

A minimalist line drawing of two hands, one above the other, rendered in black outlines on a light blue background. The hands are positioned as if they are about to clasp or are in the process of holding each other. The drawing is composed of simple, continuous lines that define the fingers and palms.

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digging

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A collection of short fiction by the students of ENGL-223 Fall 2021
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What a wonderful semester with you all!
Thank you so much for your time, your enthusiasm, your creativity,
and your support for one another.
It has been an honor and a delight to work with you all!

Yours,
Katie M. Zeigler

digging:

a literary collection

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.

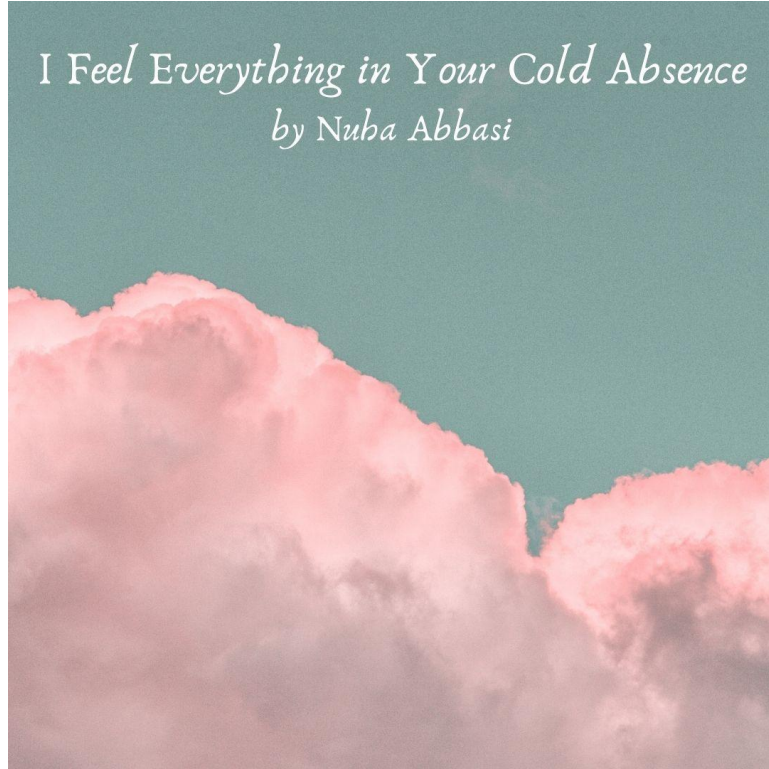
Seamus Heaney

Table of Contents

I Feel Everything in Your Cold Absence
Self Sacrificing
Spring Cleaning
Before Advent
The Colors of Life
Limerence
The Most Stressful Day of my Life
A Clash of Cultures
Our Brush
Unforeseen Consequences
The Pill
Running. Flying. Free
Non Essential
An Unwanted Position with a Secret
sideways
It Wasn't Me
Wakeup, Wonderland
The Steps to be Free
Cutting Edge
My One True Love
An Ill-Fated Conscience

Nuha Abbasi
Ashley Baumgartner
Saemi Cho
Damon Chu
Michael Ford
Juliana Grosvenor
Mahima Gupta
Tiffany Guzman
Christina Johnson
Jessica Kilburn
Aaron Lee
Karinne Lee
Evan Lola
Quinn Morgan
Lotus Price
Michael W. Schuler
Aaron Thai
Xavier Velazco
Carolyn Vidal
Camille Vilar
Polly Wold

I Feel Everything in Your Cold Absence
by Nuba Abbasi



The cold, damp air is deafening as I fall through it. Although, I don't even feel like I'm falling. Rather, I'm suspended amid these smoggy clouds, unable to control my body. *Breathe.* I look around trying to find an inconsistency in these puffy pink clouds. But I can't. Every way I turn my head I find the unchanging pastel pink hue, the dewy air, which is slowly suffocating me, and the dim light that I know lies in the distance. *How did I end up here?* I'm trying not to move-- not that I have a choice-- to save my breaths. *Think.*

I took a small breath and looked up to the stars that have yet to come out. The sun let out a couple of last rays before it disappeared beyond the forest at the end of the meadow. It left a warm film over everything: the frosted mountains in the distance, the tall pine trees at their base, even the tops of the pink clouds, which floated calmly in the mouth of the everlasting canyon ahead of me. I looked back to where I had just come from; a trail of bent flowers and tall grass in the otherwise untouched meadow. Miniature snowflakes fell around me, some landing in my eyes and mixing the cold masterpieces of winter with my burning tears. *I'll be waiting for you, I'll always be waiting for you.* I looked down at the magic dust in my palms and held it close to my chest. I could almost hear

them shimmer against my heart. It stung knowing that she was not there to be the light against my chest. The sharp burn of a tear left a scar as it trailed down my face. On the ground, I saw the bushes she made grow with this dust that I hold so desperately onto. I looked back up to the sky, searching for her. I took a deep breath and sprinkled her dust on me.

My chest feels tighter and I realize I have been wasting my air reliving my mistakes. The pink clouds taunt me as I am unable to move a single muscle without their consent. The weight of my body slowly drags me down through the clouds-- slowly but steadily. My breaths get shorter, heavier, and the force on my chest feels like a fisherman has hooked onto my heart, pulling me down. Sudden awareness dawns on me when I realize I do not know what is beneath these clouds. Where do I go once the fisherman has exhausted his line? When these clouds have thoroughly filled my lungs with their alluring poison? *Breathe. No, don't breathe. Wait-- breathe.* The clouds feel thicker, darker, and colder on my back. My short breaths turn into gasps for air, and those turn into nothing. The air is heavy; I feel a layer of it on my skin, like a frosty blanket, waiting to suffocate me. My eyes begin to shut as I spin my head left and right, searching for a drop of fresh air.

"Shh, breathe."

"I am breathing!" She would laugh at my childish response. "I told you not to open your eyes yet."

"Okay, okay, I'm waiting."

"Alright, open 'em," she instructed, "What do you think of them?"

"Them?"

"Yes," she paused, "*them*. What do you think?"

I glanced at her, then down at the glowing dust in her palms.

"They're...," I hesitated before answering, "they're definitely something alright." I kept staring at them in awe. It was as if she had reached into the night sky and grabbed a handful of stars. They glowed and shimmered like nothing I had ever seen before-- except one thing, one person. She watched me as I watched them and smiled.

"Would you like to try them?" she asked. "They are quite magnificent."

"*Quite...*," I mocked as I looked back at her. She rolled her eyes and smiled as she shook her head. *She's quite magnificent*, I thought to myself. I loved to see her smile and it

was easy to make her smile. I loved counting the creases under her eyes when she would laugh. The pink tones on her cheeks and forehead when she blushed or laughed too hard or for too long. The sound of her laughter, her voice, was sweeter than any fruit in its ripest state. She would always turn away from me when she blushed. Instead, she would look towards the distant mountains or up at the stars shining brighter than the glimmering snow on the mountain peaks.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, hoping to catch a glimpse of her flushed face. She turned and looked at me.

“We are going to go see everything out there one day,” she said, smiling. Her warm brown eyes consumed me in the worlds that they held. I couldn't help but let myself fall into a trance, insentient to the wonders of the world around me, existing only in a corner of the universe with her. What more does the universe even need after all?

“Have you not ever wondered about what is out there?” she asked, gesturing to the sky and frosty mountains in the far distance. “What you could find and experience and feel?”

“I don't know, I'm sure there's plenty of things, but I never really cared,” I replied. I took a deep breath and felt my heart float for a second before I added, “I have everything I need, everything I could ever want right here.” She didn't look back at me but I could see her cheeks raise and head tilt down a little. She was smiling and blushing at the idea of being my everything. A cool breeze shifted through the tall grass of the meadow and she took a deep breath, turning away to look at the stars once again

A frosty gust of wind scratches my face as my body breaks through the dense clouds.

Breathe. My chest feels like a balloon filled with nitrogen. Smooth and freezing-- at least something. But that smooth, cold air feels more sharp and icy as I realize I am falling through it with nothing to slow me down. The universe has kicked me in the chest, sending me spiraling down this canyon, because the gravity pulling me down isn't enough. The gushing wind is almost deafening, but it does not last long. I don't have enough time to comprehend this unfamiliarity when suddenly I feel a sharp pain stab me through my back, and come through from my stomach. A searing stab in my leg then my arm. My head hits a heavy branch, disorienting me and flipping my body forcing me to

look where I am falling. I am plummeting through a vast forest, with trees taller than the eye can see, and no end in sight. The little twigs scratch my face and the stiff leaves tangle themselves in my hair. Slowly losing every atom of oxygen with each sharp puncture from this luscious forest, I can see less of the clouds, getting closer to the bottom, but not slowing down.

"Come on!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" I laughed as she pulled me through the tall blades of grass.

"My Lord, you're so slow, hurry up!" She was a masterpiece, glimmering under the sunlight, emitting her own warmth everywhere she went. She would turn to look at me and the sight of her beauty stopped my breath for a moment. Her inviting brown eyes, distinct eyebrows, and cheeks painted like plums-- no one could pass by without being mesmerized by her beauty. The slightest glance would make a man stop in his tracks and study her in awe. Her hand swayed through the tall blades of grass, brushing against the soft petals of the flower.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, not that I cared-- I'd go anywhere she wanted me to go.

"You will see... it's quite the spot, you will love it," she said, hastening her pace and smiling. That smile. That smile could convince me to rip this world, myself, to shreds at her request.

"Quite..." I whispered.

We soon arrived at the edge of a canyon, ahead of us were clouds of cotton candy which were quite tempting to step on, but that was their deception. Behind us was the meadow that we had just crossed and beyond that were some frosty mountains. She looked at me again, with those beautiful round eyes which held worlds in them, tempting me to ruin myself for her. She bit her lip, "Do you trust me?" she asked. I nodded without thinking, unable to come up with words. She reached in her small brown pouch and pulled out a handful of magic dust. Every little particle glowed like the sun in her hand. Little bits fell to the ground and bushes of flowers grew where they landed. I was fascinated by this

phenomenon and the capabilities of this dust. Their reflections glittered in our eyes, illuminating the curious worlds in them. So, I closed my eyes.

She took a deep breath and sprinkled the dust on us.

The splinters in my skin seem to spell out my mistakes. The little slivers slowly grate away at me, building up to the larger branches and stems which continue to stick out of me. The twigs in my chest release the air that I have been hopelessly trying to keep in. I feel the crispy leaves and insects crawl around in my hair, braiding themselves in tightly. My fists get tenser and I hope whatever dust I have hasn't escaped from them yet. Looking around as I plummet through this endless forest, little seems to have changed. The branches have gotten bigger, hopefully meaning this is coming to an end, and little creations of life have begun to appear. The bright haze which lies closer to the clouds has now diminished to almost nothing. The dark green leaves and brown trunks have taken over me, wrapping me and tucking me away down here in the darkness. I feel the blood seeping from my wounds, drying up and leaving a dark, sticky layer on my skin-- or what is left of it. In the distance-- unsure of which direction-- I hear the chirp of a bird. My current drop to Hell makes it difficult to listen clearly, but the sounds begin to become clearer and louder. A couple more branches take their turns playing with me before I see the wonders of life down here: a red bird flies above me to sit on a tree branch and watch me fall.

Another one passes my head, letting out a high-pitched shriek as it goes, leaving a ringing sound in my left ear.

"You have not been listening to me!" she cried. "What do you mean, that's all you've had me doing!"

"That is what I have *made* you do?" she asked, the distress in her voice turning into anger.

"That's not what I meant," I took a breath, "please just tell me what I did, what did I do?" I was pleading for my life, begging the world for a deeper meaning. The tears forming in my eyes seemed to be following hers. I could hear us both trying to hold in our cries in the slivered silences. She sniffled and exhaled, trying to level her tone.

"You did not do anything. I just do not feel it anymore," her voice trailed off, almost trying to hide what was to come next, "maybe I never felt it." My breath choked me and pulled me down from my heart. *Never felt it?* I could feel something creeping up my throat and my body felt the weight of the mountains holding it down, unable to move. The anguished look in my eyes and depressed limbs did not go unnoticed by her. I could see the quick regret in her face, the alarmed eyes, her raised arms like she would try to catch me if I fell, and the locked words in her throat. I saw it all.

"What?" was all I could muster up without getting sick. We stared at each other in silence for a few moments. I looked in her eyes, searching for the worlds we wanted to explore together, the magic we wanted to feel with each other, anything that made this untrue. Anything that showed me there was a chance of this all being a side effect of breathing this air. Because at this moment, I would stop breathing if it meant that this wasn't true.

"I did not mean that. I did feel it, I felt everything," she turned away and looked down to her feet, "I think maybe you felt it more than I ever did. Maybe you felt something other than what I felt." I was discomposed, standing there with no words, rethinking our entire relationship in a millisecond. My eyes shuddered and traced the fading and firm memories in my head.

"What do you mean? What did you feel then?" The desperation was quietly returning to my voice as I searched my mind for where our feelings diverged. "What was so wrong about how I felt?"

"Nothing," she quickly turned to look at me. "You did not do anything wrong. It is just that I have always imagined a life of adventure. I want to explore and feel the unseen, the unfelt.

And when we met, I was so excited to share my world with you," she paused. "I wanted a life with you there too, do you understand?" I didn't. But now I was becoming angry, angry at myself for falling into this trap, angry at her for trapping me here.

"Was I just another adventure to you? Something you could feel and explore then just dispose of?" I asked a little too harshly. She frowned and tilted her head at my tone. I could see it hurt her, but she hurt me.

"No, of course not. You couldn't imagine a life without me, that is the difference." And I still didn't want to. I stared at her, begging her for a chance, but she just let out a tear. A pity tear. A 'sorry for doing this' tear. An 'it's not you, it's me' tear. But it was me this time. I had shattered my own heart into infinite pieces by loving her more than she wanted. How was I supposed to walk over these shards?

"Why can't you just love me?" I begged her again. She shook her head and came closer to me, holding my shoulders.

"I do love you," she cried, tears streaming down her face, "You do not understand. You must let me go, please." Her warm brown eyes glowed like honey. Crying streams of honey, leaving me sticky and warm, leaving the residue of her love and pain on me. I felt a piece of cool leather on my palm and looked down through my own blur of tears that I had not noticed pouring out before. It was her small brown pouch. Her hand shook as she tried to close the pouch in my hand with my weak fingers.

"What are you doing?" I managed to spit out.

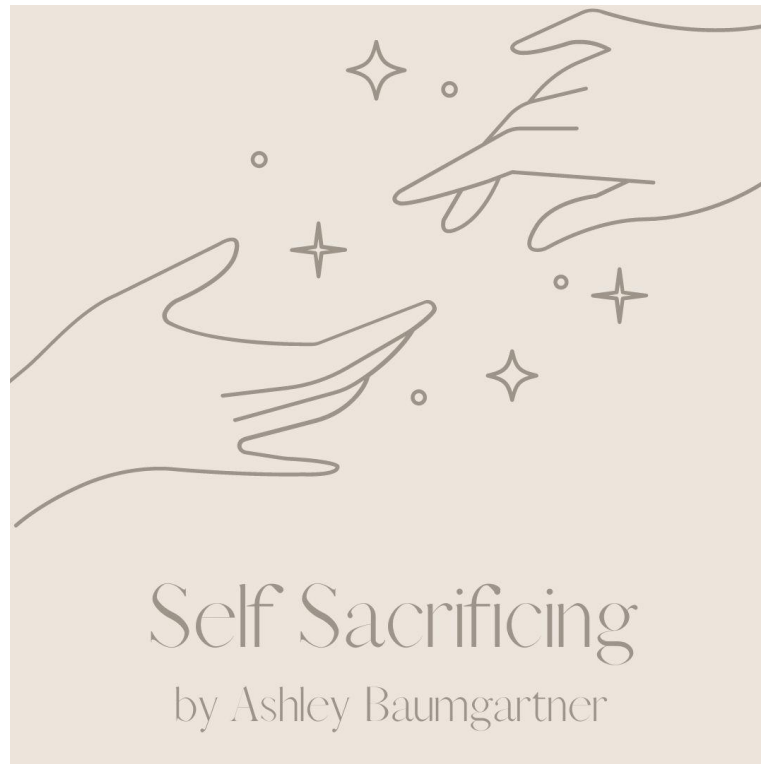
"Please just take it," her words quivered. "You will need it more than I do." She could not even look at me anymore. *Did she really think she hurt as much as she hurt me right now?* Her soft fingers shook as they rested on my fist with her little pouch enclosed within it. Even soaked in tears and despair, she was stunning. The universe framed her very existence at any moment in time.

Missing her is not possible. Missing her cuts too deep in my soul, leaving me paralyzed at the thought of her. Maybe I have to hate her, so that spot where she rested so nicely in my chest, does not hollow me out. Because pretending I never knew her is not possible after I've felt the sweet tones of her existence. If I can't have her, then I must hate her.

The walls of the canyon close in, the branches become smaller and sharper, and the air gets warmer. The branches come to an end, and I see myself falling alongside the bases of the trunks. I do not know what lies beneath me or what exactly lives above, but the darkness and emptiness are filled with nothing down here. As I look up, the world that I felt collapsing in on me, is seemingly untouched: the branches sway gently to the

cool breeze, the birds chirp softly sitting on them, and the clouds in the remote distance mimic cotton candy.

I hope I disappear when I reach the bottom of this endless canyon. I hope she's there with me. I hope we see each other. But I don't, and she is not, so we won't. So, I breathe and I let go of the dust in my palm and I watch the particles disperse in the air. I can't tell if they float or sink as I fall farther away from them. A ray of light breaks through the clouds and trees and fog, illuminating the dust. And for a second, I see the sparkle; I see them shimmer as they did once before. And so, for one last moment, I search for her in these stars.



"You poor waif," the baker coos, passing the bruised piece of cake over to you. You nod and give a meek smile of thanks to hide the hunger clawing at your stomach. Once he's gone, your mouth waters and the air is suddenly thick with the smell of sugar. You fight off the urge to wolf down the cloud-like pastry in your hands. *The others are hungry too*, you remind yourself as you make your way off the bakery's stoop.

Greedy eyes narrow in on the cake you hold, making you anxious. You shield your precious bounty by holding it tightly to your chest. Your gut growls as if it wishes it could absorb the crumbs sticking to your shirt. You walk faster, dodging the beggars and vendor stalls that call this stretch of slick cobblestone home.

"Watch out!" a female voice squeaks making you halt. A woman emerges from a building, wheeling a cart piled high with laundry ahead of her.

"Do you need help?" you ask, recognizing Kit, the washerwoman of some noble family of whom you don't remember the name.

"No, Effie, I'm fine," Kit reassures, as she pushes the cart forward. *That could be you*, your mind whispers. You feel a twinge of envy knowing Kit doesn't have to beg for food. She can pay for it. Unlike you. You have to beg or steal to fill your belly with a bit of food. The cake you hold is meant to feed one, but it would have to feed three.

You see the two other mouths up ahead. Azalea and Olympia sit on a discarded plank of rotting wood, pulling at each other's brunette braids playfully.

You whistle sharply, getting the twins' attention. They bound up to you like puppies, their eyes aglow at the sight of the golden bread you hold. They dig their tiny hands in and each gobble down a fistful of cake with abandon.

"Leave some for me!" you scold with a laugh, despite the ache you feel watching them wash down the precious meal.

"Ma really ought to feed you two more," you comment, forgetting yourself. Your mother couldn't feed them more, that's why she kicked you out. She argued that three is too many to provide for. So you, the eldest daughter, had to go. The little ones needed her more, is what she said. She's wrong though, they needed you. You were the one feeding them after all.

"You know she can't," Azalea grumbles, scowling. A lump forms in your throat seeing her face crease like that. *How like Ma she looks when she scowls*, you muse.

"Do we have to go back to her? I want to stay with you!" Olympia whines. She lunges forward and hugs your right leg, pressing her nose into your pant leg, not seeming to care about the dirt stains littered upon the old fabric.

You smile warmly at your sister for a moment before gently peeling her off. "You have to go back, Pia," you say crouching down to look the little girl in the eye. "The streets are no place for children."

That's what you believe, but it's not the truth. Plenty of children roam the streets but you'll be damned if your sisters become them. At least with your mother, they could have a roof over their heads.

"You two be on your best behavior for her, alright?" you command and they nod despite themselves. *Please don't be like me*, you plead silently, kissing each of them on the top of the head before straightening up and sending them home.

You wait until their thin and ragged frames are out of sight before leaving the square. The slums and pickpockets are soon swallowed whole by stately storefronts and aristocrats. You squint as you step into the sun; there are no alleyways to slink into here. You're utterly exposed to judgemental eyes and the weather. The sun's rays don't warm your pale and scabbing skin, possibly because of the intense coldness coming from the glaring eyes upon you. You wrap your arms around your middle but keep your head level. You hope the blush on your face gets confused for a sunburn.

A number of the rich scuttle out of your way like ants. Rightfully so, perhaps. They're the kind of people you steal from, in terms of appearance anyway. Some of these nobles come to the slums occasionally and pass out food to the needy. The honorable poor take what they are given but the more ambitious take what's in reach, like coins in the pockets of dresses or pocket watches. Knowing this, you swallow down the burning sensation of offense in your throat.

They're right to be wary, you remind yourself, well, all but one of them is. At least not anymore.

The reason for coming to this side of town is up ahead by the castle's gates. He's accompanied by a guard who stands stoically in the prince's shadow. You smile affectionately as you watch Oliver try to engage the man. His handsome face is stretched into a wide smile and his shoulders shake jovially as he attempts a joke no doubt.

"... then he punched himself in the face!" you catch the presumed punchline as you near the two young men.

"Get it?" Oliver asks, his grin slipping.

"Yes, sir. Very funny, my lord." The guard's blank expression has no visible cracks.

"Get what?" you pipe up, slapping the prince's shoulder. He spins around, a lustrous smile back in place.

"Effie!" he greets before leaning down to you. You feel a blush creep onto your face at the sudden close proximity of his. "My savior," he whispers.

"You're dismissed, Ivan," Oliver orders loudly, turning back to the guard.

"But, sir--?!" The man's blue eyes flash briefly to you. His gaze is full of distrust even though you've met before and he knows you're a friend of the prince.

"Dismissed," the prince repeats more commandingly. The guard nods and marches off. "That stick-in-the-mud. I don't know why, Father always assigns him to me when I leave the palace," Oliver complains.

"Aww, I'm so sorry your parents care about you," you tease. It takes some amount of effort to keep the bitterness out of your voice, but you manage it and he doesn't notice.

"Being universally adored is such a burden," he dramatically sighs. "Ivan certainly doesn't adore you."

"No, he certainly does not... and that's his loss," The two of you laugh. The joy-induced tension in your stomach fills you more than that cake would have. You're willing to believe that sentiment for a moment.

"I have something, rather serious. I would like to discuss with you," He scratches the back of his head nervously, mussing up his black curls in the process.

"Oh? What is it?"

"It's kind of embarrassing..."

"Bowel troubles?"

"No!" He swings the side of his hips into you as revenge for that suggestion. You stumble, easily thrown off balance by his weightier frame.

"What is it then?" you ask, between giggles.

"This," Oliver passes a carefully folded piece of paper over to you. You unfold it and your heart drops like an anchor. The flyer is issuing a challenge to any brave, young, and highborn person in the kingdom. The task is to rescue a princess trapped in a tower guarded by a dragon. The stated reward is her hand in marriage. *How ridiculous*, you think and your eyebrows shoot up when you read the next line. The girl's parents are the ones offering the reward and they've included a painting of her as an "extra incentive."

"You can't be serious," you scoff, shoving the flyer into Oliver's chest. He fumbles to unwrinkle it before folding it back up.

"You want to risk your life to rescue this princess, just because she's pretty? And then you want to marry her? A total stranger?" He opens his mouth, but you quiet him with a raised finger, "I'm not done yet. How do you know you will even like, let alone, love her? And who knows if she will even like or want to marry you? Her parents are proposing, not her."

Your chest rises and falls rapidly after your tirade and blood roars in your ears. You blink away the tears gathering in the corners of your eyes before they spill and give you away. Oliver gapes at you, taken back. Then his mouth settles into a firm line as he gathers his thoughts before responding.

"I know it sounds crazy. But this-- she could be-- my chance to choose the woman I marry instead of just settling for whatever bride is placed in front of me. And we won't marry for at least a month after she's safe, so we can get to know each other."

"A month is not enough to base a lifetime on!" your voice cracks, the pain showing for a moment.

"But it can be!" Oliver fires back, "I've read so many stories where people wed after less."

"Stories aren't real," you counter softly, too softly for him to hear. His brow furrows as he tries to but he can't and you won't repeat it.

"Effie, I just have this feeling that it's going to work between us. I think she's the one." His voice is so genuine and hopeful, your heart wilts.

"Then I wish you the best of luck," The smile you toss his way is just a painful grit of teeth. You speed up your strides, desperate to get away from him and all these people. He doesn't take the hint, instead he catches your wrist and spins you around. The movement is so poised it's almost as if the two of you were locked in a dance.

"I was kind of hoping you'd come with me?"

"Why?" you blurt and you can't help from adding curtly, "I wouldn't want to intrude on you and your new bride."

"Please, come with me? I need someone to watch my back."

"What about one of the palace guards? They are more capable in a fight than I.

"But I need someone with resourcefulness if I'm going to slay a dragon, and that's you," his voice is thick with earnestness and your defenses crumble. But the rest of your body doesn't feel the release. Your rib cage seems to squeeze your chest when you reply.

"Then yes, I'll go with you," in his joy, Oliver lifts your hand and places a light kiss on your knuckles.

"Once more you save me from boredom and solitude," he enthuses. "Meet me at the gates tomorrow morning!"

And with that he's gone and you're left alone to recover from the whirlwind.

...

The wind tosses and tangles your hair as you stand in the cold, waiting. *Why am I here?* You sigh and shake your head at your apparent lack of emotional preservation. But the heartache is duller now and you feel more in control.

You smile, catching sight of the prince through the bars of the gates. He walks confidently toward you carrying knapsacks stuffed with supplies. Your first impulse is to ask which one contains food.

"Are you sure we will need all that?" you ask instead, watching him struggle to unlock the gate with his hands full.

"Do you want to survive?" His serious-sounding tone is countered by the raising of a single eyebrow.

"Yes," you laugh. He passes you two bags in a 'there-you-go' gesture. You toss the heavier of the two over your shoulder. Seeming to read your mind, Oliver opens one of his bags and hands you a cake wrapped in cloth. Unlike the one from yesterday, this pastry isn't cold. It must have just come from the oven.

Gingerly, you take a piece off the cake and chew with more care than you would have if you were alone. Or more specifically not with Oliver. He's not paying you any attention, rather he's fussing with the supplies and the bayonet he carries. But you aren't willing to take the chance that he turns to see you eating like a starving rat.

"Let's go!" the prince announces. You freeze briefly, mid-bite, when his gaze flashes to you. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to take any special notice of the crumbs clinging to your chin. You wipe your face before making your way down the street.

Oliver's part of the city is quiet this early in the morning. Only a few shopkeepers are visible through frosted windows, restocking their shelves. No customers yet; the nobility are, presumably, still sound asleep. However, your side of the city isn't nearly as tranquil.

Loud drunks and gamblers shamle their way home and household servants skitter about with newly laundered clothes and washed plates. Your ears ring from the cacophony of conversation; you hear bits and pieces here and there. Wilson curses the man who won his rent money that he foolishly gambled away and two maids fret over a stubborn stain that remains on their lady's shirt.

Oliver's face twitches and he shifts closer to you. He's woefully out of place among the frantic hustle and bustle of the lower class. His ears seem to be overwhelmed by the hoarse, scratching, blunt and rude tones. He's more used to the refrained sopranos and baritones of court.

Embarrassment and an odd kind of protectiveness over this dreary place wage war in your chest. The sour battle comes to a stalemate when you leave the city's limits. The unfamiliarity of the outskirts is refreshing, making the stark differences between your life and your friend's seem nonexistent. Now, you and Oliver gawk, and stare wide-eyed. You have spent the majority of your life in the city. Rolling hills and towering trees seem more at home in dreams than right in front of your eyes.

"I've seen paintings of this flower," Oliver mutters, bending over said blossom. In the pale sunlight the flower's petals shimmer like polished metal. Its natural hue is dark bronze but it's tinged with gold in the right light. *Like Oliver's skin tone*, that unbidden thought makes your heart race.

"We should keep going," you clear your throat and turn away from the prince.

...

"I need to rest," you announce, shrugging off your bags. Your legs shake and your stomach growls with hunger once more. That one cake hasn't been enough to sustain you all day, but you've made do. You're used to the emptiness in the pit of your stomach but the shakiness in your arms and legs is new.

"But I thought 'we needed to keep going?'"

"Now we need to stop," you bend down and sit on top of one of your bags, the bigger one.

"Don't sit on that!" Oliver shouts and you gap at him. *There wasn't any food in my bags. What's the matter?* You think. You don't budge from your seat; not out of defiance, but tiredness.

"What's wrong?"

"There's a cloak in that bag for the princess. An early wedding present, if you will." He informs you bashfully.

"Oh," you awkwardly stand and sit on the other bag, swallowing down the lump in your throat. You had almost forgotten the reason for your impromptu quest.

"That's nice of you-- to give her a gift."

"Thanks, I hope she likes it."

"I know she will," you say brightly, giving your own heart a twist. You know this princess will love his gift, and she will love him. And you will watch your friend be happy without you. You wonder if you would be able to be happy for him.

...

Your body goes cold as you peer into the chasm. Then your eyes go to the rickety bridge across it that leads to the princess's tower.

"I don't like heights," you croak out, wrapping your arms around yourself.

"Neither do I," Oliver sighs heavily, "but there's no other way across."

The prince squares his shoulders and approaches the bridge. A feeling urges you to follow him, to try and do what you could to make sure he doesn't fall. Seemingly just as wary of the possibility of slipping, Oliver takes out a rope and ties it around his waist.

"Hold this... just in case," he instructs breathlessly, handing you the end of the rope.

"If you fall-- I'm not sure I'm strong enough to lift you," you gesture to your thin and malnourished frame. Then you point at the posts at the bridge's threshold, "Maybe we should tie the rope to one of those."

"I trust you, more than I trust those posts," Oliver says. Now that he mentions it, you take a closer look at the posts the bridge is bound to. The wood is old and leaning rather precariously. *He has a point*, you think.

"Ready?" he asks.

"When you are." With that the prince dips a toe onto one of the planks of the bridge. You exhale in relief, watching the bridge sway not nearly as much as you thought it would. Oliver smiles at you from over his shoulder, encouraged too.

He continues onward carefully, testing the weight of one foot before placing the other. Slowly but surely, he makes it to the other side. Once there, he removes the rope around his waist.

"It's safe! Just do exactly what I did!" you faintly hear him shout to you. You nod and swallow, your voice is too brittle to be trusted.

You near the bridge and take a step, the first plank sways and you instantly retract your foot. *I don't remember it swaying that much for Oliver*, you stare distrustfully at the board in front of you. You take a deep breath before trying again.

The bridge still swings but this time you're prepared and clasp the rope rails for support. Once your full weight is on the first plank, you move to the next then the next. Until finally you find yourself a few strides away from your friend. He claps for you like an overzealous audience member moved to elation at a performance. You flush and take the hand he offers to help you over the last plank. Your moment of respite is short-lived, however. There's a princess awaiting a rescue.

Oliver starts walking faster, his giddiness to meet the girl overcoming his senses. He seems to have forgotten the dragon also waiting inside the castle's walls. You catch his arm and remind him of that one obstacle in your way. His face falls, becoming solemn and serious. And he reaches for the loaded bayonet gun on his shoulder.

"Stay behind me," he cautions as you both climb the castle's steps. Adrenaline flows through your veins and floods your muscles with newfound strength. It distracts you from the hunger-induced dizziness making your vision blurry. But your mind still functions.

"We can't just waltz in there," you caution him back, quickly you scan the exterior of the ancient castle and spot a vine that climbs all the way to a second-floor window. It's a burly, green stem that looks strong enough to hold the weight of a person.

"There, we can climb that." You announce, pointing at the vine. "I thought you didn't like heights?"

"I don't like dragons, more." Oliver smiles giving his agreement to the change in plan.

The two of you go to the wall, quietly. You climb first then him, each of you finding your way up the vine easily enough.

"It's better than the bridge," you comment once you're through the arching window. Oliver's reply is cut off by rustling.

"Who are you?" a soft, feminine voice asks. You and Oliver turn toward it and catch your first glimpse of the princess. She's a short, pear-shaped woman with shiny red hair. Her wide eyes flicker back and forth from you to Oliver. Your eyes leave her and go to your friend. He looks breathless at the sight of the princess causing bile to rise in your throat. Irrationally, you feel dislike for her churn in your stomach.

"Who are you?" the princess repeats, her focus mostly on the prince. You lightly smack your friend's arm to make him stop staring and answer her.

"I'm Prince Oliver, my lady," he bows, then gestures to you, "and this is my friend Effie."

"Your highness," you clumsily curtsy to her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both. I'm Princess Isador Regis Filia. I thank you for coming to my rescue."

"The pleasure is all mine," Oliver blushes.

"Shall we go, then?" You suggest, stiffly.

"Yes, of course. We can just leave the way we came."

"No, we can't," the princess disagrees. "You have to slay the dragon. Wherever I go that beast will follow, it's a part of the witch's curse."

"A witch cursed you? Why?" Oliver asks.

"I wish I knew. I don't know what I did to deserve this," Isador shrugs sadly.

"I doubt you did anything, personally. No one knows why those old hags do what they do." the prince reassures her. "I'll kill the dragon," he decides, taking a step forward he adds, "please stay behind me. I'll protect you with my life."

"You're very gallant, sir." The princess grins coyly, pearly white teeth showing.

"I aim to please," he says, then they share a light laugh. You cross your arms glumly, not quite in on the joke.

"Do you have anything I could use as a weapon, my lady? Oliver has his gun, but I just have the clothes I'm wearing."

"I don't think so, I'm sorry," Isador responds. Her face scrunching up in distaste at the mention of weaponry.

"That's alright. I'll protect you both," Your friend resolves, swallowing. You know him well enough to know he's not sure he'll be able to do so, but the princess is easily charmed.

With only one gun between the three of you, you all begin descending the stairs. The scuffling of your shoes echoes off the high ceilings as does the sound of everyone's breathing. Which grows more labored the closer you get to the bottom of the circular stairwell.

"I'd like to think this place didn't always look so bleak," the princess's comment ends with a gasp at the realization that her voice carried. It's met with the low moan of the dragon awaking from its slumber.

"We shouldn't talk anymore," Oliver whispers to her. She nods, curls bouncing, in agreement.

Your little party makes its way to the bottom of the staircase; you cross the large stone expanse of the hallway and near the great hall. The prince removes his bayonet gun from his shoulder and readies it. He peers into the hall from around the wall the three of you are lined up against. Oliver instantly jerks back, startling the princess behind him.

"It's waking up," he whispers, "now, may be the best time for me to attack."

"You're not facing it alone," you protest softly.

"What choice do I have? Neither of you is armed." You look up and down the hall before you and see a rusty suit of armor on the other wall. The inanimate knight holds an equally neglected sword. *It's better than nothing*; you separate from the group to grab it.

"Effie, no," Oliver hisses. You ignore him and inch your way over to your quarry. The steel clangs softly as you peel back the knight's fingers to free the sword.

Your heart falls to your feet and dread fills your stomach when you hear the dragon roar. You whirl around, sword in hand and expect to face the fiery maw of the beast. Instead, you see a metallic whip of a tail coming for you.

You grimace as the tail spikes cut into your homely shirt and slice your skin. You drop your sword and place your trembling hands on the area right above your belly button; the site of the gash. You hear the muffled sound of another roar and the pop of a gun going off. You don't look up at the deadened commotion; you're too consumed by the sight before your eyes. Spots of burgundy red are appearing on your fraying shirt and smearing your white hands.

The muscles in your legs lose their strength and your body folds in. You collapse to your knees then onto your backside. The weight of your torso and head, suddenly too much for your papery legs to hold up. You prop yourself up with one arm's elbow and with the other arm's hand you tug at your top. You free the hem from the tight waistband you

wedged it into. You tuck your chin into your neck to give yourself a better view of your bloodied stomach. You suck in a sharp breath and your lips part a bit in shock.

Blood bubbles at the fleshy tearing like water at the lip of a stream. Your body is cold and numb except for where the wound lies, there it's hot and tingling.

"Are you ok?" Isador questions. You hear the swishing of her puffy skirts as she nears you. *She wants to help.* You realize.

You want to say, *I'm fine*, but the words don't come. You open your mouth and widen your jaw to form the sounds, but you don't say anything humanly comprehensible. Just whine like a street dog in distress.

"Oh my..." the princess gasps daintily beside you. Morbidly curious, you watch out of the corner of your left eye the princess blanch. She skitters backward, shaking like a leaf then she grabs her bodice as if her heart is in pain. *You don't know me? Why are you heartbroken?* You want to retort but instead you laugh. It's a breathy and wheezy sound that only the dying make. It's irrational to laugh right now, you know, but it's also senseless to get weepy over someone you just met. So you laugh, a little haughtily, in the naïve girl's face.

The laughter drains from you when you hear a third shrill roar. This time, you look up just in time to see Oliver take aim at the scaly beast. The bayonet gun pulses and a bullet embeds itself into the dragon's chest. Greyish green scales fall off the dragon's body, they shimmer like seashells when touched by the sunlight coming in through the torn ceiling. The dragon's body slumps forward, the prince's moves out of the way before the creature falls. The ground tremors beneath you, the whole castle creaking loudly.

Once the dust clears, Oliver's attention is solely on you. The bayonet gun in his hands clatters to the floor, now as uninteresting to him as a stalk of grass.

"Effie?" he asks. His voice cracks, making your heart twinge.

"I'm fine," this time the words come, though they are quiet. He shouldn't have been able to hear you but it seems he does. He runs to you, not sparing Isador a single glance before dropping to his knees beside you.

He wraps one arm around you as if intending to lift you like a bride. You feel his warm hand latch onto your bare shoulder as he scoots you nearer to him. You eagerly move

closer to him, welcoming the unexpected but not uncharacteristic tenderness. Oliver's brown fingers brush the wound making you flinch and shut your eyes tight.

"Sorry... I'm so sorry," he mumbles, lifting his hand. The aforementioned hand moves back and forth, mid-air, uncertainly.

"You're going to be ok... I promise you." There's a quiver in his voice that he tries, unsuccessfully, to hide by clearing his throat. You nod, you'll believe him as long as he's here.

You notice a coil of dark hair come loose from its place behind the prince's ear. You take a deep breath and focus on lifting your leaden right arm and icy hand. Your fingertips graze his cheek before your eyes close of their own accord.

spring cleaning

BY SAEMI CHO



"Honestly, Mom, the house is a mess. I don't know if we can get it cleared out on time."

Mom kept staring at the TV, which was playing CNN on mute.

The only other person in the room was a lady in a motorized wheelchair; she was parked in the adjacent corner, opposite a tall ficus plant, and facing the wall. It wasn't clear if this positioning was deliberate.

"Anyway," I continued. "Obviously we'll do the best we can."

After another silence, I video-called Maggie. The neurologist had recommended we keep to a routine, though I wasn't sure that advice still applied at this stage.

"Say hi," I instructed when Maggie picked up, pressing the side of my face against Mom's. On the other end, Maggie split into large pixels before reintegrating into a smear.

The picture quality was that of a painting left out in the rain. We waved to each other with exaggerated swipes.

"Hi, hi, hi. Hi Mom, hi Lana. How's her eye?"

"It's okay. Seems healed." I swiveled the phone inches from Mom's face, tapping at random spots on the screen to get it to focus. "Paparazzi's here, Mom. Look at the camera."

"What about her elbow?"

"Looks okay."

"Wasn't there a sore there — "

"Yeah, it's fine."

"Is there at least a cushion on the armrest?"

"Oh my god. Yes, there is. I told Malee about it the last time I was here."

"Alright, alright. Hey, I can't talk right now but I'll see you guys so soon! Okay? Bye!"

Maggie burst into pixels again as we waved, physical distance demonstrated via a bad internet connection. She had moved away from home ten years ago and hadn't been back for any meaningful amount of time since. Ostensibly I was fine with being the local child, except when faced with any sort of situation that reminded me of it.

Now that the ritual of our visit was over, I crouched down in front of the wheelchair. "I have to go too, but I'll be back with Maggie in a couple days. We can update you on the house, okay?"

Watching for a reaction was a habit I had yet to break. Mom's eyes remained almost closed. On TV, three anchors were laughing in silence. As I prepared to leave, Malee came bustling through the hallway. She owned two board and cares in the area and was always moving on fast-forward.

"Hey," I called. "I'm heading out. Can you please keep an eye on her elbow?"

"Of course, of course," Malee said, patting her own elbow. "Sue! You okay?" she yelled at Mom, then, without pretending to wait for an answer, said to me, "Maybe I can tie a bandage there to keep the cushion in place."

"Sure, that sounds good," I said uncertainly. "Let me know if you need anything else for next time."

I stood again and surveyed Mom from this height. Her knobby bent limbs looked like a dead spider's. "Bye," I told her, putting my hand on her knee for a brief moment.

Outside, a couple of the other residents were parked around the property like lawn decor, squinting into the sun with open mouths. They were wax figures, or liminal creatures awaiting reanimation. I hurried to my car without looking back.

#

Mom's house was tucked away off the main road, in one of the pastel stucco developments that dotted the hillside in fractals. When I walked in, Henry was already lying in wait, huddled behind the couch with only one shiny eye peeking out.

"Come eat, you little hellcat," I said, dumping my purse on the ground. The feed dispenser had already released a pile of kibble, but apparently Henry required a strict minimum separation radius from me.

I sat at the dining table and surveyed the place. Behind Henry, lurking in the half-dark, was the growing Everest of possessions. Mom gave the impression of being a no-nonsense organized minimalist, but unearthing her life and home proved the opposite. The house was turning out to be a clown car of a building where each door yielded disproportional amounts of junk that had calcified over the decades.

Finally, Henry emerged from his hiding spot and slunk over to the food bowl, managing to knock over an avalanche of decades-old utility bills on the way. Sometimes he seemed not to miss Mom at all, especially if distracted with food, and sometimes he roamed the upstairs hallways yowling at four in the morning. She loved him despite the surliness; to me, he was yet another thing to worry about packing up. Since I'd gotten here, we had mostly been treating each other with a mutual distrust, though a few times a day he deigned to walk a double figure-8 between my legs.

The pile of stuff seemed to grow larger in my periphery the more I tried not to look at it. Tomorrow, Maggie would be here. It could wait until then.

#

As promised, she arrived at nine. I trudged downstairs and held back a stab of resentment when another knock sounded right before I opened the door.

"You don't have a key?" I grouched, even though the answer was obvious.

"Why would I have a key?" Maggie asked. "Hi."

She looked the same — sharp chin like mine, straight brows untouched by tweezers. The single duffel slung over her shoulder dwarfed her and gave her the air of a service member on leave.

"Hi," I said back. Effusive greetings had never come easily to us. "Come on up."

"Are we both staying in our old rooms?"

"Yeah, unless you want to stay in Mom's for some reason?" We walked to the room opposite mine and I announced, "Welcome to your shrine," with a grand arm sweep, opening the door.

Both our bedrooms had essentially remained untouched, preserved to the point where it almost seemed like a memorial.

Posters, pictures, and magazine cutouts still dotted the walls, sun-bleached and fragile, tape edges curling up with age.

"Whoa." Maggie stepped inside gingerly as if she were disturbing a crime scene. "Jesus. This is bizarre."

"Yep. The whole place is a time warp." I leaned against the doorframe, watching while she brought her bag in and glanced around.

"I mean, it looks the same, but sanitized," she observed. "Reminds me of how I knew whenever you went through my stuff, actually."

I rolled my eyes. "Please. I always put everything back exactly where it was."

"Yeah, but you did it too well. That's what gave you away."

"Oh my god," I said, but also huffed out a laugh. "Are you hungry or what? There's bread."

"Bread," she repeated dubiously but followed me out anyway, staying behind me like she was in a stranger's home.

The coffee machine had already clicked on via timer and was percolating in angry breaths. Henry was lying on his back by the sliding door, front paws curled up by his shoulders. They looked like little white mittens contrasting with the gunmetal of his coat. When Maggie squatted and reached out to pet him, he raised his head but didn't attack.

"He hates me," I said, popping slices of bread into the toaster and pouring out the coffee.

"He's just scared," Maggie dismissed. Henry's tail was snaking over the linoleum in a roiling sine wave, somehow both threatening and pleased at the same time. Maggie got up and sat at the dining table after I handed her a mug. I sat across from her. In the light, I saw that her cheekbones were dotted with faint sunspots. Some grays had also invaded her hairline.

"You look the same," I said.

"Mm." She took a sip of coffee. "So do you." Her eyes flitted past my shoulder to the Everest behind me.

"That's like, ten percent of it."

"We'll get it done. I bet we'll finish by the end of this week."

Henry still had his head up and was looking at her as if skeptical, but I believed her. I always did.

#

A dumpster came on loan from the city an hour later. Maggie instituted a ten-second rule: assess an item for ten seconds and if still unsure, trash it. We started a “to shred” pile in the corner by Henry’s food bowl, then a second one by the front door. Henry remained stationed at the top of the stairs, peering through the balusters as if supervising the whole thing.

We moved back and forth through the house, driven by having a shared goal, and the work began to have a satisfying rhythm to it. By noon, the kitchen and living room were done. By nightfall, the study had also been cleared out, leaving ghostly outlines of furniture on the walls. My body ached and my fingers were raw from handling so much cardboard, but our progress was visible in how Everest had almost been razed.

