about. It said something about love being our true destiny, about love being a journey we cannot take alone. I went home

after my first appointment and journaled like the therapist told me to. I wrote, “We are born hungry. We are born wanting. You will have many true loves and many true heartbreaks. Pain is pain. There is no way around it.”

“It’s interesting,” Dan says, still talking about the economics podcast, “The idea of measuring the total quantity of physical force from humans. When you think about it, all of our problems can be explained by that. Power has increased exponentially over the last four hundred years. It makes you wonder what it’s all building towards.”

Maybe Dan is the voice in my head. Like him, I’m always thinking about things I don’t understand. Like him, I’m always expect a disaster to happen. Unlike him, I don’t seek disasters out. But maybe all of this doom and gloom is his own silly way of taking back control, and if I know anything for sure, it’s that I cannot blame him for trying.

I pour out a bit of salt on the counter and press down on the granules with my fingertips.

Christopher had a favorite phrase: “Don’t treat this like it’s a big deal.” He said it all the time.

The night we broke up, we were sitting on the couch after dinner and watched local PBS because we couldn’t afford cable and he thought it was sweet. The apartment smelled like static. I haven’t turned on the TV since he left. Now, I watch movies on my computer while I curl up in my bed like a baby animal. Sadie and Dan are done with the dishes and looking at me for answers. I wait for one of them to make a decision, to lead me somewhere new. All that I can think to say is, “I want so badly to be known.”

## Moments of kindness and reconciliation

Melanie suggested that they meet at a café near Washington Square Park around 3 pm. The place she picked was quiet and old. The shiniest thing inside was the copper-colored espresso machine behind the bar. When Willa entered the café, she could see the fly aways coming out of her ponytail in the machine's reflective surface.

Willa was early. According to her editor, Matt, it was important to get there before the person she was interviewing. It would establish that she was serious and that she had a genuine interest in the interviewee, which would pay off later when she asked more hard-hitting questions. Matt was all about good impressions. He used to work at a big, important, high stress newspaper. But he had a breakdown and lost all his hair. Everything else had been done before. His decision to start living purposefully by doing things like getting a personal trainer and investing in tech startups made him feel like he had something new and exciting to say. He started *Lacquer Magazine* two years ago to execute that vision.

Willa ordered a coffee and sat at a table by the window. She took out her phone and looked at the article that had brought her here.

*Senior year of high school, lead singer of The Midnight Policemen Ross Dunn sexually assaulted a fellow student in front of 300 classmates at a Homecoming dance. The school conducted a "thorough" investigation into the incident, but because the victim was intoxicated at the time and the fact only 3 students came forward as witnesses, Dunn was never charged or punished. Now, Dunn's victim has stepped forward. This is her story.*



Willa was the one that proposed they do a story about it in the magazine. When Willa was a senior, a girl at her high school was sexually assaulted at a Halloween party. Everyone knew about it except for the victim. She didn't know until someone came up and told her she should talk to the guidance counselor. Willa couldn't remember her name or even the name of the guy who did it. Talking with the guidance counselor didn't help; the girl still couldn't remember what happened, even if everyone else could. The assault was never investigated.

"I want to write something about Ross Dunn," Willa said to Matt in his office. It had only been one day since the story came out. She was noncommittally standing by the door while he sat low in his desk chair, sleeves rolled up, fingers interlaced behind his head.

"Yeah?" Matt said.

"Yeah. There's been a lot of backlash on the victim, and I think it would be good to get her side of the story."

Matt hummed skeptically. "This is the first time you've come to me with a story, isn't it?"

"Technically."

It was silent while Matt mulled it over, and then, all of a sudden, he jumped out of his chair. "Great, then. You have my approval," and he reached out his hand to Willa. Aware that the everyone at the magazine could see her through the glass walls of Matt's office, she shook it.

It was easy to find Melanie through comments on the article. Everyone who stayed quiet about the assault ten years ago was ready now more than ready to talk about it.

*Melanie Parish*

*Her name is Melanie Parish*

*Is this Melanie Parish from Roosevelt? I think I went to school with her*

*We always believed you #StandwithMelanie*

*I stand with you, Melanie!*

Melanie was an elementary school teacher in Bridgeport. Willa found her email through the elementary school's website. Before meeting with Matt, Willa had emailed Melanie on a whim about getting coffee. Since the initial story came out, there had been several follow up articles. Both well-meaning people and trolls exposed Melanie's identity. Online, people who supported her demanded that Ross' band have their tour cancelled. The trolls called Melanie an attention seeking whore who was just using Ross' success to get her moment in the spotlight. A female stand-up comedian Willa followed on Twitter wrote, "Seems convenient that a guy gets accused of r\*pe the DAY after his band's new album comes out..." Convenient for who, Willa wasn't sure.