“I feel like we need to go through some fun stuff,” Maggie announced from far away. Her voice carried an unfamiliar echo. I listened to her descend the stairs into the living room, where I was lying on the carpet.

“No,” I moaned. “No, no. No more today.”

She came into view, standing over me while holding a box. “C’mon. This is just junk from my room. You can lie there and be my audience.”

I flopped onto my stomach as she sat down next to my head and went through the contents. Unsurprisingly, it was full of tchotchkes and other things that only held value through associated memories. She narrated their origins like a docent while I laid my head on my arms and listened with closed eyes.

“Look,” she eventually said. I opened my eyes and saw that she was showing me a photo. “Where is this from?”

The image was zoomed in on the three of us, at what looked like a national park. Craggy mountains lined the background.

Clearly it’d been a windy day — our hair was whipped across our faces, mouths open in laughter. I couldn’t tell any of us apart. I couldn’t even remember taking the picture at all.

#

The day's accomplishments left a sheen of jubilation that lasted through breakfast the next morning, but was wearing thin by the time I pulled up in front of the board and care.

"This is nice," Maggie commented blandly. "The yellow paint makes it look cheerful."

"Yeah, Malee keeps the place pretty clean. I think her family helps out, too," I said, just as blandly.

We got out and made our way up the driveway, Maggie trailing me. Inside, it was almost the same exact setup as the last time I'd been there, except the lady in the motorized wheelchair was actually facing the TV this time. I considered telling Maggie the story, seeing an opportunity for a moment of shared humor, but it passed before I could make up my mind.

"Mom!" Maggie chirped. She shuffled over and bent down to give her an awkward hug.

I hung back for a bit, poking my head into the kitchen to greet Malee before joining Maggie, who had taken a seat on the couch. One hand was reached over at an awkward angle and holding onto Mom's pinky.

"Is she wearing the same outfit as the last time you called me?" she asked.

"Yeah. She doesn't have many options, though. Her wardrobe basically needs to be like baby clothes, you know? Easy on, easy off."

"Oh. Right."

"Do you want to talk to her alone? I can leave you for a bit."

"It's okay. You guys call me every few days, there's not much to update."

The TV was showing a round-robin talk show today, again on mute. I picked at the couch seams before sitting forward and looking at Mom. "Maggie's been a huge help with the house, Mom. It's going really well, so I guess I worried you for no reason."

“Oh my god, Mom. There’s so much stuff, though! Where’d you even get all that stuff?” Maggie asked, more animated now. The two of us tittered unnaturally.

“We’re almost done,” I continued. “The city will help us haul away the garbage —”

“In a couple days?” Maggie interrupted, blinking at me as if she didn’t already know this information. We were on an imaginary stage, performing a one-act play.

“Yup,” I confirmed. “And we’re donating a lot of things. Maybe we’ll donate Henry, too.”

On cue, we left a pause for Mom’s reaction. Maggie patted her hand. I was smiling but the expression seemed heavy and foreign. We turned back to the TV in silence and watched the on- screen hosts argue noiselessly.

A vindictive part of me reveled in the unadulterated awfulness without a phone screen acting as a protective factor. But there was also a strange kind of disappointment. I’d had expectations without even realizing it — that with the two of us, it would’ve been different.

Later, the programming switched over to the news and we said our goodbyes, me with my hand on Mom’s knee and Maggie leaning down to hug her shoulders from behind. In the car, Maggie immediately angled her body towards the door to stare out the window. All I could see was the back of her head, white strands skimming through a sea of black like fishing line. I turned my attention back to the road, watching the turn signals in front of us sync up and fall apart in cycles. We didn’t speak.

#

As we worked our way through the upstairs, the cleaning was yielding diminishing returns and I was spending more and more time getting buoyed away by nostalgia. We took turns asking each other, “You think she’d want this?”, while holding up things like an old passport, or a gaudy brooch of a dragonfly with emerald eyes.

Despite that, the master bedroom was finished up on the second to last night. We had cheated a little and packed a couple boxes of heirlooms and other random items that would probably sit in my closet until I had to dig them out in an unknown number of years and repeat the ten-second test. I wondered if the process would be more straightforward then.

It was almost midnight when I hauled the remaining boxes of her clothes to the foyer. Henry was sitting in the middle of the empty living room and looked very small.

"Hey," I called up to Maggie. "You want any more pizza?"

"No, I'm okay," came the reply.

She was in her room, standing by the window that overlooked the backyard. Beyond that, you could see all the way down the street leading into our cul-de-sac.

"Look," she said, pointing. I stood next to her and peered outside. The guts of the dumpster were visible from our view. "There's so much."

"I know." I looked behind me. The closet door was hanging open, trailing contents onto the carpet. About half the drawers were open and empty. "Are you going to take anything?"

"Probably. Mostly dumb things."

"Dumb things are still worthwhile. Most of what we have are dumb things, anyway." I pressed my index finger against the glass until it bowed at the joint. "Do you remember when Mom used to stand here in the dark and wait for us to come home?"

"Of course," she said with a short laugh. "She was like a bat. I could've sworn she slept upside down sometimes."

I laughed, too. We stood there together, looking out the window as if expecting to manifest a car crawling up the street, but it remained empty. The plan was to visit Mom again tomorrow, finish packing up our respective rooms, and then Maggie would leave the day after. Thankfully, she was taking Henry with her. It would be over.

#

My room was in a similar state as Maggie's, a lazy pile taking up most of the space. I sat down and started picking through it, adding to the trash bag as needed. At some point, there was a soft rattle of Henry's kibble being released in the kitchen. Maggie's footsteps went up and down the stairs before I heard the sounds of her getting ready for bed. We had to get up early tomorrow for the dumpster collection, but I kept on, driven by a methodical kind of inertia.

My pace slowed when I dragged out a box of journals from under the bed. Some entries were typical, painstaking recounts of truth or dare sessions or sneaking out early from school, but most of the pages were covered in what appeared to be exorcisms of childhood rage: scribbles spiraling out from the center in variable colors and nib sizes. I looked through each of them, oddly jealous of my past self and her capability to be consumed by only one singular emotion.

The final entry of the last journal had its bottom corner dogeared, a habit I'd never picked up. I stared at it, then flicked at the paper to gauge the probability that it had been an accident. Most likely it wasn't – the crease was sharp, almost certainly pressed in by a fingernail.

"Hey." Maggie stood in the doorway, holding Henry against her with one arm. She offered me a box of tissues with her other hand.

"Thanks," I said. My voice felt stuck in my chest. When I coughed, it was like some sort of signal for the tears to finally flow down my face.

"I guess grief is nocturnal," she tried to joke. Her own eyes looked hot and swollen.

I made a noise that sounded like a laugh, a choke, and a sob all mixed together. "She went through my stuff," I said. "The stuff that no one was supposed to see."

"Same. I wonder what she thought."

"She was probably horrified," I said, even though I didn't actually think so. I flicked at the paper again. Maybe it was a message, or a simple acknowledgement. As if Mom were saying, *you were here, and so was I*.

There were two photos tucked between the last page and the back cover. The first was a copy of the same picture that Maggie had found, but the other was unfamiliar. There

was only one person in frame, with the same wind-whipped hair and anonymity. I studied it restlessly, trying to compare side-by-side with the group photo as a reference, but still, it was impossible to identify. She could have been any one of us.



-November 22 2042: Rosmarinus Tsuin-

I can't believe I'm imagining that again, that old super robot series always fascinated me when I was younger. I was so inspired and in awe as a kid by that mech. A show where robots go around being heroes, saving people from monsters. My chest would always be filled with energy every time I saw action scenes from it. Though, I do have to thank it. It got me curious about the outside world, I even thought about wanting to go around helping people. But, thanks to the Tsuin bloodline, I can't even do that. They'd just keep me in that damned mansion. That show also caused me to be a bit stubborn too... I ended up running away when I was about to turn 14. I thought I was a stealth machine when I got out, but it turns out that my mom convinced the Overseer to let me go and recall the pursuit. And this is how I ended up as I am... 4 years later and I'm enjoying myself while travelling the world, what I wanted to see in person a long time ago.

-Western Border of Satellite: 6:30PM-

"Lady Schatten, looks like you're the star of the show now!" The knight promptly shouts, looking at a woman wearing a black and yellow overcoat with her distinguishable silver hair and azure eyes, wielding a large, white lance with the insignia of a lotus engraved

on it, with full intent to strike a man wearing glasses with a black suit and white vest with his short, brown hair with white ends flowing in the cold air of the empty highway.

The man looks up at the lance wielding knight and her fierce eyes with clear intention to strike him. *You Knights are impressive as always, your coordination is almost perfect.* He thinks to himself before sticking his arm out.

-3 Kilometers South down the highway-

The black and white crystalline body of a Helminth, slowly wandering down the highway, barely reflecting the remaining light of the sky which would give off a pressuring appearance to almost anyone, slowly wandering towards the constructing city of Advent.

"Hold up there buddy." A young man walks up to the Helminth, wearing his navy blue sweater jacket with his black hair tied, giving him a small, unkempt ponytail, wielding his metal-wood bat. "A big guy like you is walking towards human turf. You're also occupying a major highway. We can't have you entering or blocking the traffic, that'll just upset the locals."

He readies his bat with his right arm, staring down the Helminth. "You've been a real pain for the locals too. Looks like I gotta show you what a hero can do and see you off!" His banter is quickly followed by many instances of crashing and thumps from his bat while avoiding the swings of an angered Helminth with its attempts to crush him. After some struggling, the Helminth was beaten.

"Welp, easy money. That thing had a pretty big bounty on his head too, least I got him before C.R. did. What to do with the money later though..." He begins slowly walking down the highway with noticeable cracks in it, before looking up and seeing a smoke trail down the road that was noticeably distant. "Wait... Smoke? Did something explode, that far off too." To his surprise, a figure appears to be falling in the air towards him. "You gotta be kidding me..." The figure was a silver haired woman with her black and yellow overcoat. "A person. Falling from the sky!" He swiftly runs under her to catch her fall, but due to the speed, he ends up falling while catching her, onto the ground, leaving a small imprint of their landing. "Sheesh! The Hell did this woman come from?" He simply stares at her in his arms, clearly out cold from earlier. "Hey, Miss! You alright? Can you hear me?" He shouts, seeing if she will respond.

-Crash site-

"The box is empty, looks like that intel was designed to throw us off." The man with the black suit and white vest says while looking at his right hand wearing gloves with marks of blood on it.

"Are you bleeding?" A short, green haired woman walks up to the man wearing her coat with her arms out of the sleeves.

"No, it's that silver haired Knights. I have a hunch that we should find her. We might be able to get something useful out of her." The man takes off the glove to notice that the blood is steaming while making a sizzling sound.

-Advent: Under Construction, 6:00 AM-

The young man gives a brief yet heavy sigh "Oh great..." He's sitting on a wooden chair facing its back, staring at his wooden bed at the silver haired woman. "What am I thinking?"

Why'd I bring her here?" Judging from her attire, she's a Knight from C.R. And I ended up pulling a lot of shenanigans just to even get out of the highway. He places his left hand on the side of his neck, rubbing it. But I can't just leave her out there, I'd never let myself live that down. A hero wouldn't do that either. He notices that the woman seems to be waking up, slowly moving around in his bed, before slowly opening her eyes.

"...Huh? Where am I?" She says with a quiet and confused tone, before sitting up in the bed and putting her hand over her forehead.

"Oh, um... You're in my home." The young man gets out of the chair, placing his hands on the top of the chair. "You got hurt, real bad. So, uh... I decided to carry you back to my place, so... Don't worry, I'm not a bad guy." He puts his left arm over his chest and points his thumb to the location of his heart "I'm Rosmarinus Tsuin, most people just call me Tsu! I'm a he-... I mean, a private detective. I usually help the locals around, sometimes getting rid of Helminths that get too close... Yeah!" *Jeez, I must look like an idiot right now...* "Oh, you must be hungry." He gazes towards the wooden counter next to his bed at

a bowl of soup he made, though it looks bland and has a fish head stuck in it. "I made some soup if you wanna try it." He grabs the bowl and slowly hands it to her.

"... Thank you, Sir Rosmarinus." She says, taking the bowl of soup and taking a sip from it and makes a silly face while doing so. *It's cold, sour, and bitter at the same time!*

Tsu scratches the back of his head "Sir Rosmarinus, that's a mouthful... Just stick with Tsu." *She can actually stomach the crap that I make?* "Erm... Who are you, might I ask? What happened yesterday too? You literally fell out of the sky onto me." Tsu asks with a concerned look and tone.

The woman perks up slightly "Oh, I'm sorry, I should've given it earlier. I'm Arcadia Schatten. I... Can't say anything about yesterday unfortunately." *Wait, what about the others?* "Oh! There's something else. There were two others with me, did you see them?" She asks, seemingly worried.

"No... You were the only one who fell out of the sky towards me." Tsu said with slight confusion.

Arcadia gives a brief and audible sigh and looks at the birch wood flooring. *You both better be okay.*

"Don't sweat it Arcadia, you don't need to tell me anything if you can't. My place is pretty sound, so just focus on getting better." Tsu says, trying to reassure her.

Arcadia gives a somewhat gloomy expression. "I'm afraid I can't do that Sir Ros-... Tsu, you're very kind, but I need to return to the base."

"So you value your objectives more than your own life..." Tsu says while squinting his eyes. "Agh! Alright then. I hate it when people do that." He puts his hands over the back of his head "Change of plans, I'll give you a ride back to your base, you're wounded, and out of money. It'll be pretty difficult on your own." He says while pointing his finger up to the wooden ceiling.

"Wait, I don't wish to trouble you any more Tsu..." She says.

"I already said don't sweat it, I'm used to doing stuff like this. Besides, I want to see you back at base... So your boss can pay me for all the things I did for you. Let's see, there's

the first aid, lodging, and the soup I made for you. That'll probably be around 3,000." He said with a somewhat cheerful and boastful expression.

Arcadia simply looks at him in shock and awe "Pay you?" *He has no idea who he'll have to deal with.*

"This hero better get his money or you won't be going back to your base, Arcadia." Tsu says this winking with a smile on his face.

Arcadia looks at Tsu and sighs "Alright, Sir Tsu, but do you know where my base is?"

Eh... He gave me this dress because my uniform would attract unwanted attention, and my pursuers could possibly track me down with it on... "I've never worn civilian clothing before, why do people wear clothing that doesn't protect them?" Arcadia looks at her hair and then towards a pair of scissors.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, I'm all set!" Arcadia says, running towards Tsu.

"Whoa! What'd you do to your hair? Tsu says while staring at Arcadia and putting his hand on his hip, staring at Arcadia with her hair shortened by almost a foot.

"I thought my hair would get in the way while traveling, it also might attract attention, so I cut it.." Arcadia lets her fingers touch together and somewhat locks them and looks away slightly. "Does it look weird?"

"N-No, it looks really good, Arcadia." Tsu looks away briefly, seeming slightly flustered and grabs Arcadia's arm, taking her to his motorcycle "Let's get going, this'll be a long trip."

"Whoa! Tsu, this town! I've never seen such a busy place like this!" Arcadia says with some excitement, looking at all the red brick and wooden buildings with an old fashioned design, giving a comfortable view of everything. "Tsu, what is this place? It has a fox for a sign, do they sell it?"

"Eh, kind of, they actually sell hamburgers here, do you wanna try one?" Tsu asks, not expecting much of an answer.

"I might consider it. You know, Tsu. I've never actually left the base by myself... I only ever did missions in areas that had already seen ruin, or other C.R. facilities." Arcadia says while staring at the wooden signs that hang over some of the buildings.

"If you'd like, we can stay here a day or two and I can show you around..." Tsu tries to suggest, before getting Arcadia's quick response.

"No, Sir Tsu. I can't, I have to report back to my base, I'm still on a mission." She says with a serious tone with her gloomy expression slowly returning.

Tsu simply stares at her while standing next to his bike. *She's like a caged animal, never seen the outside world before. Dammit... I guess I have to pull something again. I'm going to regret this later... But it's time for you to see what it's like to have no restraints Arcadia.* What follows is a loud snap of metal. "Oh geez!" Tsu shouts, immediately grabbing the attention of Arcadia who looks at him. "Um... The handle for the brakes broke off my bike... I gotta bring it to the shop now to get it fixed, might take a day or two. We'll have to delay your return, Arcadia." Tsu says this with a hint of regret.

Arcadia takes a few steps towards him. "No, it's alright Tsu. I'm sorry for your bike." "Don't sweat it, there are plenty of areas to rest around here, we've got some time to spare. See anything you wanna look at?" Tsu says with a brief smile.

Located in a nearby window, a man wearing a black suit and white vest is looking down at the both of them from the second floor of one of the buildings. "She's here, we've got our target." The man says while crossing his arms.

-C.R. Facility, Germany-

"Overseer, the others will be ready for deployment after a month of recovery. We couldn't locate Arcadia, potentially captured."

"Tch. Arcadia is a valuable asset, get the intelligence department and find out where she is. I'll retrieve her myself if I have to,"

-7:30 AM Advent-

"The shop says they'll need another day to find a part for the break, sorry, but it'll be a bit longer." Tsu says before grabbing Arcadia's hand. "Since we're here, we can explore the place for a bit, anything you fancy?"

"Thank you very much Tsu." She starts to look like she's contemplating and then puts her fists in her palm. "There are actually a few places I'd like to visit." Arcadia ends up dragging Tsu around local shopping malls and libraries, reading the books that interest her with Tsu being seemingly bored in these locations.

-1:00 PM-

"I'd never known the world was so vibrant and lively, thanks for showing me around the area Tsu." Arcadia says this with a gleeful smile on her face, looking around the local park, looking at all the trees and grass in the area while they both sit around on the wooden bench.

"Yeah, these places are pretty nice and all... But the real fun's about to start." Tsu says with a smile on his face.

"Real fun?" Arcadia has a curious expression.

"Hell yeah." Tsu responds before grabbing Arcadia's hand and bringing her down the park towards their next destination.

"Here it is!" Tsu says, while the both of them are staring at a building named Game-Hall, a white building that seems out of place with all the red brick and wooden buildings surrounding it.

"Hello Tsu. It's been a whole year since you showed up here." An old lady walks up to the front "Were you travelling again?" The old lady notices Arcadia "Oh my, and here I thought you'd never get a girlfriend." She says with a grin on her face as Arcadia's face goes slightly red hearing that.

"Gosh, Granny. She's just my cousin coming to visit. Let's get in Arcadia, it's time for some fun." Tsu says while grabbing Arcadia's arm and pulling her in.

Tsu immediately goes to the arcade machine that has you aim a gun at the screen to shoot targets that pass by the screen. After some time of Tsu playing, he saw that his score put him in third place.

"Fun, right? It's been a while since I did this, but it's a nice warm up. I'll be reaching the leader boards all over the place here soon." Tsu says, sounding mildly boastful.

Arcadia stares at the arcade machine before glancing at Tsu and asking "Can I give it a try?"

"Of course, here's my action card." He hands her the card to give it a try "These games can be tricky sometimes, you might have some issues at the start. Your training will give you some help here" Tsu simply watches to see how Arcadia will do, to which she ends up getting first place in the game.

"Yeah! I won!" She says, seeming more cheerful than before.

Tsu looks at the game and grabs the side of the arcade machine *Curses! You Knights and their superhuman reflexes. Time to get serious.* "There's plenty of other games in the arcade, y'know. Wanna play a few more matches with me?" Tsu beckons her towards the other games.

"Of course, Tsu!" What ends up following is Arcadia reaching the top scores on every arcade machine that Tsu had suggested.

Tsu seemingly mildly infuriated *Curse you Knights with your superhuman reflexes, she's beat me in all of them and it's her first time here!* He walks up to another game which is simply just the design of a cartoonish shark head.

"Tsu, are you sure about this one? Y'know it's a guessing game, you have to place your hand in its mouth." The old lady says with a mildly serious tone.

"What's wrong with this game Granny?" Arcadia says with slight concern.

"If you end up guessing wrong, it'll bite your hand off." The old lady says while sweeping the checkered floor and winking.

"Doesn't that seem a little dangerous for a game?" Arcadia sounds even more concerned.

"Nah! Stop scaring her Granny, it's just a game." Tsu immediately puts his hand into the shark's head.

"WELCOME TO FEEDING TRIVIA! DO YOU LIKE CHEMISTRY? ARE TWO ATOMS OF THE SAME ELEMENT THE SAME?" The shark heads speaker says. *The Hell? It was way easier last time! What'd they do to it?*

"Um... Yes?"

"WRONG! I'M TAKING YOUR HAND NOW" The shark's head starts to quickly clamp down on Tsu's arm.

"Careful Tsu!" Arcadia quickly reacts by dragging Tsu away from it and pushing him onto the floor, leaving her on top of him and looking back at the shark head.

"You don't need to be scared girl, the game's meant for children, it's teeth are made of sponge." The old lady says as the shark's teeth flops over.

Tsu simply laughs at what had happened as Arcadia puts her arm behind her head seemingly embarrassed at the stunt she had pulled.

-9:15 PM-

"They serve good food here, have it while it's hot." Tsu says while sitting on a black, metal chair.

Arcadia takes a bite out of the wurst "Wow! It tastes way better than it seems!" She says as she begins to eat.

"Told you you'd like it. The town's actually well known for it." Tsu says with a smile.

"Thank you so much. I just realised I've never actually had real food, I've only ever had rations my entire life. Thank you so much for taking me to all these places. This has to be the happiest two days of my life, I'll remember this for as long as I live.

Right... Once she returns to C.R., they'll keep her inside again, only to continuously do missions and training. "I can probably take you to other places in the future, you know." Tsu says as he wipes a piece of food off of Arcadia's face with a napkin.

"You know they won't allow it..." Arcadia says while starting to seem gloomy once more.

"Yeah, I get it, your base can be a real pain, you seriously deserve a vacation every once in a while though. I used to be locked up in some household too, but I ended up leaving though. Maybe you can do the same and break out too." Tsu says looking up at the sky.

"Can I really though..." Arcadia says, looking at the pavement.

"Of course you can, I left my home, and I'm travelling all over the world. Seeing all these attractions and festivals is a great feeling, even seeing Advent being built is a fantastic experience, the worlds a big place y'know, I can't imagine being locked up for the rest of my life. If I stayed, I would've regretted it for as long as I live. Everything we did would also get better as time goes on too. I could take you to different parts of the world and there are plenty of other arcades if that's what you want too." Tsu simply sticks his hand out, wanting Arcadia to grab it with a very sincere smile.

Arcadia puts her hand out attempting to grab it, but she has a slight flash of memory of the contract she had made.

-9 Years Ago-

"You can't do this Gramp's I won't let you do this to Arcadia! She's my friend!" A little girl says to a man wearing a white fur coat with blond hair.

"This is for the future of C.R. Lilia. Even she agreed to it." The man said while looking back at Lilia.

"Don't worry about me Miss Kallen, I already agreed to this. Besides, I've only ever been at the base my whole life, it won't make a difference." She says while rubbing Lilia's head. *The base is my home, I don't have to leave it.*

"Hey, Arcadia, you got quiet, everything alright?" Tsu asked with a concerned look.

Arcadia puts her hand back "No, Tsu! I can't go with you!" *It hurts to say it, but I don't have a choice.* "We should just forget about this, I'll get the Overseer to hand you your payment." Arcadia says quickly, seemingly trying to put everything off.

Tsu just laughs her statement off "No way! I'm not even concerned about the money anymore, but I've got my pride to hold on to, I'm not gonna give up until I beat you fair and square." Tsu then looks like he just remembered something. "Right! One more place for the night." Tsu simply takes out two cinema tickets that have the picture of his favorite show with the giant robot.

That robot? Arcadia looks at Tsu for a second *He was looking at the claw machine earlier at that same robot at the arcade, maybe I can get it for him as a present, he's been a really nice person to me.* "Hold on, I'm headed to the arcade, wait right here." Arcadia simply runs towards the direction of the arcade

"Huh! The arcade?" Tsu simply puts his hand out. "Is she not interested in the movie or something?"

A man sitting on a nearby bench looks up at Tsu and speaks into his phone "They've been separated, she's headed for the arcade"

"Got it." A short woman with green hair begins to enter the arcade "I'll let you handle the other one." She says, hanging up her phone.

-Arcade: 9:30-

"Hmm, why are these cranes so annoying..." Arcadia says after failing at the crane a few Times.

"Allow me." The green haired woman walks up to her and attempts to use the crane machine. She ended up getting the toy that Arcadia was trying to get after a few tries.

"How'd you do it in a few attempts?" Arcadia asks politely, staring at the woman.

"Oh, they're pretty much a scam no matter what, I simply do it by manipulating the other prizes in the machine then grab the one that I want." She says while staring at the crane.

"Thank you." Arcadia says.

"It's fine. What I'm about to do to you isn't going to be pleasant though... Good night."

She says taking out an empty syringe.

"Huh, what'd you say, I can't hear... You..." Arcadia falls to the ground and passes out.

"Looks like the sleeping gas worked, I'll draw her blood now, remember to keep an eye on the first one." The woman says into her phone.

-Outside the Restaurant: 9:32-

She's really taking her time... It's been 8 minutes now... Tsu sighs Just calm down, a hero would stay calm in this scenario. But I can't shake this worry off my chest. Tsu's thoughts are quickly cut short by panicked screams as there are people running from the direction Arcadia went.

"Help! Someone gassed the arcade!"

"Huh! Dammit! I knew something was off. I made a mistake! Tsu starts running toward the arcade and enters an alleyway *Good thing I know a shortcut!* His running however, is cut short as a man with a black suit and white vest blocks his exit in the alleyway.

"Stop right there young man, you won't be going anywhere. That woman is no ordinary girl, you shouldn't have even met in the first place." The man pulls out a small firearm and points it at Tsu. "We won't hurt her, and we certainly don't want to hurt you, just walk away from this and forget everything."

This guy... Must be a C.R. agent sent to retrieve her. Tsu clenches his fists, seeming irritated "You can't just give us a few more hours to watch a movie!"

"I'm sorry young man, just walk away and go ba-"

"Cut the crap, you damned C.R. Your little gun doesn't scare me!" Tsu shouts, before charging towards the man, clearly frustrated.

"..." The man simply puts his left arm forward and opens his hand, emanating a black and red aura, to which Tsu suddenly is forced onto the ground.

Why did everything suddenly get heavier! Tsu, struggling to move "Dammit, what the Hell did you do!?"

The man looks down towards Tsu "I increased the gravity around you ten-fold, I suggest you don't move." The man says, sounding concerned.

"Very funny!" Tsu plants his hands face down on the ground trying to pull himself up.

"She's never seen the outside world, I gotta show it to her. She wants to see more too. She wants to see the world you prick! Why can't you people just grant her that!" Tsu begins to grasp his footing, starting to stand up.

"Don't move young man! You're going to rupture your organs if you keep going!" The man says with a tone of surprise and concern.

"What I'm going to rupture is your damn face! This hero's gonna help his woman."
Even through all this pain... Tsu slowly starts to walk towards the man, clearly struggling
"People like you, always crashing people's lives. I'm gonna walk up and teach you C.R. a lesson." Tsu begins to wind his arm back, clenching his fist. "And bring it right to your face!" Tsu releases his arm, only for it to be followed by an impact from the man's fist into Tsu's gut.

"Easy there." The man catches Tsu with his arm as Tsu falls forward and looks at him, giving a brief sigh. "He's still breathing thankfully, I was worried I might've killed him..." *All that talk about being a hero.* The man carefully sets Tsu down on the red brick walls of an alley, lit up by the streetlights.

The green haired woman walks into the alley and up to the man. "Mission complete. I got the sample we needed." She turns her head towards a vial containing Arcadia's blood. "What about the girl, should we take her as well?" She says, glaring down at Tsu, and then back to the man.

"No." He says, looking down at Tsu. "This man has a promise to fulfill to her. We don't have a right to keep them apart, let alone shatter that dream of theirs." The both of them exit the alleyway towards the streets. *You're a good kid. Take care, young man.*"

-9:43 PM-

Where could he be? Arcadia is sprinting through the streets gazing her eyes around the alleyways and roads until she catches Tsu laying down, leaning on a bricked wall. "Tsu!" She runs down the alley towards him and grabs him, placing her fingers around his neck checking for a pulse. "Oh thank god you're alive..." *I woke up thinking they might've killed him.* "I'm sorry, this is my fault." She looks at him with an expression that shows sincerity.

"You've become careless Arcadia..."

Arcadia looks to one of the entrances of the alleyway to notice a tall man, wearing a white fur coat with his kempt blond hair. *Overseer...*

"I thought you were better than this."

"Just give me a few more minutes, please..." She said.

The Overseer looks down at her and then at Tsu with a blank expression. "You will return now. Your Overseer has spoken..." He disappears out of the alley, removing his presence from the picture quickly.

"You shouldn't go... Arcadia, I still need to beat you fairly..." Tsu's eyes were barely open as he clearly heard what had taken place.

Arcadia begins to have a teary expression with a smile on her face. "No... Tsu... You've already won." She looks up towards the sky, staring at the crescent moon above them as her eyes start watering. "You've already won..."

-2 Days later: 8:00 AM-

She was already gone by the time I had woken up. I'd ask around, but nobody ever saw her, almost as if she had never visited the place... Like everything was just some fairy tale. Others told me it was a dream, telling me to simply wake up and move on. I'd revisited where we'd gone, but none of it brought anything comforting to me. For the first time, I felt lonely, and these memories hurt. Nothing I do can close up this gaping hole in my chest. Even now, I can still feel the tears. It hurts like Hell, Arcadia... I can't stand being away from you. Tsu stares towards the sky, looking at the few crows that pass by in the air, holding onto his gloomy expression.

"I didn't expect to find a hero sulking like this, guess it didn't go well."

Tsu looks to his right, noticing the same man he encountered in the alleyway, wearing a beige overcoat, staring at him with his arms in his pockets. "What do you want..." Tsu says, clearly bothered by his presence.

"I'm not here to fight, or argue with you. I figured out what happened." The man puts his arm forward wanting a handshake. "Call me Nile Yen, one of the leaders of a company called Narrative. I've come here to give you an offer."

-March 24, 2044: 2 Years Later-

Arcadia looks at her lance, then at the dark, metallic flooring of the empty room she was in. *2 years have past now, I was always stuck in this room, where time had no longer meant anything. Whenever I close my eyes, those memories would return, they clung to me dearly.*

Those few days kept me alive for all this time. He gave me his hand, perhaps I should have taken it. Maybe I could've started a new life... No... This is for the best, he gave me the best gift that'll last an eternity. A lovely experience in that little town.

Remembering his smile is enough for me... Arcadia hears the door to the room open to notice a girl with blond hair wearing a black coat in her late teens walk in.

"Arcadia, are you ready?" She says with a small smile on her face.

"Miss Kallen, what is it?" She asks but before wanting to add on to her statement, she grabs her arm and drags her out of the room she was in down into the lit up, white hallways with hexagonal patterns on its flooring.

"Don't worry, training won't be as rough this time around." She says while guiding her down the hall.

More training? But It's not on my set schedule at the moment. She walks with Miss Kallen down the hall, only to briefly stop at someone leaning back on the wall, clearly waiting for someone.

With his black hair tied back the same way and his navy blue sweater jacket with a few small bandages on his face, he looks at Arcadia. "Yo! Arcadia. It took me some time, but I made it here." He slowly walks up to Arcadia, stopping a few meters away from her. "What's with the silence? I can explain everything if you need me to."

"Tsu... You..." Arcadia has a shocked expression, unable to take her eyes off of what she sees in front of her.

"Yeah, it's me. Remember that promise we made Arcadia?" "Huh?"

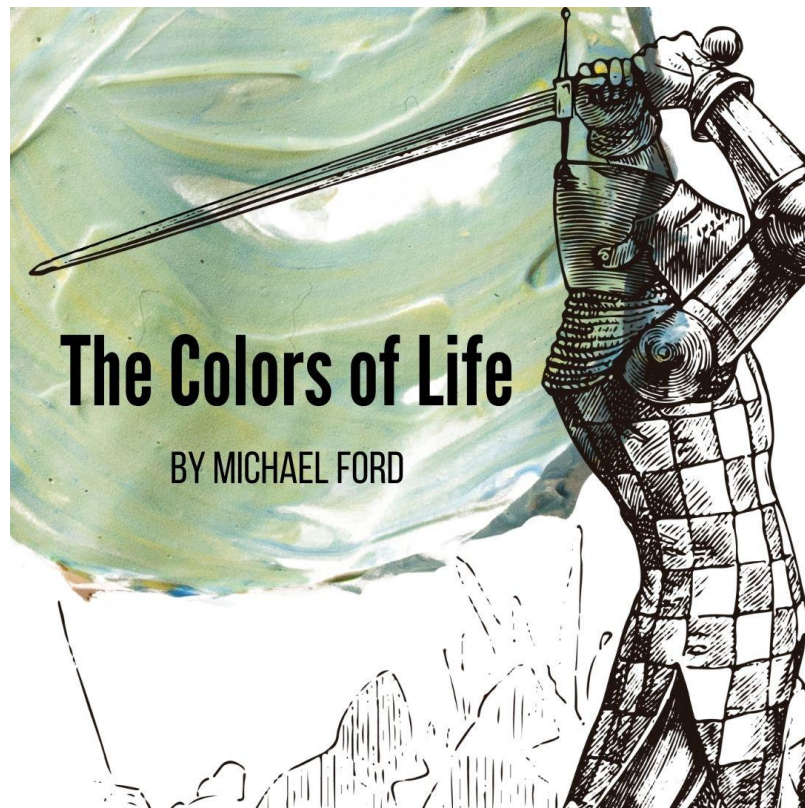
"I've still gotta beat you fair and square." Tsu sticks his hand forward to Arcadia.

"Tsu! You came here for me!" She couldn't hold it in anymore and gave a large, sincere smile, embracing Tsu as tight as she possibly could.

-Narrative Base, Germany-

"You really went out of your way to train him for two years, Nile? You're too nice sometimes." A woman with green hair says.

"Well, Sol. He reminds me of myself when I was younger, he simply needed a push in that direction. Besides, I'm not going to let an opportunity slip to spite that Overseer. I can't stand how he treats everyone like chess pieces." Nile says, staring at his monitor, checking records of C.R. with a smile on his face.



It was a bleak morning in the Gray District of the Color Kingdom and the sound of raindrops assaulting the roof echoed through the halls of the royal dungeon. Wails of tortured souls within could be heard just outside the high walls of the imposing, windowless, cement compound. A murder of crows circling the building dispersed as the clanking iron gates to the courtyard swung open. Rows of gruff, emotionless guards with pointed spears herding a line of prisoners shackled together by a chain emerged from the darkness. In the center of the yard was a tall wooden platform situated underneath a white rope.

The prisoners were lined up in order of seniority and an old man with white hair and a scruffy beard was at the front. Behind him was a woman around the same age whose drooping head was complemented by the solemn expression on her wrinkled face. Next was a middle-aged couple along with their two brothers and sisters, followed by a much younger couple, and last was a small infant being dragged across the ground behind them by the chain attached at his ankle. The similarities of complexion and facial structures of this once noble family gave the scene the appearance of a fine painting. When the group arrived at the makeshift gallows, a magistrate was there to meet them and motioned toward the first middle aged man in line whose brown combover was now sodden with rain.

He began reading off his piece of paper and proclaimed, "You stand convicted of high treason for selling classified secrets to our oldest rival the Monochrome Empire." He continued, "In accordance with the royal rules on collective punishment, you, along with your entire bloodline, have been sentenced to death." After those words departed his lips, two guards violently jostled the man out of line and marched him up to the rope.

The magistrate asked if he had anything to say for himself after his actions facilitated a devastating attack on the Red Ramparts, but his stoic countenance remained unchanged as he prepared to face his death with dignity. A light stream of tears poured down the already rain-soaked face of the youngest woman in line as the rope was tied around her father's neck and buried her face into her husband's shoulder. A gasp fell over the traitor's brothers, sister, and decrepit old parents as they witnessed in awe when the platform dropped, and his limp body swung in the breeze knowing the same fate was shortly awaiting them. One by one each member of the family was executed until it was the infant's turn.

"Where did that baby go?" One of the guards boomed as he turned and saw the unlocked chain that used to be around his ankle. "Secure the perimeter and lock the place down, we must find that baby!"

Slinking through the depths of the prison was a young guard clutching the infant near his chest. Two other guards were making their way down the hall, and he knew a swift death was awaiting him if he were discovered, but he couldn't bear to see yet another baby perish at the hands of this regime. He leapt into an empty cell, closed his eyes, and calmed himself by picturing his family's vast farm he was set to inherit before the conscription notice arrived. His cleanly cut blonde hair blew in the wind as he appeared from the emergency underground exit leading to the nearby woods which he learned had been installed after the dungeon flooded a few years ago resulting in many casualties. The spry young guard evaded search parties in the woods behind the prison and nearly tripped while running back home because he couldn't wait to tell his wife the good news.

He enthusiastically opened the door, calling to his wife, "Come quick! I've been blessed with something amazing!"

His wife snapped back at him from the bathroom, "Unless you can finally satisfy me, I don't want to hear about it!"

The guard quickly covered the baby's ears as she continued berating him, "I can't believe my parents would marry me off to a dolt who can't give me a child, or even--"

His grandfather's antique sword hanging above the door frame shone in the light as she emerged from the bathroom and her jaw fell agape when she laid eyes on the baby. Sheer joy overcame her as she moved closer and gazed into the baby's big blue eyes. "H-how did you get this?" she inquired.

Knowing his wife would fear for their safety if she knew where he got the baby, the guard said, "I found it abandoned near the river, I couldn't leave him there."

His wife kissed him and took the baby in her arms and frowned, "It doesn't look healthy, I'll make some food right away." With that, she left for the kitchen and the guard sighed in relief and grew a big smile.

#

Meanwhile, the royal council summoned the Gray District manager to their chamber. With both hands, he pushed open the grand doors and stood before the council. The leader forcefully took off his glasses, came forward and exclaimed, "We expected better from you, Copperfield! Not only have you failed the only task on your agenda today, but your subordinates at the dungeon also lied about it!" Sweat began pouring down Copperfield's forehead as he continued, "You've been in the service long enough to know that we always check the body bags, and you thought we wouldn't notice that the baby was gone?"

Copperfield stammered, "p-please, I can explai--"

"We don't want your explanation! the leader shouted, "You will find that baby, or you will be killed in his place. Understand?" Copperfield nodded and sped out of the room.

#

Two decades later, after being promoted to a royal sentinel, the guard and his wife were startled out of bed by the sound of heavy boots approaching the house followed by loud knocking. When he opened the door, moonlight illuminated the disappointed face of his commanding officer accompanied by two other soldiers. The officer put out his cigarette, cleared his throat and said, "Surrender now and you will be rewarded with a quick

death!" Enraged by the sentinel's puzzled expression, the officer exclaimed, "Don't act dumbfounded, we know what you've done. It's been twenty long years since you snatched that baby from the gallows!"

The sentinel's eyes widened as his heart began to race and backed away. His wife recoiled in horror and butted in, "Wait... you told me that baby was abandoned next to a river!"

The sentinel lowered his head, "I just didn't want you to worry."

"Yeah, you aren't sly!" The officer yelled as he pointed a finger at his wife, "She's been telling everybody at the garrison about your impotence while you're away on duty and we've been satisfying her needs every night, so when we overheard your little conversation with Irish about a son, it wasn't hard to put the pieces together. The council grew impatient with Copperfield's ineptitude long ago, but they'll reward me nicely when I bring them your head!"

The commotion awoke the now fully grown young man and his black hair, hazel eyes, and chiseled jawline came into view as he descended the stairs.

"Seize him!" ordered the officer as he lunged at the sentinel and stabbed him in the chest. As his other soldiers cornered the young man, the officer turned his attention away from the sentinel's bloody corpse and glared menacingly at the wife, "Your lascivious conduct with my soldiers will not stand!" he yelled, unholstering a flintlock pistol and placing a shot between her eyes. Fire engulfed the young man's heart as he broke free and leapt for the sword hanging above the hallway and slaughtered the intruders, saving the commander for last, because unlike his parents, he would not have the luxury of a quick death.

#

Surveying the room, the young man fell to the floor, overcome with grief. After burying his parents, he took his father's antique sword, unsheathed it and stared into his reflection on the blade, remembering the long days they spent training to refine his combat skills. Fearing that more soldiers were on the way, the young man decided to honor the memory of his parents by visiting some of the places his father used to tell him about. Without a home to return to and no remaining family, the young man would henceforth become known as The Wanderer. He came upon a shady vacant picnic table in the lush

meadows of the Green District, where budding flowers marking the beginning of Spring dotted the landscape. He examined the sword again, bringing memories of his father telling stories by the fire where it hung on the wall up from the depths of his mind. He would tell him, "That sword over there has seen more battles than all the warriors in the kingdom combined, and one day, when I'm gone, it will be yours." That day came sooner than expected, but the young man slung the sword across his back and packed a healthy supply of medicinal herbs, water, and trail mix as he prepared to brave the unknown.

The Wanderer encountered many tribes and factions until his travels eventually brought him to Purple Village, where everybody lived in glass houses. The glistening reflection of the houses on the desert sand attracted the attention of roaming minotaurs that hungered for nothing more than destruction and carnage, making Purple Village a prime target. As night fell, the towering minotaurs approached with steam billowing from their noses as they readied their pointed horns to charge, but this time would be different, for the minotaurs were not expecting an encounter with The Wanderer that night.

The alarm bells in each corner of Purple Village sounded as residents prepared for the worst, but The Wanderer raised his sword and gracefully cut down every single one of them... Or so he thought. The Wanderer found himself pinned to the ground by a minotaur that was much taller and stronger than the rest. His bright red eyes widened as he raised a massive axe, but before he could strike his prey, a small light flickered behind him, and a five-foot-tall slim brunette fairy emerged. She had dark blue butterfly wings stretching down the length of her back, red lips, brown eyes, and a perfect hourglass figure. She motioned toward the minotaur, and with a confused and surprised wail, the minotaur lost all his strength, dropped his axe, and collapsed under the weight of his own chiseled physique, giving The Wanderer an opening to escape and vanquish him. As The Wanderer tried to regain his composure, the fairy approached him, introducing herself as Lyra, the guardian of the universe. As they began talking, the residents of Purple Village assembled for a feast in honor of The Wanderer's heroism that night. Plates piled high with steamy asparagus, seared beef, fresh green salad, and bread rolls were dispersed across a long table that was brought to the town square. The Wanderer was nearly finished eating when he noticed Lyra poking at her food skeptically.

"So where are you from Lyra?" he asked, setting his fork down.

She looked at him and said, "I'm from the Blue Hollow."

Her wings perked up as she continued, "That's where I used to live with all my friends, but after the war ended it's been deserted."

The Wanderer had remembered the stories people used to tell around the kingdom about the crushing defeat suffered by the Monochrome Empire all those years ago, but he was unfamiliar with the Blue Hollow.

"We'll have to go there someday." The Wanderer responded enthusiastically.

Lyra pointed a finger in the air, "don't get too excited, you're not allowed in!"

With his spirits crushed, The Wanderer lowered his head and looked at his empty plate.

"Yeah, bummer!" Lyra said with a smirk. "Only fairies can get into Blue Hollow."

The Wanderer noticed her full plate and asked, "are you hungry?"

Lyra's eyes widened and she replied, "yeah, I'm hungry, it's just that I haven't eaten this kind of food in a while."

He was ready to follow up, but their conversation was interrupted by the Mayor, who wept a joyous tear and stood up on the table, raised his arms and proclaimed, "For valiantly protecting our village from those unruly barbarians, you may spend the night in one of my finest suites!"

"I must humbly decline." The Wanderer replied. "I need to get a move on."

"Oh well, we hope you two have a safe journey!"

With a final goodbye, Lyra and The Wanderer departed from Purple Village to continue trekking through the rough sand dunes.

"Ugh, how much longer? I'm tired!" Lyra groaned with her wings drooping to the ground.

"Shouldn't be much further, they said it was only a few miles away." The wanderer replied, energetically picking up his pace.

She threw her hands up, "And you couldn't wait until morning to walk all the way out here?" The room they offered us was sooooo fancy, I could see it from where we were sitting! Why did you have to say no?"

Gazing up at the clear starry night sky, The Wanderer responded, "It's peaceful tonight and it calms me down."

Lyra raised an eyebrow, "Oh really?"

The Wanderer shrugged, "Yeah, what's wrong?"

"You're saying that as if you weren't almost butchered by a big ugly monster earlier..."

"That was just a small occupational hazard. There was really nothing to worry about."

Lyra rolled her eyes, "Sure..." "And what'd ya mean by 'occupational' anyway?"

The Wanderer lowered his head and confessed, "Well, I don't really do anything else besides adventuring, so I guess it's kinda like my job."

"Oh, I see." Lyra said, pointing at him accusingly, "You're a bum!"

"I'm no bum! I'll have you know that I-"

Lyra slapped him on the shoulder, "You're so much fun to tease."

Trying to keep his face from turning red, The Wanderer scoffed and turned away from her.

"See, look at you!" she giggled, flying in closer to him.

The Wanderer squirmed and backed up as their shoulders touched but Lyra pulled him closer and didn't let go."

"What are you even doing out here anyway?" Lyra inquired as she moved a strand of long brown hair out of her face.

"I want to explore every part of this kingdom that my father used to tell me about." He said as he tried to puff his chest out.

"Awww, I think" Lyra moved her head in close, "that's kinda lame if you ask me." She said with a sly grin and playfully poked the tip of his nose.

"Whatever, you're the one who chose to follow me. I don't need validation from you!" He hissed and continued walking away.

"You're funny, I think I'll stick around with you." She said as she caught up with him.

When The Wanderer gazed into her dark brown eyes, a soothing feeling came over him and they continued talking until they spotted lights in the distance.

"Look over there, we finally made it!" He shouted as the tiny faraway buildings grew with every step forward.

Lyra inspected the sign greeting them at the entrance and snickered. "Brown Town!?"

They advanced into the town and the deserted streets illuminated by lamp posts guided them to the local inn.

A shiny silver bell sat on the counter of the empty lobby. Upon ringing it, a blonde receptionist appeared before them.

"Welcome to Brown Town strangers!" Her blue eyes lit up as she shuffled through some papers, "What can I do for you tonight?"

The Wanderer laid some cash on the table, "Got any vacant rooms?"

"You're in luck, strangers, the last open room is up on the third floor" she cheerfully told them while counting the money. She handed them a small, rusted key and waved them upstairs as silence enveloped the rest of Brown Town.

The Wanderer set his gear on the bed and examined his sword again, picturing how proud his father would have been if he could see how hard he fought to protect the village. His thoughts were interrupted when Lyra placed her hands on his shoulders and a sharp pain shot through his body as he fell to the floor. Try as he might, The Wanderer found

himself too weak to lift his arms as Lyra straddled him. She gazed into his puzzled eyes and her usual cheery smile turned into a sinister grin.

"You're so gullible." She couldn't help but giggle, "I can't believe you actually thought there was such a thing as the guardian of the universe!"

Another shot of pain coursed through The Wanderer's body. Lyra revealed that when Color Kingdom forces advanced on the territory that Blue Hollow occupied, Monochrome generals desecrated the area and laid a curse on the fairies dwelling there before abandoning it. Their dark magic corrupted the fairies' hearts with evil, forcing them to survive by draining the life force of men they found desirable. The Monochrome generals predicted the fairies would disperse and attack unsuspecting Color Kingdom citizens for generations to come in a final effort to destroy their enemy.

With his dying breath, The Wanderer croaked, "why?"

Lyra furrowed her brows and explained, "the information your grandfather sold to the Monochrome Empire twenty years ago was used to launch a surprise attack on the Blue Hollow before steamrolling through the Red Ramparts."

"What?" The Wanderer sat pondering but Lyra interrupted him by sending another painful jolt through his body.

"Oh, you probably don't remember. You'll get a real kick out of this!" Lyra elaborated, "Your grandfather's treasonous actions condemned his entire bloodline to be executed and I had the satisfaction of watching it all play out from a distance."

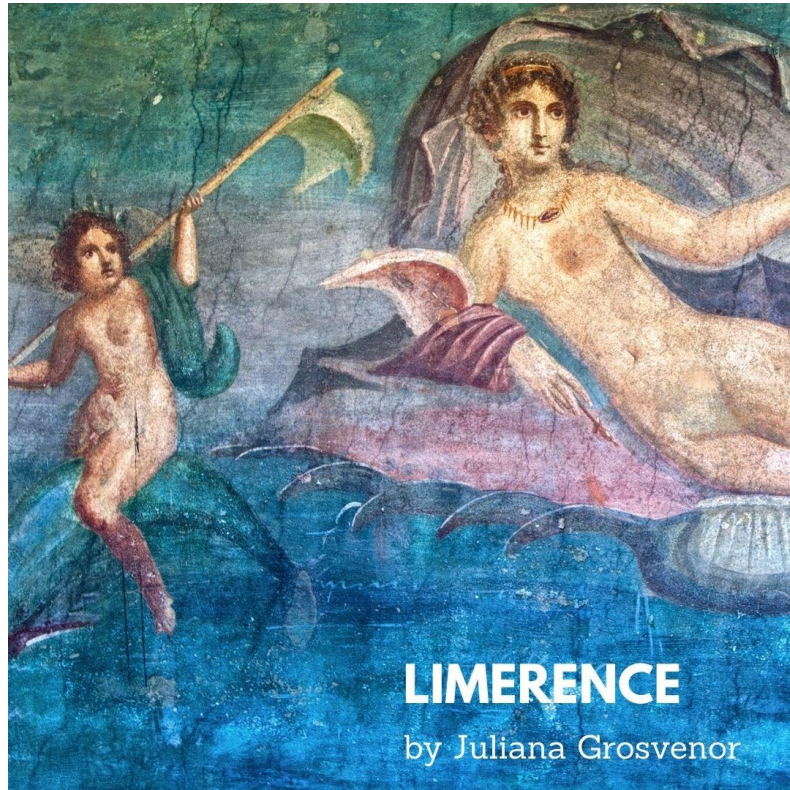
She leaned in and placed her hands on his face, "you were there."

The Wanderer froze and images from his infancy flashed before him. He remembered being chained in line with his family, the expression on the guard's face who smuggled him out of the dungeon, and the excitement in his wife's voice when she first saw him.

Lyra began stroking his hair and said, "the execution was never fully carried out that day, and now I'm here to finish the job."

She held no real affection for The Wanderer because Lyra was evil by nature, and nothing could change that. When she was finished, her elegant butterfly wings carried her

through the window to find her next victim, leaving The Wanderer broken and unconscious on the torn, stained floor of the hotel room.



She looked like a dusky Venus in a peacoat.

I always thought there was something askew in the chamber of my brain reserved for loving. Like someone had chucked the user's manual before screwing everything in. It had to be dysfunctional, the way I could be snagged by one cheekbone. It was like someone had ordered an excavation in my chest, dug in neat lines to be filled by my Venus. Here she was, some inferred proof of my abnormality.

The first time I saw her my stomach sank, some acid beginning to methodically burn through my body. She was leaning against a marble column, the sharp sweep of her cheekbone limned in fiery gold sunlight. She looked like one of the ancient Grecian statues in the exhibit I had just walked out of; poreless and untouchable. Something in the set of her bones struck a match against mine. I told myself not to look at her, counting the flagstones as I walked.

I think I would have been fine if she hadn't picked up the phone call. If I hadn't heard her voice. It was an ordinary voice, a little raspy around the edges like she was

getting over a cold. But there I was, still rolling my eyes up to the clouds to say *oh God why*.

Because I am a coward, I met her eyes for the barest second, like the drag of fingertips over the sleeve of a coat. She smiled perfunctorily and I fled.

There was a myth I read once that had always made me uneasy. There was an ancient Greek sculptor, maybe a king or maybe a peasant, that could not be content with any woman. So he carved one, creating soft shapes out of a block of stone. When Aphrodite blessed her with life (what a joke that was), they lived happily ever after. If I believed in myths, this is where my belief would stop.

The point is, I don't know if I'm the sculptor or the stone anymore. I worry that she is my stone-woman or at my own selfishness. And I worry and I worry. I don't want to be the sculptor but stone doesn't desire the way I do.

Imagine you are the stone-woman. All you have known is the slow grind of the earth and the bliss of unconsciousness and then you wake up to some ape kissing you. Imagine having flesh and a soul when you were once immortal and inevitable. Imagine the man's lips on you, desperate and wanting and selfish. Imagine the man making you love to the point of weakness.

I have bad luck. Or a higher entity is laughing at me, because that is the only explanation for her being the new paralegal in the office. She's sitting in the end cubicle on Monday, hair swept up, which only exacerbates the cheekbone problem. I am three cubicles away, which means I sometimes wonder if it's her breathing I can hear ever so faintly.

At lunch Marcy introduces us, pointing me out with a gleam in her eye that can only be perceived as mildly sadistic. She puts a winter-chapped hand in mine, and I want to push her away. Push her away or hold her marble-hewn face between my hands, thumbs against those cheekbones.

My welcome is quick, mumbled, and I can't pull a smile together. Marcy will find a way to explain it, I'm sure.

When I get home, after I'm already uncomfortable in my bed, there is a new uneasiness in me. It takes me two hours of thrashing and flicking my lamp on and off before I can identify it; I can't recall her name.

"Jamie, right?"

Her voice startles me so badly that coffee slops over the edge of my mug, seeping into my sweater. Cream, a color I wouldn't have picked for myself.

"Oh, geez! I'm so sorry," she says, lips quirking into an embarrassed smile.

When I don't immediately respond, still thinking about how round and soft the syllables were coming out of her mouth, she hastens to reintroduce herself.

"I'm Diana, we met a couple days ago?"

Of fucking course her name is Diana.

"Uh, yeah," I stumble over the words, "I'm sorry I'm terrible with names."

That's a lie. I have a head full of useless names of people I don't need to remember. I always win at trivia games.

"I feel so bad I startled you," she says sympathetically, "and that's such a nice sweater."

When she's worried, a crease appears between her brows, like a soft slash. It's disarmingly charming, especially when she's nervously tucking her curls behind her ears. Like she's doing now.

"Don't worry about it, it's an old sweater," I tell her, the lukewarm coffee drying sticky on my arms beneath the wool knit.

Can I blame her for turning me into a liar? I am becoming crowded by all these untruths.

She-Diana, I should start calling her Diana-scrambles for paper towels. She presses a few into my hands like I can't reach the roll right behind me, a whisper of heat from her skin brushing against me.

"Thanks," I say, feeling a bit like she's hit me upside the head with that expression, hesitant and hopeful.

She nods, folding her fingers together into a tight knot before her, knuckles paling. She does a funny little jerk of her chin, earrings spinning, like she's reminding herself of something. I belatedly dab at my sleeves, the wool already turned a not-entirely-unpleasant sepia. The wool is thirsty, swelling as it slakes its thirst. I can relate.

Sometimes I forget the right way to...emote. My internal emoting is firing on all cylinders, it's the outside parts that fail me. The knowledge is right there, but pinned like a butterfly speared under glass. I haven't been saying the right things to her, the words clinging to my tongue.

"Really, don't worry about it," I manage, voice alarmingly croaky to my own ears.

I see her brighten though, that crease I still want to iron out with the heat of my hands softening. Her knuckles retreat.

"Good to hear, I can't make any enemies in my first week," she says, laughing. Just like her voice, it shouldn't arrest me. But it inevitably does, that awful slow wringing of my heart starting all over again. I jerk my thumb over my shoulder at my cubicle, smiling in what I hoped was a good approximation of sincerity.

"Alright, I'll see you then!" she says with enough cheer that I think I pulled it off.

Before I leave, she turns for the coffee pot, hair sweeping over one shoulder. I can see the jut of each vertebrae, like a ridge of mountains marching down a fault line. I swallow the dark, acidic lump in my throat.

Marcy comes up with the idea, sitting on my desk, crinkling the delicate sheafs of paper beneath her. I clench my hands under the desk, a knuckle popping like a flinch. I don't know when we became friends; I didn't mean it to happen, but her camaraderie had blurred over the days into friendship. She liked to do this, hop up onto the desk, smoothing out her skirt then crossing her feet at the ankles. The color of her foundation doesn't match her neck, a shade or two too dark. I can see the pale pouches beneath her eyes bleeding out from under the powder, like a weak sun behind a foggy bank of cumulus. I always fixate on her neck when she speaks, the freckled sun damage crinkling the skin. Her neck is older than the rest of her.

"...Let's all go see that new movie, the one with Chris Pratt?"

She's rattling away, clicking my good pen open and closed at an uneven pace that scratches at my brain. I want so desperately to seize her wrist, hard enough to squeeze the pen from her grasp and feel her pulse ratchet up. Right before my fist unfurls, she clicks the pen closed and drops it back onto my keyboard.

"Can you go after work? I was going to invite Diana too?" she asks, blissfully unaware of the tight little shock in my chest.

I breathe out a little smile, the fist twisting at all my inside bits softening its grasp.

"Sure. What time?"

Marcy hops down from my desk, leaving destruction in her wake. But her face is round, soft, open. I suppose I'm unfair to her.

"5:30? There's a 6:00 showing."

I nod my assent, hooking my heels behind the legs of my desk to pull myself definitively back into my work. I have to work so I don't think of Marcy sitting on Diana's desk, Diana leaning back in her chair. She takes her heels off at her desk, stockinged feet hidden from sight. I caught her rubbing her heels once, folded up like some creature curled up, licking its wounds. She caught me looking, giving me an embarrassed little smile, eyes down. I'm not sure I played it off as a merely a glance.

I can't stop myself from staring into the fuzzy mirror in the bathroom that afternoon, just before the clock clicked past five o'clock. It's as old as the bathroom I think, a little like a funhouse mirror, making me bulge in odd places. I gave up on presentability a long time ago, I think the last time I kissed someone and felt nothing. My sweaters cover up shirts I shouldn't be wearing to the office.

But there I am, leaning in close enough to see the faint acne scars. Is it normal, I wonder, to look into your own eyes and feel as if you're surveying an alien planet? My eyes are a jumble of brown and green, which I think I forget sometimes. The patterns about my pupils look like a tree's rings about a secret rot in the roots.

I trace a finger down the bridge of my nose, the little bump in the middle I had been born with, over the lips that were never plump enough. Something felt wrong in it,

like someone had done a shoddy paint job over wallpaper. I press my fingers into my temples until the skin blanches under the pressure. My mouth is just barely ajar, my teeth hinting at a scream. I am some strange Frankenstein, patchwork and pain.

Before I leave the bathroom, I splash cold water across my face, plastering my hair back from my forehead. With a blink, I have a clarity about me. Even if only for a moment.

Marcy is waiting in the lobby, tapping out texts. She looks up expectantly at the soft scuff of my shoes, smiling brightly.

“Hello, you two. I was worried I’d have to track you down,” she says cheerily, hoisting her purse onto one shoulder.

I whirl, body tensing without my consent. I only know flight. Never fight. Diana’s standing behind me, wrapped up in a coat and scarf. The same coat I’d seen her in all those weeks ago, downy and innocent. She’s startled by my quick turn, what I am sure is an ugly face. If I see something ghoulish in the mirror, what does she see?

The light in the lobby makes everyone look harsh, turns their eyes into flat dark stones and finds hollows in their cheeks. When Marcy stands beneath the sharp fluorescence, I can almost see her skeleton straining beneath the flesh. It is very cold very suddenly.

Diana steps up to meet Marcy beneath the light, and I want to pull her back by the elbow. Seeing her bones would be unbearable, like a specter of death. But when she joins Marcy, the light traces the smooth, lovely curve of her face as a worshiper might. It is a relief to not be the only one at the altar.

“Ready?” she asks, confidence wrapped in wool. I can feel my jaw is slack. I cannot get past her beauty, its shadow wrapping up my ugliness.

“Sorry, I’m just exhausted,” I mumble.

“It’s ok! I understand,” Marcy chirps.

I don’t want her reassurance. What is she but bones and powder?

When we get to the theater, I don’t know what to pray for; Diana beside me or hidden by the wall of Marcy’s presence. She buys popcorn with too much butter, disappointingly just as I like it. When Diana settles in between Marcy and I, I tuck my arm in

quick from the armrest. Her hair brushes my shoulder, like a livewire pulsing through three layers.

“Do you like this kind of stuff?” she whispers too close to my cheek, breath so warm it should repulse me. I cannot stand anyone’s heat but hers.

“Sometimes,” I whisper back just as quietly.

Only a half-lie. I should be disillusioned by romances by now, but sometimes there would be a moment—just a moment—where I could feel the lead’s gaze right beneath my breastbone. And then my chest lifts and I feel the queerness of something akin to hope. When I take my next breath, it always spills back out.

She huffs a laugh just as the movie begins.

It is difficult to watch the film and not her with the way the light dapples about her, the crease in her cheeks when she laughs with the rest of the theater. I keep my head straight, sliding my eyes over when the room gets dark and quiet. Her nose has no bump in it.

The most awful moment is when our hands meet in the popcorn, and I ever so briefly bump the delicate bones of her hand. There is a roughness to her palm I am not expecting. *Sorry*, she mouths and slides her hand back out of the oil-slick bag. My fingers, in the throes of a sudden paralysis, catch on her wrist. It is the barest graze, the tiniest slice of a moment. I should not feel the pulse in her veins there, I cannot. But there it is, the tiniest jump.

Maybe I just want to feel a heartbeat. I’m tired of counting my own.

Everything about her hurts.

The movie made things worse, because now we have all been brought together. By a shitty romance and a careful dissection of the plot by Marcy and Diana at lunch the next day. I nod along to their conclusions, but each actor had been so flat it felt like watching a clever animation. Like there was nothing but stuffing beneath the crafted attractiveness of the actors. But I am not allowed to think about puppets or masks made out of skin anymore.

Ever since I touched her that first time, felt her lifeblood, it aches to look at her. My eyes burn, like my rods and cones can't quite process the light bouncing off her. There is the cruel twist of my softest bits, so deliberate I expect to find a grinning executioner when I get home each night.

I am sitting in the corner of the break room, back pressed into the corner. I saw somewhere that you're never supposed to bend to drink from a stream; you always kneel and cup the water in a palm. I think I'm eating my soup a bit like that, some limping beast, when Diana slides in next to me. Anyone with any sense of propriety would sit across from me, but she sits next to me like we're going steady in a 50's diner. She pulls out a tupperware, sweating under the fluorescent lights. Casserole again. Diana pops one edge off, two, then pauses.

"Are you alright, Jaime?" she asks.

Sometimes hearing my name is almost enough to set me off. The syllables don't always click back together when someone else says them.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why?" I tell her.

"You seem distant. I mean, from what Marcy tells me you've always been quiet. But quite...withdrawn," Diana drops her voice when a couple of suits step in to root through the refrigerator. Her brow slash has made an appearance.

I don't quite know what to say to that.

"Don't go!," she laughs. It's the first time I've ever heard her nervous. I hadn't noticed the reactive shift of my posture. My natural inclination for flight back again.

"|-"

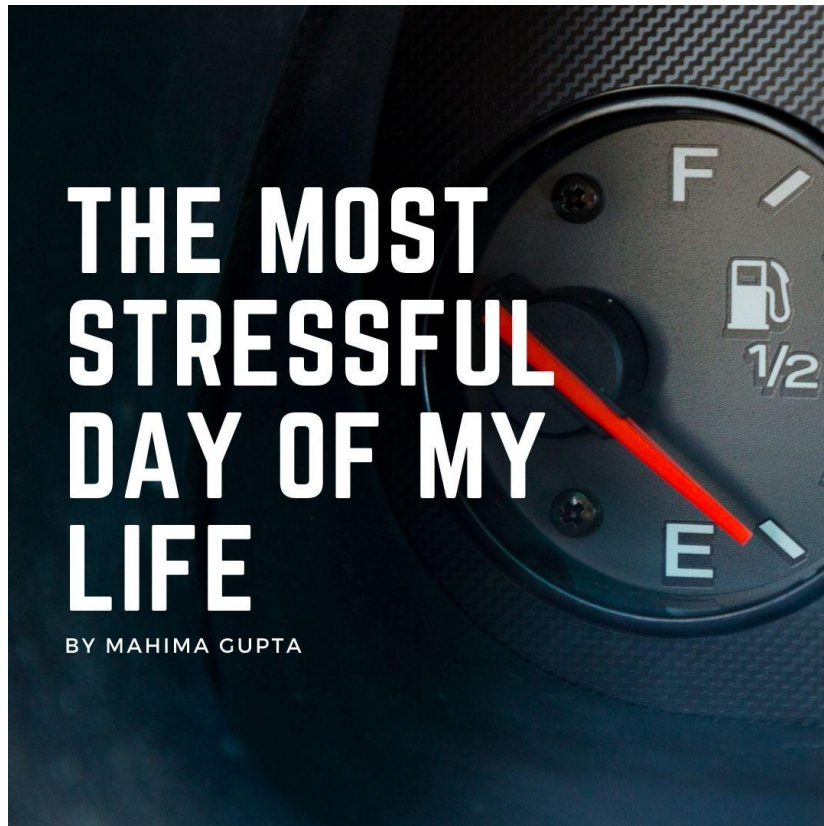
Diana puts one decisive hand on my forearm. That is, the movement is firm, but her touch is not. She touches me just like the way hummingbirds touch down, so gentle you can't quite comprehend the weight of it. It's good. If I touched her it would be like the touch of the Pacific Ocean on the shore; that is, a crushing.

I drag my eyes up from my forearm, so pale when it's the backdrop to hers. She's wearing the nerves on her face now, throat working like she's building up words in that long neck of hers.

"It's fine. Don't worry," I say, embarrassingly close to a whisper before she finds the right things to say.

She puts another ounce of weight into her hold. I can feel some of the nerves shivering out from where her skin is against mine. I haven't realized how tight my fist has been flexed on the lunch table until the pressure smooths it into something limp and pliable. My hand pinks back up again. Diana smiles, and very carefully and very purposefully squeezes my wrist before sinking back into her seat. I let her.

Here I was, thinking I was the one meant to do the sculpting. And here she is, my Pygmalion.



My day started off as any other....well sort of. I woke up earlier than usual, at precisely 11:30am which was nice. I didn't have a headache, wasn't tired, and felt really awesome. I got up to go to the bathroom when all of a sudden I felt this gush of liquid. I looked down to see that my period started. I quickly ran to the bathroom and rummaged through my cabinets. For the life of me I could not find a single tampon when low and behold I found the box shoved into the back of my cabinet. I quickly grabbed the box and just my luck, there were no more tampons left. I grabbed some toilet paper, put it into my underwear and rushed back into my room. "Come on, there has to be a tampon in here somewhere" I thought to myself as I checked every nook and cranny of my room. Aha! One lonely tampon fell deep under my bed. I made every effort I could to grab that tampon and after twenty minutes of struggling I finally got it! I was finally able to relax and have some breakfast. I grabbed my phone off the charger and saw that the clock read "1:15". My heart dropped, that cannot be right I thought to myself as I grabbed the handheld clock next to my bed. "11:45am". I got up and ran as fast as I could to the stairs. As I was running I conveniently slipped and fell, hitting my chin extremely hard on the bottom railing.

"What happened!" my mom yelled as she ran out of the kitchen.

"I-I slipped and hit my chin." I said with tears streaming down my face. I got up, looked at my mom and asked what time it was.

"Um it is 1:17pm," she said with a smile on her face.

"WHAT! I have work at two, why didn't you wake me up!" I screamed as I ran back upstairs to get ready.

I somehow managed to quickly do my make up and put on a decent outfit before heading to work. I grabbed my keys and water bottle and headed to the car. Crap, I forgot my wallet, absolutely livid with how my day was going I ran back inside, grabbed my wallet, and ran back to the car. At this point I was running really late and sped into work. I got out of the car and headed to the main office. I needed to get the keys because I was in charge of opening the doors for our after school program. I knocked on the door, no answer. I knocked again, no answer. At this point I was really late and didn't know what to do, not to mention this was my first solo day on the job. I was about to walk around campus when finally Angela opened the door.

"Hey can you please open room 121?" I asked.

"Sure! I thought I was supposed to open it at two but it's 2:30 now so I guess I was wrong!" She chuckled as she unlocked the door.

"Yea haha it was supposed to be two but I was running late." I explained as I set my bag down.

To my luck there was no one here. I sat down and started to set up the sign in sheets when my lovely student Sofia showed up. "Finally my day is looking up" I thought to myself as I greeted her.

"Hey pretty lady!" I said as she walked in.

"What's wrong with your face?" she said.

Sofia is autistic so I make sure not to take what he says to heart. "What do you mean?" I said with a confused look on my face.

"The bottom of your face is purple."

“What?”

I grabbed my phone out of my bag and opened the camera. The entire bottom part of my head was bruised dark purple. Oh my goodness I said to myself knowing that I have been walking around thinking I look hot when in actuality I look like the Willy Wonka scene where Violet turned violet!

“Oh Sofia I fell and hit my chin this morning, that's why I look like this.” I said smiling trying to hold back tears.

“Okay, you look weird. Today's movie day, what movie did you pick?” She said
Movie day? There's a movie day?

“Uh, I didn't bring a movie.” I said.

“What do you mean? We watch movies every friday!”

I ran to where we keep the snacks and brought out the tastiest ones we had! “We might not have a movie but we have snacks!” I said as I layed out her favorites.

Sofia picked up a granola bar and a wave of relief washed over me.

“Want to listen to some Disney music?”

“Sure!” Sofia said with a smile on her face.

“Okay what song-”

“After we play letter blocks”

The feeling of panic rushed over my body. I forgot the letter blocks. I promised her I would bring them today. I was about to tell her the bad news when my other student Jack walked in.

“Jack!” I screamed in excitement.

“Welcome back buddy, why don't you and Sofia play a game.”

As they were playing I took the opportunity to check what homework I had to do. I was scrolling through my school's app when I noticed a message saying “Unit 3 exam due

at 6:30". It was 3:15 and I am just now realizing that I have a final due at 6:30! My soul sank into the depths of itself, I didn't finish. I sat on my phone contemplating what I was going to do when my coworker showed up. I hopped out of my seat and begged her if I could leave. She said yes and I grabbed what I had and ran out the door. I was almost home when my car showed me a message that read, "Extremely low fuel, car might stall" I looked down at my fuel gauge to see that I had only three miles of gas left. I made a U-turn and headed to the nearest gas station. I called my sister absolutely livid because I know she left my car without gas.

"Hello?" She said.

"Naomi, you didn't fill my car up with gas!"

"Oh yea haha I forgot."

"You forgot! How could you forget my car might stall!" I screamed as I was speeding to the gas station.

"Jeez sorry, you don't have to yell"

"Oh my god, bye!" I hung up.

I looked to make sure the tank was on the left side of my car. By some miracle I made it to the gas station and went to put my card in. Everything was all set when I noticed that my gas tank was on the right side...not the left. I quickly pulled the car around. As I was getting out I twisted my ankle and fell face first into the trash can. I was trying to get out when I heard a man say "do you need some help?"

"No I'm okay, my day has just been not going my way." I said.

I turned around and to my surprise I saw my ex...and his new girlfriend. "Oh my god I am so embarrassed." I said as I tried fixing my shirt.

I said my farewells and remembered I needed to get gas. I put in my card information a second time and when I tried to open my gas tank it wasn't working. I called my dad and he told me to try again...after five attempts I gave up and started to drive home. At this point I only had one mile left and somehow I made it home.

When I walked into my house I was greeted by my brother.

"Jesus Kiki, you look awful." He said as he chuckled.

"I know dipshit just leave me alone."

"Oh my goodness Kiki your face!" My mom said in the most dramatic way possible. "Is that from when you fell?" She asked.

"Yes, now I have a final please leave me alone." I said.

I headed upstairs and slumped into my bed. I grabbed my laptop and realized I forgot tampons. With no gas and a final due soon I knew I'd have to suffer without it. I opened my laptop, grabbed my study materials and started studying for a test I was nowhere near prepared for. I could hear my cat pawing at the door and despite me telling her to leave me alone she wouldn't stop. I opened the door and she rushed into my room and sat on the bed. I didn't have time to kick her out so I continued my work. I was ready to start my exam when my cat wouldn't stop trying to sit on my laptop. I pushed her off and got up to use the restroom and all of a sudden I heard a loud boom. I ran back into my room only to see that my cat had pushed my laptop off my bed. I fell to the ground crying because I knew my five year old laptop would not survive that fall. In complete anger and disarray I opened my laptop to see just a tiny hairline crack in the corner of my screen. I started jumping in joy because I was able to still use my laptop. I somehow managed to finish my exam with only a minute remaining. I layed back into my fortress of pillows I left messy in the morning and pondered on the day I had.

I got up to the smell of something delicious being made. I walked into the kitchen and saw that my family was making pizza, I was so excited because in all of the craziness I had forgotten to eat.

"Hey sweetie can you grab the pizza from the oven?" My dad asked

"Of course!" I said absolutely enthused that my day was over

"Okay Kiki I have to know what happened to your face!" My brother said as he cracked up.

"If you have to know, I was running late this morning and tripped and fell...down the stairs...and hit my face on the railing."

My whole family looked up from the table, it was dead silent. "Man...I've got to admit. That's pretty damn funny!"

Everyone started laughing, and I have to admit that I was too. I went to get the pizza from the oven when I started smelling smoke, I opened the oven doors and a plume of smoke followed. The pizza was burnt. My entire family was disappointed and all I could do was laugh.

"What's so funny?" My mom asked

"Nothing, I'm just having bad luck today."

"What do you mean?" She asked

"Nothing has gone right today, I've had the most stressful day and my bad luck has rubbed off onto you." I said with tears filling my eyes.

"So what?"

"It's just one day, why don't we order pizza."

I looked up to see my entire family smiling at me. I was relieved knowing that my family was there.

We ended up eating a lot of pizza and I was happy that my day was ending on a good note. I headed upstairs and started to get ready for bed when I heard a knock on my door.

"Hey Kiki." My brother said

"Hey what's up? I'm getting ready for bed."

"It sounds like you're having quite the day." He said with a weird grin on his face "Yea...it has been pretty stressful." I said as I slowly sat down onto my bed.

He placed his hands on my shoulders. "What are you doing you're freaking me out."

"This isn't real Kiki." He said as his grip got tighter I pushed him away, and stood up.

“Seriously man, you’re freaking me out.” “Wake up Kiki, none of this is real.”

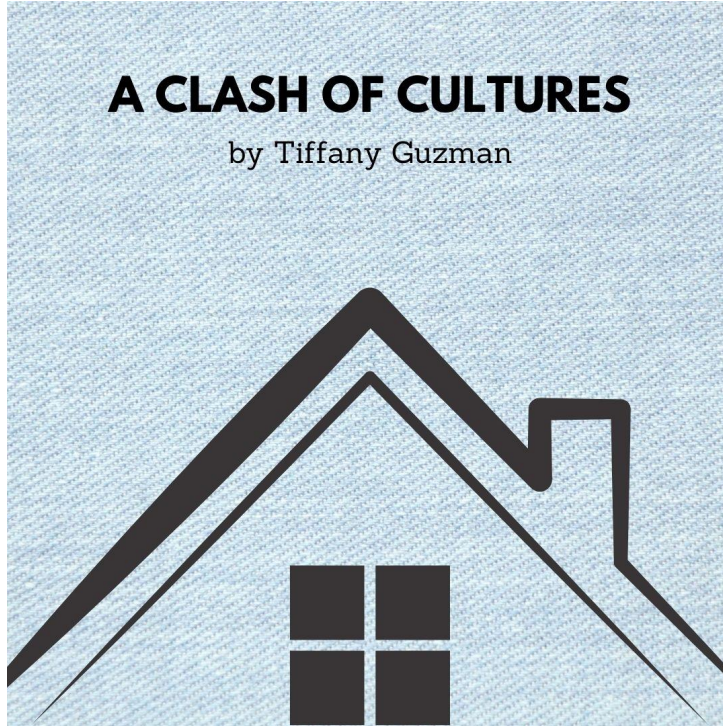
His words started to slur as a string of drool fell from his distorted smile. “What is going on...MOM!” I screamed for help

“No one can help you, she isn’t real, wake up.” “Wake up Kiki, wake up!”

I jolted awake from my bed, sweat encased my body. I turned to look at my clock as it read 11:30am. That’s when the realization hit...my day didn’t end, it was just starting.

A CLASH OF CULTURES

by Tiffany Guzman



The house next door seemed really cool in my eyes when I was small. It was HUGE, had more than one floor, large front yard, and the best of all... it had a pool! The people who lived there were always nice, too. If they decided to have a pool party or if it was the birthday of the little girl of who lived there, we'd always be invited to the fun things they did. The family never seemed weird to me at the time, thinking about it now though, I once noticed something off about them.

The day started just like any other. I was just a kid back then, no adult responsibilities that keep the rest of the world and I endlessly busy. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and people out and about of their houses enjoyed the sunny California weather. Like any other kid who lived in the golden age of video games, I decided to not see the sun that day and stay in to finish a new game I had gotten. I would have gone through with my plans if my parents hadn't told me to save my game and then come to the kitchen. They stood staring at the full driveway of the house next door. Words and thoughts were murmured under their breath, words I could only barely make out.

At that time, I only saw the front yard where a large group of kids were playing together in nice clothes. The many cars in their drive didn't matter to a 7-year-old. The only thing that mattered at that point was that kids were playing, and I wasn't there. I was all but ready to

dash out of the door and join them, but my dad grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and stopped me.

“Hold on ‘ere, buddy pal. At least take this case of beers over for us, would ya? Then you could go and play to your little heart’s content.” The sound of my dad’s fading Southern accent that day was something I can still vividly hear up until now. My dad was one of those men who you knew that he was raised amongst people who said “Y’all” and drank sweet tea like water in the deep south. When I was little, I always thought my dad had been a cowboy before he met my mom. He was a giant of a man, put any gym rat to shame in strength, full majestic beard, and he certainly sounded like it with his accent. Everyone in California could tell he wasn’t a native Californian just by the way he talked, but no one ever questioned it until the day my dad’s accent had completely faded.

He plopped a heavy case of beer into my hands and sent me on my way. Thank God the party was only about a few feet away, I don’t think my arms would have been able to carry that beer case anymore than that. As I waddled my way to the fence the girl who lived there, with her chubby cheeks and explosive laughter, greeted me. I think I eventually learned her name, Amber.

“Do you need help? My momma told me if I see people carrying something to the gate, they’re gunna need help.” Amber offered as she opened the gate to let me in. The girl might have offered to help, but she never really followed through with her offer. “My dad told me that I couldn’t play until I gave this to your mom and dad, so.. Do you know where they are...?” My eyes looked around the yard to try and find the girl’s parents before the weight of the beer case became too much to handle.

Everything had been set up for a party, streamers everywhere, tables of people eating and chatting. The gate that was open led to the backyard where the pool was, the party becoming a pool party there. Everything was normal, until the girl finally processed my question and answered back. “Oh yeah, give the stuff you’re holding to my momma inside. She’s in the living room inside with the rest of the sad people.” With a smile, she pointed towards a screen door into the house. I wasn’t the brightest boy on the block, but when she told me “with the rest of the sad people” I was thrown for a loop. The heavy case of beers in my hands didn’t really let me have time to question Amber’s words though, so I followed her direction.

"Hello? Ms. Shandera?" I said. "My mom and dad told me to give this to you or else I can't play with the rest of the kids." As I walked in through the opened screen door, I bore witness to a heavy scene. Many adults in all stages of grief sat on a leather couch that surrounded the whole room around a make-shift altar.

The feeling of sadness was like an unforgiving wave to anyone who walked into that living room. It did not care who came into the room, it mercilessly washed over my tiny body at the time. The place where my neck met my collar had felt like someone had placed a heavy necklace on it and I could feel my eyes water up despite the loud, energetic dance music that boomed close by.

Ms. Shandera got up from her seat where she'd been comforting a wailing lady who had curled up into herself. The lady's wails were painful, it was like she was a little girl again begging and pleading with some invisible force to bring back her daddy. The lady was even sobbing the words "Daddy, please.. I can't be in this world without you, momma's already gone, I can't lose you too!"

Ms. Shandera looked over at the wailing lady with sad eyes before she took a deep breath and faced me. "Ohh, you're the little boy next door, uh, what was it again? Shaun? Billy? Leonard? It had to be Leonard." She racked her brain for my name like she always did.

"My name is Leo-" I reminded her. "and my mom and dad told me to give this to you." with the last strength in my arms I thrust the beer case into her direction. It caught the girl's mom by surprise, but she was quick on the uptake and took it from me.

"Oh good, we can put this in the cooler in the back, Armando will be happy for more beers with my brothers." Ms. Shandera spoke to herself out loud before she placed the case down on the floor by the couch.

"So, Leo, what brings you here? Did you want to join in our party too, if so, are your parents are going to come too?" Ms. Shandera was at my eye level now, she bent slightly down to make eye contact with me. I looked her back in the eyes, too.

"...This is a party? Why are people here crying? I... I don't get it." Tears had started welling up in my own eyes, my body now a vessel for all of the sadness contained in this room.

All of the adults who were crying looked at me, their grief mixed with some unspoken fear. Their sobs turned to annoyance and even some slight anger to Ms. Shandera, the woman who had been comforting all of them on top of making sure the party outside. I remember their venomous words:

"He doesn't understand."

"Shirley, why you would let a kid who doesn't understand come to a place like this? Americans don't do this. *The kid's crying and he doesn't even know why.*"

My tears spilled more now, I thought I was in trouble. However, Ms. Shandera comforted me like she had been doing for these adults. She patted me on the head and smiled. I looked up and I couldn't believe it, she was smiling. "You know, none of the kids out there except Amber paid their respects, you know. This room is to pay your respects to those who are gone. You see, that man, in the picture, Leo?" She pointed to the picture of the old man. "That was Amber's grandpa and the dad to everyone here except for Sheryl, right?"

Ms. Shandera looked to the lady who I assumed was Sheryl. With a sniffle, the Sheryl lady spoke up. "He was my brother, the only one I had left." Tears fell ever so gracefully from Sheryl's cheeks, staining the black leather of the couch she sat on.

I looked up at Ms. Shandera's face still not understanding what was happening. "What's... 'paying your respects'?" I sniffled, my confusion stronger than the feelings of the room for a second. The woman's comforting smile turned to a sad, but tired look.

"Of course... He wouldn't understand that term, he's only seven." Ms. Shandera muttered to herself, now feeling a little stupid. She fidgeted, a look of nervousness as the grieving people around her look to her to do something about the crying kid in front of them. I didn't notice it then, but they probably wanted to be alone in their grief, not wanting to explain this situation to a little kid.

"Leo, have you ever had someone you love go on a trip very far away and this would be the last time you saw them before they left?" Ms. Shandera's head tilted to the side as she looked me in the eyes. She then continued:

"'Paying your respects' is like that, Amber's grandpa is off somewhere very far away and all of these people miss him so much. You would cry if someone you loved was going

to be going somewhere very far away and you couldn't see them for a long time, wouldn't you?" I thought about Ms. Shandera's words, my mind constructing a scene of my own father with a suitcase in hand as he was about to leave to a very blurry, but faraway place where I couldn't talk to him anymore. This made more tears run down from cheeks, and sobs start to come out of my mouth as the image of my dad leaving me in my head grew stronger.

A woman hit Ms. Shandera on the head and looked at her with an annoyed face, tears still streaming down her cheeks.

"You made it WORSE, Shirley. Now the boy who was excited to be here with the other kids is fuckin' crying! It's bad enough that we're all crying over Daddy here and you made him cry over something he doesn't have to!" I flinched at the sound of Ms. Shandera being hit, but it seemed that it didn't hurt to her at all. It was like she was used to it.

Ms. Shandera and the woman broke out into an argument that I watched, my eyes like an endless fountain of tears.

"The rest of our kids know what this room is and they're fine, this boy can know too. He will have to face this one day and having this experience will make him stronger, Fatima." Ms. Shandera explained calmly. The other woman looked at her, clearly wanting to spit back some words to this explanation, but Fatima couldn't muster any words. Sobs instead filled her anger's place, Fatima put her face into her hands.

"No one ever told me when I was small like him that Daddy would leave us like this. Maybe its better for him to know like you said." Her voice shook, a sob trying to force its way of her.

Ms. Shandera sighed and looked around, but her eyes widened, and she remembered I had been watching this whole time.

It seemed that Ms. Shandera could understand what I was thinking before I could say it. "You're worried for everyone here now, aren't you?" she said with a heavy sigh. I looked down, I didn't know if saying what I actually felt with get me in trouble or not so... I thought it would be better to say it without looking at her.

"Y-Yeah. I understand... I would be sad if my daddy left and you guys' daddy just left..." That was a white lie, I only really understood why people were crying, but not why there was a party outside. Ms. Shandera's frown only turned to a pained smile.

"Good... Now you've paid your own respects to Amber's grandpa and my daddy, you can go. You came to play with the kids next door, not be sad. Come on, wipe your tears and take your Gameboy out there, Amber has the new Pokémon game that she's been dying to have someone else to play with." Ms. Shandera pushed me towards the open screen door.

I didn't know what to do, this was just too weird. My mouth wanted to open and say something more about the crying circle in front of me, but I decided to leave. Maybe Amber and her cousins could explain to me and I wouldn't get into trouble.

When I finally got out the front door and let the screen door slam on the way out, the very same kids who I had seen playing came to greet me. "Hey, who are you? Are you a cousin?" They circled around me, asking my relation to Amber and her family. To be honest, not all of the kids in the group WERE actually kids. A handful were teenagers and one guy who went by the nickname of "The Dude." He was probably there to watch the actual kids like Amber, three of her cousins, and me. Seeing that I was overwhelmed, Amber pushed her way through the group and got next to me.

"Guys, this is my neighbor, Leo. We don't *suddenly have another cousin* or something." She used her chubby body as a barrier to put space between me and the others. She muttered to herself a thought out loud "Though, we do have a lot of family members from all over, maybe one of the uncles married an American..." and then looked back at me. The kids stared at Amber for a moment, blinking a few times in her direction.

"Look. He really is my neighbor. He doesn't even know where our family comes from! Momma told me that most Americans don't and think we're from, *like*, Mexico." Amber put out both of her hands as to gesture in my direction. I must admit being called an American at the time hurt me in a strange way. It was like I was some sort of alien or foreigner despite all of us currently being in America and having been born in America too. Most of the kids nodded their head in agreement to Amber's statement while the rest didn't seem to even care that I was joining them.

Amber's vouching for me worked and got the other kids off my back. We were all just kids back then, they all probably forgot I wasn't a part of the family after that moment. I was glad for that because whatever they were doing looked fun.

The rest of my time was following the leader and playing whatever game that they were doing. However, even as that was a lot of fun, I remember feeling even more alienated by certain aspects. I'd lived by Amber's house for a long time, but I hadn't really realized until then that there were parts of the house next door that I hadn't seen before. We wandered through every last nook and cranny of the Shandera household, leading me to see sights I've never seen before.

The sight I remember the most vividly was when the group and I wandered into the Shandera backyard: a little courtyard comprised of intricate brick patterned ground that housed a small playground between two rusty red sheds and a flowering tree in the middle of a lively garden. The garden and tree were surrounded by flimsy plastic fencing, but the tree did not care, it loomed and bloomed over us. Some plants had crept up and over the weak plastic fence, its vines long enough to nearly touch the ground on the other side. I took a moment to stare these bean-like vines before reverting my attention back to the amazing tree. Amber and the other kids went straight for the playground set while I stood under the tree because I was in awe of how pretty it was.

From what little I knew about Amber's grandpa, I remembered that he loved all of the trees that were there on the Shandera property. When the cherry tree in the front yard started to bear fruit every year, I could remember how proud everyone and especially Amber's grandpa, was of it. The tree in front of me wasn't that same cherry tree I knew, but when I saw this other tree with its almost beautiful, white with pink accents pristine flowers, I understood why. As I stood staring at the tree, Amber was on the swings behind me, laughing with that loud, scream laugh others and I knew her for.

"Leo! Leo! You gotta come and swing with me, look, I'm going really high-" She called out to me, but I didn't respond. A wind gently blew overhead which caused some of the flowers to start falling softly onto the ground. One even fell on my head, which caused me a jump a little. I was okay though, it was just a flower after all.

"Leo?" The chubby girl called out as she dragged her feet on the ground to stop her swing. She got up off her swing and stood by me under the tree, some of the pedals of the falling flowers landing onto her long black hair. She tilted her head upwards and looked

up at the tree above us with me as if trying to understand what I was seeing in this tree that she lived with daily.

It was then my brain finally processed that she was calling my name. "Amber! Sorry. This tree is really pretty. I couldn't stop looking at it." I then replied back as I turned my head to look at her as she kept looking up at the tree.

"It is..." Amber was soon taken by the beauty of the tree just like I was. So, we stood there looking up at the tree together for a while as the other kids played on the playground.

"Your grandpa planted this tree, right? It's really pretty like the cherry one you have in the front." I asked her after our mutual silence.

"I think he did. My momma told me that all of the pretty plant stuffs we have around us was grandpa's favorite thing. It was something he missed being here in America. Back where she came from, there were really pretty trees and flowers like these everywhere."

My mind filled in the details of the place that Amber's family could have come from, a large wilderness full of colorful trees and flowers, so many that it seemed that there was more forest than humans. If where Amber's grandpa had come from was a place like that, it had made sense to why he loved the trees and plant life around the Shandera house.

After a while of being under the tree, the other kids grew bored of the playground and called for us to continue wandering the large house. I was about to join them again, but I saw Amber dip out of the group and into the food area by the pool. In my mind, I was confused, she was leaving the group just to eat? Who does that? She quickly picked up on my presence and looked at me with slight tilt of the head.

"What are you looking at? I'm just going to get some food. I'm hungry." She pouted a little, I think she probably thought I was looking at her weird for wanting food. I mean, she was correct, but at this point everything around her seemed to be weird. Amber wasn't out of her element.

"There's food? Where?" I asked, trying to hide the fact that I just wanted to follow her.

"Yeah. I'll show you!" She began her journey towards the food tables, looking back every few minutes to make sure I was following behind. Amber walked with a confidence

that she didn't usually have. I think it was because I was on her turf and she had some power over me because of that. I had to listen to her, follow her every step, and follow the rules of taking food.

When we finally arrived at the food tables, the food not only smelled, but looked amazing. There was Indian food, Mexican food, the normal foods like hot dogs and burgers, and then there was the foods that Amber absolutely loved but I could not pronounce the name or even understand what they were made of.

"You never had Choka before?!?" her face lit up in surprise at my admission of never having the mushy, pale yellow goop she had so happily scooped up into her plate. After Amber ran her mouth off about what the new foods were, I felt like I was starting to understand at least a small piece of the strange world she knew like the back of her hand.

With my plate in hand, Amber and I sat down at a nearby table to eat together. It was finally a chance to ask her just what the heck was going on with the room inside and this party in general. As she stuffed her face, I decided to make my move.

"Hey, Amber... Uh. Why are there sad people inside?" I nervously asked, not sure how I was going like the answer. The chubby girl took a big swallow of her food before talking.