Some other stories started anonymously popping up. One that stuck was a number of people saying they had seen Ross watching porn and rubbing his dick through his pants on a plane to London three weeks ago. This got so much attention that the airline was forced to release a statement on their zero-tolerance policy for sexual misconduct.

At 3, Melanie had not yet arrived. Willa looked around the café to make sure she didn't miss her. The only other people in the café were a guy with a beard and his nose in a book and a barista, who was wiping down the espresso machine with a damp cloth. She opened her phone

again to the original article. There was a link at the bottom to a profile on Ross from a few days earlier.

*After graduating high school, Ross Dunn moved to New York and performed for free at bars for students at NYU. It was here that he met fellow musicians Tristan, Greg, and Sean. In these humble early days of their career, they created their sleazy, indie rock sound. Their sound stood out with their nihilistic lyrics and shows that bordered on performance art. Soon, they were attracting an international audience, mostly of young women, and got on their way to stardom.*

*However, like all mega successful acts, Dunn's rise to fame has not gone without critique. Some have accused Dunn of making fun of young female fans while simultaneously profiting off of them. Their audience is, after all, largely young women. He has been accused of promoting an unhealthy lifestyle with drugs and drinking. On top of that, he has garnered attention for his sardonic treatment of topics like gay marriage and abortion on social media.*

*When asked about his many scandals, Ross is surprisingly lighthearted about it. "People love hating someone. If that's me, it's not really any of my business.*

The band's lyrics plucked the heartstrings of girls across the world. Their fans were dedicated, and yet Ross didn't care what anyone thought about him. Smoking is bad for you? Fuck it! He'll smoke a whole pack a show. Cancellation? He's uncancellable. Subversion? Post-modern? Meta? Kafkaesque? Huh? Hello? Are you still here?

At 3:15, Melanie had still not arrived. On Willa's side of the table, she rearranged a notepad, a pen, her phone, and her empty coffee cup. Her tote bag sat on the floor with a book about ancient poetry or something in it. Willa had only read the preface. The spine wasn't of the book broken yet. She opened her notepad and wrote, *late*.

The bell above the door rang out and a pretty woman walked in, out of breath, smiling, and pulling the scarf off from around her long black hair. She was smiling for no reason. Willa got the impression that she was wearing the same face she wore all the time; entering her house, talking to a bank teller, ordering at a restaurant.

"Melanie?"

The woman turned to Willa. "Oh! Hi," Melanie said, "Willa—Willa!"

"That's me," Willa said, standing up from the table. Melanie walked over and shook her hand, a wide smile still on her face.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," Melanie said, pulling her jacket, gloves, and hat off at the same time. "I'm not usually late."

"No, no, it's okay," Willa replied, and then, "I have a book."

With her outerwear bundled in her two arms, Melanie hummed and nodded her head in agreement. Her mouth snapped open quickly, "I'm just gonna order and then we can talk."

"I'll go up with you."

Melanie ordered an herbal tea, saying to Willa, "I'm trying to quit caffeine." Before she could get out her wallet, Willa ordered her drink too and told her she'd pay.

"No really, it's nothing. Company money," waving 20 bucks in front of her, regretting it. Her editor Matt gave her cash like a father giving his child allowance.

Melanie struggled to put her bag on the back of her chair. She stuffed her gloves, scarf, and hat in the sleeves of her wool coat. Hanging it over the chair, the bottom rippling on the floor, Willa thought about what she must have been like in high school. “Sorry for making you come so far,” Melanie said, “I don’t come to the city, well, ever.”

“No worries at all. I could stand to get out of my apartment.”

“The thing is, I hadn’t talked about it for about ten years,” Melanie said. She searched outside the window for the right words. “I saw something about him coming out with a new album, and this feeling—like getting crushed. I was just mad. I was really furious.”

Willa looked at her notepad with her questions written in it. They sounded fine when she went over them with Matt, but now they looked like something a police officer would ask.

Willa cleared her throat. “How have you been doing since the article came out?”