"Oh, my grandpa died. We just came back from his funeral, that's why I'm dressed up in this stupid dress." The same uncomfortable, heavy feeling I felt from the room inside returned as I finally processed what morbid thing she just happily admitted to me. I couldn't even think about the food on my plate now, this is was just too confusing. "Aren't you sad?!? My mom and my dad told me that it's a serious thing when someone isn't here anymore and that a lot of people are sad through it!" My confusion turning to anger as I exasperatedly yelled. I brought my hand down on the table we were eating at, how could she just say that while everyone I've ever seen spent weeks, or months crying over the person they loved going away.

Amber's eyes went wide, and her mouth gaped at my harsh tone. "I was sad, I cried with everyone at the funeral!" The nicely dressed girl stopped eating her food and put down her spoon with its large portion to convince me otherwise. "I even went in there with the sad people and cried too. I miss my grandpa, but he's not here anymore!" A hand with

nicely painted nails pointed to the house where all of the crying people were still in, tears falling from their eyes like an open faucet.

“He’s not here anymore? Where did he go then? Your mom told me he was gone to somewhere far away, but when people go far away, they always come back!” I was struggling to understand where Amber’s grandpa could have gone. There’s always a way to come home, there couldn’t just be a place where you couldn’t come back from... My little seven-year-old brain hit a mental wall at that idea. The loud music of the party didn’t help my struggling mind either, it seemed to seep into my brain and distract me further from understanding.

The chubby girl looked at me and let out a long “Uhhh...” It seemed like she knew something I didn’t thus making me look like the stupid person here. She stopped saying uh and putting her hand to her chin as if thinking. I took a bite of my hot dog while she thought about her words, I might as well try to eat something if she was going to take a while to get out her thoughts. As I ate, the reality of the people having fun in the pool just two feet away from me finally hit me. Well, literally and mentally. The water splashed onto the backs of my heels as a group of kids and adults dove into the deep side of the pool, causing the pool to overflow and hit me and a few other people at the party. The mental part of the pool was something that made realize that everyone was as happy and carefree as Amber was. They all thought it was just normal to be having a party when someone important wasn’t here anymore.

“Okay, like, you know those people with the wings and the glowy thing above their heads in cartoons?” Amber spoke up while spreading her hands out like wings. “Those are “Angels” as my momma called them. She said they come from a place called ‘Heaven!’” Amber determinedly pointed up to the sky to emphasize her last word. My eyes stared at Amber’s hand, and then followed the path of her pointed finger to the now grey toned twilight sky.

“So those angel people come from up there?” I also pointed upwards with a finger. Amber nodded, her head move up and down as if she was nodding furiously. Heaven... My mom and dad had once told me about it before, it was supposed to be a nice place where good people went to when they died. Amber’s grandpa was a good man, he’d always talk to me and help with things whenever I or my parents asked. “So, your grandpa is an angel

and he had to go back to this heaven place?" I pondered out loud, the idea of an old man like her grandpa growing wings and flying away kind of amusing.

"Well, n-no! He's not an angel, my grandpa is a person just like we are. It's just that he's there in heaven with the angels now. That's where people go when they aren't here on earth anymore." Amber stuttered back, her arms flailing in front of her as if she could physically deflect the words.

"So, you guys are having a party because your grandpa went to heaven with the angels? So, it's a good thing he died? Because I've seen a lotta of TV shows and other people who had a person go to heaven and it wasn't a good thing or a thing people had a party for." I took my gaze away from the sky and looked all around me as I said this. At the men drinking happily, at the kids running around the pool, at the ladies chatting each other up about the latest family gossip. Someone being gone was not something that people had a party about or something that adults start drinking those drinks neither Amber or I could drink about.

The girl sighed as if this was a question she didn't like to have to think about. "I know.. I know it sounds weird, but my momma told me a long time ago when my grandma died that if we keep crying forever for a person who is dead, they'll be sad in heaven. So, we need to have a fun party and enjoy life so that my grandma and my grandpa will be happy in heaven and won't worry about us." It was like Amber was tired after saying that, the way she looked seemed like she needed a nap.

Everything started to make a lot more sense now, Ms. Shandera's words were right. Amber's grandpa was in heaven, a nice place for good people. And heaven was supposed to be up in the sky, very far away from us. Amber's grandpa was indeed far away, in a place that no one could ever talk to or hear from him again.

The puzzle pieces of this weird party were starting to match, giving what my tiny seven-year-old brain could accept as a good enough answer. One piece wasn't fitting though and I had to ask.

"Wait, if your grandpa and grandma are up in heaven far away from us, how will they know you're sad here on earth? Do they have one of those telescope things you can use to see far away?" I questioned her, once again looking up at the sky.

“They can see us just normally, like if you went to top of my house and looked down at everyone.” Amber spoke, her mouth currently full as she attempted to eat some more at the food on her plate.

“Ohh... That makes sense. They’re so high up that they can see everything, even us talking about them right now.” I imagined Amber’s grandpa and grandma in a house, but one made of clouds in the sky. It had everything that someone could want, a TV, video games, cloud food that tasted like real food. They could even look out through the window in their cloud house and at Amber and her family. Like a second place to call home.

“I hope they’re happy up there. They’re so far away from us and we can’t even talk to them or anything.” I said as I picked at more food on my plate, having gotten foods I could tell what they were like tater tots. “Do you think you’ll ever get to talk to them again?” I ask, my head tilted this time.

Amber swallowed a large chunk of her food in one go before speaking. “Yeah, I think I will. But my momma says it will be a long time before that happens. For now, we have to enjoy the party and make them not worry about us.”

The girl’s previously worried look turned to a sadder one like she had been thinking the same question herself. She only stared down at her food, looking like she had something on her mind. Amber was no longer scarfing down her food like she normally did, just slowly picking at her food now. You knew something was wrong when she slowed down while eating. I should have been happy that I finally got her to be sad about what would normally be a sad event for anyone else in the world, but what little food I had eaten just sat heavy in my stomach instead.

Amber was happier before I brought this up, happy in this strange party filled with all sorts of odd things that I’d never seen, heard, or experienced before. I felt like I had done something wrong, trying to force onto her the idea that she should be sad right now. I wasn’t *making either her grandpa or grandma happy*. The thought of her grandparents staring down sadly at me from their cloudy home in the heavens wouldn’t leave my head. But what could have I done at the time, I couldn’t just pull her grandpa and grandma out of heaven. I watched as she finished the last bits of food on her plate, slowly chewing and keeping quiet.

It was long until I heard heavy breaths that came from her chest and her already high-pitched voice become even higher. “I know this all seems weird, I know, I know, I

know-!" Tears were really falling now from her face and onto her food. "But it's just the way everything is for me, I don't want to be here! I want my grandpa back, *I don't want to be having this stupid, weird party!*" Her lips trembled as she hid her face in her hands, her voice following along in the trembling as well.

Now it was my turn to cry, her sadness flowing into me like radio waves. I started tearing up now too, but instead of putting my face into my hands, I looked around me. The gossiping ladies and the drinking ladies were looking at Amber and me. The men had scornful looks at me, but the ladies only looked at us with pity. This made me cry more, I had messed up for real this time and it was all my fault because I called Amber weird.

All I remember after crying was one of the gossiping ladies telling us to get up and go inside so we could talk. We left our food and walked through the party, everyone staring at us like it was a walk of shame. The woman was Amber's aunt, a woman short in stature but full to the brim with emotion. She pulled us into a room with bed and told us to sit down and explain the situation, I tried to explain my situation but honestly all I remember was being so tired from crying that I fell asleep on the bed. It wasn't until the party ended that I woke up to the sight of my parents nudging me to walk home.

After that fateful day, the world just fell back into its usual frantic pace. Wake up, go to school, do your best all day, come home tired, do homework, *ad infinitum*. As I got older, I came to understand that death is just something you cannot avoid. It will happen to everyone including myself, but until that day and even after that day, I had never seen anyone do anything like what I experienced at the Shandera household. No other family did this party, they only somberly stared ahead wondering what their future without their loved one would be. And the most frustrating thing about this whole party was there was not a single mention of that party ever again from Amber and her family. Only tears and grief laden words about Amber's grandfather passing. It was as if the party was just a ritual that was done while grieving in Amber's family, something they didn't think twice about. Like how others and I don't exactly think about washing our hands every time we go to the bathroom, it's just something you do and be done with it. Life has to go on and there's no time to think about it.

My life and Amber's continued to parallel each other in our houses next to one another. The seasons cycled through many years and days in what felt like a blur that lead to adulthood. While I was out and about trying to pursue a promising career in football hoping to one day strike it big in the NFL, Amber had become somewhat of a tech whiz. All

of those years spent absolutely unable to shut up about video games lead her down the path of being able to use a computer well. The girl had become a bit of a recluse because of her technology knowledge, but not entirely cut off from the world. It always seemed like her parents were okay with that fact. Ms. Shandera shrugged it off as "Computers are the technology of the future. If Amber cooping herself up in there using her own computer leads her to having a job in tech one day. Then, well, it's fine." My parents and I doubted Ms. Shandera's words every time she said this, but here I am now as an adult in a world where you simply cannot avoid using technology...I'm starting to think I should have at least invested a little time learning how to use the computer like Amber did.

My computer troubles aside, I have no time to worry about it. For now, I need to worry about how I will juggle my dreams and taking care of this house my parents left to me. I never expected my parents to die this soon when I'm only 27 and in my second year of university, but life had other plans. Those plans included a horrible car crash where my father died immediately, and my mother had survived long enough only to die to complications in the hospital. So, I stand here in my childhood home, still filled to the brim with the signs of my parents' life before the faithful crash had happened three weeks ago.

The house is quiet and covered in dust as I walk around and somberly inspect everything. I have to say this isn't what I thought seeing my childhood house again in almost a decade would be like, but like I've said before, life's plans don't align with mine. My parents' clothes, their shoes, their knick-knacks, and everything else in place awaiting their owners' return like a dog. They wait for the day my parents would come back and breathe life into them once more, but it's futile. They've gone off to the far place that I remember Amber's mom had told me about those years ago, Heaven. The only different thing now is that I know better. *Way better.* My parents are not coming home and ***will never*** come home again.

Those loyal items only have me to answer to now as all of my parents' material possessions became mine. As I walk down the same stairs that I did for years and on that day of the party, I make my way down to kitchen, wanting to glance out the same windows I remember my parents looking out of. However, as I go to look out the window, a person who looks very much like Ms. Shandera did back then looks me in the eyes up close through the glass.

"*FUCK!*" I let out as I jumped back from the window with my heart racing. What was Ms. Shandera doing that close to the window, peering in like a creep?

"Yo, Leo! Let me in, I have food for you!" The women like Ms. Shandera pleaded while she held up a bag of food to the window.

"Ms. Shandera? What are you doing at my window like this, couldn't you just knock at the door?" I looked at the lady, not liking how this situation was turning out.

"...*Ms. Shandera?* Leo, you don't recognize me? It's me, Amber! I mean, I know I look a lot like my mom, but would my mom be doing this right now? I highly doubt it, she doesn't like doing weird things-" Amber started rambling, which finally jogged my memory of her. They do say that people start looking like their parents at some point, but I didn't expect Amber to be an almost perfect clone of her mother.

"J-Just come in. The door's unlocked. I hadn't locked it because I was just looking around. We can catch up over the food you brought." The current situation was starting to remind me of the party. The only thing is that I was the one with the death in the family and giving the instructions.

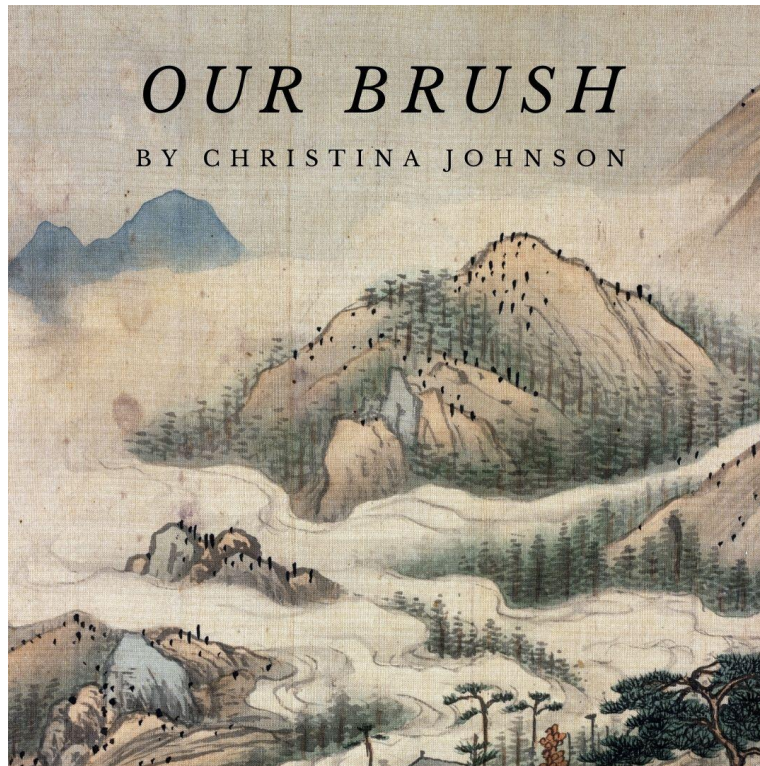
I could hear heavy footsteps as the woman walked around the house and onto the welcome mat of my parents, err, my house. I watched as she fiddled a little bit with the doorknob before the door gave way to her.

"Leo, welcome back to the neighborhood! It's been a while since you've here. Where should I put the food?" Amber loud voice boomed through the empty house, making the sad, quiet mood retreat for a while. Her head looked all over the place, her short hair moving along with it.

"Just put it on the dining room table right by you, I'll uh, get some forks and spoons." I meekly said as I looked around at the drawer where the forks and spoons had been since I was a kid. Thank god the drawer didn't change, I know the house had gotten some changes since I had been away at university, but to know the forks and spoons were exactly were I remember was a comfort. But at least I didn't make myself look like a fool fumbling around as Amber pulled up a seat and made herself at home.

With forks and spoons in hand, I joined Amber at the table. Even though it been almost a decade since I saw her, there was things that hadn't changed about Amber. She was still a big eater, her voice was loud but energetic, and did unconventional things-

(To be continued...)



Your mother always makes you go to Mr. Chu's studio. Whether or not you like it, the studio is the root of everything you are. The ink stained tables, the calendar with Chinese characters, and the gold statue of Buddha in the front of the room. But more importantly, the blank piece of paper that interrupts the blue paint stain on the cracking wood table. It hurts your neck to keep looking over your shoulder. But it's a necessity to know when Mr. Chu is looming. After all, your earliest memories of him are his furrowed eyebrows as he inspects your work.

When Mr. Chu hurries upstairs to see what Mrs. Chu dropped, that's when your eyes can wander. They crave something exciting. Something that doesn't scream Mr. Chu. Your eyes drift to the big window at the front of the studio. It's a marketing tactic. Mr. Chu's way of enticing other tiger parents into dropping their kids off at his doorstep after they rebelled against piano and violin. For you, it's your favorite source of inspiration. There's a story behind every person who passes that window. Every car, every stain on the sidewalk, and every crack in the building. That's what you want to paint. Whenever he catches you staring at the glass, Mr. Chu snatches away your paper and points to the table in the corner, the one that faces his favorite landscape painting. In his broken English, he always says, "Head always in the wrong place! Put it

here!" His bigger and rougher hand wrapped your smaller fingers around a heavy wooden brush. The familiar grip always brings a stinging pain to your wrist.

You hate this brush more than anything. It never paints the world the way you see it. It's too thick to make the thin lines of the convenience store across the street but too thin to make the lines of the cars that zoom by. You hate that this is the only tool you can use with your left hand. It's too long and you keep jabbing your face with it. Your hand always cramps after using it.

Almost as if it was punishing you.

The teachers at your school worry about you often. They always look at you with alarm when you avoid doing anything with your left hand or when you need to wear a supportive glove. Those bright and accusing eyes always turn to your mother, who needs you to translate all the emails that got sent to her.

"Abuse? Americans don't know what abuse is," your mother curses in Mandarin, yet she still forces you to be polite as you extend invites to the teachers. The invite is large enough to hide the pain in your wrist. The day you pass them out, the teachers don't ask you about your constant injury. Instead their bright eyes fly over the title of Mr. Chu's art show printed in a bloody red.

The very sight of the vengeful vermilion sets a deep fire in your heart. It forces you to wait for all the other students to leave for the night, until it's just you and Mr. Chu in the studio.

Can he feel the glare on the back of his head? Can he hear your raging thoughts over the sound of the running water he uses to clean those fucking brushes? If he does, Mr. Chu doesn't show it.

Instead he hums a light tune, refusing to look over his shoulder to see the tears pricking your eyes.

"I don't want to be an artist anymore!" Your own words send you reeling back and slapping a hand over your mouth. For a moment, you can't help but think he didn't hear you. He still isn't turning around to face you. But you know your words still reach him, driving themselves into his back as he sits up straight with tense shoulders. The only thing fighting the gaping silence is the running faucet.

"You're wrong." Mr. Chu says the words gently, as if explaining a better way to hold a brush and not your own feelings about art. He still won't face you. The sound of splashing water continues as he goes back to cleaning his brushes. But his back is still abnormally straight, as if he hadn't been the template for your bad posture. Just half an hour ago you two sat crouched over your copy of *another* mountain.

The tears aren't enough to cool the heat of your face or the anger coursing through your veins. He doesn't see you or listen to you. Mr. Chu is immovable and cold, a towering presence in your life. His shadow hides all the pain he puts you through. That's why you can't back down. Not this time. With hands moving faster than your mouth, you slam your school bag to the ground. Mr. Chu still doesn't turn, even as you force yourself to march towards him.

"I hate drawing mountains over and over again! I hate when you put a landscape in front of me and just tell me to draw! I hate when you put that fucking brush in my hand and nothing I ever make is good enough for you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you more than anyone else in my life!" Your hands don't drift to your mouth this time, making sure to drive each of those words deeply into Mr. Chu's back. You want him to feel the stabbing pain of your words. You want him to feel like you do.

Mr. Chu finally turns around. His black eyes are narrowed, crushed under the weight of his furrowed brows. The crows' feet pull at his eyes and a deep frown twists his lips. You're sure this is it. The breaking point, the point of no return. Drawing up your posture to match his, mentally preparing yourself for his own sharp words. The ones he had no problem using against you before. The ones that carved away at your left hand until it could only hold the stupid brush. Mr. Chu's sharp eyes suddenly soften.

"I teach you the way my teacher taught me. My teacher taught me the way his teacher taught him. You hate the way we teach you art." There is no sympathy in Mr. Chu's voice, nor disappointment. It's not angry, it's not placating, and it lacks the edge that your words had. Mr. Chu isn't using his words to harm and you wonder if he ever did. He tumbles between Mandarin and English but you hear the intent loud and clear. It was muffled before under his critique and the way he dragged you away from the window. It's clear now in the darkness of the studio and over the sound of the running faucet. But you don't interrupt. You let Mr. Chu continue. You need to hear it and

thankfully he sees that. "But I teach you that way because it brought the best from me and that's all I want from you."

It takes you a few minutes to understand the words, only half of them are in English. But when you do, you nod. It's all you can do. Picking up your school bag, you make your way to the heavy door of Mr. Chu's art school. No goodbyes are spoken, but Mr. Chu wipes his hands on his apron as he follows you out of the studio. The door feels heavier as you shoulder it open. You can feel his eyes follow you as you walk. Tonight, the way home feels longer than usual.

#

"Your dinner is cold," is the first thing your mother tells you when you walk through the door. The words are clipped and her eyes follow you all the way to the dining room where your father sits at the head of the table, lottery tickets surrounding him. His cup of water steams next to his mountain of losing tickets. Next to him is a bowl of porridge decorated with meat and scallions. The smell of something comforting lingers in the air.

He doesn't even look at you as you collapse into the chair, blue backpack still clinging to your shoulders. You accidentally grab the spoon with your left hand, the stinging pain makes you immediately drop it into your lukewarm dinner. Father's head doesn't twitch, not even when curses leave your mouth.

You're too tired to cry. Biting your lip, you fish the ceramic spoon out from the bowl and watch as porridge drips off your hand. Quick as lightning, there's a napkin next to you and your mother scolds you for being so messy. Her hands are nimble as she unclasps the jade necklace from you before holding it to your face. The silver butterfly with outstretched jade wings contrasts the dry and cracked texture of your mother's hand. The smooth light green stone is marked by paint from earlier today, a large black splotch weighing down its left wing.

"There's paint on your necklace. Be more careful!" Her other hand carefully removes the backpack, your shoulder blades screaming with relief as your mother effortlessly moves the bag to the floor. With feet loudly clashing against the dark wooden floor of the kitchen, your mother continues to mumble something Mandarin. Her back is towards you, but you can see how careful she is while she cleans off the paint. The only

noise in the room is the sound of the running faucet. When your mother turns, her eyes are narrowed and her brows are furrowed.

There's crows feet pulling at her face and a frown twisting her lips. It makes your eyes widen and you can't help but see her in a different light as she reclasps the jade necklace to your neck.

#

After school, the bus breaks down a few blocks away. Passengers who have never taken the time to speak to each other all meet on the corner as they complain and search their phones for the next bus. But you don't have time to be angry, you need to get to Mr. Chu's studio. You run the rest of the way, your usual route looks different. You're closer to everything. There's no dark, tempered windows to dull any colors or sounds. You hear the windchimes on the pink house clatter violently when cars drive by and see the stripes of the cat who sits in front of the convenience store as if it's the manager. It's hard to explain but the world feels different today. That feeling resonates stronger the moment you step into the studio.

Fridays are the quietest days, most students show up once per week and no one ever picks Friday. But your mother makes you go three times a week. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. It means explaining to your friends every week that you won't be free until 7pm. No end of the week boba runs, hot pots, or shopping at the mall. Sometimes your friends wait outside the studio and you eat at a diner a couple blocks away. Those nights make you want to cry of relief. Today isn't one of those days. The thought makes you hesitate outside the studio. For a moment you think of taking the bus back to the mall and hanging out with your friends. But Mr. Chu meets you at the door with a frown on his face. "Why are you late?"

"The bus broke, I ran all the way here!"

"The paint will dry, hurry up!"

Maybe last week you would've snapped at your teacher. You'd probably roll your eyes and shove your earphones in before you could say something you'd regret. But for some reason, today feels different. Instead you nod and follow without argument. You don't

even move when Mr. Chu sat next to you with his own brush and a copy of *another* mountain landscape.

“Copying mountains doesn’t let me be creative, I think that’s why I don’t like the way you teach me.” This time the words are gentle. There’s no sharp edge to them and you’re almost whispering the words, as if criticism should be a secret buried deep enough to never see the light of day. But Mr. Chu never hesitates to unearth it, so why should you?

Mr. Chu looks down at you with widened eyes, “Do you think I wanted you to *copy* these mountains?”

“You always tell me to paint them!”

“But I never said copy them!” Mr. Chu sets down his brush and fully turns to peer down at you. “When I ask you to paint these mountains, I want you to paint them the way *you* want to.”

The familiar feeling of frustration courses through you, but it isn’t as intense as before. It doesn’t make you scream or cry like the other night.

“Is that why you hate all the things I make? Because they aren’t from my heart?”

Mr. Chu’s shoulders droop a bit at your question. This time there’s nothing to break the brief silence that follows.

Your mentor finally smiles, “I like everything you make.”

It takes you a few minutes to understand what he said. They aren’t words you’re used to hearing from him. Your weekend Chinese classes finally pay off as the words piece themselves together. The two of you sit there for a long time, staring at the picture. It’s the same as the one from last week. Before, you looked at the trees as sharp knives stabbing through the mountain.

Tall, strong, and unyielding to high winds. You thought the mountain was cold, with its peaks carrying snow and the white clouds taking away any chance for a blue sky. The shadows felt unforgiving. At least that’s what you saw. Today, the picture looks different. The trees make the mountain look soft and fuzzy. Like a warm jacket that protects it from the strong winds. The mountain still feels tall and strong, but not unyielding. The cracks to its profile are the points where it gives way, letting rocks tumble below to create little

decorations for the Earth. More importantly, the mountain doesn't feel cold. It *carries* the cold and protects the valleys below with its shadow. Today, it feels kind and warm. It doesn't feel like an enemy.

The stinging pain in your wrist that almost distracts from your new revelation about the picture. The brush makes some of your movements jerky, forcing you to soften your mistakes away with a small q-tip dipped in water. Mr. Chu keeps glancing at your work and occasionally nudging your shoulder when you lose focus. Without a doubt, it's one of the most difficult pieces you've created. Today, painting feels like a battle. It takes everything in you not to let the technical overshadow the emotional. By the end of it, your wrist is screaming in pain. But it's worth it, because it's the widest you've ever seen Mr. Chu smile. It exposes his one gold tooth and the crows' teeth wrinkle even more. You can't help but laugh as Mr. Chu reaches out, barely remembering that the painting needs to dry before he can carry it.

Mandarin slips out as he repeatedly calls your piece beautiful and lists everything he loves: the softness of the trees, the swirls of the clouds, the minor shadows over the valley, the boulders that seem to lead a path, and the elegant curves of the mountain ridges.

Before you go home, Mr. Chu pulls out a book from his desk. There are sticky notes poking out of it from every direction. Each with different characters and words, some which were familiar to you and some that weren't. The page he turns to has a picture of a yellowing hanging scroll painting. It's one that you don't recognize yet it feels so familiar.

"In the Song Dynasty, the Chinese used landscape paintings to express their ideas." He's talking so fast that you can hardly understand him. There's a sense of urgency in his eyes as he grabs your hand and places it on the black blobs on the top of the scroll. "This is *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*."

It doesn't make sense at first. Until you realize why the painting is so familiar. The black blob your finger rests on is more than just a black blob. "I painted my trees the same way!"

Mr. Chu nods eagerly, "Very soft!"

The longer you look, the more similarities you see. It's a different mountain than the one on your paper, but the ideals are still the same. An artist from hundreds of years ago saw a mountain and painted all the things you saw. The strength of the mountain, the

cracks in the visage, and the softness of the trees. Your heart couldn't help but race at the sight of your painting next to the picture of the hanging scroll. It feels more important than anything you've ever made. It isn't just a piece that Mr. Chu forced you to make nor was it a copy of a mountain.

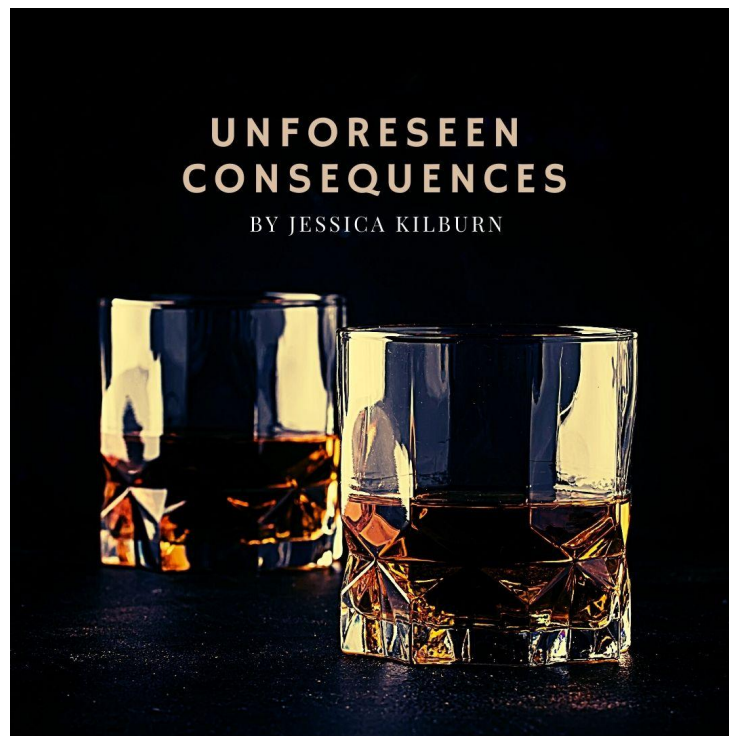
The gap between the technical and the emotional finally closes and you can confidently say this painting isn't a mountain, but the portrait of someone you love.

Mr. Chu laughs when you cry, hugging you tightly and murmuring something about how you're too emotional ("Ah, crybaby."). But there's no judgement to his voice and his words are warm. He doesn't ask you to help him clean brushes, but you help him anyway. The two of you scrub paint carefully out of the delicate bristles until each is white and pointed. Conversation is light and easy. Mr. Chu tells you all his plans for his upcoming art show. "I'll put yours in the front."

You thank him in his language as the two of you take one last look at the piece. Tonight is the latest you leave the studio and it takes you a long time to convince Mr. Chu that you could walk the three blocks to your house by yourself. He still insists on standing at the door and watching until he can't see you. At every street lamp, you take a look behind and you see him standing impatiently at the studio. This time, it doesn't annoy you.

#

At home, your mother asks why you're late and tells you dinner is cold again. You sit next to your father and stare at him for a long time. He doesn't look at you, but the number of losing lottery tickets grows in his pile. His hand slams another ticket down on the table and the force makes more orange papers fall from their stack and onto the ground. He doesn't ask you to pick it up, so you don't.



“Do you mind if I make myself a drink?”

It was a chill November night when he found himself in her living room again, moving with familiarity towards the gold mirrored bar cart in the corner. Thankfully, a fire was burning in the charming brick fireplace when he arrived. The only other light came from a dim lamp on the small round oak table sitting between two beige club chairs facing the warm fire, one of which she was occupying. The colorful Persian rug and matching oak bookcases gave the room that worldly but lived-in feel he’d always liked.

“I just want to apologize again for dropping by unexpectedly,” he said, after pouring his drink and moving to face her from a distance, giving her space. He sheepishly turned before speaking again, “I’m sorry if I seemed upset when I first got here... I’d like to explain.”

The sound of the crackling fireplace met his ears as he brought the cup to his lips. Meaning to look at her, he caught his own handsome reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. His face was flushed, and his hair disheveled. Frowning, he raked a hand through the longish dark brown strands. Time for a trim. The stubble that grew along his cheeks and chin since the morning wasn't unattractive and highlighted his strong jawline. He briefly took in the thick manicured eyebrows that framed his burnt umber eyes and was satisfied (if not pleased) by what he surveyed.

Artfully, he rearranged his face to express sympathy before turning towards her. She sat quietly, her posture rigid in the overstuffed chair. The light reflected off her eyes, blue as any cornflower he'd ever seen, making them appear glassy as she stared somberly into the fire. She hadn't been listening.

"Hello?" he said, walking over and waving his hand in front of her face. As her gaze slowly turned towards him, the warmth in her eyes was absent. A shiver crept up his back despite the heat. Getting her to understand might be more difficult than he thought, but he was up for the challenge. He nodded curtly to himself with determination and downed the last of his whiskey, neat, and set it on the mantle.

"I know you've probably heard some of this before, so I apologize," he said, beginning to pace, "I just really need to tell you the whole story." It really wasn't his fault, and she would understand that soon. He licked his thumb and wiped at a dirty spot on his hand.

"When I was a boy, around eight or nine, I finally convinced my parents to get me a dog. Now this dog was a border collie, real high energy but loyal as you can get. She had one blue eye, and one brown. I always loved that about her," he said, stopping in front of the bookcases and rubbing the book spines absentmindedly, "my mom was in bed a lot in those days and with my dad working- most of the care of that dog fell onto me. I really didn't mind though because I *loved* that dog. So, I fed her, bathed her, and cleaned up

after her. It was me that took her for walks and threw the frisbee for her, tried to get rid of some of that boundless energy," he paused smiling in remembrance.

Roused from her shock by his hands in her face, Liz was slowly coming out of a daze. She hadn't thought she would ever see him again and certainly not like this. She began piecing together the events of the night. It still felt surreal that he was in her space, her sanctuary, invading it like this. The violation was stirring something inside of her. Most nights she would give anything to be curled up in this room with the fireplace lit and a good book. Tonight, she would rather be anywhere but here. That felt wrong and she could only blame him.

"Oh man, you should have seen that dog catch a frisbee, the way she would jump so high in the air and twist her body to make any catch! I'd never seen anything like it," he said fondly, "she was soft too, so soft. Much different petting a dog like that over a short, wiry hair dog, you know what I mean? Anyway, that dog was loyal to me, and I was loyal to her. I would have done anything for her, I mean *anything*. I *spoiled* that dog. I'm an only child, and on top of that I didn't have too many friends so honestly, that dog was my everything," he said, pausing to retrieve his glass and pour another whiskey.

She defiantly tuned him out as he went on. He claimed he was speaking for her benefit, but she disagreed. He didn't seem to notice she wasn't paying much attention. Their brief relationship had been like that. His romantic gestures had felt empty and hollow as if they were for him, not her. Doing everything she could to avert her eyes from the floor of the room, she busied herself by searching it instead. She needed a way out of whatever this was. God, she would give anything for him to just leave.

"The thing was.... that dog was mine and I was hers *unless* my father was in the room. My dad...not the nicest guy okay, and he was old school. When we first got the dog, during the training process, he established a dominance over the dog pretty early on. The dog recognized him as the alpha of our pack. I mean, I guess we all did...but no matter

how my dad treated her, or how I treated her, if my dad was in the room I almost didn't exist to that dog!" he said, punctuating his last remark with a harsh gesture that sent whiskey flying from his cup.

His frenetic hand movement set off alarms in her body that felt like tiny jolts of electricity. Fully coming back into herself from the initial surprise of him showing up on her doorstep and inserting himself into her evening like this, she began racking her brain. Had she done or said anything to deserve this intrusion? Did he really believe she owed him this or anything at all?

"She followed him with her eyes and a look of yearning for his attention or affection which he *rarely* doled out and even when he did, it was in extremely small doses. By that age I had already caught on to all that. I learned the hard way it was better to fly under the radar and have no attention from my father than to wait around for him to be a decent human being every blue fucking moon. Or risk drawing the wrong type of attention; the kind he *loved* giving out. That stupid dog, that poor dumb bitch, she never learned that" he said, letting out a harsh laugh.

The sharpness in his tone pulled her attention back to him. A flush of heat began to rise in her. She was angry at herself for bringing him into her life, but angrier with him for not staying out of it. Their "relationship", which had been mostly physical anyway, had turned into more than she had bargained for, more than she had wanted. She held back frustrated tears, not wanting to give him anymore of herself.

"It was sad really, and pathetic. No matter how much my dad ignored her or gave her the wrong type of attention, that dog went back for more. Here I was, the best dog owner in the whole fucking world, and she just wanted him," he said. He abruptly stopped his pacing which had become increasingly erratic and came to where Liz sat. Gripping the arms of her chair best he could with a cup in his hand, one knuckle turning white, he looked directly into her eyes.

"That fucking hurt Liz, I have to say it really broke my heart. No matter how much I loved that dog, no matter how much I did for her, if my father was in the room she would choose him, every time."

The darkness in his eyes felt like a warning. On high alert, she tracked his movements as he angrily pushed off the chair.

He was drawn to her fireplace once again. Sneering into his cup, a feral look on his face, he swirled the last of the whiskey before finishing it off. Setting it back down on the mantle, he exchanged it for the dirty kitchen knife placed there earlier. His hand was shaking as he seethed with rage. Liz began struggling against the binds that held her in place, frantic at once. Inspecting the knife, her muffled cries barely registered.

Realizing that he had come to the end of his story, and running out of time, she worked harder to untie the ropes that bound her hands behind her back. Maybe he thought she was pleading for her life, but her blood was boiling. She was shouting expletives at him against the gag.

"So now you get it Liz. It's like that dumb fucking dog all over again," he snarled, kicking the feet of the body that lay on the floor, "no matter how much I love or give to you, you bitches always choose someone else." Finished, he moved towards her.

#

He woke slowly, head pounding, blood beating loudly in his ears. There was something thick and warm on his eyelashes. Fluttering them open and closed, he fought against the substance as he tried to get his bearings. His vision clearing, he was met with a kaleidoscope of colors. Just beyond that lay another body on the carpet, a blanket covering the corpse. He smiled internally, replaying the beginning of the visit in his head. Hearing Liz's voice, he turned his head towards the sound of it, chafing his forehead and cheek against the Persian rug.

"...all of my whiskey," she said, mumbling under her breath.

She was standing by the bar cart, pouring the rest of the whiskey into a glass. Bringing the cup up to her bow shaped lips, she took it like a shot. Her blonde hair pillowed around her head in messy tangles, her shirt was ripped in several places, and her lip swollen, a bruise blooming under the surface like a beautiful red rose. Covered in blood, she never looked more beautiful. He let his gaze linger lustfully over her until it froze on her left hand.

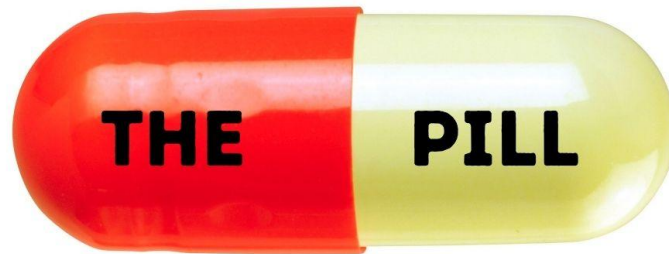
Puzzled, he realized she held the knife. This was an interesting twist. The anticipation of a continued fight exhilarated him. Neither his dog, nor any of the others, had bested him like this. He didn't recall there ever being a round two. Perhaps he had underestimated Liz. He started to pull his arms forward, intending to push off the ground, but they wouldn't budge. The ropes once used to restrain her were now tied around his wrists and ankles as he lay belly down on the floor. He began thrashing around, growing angry at the hindrance. He tried to speak but a gag bound his mouth.

His movement caught her attention. Slowly setting the cup down, Liz wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, wincing as she brushed against her wound. Switching the knife to her dominant hand, she walked towards him, before kneeling on the carpet.

"You talk too much," she said, looking him square in the eye.

Enraged, he continued to jerk his limbs about, attempting to free them from their binds. She sat unmoving, calmly watching his struggle. When her eyes drifted to the left as she tilted her head, he paused. The movement was reminiscent of the way his dog would tilt her head at the sound of his father's truck in the driveway. He imagined for a moment that he heard sirens in the distance but for the second time that night, only the sound of the fireplace met his ears. Now dying, the embers popped as they went out, their sparks extinguished. He resumed his fight as she got off the floor, looking down at him.

"Now I'm going to tell you my story," she said, smiling coldly while toying with the knife, "well...the short version."



BY AARON LEE

The winter's cold morning breeze blew right through my window and onto my exhausted body. I was blacked out, and I wished it was from a wild party where things got so crazy I could barely remember but the blatant truth was far less entertaining.

The tremendous amount of workload my boss had been throwing at me lately was killing me slowly both emotionally and physically. It's sad he wasn't born in the 1500s because he would have thrived as medieval torture! He has such remarkable talent for knowing how to get under someone's skin and annoying them to death. What's even worse is his happy-go-lucky attitude to work, chanting that absurd motto "no matter how hard you work, someone else is working harder.". I think he neglects to take into account the fact that even prisoners need to eat and sleep.

That morning, I slept through both of my alarm clocks only to be awakened by the shivering cold breeze of a New York winter. When I said I blacked out last night, I really

meant it, I completely forgot how I had gotten back to my own apartment, and the mess I had made. After wasting all that time trying to piece the story of last night back together I glanced at the clock only to realize, I was almost late for work. I quickly changed my dirty clothes, grabbed the only thing I saw insight, a hardy loaf of bread, and ran down the stairs of my apartment hoping I didn't miss the 103 into the city. In the entire time I had been working there I had only missed the bus once It was years ago when I had just gotten the job and the young naive me said: *"you'll love the long commute, it'll give you time to read or do other productive things on the bus"* which, by the way, I never did, but I had to wait nearly an hour for it to make the whole loop again. And from then on I swore to never miss the bus again even if that meant grooming myself in front of a bunch of strangers.

Luckily today I made it just in time, the bus pulled up, right as I ran out the front door of my apartment, it was timing so perfect it seemed scripted. When I was a kid I always thought that when I got older my life would be like an action movie or a sitcom where they made being an adult look it was fun and thrilling, but this was something I couldn't have been more wrong about. I never expected that the most exciting part of my day was going to be nearly missing a bus for work. After getting on the bus I took a seat and let out a hardy sigh of relief. I thought to myself, what a morning it has been, and in my mundane world, probably the most interesting story my co-workers would hear all day.

Pulling out my phone to check the time, I saw in the makeshift black screen mirror my horrifying appearance. There's a reason why they call it beauty sleep because, without it, you look like a monster and this morning I was a zombie. My hair looked like a category 5 tornado had landed on my scalp and went to town on each hair follicle. My eyes were red and had bags that said I haven't slept well in weeks. I was half-awake, and my words came out like complete gibberish, If I was any paler someone might have mistaken me for an actual zombie. The long bus ride to work was almost like a daily tour of New York City and

the sightseeing never really got old to me. How could it? As a kid I had always dreamed of moving to the Big Apple, the only part I never saw coming was working a treacherous 9-5 job to get there. I fell asleep on the bus ride trying to recharge as much energy as I could before the work-feeding frenzy started all over again.

I was awakened by the loud brakes screeching hard as the bus began to pull up to my stop, jolting the bus and everyone on it forward. This was the daily alarm clock that told me to get ready for another “exciting” day of work. I got out and took another deep breath and then began making my way into the building.

I scanned my badge then walked through the gates and up into the elevator pressing the 21st-floor button. Years ago I would stare in delight, as I saw the overarching view of the city on my short ride up, but now it only served to remind me how long my commute back home was. The elevator doors opened and I walked out of the elevator trying to make my way through the chaotic battlefield of a high-rise office building filled with fast-moving mail carts, loud clacky keyboards, noisy printers, and annoying office chatter. I got to my cubicle and was greeted by Ryan, my cubicle neighbor. Ryan reminds me of the person I once was when I started working here, he’s just as young and naive as I was when I was first hired, and he looks just how I did before the stress broke me. On the seldom occasions we have hung outside of work, we’ve talked about our shared love for comic books, something I gave up when I entered the adult world but Ryan held on to.

This morning Ryan leaned over and, seeing how tired I was, tried to cheer me up with the generic pep-talk, saying “Once we get the proposal done, this nightmare will be over and work will return back to normal”. Being the negative person I am, I remind him with my years of seniority that projects like these always take longer than they expected, and the workload probably won’t die down for another couple of weeks. Ryan who never likes it when I pull the seniority card changes the topic to comic books and asks “Have you

checked out the new Mr.Awesome comic book that just got released?" I told him although he was my favorite superhero as a kid I haven't bought a comic book in almost a decade. Ryan, being the nice young kid, handed me the comic book and says "Keep it, sometimes it's nice to be a kid again". Trying to be polite I thank him for the comic book and return to work.

After another gruesome day at the office, I head out of the building and catch the 103 back to my apartment. On the long bus ride back I try to pass the time first by looking around the bus at all the unique individuals. I like to play a game where I create a fantasy story of who this person might be from what they're wearing or holding, A student? Stockbroker? Grandma doing some grocery shopping? After a while it gets boring, but then I remembered that Ryan gave me a comic book, and having nothing better to do I decided to give it a read. I had always loved comic books as a kid, and then when I became a teenager that peisty bully named "society" said that reading comic books was something nerds did and when you're that young and impressionable you buy into that idea and decide a performance is much better than being yourself.

At my age, I couldn't care less what people think of me anymore. That phase had gone and passed, so I began flipping through the pages until I stumbled onto the ad section. These were always my favorite part of any comic book. When I was young I thought they were cool; they listed products with outrageous claims. Have you ever wanted x-ray vision? Sea creatures that could come to life? Well, if you sent in the few dollars you had as a kid, your dreams could come true. Of course, these products never worked as advertised, often leaving you feeling more disappointed than before, but as a kid who's there to tell you to stop being so gullible. It wasn't like the internet was invented to tell you how dumb the product you purchased was. The only way you could find out that the x-ray goggles you just bought didn't work was after you mailed in your money to some random address,

hoping it wasn't a scam, and then waiting two weeks later for it to miraculously appear on your doorstep. After all, this waiting, your heart is beating quickly, and you bring the box inside. At this point, your excitement is through the roof only to be severely disappointed when you open the box only to realize that these x-ray goggles were really just some stupid cheap pair of sunglasses. This was your glimpse into the adult world, where some snake-oil salesman sold you a dream and passion only to leave you empty-handed with a shitty life that was far less glamorous than what it was sold to be. To be honest, I still couldn't believe that these snake-oil salesmen are still selling the same scam.

Looking at the various items throughout the catalog, one really caught my attention, it said in bright bold letters "Have you ever dreamed of being a kid again?". It felt as if the comic book was talking right to me as if it knew about my ratty apartment and my terrible 9 - 5 job. Right below, it stated, "One pill will return you to your youth" with just a mailing address below. The reality of such a pill would have been a scientific miracle, and yet here it is advertised in the most obscure of places, a comic book. My adult size brain was telling me to stop being so gullible all the time, yet my inner child was screaming "What if?" and I couldn't tell if it was curiosity that struck me or maybe just nostalgia, but I had decided to fill out the form and mail it in the next day.

Getting back to the apartment late, I was physically exhausted from yet another horrendous day of work. I decided to head straight for the bedroom. As I sat laying in my bed with the room pitch black, my brain was more active than ever before. I began to reminisce on when life was a bit simpler and work meant hanging out with friends at the cafeteria, sitting in a classroom coloring in posters, and playing sports after school.

The next morning I mailed off the letter and resumed back to normal life forgetting that I had even sent it out in the first place.

Two weeks later I arrived back at my apartment to see a small package waiting for me at the door. I brought it inside and got out a knife. Opening the box revealed one pill in bright packaging, with little to no information on it at all. The only writing was "have you ever dreamed of being a kid again?" I opened the package and let the pill touch my hand. Reality had set in and the novelty joke had gone a bit too far. What could this pill be? A new type of drug? A candy? Maybe it was just a novelty gift. My curiosity persuaded me, and down the pill went, slowly making its way into my stomach.

I sat down in a chair waiting to feel any effects. Minutes went by and turned into an hour, and an hour into a few hours, I braced myself for the worst possible effects but yet I felt nothing. That same disappointment from my childhood soon started to creep back up and I was reminded that products like these never actually work. I sat there sitting in the chair, resenting myself a little at how gullible I had been. I should have known by now but I decided to cut my losses and head to bed.

It's hard to describe what happened the next morning. When I woke I came to the stark realization that something was different. I couldn't tell at that exact moment but something felt different, The temperature? Smell? How my body felt? I couldn't pinpoint it exactly but something had changed. I had awoken quite energetic, the first time since my youth, and the aches and pains I had the night before mysteriously disappeared. I hadn't felt this well in years. Most days I dreaded getting out of bed, but with all of this energy, I felt gleeful in the day's endless possibilities.

I sprung out of bed, like a tiger hunting its prey. As I stood up from my bed something left me speechless. Standing up on the floor I was nearly half the height I once was, with my pajamas just sagging to the ground. I panicked not knowing what was going on. I ran to the bathroom in a whirlwind of dismay, sprinting as I had never done before,

and when I looked into the mirror, to my own frightening horror, I was greeted with a boyish face I hadn't seen in years.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing, I stood there in silence staring at my own reflection, trying to make the slightest amount of sense of this situation. My brain was racing with so many questions and the idea that I had wanted to be a kid again soon fell into ruins as I grasped the reality of my situation. What am I going to do now that I'm a kid again? How am I supposed to tell my boss or my family and friends? Can I still work? Do I have to go to school again? I frantically searched for answers, googling every stupid question I had and even looking back at the comic book to see if there was any information available, yet nothing appeared except an address. After calming myself down I bumped into my first problem. I realized I didn't have any clothes that had fit me since I was 10. I scoured the apartment to find the smallest outfit I had and what I had stumbled upon was still humongous on me. The shirt looked more like a dress, and my pants were baggier than MC Hammer's, I decided my first task would be to buy some clothes that would actually fit.

I called in sick that morning, doing the whole Ferris Buller shtick, with the coughing, and sneezing, I might have gone overboard over the phone but my boss reluctantly bought into it. I was finally free to enjoy my first day off in months in a body that was much more vibrant and capable. I still didn't have any clothes that fit my pre-teen body, so I headed out of my apartment making my way to the local department store. As I walked out into the street, a long-lost feeling had returned, my sense of astonishment and wonder for the city had come back to surprise me. For the many years, I had lived in New York city I often forgot about the alluring reason why I wanted to move here in the first place. Work and other life priorities had always distracted me from adventuring through the city and it was only until today that I realized how blind I had been.

As I walked around the bustling streets of New York, I took in a big breath of air, and let out a relaxing sigh of relief. Like Ferris Buller, I needed a day off and I wanted to reminisce about what I had missed for so many years. I stood outside of the bus stop and waited for the 107 bus so I could head to the apartment store. The bus driver gave me a weird glance as I hopped on and said, "Hey son where are your parents". Forgetting about my child-like appearance I was about to say back in California where they had been for the past 30 years. But I realized such a response would have made absolutely no sense to him so I said I'm going to meet my parents now. He replied, "Well a young boy like you should be riding the bus alone, If I saw your parents I'd let them know how irresponsible they were being". As I sat on the bus, it became more apparent how many people were curious as to why a young boy in baggy clothes was riding alone.

The bus pulled up to the stop and I got out and started walking towards the department store. I noticed the preying eyes of individuals passing me on the street. As I got to the department store I headed in and decided to find something that would fit. As I went from one section of the store to the next I noticed the store security eyeing me quite a bit, He probably assumes like any other kid that enters an expensive department store without a parent, I have come to try and steal some stuff. I grabbed some clothes and tried them on, after spending quite a bit of time I finally found something that fitted so I made my way to the cashier. Behind the register was a young lady, she asked as I walked up "Aw where are your parent's little boy?", I told her that my parents wanted me to pick up some new clothes for myself and handed her my credit card with my name on it. She gave me a cheerful smile and wished me the best as I headed back into the changing room to put on my new clothes.

I adventured through the large city. In all the years I had lived here I never took the opportunity to see what New York had to offer. Millions of people traveled all over the

world to see my backyard and yet I had never taken the time to see it myself. I decided to walk through Times Square, and my attention was caught when I walked by a candy store. I remembered how much I used to love candy, and when Halloween came around, I was so eager to be the first one to knock on doors, making sure I got as much candy as I could. Then somewhere in between my teenage years, someone said it wasn't cool anymore and so I blatantly agreed with them and tried to stuff my eagerness to trick or treat down by saying how uncool it was, and that it was time for me to grow up. I went into the store and that same old saying kid in a candy shop perfectly described how I was feeling. There were numerous types of candy all over the store, and I decided to go crazy and purchase a large bag of all my childhood favorites, the bag was about the size of my head, and maybe if I was an adult I would have worried about my blood sugar but now was the time to use this grand opportunity to enjoy it. I paid for the bag of candy and left the store with sugar dripping at the sides of my mouth.

For all of the bright lights and neon signs, I still felt a little lonely. I wandered the city thinking about the grand memories I had kept from my childhood. I made my way through the park and saw a playground. I had vivid memories of how much fun they were when I was a kid but the older you got the less enjoyment remained. Being 10 again I was the perfect height for everything so I ran and decided to go play on all the fun rides I hadn't touched in decades. I ran around a little bit, climbing up the walls but something still felt empty.

When I thought back to my childhood what I remembered was the good times I enjoyed with my friends and family. It was the time spent together and not my youthful body. As the sun started to set I decided to make my way home, and I walked through the city, caught another bus, and ended back at my apartment. I was wildly tired as my body hadn't seen this much movement in years. I decided to go to sleep early, and sitting in my

bed after such a weird day I thought that I would have gotten much more enjoyment out of being a kid again but it felt a little hollow. I missed my friends and the quality time I spent with my family. As I thought it over what I began to realize was I didn't miss my youthful body I missed what my youth had offered me, the freedom to enjoy the little things in life like laughing with friends, eating meals with your family, and being able to be yourself before it was deemed uncool. I thought that the most important part of life was fitting in and not being different, as different was the enemy, the worst outcome you could be. It was a pill most of us had swallowed until years later the promises blossomed into nothing, where being cool didn't give us any satisfaction. I began to resent my kid body I wanted to return to who I was before. I was reminded that being yourself is the best thing possible and I painfully wished to be back into my adult body again. As much as I had dreamed about being young again I realized that what I had missed was the boyish sense of charm and wonder for the world, and not my younger body.

The next morning I woke up feeling grateful for what I once had. I decided to write a letter to the company, hoping they had a cure to turn me back. I headed down to the post office and sent off the letter. I waited anxiously over the next few days, hoping to hear the pleasant sound of a knock. Then it happened, opening the door I was greeted with another envelope. I opened it up, my heart racing with the same amount of excitement when I was a kid. Inside there was a single pill, with no hesitation, I instantly swallowed it. When I awoke I was never so happy to be myself again.

###



I am running. Running away from everything I thought I knew. My father is running after me, but he's just as fake as all the rest of them. Even more so than everyone else. After all, they were just keeping out of it, ignoring the facts and lying to my face. *He's* the evil bastard who started it.

The wind whistles through my hair and the low roar fills my head, drowning out my racing thoughts. I run faster, craving the repetitive, mind-numbing motion of feet pounding, arms pumping, left, right, left, right.

I stumble. Stop for a moment. I lost Dad miles ago, so I can spare that at least. But he knows where I'm going so I don't slow for long. He knows this city so well, he

could be there already, waiting for me. He'll want to comfort me, pull me into a hug, say he's sorry, hope I forget tonight ever happened. I never will. I couldn't if I wanted to.

Apparently they all know the truth about my mom. My friends, my family, my *boyfriend*. I didn't even know there *was* anything to know about her. My dad has always been so open about my mother. Now I can't say what is true and what are the lies I've happily gobbled up my whole life.

He didn't tell me when I started high school, when I graduated, when I left for college, when I got my own place. My mother was depressed. My mother *killed herself*. And everyone knows. Everyone has always known, and they all pity me. Because it was *my fault*.

I can see my house now. My father is nowhere to be seen, so I start slowing down. I'm almost there, I can lock him out and drown in my tears without anyone bothering me. They're already streaming over my cheeks, have been for a while.

I don't make it to my door though. My foot catches on the curb. I pitch forward.

And I fly.

#

My mind takes me far away and by the time I realize I am not actually unconscious it is far too late to turn back. Not that I want to. I've never felt lighter than I do now. I turn my face upward as I shoot towards the heavens and wonder what awaits me. I feel so lost, I just want to be free again! Free of the chains of pain and betrayal.

I breach the clouds and come to an abrupt stop. All around me is whiteness. I warily put a foot out and lean forward. When I do not suddenly plummet to my doom, I put my other foot forward, then again and again, until I no longer know how far I have traveled in the monochromatic landscape.

#

Finally, I see a spark of something; a deep green that does not belong up in the sky, not that I do either, of course. I gradually speed up until I am sprinting as fast as my legs can carry me toward the smudge of color. Truth be told, I am running quite a bit faster than my usual strength allows, which is curious, but not interesting enough to distract me from the light. It does not grow much larger as I approach, despite the ground I'm covering. When I'm still a ways off, it begins to streak towards me faster than my eyes can follow. I fling my arms open in welcome and as soon as the light sinks into my chest the clouds give way beneath my feet and I begin to plummet, faster and faster and faster until I can see the pavement in front of the house I left what feels like so long ago.

I am not worried. Calm as could be, I lift my hands to my chest. I can feel the heat growing within me and even with my eyes closed I can see the brightness of the lights flashing around me. Inches from the roof of my home something bursts from my back and when I pull with all my might, strange muscles I have never felt before spasm violently. I suddenly stop, hovering for a moment, before those strange muscles give out and I collapse softly on the roof. Out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of him coming up the street, pausing in front of my house, and pulling out his phone. I have to admit, he looks distraught. But enough is enough. I can't be near any of them again. Especially

him. After a moment of rest and exploration of my new wings I flex those muscles again and shoot up and up and soar through the skies and I am finally, *finally* free.

When I land, back up in the strange cloud world, the wings begin to burn. They do not feel like *me*. And yet the pain says they are.

They are me but they are hurting me and I cannot escape because they are ME.

I need help. But everyone is gone, I left them for this pain. I am not sorry, despite the hurt. Physical pain is easy, especially when it comes with such great rewards. So I am glad I left them. Who knows if they would have even helped me anyway.

My thoughts feel short. As if I am incapable of carrying one for long. It must be the pain again. Oh well. I should probably stop using them. They still hurt so much. I wish it would stop. I wish I could stop. I cannot though.

If it were possible I would not go back. I would not stop the pain. I am beginning to like it. These things on my back, the small ones on my sides, are a part of me now. I am beginning to know them better.

They still hurt.

I do not think it is the wings. I hurt even when they do not. In fact, they never hurt anymore. Only I hurt. At least, the parts of me that are not them. Because they are still part of me. Thank God. They are the only part of me strong enough to keep going.

I'm still glowing. Now that my eyes are open I can see it, flashing green and gold around me. I wonder what the people below see when they look up as I fly over. Can

they see the vibrant color shining through the clouds I rest on? Perhaps they think it's lightning. Strange green lightning that stays still and shines bright as the sun.

Although, what if I'm not sitting on clouds? They don't feel like clouds, I always thought clouds were wet. Perhaps this is a whole other world. Maybe there are even other people up here! Although, if this is another world, would there really be *people*? Do I even belong up here? Do I even know how to get home? The thought is alarming, but before I worry myself into a frenzy I remember my wings. I'm not exactly human anymore am I? And I did get my wings in this strange, cloud fantasy, so there is a chance I might belong here. Even a good chance. So long as I can find other people.

I hope, if they do exist, they'll be nicer than the people down there. I don't know what I will do if they lie to me too.

#

I've been flying for so long now. Everything aches; except, curiously, my wings. They were the only thing burning in the beginning, but they seem to have healed now. The more I fly, the stronger they grow and the more my body burns. Day and night the fire laps at my skin, licks up my body, and sinks its claws deeper and deeper.

The pain is so great when I wake up I can hardly push myself to my feet. Instead I again spread my wings and let them carry me further and further into the blank whiteness.

Something is different today. There is a glow off in the distance, different from my own and without the magnetic pull it had on that first dash through the sky. My light flares when I see it, as if trying to match the brightness. It's not much later, only a few

more minutes of flight, before a piece of the light breaks off and grows larger. It dims, too, as it comes closer, which is odd to me but I think nothing of it as the fire suddenly wraps around me, head to toe, halting all thought and burning away the last of my will and determination. Nothing my wings do keeps me in the air.

Before I hit the clouds, arms wrap around me in a vice that only makes me burn all the more.

#

Awareness returns to me in increments. Flashes of light and sound wrapping confusedly around me. I know my eyes are open, but everything is blurry and dark. My arms and legs refuse to move no matter how long and loud I scream at them to. My mouth won't move either and I know it isn't open because something is blocking my nose and I can't breathe. My chest is seizing, my back arching, causing my neck to twist and block my airway further. I know it's happening and I can't stop it, can't regain control over my twitching muscles. The sound around me has reached the point of tearing at my ears and banging at my brain.

There are hands on me now, and I want to be grateful but my confused body is only panicking more, fighting at the hands that I hope are here to help. Then a sharp prick and the lights go out.

#

This time around I don't open my eyes. The room is silent but for a soft shuffling noise to one side of me. I slowly take stock. My skin still burns, but my muscles are relaxed and my hand clenches when I want it to.

There's something in it. Something soft and warm that I didn't notice before was a steady presence. I decide I must open my eyes. This is a much more daunting process than moving my hand, but there is a voice above me now, whispering encouragement, practically begging me to wake up. This confuses me. I am awake, aren't I? Why do they sound so sad? Last I checked there isn't anyone in this world who cares for me that much.

"Heart Sister? Heart Sister, please wake up."

I turn my head toward the voice, slowly cracking my eyes open.

Even the faint light is still sharp, making my head pound, but the pain is all worth it when I see the face staring down at me. My green glow that has not stopped pulsing since it appeared suddenly calms, dimming to the point where I can open my eyes wide without discomfort.

She is glowing, quite literally, the same deep shade of gold streaked green I am. The skin of my hand she holds tingles gently and the burn fades. As her hand slides further up my arm the tingling follows and chases away any lingering heat. The same happens to my face as when she lifts her hand to hold my cheek. Frantically, catching on to what is happening, I reach out to pull her onto the bed with me. She follows willingly, despite that she could easily have resisted my weak tugs. She lays down next to me and pulls me on top of her. At first I resist, afraid of smothering her, and then she pulls my head down so I can bury my face in her neck and any worries I had fly out of my mind.

Slowly, my mouth opens. "Heart Sister?" I ask, my voice hardly above a whisper.

She chuckles softly and I can feel the low sound in my chest with how closely pressed together we are. "You're probably so confused right now. And I don't think you're in the right state of mind for explanations. So just sleep, Heart Sister. I will explain when you wake."

#

When I wake a third time, I am vastly more comfortable than I can ever remember being. I am warm, all the pain is gone, and the bed seems to be twice as wide to accommodate my wings, which stretch out to either side of me. None of this, however, compares to the warm, soft person underneath me. I feel my Heart Sister shift as I begin to wake.

Heart Sister.

It should confuse me. Scare me, even. But instead all I feel is immense comfort and peace. I trust this person. I would die for her. And now she is smiling down at my intense stare and I blush heavily.

"Hello there. Are you hungry? My friend brought us some food. I'm not any more sure of what time it is than you probably are, but it's just sandwiches."

I slowly lift myself off her, bracing myself for pain as I sit up. When nothing happens, I turn and look at her. I'm about to respond when my brain finally registers what it is I'm seeing. Her hair is green, and looks long enough to reach her feet, even laying down as she is. Then her eyes meet mine and I can tell she is trying not to laugh. Actually, I can feel it somehow, as if I'm in her head, or perhaps she is in mine.

Her eyes are *gold*. Bright, glowing, and breathtaking.

She can clearly see what's going on in my head as clearly as I can see what's going on in hers, because she says, "You have them too now, you know. The hair, too. Although yours isn't quite as long yet. Don't worry though, you'll get there."

All I can respond with is a sort of strangled choking sound, and even that almost gets caught in my throat. As I register what she said I desperately wish for a mirror, but I can't seem to look away from her. Is that what I look like? There's no way it looks nearly as good on me.

"No angel is ugly, you know. I'm not even sure if it's possible," she says.

This time I manage a soft, "Angel?"

"Yeah!" she says. "You know, I never thought my heart mate would be one of the blessed. I've always thought it would make it harder to connect to each other, but I'm not having any trouble."

I don't know what to say to that, and I'm about to ask what blessed means too when my stomach begins to rebel.

My heart sister winces and reaches over to pull the tray of food into her lap from the bedside table. "Here," she says, "you really should eat. I can explain everything afterwards. For now, my name is Angela."

Even though I'm still reeling in confusion I reflexively say, "Chloe, I'm Chloe-" but I stop there. I'm not sure why, but I don't want to tell her my last name. Maybe because it just doesn't seem quite right anymore, but Angela doesn't comment.

Instead she says, "Oh that's a beautiful name. Much better than common old Angela. My parents were so boring. No creativity at all. I know at least a dozen Angela's." As she speaks she helps me sit up and begin to eat. She doesn't eat with me, too focused on talking up a storm to fill her mouth. "That's not even including all the Angelina's, Andrew's, Andy's, and Angelica's. Those aren't as bad as just straight Angel though. That would be

terrible. I've only heard of humans using that one though. Do you know any Angels down on Earth?"

I blink at her, mouth full of food. She waits patiently for me to swallow, but I don't answer her question. I have too many of my own.

"Where are we?"

She looks taken aback, but quickly chases the surprise away with a huge smile. I'm beginning to suspect she's used to getting what she wants when she flashes that smile.

"Well, we usually make sure Blessed are settled before we answer that question, but you don't seem to want to be distracted."

I stare at her. "And what's 'blessed' mean?"

She doesn't say anything for a moment. Then, "Okay. Before I say anything you need to know that you are *not* dead. You haven't been dead, ever." She looks at me, expectant, but I don't know what to say.

"Okay? Maybe you shouldn't tell me where we are just yet." She shifts on the bed to better fit me in her lap and just looks at me, eyebrow raised. "You know," I continue, "If you're leading with something like that I'm not sure I want to know."

"Well, I've already started answering and now it'll be all you can think about so I have to finish." She moves me off her lap until I'm against the headboard and she's sitting, criss cross, in front of me. Any foreboding I felt before triples when she takes my hands and pulls them into her lap. "You see, we're kind of in heaven."

I freeze.

My mind is whirling and all I can think is, *'duh, she did say we are angels.'* I finally meet Angela's eyes and find her looking at, clearly expecting something.

And that's when it really hits.

My mind goes back to how this all started and all I can see is the ground rushing up towards me and I remember the sudden pitch black before I rose to the sky. I can picture

him in my mind, not rushing up to my house like I thought he would, but rather stopping and calling someone. And he didn't see me. I was falling and then I was taking off from my roof and he was *right there*.

I can't breathe. Angela said I wasn't dead, hadn't ever been, but there was really no other explanation. Was my body down there still?

What did that make me now? My father must have found me! I might hate him and never want to see him again, but I would never wish something like that on anyone.

Someone is holding me, rocking me back and forth and I finally notice the quiet whispers. "It's okay. It's okay. Calm down. *Breathe.*" I slowly come back to myself. I am out of breath and my hands are still shaking, but Angela has wrapped herself around my whole body and I gradually relax into her warmth. I can hear her heart thumping, beating in time with my own. I remember when she called me Heart Sister and my calmed mind vaguely wonders what that means.

When I finally manage to get up Angela doesn't let go. She moves with me and settles against the other half of the head board, both of us still tangled together. "Peace sister. You're not dead. You are here with me, both you and your body. And your father's just a prick, although you already know that. Don't read into anything he does."

I turn in her arms to face her, frowning. "How- how do you know that? I didn't..."

"Say anything out loud? No, you didn't, but I know. Besides, I've been following you since you fell. Paid Father dearest a little visit. He's a real piece of work- more than you know."

"But then why didn't you-," she interrupts me again, quick to refute my accusation.

"Maybe not follow- exactly. See, angels aren't allowed in the clouds around heaven. It's dangerous; we could fall. Figuratively, of course. You know, the 'banished to hell' kind of fall. We are allowed on Earth though, and as soon as you fell and were exalted I was alerted, as your Heart Sister, and got there as soon as I could. You flew away too fast

though." I watch as her face falls, clearly feeling guilty about something. "When a Heart Mate is Blessed our job is to take them to heaven. Before they do something dangerous with their new powers. I- I'm sorry. I failed you." Her bubbly attitude has all but vanished and I want nothing more than to wrap her up and smother her sadness away. But I still don't understand.

"So, I wasn't supposed to fly to the clouds?" I asked, tentatively wrapping my own arms around her.

"Well, yes. But if I had been there to guide you, we'd have gone straight to heaven and I wouldn't have been left behind to wait and there wouldn't have been any pain. I let you suffer, Chloe. I'm sorry."

I don't know how to feel about this. I start by telling her it wasn't her fault, she has nothing to be sorry for. But I have one more question. So when she has calmed down some I ask, "You mean the burning right? Was that because I was in the clouds?"

"No," I could feel her getting worked up again, so I pulled her closer. "It was the Heart Mate bond. I had seen you and the bond was activated, but we hadn't touched before you flew off. It would have been worse with a broken bond, but unfinished is almost as bad. The incomplete edges were rebelling and hurting you, trying to lead you to me. I hate to say it, but it's probably the only reason you made it here without falling."

We sat for a moment, reveling in the warmth and comfort of our closeness and listening to the faint sounds of life coming through the door. I hadn't noticed that before. I felt much better than before, and calmer in my Heart Sister's embrace.

"Well," I said, hoping to lift the heavy atmosphere, "I am much more on top of this whole angel deal and feeling much better. Those little sandwiches were delicious." Both our gazes fell on the empty tray, now resting on the edge of the bed. "Um... sorry? I was really hungry. You didn't want any did you?"

The sudden burst of laughter was reassuring, and any tenceness left in my body drained. "It's alright Chloe, those were for you. I figured you'd be hungry."

I smiled up at her and shifted again. "Well, I might be feeling better, but I need to stand up soon or I'm sure my whole body will go numb."

She laughs again. I get the feeling it's a common occurrence, and I'm already half in love with the steady cadence and pure joy of it. "Alright then. You're probably healed up enough to go for a quick flutter around." She hops down from the bed, which I'm only now noticing is strangely tall and definitely bigger than a king, and she heads straight for a curtain that hangs across one wall and matches the other three. I swing my feet down and drop lightly to the floor, surprisingly with just as much grace as Angela did. I hadn't looked at where we were till now, but it looked like any bedroom only with a monster bed. Aside from the curtain, there was a walk-in closet in one wall and a small alcove in which stood an elaborate vanity.

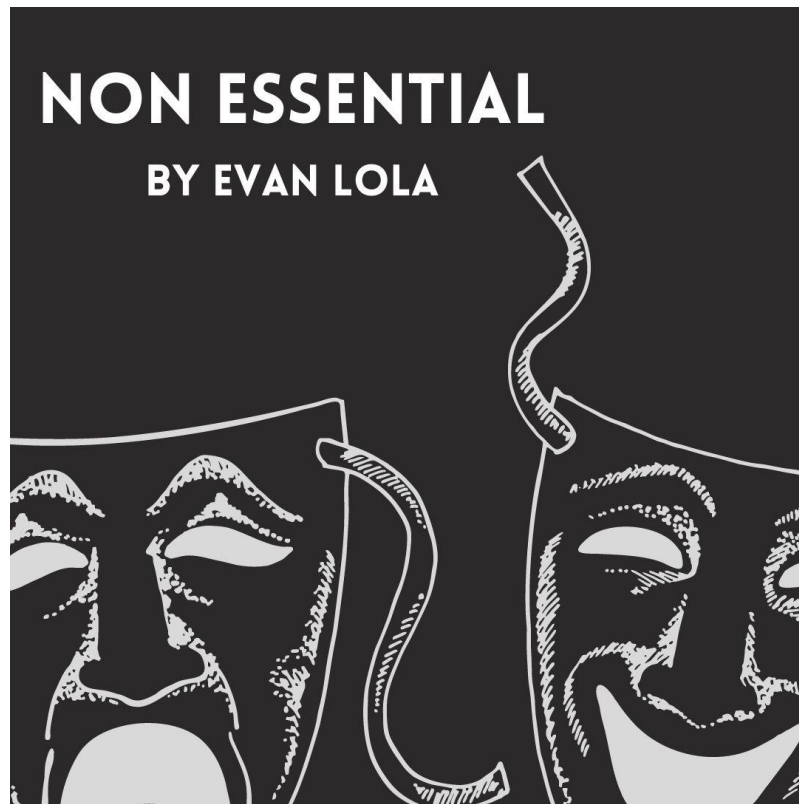
Just when I begin to wonder where the door is, Angela sweeps the curtain to the side and the room floods with a multicolored light, radiating from every angel flying past. There are huge, twining, almost tree-like buildings all surrounding a seemingly endless and perfectly smooth river of water that, impossibly, disappears into both the clouds *far, far* below and great, yawning expanse of space that is above us. Through the strange up-and-down river there are other windows, huge just like ours, set into each house.

Except Angela has just stepped through ours.

I stare as she hovers in front of me, bright, glowing, green wings spread magnificently behind her. She smiles her bright smile that I love just as much as her laugh and reaches out for me. "Don't worry. You've done this before. Don't think, just jump."

I snicker at that. My dad would have hated that line. But I don't have to worry about him anymore. Nothing on Earth is important any longer.

I don't have to run anymore. Now I can fly.



It is March 15, 2020 in the San Francisco Bay Area. Everything is quiet outside. There aren't any cars on the roads and the lights are all turned off in local businesses. Nobody is out shopping or walking dogs or playing in the park. Usually around this time of year is when people would finally be declining off the holiday high and hoping and praying for summer to come soon. Spring is here but the flowers emerging from their buds seem to be the only living things out to be seen. The world is still turning but everything is still and slow. Everyone is sheltered in their homes as we all are facing something new to us. We are up against an enemy that can't be seen or heard. "We" being the members of the human race on this big blue planet that we call our home. The enemy is a global pandemic. People are getting sick and it continues to spread fast.

Despair is in the air and you can cut the ongoing tension with a knife. Nobody knows what is going on, including our parents who seemed to be full of answers about life back when we were kids. In a way, this time felt a bit more peaceful than ever. Everyone is suffering through this crisis. All nations are struggling to figure out what to do and what could be done to help the situation. For the first time, I feel like the world is on the same page. It's a scary page, but still the same page. It is mandated that non essential businesses must close for the time being while the crisis is being resolved. Last week we were told to wash our hands more but now those of us who are not essential to the day to day operation of the country must not leave our houses. What is essential and non essential? Essential means the healthcare workers out there saving lives of the people suffering from the monster out there spreading around the world. Cancer is put on hold. Diabetes is put on hold. The only thing there is time, energy, and room for are the patients who suffer from the common enemy. The doctors and nurses who are saving those lives are the essential workers. Essential also refers to grocery store workers, the unsung heroes of society. Food is needed for humans to live, therefore essential. I am not essential. My girlfriend is. The biggest difference between us is that she can carry on her work online while I can not. My girlfriend, Courtney, is a second grade teacher at a public school. Second grade has taken to the internet and is being conducted via a virtual meeting platform. Courtney is great at her job. Her work every day inspires me to work hard and be a better person. Her passion and patience with the second graders is astounding. Especially now since all of her students who have only been alive on this planet for seven years are expected to log into their computers, turn on their webcams, and be at class on time while their parents are trying to do the same thing in the background for their siblings or themselves if they can work online. The world continues to spin so school must continue to happen by any means necessary. I don't have that "luxury". I am an artist. Not the kind that

paints or makes sculptures though. I am a lighting designer for theatre. At least I was until yesterday. I would go from production to production hanging lights and programming cues for plays and musicals at local community theaters, high schools, and colleges. One day however, I opened my eyes and realised that I was 23, living in my mom's house, and had no money. But I had art. I have loved theatre since I was a little kid in elementary school. Seeing big touring productions amazed me and inspired me to pursue it myself. I started off by wanting to be a professional actor. I kept that dream in my head up until sophomore year of high school. That is when I found my love for lighting design. From then on I knew that that was my art and that's what I wanted to show the world. Until that dreaded day when I knew I had to get a "real" job. I'm pretty stubborn though. I wasn't going to work at a law firm or marketing company or at a doctors office. That wasn't by choice though. I had little education past a high school diploma. But still, I refused to get a more common job and instead worked at a local performing arts center. I had been around theatre long enough that I had the skills to work in a facility and put on other people's shows. After a year of that I was hired by the performing arts center in the next town over except this time I was the boss. I was able to hire my own staff and run the facility however I saw fit. I loved it for the most part until I realised that now I had money but I wasn't creating my art anymore since I had a lot less time. At times I missed my art but my two main employees, Nolan and Michael, often took my mind off of my doubts. Nolan was tall and gentle while Michael was a total brainiac. Together, we were able to make every event happen while having fun along the way. Until yesterday. Yesterday we were told that all upcoming events are cancelled due to this huge wave of global sickness. At the end of our event we said goodbye and parted ways. Without events, my employees don't have jobs. I still have a job but I am alone. Art is not essential. Art has helped define civilizations for centuries but is not required to make the day to day events of

human beings possible. Art is not essential which makes me non essential as well. My name is Tony and I am non essential.

It is December 10, 2020 and I am just as non essential as before. I have been working from home for nine months without an end in sight. The biggest difference now is that Courtney and I have moved in together. What an adult thing to do, one might say. We have moved into my friend Ryan's townhouse. It is two stories with the ugliest green paint I have ever seen on the interior of a house before. Ryan's form of decoration literally makes the house look like a model home featuring only products from Cost Plus World Market. There isn't one photograph to be found on any of the walls but instead a bunch of framed prints of paintings depicting fruit, numbers, and the 90's singer, Dido. Let's just say that the decor is not my style nor the style of Courtney. Also to top it all off, Ryan has three cats that shed a lot. There is cat hair on and in every piece of furniture, appliance, and piece of Ryan's clothing. Ryan and Courtney get along really well since he is also a teacher for the same school district as Courtney except he teaches highschool math and leadership. Every morning starts the same way. Courtney wakes me up and tells me to go downstairs since she has to teach virtually soon. As I leave our very purple colored bedroom, I pass by Ryan's home office that he had turned into a recording studio for distance learning. His handmade, long desk has three computer monitors, a video switcher, a fancy microphone, and a bunch of textbooks and worksheets to go over with his classes. We make a little small talk and then I proceed to go downstairs. I spend most of my time every day alone downstairs. By alone I mean myself and Ryan's cats. I never have anything to do. I just sit around, play some games on my phone, and daydream about the good times I had before this pandemic. Today started off no different from most days.

"Wake up Tony. It's eight o'clock and I need you out of the background so I can teach," Courtney said to me while shaking me to get up.

"What?" I asked confused and half asleep.

"You can go back to sleep but it has to be downstairs. Do you have anything specific to do today?" asked Courtney while preparing her desk in the corner of our bedroom for virtual teaching.

"Um, maybe. I have to check my calendar." This was definitely a lie because I damn well knew I had nothing going on today. I rarely did besides going to check the performing arts center once a week.

"Okay honey, well let me know if I'm still teaching if you leave," said Courtney kindly as she sat down and opened all her computer tabs for the day.

"I will. Have a good day at work," I replied as I walked out of the room wrapped in a blanket and closed the door. Next stop for the day was some small talk with Ryan before he had to start teaching as well.

"Morning Tony. What do you have planned for today?" Ryan asked like every day.

"A few things actually. I have a few appointments in my calendar. It's good to stay busy," I lied. "Yeah totally. I have to teach now so I'll see you later this afternoon," Ryan said as he sat down in front of his elaborate control center desk and prepared to teach.

"Yeah, see you later," I replied as I left him to teach in his cat hair covered office. Down the stairs I went to the puke green living room where I would spend the rest of the day doing nothing productive at all.

"Alright, let's check the calendar," I said out loud to myself as I opened the calendar app on my phone. Nothing. Just as I expected. Just like almost every other day. Courtney and Ryan haven't seemed to catch on yet that every day is the same for me. I spend all morning and afternoon alone just waiting for them to be done teaching so we can socialize again. It started off as kind of fun. I felt bad for them because they had to work. After months of doing nothing though, I started feeling like I had no purpose. I literally pattered around the house just doing chores and hanging out. Every time they would ask what I was doing that day, another part of me died as I knew I would have no new activity to reply with. The world is a different place than it was a year ago. It's even different from back in March. We now know more about this virus that has been circulating societies around the planet. It is transmitted through air particles, making it necessary to wear masks out in public. People are back out walking their dogs and playing in the parks and shopping at local stores. It's not back to normal though. There is always a large distance between everybody. Even loved ones who live in different households can't be too close together. The world may seem more open but there is still an isolation among us all. Entertainment venues are not open yet. That means my staff was laid off and they all went their separate ways to work wherever they can. Nolan and Michael both work together now at Target. At least they're still together. I sure do miss them though. I pull out my cell phone and call Nolan's phone.

"Hello?" Nolan says as he picks up his phone. "Hey man, it's Tony. What're you up to?" I ask.

“Hey man!” Nolan says with excitement. “I’m actually at work right now with Michael. He says hi!”

“It’s so nice to hear from you two. I’m glad you’re still making things happen together,” I say.

“Yeah man, awesome. Michael is asking when we should put in our two weeks notice here so we can come back and work for you.”

“Um,” I respond. “Soon. Hopefully really soon. Things in the world seem to be getting better so I hope to work with both of you again soon. I’ll keep you posted. I just wanted to reach out and say hi since I was thinking of both of you.”

“Cool man, we’re looking forward to it. Talk to you again soon. Bye!” Nolan says before hanging up.

The world isn’t looking much better. I don’t know when I’ll work with them again or if I ever will. I open my phone and start looking at updates on social media. The first thing I see completely shocks me. My old drama teacher from high school has died. He was the one who had inspired me to pursue lighting design as my art and career. He’s now gone. I want to tell someone but Courtney and Ryan are both busy teaching. I decide to stay sitting and think about what my old drama teacher meant to me. He got the best out of people in his drama program. He had inspired numerous students over a thirty year teaching career to follow their passions and he guided them as well. I am one of hundreds who he inspired with his gift of teaching and mentoring. The lives he touched and changed will forever remember him and be grateful for what he did. I understand what Courtney and Ryan do. They also inspire their students. Teaching isn’t

about making art and a path for yourself but about helping others find their strengths and passion as helping them along their own journeys.

“I can do that,” I whisper to myself as I sit there deep in thought on the cat hair lined red couch in the living room. I have spent years mentoring Nolan and Michael and have loved every second of it. What if I can do that for high school students too? I begin looking up what it takes to become a high school drama teacher. Several sources on the internet say that a degree in and teaching credential in English is needed to become a drama teacher in California. It’s weird but it’s what is required. As I have only a few credits in college from a few years ago, I need to go back to school.

It is still December 20, 2020 but later in the afternoon. Courtney and Ryan are about to finish teaching for the day and I am excited at the discoveries of a possible future career for myself. They leave their respective workspaces and come downstairs to socialize with me like every day.

“Hey babe. What’d you do today?” asked Courtney.

“I figured out how to become essential,” I responded.

“What does that mean?” asked Ryan.

“I’m tired of being non essential. I’m tired of puttering around the house all day doing nothing. I feel like I have no purpose but to clean and sit around. It’s getting really tiring. I want to make a difference in the world like my old drama teacher. I want to change someone’s life and inspire them to follow a passion of their own. I want to do what you two do and fill the minds of the youth with knowledge that they didn’t have before. They will always remember you. I want to be remembered too. Even

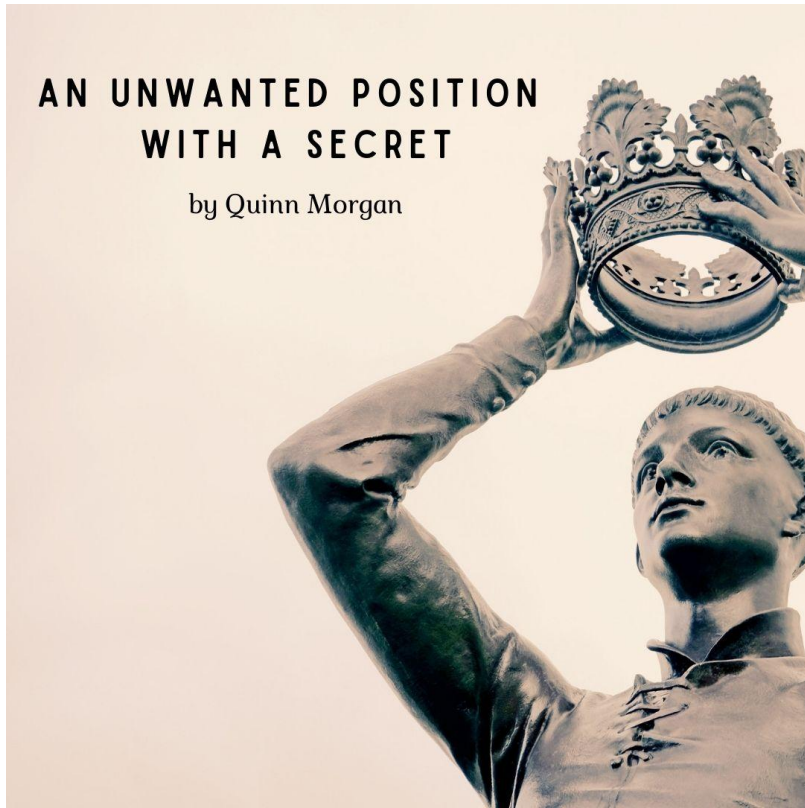
helping just one life would be enough for me. I'd like to go back to school to become a high school drama teacher."

"Wow honey, that's fantastic. You'd be a great teacher! I'll support you however I can."

It is December 7, 2021 and I have been back in college for twelve months. I put in my two week notice at the performing arts center and I am on my way to becoming essential.

AN UNWANTED POSITION WITH A SECRET

by Quinn Morgan



“It’s time.”

Cael stared at his mother in disbelief. He shook his head ever so slightly. Most of the time, he had an unbelievable ability to comprehend words, dialects, or even other languages; it was a skill that was very valued across the universe, especially on Ohiri as it served as one of the major ports. The corner of his mouth twitched as he mulled over those two simple words. With the click of his jaw, he spoke precisely and firmly, “Mother, it cannot possibly be time.”

Elina shifted in her stance before waving her son to follow as she took off down the hallway. *He’s making this harder than it has to be*, she thought as she glanced behind at her offspring.

There wasn't a sound heard other than her footsteps on the white stained marble floors, not even a servant in sight. Outside the palace was bursting with activity, catching the eyes of her son. It took a moment for the young man to register that she had moved before he began to trail behind her.

"It was my job just to tell you, not explain everything to you," she said. Cael blinked twice. She continued on without a moment's hesitation. "The oracles had predicted this, so it should not be a surprise."

"I... I know," he stuttered as he took another glance out the window of the corridor. The Koracon were lining up outside the spaceships on the launch pad. A few of them had begun taking off into the purple sky. Their black armor suits reflected in the dim sunlight coming from the nearest star, Esklie, which emitted a white light. In a single file, the Emperor's army marched into the newest model of attack ships that were slick black and had four jets to travel at the speed of light.

Cael ran his fingers across the spotless window seal, letting the cold air hit his gloved hand.

His mother stared at him in distaste. She always thought his biggest flaw was his ability to get distracted easily. "Stop looking at the Emperor's army."

Cael gave no attention to his mother and continued to stare out the window. "A war is near," he muttered, stating the obvious.

Elina pressed her palm to her forehead. "Indeed, which is why it is time."

Cael's head whipped around as he locked eyes with her. A flash of worry rushed through him before his stare hardened as he advanced on Elina. She gave no indication of movement and her face maintained a far away look. "Mother-"

She raised a hand to stop him. "Your only duty now is to do what you were born to do."

"I-"

"You will lead this planet as well as you assist our people." Her eyes flickered to him for a quick second before looking back into the distance. "It is not in my interest to see you fail. If you would just accept-"

"What if I'm not ready?"

Elina turned towards him and stared at his figure. He was a tall, lanky boy who looked several years younger than his age, two months prior to twenty. His black hair was unkempt and his clothes were untidy with the sweat stains from last night's stress. The plain colored attire he wore clung a little too loosely to his lean body. His green eyes were normally warm, but today they were calculating. Her eldest son could not top her proudest accomplishment, marrying an Archduke. A daughter had always been in her mind, but she instead got stuck with two young men.

Cael was not the heir she wanted. He was too much of a gentle figure and could not kill the tiniest of creatures, let alone a man. She viewed him as a disgrace to the Geradies name and much preferred his younger brother, Alivander, soon to be the leader of the Koracon. He was the most accomplished fighter of his time, while his elder was timid and would not last two seconds on a battlefield. What good would an Archduke be if one could not fight?

Glancing him up and down one last time, her lips turned into a snarl. "It's not an option, son, it's duty."

His eyes twinkled as he opened his jaw, about to add something more before Elina cocked her head to the side, sending Cael off his feet and to the right where he was gently set down. "Was it necessary to use your powers on me?" he said as he stalked towards his mother once more.

Elina bit her lip and stared at him, causing Cael to freeze in place. "There is no more debate. You must get ready."

The air turned cold around the two of them as his face hardened. "So it's decided, then?"

Slowly, Elina released her hold on her son. "There was no decision formed now. It was your destiny. It was the reason you were born, you know that." His mother turned around, walking towards the far door down the hallway before she was yanked off her feet and back to Cael.

"Two can play this game," he snarled.

The far door opened, letting a gust of wind in from the outside. An adolescent boy appeared in the frame and stood there for a moment before taking large steps with haste down the hall. He had Cael's same wavy brown hair, although cut shorter, and dark brown eyes that were practically black. The boy did not smile, nor did he show any emotion, but it was obvious he heard the conversation since his sword was drawn, glittering against his all black clothes that matched the outfit of the Emperor's army. Unlike Cael, he had a burly stature and towered above most beings. He stopped abruptly a few meters away from Lady Elina.

"There is no need to break up a fight," she assured him. The boy's face remained expressionless as his eyes darted back and forth between Cael and Elina. Biting his lip, he grunted before placing the sword back in the holder and tucked it away in his bodice.

Cael took a step forward, tilting his head up to look the boy in the eyes. "This is none of your business."

"I'm well aware of what's my business and what's not," he said in a deep voice.

"This doesn't concern you--"

"It might as well concern me as you are going to assist us in battle." He frowned for a moment before continuing. "As you are the new Archduke--"

"He hasn't even been pronounced dead!" Cael screamed as he shook with fury.

The boy only blinked. "He's off the radar, might as well be dead."

Cael brought his hand back and swung through the air at the boy's face before his hand stopped in mid air.

"Enough!" Both males looked at Elina whose hand was outstretched, stopping Cael's punch. "You're making me waste my energy."

"Then release me," Cael snarled. "If it's taxing your abilities, there is no reason why you shouldn't--"

"I'd be careful about that punch if I were you," the boy warned.

Elina tightened her hold, straining her arm before she released Cael's hand. They waited a few seconds to see if Cael would punch the boy, but the moment never came.

"Wise decision," the boy said smugly.

"Alivander, let's not provoke your brother." The boy rolled his eyes and stared at Cael with a cocked head. Their mother turned towards Cael. "Before I was interrupted," she shot a glance at her younger son, "I was saying that you need to get ready." Cael grumbled and crossed his arms. "Very well then, Alivander, assist him."

Alivander grabbed the back of Cael's collar and tugged him down the marble corridor. When they reached an intersection, he pulled his older brother right. The new hall had darker tones, practically black with windows and lanterns to signify the pathway to the Archduke's bedchamber and study. The boys slowed their pace, stopping right before the two doors. A scanning hand pad and a digital lock were located on either side of both doors.

Alivander stared at Cael. "Open the bedroom door."

"We can't open this door," Cael reminded his brother.

"Try your hand." Cael shot Alivander a look. "Just do it."

With a curse under his breath, Cael pressed his hand to the pad and then punched in the number combination his father had given him when he started his training. To Cael's surprise, the door opened revealing a small antichamber which led to a grand bedroom with high vaulted ceilings. An industrial beam, more for aesthetic than function, ran across the ceiling letting a gold chandelier hang off of it. The room was painted a dark grey with contrasting gold accents along the trim. The focal point was the grand four poster bed made out of a unique, rustic wood from a great Recklend tree, a rare commodity that was scarcely seen throughout the galaxy. Historic paintings hung from the walls, dating back to several thousand Metatronic years ago.

Cael stifled a laugh when he saw the painting of his father hanging above the bed. *It's a bit narcissistic to have a painting of oneself in your bed chamber,* he thought. His brother shot him a look before darting into the closet, leaving Cael to sit on the bed and look around. Although Cael was the heir to the Dukedom, he had never been in his father's bed chamber before. He had only seen the Archduke's office, as that's where he spent most of the hours of his days.