“I knew it would be hard,” Melanie said. “The writer is a friend of a friend, so she coached me on how these things go. I knew there would be backlash. But ultimately, I’m glad I did it.”

“Why is that?”

Melanie sighed and sat back in her chair, tapping the ring on her index finger against the side of her mug. “After it happened, I wasn’t afraid of him. I wasn’t afraid of school or sex or getting drunk at parties. I was just afraid of being labeled a victim. I never liked that word. I didn’t want it. It felt like pity, like no one saw me as a person anymore. Just a shadow person. That is how I felt, like a ghost of what I used to be. But I wasn’t ready for anyone to know that yet.”

“Is that why you stayed anonymous for the first article?”

“Probably. But I always knew it would come out, sooner or later. People don’t forget things like that.”

“Have you heard from anyone from high school?”

“A few. It always seems like they want to apologize, but instead they say stuff like ‘I saw the article. I’d love to get together’ and shit like that. But they weren’t the ones that assaulted me.”

The words sounded harsh coming from Melanie’s mouth. Up until then, she had used words like “it” and “incident” to describe “what happened to her.”

“That’s nice of them to reach out.”

“Hmm,” Melanie said, “Not really.”

They talked for about two hours. At this point, Melanie had been interviewed upwards of ten times. She had her answers memorized. But Willa got the feeling that Melanie was sharing new things with her. Maybe it was Willa’s age, her being a young woman, but something seemed to make Melanie feel comfortable with putting it all out on the table.

Before parting ways, Willa asked for Melanie’s number and she said yes. She asked her what she was up to the rest of the day, to which she replied, “Oh, just normal stuff. Talking to my lawyer. Watching porn on the subway.” They laughed, and they said goodbye.

*The release The Midnight Policemen’s fourth studio album earlier this month should have been another joyous success for the band. However, a former classmate of lead singer Ross Dunn came forward just days after the release to say that Dunn had sexually assaulted her their senior year of high school.*

*The support and backlash for the victim online have been equally deafening. Because of this, her identity, which remained anonymous for the original article, was exposed.*

*Now, Melanie Parish has come forward on her own terms to set the story straight.*

“This is great!” Matt replied to my email containing the first draft. “Let’s meet Monday to talk through some edits.”

Willa still didn’t know how to do this. Was there a right way? Was there a secret everyone was born knowing that she could never grasp? At her college newspaper, where she was editor-in-chief, everything was so cut and dry. There were rules and formats and faux-pas. Like with most things, Matt’s attitude towards the writing process was “Fuck the rules!” Not knowing where to start with the writing process, Willa wrote every detail of her meeting with Melanie in excruciating detail. She described the soft sound of the bell above the door when Melanie entered. She included her order, how much it was (\$3.75), how much she tipped (none). If she wrote everything down, there couldn’t be anything she missed.

This turned out to not be the case. Her story lacked structure. It didn’t have a punchy opening line. There was no hook. Matt asked to look at Willa’s notes and she said no. Assault wasn’t enough. They needed murder. They wanted unsolicited dick pics and racial slurs. The only reason Willa didn’t use the word rape was because Melanie never did. Assault was enough to tell you that what he did was wrong. But not to Matt. One thing he learned at his old job was that readers got bored easily.

Willa edited her story so much she forgot what she was writing. Matt insisted on shorter sentences, more creative diction. Perhaps Willa had been too ambitious. By the time Willa sent

Matt her final draft, almost all of the first story was gone. Willa thought about her job interview with Matt. He was standing the whole time, pacing around her sitting in his office like he was giving a Ted-Talk, explaining his nuanced approach to journalism at *Lacquer*. It all sounded very idealistic. Now, Willa felt like she had been sold something that was good in concept but useless in practice, like biotin gummies or weight-loss pills.

It had been almost a week since Willa met with Melanie when her article finally got published. Willa was sitting at her desk and trying not to think about it. She tried to avoid the news, but that was almost impossible when sitting at a computer. She ended up on Twitter again. Dunn's management team had come out with an official statement.

*Ross loves and respects his female fans. These allegations are unfounded and untrue.  
Ross wishes for privacy for both himself and for her at this time.*

Other headlines followed.