Alivander shut the closet door and threw his brother some black clothes with much more force than needed. Fumbling to catch the clothes, Cael held them up and put them to his chest. The outerwear was way too wide for him in the shoulders and slightly too short in the legs. His younger brother grinned as he saw Cael's distaste for the clothes. "Put those on."

"Since when did you become in charge?" Cael asked with raised eyebrows.

"When you became unable to make rational decisions. Put them on," he repeated.

"They won't fit."

"That's the least of your concern, we'll get them tailored."

Cael shook his head and shoved the clothes back to his brother. He couldn't wear his father's clothes like he wasn't alive, much less, assume his position. The Archduke was pronounced missing less than an hour before, not dead, so Cael thought it was premature to be taking his place already. Wearing his clothes would be confirming the fact that the Archduke was dead, a fact that he didn't want to believe.

Alivander paid no attention to Cael's disinterest and placed the clothes back in Cael's hands. Slowly, he looked up at his younger brother with stern eyes. "I will not wear father's clothes."

"If you're going to assume the role-"

"Who said I wanted to assume his role?" Cael screamed. "He's missing, not dead." Alivander didn't respond as Cael let the clothes drop to the floor and began to pace. "Everyone's rushing this and-"

"We must behave in a timely manner."

"I know we must behave in a 'timely manner,'" he said mockingly. "But isn't this too extreme?" He looked to his brother for support.

Alivander remained as motionless as a statue, his lips barely moving. "Nothing's extreme when war is near."

"To hell with war!" Cael flung his hands up in the air. "No one asked me my thoughts on this whole damn situation. Yet, they expect me to lead this planet and the Port."

"You're letting your emotions overtake you, brother."

He turned towards Alivander with his glassy eyes. *Why did he have to be so emotionless?* he thought. Lifting a finger, he pointed at his brother who didn't even flinch. "You," he began while taking steps towards his brother till they were practically nose to nose. "It's not my fucking fault that you can't feel and that you can't relate to how I'm feeling because you've never had this responsibility."

Alivander sighed, his eyes softening. "I know you're under pressure, and believe me, I have been too-" Cael rolled his eyes as he wiped them with his sleeves. "You're not the only one who experiences those things. I've been in your shoes before- when I started training for the Koracon several years ago- but we're taught to shelter those feelings."

"Why?"

"Because a soldier can't fight if they're constantly breaking down," he took a step closer to his elder brother. "I feel. I share your pain. But you need to pull yourself together and lead your people since father is gone. They are probably in much worse shape than you are."

Cael looked at Alivander with wonder. From the minute Alivander was born, the brothers had been at war with one another. They competed for their parent's attention, both of whom ignored them, their mother more so than their father. Cael always challenged his younger to a fight, hoping that one day he might win, but always got let down. Alivander constantly tried to sit in on Cael's training with their father, only to get rejected. This time, it was different. The two boys were close to each other, not in a battle, just merely sharing their experiences; It was the closest they ever got to affection. Awkwardly, the brothers took a step back from each other.

"I should get ready," Cael mumbled.

"I'll get you when it's time," his brother nodded, exiting the room, leaving Cael alone with the pile of clothes on the floor. Cael listened to the door click before sighing and letting a tear roll down his cheek. Without any urgency, he leaned down to pick up the clothes, before hanging each garment up one by one into the rotating closet. As he did so, his thoughts began to wander.

It's not that I don't want to be the Archduke... He paused as he shut the closet door and flopped onto the bed. *It's that I'm afraid.* "What if I let them down?" he murmured. "What if I let father down?"

#

The halls of the Ohirian castle were clustered with townsmen trying to speak to the Archduke and the butlers refusing. Many wondered why the Archduke wasn't in his normal position during that time of day. The servants gave a simple answer, "His grace is with his heir."

Down the various hallways on the farside of the castle, away from the public, were two doors. Guards stood outside both, waiting to come in contact with anyone who dared to disturb the Archduke. The Archduke was in his office, sitting across from a young boy, his eldest son, Cael. He had just finished ranting while his offspring was staring out the window at the seas below the cliff.

"Son."

The boy looked up at his father, his eyes twinkling with wonder. "Yes father?"

"Were you paying attention to what I said?" said the Archduke with raised eyebrows.

"The Koracon are only on Ohiri to protect the ports. They serve the Emperor. It is a privilege to have them here," Cael repeated.

His father smiled with pleasure and nodded. "Very well. As I was saying--"

"May we go for a walk?"

The Archduke glanced at the clock, which was on Ohiri time, and shrugged his shoulders. "We have been here for three hours. I don't see why not."

The boy backed out of his chair in a rush as the Archduke tucked a folded piece of Recklend paper into one of the drawers. He let his son lead him out of the long hallway as the guards followed them. They passed the training room, where a younger boy was sparring with his partner. Cael looked at them longingly. *I've always wanted to be a member of the army as they are so brave*, he thought.

"You'll have fighting lessons one day, when you're old enough," the Archduke told him.

Cael's brows furrowed. "But Alivander is training now and he's younger than me!"

"But he's not the heir."

The Archduke yanked his son down the hallway, passed his younger brother. Cael was led out a secret entrance to the back of the castle. The two males stood awkwardly in the dim sunlight with the guards a hundred meters behind them. The son looked at the sky, spotting the different planets in the solar system and naming them to his father.

The Archduke crouched down to his level and said, "One day, it will all be yours."

"What will all be mine?" Cael asked.

"The Universe."

Cael rose a brow. "How?"

"Someday, you'll see. Let's go inside. You've had enough fresh air." His father pressed a hand against his back, leading him back inside. The boy never understood what his father meant about the universe being "his."

#

Cael shook his head as he recalled the memory as he changed into a smaller set of his father's clothes. Cringing as he looked himself in the mirror, he fixed his hair and headed into the office. He sat at the desk and put his feet up, something he never dared to do before. *If it's mine now, then I get to make the rules*, he thought. Laughing, he began flipping through some papers that not another soul has seen besides his father. They were all budgets, spendings, and lists of the items at the Port of Ohiri.

A sigh escaped his mouth and he opened up various drawers, all which had mounds of paper he didn't want to read. He spotted a much smaller drawer which had a hand and keypad. Curiosity sparked in his veins as he scanned his hand and tried each of the passwords written in his father's note keeping book in invisible ink. After the fifth password, the drawer opened. Inside lay a single piece of Recklend paper.

Carefully, he pulled it out and unfolded it.

#

My eldest son,

If I am handing you this letter, it means that I have succeeded and we have won. You are the Emperor now. Lead the universe how you like, as this is the greatest gift I can give you.

-Caspian Alridi

#

What does this mean? Cael thought as he furrowed his brows before it all hit him. This was the piece of paper his father shoved in the desk before he told him that the universe would be his. His mind raced back to that memory when he was nothing but a naive child. Still, he couldn't trace the connection on how he'd be Emperor now. He didn't even know what caused the war.

As he digested this news, the door buzzed. Cael reluctantly got up and opened the door to see Alivander who simply said, "It's time for your coronation."



i feel as though i slept upside down today. i don't want to talk about the violence i don't want to talk about the shape of the bruise, i don't want to talk about how it sounded or what it felt like, or how afterward, for hours, i had three sharp words banging around in my head in a cartwheeling spike - i just want to say it was something that hurt. i just want to lie down without being asked to show where the hurt came from and give birth again to the shadow memory, watch it ooze across the floor to dance in the wake of my feet. I do not want to play a game of abandoned survivors or pitied, unmarried man.

5 months ago my mother died and an unequivocal storm filled her place. i say this with malice on my tongue; her leaving, and everything that's followed after has become the worst circumstances any of us have ever known: my wife left 2 months later, then the first cryptid was discovered: a shuck. enormous hounds they are, and certainly vicious. ever since i've been ruminating over casualties.

my balcony is bleak without the unwanted nonsense my ex-wife always had to offer. i forgot our wedding anniversary, so in spite, she left. maybe it's not as simple as that, though i can't comprehend the cruelty embedded in her departure. i was in the middle of bereavement for fucks sake. certainly, that was more important than getting £5 peonies that would die in a week anyway?

my mum was celestial and remarkably shameless. i fought to keep the memory of her alive. too alive, maybe. all of her energy was used up. i reckon it was an altruistic suicide.

in the distance, there's a small cabin, faintly in the view from my porch. i always make stories in my head about who lives there. a woman, perhaps 85 years old. i saw her take in groceries last week but curiously, i never saw her leave. she speaks only to the crows she feeds every morning. the wind howls through the trees around the cabin, and on the inside, her fire has nearly suffocated. a deserted old woman i presume.

three swats hit my door and i drop my mug in a stunned frenzy. the disturbance startles the family of crows that resides in the willow tree outside the abandoned ladies' residence and they fly away cawing. as i shuffle to the door and fear who might be behind it, four faces cross my mind in great detail: 1. my mum, though that would be mad. 2. my ex-wife but that's just wishful thinking. 3. the medic i've been seeing every week, perhaps she forgot something. and 4. adryan. he's my best friend but things have been kind of stiff between us. we shared an unparalleled trauma 3 nights ago; his car got stuck on the road leading to his eldest son's home, it's quite rural there, only forest for at least 14 miles each way. anyway, he called me to get him gas and bring the jumper cords. it's sheer luck that he had any kind of reception. if i hadn't come around when i did, he would've been devoured. not that he'd ever admit that though.

sure enough, i unlocked the latch to reveal a chilled gust of wind- cold enough to give a small child hypothermia- and adryan. he was looking off at the cabin as i always do,

probably wondering why the crows vacated and thinking of some fake-deep shit to decipher. he invited himself in before i even had a chance to open the door all the way.

"so you come here unannounced and come inside without asking?" i snicker. it's not annoyance i feel, but he seems a little frantic and i'd like to tone that down before we speak.

"sorry, it's just really fucking cold outside." i look at him unamused and blink 4 times- my way of gesturing *spit it out*. "i wanted to talk to you about the other day.." he looks down and rubs snow off the toe of his left boot with the other. he seems awkward like he's trying to keep his head from imploding.

"right, right. we have much to.. discuss. have there been more cryptids near your son's place? is he okay?" worry strikes me and i stress his son's been eaten, or hurt at the very least.

"that's just the thing baron, there are no cryptids- i mean, what you saw, it just... listen, baron, i'm worried about you. has Delilah been here since that day? I know she checks up on you but i mean, is she checking your meds?" i grimace at the question.

"you think i need a chaperone now? for fucks sake adryan, if you're going to disrespect me, could you at least do me the favor of it not being in my own home?" he twiddles his beard between his forefinger and thumb, just looking at me. the expression on his face is unreadable.

"you're wasting away i fear baron. it's simple, and i can never bring it up because i've not wanted to kick you while you're down. i mean everything with you mum and then there was erica I just-"

"that's enough! i am not wasting away, i am finding inspiration in all the edges. you can't understand because you are a simple-minded and arrogant *boy*. do not do so much as taste her name on your tongue again. i would like you to leave now." he's stopped fiddling with his beard, something i find strange. this is a disillusioned nightmare, even more so than

that outlandish 4-times-divorced-man-on-a-tropical-island shirt he decided to desecrate himself with this morning.

"are you hearing yourself?" so much acrimony glimmers across his deep brown eyes. so many secrets lurking behind his forehead lines like lost dogs, hungry and waiting to be let out. I can only imagine what despicable and tasteless thoughts are rummaging around his head. "i'm just worried. we've been friends since grade school. i thought you'd want me to notify you if you were living in dreamland and as harsh as it is, you are. you're driving everyone away."

"i said leave." my tone is softer now, more discreet. i'm hoping he's receptive to the sternness still lingering.

"there is no reasoning with you is there?" i say nothing and open the door, once more letting in goose pimples and pink noses. he sighs and walks out, down the stairs, and into his car without saying another word. i watch as he drives out of my gate, slowly. he takes one last glance back to me, now standing on my porch, the fragments of porcelain at my feet. i'm alone and i know he's pitying me.

i go back inside and sit by the fireplace, simultaneously fuming and contemplating my next move. i noticed the tv had been left on throughout my conversation with adryan, which is weird, no? i don't remember turning it on at all. i haven't listened to the tv since the cryptid. it's all a bunch of bullshit lies anyways, they don't know what happens. still, there's a gnawing sensation in my gut, begging me to watch. the channel cuts out and a bizarre-looking woman is now being broadcast instead. she has a short, creamsicle-colored bob and a ring on her left nostril. i think i know her from somewhere... eh... ehra... oh! that's right. erica. she sells fish to children during the autumnal equinox to raise money for some type of holier-than-thou charity organization. i'm not sure that's credential enough to tell the news, but i can see why they chose her; from her highly emotive facial expressions to her

poised stance, it's perfect propaganda. she's the type of vision that makes you think she knows you.

...8 more found dead today in Norab, England. The cause of death is still being examined, however, all of them had bite marks. professionals have not yet identified the animal that could've bitten them, saying it's nothing like they've ever seen before. officials are trying to connect the dots between the alleged extraterrestrial sightings in California and the deaths here in England. If anyone has any more information regarding new sightings or deaths, please call 1-1-2.

just as i suspected, shucks.

the rest of the day feels like a slow, hot shower. it sucks being right about these sorts of situations. my head is burning and my blood feels still. maybe i do need to call the medic again.

i hop off my bed, into my slippers, and dial the number. "hello? baron? do you have any idea what time it is?"

"hi, yes. i just feel a little off and thought it would be in my best interest to you let you know. that's all."

"are you okay? hold on. i'll be right over, just let me gather myself. are you seeing erica again?"

"oh, did you see the news clip too?"

"no, i- wait, what?- never mind. i'll be there soon, just wait for me and the for love of god don't go anywhere." the line beeps.

//

when she arrives it is nearly 4 am. she sat me down and took my temperature: an average 36.9 degrees celsius. her blouse is edged with elegant lace and her fingers are shockingly frigid. "have you been sleeping, baron? your eyes seem mighty tired." her voice is sweet and comforting. delilah has always been a rock of mine, stupendously considerate.

"well, now that you mention it, i think the last i rested an adequate amount was..." i trail off. the realization that i've not gotten good sleep since the night with the shuck... it seems haunting.

"yeah, i know it's been hard but this is concerning. please baron, tell me what's going on in your head. have you been taking your meds like i told you?" the frustration in her voice reminds me of my mum. how she would scold me but was too scared to lose her temper enough to seem indignant.

"you know i don't like how they make me feel." my mouth feels like clay, "if i take them i lose my energy, i can't keep up, you know?"

"baron, this is mandatory. this isn't some game, you are seriously unstable-" she takes a deep breath before continuing, "i'm sorry, let me backtrack... you mentioned seeing erica on the news when you called, could you tell me about that?"

"there's not much to tell delilah, she's just a news reporter."

"no, no baron. she is your *ex-wife*. does this have to do with the cryptids you keep talking about?"

"what are you suggesting? that's not possible. she's a news reporter, i've seen it! and yes she was reporting on the shucks!"

"okay, this is getting out of hand. i'm going to give you a half dose of the lamictal. please, this is necessary." i quickly retract my arms from her general vicinity and try to escape to the porch. before i can reach it, her hand grabs my thigh and she injects me with a sedative, presumably haldol.

//

when i awake i am struck with the awareness that i am in the hospital. white consumes me from every nook, but at least my thoughts are viable and untainted. no one is with me. i glance down at my right forearm. my vein follows down to the middle and connects to a long, noodle-like tube. the iv is likely filled with the lamictal i refused earlier. further down on the bed sits a red button that appears to have been squeezed a thousand times over. i contemplate pushing it but before i can, a woman in scrubs steps in.

"ah, you're awake finally!" her voice is sing-songy, like a child's and she holds her clipboard like her life is dependent upon it.

"i don't want to be here. i am a grown man, you cannot keep me here without my consent." i spit. she frowns and apologizes hastily.

"baron, you have been put on an involuntary commitment hold. this means you are a danger to yourself or others and from your chart it seems you've been dealing with altered perceptions. i've been made aware that you hallucinated your ex-wife on television? listen, we are only here to help. currently we have you on lithium because the lamictal didn't seem to be working. we're hoping it calms your mania, at least to a manageable degree before we send you home."

"this is bollocks! are you kidding? i am not manic, you must have the wrong chart. my mum had manic depression, not me."

"we know, and usually these things follow a hereditary theme. we do have the correct chat though sir, i assure you."

"may i please speak with delilah?"

"i'm very sorry to have to tell you this, but she states she no longer wishes to work with you."

"get out, please. i need to be alone." she leaves reluctantly and i am once again bewildered with thoughts. i rip out the iv and lock the door to my room. they've placed me on the first floor and this hospital can't be too far from my house, maybe 3 blocks at most. i open the window and climb outside. there's a loud siren that goes off and i hear commotion so i duck behind some bushes. once i see the staff have been looking the other way, i bolt.

//

it's been 4 days since i escaped from the hospital and no one has come looking for me. i wonder, even, if anyone has thought about me since. i have not had a wink of sleep and i'm starting to speculate. it seems nothing has its place anymore; i don't have a place anymore. i take out a pad of paper from my desk drawer and start writing:

sometimes it's like, i'm going back to my house. sometimes calling it my house feels unfair. when you're so casually aware of how often nightmares permeate into your mind and it's like, all this running. my mother's house was never like this, it didn't haunt me. two nights ago i was confused about whose bed i stayed in. i still sleep upside down, how i did at my mother's all through high school.

up until recently i never paid much mind to semantics, never cared about the who's, what's, why's, and when's. right now though, this shit is overbearing. i think one of those buggy parasites has crawled into the corners of my brain and branded me. maybe that

would explain the vile nothingness i feel. i'm saying, this shit is wack. i mean it's not like i've ever been much of a jubilant person but now? the world is getting to me i think. all the folklore i've heard presents more as daily news. i keep all the lights on in my house for that very reason; fear. who knows though, perhaps i'm just as unhinged as everyone expected me to be. it would make sense, the lunatic comes up with stories and everyone else just feeds off them. i bet it's comforting. i am not here like i used to be. when i see my reflection it seems past due. for whatever reason, this stubborn spirit of mine keeps clinging on like it's got nowhere else to go. i have to wonder, if staying stuck in my body is the best option, given how pulverized i've become, how bad is it elsewhere? i question my authenticity like it's not really happening, and i could just sleep if i wanted. i know it's not the case, something's amiss, it's gotta be. otherwise what the fuck have i even been doing this whole time? fighting for what? for who? why? i can't even call the medic anymore.

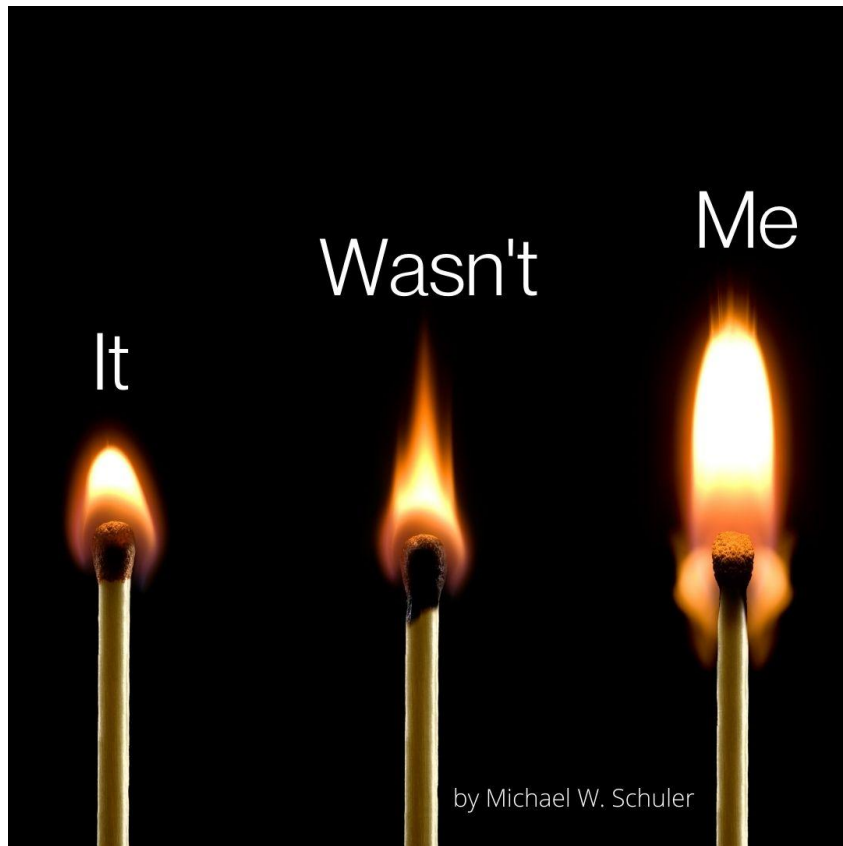
i've muddled my way around these thoughts too often to bear thinking about anymore. my lack of sleep is fundamental at this point. i won't reach any type of solace mindlessly begging for life to be normal again. i've lived in this house, this very bedroom for four years, and up until two days ago i never noticed the painting on my wall. i've been thinking maybe it's some kind of fucked up foreshadowing, but if i'm being honest, reality seems too bleak for that. only thing keeping me sane is the nightcap i've negligently chosen to poison myself with every night. the precipitation on the edges seems the closest to waking up refreshed i'll ever get. reminds me of the dew that straddled all the plants at my mother's house every morning.

when you look at it all a bit sideways you start to see things others wouldn't. i've been crooked for too long now and i'm stuck in it. i'd like to think i could guzzle some ambien and call it for a few days, but i don't think that would work. this headache i've been bridled with has monopolized me. i'm sorry, but i cannot continue.

when i'm finished with my letter i carefully tuck it within an antique envelope and seal the top with a handcrafted wax stamp. i pull out the bottle of pills i protested a mere 4 days ago and begin to swallow them, counting. one, two, three, four..

my head starts to feel woozy and i know it's working. they'll find my note, at some point at least. my stomach turns, my head gets hot. i don't feel panic like i think i should. maybe the abandoned lady will glance over as i've always done with her and notice that i haven't left in a while.

i slip into a new wonderland of odd silhouettes and fervor and think: is it possible that all of this is just grief?



Jacob bent over and tied his second shoe. This is the first time he had ever had any real friends...well, at least one's that weren't like 20 years older than him. He knew he should probably be watching football with his dad, because, after all, Sunday was always "Football Day". Tuscatville was the pride of the whole state, because crime was almost non-existent.

Although there were occasional "real" crimes, mostly there was trouble for minor things like TP'ing someone's house, or letting the air out of car's tires, which Jacob thought was actually kind of funny.

Jacob knew living here was better because no one would think because he was young, he must be a troublemaker. Jacob continued to think about how great Tuscatville was, as he put the finishing touches on his outfit for the day.

“Hey, Jacob, Let’s go!”, shouted Eric, from below Jacob’s window. Jacob went to his window while he carefully and quietly opened it. As he did, the cold air swarmed over him like an ice blanket. Jacob couldn’t believe Eric only had a thin jacket on.

“I’m coming bro. Just be quiet. I don’t want my dad hearing you screaming at me to come out”.

“Oh. You mean like your dad screaming at the game right now?” Eric said laughing. “Whatever Jacob. Just hurry up! We gotta meet the guy's RIGHT NOW!”

Jacob turned his head to see if anyone was peeking in his bedroom door then turned back to Eric and said, “Yeah like that! Okay, I just gotta put my jacket on. I’ll be right there”.

As Jacob closed his window, stopping the cold, brisk air from getting past his bedroom door, he couldn’t help but feel a little excited about being asked to be a part of Eric’s gang. Well, not a gang, but a group of “cool” kids that all the other kids in town thought were pretty awesome. Jacob never really felt part of the “in” crowd before, but Eric was different. He was a cross between a bad guy and a good guy. If that makes any sense. As he threw on his old blue jacket, and grabbed his blue bag, he quietly shut his bedroom door as he entered the hallway.

Passing by all the pictures from the old house reminded Jacob that this place was so much better; pictures of him trying to smile but secretly feeling miserable about where he lived. Jacob stopped at the fourth picture and glanced at it for a moment. He stared at the man in the background, on the sidewalk behind his family. “He looks soooo familiar. Hmm? That ugly beanie is... Eh, Whatever. I gotta go”, Jacob whispered to himself while he continued towards the front door.

As he tried to walk past the living room without being noticed, his dad, a rugged man with dark hair and a perfectly trimmed mustache, was watching football and shouting at the TV, as usual, just like Eric had said. Jacob walked past and his dad happened to look up at him..

"Hey, where you goin' Jake? Did you forget this is "Football Day?" he said indifferently yet with an inquisitive tone.

"Oh, I'm just gonna hang out with some friends' Dad", Jacob said. "I know it's "Football Day", but I just want to try and make some new friends".

"New friends, eh? I wish you'd stay and hang out with me but... eh. That's alright, I guess" Dad said casually. "Well, be careful and stay out of trouble. Ahhh, pppffttt... what am I saying. Of course, you'll stay out of trouble. Love ya son! Have fun."

As Dad resumed his place in the living room, Jacob offered some added information. "Thanks dad, liiii... shouldn't be out for too long. I'm just gonna go with the guys and hang out at the park."

"Oh, the park, huh? Could there be... mmmm some *GIRLS* involved in this little adventure of yours?" Dad said while chuckling.

"Oh... Please dad. Not the *GIRL* thing again," Jacob said, trying to not be annoyed.

"I'm just sayin... You are a good lookin kid. Gotta a good head on your shoulders and... never mind. Like I said, have fun and... "

"Yeah, I know... Stay out of trouble. Gotcha Pop!" Jacob finishing his dad's sentence.

Rushing out of the front door, and down the steps, Eric was waiting on the sidewalk, texting someone on his cell phone.

"Hey Jacob! Finally!", said Eric.

"What the fuck are you talking about Eric?" Jacob said jokingly. "You're lucky I even hang out with you" he laughed and patted Eric's back.

"Let's get outta here. We're gonna have some fun today FOR SURE!" Eric said sinisterly as he stuffed his phone in his right front pocket. Jacob shrugged his shoulders, nervously smiled and said, "Whatever you say."

Eric started running through the street at a pace that would make a cheetah proud, but caught Jacob off guard. Jacob, who started running as well, tried to shout in between puffs of breath, "Hey. Eric. What's the hurry? It's Sunday. There's nothing to do".

Eric looked back at Jacob for a moment and said, "Oh, nothing to do? Hmm... Well, you just keep thinkin' that, Jacob. Remember, there's ALWAYS something to do!"

As they veered left, down Adams Street, Jacob started looking around and wondering where the other guys were.

"Hey, where's the guys? I thought we were meeting them at the park?" he asked Eric. "Oh, they're gonna meet us down by the creek, not the park. I thought I told you that already bro."

"You might have." Jacob said, "I probably just forgot, but I told my dad that we....

"Oh, c'mon Jacob. You really tell your parents EVERY single thing you do? Get real dude."

Jacob tried to play it off like it didn't bother him but deep down, he didn't like his parents not knowing where he was. Especially ever since that time in Brolen. Jacob remembered some things very vividly about that day, while other things were still kind of a blur. He was with some kids he had barely met and they had lit an abandoned farm house on fire. Or at least he thought they started the fire, though he never actually saw who did it.

While the farm house was in flames, they all started running in different directions leaving Jacob there not knowing what to do. Jacob's conscience wouldn't let him just leave the building on fire so he tried putting it out himself. When the police showed up, they blamed him for the fire and he got in serious trouble for it. He was 14 then, not even old enough to go to jail, but his dad let him have it. His mom cried, even though he pleaded with them to believe that he didn't do it. "It wasn't me," Jacob kept saying over and over.

But he also remembered the craziest thing that happened... About 2 weeks after the fire, the police actually identified the person who lit the fire. It wasn't even the kids who were with Jacob. He found out later, it was some guy that they all saw by the farmhouse. They were so scared they just started running and left Jacob to take the fall. And the best part, in Jacob's mind, was his mom and dad having to say they were wrong and how sorry they were for punishing him so harshly. "They never did catch that guy, " Jacob mused, "I wonder what ever happened to him?"

As Jacob came back to reality, the two of them made their way down Adams Street, past Mckinely Street and through Brush Court, as a cut off, to get to their final destination, which was Creek Way, named after the creek that runs about 2 blocks from the main road. Jacob and his dad came there a few times to fish, but never caught anything.

"You ready to have some fun Jacob?" Eric asked fiendishly. Jacob, trying not to look nervous, said through his chattering teeth, "Yeah. I just hope we don't get wet because it is fu-cking-cold out here." Eric just laughed.

"Stop being a pansy. We're just gonna mess with the homeless guy down here. We won't hurt him, were just gonna mess with him a little bit".

Jacob and his dad had seen the homeless guy before. He kept to himself mostly and usually had his fishing pole out trying to catch his dinner. Sometimes local people would give him some food and clothes, especially warm clothes in the winter because it gets so cold by the water.

As they neared the creek, Jacob saw the other guys and waved them down. Eric and Jacob hurried their pace to meet the others by the creek. As all of them gathered together, one of the guys said, "Hey, shhhhhh. We gotta be quiet. That homeless dude will hear us." Eric, throwing his hands in the air and laughing, said, "So what, bro. What's he gonna do? Beat us up?"

Jacob, now feeling more uncomfortable, spoke up and said, "Hey guys, can't we just get out of here and go to the park? It's too friggin' cold to be down here anyway."

"WHAT? What are you talking about? Eric! Why did you bring this guy? He's like scared or something. What is he, a little..."

'Hey Tommy, just shut up and leave him alone. He's with me. If you don't like it, you can kiss my ass," Eric responded.

"Whatever... You're the boss... right?" Tommy sarcastically responded.

"Just.... shut the fuck up. Let's just do what we... Hey, who the hell is that?", Eric asked pointing up and away from them.

They were approaching the homeless man's "house", a tent, when they noticed another person standing a few feet away from it, near the trees and up from the creek. The mystery person was wearing very thick, dark clothing and what looked like a knitted furry green sweater beanie. Jacob immediately felt a knot forming in his stomach as the guys started to advance towards the unknown person.

As they got closer, a loud, deep voice yelled out, "Don't you boys come any closer, you hear?" The obvious aggressiveness of the man's tone was enough to make all the guys stop dead in their tracks.

Eric turned and said, "I'll bet it's the homeless dude. We probably scared the shit out of him. Well, there goes our plans."

The man turned around and began to walk out of the trees and back to main road. Jacob felt so nervous now, spoke up and said, "I think we should just go. This is a bad idea bro."

Although he couldn't be sure, the voice reminded Jacob of someone he had heard on T.V when that thing happened in Brolen, or recently near his house...or.... He just couldn't remember exactly. But that voice was distinct and he knew it. Or maybe he was just. Jacob was not okay with what was happening. Eric suddenly motioned for all of them to go after the mystery man, but the guys just stood there looking at him dumbfounded. Eric finally broke the silence and said, "What is wrong with you guys? We're just gonna SCARE him, not hurt him".

Tommy responded and said, "Eric maybe Jacob is right. This is stupid! Let's just go and hang out at the park like we were gonna to do in the first place." Eric, who looked defeated, said, "Fine! We won't go after him, but let's burn his shit down. That'll teach him for bein' an asshole to us!" Eric, ran over to the homeless man's tent, pulled out a lighter

from his left front pocket and carefully bent down to light the corner of the tent. Before anyone could protest his decision, the tent caught fire and spread so quickly that Eric barely had enough time to back away and not get burned.

The guys looked at each other and started shouting, cheering and dancing around as if they just won a football game. Jacob still felt uneasy about the whole thing and couldn't stop thinking about that voice, the one he knew he had heard before.

"JACOB?" Eric shouted, "I told you we were gonna have some fun!" Jacob, trying not to be occupied by his own thoughts, said, "Yeah, I guess so. I still feel kinda bad though". Just as Jacob finished talking, the fire, which had burned the entire tent and more than likely all of the man's belongings, started to die down. Jacob felt relieved that it was over. The guys were laughing and carrying on, and decided they should probably put the burned-up tent remains and all the stuff inside of it into to the creek so it could be carried downstream. Tommy slapped Jacob on the back and said, "C'mon Jake, let's all grab this shit and toss it in the water." Jacob, nervously laughed and said, "Yeah yeah... that's cool. Evidence and stuff, right?!" Tommy nodded and laughed.

Eric, who was grinning from ear to ear, apparently enamored with himself, grabbed part of tent just as Jacob and Tommy grabbed the other end. As they began to move the tent, Jacob couldn't help but cough because of the horrible odor coming from the tent.

"What the fuck is that smell Eric?" Jacob said. Eric laughed and told him, Tommy and the others' to just keep dragging it. As they neared the creek, Jacob looked to the left and noticed a brown boot sticking out of the tent. Jacob, immediately overwhelmed with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, said, "E R I C..." and pointed at the boot.

Eric looked over at Jacob, then where he was pointing. Jacob dropped his corner of the tent and stared at Eric, who looked unmoved and unsurprised.

"I don't know. It's obviously his shoes or something. Who cares. Let's get this thing down there", Eric said.

Jacob, trying not to be the "pansy" in the group, decided just to make sure it was just a boot, which he was sure Eric was right and he was just being paranoid. As Jacob grabbed the boot to pull it out from under the tent, it seemed to be stuck. Jacob thought, "Must be burned to something in the tent". Jacob pulled harder until all the sudden a leg, above the boot appeared from under the tent. Jacob screamed out, "Holy fucking shit! Oh, my God!" Eric dropped the tent corner and jumped over to where Jacob was and pulled back the tent. They all let out an audible gasp as they saw the body of an older man burned up laying in the remains.

Eric shouted, "Let's get the fuck outta here!" and started racing for the main road. The other guys scattered in all directions, and Eric felt that same, familiar feeling he had in Brolen when he was left to take the blame for something he didn't do.

Jacob dropped the brown boot and began to run. He looked around for Eric, but he was long gone, as well as the others.

As he neared the main road, he heard a man shouting his name. "HEY. JACOB!" He looked over and saw his neighbor, John, who was standing about 50 yards away. "Jacob looked over, paused for a second, and without saying anything back, just kept running. Jacob didn't really know John all that well, but he knew if he saw him, he would tell his parents.

Jacob kept running, past Brush Street, McKinley and Adams Street, all the time thinking he knew he should have never gone with Eric. He wanted to fit in, but he also didn't want to get in trouble. Jacob was so upset he didn't realize he had gone in the wrong direction. His mind was spinning and he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. He knew Eric burned another human being to death, but how was he supposed to deal with something like that?

Jacob, started to cry as he neared his house, way later than he intended. not knowing what to do. He knew one thing: He was not going to lie for anyone, even if it meant not having one friend, but he also wasn't going to tell anyone... EVER! Jacob burst through the front door of his house and just kept running, until...

"What the fuck are you doing? Slow down Jake. What the hell are you doing running through the damn house. Is there a *fire*? I've told you over and over, again and again...," Dad was pointing his finger directly at Jacob... "DO NOT RUN IN THIS HOUSE! Do you understand me?"

Jacob stopped dead in his tracks. "WHAT?"

"You heard me, "Dad said with authority.

Jacob's eyes grew wide as he looked at his dad. What seemed like an eternity of them looking at each other passed and Jacob shifted his eyes and just stared at the floor and said, "Sorry dad."

"You know what pal... "

"Yeah, I know dad. Don't ever run through the house."

"Well, if you KNEW, then why the hell..." Dad, looking perplexed, paused, threw up his hands and just stared at Jacob.

"I don't know. I just um... I just wanted to get to my room is all," Jacob said, in a broken tone while rubbing his left index finger with the thumb and index finger of his right hand. Dad continued his gaze at him as if holding him captive where he stood. Mom could feel the tension as she peered around the corner from the living room.

"Everything okay, guys?" she asked while faking a smile and tapping lightly on the wall.

"Everything is just fine, sweetheart," his gaze still fixed on Jacob. "Jacob and I were just... uh... discussing the importance of NOT running in the house"

Mom stepped out from behind the wall and turned to Dad and said, "Oh, I see. Well, I just talked to someone a little bit ago and..." Mom turned to Jacob, stiffened her tone and said sarcastically, "Well, maybe you should just let Jacob go to his room for now. I'm sure he has MUCH more pressing issues than running through the house."

Jacob looked up and met eyes with his mother, as dead silence filled the room. Jacob, now rubbing his finger at a blistering speed, didn't know who to look at.

"Can I just go to my room now?" he asked, quivering with tears in his eyes.

"Maybe that's exactly what you should do, *son*," Dad said in a harsh tone. "Me and your mom obviously need to talk."

"Yeah, obviously." Jacob muttered under his breath.

"Excuse me? You have somethin' you wanna say to me?"

“No dad, I was just... I’m... sorry,” Jacob dropped his head, turned around and headed off to his bedroom. The front room was deafening quiet again. Mom looked at Dad, walked over to him and wrapped her arms around him.

Dad stood there looking at his wife for a moment, took a deep breath and said, “Let’s go to the kitchen and have a drink!”

Jacob jumped onto his bed, buried his face in his pillow and began sobbing. Was he really a part of an innocent person being killed? The pressure was killing him and he just couldn’t take it. Jacob slowly moved his legs off his bed, then sat up, and stared blankly at his wall. After what seemed like an eternity of Jacob’s mind fighting with his legs to get moving, he eventually got up and walked to his door and opened it. “This is going to be the longest walk of my life,” he thought as he made his way to the kitchen.

He could overhear his parents talking and laughing as he was trying to maintain some form of composure. As he passed the living room, he noticed the people on the television were talking about the football games from earlier when suddenly, the TV screen interrupted the normal show and flashed, in big red words, “HOMELESS MAN KILLED IN TUSCATVILLE”.

Jacob’s heart began to race as it sank into his feet. Beads of sweat started forming on his forehead and he couldn’t stop the rattling of his stomach. Once again, his mind was fighting with his legs to move. He knew... He knew what had happened and now he was a part of it. He was going to go to prison for a long time, he thought. Tears started running down his cheeks as he braced himself for what would inevitably be the worst night of his life.

Jacob’s body started to quiver as he tried to regain his composure and finally began walking to the kitchen to tell his parents exactly what happened. Jacob slowly and carefully

rounded the corner and entered the kitchen where his parents were having wine and laughing.

"What's up Jake?" his dad asked. Dad scanned Jacob, and couldn't help but notice the sweat, now visible, on Jacobs' face. "You look terrible son.!"

"I need to tell you guys something... Today, I was hanging out with Eric and the guys and..."

"Yeah Jake, we know."

"Wait... you know what?"

"Jake... WE..KNOW!"

Jake became overwhelmed and nearly fainted as he broke down in tears. He dropped to his knees and sobbing said, "I'm so sorry dad. I'm so, so sorry. I know I shouldn't have been with..."

Dad walked over to Jacob, leaned down and wrapped his arms around him and said, "Son, it's okay. It's going to be okay."

"Dad, I don't want to go to prison. I'm too...", Jacob said through his weeping.

"Prison? What are you talking about Jake?", Dad asked nearly in shock. Mom, who sat relatively quiet, was now visibly upset, spoke up and said, "Jacob, what you did was wrong and you know it. You should be ashamed of yourself. Playing with fire, let alone setting fire to any person's property... but..."

"MOM!", Jacob looked up and cried out, "I swear it wasn't me. It wasn't me! I didn't light the fire! I swear I. "

“Jacob, we know it wasn’t you,” mom said. “But that poor, poor man. It’s so damn sad”.

Jacob’s mouth dropped open and he lost all sense of time as he heard those words, “We know it wasn’t you.” He nearly fell backwards and stared at the ground not knowing what to say, or if he should say anything at all.

Dad said, “Son, the police came here earlier because they were told you and the other boys were down by the creek when this happened. They wanted to know if you were here so they could ask you some questions. The fire captain said, while they were inspecting the body, they noticed a gunshot wound to his skull. Jake, the homeless guy was shot to death, not burned to death. The cops told us it was an unfortunate coincidence that all this happened like it did, but you guys did not..”

Jacob leapt to his feet, stared at his dad in disbelief while his mind was racing a hundred miles an hour. Jacob couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Dad, you mean, he was...”

“Yeah, Jaky. SHOT! Not burned. Shot.”

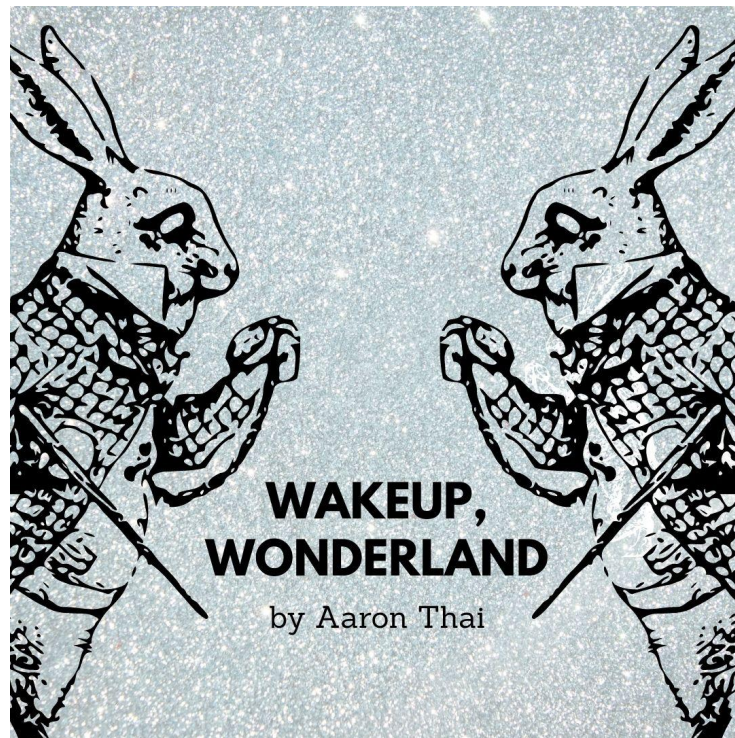
Jacob was overwhelmed and tried not to sound too excited as he let out a yelp, cried even harder, and leaped into his dad’s arms. Dad, with tears running down his cheeks, told Jacob although they were still very disappointed in his behavior, they were relieved at his honesty to them about what happened. All three of them were hugging, crying and consoling one another when all the sudden, the doorbell rang. Jake, who was emotionally drained but excited, ran to the front door.

Dad shouted, “Wait up Jake!” Jacob was too emotional and revved up to go slow. As he reached the front door, he grasped the handle, opened it, and there, standing on the

porch, was the neighbor John, smiling and dressed in thick clothes and wearing a green sweater beanie, which was the first thing Jacob noticed.

“Hey Jacob, what’s going on? Are your parents here?” Jacob’s heart, that was just leaping and feeling relief, suddenly sank deep into the pit of his stomach again and his face became ashen white...

Jacob immediately knew... THAT VOICE.



In the bottom left corner of her vision, the digital clock's azure display changes from 6:59am to 7:00am. With the turn of the hour she stops soldering. Again, there is silence.

Annoyed at the fruitless results of burning the midnight oil for nothing she starts to minimize the color-coded information data feeds and the various theoretical calculations overcrowding her vision. As the processes are packed away, Fran's attention shifts away from her workspace to the clock. The display expands, stretching itself to take up a more prominent position in her field of vision, 7:00:05:94 am. Even as she blinks the clock continues: 7:00:06:71 am. She adjusts her posture, joints realigning, the silence of the room disturbed only by fabric of her white lab coat. The sharp clack of her shoes touching the sterile floor echoes enough to break the monotony of her post work ritual. Her annoyance grows, and the display shrinks again to 7:00 am. A quick diagnostic check reports a subconscious process creating the extra momentum placed in moving her feet. A small

weary sigh escapes her and instinctively she stretches her upper body, her artificial muscles tighten, relax, and then recalibrate. Pushing away from her painfully organized desk, the floating chair rocks once and Fran stands in silence, staring at what could be her magnum opus or another failure. The clock changes. 7:01am. In that split second, she begins a new set of calculations and moves to exit the lab, automated lights turning on then off as she moves through the hall.

Despite her best efforts, the results are the same. She's going to be late. Another sigh as she resumes control. In one of the vacant rooms a 7am alarm beeps incessantly as it has done for a time Fran would like to forget. As much as she wants to turn it off, it is an anchor, for herself, her memories, and her past. Eventually it will stop, only to scream in defiance at the new day, only to be stopped as it awakens someone from their slumber.

Now in the common room, she walks with purpose toward a small box next to the coffee machine. Similar boxes are scattered around the room next to other items of nondescript appearance but of the upmost importance to Fran. She begins to make a cup of coffee, her hands moving with methodical muscle memory tuned to near mechanical perfection. She finishes with two cubes of sugar, a touch of artificial dairy, and a small stirring spoon in the cup.

Then she opens the box. Inside is a crystalline shard only slightly bigger than a toothpick, which radiates the colors of the sky. She gingerly lifts the pillow it rests on and the tiny note card whose hand written note states: ORIGINAL. Underneath is now mostly empty honeycombed rows, in which only half a dozen duller shards glow in the bottom right corner. With much less care she takes one of the six and places it to the side before gently restoring the rest of the contents and closing the box. Shard in one hand and cup of coffee in the other she walks to the comfortable black lounge chair and white wooden side table.

Fran adjusts and shifts her weight, her internal muscle tensions calibrating to make herself as comfortable as she possibly can. Satisfied, she looks at the cup of coffee, the spoon in her right hand and in the left, the shard. She stirs once and breaks the shard which to the naked eye disintegrates. Twice, the diagnostic light turns on and Fran begins to lose feeling on the left side. Thrice, the diagnostic light turns red, and the word ERROR flashes red in her left eye before morphing a bleeding rainbow of colors which overwhelms her vision. Then without warning, like a computer shutting down, everything goes dark.