*DESPITE LEAD'S CONTROVERSY, MIDNIGHT POLICEMEN START TOUR APRIL 12  
AT MSG*

*MIDNIGHT POLICEMEN TO PERFORM FREE SHOW IN NYC*

*EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ROSS DUNN ACCUSATIONS*



The magazine tweeted a blurb and link to her article along with a picture of Ross performing at last year's Governors Ball. His shirt was almost completely unbuttoned, exposing a blazing heart tattooed on his chest. She opened Twitter again. The magazine's tweet was at the top of her feed.

*"I WAS AFRAID OF BEING LABELED AS A VICTIM": ROSS DUNN'S ACCUSER  
SPEAKS OUT*

It already had hundreds of likes. Among the responses, there were a few people asking, "Is this really relevant anymore?" As if it hadn't been only a week, as if people had moved on to something else to proclaim their disgust over.

At lunch, Willa booked it to an overpriced coffee shop around the corner. Sitting with a sandwich and a coffee, she opened her phone and automatically on the little blue box.

*I knew it. #rossdunninnocent*

*It's "believe all women" until shit like this happens. So disappointed*

*I knew it! The timing was too perfect. People will do anything for 5 seconds of fame.*

*This is disgusting*

*I'm disgusted*

*Shocker: she made the whole thing up*

Willa felt like she walked into a party mid-joke. The Monday after the girl at her high school was assaulted, Willa went into her journalism classroom and found everyone huddled around one table. She heard the word “allegedly” and something like “I knew someone who was there and they said...”

“What are you talking about?” Willa asked. Everyone turned around and looked at her like she was the saddest thing in the world. She was sworn to secrecy for something she didn’t even know yet. Willa didn’t know what was going on, but she felt like it was her fault.

The same morning that Willa’s story was published, a classmate from Melanie and Ross’ high school came forward and said that Melanie had admitted to making the whole thing up a few days after the incident. Willa’s article had been grouped in with a new wave of scrutiny, this time, pointed at Melanie.

*No tip?*

*Guys, this is a common trauma response. You can't blame her for taking it back. She was 17 and facing pressure from the school, the police, and him. Try a little bit of empathy*

*Doesn't surprise me at all*

*There's a special place in hell for people like her*

*Lies, lies, and more lies. So disappointed*

*Apparently she's friends with the journalist who wrote the first article so... yeah. It was fake*

Willa felt like she had turned in a college paper and just seconds later realized she hadn't written anything but "peniscockandballs" over and over again for 8 pages. But there was no penis or cock or balls. Just her words squeezed below a ludicrously big ad for the American Cancer Society.

*Parish was late to our meeting...*

*At the espresso bar, she got chamomile tea, clicked "No Tip" and sat down...*

*Parish says that the details of her assault are foggy. After all, it was over 10 years ago...*

*The word "rape" was distinctly missing from our conversation...*

*As we said our goodbyes, I asked Parish what she was up to for the rest of the day. "Oh, just normal stuff," she said, "Talking to my lawyer. Watching porn on the subway." This last comment was a reference to one of the many stories that have come out about Dunn in the last week. Her attempt to make light of the situation was startling to say the least.*

Willa knew that they were her words, but it read like it was in another language, something vaguely familiar with similar roots and noises but no meaning.

Willa's profile of Melanie was apparently less than sympathetic. How she portrayed Melanie added fuel to the ongoing fire. She had written down everything just as it had happened, from Melanie's rushed entrance to the hug at the end of their meeting.

It didn't occur to her until she was at her apartment, scrolling on her phone, that maybe they weren't all her words. Maybe Matt had made bigger edits than she initially thought. In high school, an obnoxious editor on the paper edited one of Willa's stories on the girls' basketball team so much he mixed up most of the names of the players as well as the name of the school they played against. She texted the team captain something like "I'm so sorry about the article. My editor fucked it up and..." She never got a response.

The outrage turned into overnight. Suddenly, Willa was being contacted by strangers saying things like "Thank you for speaking the truth. If only all journalists were like you."

She wanted to say, "You're mistaken, I'm not the one that broke the story about her making it up. I actually don't think she made it up!" But it would take more energy to correct them. Willa typed out multiple apologies to Melanie, but she never sent any of them. How do you apologize for accidentally calling someone a liar?

Overwhelmed by the number of follow requests on Instagram, she made her account public. The magazine was also getting a lot of attention, and Matt was eating it up. In the days after the article came out, Matt let her work from home as a sort of thank you for making his baby popular. She stopped leaving her apartment. It felt worthless to go outside when she was already so popular online. When she wasn't reading comments on her article, she was researching a longer piece Matt had assigned her on a woman who lied about being at the Boston Marathon bombing. It seemed like this woman had become a ghost; changed her name, moved cities and started a new career. Willa's only lead was from an old classmate of hers in West

Virginia who claimed she might be living in her mom's basement. Willa found the number for the community center where her source said the mom played bridge. So far, they had not returned her calls.