#

The coffee shop's doorbell makes Fran look up from her coffee. Fran was late, but Alice isn't here, and it's pushing fashionably late so she will tell Alice she just got here. Again, it's not Alice. She sighs and reaches for her drink, enjoying the smell's memory before she takes a sip. The blatant bitterness breaks her worried concentration. In her concern and relief about not being late Fran's usual adjustments to her coffee were forgotten. She pouts and wraps both her hands around the drink for warmth before putting it back down. Without moving her head, she takes a quick glance at the baristas. Unable to find a familiar face, she resigns herself to her own suffering.

It's because I'm too needy, and I waited too long. She'll find someone better once this is over. Staring into the darkness of her drink and feeling its bitterness spread, her inner demons begin to surface. *This is nothing more than a little fling for someone like her.* The chiming of the bell brings her back, the cold air brings with it another stranger, stealing a bit more of her warmth. *What do I even say to her? What was the point of coming here?* She absentmindedly begins to scroll through things on her phone. First the internet. *It'll be fine. The worst thing is just a date between friends. Right?* Next a half-hearted attempt to read something saved on her phone. As the door opens and closes, she begins going

through her text messages with Alice. *She's late, should I text her? Would that make me seem too clingy? What am I even doing here?* Looking at the last exchange of texts, Fran crawls into the safety of her memories. She recalls how she and Alice went on for an hour back and forth before ending it with a phone call that lasted even longer. The last text from Alice, isolated by its time bracket, reads: "it's a date!" Turning off her phone, Fran places it gently onto the table. She rests her elbows on the table and brings her hands to her face, the warmth of her hands clashing with her cold cheeks. She looks at the store's clock like those on shift do, trying to determine whether time is moving slowly.

The bell tolls once more and as Jack Frost holds the door open the wind carries with it the familiar sounds of laughter that get Fran's attention. The first one inside is a familiar face, but right now to Fran he is just a side character, an extra in the shot. Behind him walks in Alice, wearing a smile that nearly closes her eyes. Another laugh, something about the cold, but her presence warms up the entire store. A few regulars and some of the baristas call out and hellos and smiles are exchanged. Compared to everyone else Alice seems to be in her element on this cold winter morning. As everyone moves on with their day Alice stays put, her head scanning the room, and within moments sees Fran. Fran's body immediately heats up as it involuntarily ignites the fight or flight switch. *I should have said hello with the others.* Having missed her chance to do anything other than exude awkwardness, Fran gives a pained smile. Alice, for her part, smiles back but her face too begins to show conflicting emotions. Coming closer Alice sticks her hands into coat pockets and walks closer, eyes carefully taking in Fran, her phone, and more curiously the cup of coffee.

Alice, now standing next to the table takes the chair in front of Fran, much to Fran's secret displeasure, and sits down holding Fran's gaze. She does not take her usual seat next to her, and the two of them clearly know it as Alice's smile and demeanor begin to

evaporate. The one with the familiar face inquires, "Alice, Fran. Your usuals?" Did he always look like that? Alice's looks returns to the coffee on the table and back to Fran shaking her head slightly.

"No I'm good Mr. S-" the world freezes and rings for a split second and next to Alice the words Auto Translate appear before they too disappear as the world continues "-White." A profile-like dossier appears in the screen of the laptop behind Alice that begins to bloom open documents before the screen turns blue and text on the back of the owner's shirt turns to Currently Unavailable.

Mr. White calls out to Fran, "I'll take your silence as a yes Francesca."

The smallest of nods from Fran, and what was awkward prolonged eye contact turns into a stare down. Fran watches as Alice's irises make small adjustments as she continues to search Fran's face for something. *What do I say? What does she want to say?* Seconds that feel like an eternity pass, until Alice cracks a small smile, "Hi Frannie." Her voice soft, and so full of warmth makes Fran momentarily relax before tensing up again, something that Alice catches. *Here it comes.* Alice places her hands on the table, eyes still searching Fran's for something. The next words that come out, "I'm sorry." *This is it.* "But!" The raised voice makes Fran flinch, Alice immediately leans forward as her hands move off the table her face wearing a slight look of concern. "But," she continues softer tone, "I have an excuse." From underneath the table, Alice's brightly colored and decorated, albeit outdated, smart phone appears looking not at all like it should. As Fran eyes the damaged object, Alice seizes the moment and takes the seat next to Fran and holds out both hands, "I'm sorry I'm late Frannie. Please forgive me."

A number of unimportant questions begin to surface, but as Fran looks back to Alice's pleading puppy dog eyes, all is forgotten and forgiven. She places her hand in

Alice's and immediately the latter closes around them their warmth chasing away the cold. Deep down something inside attempts to break free, but as Fran watches Alice's eyes shrink as her smile grows the feeling disappears. "It's ok, I just got here," Fran whispers. Alice's eyes though nearly closed follow her eyebrows into a squint that clearly display disbelief, but she does not push the point.

Words, whispers, and some sweet nothings are exchanged in moments as time flies at an almost unnatural rate. With one hand still holding Fran's, Alice drinks the coffee that she had claimed during their little moment. Alice drinks at a slow steady pace that makes Fran's mouth water, but makes her question how Alice can drink it again without fail. Fran gives the hand a light squeeze, and Alice returns the feeling as she puts the coffee down with a smile asking "How do you like your coffee?"

Fran grimaces, much to Alice's delight, "I don't like it. I only like drinking it with you."

Alice glows from the comment and gives Fran's hand a squeeze and the warm carefree smile returns to her face. Shifting her weight, she scoots the chair closer. Where there should have been the obnoxious screeching of wooden chairs there is only silence. The familiar face walks up to the two of them, his face is an obscure blur as Fran's whole being devotes itself to the moment. It drops off a drink. Coffee? Not important.

Alice looks up and says "Thank you . . ." Words are exchanged and deep-down Fran knows the face, the voice, but can't see or hear it. The being's shadowy hand touches Alice's shoulder. *Lovingly? Tenderly? Knowingly?* Doesn't matter, but it should and Fran knows this too, but finds herself unable to produce the correct output. It walks away bursting into a cloud of small moving objects. As Alice looks back to Fran, the coffee shop begins to dim, darken, and disappear. Gently Alice puts both hands around Fran's as the

steam rising out of the 2D coffee cup turns into binary. The next few words are the most important part, Fran needs to hear them. Alice with her eyes full of warmth says "I -" the rest lost behind a world-shattering beep.

#

As the 7am alarm rings Fran's body moves forward out of the seat, gasping and falling to her knees and almost face planting. Her eyes are open, she can feel them opening and closing, but sees only the brain grey. In short order, the internal bios beeps ring out from inside her and in the darkness of her perception she keeps a silent count. With no change in pitch or pace, the beeps tell Fran her systems are fine, and immediately glowing white text appears. System Restarting. She closes her eyes and adjusts her position to lie down on the sterile floor. What comes next is always unpleasant. As various bars and floating text cycle in front of her eyes Fran's mind begins to wander. She thinks of her friends, and of Alice. Memories that shine brightly, others that invite despair, ones that hold warmth, and the many that make her smile.

Finally, she arrives at the hole. Most of her memory can be pulled out like photos from a photo album, quick and easy. Others are buried more deeply and require more than nostalgia to find. Regardless of what memory Fran brings to the surface, there is an internal and external copy as a just in case. No matter how hard Fran tries to remember she cannot piece together its source or its end. The memory crystals are from many different points of time important to Fran, but even if they take place in the unmemorable gap she cannot tell. Should she use an original? No, the shards will have to suffice. The shards though useful, are not perfect, or maybe beginning to deteriorate after so many years and copies. A darker thought starts to creep up from inside, *What if it's me?*

The words in her eyes read System Restart Complete. Her internal hardware begins to deafen and the motor moving the blood inside her switches back to the normal pumping of a heart. The rhythmic heart beats help center Fran and the internal calibrations and muscle movements allow her to relax on the floor. What came next was an uncomfortable necessity. She cracks her eye a smidge and immediately loses partial vision to the blinding light. She can feel the machinery in her eyes adjusting. Again, a little more this time. More white. Once more, there was some color. Finally, she opens her eyes completely and the eyes finish their minute changes. Her internal thoughts bring out a color scale and Fran doubles checks the impeccable work of machinery.

Satisfied, it disappears, and like clockwork, the worst part of a trip down memory lane begins. A portion of her view changes into a small video screen and as the recording begins a very human Fran looks back. "If you're watching this, I've probably done something stupid." Her hair is greying here, a constant throughout high school and beyond, but here almost her it is almost her entire braid. Her eyes are much more determined and her voice is clear, a distinct difference to memory Fran, but no matter how hard current Fran tries she cannot find when this was made. A small weak smile graces her face, "So hello, and I'm sorry." Before another word is said she mutes herself.

#

Time passes in monotony and Fran commits herself to her work. A continuous cycle of work, rest, work, rest. Her life's work or what she assumes is her greatest creation is a very human looking robot lying incomplete in the lab. Today she has been working with the nanites in an attempt to create new cybernetic neural links. For some reason, the feeling of satisfaction lingers as she completes what could be the finishing touches on the first of many. Thinking that she should quit while she's ahead she takes a break. Making the trip to

the common room she takes a moment to get comfortable and uses a memory shard next to a book. A different memory this time.

#

I'm in a library, correction: it's our home library. A cup of coffee for Alice and a nice mug of lavender tea with an unhealthy amount of honey for myself. The taste of tea lingers on my tongue, the smell of paper and the hint of Alice's lilac perfume heighten my senses. I turn the page absentmindedly reading nothing. I want her. The silence builds and the heat in my chest threatens to burst until I close my eyes. Hunger and instincts lead me to Alice who remains engrossed in her book. Each step closer obliterates parts of our home into pixels and binary. As I wrap my arms around her, she relaxes into me, every strand of hair rendered to near perfection, her skin as lifelike as if it were real. Her face turns to me and for a moment I am lost in eternity. She holds my gaze as I search her eyes. Something is off. Something about a face I know by heart is wrong. I take one more look into her eyes and only the abyss looks back.

#

Fran wakes up still sitting at a table, her posture impeccable. Fran blinks a few times as her sight takes a moment to readjust. The side effects this time much more controlled. She frowns. Controlled but the memory, it was, wrong? That can't be, a lie she tells herself. Because if it was true, what point was there in going on.

As the dates change the weight of the lie forces her hand. Another shard. A different anchor, an ornamental snowflake. Fran takes a seat on a couch nearby and breaks the shard immediately and drifts off into the memory.

#

The world is cold and quiet. Not long ago the snow started to fall and the city is oddly quiet this evening. It's peaceful and a feeling of joy beats happily in my chest. I am not alone tonight and I look to Alice who is also watching the snow fall. She's gorgeous, the festive decorations only serve to enhance her presence. She's dressed very lightly for a winter outing, and it's starting snow so I ask, "Aren't you cold?"

She looks to me and thinks for a moment, "What can I say? I'm built different," Alice states, her face wearing a look of utter seriousness as she sips the coffee.

I made that coffee, today I put in some honey in it, and I see the exact moment she tastes it. *She's smiling, I think. She likes it right? "Is it ok?" It was a smile, right?*

Silence. Something is said in the silence.

"Are you sure?" Something is missing. Missing File begins to loop in parts of the festive windowsills.

Again, nothing.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I say, my voice painted with tones of concern and hints of my own uncertainty.

Alice finally responds, her face breaking apart and fracturing like a mask, "Whatever you want it to mean."

Before the words can break Fran, the world inverts. Snow falls up as up becomes down and down up. Normal disappears and without warning everything visible shrinks before imploding in random colors, pixels, and binary.

#

Something is wrong, the beeping this time comes from something inside her. BIOS does what it can to tell her what's wrong, but Fran struggles to remember anything at this point. She moves herself off the floor and props herself against something. As her body struggles to adjust from the abrupt wake up the text floating into view this time reads Primary System Failure. Diagnostic Unknown. Secondary System Online 94%. 97%. 100%. There is a pause as the text fades and the world explodes in bright whites and rivers of color as Fran realizes she kept her eyes open. An uncomfortable feeling settles inside as the distinct lack of feeling in various parts of her body becomes apparent.

More red text float in. Emergency Detected. Turn On White Rabbit? Y/N. *No, not now.* The text fade, the N turns to No and lingers a few frames longer than the others. A deep breath turns into a sigh. Already she's calculating the potential damage to her software and considers her options. On one hand she could try to reinstall her memories and see if that could fix the problem. Or. One that's probably the correct choice. A full body reboot in a controlled setting. After pondering on the matter Fran gets up thinking she should get the reboot. The issues with memory playback may resolve themselves in doings so, or so she hopes. Looking at the ornament she wonders where she got it.

The pause lasts much longer than Fran expects and who then begins to worry. Though on her backup, she should be able to recall this. She can see the store, the lights, the holiday decorations, and ... someone who isn't Alice. Right? No?

Fran combs through her memory files and a red error message appears bleeding red into much of her vision. Each time she brings up Alice, something is off. None of it sits well with Fran as she begins to give the what ifs in her head room to grow. As emotions play off each other, what's left of Fran's working mechanical parts attempt to snap her out of it. A drastic statement is made within her, *I can't lose Alice*, something inside her whispers,

not again. Rising to her feet and clearly hysterical, Fran opens the box next to the little Christmas ornament and grabs the labelled original.

All or nothing. Fran's artificial muscles flex and the radiant crystal shatters and with it the world around her.

#

I'm standing in the falling snow enjoying the beauty of the world and the stillness of the city. Next to me the love of my life is watching me curiously. "Aren't you cold?" she asks, a fair and honest question. She's concerned. It's cute. I think about what to say for a brief moment. This is our first winter and our first snowfall, together. I look to her as the wind gently blows through my hair, "What can I say? I'm built different." I take a sip of the coffee in my hands; a touch of sweetness lingers on my tongue. I smile as the sweet warmth spreads through me. She adjusts her beanie and smiles back at me and says "Is it okay?"

"It's perfect." Everything is.

"Are you sure?" Here she is, the insecure part that I love.

"Promise."

She watches my face and as her small forehead wrinkles make an appearance I smile, my eyes nearly closed and I shake my head. "What is that supposed to mean?" More concern and hints of uncertainty.

I will my eyes to open, the smile plastered to my face and I look at her bundled up for a blizzard. "Whatever you want it to mean."

She pouts looks to the sky and then the ground, and kicks at invisible pebbles. She sneaks glances at me, cute. "What does that mean?" she mutters. I love this.

Before she gets lost in thought I walk over to her and with my free hand take one of hers waiting for her to look at me. It goes from seconds to moments to minutes, so I conclude that the world will freeze before she does. "Fran?" She looks up, her eyes taking in every inch of my face like she could forget. Her beauty steals my breath and I end up whispering "let's go."

"Okay."

We walk in silence, not by choice but I can't find the words to say. I know Fran enjoys silence on occasion. Her hand grips mine comfortably and the pace is pleasant in this darkening street. I give it a squeeze and she squeezes it back. I guess we don't need words.

As we walk, I spy in the corner of my eye Fran's mischievous side gracing her face only for split seconds at a time before giving ground to young Fran. The one who looks at the world in wonder and savors every experience. Her attention shifting from the fallen snow to snowflakes and then something entirely new at random. The one who loves what she loves and enjoys my company more than she will ever let me know. As we walk by a particular display the colors hit her face just right. I take a mental picture of this. A mental timestamp of the us now. I'll bug her for an actual picture later, but this, this is mine. When they ask when did you know I'll say I always did, but I'll say that tonight was the night I became certain of it. Damn I'm smooth, a smile creeps across my face as I take a longer drink of my warm coffee.

"Are you really not cold?" Fran turns her face to me, expressive eyebrows concerned but I know she just wants to hear me say it again.

I take my hand out of hers and wrap it around her waist, "Of course, you're my summer in December after all." I always wanted to say something like this. We keep walking and I sneak a peek as we walk under a streetlamp. Her eyes are shifting constantly and her blush is one shade darker than before. I give her a quick kiss, the smell of lavender threatens to wake up something inside of me as I whisper, "I love you Frannie."

#

She sits up violently, coughing and suffering from random muscle spasms. Her eyes adjusting to the bright artificial lights as her head goes through the worst headache ever. The secondary systems' emergency backups begin to turn on, and the more mechanical aspects of her body begin to readjust and calibrate forcefully. She screams, the agony of individuals muscles shifting bringing her to the edge of conscious space. Through her own force of will the system process accepts the temporary manual override and her human half takes its first full gasp of air in ages. Her heart is hammering and she closes the open chest compartment feeling each lock click back into place and lies back down.

As the social construct of time passes by, she waits in the disquieting silence for her body to calm down. Many deep breaths later and with a much more relaxed heartrate she takes in what looks like the commons room. Subconsciously the secondary system begins its restart and though the hum in her chest catches off guard it is quickly muted. Her internal systems begin the work of reestablishing what could be considered normal operations. Hormones administered and balanced, system diagnostics and a full system scan is performed without her awareness. Instead of shock and confusion, she feels an unsettling calm. In the periphery of her vision bold white text begin to appear and assemble at a readable distance.

System Start: Y/N?

She reads out loud, but nothing comes out of her, the thought though carries through. System Start turns into System Starting and drifts into the center of her vision. As minute scripts of data fly by and columns of information scroll beyond recognition the percentage accompanying the startup reaches 100. The text fades. Her eye twitches uncomfortably and uncontrollably for an unpleasant moment before displaying a number of more familiar items. Most prominently in the bottom left corner of her vision there is a digital clock. Its azure display reads 6:52am. She focuses on it and it expands to show the milliseconds and as her internal thoughts call it pointless it shrinks.

Standing up, she steadies herself as her body continues to right itself. A good stretch tells her what is organic and what isn't and with that done she begins to rack her brain. "Where am I?" her voice creaks. A few hums, huh, and ha's later and her 'voice' starts to come back. She circles around the room, investigating the room. Her face one of concern as she counts how many memory nanite boxes are present.

The 7am alarm clock rings making her jump. She starts walking in its direction, but as the day resets a new prompt appears. Emergency Detected. Turn On White Rabbit? Y/N. Internally and visibly she grimaces, it's serious then if the White Rabbit is in play. A quiet whisper escapes her chest, "Yes."

Mr. Shiroi, or Mr. White, an older man who is built like a superhero but has the aesthetic of a James Bond villain materializes in the room via several hidden projectors. Barista, coffee shop owner, and close friend of Fran and Alice. His see-through image straightens its coat and scans the room before looking at her. Usagi Shiroi, or in Japanese Shiroi Usagi, white rabbit. "Hello there, mind if I ask you a few questions?" it asks but instead of waiting for a response it continues, "Good. What is your favorite book?"

"Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley," she responds, her voice finding strength.

It nods, "Classic. What drink do I make you?"

"Coffee," part of her recalls doing this, almost a lifetime ago.

"How do you like your coffee?"

"Black."

"Good choice. Next question, what do you call me on a good day?"

"Bugs."

Another nod, and copying his real-life counterpart another softer subtle nod. "And when you're cross with me?"

"Asshole," a bit more oomph with that one.

A burst of life like laughter catches her off guard as the image hones in on her.

"Final question, what do I call you?"

"Wonderland," she whispers.

For a moment he looks like he's standing there, arms stretched out leaning forward on his bar. "Good morning, Alice. Oddly punctual this time. So. Did you dream of Wonderland?" On que System Restoration floats across her vision and a tiny viewing screen opens. It's Fran. "If you're watching this, I've probably done something stupid." Her hair is greying here. Her eyes are much more determined and her voice is clear, a distinct difference to when we were younger. She's so lovely, but, what does she mean? A small weak smile graces her face, "So hello, and I'm sorry."



Waking up early, no matter how uplifting a sunrise, is hard work. I know why I started doing it, and I'm happy about it, but sometimes it's a pain. The moment you wake up, a cold atmosphere is waiting and stalking you from the moment you leave the protective warmth. Whenever I pull off the covers, it bites. I'm wrapped by a stretch of cold that I have to move closer to . It really sucks, but there is no other way to get moving, and no other feeling like it in the world. Such a drastic change from something so simple is worth writing about, but I already did that. "Maybe it's just time to go for a ride," I thought.

I grabbed my phone and headed to the garage. My bike was well-kept, thankfully, so I at least was able to keep myself outside for as long as I needed. The garage door slabs crunched open and I was off. A bike ride, a walk, and a jog are all pretty different, but I at least tried the other options before deciding that I only had an interest in biking. I get to feel the grooves of each change in the road, whether it be on the street, the grass, the sidewalk, or the hills. Each tells a story, and it's a story I get to feel and experience again every time I wheel myself outside. Definitely helps for inspiration. School also takes a toll

once in a while, and it's fun to be able to move through the neighborhood in the opposite direction sometimes.

Most kids don't seem to care too much about taking a break, relaxing, or sitting down and having an original thought. A test, notes, and a piece of homework is all most kids seem to understand. Reaching college is somehow reaching nirvana and eternal peace, at least that's how they see it. Assuring your spot among the ranks of the accepted elites is somehow the most we can hope to achieve while at highschool. "Even thinking that sounds dumb" I said, angrily gesturing as I zip past another stop sign.

At least I have a bike. The sunset is aligning right above my helmet as I'm heading down the hill for the stop light. Every tree is chanting it's own tune to a breeze that stretches its' form through each avenue and boulevard. Each leaf has its own mosaic of beauty as they blend into the grass and the pavement. Ffp, ffp, ffp, ffp . The squash of each leaf makes a smack under the wheels, easily becoming too much to count. I depart to the bike lane on the left as the light is turning green, looking back for just a second. Immediately, each car blasts off, and I lean forward to get the biggest lead that I can. I speed ahead, squashing ten leaves a second while my bike pops left and right. The blaring motors explode by my side, and despite reaching my neck out for a little extra reach, they zoom past.

A paradise of trees, birds, and the heat inches closer as a new song sings. I'm exhausted but fulfilled. I head down further and further, looking every which way, experiencing what I might take for granted tomorrow morning. It's one more block until the bottom of the hill, so I scoot to the right and re-adjust myself on the sidewalk. New leaves and shades of fall hit me from all corners. A patch of grass on the right strikes me first, looking like a little habitat, a mini amazon. Trees of all sizes are splurging, hitting the roof of the sky without even trying. The clouds are parting, and make a stance while sharing every

color I can count. A brave front of yellow and red drips from the tips of the hill in the distance while the sun is peeking behind it.

I take a small detour to the bottom of the hill, slowly moving to the right once more. The turn is crisp, and takes no time for a new view to make itself. The road now winds upwards, keeping me quiet the whole time. I get ready to turn around and go home when I notice a steep passage hiding behind shrubbery. One more second to change the gears, and I'm off back to where I started.

At least I know that I have been productive, although I hardly showed it. There are more stories to tell on each ride than to fill a library, and this one is no different. I head up the road that I normally take to school, and switch gears again for the uphill. I am tired, but still happy. There is a lot outside that I tend to miss. Either too much working for school, or too much time worrying about myself at home normally closes this door for me. It's why it is so important for me to be able to walk through these doors anyway. I can't go too far, of course, but I can at least spend some time enjoying how wondrous the leaves can really be on the other side of the glass window. I move towards the elementary school, eyeballing two moving figures in the distance. A few more seconds, and I realize that they are also bikers, strolling through the sunset-colored field. We are both on the same sidewalk, so I take my time moving to the left. As I bump down from the sidewalk to the street, the front wheel is stopped by a rock perfectly hidden under an un-crushed leaf. My bike is still moving forward as I lean out of my chair to try and gain control of the steering. I grip the handles with all my might, and steer it the best I can. I swerve, but in the wrong direction. I lean to the left as a pole as thick as an orange makes itself known with two checks. First with my handle, and then with my shoulder. The couple sees this, and stops instantly. I crash, and I am instantly more embarrassed than hurt. They run off the bikes as I am scrambling to not fall over, which I eventually do. My bike hits the pavement, and I flop off

like a fish. I roll to the side and see the couple running towards me to make sure that I am ok, which I was not.

“Are you ok?”. It was the only question they asked, but it was the only question I would have answered. I look at my bike, and then at my shoulder. My bike is laying flat on the cement, with the handles kissing the floor. My shoulder is hurting. Bad.

“Yeah, I think I’m ok,” I answer, obviously a lie. What a lame way to end a trip. I look around while they are making sure that I can get up on my own. My legs retract and stumble below me for a second, but I get up. I whip my head around after a few seconds and see that my phone had been lying on the floor. I picked it up with my right hand. Thankfully it’s not cracked. I turn back at the couple, and the sunset is still singing violently, as if to tell me “the show must go on.”. At this point, I’m hoping it would quiet down a bit, but nope; birds are still chirping from all directions, now even more than normal since the sound of the crash was as subtle as a pickup truck. I pick up the bike slowly, with the couple behind me, keeping a safe distance. I then hop on, forgetting that my arm hurts, and wincing loud enough for them to hear.

“I’m okay. Thank you!”. I forgot to mention that I’m a pretty good liar. I plop my phone into my pocket. There is such a disconnect between both sides of my body that it confuses me to even think about. Not only did my left shoulder hit the pole, but I fell on my left hip, making my leg yell just a bit when I moved it. It was a yell that only I could hear, but it was enough to make me want to yell as well. I pedal slowly and controlled, with one arm on the handles until I reach a corner. I did not care which leaves I stomped over, just that I was well-off enough to make it out of sight of the couple. I jump off my bike again, this time landing on my right foot, and take out my phone. I call mom and tell her that I need her to pick me up; in case no one already knew it, the drive of shame is the worst of all.

I'm glad that Fridays are a thing, because getting hurt on a Friday lets you recover over the weekend. Saturday and Sunday are used to either relax or procrastinate, but they are great for just staying at home with an injury. You can also move to the family room and watch some TV while you drink some warm milk. Good times. Well...too bad it's a Wednesday. My bike somehow makes it to the garage, and I have a made bed waiting for me as I walk into the hallway, holding my left shoulder while doing so. Not hitting the light switch, I head forward, not slowing down. I stomp carefully over the shoes that never move, and beeline towards my room while only given a hair of light. I poke the wall, hitting the switch and lighting up the room with a sun that flips on. I see a cup of warm milk waiting for me, and my unfinished work laying on the desk. Sometimes I really hate looking at that desk.

If I had been making sure to finish my work right after school, I probably would not have gotten injured. I probably would have tried to talk to a teacher after school to get some extra questions in, and I probably would have tried to make a text or two to get some help with some problems. I would have sat at my desk, dusted off my lamp, and worked until I either got tired or too bored to pretend like I wasn't tired of working. Instead, I'm sitting on my bed, still, stiff, and a bit sweaty to be honest. It takes me one minute to turn my body to the other side, and five minutes to set up blankets with one hand. I look out the window at the one tenth of the sunset that I can claim by myself. There is almost nothing left. The birds stop chirping when the light dies down. The trees stop moving once the light dies down. The leaves stay still when the light dies down. My closet is popped open, so I lean over to the side to try and step off the bed. The cover moves slowly, shifting to the left as I pull it with my only working hand. It feels like a pack of needles was taped onto my left shoulder. I hop off the bed, trying to keep myself secure, and slide the door to hide the mess underneath. There is not much that I have left to do other than homework, so I take my binder from my desk, toss it to the far side of the bed, and grab my favorite pencil. For

the next few minutes, I make sure to at least try and distract myself from the pain. It sucks that I have to be doing this with one arm, and I don't seem to be able to focus. There is a certain feeling that I get whenever I know that there was something that I could have done to avoid or make something not happen, and I don't know what it's called. I don't like to curse, and I don't like to make decisions out of pure emotion, but I was upset. I was upset that today went so great, only to go so embarrassing and bad so quickly. The way the couple looked at me was as if they found a child that was crying that she had dropped her candy. I was hurting, but I'm not a little kid. And having to move just barely outside of their vision to get a chance to call someone to help me out? That's embarrassing. Now I'm sitting on my bed and trying to make this math work in my head and on paper while my left arm feels like it's going to pop off. I guess I am just a bit worried that this injury is a bit worse than I thought. And for what? Going on a little stroll with a shiny bike?

It's much later, but the pain hasn't left yet. My finished papers are adding up; thankfully I only have to worry about worksheets and not actually typing anything, but tomorrow may be a different story. The room has had the same quiet in it since I last took the time to look around, and it's getting old. My body is stiff, adapted to make a singular movement with my hand in order to finish what I need to do. I realize my stiffness, and try to move my body a bit. I try to get my left leg moving while keeping my papers on the bed. It hurts to lay on my side, but walking should be okay. I then move my right leg toward the edge of the bed, and immediately all but two of my papers shoot off. I reach down as fast as I can to hold my binder up, but I lose my grip and it slams on the floor. Awesome. I pull my hand off the papers, and feel a chill down my leg. Almost the same chill that I feel in the morning. A little less, but they both still suck. This is only a feeling that should be felt once a day, not twice, not thrice, but once. I see all the bottles of water and leftover cups that are on my desk, and with one hand shove them to the back. Each one makes a different sound that I hate, but nothing else is going to fall over. I reach down for each individual

paper that I need for school, and that I cannot crumble. As I bend down, my left arm slightly moves towards the floor, making me wince just a little bit, but enough for me not to want to stand. I begin to plop on the floor, and complete my homework while my body is laid out like a starfish on the floor. At least a starfish can regrow limbs. My left arm is limp, and laying in front of me as I am trying to put the next piece of homework on my now upright binder to continue working. I might have to go to the doctors, but I won't tell my parents until I cool off. At least I am well enough to say that.

After a few more minutes, I finish up with my work, and begin piecing my binder together. Some papers flew off after it fell, and some stayed. I lift my left arm up and place it in my lap like I'm an elementary teacher starting storytime, and I piece my schoolwork back. "Was that little bike ride worth it?" I ask myself. "Seriously?". Reminiscing, I remember seeing nothing but colors. I remember every shade of the sun, I remember the bike turning nice and crisp, and I remember the pole. The last one isn't that fun so ill just think about the first two. If I am being honest, that is a beautiful sunset. I got to see trees jingle to the beat of the wind, and cars fly by with leaves falling behind them. I also got to see the grass. When I didn't hate bugs I used to love rolling around the grass, sometimes down a hill. Next was the birds. In the silhouette of the sun, I didn't see specific species too well. They were mainly black. But I got to hear. I got to be a part of the little atmosphere just 20 feet above me, even if it was for just a little bit.

Okay, but to be fair to those kids staying after school, I know a lot of them that aren't bookworms or school fanatics, they just learned to stay on top of things. I guess that's okay, but the problem comes with each and every day that I feel like they are giving their best to school, and the school it not giving back. These are the kids that care about college, hopefully not because of the Tiger moms, and want to keep their best foot forward. I guess I am not the best at being that form of studious. I just wanted \ a bit more

today. That isn't too much to ask right? Surely for one day it's okay to have something else at the complete forefront of your mind other than assignments and tests. Since I don't get to enjoy the sunset much, I am at least happy that I got to appreciate this one. The days are mostly the same here, and I don't have much else to do after school, but come on. What I saw was something special. If anyone else saw it there'd be crowds for miles, waiting for the clouds to change colors like a chameleon. My shoulder hurts pretty bad, though. I don't really know how well I am going to sleep tonight. At least when I do sleep, whenever that happens, I know what I would want to dream about. It's better than school work at least.



It had been a week since we exited “Daylight Saving Time.” I had almost forgotten about this ridiculous system that disrupted my mental clock twice a year. Fall—fall back. Spring—spring forward. I was already pissed because it was cold and wet in the San Francisco Bay Area. Sunny California, yeah, right.

My appointment card from last week said, “November 8th, 3:30PM.” I was on time but something stopped me before my hand reached the doorknob. I stood stock-still as a tsunami of other people’s emotions hit me all at once causing an almost full blown panic attack. I could feel their grief, disappointment, and frustration reverberate even through the closed door. I was absorbing it all, and had only recently been able to control it without the black box. With a few useful techniques I had learned from Veronica after my first panic attack in her office, I eased my breathing and exhaled through my nostrils slowly to get rid

of the hostile tension that consumed me. I cleansed this energy with prana, and after a few moments, I turned the doorknob.

Inside was dark and dreary. It was the same temperature as outside but somehow not as cold. There were no other changes since last week or the week before; a square with white walls and two doors – one to enter and exit, the other leading to perpetual “help.” The receptionist was separated from the patients by a small square in the wall with a sliding glass window. I gave my name and found a seat. The other seats were occupied with six other half-masked faces; people waiting for their name to be called. I only glanced; I didn’t stare because we all looked guilty for being there, as if we just couldn’t make it through this life cycle without being analyzed so we could eventually be normal enough to join society.

Suddenly, I heard my name from a familiar voice.

“Bianca Woodard.”

“Here, here, I am,” I said, jumping to my feet. I swung my backpack across one shoulder and smiled at Veronica standing at the entryway waiting for me. She always looked pleasant, nice warm eyes and always well-dressed, like a professional without all the stiffness.

I tried not to appear nervous since this wasn’t our first pony ride. I was nervous, but she didn’t have to know that. As a matter of fact, I didn’t have to tell her anything at all. I could actually just sit there the same as our first session with my mouth shut for the entire fifty-nine minutes and walk out the door—done. Everyone was satisfied, especially my stepmother. There’s something called patient and doctor confidentiality. Boo-yah!

“Have a seat,” she said, gesturing to the two tan upholstered leather chairs opposite her desk. I removed my winter coat and draped it across the back of the chair with

my backpack. I sat down, finding the flat padding only marginally more comfortable than the plastic chairs in the lobby.

I scanned her office because something was off. I couldn't figure it out right away, but then I noticed the plaque on the door with her name engraved on it. "Mrs". Veronica Walters instead of "Miss." I glanced at her and she smiled behind her plastic facial get-up. I didn't know whether to congratulate her or give her my condolences – her life would never be the same. My eyes found another picture, a family picture. I imagined an updated family with new additions opposed to the single photo displaying her with a couple of lap-dogs. Yes, that was it. I should tell her, 'it's not what you think, it's not a fairytale. Fairy tales have happy endings.' I kept my mouth shut because I didn't have anything good to say.

The furnishing was the same as all therapist offices around the world. But she had two big picture size windows that decorated the sidewall, bringing the outside inside. Dark and dreary, but ever-changing. And of course, there was a sofa – it looked much more comfortable than the chair I was in. I grabbed my things and walked over. I dropped my backpack on the floor next to the leather tan sofa and plopped down on the center seat. I watched her gather notepad and pencil, god forbid she try and write this session in ink.

Suddenly, I felt as if I was sitting in the hot seat waiting to be ripped apart, like Humpty Dumpy before the fall, and I prayed this woman could put me back together again. The clock on the wall said 3:36. I tried to make myself comfortable, but couldn't. Instead, I kept popping my knuckles like an idiot. There was something about the sound that eased the tension coursing throughout my body.

She crossed her legs and placed a notepad on her lap. We went through all the formalities before she actually started performing her job, which was to get inside my head and fix whatever was broken. If I told her what I had to say when I wasn't pretending to be

somewhat normal, by the end of our sessions, she would stamp my forehead with 'BROKEN' and ask me politely to leave and never return, exiling me from society.

Mrs. Walters insisted that I call her Veronica, as if we were potential bffs, but she didn't know I was empty inside. It didn't make me feel any more comfortable with her sitting so close to me. I felt her anxiety rolling off her like time in an hourglass—slow and steady.

"Look in the mirror and tell me what you see," she said, holding a hand mirror.

"I'm not doing that," I said agitatedly, cutting my eyes from hers to one of the big picture view windows just as raindrops polka-dotted the glass. I leaned back slouching in my comfortable position, increasing the space between us. I laced my fingers behind my head to stop myself from cracking my knuckles. I glanced at the clock once again, only a few minutes had passed. I swore it was like watching paint dry.

"Why not?" she said calmly, shifting in her seat.

"Because it's stupid," I said, rolling my eyes to the ceiling. "I'll tell you what," I said leaning forward, "why don't you look in the mirror and tell me what you see?" Seriously, she was expecting me to do her job. I let out an exasperated breath and grabbed my backpack off the floor and reached into the side pocket pulling out a stick of gum. I removed my face mask and started chewing right away, taking the edge off.

"Bianca, you agreed last week. But if you are not ready, then we can try again next week. No pressure."

“Whatever, but I’m busy next week,” I responded sharply, not really understanding my own sixteen-year-old rebellion. I leaned forward, giving in, and snatched the silver plated hand mirror from her grip.

“I see Bianca. A brown girl with black braids. She loves track – she is good at it. She’s super cool, some people say smart. Full lips with... sad brown eyes.”

She seemed surprised as she looked up. “Why are your eyes sad, Bianca?” She asked, scribbling something on her notepad or doodling. I paused for a moment to gather my thoughts, raking my fingers through my long braids.

“She’s in pain, always in pain.” I told her the truth. My chewing became rapid. The more nervous I became, sounds came out my mouth like a series of machine guns firing off inside. I was getting too close to needing the black box. She waited. I could feel her agitation, so I stopped smacking and immediately replaced it with the tapping of my foot to the carpeted floor. What I really wanted to do was get up and run out the door. Get home to the black box.

“Okay, where is this pain?” she asked solemnly. My eyes blinked up to her and met her gaze. She reminded me of my stepmother. She pretended to care, too.

“What do you mean, where is this pain? I told you last week. If my pain was any other kind of pain than mental, don’t you think I would be at a different doctor’s office?” I said tersely and added, “But then again you are not a doctor. Not even a good listener.”

I cut my eyes from hers to the clock on the wall—forty minutes to go. When I turned back to her, she was writing fast and furious. I could feel her anger even though she didn’t wear it on the outside. I stood up and walked over to the big window waiting for the tension in the room to settle down before I started pretending. After a moment of staring

out at the rain, I turned around to face her. "I'm sorry Veronica. I'm just having a bad day. I can't shake it," I said.

"Bianca, it's okay. I just want you to relax and be yourself," she said, taking a sip from a glass of water. She offered me water from a side table with about six bottles of water on it. I said, "no thank you."

I came here today cocked and ready, wearing a different face than last week or the week before. I was all too ready and prepared to tell her the same story I rehearsed since last week, but something happened when I looked into her brown eyes. I saw her. A reflection of me. I never did that before now. My stomach was knotting.

Veronica's eyes had a sincerity to them that made me feel as if I could trust her with my story. I had to trust her with my story—my real story, maybe even my secret. Maybe I needed to give a little. I was so tired of feeling like crap, carrying the hidden shame, the weight of that shame on tired shoulder – not just one but both. One secret outweighed the other. So, I walked lopsided on bad days. No one could tell, but I could feel it. It was always there. Some people would say they had an angelic angel on one shoulder and the other a malevolent demon. Well, boo-hoo. I got two demons, one on each shoulder as a reminder of keeping secrets. Yes, I was tired of them too. I was tired of being afraid of living with my lie, but I didn't want to die either. I was tired of wearing fifty friendship bracelets on both wrists even though Veronica was my only friend.

"You know," I said, forgetting my next words. The palms of my hands were sweating. I rubbed them dry on my jeans and exhaled. I was a coward...grinding my teeth. I needed to breathe. I kneeled down to lace-up my black and white Converse.

“My mom died before I got to know her,” I said without looking at her when I stood up. I turned to face the window. Eyes closed, I breathed deeply and felt vulnerable.

“Then my dad met Linda and they fell in love, just six months of dating that led to marriage,” I said tracing the raindrop on the glass window pane with my finger tip remembering that day. “She didn’t come alone,” I said with a small chuckle and looked over my shoulder at her. I wondered if she understood why my attitude changed when I saw her new photo with the new additions to her family. Her posture didn’t change. Neither did her facial expression. She wrote something on her notepad and then looked up at me. I cut my eyes and turned back to the window and spat my gum into the palm of my hand.

“She didn’t come alone,” I said and rolled the gum from my palm between my fingers and swooshed it directly into her trash can. “She came as a package deal with two sons, Jordan and Jake, twins. I had an instant family.” I plastered on a smile when I turned around to face her. I tried to make it look genuine, still pretending, like the fraud I was.

“And how did that make you feel, the instant family?” Veronica asked, searching my eyes for the answer. I wasn’t sure if I was more shocked by her question or that it was text-book. Every movie, every book, every comedian said those exact words. What was her deal? Was she even listening? I was giving her a piece of her future. I felt a pang of sympathy because that wasn't why I was there. Linda instigated the session with Veronica. She was my only parent, now. I get fixed or get out – if I was to live under my father’s roof. I focused on the present, but I didn’t answer her right away. I had to be careful.

I walked over to the bookcase that lined the entire other sidewall. I felt more relaxed from the smell of old books. They reminded me of the library, a place my father and I would visit often. I pulled out one book, staring at blurred pages, not interested in reading it or the title. I was still searching for the right words. I checked the clock at 4:11. Jeez, can you

go any slower? I put the book back and slipped my hands in my pockets to stop me from cracking my knuckles. I couldn't shake the nervousness that eddied my stomach, so I walked the room at a slow pace. I had to keep moving if I was going to tell my secret. I couldn't take it any longer.

Suddenly, Veronica asked, "Bianca, how's your relationship with your stepmother?"

"She's okay," I lied. I hate that bitch, she and her perfect sons – the almighty sports jocks, honor students. Everybody, including my dad would say, "Oh, my God, they are so... cute and smart." "How can you tell them apart?" I didn't exist. Until I did and that was when my life changed. It was like an evil curse – you couldn't call them back, there were no antidotes.

I walked over and sat on the sofa instead of the chair parked in front of her desk. I looked directly in her eyes. "What I am about to tell you must stay between us," I said emphatically and added, "promise me." I didn't need a pinky-finger promise, but I needed her words. Especially if she thought I might be a danger to myself. I couldn't have that.

"Of course," she said and with a nod of my head I said, "Alright."

Contentedly, I leaned back pulling my long legs up to my chest making myself comfortable. That gave me a sense of protection. I needed comfort like a hug, something that was missing from my life. I looked up to meet her gaze, draping my long braids forward shielding my face like a curtain.

I laced my fingers together and blew an exalted breath between my thumbs, releasing the tension in my stomach. I never told anyone what I was about to tell Veronica. This was only my first secret, and it was difficult. I couldn't explain it to myself, why I cared about how she would see me after I stopped pretending. I didn't before, why now? I

closed my eyes because I wanted to cry, because releasing the cold-hearted ugly truth could destroy me. After my dad died, I destroyed every friendship I ever had – I didn't deserve them, and they certainly didn't deserve a diabolical demon in their lives. Veronica wanted to help, so she asked for it.

"I was sitting in the dean's office waiting for my dad to pick me up. I knew he was going to be pissed because he had to leave work early." I said, fanning my face with my hand because I could feel all of it stirring in my gut like demonic stew.

"He warned me that morning before school about allowing my temper to get the best of me." I rubbed my eyes, I could feel the tears, they burned like the demon I was. "I was suspended for three days even though I didn't start the fight, I was only defending myself." I said convincingly, my animated hands backed up my perfect lie. My eyes weren't focused on her because liars don't look you in the eyes.

"It was due to the school's strict policies, no bullying and fighting, which I felt I was in compliance with," I said with an innocent hand gesture, and faultless facial expression. I hoped she was buying it. I was getting so good at pretending, I wondered if I would ever find myself again. "Anyway...", I said and paused because suddenly I was overwhelmed with fear, as if the demons from Hell weren't quite ready for me to tell my secret.

"Bianca, are you okay?"

I held up my index finger remembering my prana exercises with my eyes closed.

A shadow encompassed my closed lids. I was startled, popping my eyes open.

"Here, drink this," Veronica said, standing in front of me with a bottle of unopened water.

"Thank you," I said, twisting the cap off. I guzzled down enough to get rid of the queasiness in my stomach. The fear stayed.

Veronica had taken her seat and met my eyes. "Go on," she said. I started back retelling the story I had kept a secret for six months. Tears came automatically from missing my dad.

"It's hard for me. Once I tell you, you're not going to like me," I said, palming the heel of my hand to my eyes to dry them. I couldn't believe I was about to tell her what really happened.

"Bianca," she said with the tilt of her head, her hair falling across her eye, she gently pushed it behind her and looked at me. "My grandmother told me long ago about secrets. I am going to tell you exactly what she told me when I was about your same age. I also had a secret that I couldn't tell anyone, I lived in shame, and felt it was my fault. My grandmother, God rest her soul, she said that we all live in boxes, boxes created by secrets. The box eventually limited our growth, disabling us, but it was up to each individual to liberate themselves by separating from their secrets. My grandmother told me that she would hold my secret for me until I was ready to fully free myself and I said okay. I wanted to be free from the mental shame, the pain and suffering I endured from my secret," she said, releasing a breath. "So, I told her everything, I didn't hold back, and she held my secret until I fully liberated myself." she said, looking at me with warm eyes, trusting eyes. "You see," she said, never swaying her eyes from mine, "she gave me the courage to trust her."

With praying hands pointed at me, Veronica said, "I will do the same thing my grandmother had done for me, for you. I will hold your secret for you so you can free

yourself but only when you are ready," she said with a sincere facial expression that enlightened me.

"I want you to hold my secret, please," I said, trembling, shaking like a leaf on a tree.

"Relax Bianca, I got you." Veronica said with animated hands as if she was ready to accept my secret.

I rubbed my sweaty hands on my jeans and swallowed the thick lump in my throat. I inhaled deep into my lungs until my lashes fluttered, releasing the tension in my gut that was starting to eddy.

"My dad never made it to the school." I paused and stared at my hands. "Before I could even digest the idea that he was gone, I was at his funeral saying my goodbye." Tears fell out of my eyes, one by one fading into the fabric of my jeans, I swiped the tears away but they kept coming. "It was all my fault," I finally blurted, tears streaming down my cheeks. I saw the tissue box on the coffee table, but I didn't bother. I used the sleeve from my sweater, and then covered my face with both hands to hide the shame. The conversation had taken an uncomfortable turn, but I couldn't just leave. I hesitated.