At 1 am, a week after the article, Willa got an email from a guy named Jess claiming to be Ross Dunn's publicist. He reached out to invite her to a "get together" Ross was throwing after their show at MSG the next night. He included the details for the hotel and his personal phone number. When she got there, she could just give him a call and he would come down to get her.

Nowhere in the email was there any mention of the article. Willa could have pretended that this was a common occurrence, getting invited to "get togethers" where B-list celebrities probably did hard drugs and shattered their public image. In the time she had lived in the city, she had never been out clubbing. Once in a while, she went to bars with friends where skaters who were too old to call themselves that asked her for a light. They usually bought pickle shots, got too wasted, and asked for her number. Willa could deal with being around loser guys that just wanted to sleep with her. The idea of going to an actual party, with real famous people and their weird friends, caused a heavy sensation that she couldn't name to drop into her stomach. She stayed up in an early morning, paranoid haze. The lights outside her window didn't seem real. She was on a TV set made to look like a real apartment. The only light she had on was a fluorescent pink sign that spelled out "GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS".

At some point, she fell asleep. She woke up again at 2 pm to music blasting outside her window and her phone was buzzing quietly under a pillow. Instagram, 102 messages. Email, 56 messages. At the top was a news notification: *MORE THAN 50,000 INJURED OR DEAD IN NUCLEAR ACCIDENT IN RUSSIAN DESERT*

*A misunderstanding early this morning led to the activation of a Cold-War era nuclear weapon in the Russian region of Kalmykia. The region, which has been eroding into a sand desert for the last 50 years, was once home to a top-secret Soviet underground weapons base. An archeological dig led to the discovery and accidental activation of the over 60-year-old bomb.*

Willa read the beginning of the article with half-opened eyes. Everyone she followed was posting about it. #Kalmykia was trending. Already there were GoFundMe campaigns to “Provide emergency aid for victims of nuclear disaster”. Willa donated \$5 anonymously to one that her college roommate had shared and reposted it on her account.

Outside, the world was churning like it always did. A delivery truck let out a high-pitch beep as it backed into a parking spot across the street. Willa’s phone buzzed.

*@standuptoinjustice replied to your tweet: This is the kind of performative activism we don’t need right now. Do what you do best and ruin another SA victim’s life*

The account had no profile picture. 13 followers. Their only post was that one replying to her. Willa wrote back,

*Thanks for the advice, @standuptoinjustice.*

Innocuous to the untrained eye. Hopefully, some 14-year-old was seething right now. That evening, Willa ordered pad thai and watched a livestream of The Midnight Policemen show on her laptop. It was being shot on a shaky cellphone camera from the pit. Whoever was streaming it had gotten good tickets. They were so close to the stage that the camera had to be tilted up to look at Ross. Once in a while, Willa could see the singer's sweaty face or hear his voice over the sound of the crowd scream-singing. Willa was afraid of crowds and of being trampled to death. Watching the livestream, she still kind of felt like she was getting crushed.

Her reply to @standuptoinjustice's reply was causing some frenzy. More people were complaining about virtue signaling. Again, she had tried to do the right thing and failed.

There was nothing stopping her from going to the party now. She replied to Jess' email, got ready, and took the train downtown. It was past midnight when Willa got to the hotel. The lobby had moody lighting and spa music was playing over the speakers. A dark bar to the right of the reception desk buzzed with chatter from men in suits. If they intended to meet some girls tonight, they had gone to the wrong place.

Willa texted the number Jess gave her. *Hey! It's Willa. I'm in the lobby*

The woman behind the front desk eyed her like she was about to ask what her business was at the hotel. "I'm just waiting for a friend," Willa said.

She had been standing for too long, but it seemed too late to sit down on one of the low loveseats in the lobby. That would mean she was admitting to being there. If she stayed standing, it didn't feel as wrong. She paced in front of the rotating door. Each ding of the elevators made her tuck the hair behind her ears.

*On my way!* Jess said. "My savior!" Willa thought.

Soon enough, a ginger man in his forties with a well-maintained beard came out of the elevator. “Willa!” he shouted, holding out his hand for a shake.

“Hi! Uh, thank you for inviting me,” Willa responded. The weight of his pricey watch reverberated through the handshake.

“Of course, of course. Thank you for coming! This is great. I’m so glad this worked out. You ready?”

Willa had the feeling that she didn’t know what she was walking into. A hundred horror movies flashed before her eyes. Maybe she was being lured into a trap. She could see it now: her black tights torn, makeup smeared, hands bloody, knocking on different hotel room doors instead of running straight for the stairs. As Jess talked in the elevator up to the 30-something floor, Willa thought, “What an embarrassing way to die.”

The party was in a suite at the end of the hall. Jess opened the door, and Willa held her breath.

For a moment, it seemed completely dark and empty. But when Willa’s eyes adjusted, she realized the place was filled with bodies. A dim light was coming from somewhere, illuminating the halo of smoke above everyone. The air was thick with wine breath and cigarettes and body odor. Willa wondered why the smoke alarm wasn’t going off.

Jess reappeared next to Willa saying, “I’ll get you a drink.” And then, a woman in a vintage nightgown and strappy heels approached her.

“Hi! What are you doing here?” She asked.

“What? Sorry I can’t hear. Do we know each other?”

The woman swayed a bit. Her lipstick had been kissed away. “Not yet!”



Her name was Celine, a name she probably gave herself in an effort to sound more chic. She spoke in a phony valley girl accent to make her sound hot and dumb. Her hair sat in a precarious knot on top of her head in a way that Willa was jealous of. She reminded Willa of the beautiful girls she knew in college and high school that would cling onto her on the first day of class. They seemed to see something vulnerable and useful in her.

“Do you know Ross?” Willa asked, feeling like a narc. She fussed with the chain strap on her purse.

“Sure, yeah. We’re cool. You want a smoke?”

“No thank you.” Celine shrugged and took Willa by the forearm. They moved through the crowd of bodies. Being in the middle of it felt like being at a school dance—sweaty and violent. Celine sat on the edge of a couch by the entrance to the bedroom. Willa peeked in, but all she could see were a few people’s backs and a guitar strewn across the bed.

Celine lit another cigarette and waited for Willa to speak. “Why are you here?”

“Why are *you* here?” Celine asked back.

“I’m a writer. I was invited by Jess.”

“Hmm,” said Celine, “What do you write?”

Willa lied and told her she was working on a book. She seemed to be impressed by that. Her silence and her smoking encouraged Willa to keep talking.

“I’m tired of books by men. I’m tired of these made-up women they create, you know? They operate as devices rather than characters in their narratives. And if a man *does* attempt to write a fully-rounded female character, it feels like pandering, you know? Like they don’t mean it. Like deep down, women aren’t people to them.”

Celine seemed less interested by this. “Wow, you have a lot of ideas.”

Jess found Willa and gave her a drink, apologizing for the delay. Celine had disappeared in a puff of smoke, so it was just the two of them. He was checking his watch for the umpteenth time since he met Willa in the lobby. He looked more like a finance guy than a rockstar's publicist. His sleek suit and facial hair looked desperate. Still, he was aware of the power he held.

"Ross wants to meet you!" Jess yelled in her ear.

Willa choked on her drink. "Really?"

"For sure, for sure. You want to meet him?" Willa hadn't given much thought to why she had been invited tonight. But the idea that Ross knew her, even just her name, made her feel like she was already drunk.

She said yes. "Good," Jess replied, "I'll just check in on him." He disappeared into the bedroom. Willa was alone again, separate from the crowd. Nearby, a man listened to a woman intently, like he wanted to sleep with her.

"It's such bullshit. Women that do things like that just make it harder for the real victims," she said. He nodded intently, repeating Jess' words, "For sure, for sure."

"Willa!" Jess said and motioned for her to go into the bedroom. She set down her drink on a side table and followed him in.

The lighting in the bedroom was much different. It was warm and mellow like a yoga studio. This was where the music was coming from. A few guys, including some Willa recognized from the band, stood around a desk by the window. They didn't recognize her entrance. Jess put a hand on her lower back and clapped the other on a tall guy's shoulder. "Sean! This was the girl I was talking about. The writer."

He gave her a “sup” and continued talking to the guy next to him. Now that they had broken through the barricade of bodies, Willa was face-to-face with Ross.

Like his bandmates, he didn’t notice her right away. It was only when Jess invaded his space that he looked up from the joint in his hand. Jess whispered something in his ear, at which point Ross made eye-contact with Willa.

He smiled, stood up, and came in for a hug.

“Hello, darling, you alright?”

Willa had to laugh as she was crushed by the heady scent of his button-up shirt. His chest was exposed, hot on Willa’s cheek.

“Oh! Good, you?”

“You know, you know, same as always.”

Willa did not know, but she nodded in agreement.

“Say, Jess told me what you wrote about, and I just wanted to say, I really appreciate it. Really ’preciate it.”

Willa was embarrassed. She didn’t know how to respond. What were the Associated Press’s guidelines on that? She replied, “Of course.”

Luckily, he didn’t wait for her to say anything else. He put his arm around Jess’ shoulder and said, “This guy right here, he says you’re gonna write a piece about me.”

Willa looked at Jess. He was unreadable. “Oh yeah,” she said, “Yes, I am.”

Jess stepped closer to her. “It’s hard nowadays,” he said, “With all the hysteria around these sorts of things. I’m glad you’re one of the good ones.”

Willa didn’t feel like it. “Of course. Just trying to tell the real story.”

“Exactly, exactly,” Jess said. Ross was noticeably quiet.

Jess continued, “Maybe we can set up an interview! Between you and Ross. It’s important for Ross to get ahead of this. Own it, you know. Everyone is getting cancelled these days.”

Willa thought it was weird that Jess was referring to Ross in the third person when he was standing right there. Ross was looking around the room, bored.

“Yeah, I think that would be great,” Willa said.

Jess clapped a hand on Ross’ back. Ross was suddenly back in the conversation. “That’s great. That’s great. What’s your name again?”

“Willa.”

“Willaaa,” he said, “Willa, this is the best night of my life. You know why?”

It just occurred to her that he was inconsolably high. “Why?”

He put his hands on either side of her face, tilting it up to see her eyes better. He smiled with his eyes slightly closed. “Because you’re here.”

She was looking into eyes she had only imagined before this moment. They were dark, tired, cold. Willa wanted to enjoy this moment. She knew that she was lucky to be here, her face squeezed between the hands everyone wanted to feel and see. Looking at his eyes, she thought about what Melanie saw in them. Did they look that dark all the time?

Jess had disappeared. Willa couldn’t tell if she was excited or scared to be alone with Ross. She knew she felt trapped. Suddenly, Ross looked scary; 7 foot tall, dressed in black, looking for someone to haunt. Her eyes must have shown the anxiety.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Ross said, rubbing her shoulder. “You want to get in on this?” He was motioning towards his friends in the corner of the room.

“No, thank you, no,” Willa said, afraid she was being a killjoy. Ross was just being nice. He continued to rub her shoulder.

“No worries, Willa. No worries.”

Willa was tired. She had stayed up the last few nights on her phone devouring the attention her article had attracted. They were mostly positive, calling her a “hero”. One of the good ones. But Willa didn’t stay up all night with her nose pressed to her phone looking at the thousands of messages of praise for her accidental...philanthropy? She stayed up reading the messages from victims telling their stories. In comparison to the praise, there were only a few. One said that the treatment they received after coming forward felt like being assaulted all over again. There is nothing you can do when someone has decided that you lied.

“Sorry?” Willa asked. Ross was trying to ask her something.

“I said, do you want to go somewhere else?” He shouted over other voices. Willa no longer knew what was right or wrong.

Then all of a sudden, Jess was back. “Okay, Ross,” Jess said, “Let’s let Willa get back to the party.”

Ross nodded. He took his hand off her shoulder. “You’re the best, Willa. I won’t forget this. Never!” And then, he was gone.

In the other room, someone had turned on the TV. Breaking news from Russia as more were confirmed dead from the nuclear explosion. This was officially the deadliest nuclear event in history. On the screen, they were playing footage of a cloud of debris over the desert where the bomb had gone off. People rushed back and forth, covering their eyes and mouths from the sand. It was blowing up against buildings and spilling in through the windows. Men in Russian military garb stood around, waiting to be told what to do.

When Willa left the bedroom, Celine was standing by the window again. Willa had never seen someone stand so beautifully. A handsome man hung onto her every word. A bottle rolled back and forth on the glass coffee table. Willa stood behind it, her back to the party, eyes on the TV. Once she turned around, everyone would be able to see her.