"Just breathe and relax. Whenever you're ready, Bianca. Take your time," Veronica said, her voice always soft and comforting, unlike my stepmother's voice; condescending and judgmental.

"Veronica, you don't understand."

"Help me to understand, Bianca. I am here for you." She gave me a look that made me believe her.

“Today, if I could, I would take it all back. I didn’t have to fight. I was already angry. I was so damn angry,” I exclaimed, covering my face, once again, with both hands, too ashamed to let her see the real me. I felt naked and unprotected. I reached for a tissue – several – and blew my nose. I sniffed a few times and my body shuddered from the memory of my father’s face. “He never asked me if I wanted a ready-made family. It had always been just the two of us. He never asked me if it was okay to get married. He never asked me if I wanted brothers living in our house, changing our things.” I paused, allowing the anger to flow through me and not linger.

“You are doing really well. It’s okay, your feelings are natural. Please, continue Bianca,” she said.

“One of the boys in my science group called me the ‘N’ word. It’s such a horrible word. My dad always told me that it was just a word. It’s not your word to claim because once you do then it’s yours,” I said.

“I knew that.” I murmured and covered my mouth with my fingers, new tears replaced the old ones as I slowly turned my head from side to side.

“That was the day I started.” I said, my voice sounded so small and that irritated me.

“What did you start, Bianca? You can talk to me, it’s just the two of us.” Veronica coerced, uncrossing her legs and placed her notepad on the desk. She leaned forward, not to touch me but to let me know she was there for me physically, mentally, spiritually, and as a friend.

“I started cutting my wrist – not to kill myself – I do it to release the pain. It’s part of the reason why my eyes are sad. I don’t want to think about the day my dad died. My black

box keeps that from happening, it holds my secrets. It has become a drug, and I am an addict." I said and she stared at me for a moment, so I removed the fifty friendship bracelets that were keeping my secret safe. I held out both wrists so she could see the red slashes, neat and perfect. Some were already faded whereas newer ones from last week had only just started healing.

"It's been awhile," I said ashamed. Veronica was the only person other than myself to ever see what I had done to myself. I quickly slipped twenty-five friendship bracelets back on each wrist. I prayed that her grandmother was right, and that she was strong enough to hold my secret because I didn't want to add any more bracelets. I wanted to be free.

"This morning, at school, I swear, it was like a bad omen. Of all days in my social science class, Mr. Stevens showed a movie clip of car accidents from people who drink and drive. He told us that social class and economics contributed to drunk drivers' role in society," I said, interlacing my fingers. I circled my thumbs nervously when it started raining really hard, hitting the window with a force that caused us to snap our heads toward the windows.

"Go on," she said, sitting up straighter in her chair. I looked at the clock, and realized I was running out of time. She never heard my real story, because I made up a story on our first visit. Now I was about to tell her the truth – all of it, including the ugly.

"First I was angry, then I found myself losing control; guilt, shame, pain, suffering – all of it was suffocating. So, I grabbed my things and left. Mr. Stevens yelled my name from the classroom door, but I didn't bother answering. It was raining so hard, like now. I didn't stop until I hit my front door. Maybe Mr. Stevens didn't know that my dad was in a twelve

car crash caused by a drunk driver and the only reason he was driving that day was because of me," I murmured staring out the window.

"I felt as if Mr. Stevens had released the demons she had been keeping hidden," I said, suddenly angry. I jabbed my index finger into the palm of my hand. "I had tried so hard to bury it deep in my subconscious mind. Just enough so I could bear looking at myself in the mirror without repulsion," I said, feeling the sting of tears flooding my lids. I swiped them away. "Apparently, it wasn't deep enough," I added, uncapping the water bottle to moisten my dry throat.

"I ran upstairs to my bedroom and pulled out my black box from its hiding place. I knew what would happen if I put the key into the lock." I said and looked at her. "Do you remember what you told me last week right before the end of our session?"

"Yes," Veronica said and stood up. She walked over to the sofa and sat down next to me.

"I told you not to allow your secret to control you. You have the power to control your choices, and to stop before you leap. You can count to ten using the baby breath breathing technique I taught you," she said, and I smiled because she remembered.

"I didn't go back to school, but I did return the box back to its hiding place without turning the key," I said proudly, and looked up at her and she smiled back.

"Very good," she said and placed her hand on top of mine. "I need you to hear what I am about to tell you," she said, scooting closer to me. "This wasn't anyone's fault, it was simply your father's time to go. His time on Earth had reached its expiration date. He had learned everything he needed to learn, loved all he needed to love to fill his soul with compassion and understanding. All of his experiences were fulfilled. No matter what you

believe, know this, if it wasn't a drunk driver, it would have happened with him walking across the street, or him slipping on the bathroom tile. When it's our time to exit, nothing can stop it, not even the most advanced technology," she said and pulled me into her loving embrace.

I pushed her back, a little more forceful than I intended. Her body jerked and her hands flew up in the air. She didn't know that she was about one minute from hating me. I thought it would be best if we started from ground zero without me pretending.

"My secrets go deeper than you can ever imagine!" I yelled, forgetting where I was and who I was talking to. "Do you know what it's like to hate yourself EVERYDAY—I do!" I shouted, shaking my head, trembling all over, my vision blurred from my tears. I got up and walked to the window and turned to face her.

"I don't understand, Bianca?" she said, confused and jumped to her feet and followed me to the window.

"I killed my dad, I did it!" I blurted suddenly, slinging snot and more tears. I couldn't hold it in any longer. It felt oily, slimy, dark but cold, and she promised she would hold all this evil that had plagued me every second of every day since I killed my dad.. "I told my dad I hated him that morning and wished he was dead." I couldn't look at her. I wanted to run, run out the door and never come back. My back found the wall and I slid down until my butt hit the floor. I pulled my legs to my chest, tucking my head between my knees trying to make myself smaller so she couldn't see the demon I was. Through sobs and hiccups I managed a complete sentence. "I can't take it back, and I can never say I'm sorry and that I love him."

Veronica kneeled down beside me and took my hands. "Look at me," she said. I wiped my tears with my shoulders and looked at her. Her brown eyes didn't look as if she

was judging or hating me. "It's okay to have those feelings," she said, helping me to my feet. "They're your true feelings and remember none of this was your fault. They were just words from a broken hearted young girl whose life changed." She walked me over to the sofa so I could sit and handed me some tissues.

"I am sure your father knew how much you loved him and that kind of love never dies. Parents love their children unconditionally. There was nothing you could have said to your father to make him hate you. He was once a teenager, too. Do you understand? "

That was the day I trusted Veronica with my secret, and she gave me the courage to forgive myself. I trashed my black box along with the fifty friendship bracelets.

Today, I only wear one.



The sun is setting over the concert hall on a lovely winter evening as I hold my violin case in preparation for our 9th grade performance. I mention "our" because the boy I've been in love with since seventh grade will be performing as well. After riding in the car for the past 15 minutes, we are finally at the destination. I get out of the car and suddenly my heart starts to flutter, my legs become weak, and for some weird reason I stop in my tracks. Then I decide to turn around, and there he is. His round light blue oceanic eyes, his golden cropped hair, his cheeks so red from the cold, his lips so pink and soft, and his dirty blonde eyebrows. I guess I am staring too long because he's already in front of me. Then he arches one of his eyebrows and smirks at me. I look away and walk even faster toward the entrance of the theater. I can't believe it! The boy I'm in love with just noticed I've been staring at him for a long time. Why am I like this? What was I thinking? How could I let my guard down like that? How did I feel him

coming though? Do we both feel this way or am I the only one who is feeling this way?—I am in deep thought until the host snaps his fingers in front of my face to tell me where to go because it's almost time for me to perform.

As I get onto the stage to begin my performance, I try not to look for him in the audience. However, this isn't the case. The second I look at the audience, my eyes lock onto his. Then, people begin to disappear one by one in their chairs, the only person left is just him. I begin to bring the violin up to my chin and my bow to my strings. I play the piece full of life and soul. I hope as he stares at me, he can feel the music I am playing. This is all for you, boy. I keep my stare at him the whole time, he does the same. Then, the speaker stops playing my accompaniment and the trance I was in fades away. Everyone is at their seats again and I am back to reality. I exit and see the next performer climb the three steps to the platform, while I go backstage to pack my violin. As I pack my instrument back into its case, I can't help but wonder what he felt. I hope he feels what the song means to me.

As I go outside and wait for my parents to pick me up, a strong breeze comes rolling in. Unbelievably, I forgot to bring a jacket. My heart begins to flutter, my legs become weak, and it feels like time is stopping. Once again, I turn around—there he is walking toward me. I quickly turn my heels the other direction to prevent any suspicion that I have been staring at him. A minute passes and now I hear him breathing behind me. What happens next is unpredictable, he decides to strike up a conversation with me. "Hey, are you cold? You might get sick, do you want me to lend you my jacket? Would you like me to escort you back to the theater?" I politely decline him with a "no" nod because, as he is asking me the questions, his parents drive up to the curb with their 2009 white Toyota Sienna. The car honks. He understands and gets into the vehicle without saying another word nor waving goodbye. What was I thinking, I should've told

him yes. There he goes, there's no looking back now. I hope this doesn't change anything.

Maybe if I said yes, I could tell him what I want to tell him. I could've been honest with how I feel about him. What am I going to do now? I'll just have to see what happens on Monday.

#

Ring! Ring! Ring! My phone says as I grab it to turn off my alarm. Two days have passed since I declined him. Will everything be fine today or will everything be awkward between us? You know what, it doesn't even matter, because I am going to be late if I just keep thinking about him. I tap my phone to check the time and it reads 8:00am. Oh my gosh! I am going to be late, I only have 20 minutes till school starts and I am not even dressed. Okay, I'll just pick this black leggings and this peach colored shirt with a ruffle design on each shoulder. Lastly, I'll just wear my simple peach colored flats to match my shirt. Okay, I am ready to go to school.

Ten minutes pass, and now I am at school. I check my phone again, and this time it reads 8:15 am. This is such a close call, thank goodness I am right on time. I walk toward the big blue heavy duty doors. I feel butterflies in my stomach, and my legs become weak. I grab the knob and turn it slowly, and the first person I make eye contact with is the boy with the golden blonde hair, light oceanic blue eyes, and a face that forms a chiseled jawline. His name is Jaxon, and a little smile forms on my face just by mentioning his name. He's so close, yet so far. All I want to do right now is to run up to him and hug him. However, we're only like that when it's just the two of us. Once more people arrive, he changes and becomes distant toward me. All I ever want for him to see is how much I care about him.

I begin to walk toward him, wanting to tell him exactly how I feel. But why do I feel like I am at the wrong place at the wrong time? I am going to ignore this gut feeling of mine. I walk closer, but not to the point where I am literally face to face with him. I keep my distance and I hear him saying my name to a close friend of ours. He's talking about me, but what he's saying about me to a friend of his isn't as nice as I am hoping for.

"Hey, you know our Crystal right?"

"Yeah, why?" My crush asked, raising his eyebrow.

"It's just that I think you guys look cute together."

"Me and her? Why her?"

"Why not her?"

"She's a weirdo."

"How is she a weirdo?"

I quickly turn my heels toward the other end of the classroom, which leads me to this long hallway that connects the choir room to the band room. I stay here and catch my breath. I couldn't let myself hear anything after that. He literally calls me a weirdo? Why would he say that? What did I ever do to make him think this way about me? Why did I ever get my hopes up about him liking someone like me...I am just a nerdy teen.

He's the most popular kid in school because he's one of our best athletes for track and field. He's also a straight A student and one of the best musicians in our school. However, that's not what I like about him. What makes me like him is how nice he is to everyone. He would wave and ask about your day. However, this is no longer how we are, and the worst part is I don't even know why. The only time he treats me with this kindness and sweetness is when I am only alone with him. If any of our friends begin to hang out with us, he just turns cold. His emotion shifts so quickly from a total sweetheart to a total bad boy. It's so annoying because I can't tell if he likes me or he doesn't at all. It's so frustrating. You know what, I am going to pretend he just didn't say I am a weirdo. Yes,

that's exactly what I am going to do. With this in mind, I go back into the classroom and the second I get in, I check the board and it reads "today is movie day because you did a concert a couple days ago." This is great news, the movie will get my mind off of what happened a few minutes ago.

After two one and a half classes pass, it's finally lunchtime. I thought I would be over the fact he called me a weirdo. However, as time progresses—the longer I have trouble denying what went on this morning. It's okay, I'll be fine. Wait, what time is it? Oh no! I take my phone out and it reads 12:35 pm. I am going to meet my best friend Cassie in front of the library at 12:30 pm, I am five minutes late. I get out of my sociology class and begin running down the three flights of stairs that await me so I can meet my best friend at the said location.

"Hey Cassie, sorry I am late." I greet her as I am trying to catch my breath.

"Hey, Crystal! It wasn't bad, but it wasn't the best. How about you? How was your weekend?" Cassie bubbly asked.

"I am doing great, the weekend was fun and you know I saw Jaxon." I replied smiling ear to ear.

"Speaking of Jaxon, do you still love him?" She asked slightly, elbowing me.

"Yeah, why?"

"You seem off and even a little sad."

"No, I'm fine. I am one-hundred percent a-okay."

"I'm not buying it," she says as she taps her right foot on the ground waiting for my answer.

"I'm really fine, and besides there are better things to talk about than him."

"Caught you! You're sad."

"No, I'm not," I said while fidgeting with my fingers.

"You have a tell."

"Really, what?"

"You only fidget with your fingers if you're lying. Tell me what's going on."

"Well, what if I told you he called me a weirdo?"

"He called you that?"

"Just hypothetically, do you think it's a compliment?" I honestly ask Cassie.

"No, and if he did, tell me."

"It's all good. Don't worry."

"He did, didn't he..." Cassie said with her arms on her waist.

"Well..."

"That long 'well' says it all. I won't give him a hard time, but I also can't leave it at this."

"Don't worry, I am fine."

"I know you all too well. We've been friends since seventh grade. I'm the one who's been on your rollercoaster ride of emotions with this guy. Are you sure you're fine? I'm always here for you, you do know that right?"

"I do know that, but trust me everything is fine. Cassie, everything is fine."

"I believe you. But, as a friend, I am going to look out for you."

"I know Cas, you're like an older sister to me."

"Then how come you won't tell me what's going on? When I have a problem I tell you everything. How come when it comes to you, you never tell me your problems?"

"I don't want to worry you."

"It's okay Crystal, you can come to me just like everyone comes to you. You can trust me." She says as she pats my shoulder.

"Thanks, this means a lot to me."

"Okay then, I'll see you when I see you?"

"Yes, I'll see you when I see you Cassie."

She waves goodbye and leaves. It's not that I don't trust her, it's just that I had friends who I trusted back in the day but when I told them a weakness of mine—they used it against me. This is the reason why I stopped sharing my problems with others. I empathize and understand how people feel and it's the reason why I love people coming to me for problems. However, sharing my own problems makes me feel like I am a burden to people because it was also them who caused my trust issues. I'm a work in progress, and I want to trust Cassie...I just don't know how to open up.

On another note, I have no idea why but it seems I have a sixth sense when it comes to Jaxon. I can feel him whenever he is coming near me because the same feelings occur right before I see him. I felt it when I met him at the theater and when I met him this morning. Just as I thought, my gut is right—he's a few feet behind me, but he's there. I am going to pretend there's no one there. I grab my phone from my backpack to check the time, it reads 1:05 pm. I am going to be late for my final class of the day. Wait! No, no, no! This is Spanish class, which means I am stuck in a classroom with him for ninety minutes. This is the ultimate nightmare! Can I just go home now? Does this day really have to happen? Out of all the days, it has to be today! Okay, breathe because if you hyperventilate it isn't going to help your anxiety. Just breathe and imagine him being absent, this is all you have to do.

I open the door and sit at my assigned seat, and guess who decides to show up? He enters the room and walks up to me as if this morning never happened.

"Hey, it's just the two of us here...do you want to study for the test on Wednesday together?" He asks as he looks over my shoulder to see what's on my desk.

"Is there any specific area of the chapter where you need help on?" I ask looking over my shoulder to see him.

"Not much, but it's better to prepare than to be sorry." He replies as he places his head on my shoulder.

"You're right, we should study. How many minutes do we have left till class begins?" I ask as I shake my shoulder to remove his heavy head from it.

"We have five more minutes to spare." He answers while pouting.

"Okay, which sentences do we have to memorize for spanish?"

"This one and this one."

"You get the easiest ones all the time for spanish. You're such a teacher's pet."

"Well, this boy is the smartest guy in this room." He responds as he points his thumb at himself.

"Hey, does anyone notice how breezy it quickly got?" I say as I look around the room.

"Wow, only you see this side of me." Acting offended.

"You sure?" I say placing a smirk on my face.

"Yeah, you are the only one who sees me like this."

"Why me then?" I say as I get up from my seat so we're both standing.

"Because you're funny and you can easily take a joke." He replies as he hugs me.

"Thanks, I appreciate the compliments," I mumbly reply while I hug him tighter.

"Well, class is about to begin. I'll go to my assigned seat now." He says coldly, then let's me go and pretends nothing happened between us.

This is exactly how he is. We still have two minutes till the actual class begins, but because he hears the door open—he just leaves me alone while I sit in my seat waiting for class to begin. It's as if he never knew me at all. He does not even make eye contact with me at all during class. Who does he think he is? Just ignore him from now on so there is no distraction.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing! Finally, class is over! I can go home and think about other things instead of that specific someone.

"Hey, want me to walk you to your usual spot?", waking me up from my thoughts.

"You know where my usual spot is?" I say all surprised.

"Of course Crystal, I always see you after school. I even wave to you, but you never notice." He replies pouting again.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I just have a lot on my mind."

"It's all good."

"Again I am so sorry, but you don't need to walk me—I'm okay."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, see you."

#

The next couple days were the same. He would do the same things as long as it's just the two of us. It's as if calling me a weirdo was all for a show because he's so sweet towards me lately. I wonder if there's a catch for all the kindness he is showing me. I am going to muster up all the strength to ask him if he actually likes me because I just want to know the truth. It's the last class of the day and today is 'fun friday'. This means we get to chill in Spanish class today. The second I walk into the classroom, he isn't there. The one question is still lingering inside me wanting to find its way out. I guess this question is going to stay with me over the weekend. I hope by Monday next week I still have the courage to ask him.

The days turned to weeks and the weeks turned to months. It is officially the last week of school till summer. I've been wanting to tell him how I feel, but he's been gone for months. This is why I am going to walk over to one of Jaxon's closest friends, who is also a close friend of mine and gather enough courage to ask the question.

"Hey Max."

"Hey Crystal, what's up?"

"I would like to know what happened to Jaxon."

"He didn't tell you?"

"No, why?"

"Unbelievable, this boy actually forgot to tell you." He says as he smacks his hand onto his head.

"Tell me what, can you please just get straight to the point." I reply, annoyed.

"I know, I am sorry. He told me you liked getting straight to the point."

"Wow, how does he know this part of my personality? I answer, shook.

"He cared about you a lot."

"I see—"

"When we met up for breaktime, all he could talk about was you. He would say you're funny, kind-hearted, sweet, focused, energetic, shy, quiet, and lovely. And most of all, beautiful." He says, cutting me off.

"He said all those things about me?"

"Yes, he truly was in love with you, but he had to move away."

"When?"

"A few months ago. He just wanted to see you one last time before he had to move."

"Wh-what..."

"He never told you how he felt?"

"No, now he doesn't know I feel the same way."

"Both of you never said anything to each other?"

"No, I thought the feeling wasn't mutual. Also, how can he love someone like me?"

“Dude, you were overthinking. He always told me you were his dream girl. He was so upset because the day he found out he was going to move was the day he was moving.”

“Which was when?”

“A few months back, I believe it was a Wednesday. His parents wanted them all to leave in the morning of that day, but he said he had a test that day. He wanted to complete it.”

“Was it a spanish test by any chance?” I ask.

“Yeah it was, how did you know?”

“We have that class together.” Realizing what occurred that day.

“He truly loved you. He wanted to see you one last time before he left. If that isn't love, bruh, I don't know what is. Oh, I almost forgot, he told me to give this to you in case I bump into you.” He says as he hands me an envelope.

“Thanks, I'll read it once I get home. Thanks Max, I wish I had known sooner.”

Choking on my response.

“Also, maybe now is the right time for me to apologize.” He says, while staring at the floor. “He knew you were there when I called you a weirdo.”

“Wait, he isn't the one?” I reply, upset.

“No, it was me.”

“Why, I considered you as a friend.”

“I did it so I can see his reaction.” He answers sincerely. “You thought it was him?”

Realization hitting him.

“Yes...”

“Jaxon was defending you from me. You got it all wrong.”

“Oh...”

"It was the only thing I could think of doing at the time so I can see if he truly loves you."

"And does he?"

"Yup, after that all he can talk about is you."

"This is why he was so nice to me." I say, bursting with happiness.

"Yup, if only he told you."

"So why didn't he tell me?"

"I guess he thought a girl like you couldn't love a guy like him." He says, shaking his head.

"We both felt the same way, literally. He loves me, I love him, and both of us thought we don't belong with each other." I say, holding back tears.

"Don't be hard on yourself, it's okay because you made him happy anyway. Your happiness was all he cared about. And I know all you care about is his happiness." He replies as he puts his hand on my shoulder.

"Thank you for your reassuring words."

"No problem, but I have to go now."

"Bye Max."

"Bye Crystal."

I wave him goodbye, then I walk to my usual spot, which is under the tree in front of the school's attendance office. I quickly slide off my backpack and open up the tiny zipper pocket to simply take out the envelope Max handed to me. With trembling, shaking hands, I slowly rip the envelope and read the letter. The letter is in his messy handwriting. It's obvious it's Jaxon's...

It reads...

Dearest Crystal,

I would like to say...I am really bad at expressing my feelings, but I want you to know that this is the hardest thing for me to do. I love you and I hope I could've told you, but life had other plans for me. I wanted to tell you that I love you on Monday, but I couldn't bring myself to because it seemed you were annoyed at me for some reason. I didn't even know what I did wrong.

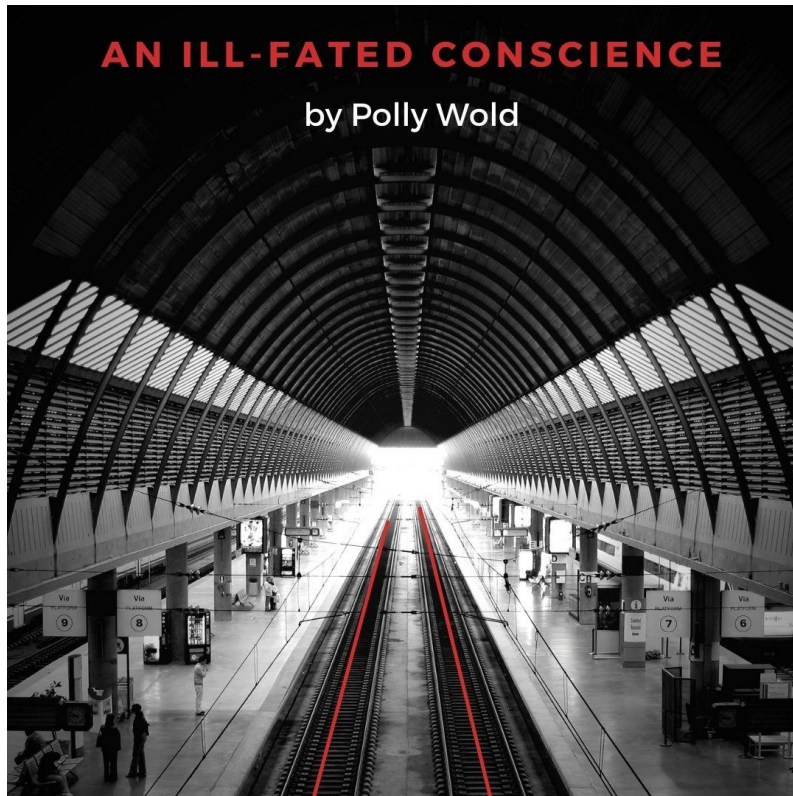
Anyway, if you're reading this letter this means I am already out of the state and have no idea when I am coming back. I wish I told you how much I love you while I still had the chance. If only I had the courage to do it even if I could be rejected. Now, all I have are what ifs. I fell in love with you when we were thirteen. I am sorry if it felt like I wasn't approachable. I hope I made you happy before I left because you always seemed so stressed out with school. You'd scrunch your forehead especially when you were doing advanced homework for english, math, science and spanish. Yet, you still managed to get B's on the tests, while I got A's (insert laughing emoji). Hey, just take life one day at a time. Don't stress and beat yourself up if you think you didn't do a good job. To me, you're already the best. I wish you the best of luck and if you're stressing out...read this letter again to remind you. I love you and I always will. I may not return or you may find someone better than me—just know this, you will always have a special place in my heart. I love you Crystal.

Sincerely yours,

Jaxon

A few droplets land on the piece of paper, but more are coming. I guess this is why they call it, the right love at the wrong time. I found the other half of me, the one who I would call my "the one", but he's no longer here. He'll forever be in my heart, but I guess

we're just not meant to be. Maybe in the future or maybe not. All I know is nothing is the same.



Alice sat anxiously in the hallway of the police station, nervously flipping through a self-defense brochure that she had found sitting on the chair when she arrived. Trying to appear calm, she took discreet deep breaths in a vain attempt to slow down her racing heart.

A heavy glass door across the hall swung open, and a tall, barrel-chested man in a crumpled suit filled up the doorway. He looked up and down the hallway until his eyes rested on her.

"Alice Banks?" he inquired.

Alice, lost in thought, flinched when she heard her name. She had allowed her mind to wander. *Stay focused Alice. As if your life depended on it.*

"Come with me," he ordered gruffly.

Alice gathered her things and stood. *Breath Alice. Breath. You can do this.*

"Don't forget your umbrella," he said, pointing behind her. Alice turned to see that her umbrella had slid down behind the chair, and she awkwardly bent down to retrieve it off the floor. Alice was unaccustomed to carrying such a thing.

He stood aside, holding the door open as she walked past him into the next room. She followed him through a chaotic maze of desks, people, and noise, paying special attention to her path, mentally preparing her escape.

"Sit," he said, gesturing to an old folding chair opposite his desk.

Alice perched on its edge, clearly ill at ease. She waited silently as he settled into his own chair and shuffled through papers on his desk. Not knowing what he knew, she didn't know what to expect. She feared the worst.

"Thank you for coming in." He looked up and smiled faintly, "Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Soda?" She shook her head no. He shrugged and took a long sip from his mug.

"Why I am here?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

"Of course, I assumed they told you on the phone. I'm Detective Ian Morse and I'm investigating an incident that happened at the train station on Friday night. An elderly woman was attacked, brutally beaten. Unfortunately, she didn't survive the attack. We are trying to talk to everyone who might have been there to determine what happened."

"Oh my! That's terrible. " *Oh god! She died?* Alice struggled to keep calm. She was definitely breathing when Alice got on the train. Wheezing actually, but alive.

"Records show that your CITI-PASS was used at the station around the time of the incident." *CITI-PASS can be traced!?* She hadn't been expecting that. *Damn!*

"Where was this? Which station?" *Play innocent Alice, not dumb.*

"Rockridge. Rockridge Station. Sometime around 10:00 last Friday night."

"Well yes, I suppose I was there, I got off work at 9:30 and was at the station maybe 15 minutes later?" *It can't hurt to admit what they already know.*

"Could you talk me through your time at the station? Anything you might have seen. Anything at all."

"Well, I walked from work to the station and...Oh! I already said that...I guess I am nervous" She let out a little nervous laugh. "I remember that It was chilly. There was a cold wind coming in from the east. I was anxious to catch my train and go home. Just as I got to the station I heard the announcement for my train."

"What did you do then?"

In her attempt to catch her train, Alice had pushed past the old woman who had been leaning up against the banister, blocking her way.

"What did I do then?" she repeated the question. "Well, unfortunately, I missed the train by seconds," *Thanks to the batty old woman for slowing her down.* "So I sat down to wait. It had been a very long day. I am a nurse at Loving Care, an assisted living community specializing in memory care. While I believe that the elderly deserve to live in dignity, it can be quite trying at times." *Stop rambling Alice. Oversharing can only lead to trouble.*

"I'm sure you are very good at your job," he responded, placating her. The detective leaned back in his chair and sighed, clearly very tired.

"So, back to Friday night. You were on the platform at 9:45?"

"About then, yes." she nodded.

"Were there other people around? Did you see anything unusual? Anyone out of place or suspicious?"

"No, no...I don't think so. Nothing unusual. Things were pretty quiet" *Except for the incessant ramblings of that crazy bat. Spit Spot! Tally ho! Oh god! If she had just kept quiet none of this would have happened.*

"I am going to show you a picture. I want you to tell me if you recognize the victim. I must warn you, she is dead. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course, if you think it would help. I wasn't really paying attention."

"Please...if you could just look at the picture" He slid a photograph across the desk. Alice drew it closer with two hesitant fingers, not really wanting to look. The photograph was of a beaten and bruised old woman. Obviously dead, covered up to the neck in a white sheet. She cringed and quickly looked away. *That is what an innocent person would do, right?*

"Oh! That poor woman!" She put her hand over her eyes and shook her head slightly, just for good measure.

"Did you see this woman while you were at the train station?" Alice clearly remembered the smelly old woman mumbling to herself about birds, and taking up the entire bench with her filthy old things.

"I don't remember seeing her. It is hard to tell from the picture" she answered apologetically.

"She was wearing a blue button-up coat and carried an old tapestry bag." The detective put another picture in front of her. This time the photo was of an old coat, a crushed straw hat with flowers pinned on the rim, and a large carpet bag, all laid out on a stainless table. *That damn purse! Surely they can't get fingerprints off a purse like that. Can they?*

"Well, yes! I actually do remember her. To be honest it was the purse I noticed. It's funny because I remember wondering if she had a hat rack in it." *Too whimsical? Tone it down. Do better.*

"The purse appeared to be empty, leading us to believe that robbery may have been the motive for the attack. Did you see anyone else around? Anything that you remember could be helpful".

Time to divert his attention away from me. Give him someone else to look for, to suspect. A wayward youth perhaps? The detective would latch onto something like that.

"Let's see...oh yes! There was that young man. He had a skateboard." *The police hate skateboarders, don't they? They are all punks and future drug dealers.*

"Can you describe him?" Suddenly interested, he picked up his pencil.

"Well, I only saw him for a minute. It was right before my train came. He passed by riding his skateboard. On the platform! Reckless and dangerous!" She looked up to gauge his reaction. He was busy scribbling notes. He seemed to believe her. *It was very important that he believed her.* "He had a dark hooded sweatshirt, dark pants, and a backpack."

Don't be too specific, keep things vague. "Oh...that's really all I remember. He was a teenager I think. I wish I could be more helpful."

"You are being very helpful. Every little piece of the puzzle is important."

"Soon after I saw the boy, my train came and I got on and went home. I am pretty sure that woman was still sitting there." *Sitting...crumbled on the ground moaning.*

Tomato...tomahto. "I feel awful for that woman. That fact that I might have been one of the last people to ever see her." Alice bowed her head, "Do you know who she was? Does she have a family?"

"We are still working to identify her." He closed his notebook, a clear signal that the interview was over.

"I wish I could be more helpful, Detective." *Don't overdo it Alice, you already said that.*

The detective thanked her for coming in and handed her a business card.

"Please call if you remember anything else, even if it is something small, you never know what might help."

"Thank you, I will." Alice took the card, resisting the temptation to crumple it in her hand. She stood up, gathered her things in her arms, and slowly made her way out of the police station. The police officer sat at his desk and watched thoughtfully as Alice walked out of the room. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was off about her. Something was definitely off.

Walking away from the building, Alice took a deep breath. She felt fine about how she handled herself but she still had to be careful. Apparently they didn't know anything.

She started toward the train station. Ahead of her, standing on the corner was a uniformed police officer. He was talking to a young couple with a stroller. They were laughing. *That's odd. Suspiciously odd.* She stopped in her tracks, instinctively took a step back. *Don't panic.* She looked around. *Stay cool.* The officer stopped laughing and looked down the block, directly at her.

She turned to her left and darted through the nearest open door. It was dark. Her eyes adjusted to reveal a small dive bar. She walked further into the room toward the bar. *Perfect.* She gingerly slid onto an old duct-taped barstool, piled her purse and coat onto the stool next to her. The place was empty except for one man sitting at the far end of the bar.

The bartender, who had been leaning over the bar and consoling the obviously distraught man, straightened up and ambled her way. He placed a paper coaster in front of her.

"What'll you have?"

"Is he ok?" Alice inquired, nodding to the man.

"Bert? Oh, his good friend is missing. He's worried"

She ordered a bourbon and ginger and thought of her father. Bars weren't exactly her scene, preferring to drink at home. Alone. In fact, she pretty much preferred everything home and alone. The bartender returned and placed a glass filled with amber liquid in front of her.

"Does your friend want something?" He pointed to her umbrella, which she had propped up next to her. The large carved parrot head handle did look like it was ready for a drink.

"No, thank you." Attempting to smile, she put money on the bar.

He nodded, palmed the money, and went back to the worried man. Her drink went down quickly, burning her throat, but the heat dissipated and spread pleasantly throughout her body.

She took a minute to look around. This place was well worn and well-loved. A typical neighborhood bar. Dark wood, beer lights, postcards, and polaroids littered the walls and crept up onto the ceiling. No doubt there was an excellent jukebox somewhere. Alice liked it. There was nothing here that indicated the world outside. Alice imagined that she could walk out the front door and be in any city or town in the country. *Wouldn't that be nice?* For a moment she allowed herself to relax and even decided to order another drink.

Just then the phone behind the bar rang. Alice watched as the bartender answered the phone. As he listened, he turned toward Alice, looking at her, nodding, "Yep. Yep...sure thing. Will do." He hung up the phone and came toward her.

"Another? On the house." Alice's skin prickled. *Who had called? Why the sudden solicitous attention? Definitely time to go.*

"No, thank you. I must be on my way." *Stay cool Alice.* She gathered her things and headed for the exit. She turned at the door to see the bartender on the phone, talking softly and watching her leave.

Once outside, she buttoned up her coat as she looked in both directions. The policeman was gone. She walked quickly down the block. At the train station, she took out her wallet, removed her CITI-PASS, and casually tossed it into a trash can. *Don't make that mistake again.* She paid cash for a ticket and entered the station.

The morning rush was over and the train station was quiet. The warmth of the bourbon had subsided, leaving her cold and anxious. All Alice wanted was to go home and put all this messiness behind her. While waiting for her train, she went over her conversation with the detective. Nothing she said could incriminate her, she was sure of that.

She had been worried when she got the call that morning, asking her to come down to talk to the police. She couldn't imagine how they could have possibly connected her to the incident with the old woman. Learning about the CITI-PASS had alarmed her and yet given her a sense of relief. She had feared that there may be a witness. But that didn't seem to be the case.

Just as the train pulled into the station, two young men in suits appeared at the top of the platform escalator, walking determinedly toward her. The doors of the train slid open and she quickly boarded.

"Excuse me! Ma'am!" one of them called out. Her pulse racing, Alice went further into the train car. The men were getting closer. "Ma'am.. wait..." One of them was waving an umbrella at her. Her umbrella. *Shit!* She must have left it at the ticket kiosk. Just then the doors closed and the train began to move. *That damn umbrella.*

Alice fell into her seat, her heart still pounding from the surge of adrenaline. She looked around, the train was nearly empty. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Relax Alice. The worst is over. Everything is going to be alright.

The doors slid open from the connecting car and someone walked through. She sensed rather than saw when they sat directly across from her. She looked up to see a young man, dressed in black, head bowed, a hood obscuring his face, one foot resting on a skateboard. *Wow... I nailed that description. Quintessential punk.*

He lifted his head and looked at her. When his icy blue eyes met hers, Alice recoiled and chills ran through her body. She had seen those eyes, those taunting mischievous eyes. She looked away. Shards of memories flashed through her mind. It was dark. She heard laughter, moaning, and cries for help swirling together in a frenzied violent symphony. Alice couldn't breathe.

But you aren't real. I made you up. And yet, there he was, sitting across from her with a malicious smile, slowly shaking his head from side to side in an ominous warning. *I don't understand what is happening. How can he be real?* It was then that the brutal truth hit her. This boy was there. *He saw everything. He knows everything. And he has come to threaten me. How dare he threaten me!* Alice wasn't going to let some punk with a skateboard ruin everything. It suddenly became clear what she had to do. Her panic subsided. She smiled.

At the next stop, he got off. Alice grabbed her purse and slipped through the doors just as they were closing. She followed him, discreetly, down the stairs and out of the station. Just as he was dropping his skateboard to the ground, she called out.

He turned, his surprise quickly turned to a smirk.

"Lady...you really don't want to mess with me."

"Oh... I think I have to"

That was when everything turned red.

#

It was dark when Alice woke up. It took her a minute to figure out that she was home, lying on her sofa. She moved to stand up but her body screamed in protest. She was sore from head to toe. *What is going on?* Slowly and painfully, she stood up off the sofa. Once on her feet, she stretched and tentatively took a couple of steps. *At least I can walk.* She made her way down the hall to the bathroom. She splashed cold water on her face. It stung. *Ouch!*

Resting against the sink she leaned in toward the mirror. *Good lord!* Her face was cut and bruised, a gash above her eye and on her cheek. Dried blood caked around her mouth. She looked down to see that her clothes were torn, dirty, and bloody. *What on earth?* Slowly she stripped off her dirty clothes and got into the shower. The heat loosened her aching body but her mind was still in a fog. *Think Alice. What is the last thing you remember?* The train! She remembered getting on the train. She remembered the men chasing after her with her umbrella. After that, nothing.

Feeling a little better, but still sore, Alice made her way to her kitchen where she washed down several aspirins with a swig of tequila. *If this doesn't help, nothing will.* She looked around her house for clues but everything seemed in order. *Whatever happened, it wasn't here.* After checking her locks and closing all the drapes, she curled up on the sofa and turned on the television. She flipped through a few channels before landing on the local news. Her eyes were heavy, her mind was fuzzy and she drifted into sleep, but a voice from the screen brought her back to reality. She recognized it immediately. Detective Ian Morse. He was in the middle of a press conference.

"... evidence found at the scene has linked the two murders and allowed us to identify the first victim, whom until now had been classified as a Jane Doe. We were also able to determine, with little doubt, that the man killed this evening was responsible for the death of the woman last Friday." He stopped to listen to a question that could not be heard.

"We are not releasing the identity of either victim until we can find and notify next of kin. That is all for now. " He thanked everyone and walked off camera. The newscaster came back on screen and promised to keep the viewers up to date.

While listening, Alice had sat up and leaned forward, as if to get closer to the detective as he was talking. Her mind was reeling as she tried to put together bits and pieces of her day. *Who was this murdered boy and why were they claiming he killed the old woman?! How could the two murders be connected? Was this a trap? What kind of 'evidence' did they have?* Nothing made sense to Alice. The facts as she knew them were not lining up. *If they wanted to blame someone else for the woman's death, who am I to set them straight?* She turned off the television and allowed sleep to take over.

When Alice woke up the next morning, she was still stiff and sore. Her night had been haunted by dreams that she didn't understand. Pulses of rage and violence, flashes of red and black. So much anger. Her dreams had muddled her thoughts and memories even more than they had been the night before. She had no answers to what had happened to her.

Moving slowly she went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. She tried to get dressed but her body, bruised and beaten, refused to tolerate anything other than her loose fluffy robe. Alice went to her front door, cracked it open, and looked up and down the street. No one was about so she snuck out to her driveway to retrieve the morning

paper. *It would not be good for anyone to see me like this.* Back inside, she poured herself some coffee, swallowed a few aspirins, and sat down at her kitchen table.

The front page featured a bold headline, "Victim of Brutal Beating at Train Station Identified" The photo under the headline was old and was of a much younger woman, but Alice immediately recognized her as the woman from the train station. Apparently once quite well known she had fallen on hard times. The picture featured a young proud woman wearing a button-up coat, holding her iconic carpetbag and black umbrella. The handle of the umbrella was quite clearly a large carved parrot head.

Alice sipped her coffee and looked at the photo in dismay.

"Well, this complicates things."

Contributors

Nuha Abbasi is currently a sophomore studying linguistics and Arabic at Diablo Valley College. She is originally from California and has lived in the Bay Area her entire life. She has a passion for learning new languages and has studied many languages ranging from Italian and Russian to American Sign Language and many more. In her free time, she enjoys hanging out with her cat and finding plot holes in movies. She hopes to travel the world and learn as many languages as possible in the future.

Ashley Baumgartner

Saemi Cho currently works in the healthcare sector. She holds a BS in neurobiology from UC Davis and a PharmD from University of Maryland at Baltimore. Born and raised in CA, she is now based out of Oakland. In her free time, she enjoys sampling the varied cuisines of the Bay Area, including Taco Bell, In-N-Out, and Round Table Pizza.

Damon Chu is a college student living in California majoring in Psychology that originally lived in Oakland, though he doesn't remember it at all. He currently is a shut-in, preferring to stay inside and enjoy himself with his hobbies of digital and physical art and writing his own stories in the form of comics and manga. Spends most of his time in his room enjoying one of his 15 hobbies, ranging from making model kits to video games and cooking. He wishes to enjoy traveling to locations that interest him with friends or family, but has troubles partaking in most forms of social interaction.

Michael Ford is a sophomore at Diablo Valley College who was born in Burlingame California on January 5th 2002 and moved to Danville California in 2004. Michael Ford is pursuing writing at the university level and is a member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society. He is also passionate about psychology and hopes to continue studying in the field alongside English because he finds human thoughts and behaviors fascinating. Michael Ford enjoys spending time with his friends and family as well as traveling, learning new skills, and playing tennis.

Juliana Grosvenor

Mahima Gupta

Tiffany Guzman is a 24-year-old mixed culture lady who got so inspired by the stories she had seen on TV or video games that she wanted to write her own. She's always had many ideas and attempted to write them out, but she could never really understand how to do a short story until she decided to take this class. She feels as if she's learned a lot of how to truly create a short story but needs to work on finishing the stories she does make as seen by the fact that her entry to this journal is unfortunately unfinished. That's okay though, it just means she knows what to work on in the future of her writer's journey. Tiffany has a lot of potential in her work and hopes that one day, her story can inspire the same feeling of starry-eyed wonder in other that her favorite video games and TV shows did for her.

Christina Johnson is a San Francisco native now living in Concord She'll be enrolling into UC Berkeley as a junior in pursuit of a degree in Psychology. When she isn't writing, Christina is taking pictures of outdoor cats or looking for a good boba place.

Jessica Kilburn is currently a student at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill. She resides in Benicia, California with her wonderful husband, two children, and her favorite child/fur baby: Indigo (aka Indi), her 2-year-old Australian Shepherd. Recently leaving an illustrious career in accounting, she returned to college after a 12-year absence to pursue her English degree. Her current dream is to write full-time.

Aaron Lee is a third-year student at DVC looking to study Business Administration. This was the first creative writing course he had ever taken, and he has greatly enjoyed spending this semester in such a fun and creative environment. He has always struggled with expressing how he felt and what he thought into physical words, so he is grateful that he was able to practice and enhance such an essential skill in a fun manner. Some fun and interesting facts about him: he enjoys working and racing cars, he is an Eagle Scout and spent most of his childhood in the outdoors, and his favorite movie is *The Matrix*.

Karinne Lee is a high school senior attending DVC community college as well as high school. She was born and raised and still lives in the California Bay Area. In the past and even now she is one of the few teenagers whose parents have to actively discourage her from reading because she is reading all the time and even has a monthly book budget to save her overflowing bookshelf.

Evan Lola was born and raised in the Bay Area. Following a passion for musical theatre, Evan is a professional lighting designer, working on several productions a year. He is currently back in school to pursue a career in teaching drama to high school students.

Quinn Morgan

Lotus Price

Michael W. Schuler is the author of the short story, "It Wasn't Me". He was born in Costa Mesa California and was the child of a military father, which enhanced his life experiences. Living in various places such as California, Arkansas, Washington, Oregon and Nevada helped shape his love of adapting to unfamiliar and unknown places. When he isn't crafting stories or musical compositions, he enjoys traveling abroad and seeing new places and meeting new people, which enhance his creativity. Being a father of 5 children and 2 grandchildren, helps him stay very active and involved. After successful careers in law and public service, Michael is currently studying psychology.

Aaron Thai is a CSU East Bay graduate returning to Diablo Valley College. Born in California, he is very happy to have been raised in the Bay Area and its diverse cultures. He is on a constant quest to feed his curiosity and to find fuel for creative works of art and literature. A lifelong fan of the fantastic and fictional, Aaron hopes to one day write a story that would inspire someone to make a game of it, so he can play it.

Xavier Velazco is 19 years old from San Ramon, CA. He was born and raised in the Bay Area, and has been interested in art for as long as he can remember. He loves to be outside, and has been playing sports like soccer, basketball, running, and martial arts since he was in elementary school. He likes to draw, animate, play video games, read comic books, and hang out with friends in his free time. In the future, he hopes to continue to be able to express himself through writing, drawing, and martial arts to continue his life as an artist for as long as he can.

Carolyn J. Vidal, an identical twin, was born in California, and has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area all her life. She has five wonderful children and one granddaughter. Her journey as a writer began a few years ago when she discovered that most of the novels she was reading followed the same patterns. Searching for something new, Carolyn began writing her own stories and fell in love with storytelling. She is currently attending Diablo Valley College where she is working toward improving her writing to better tell her unique stories.

Camille Vilar

Polly Wold wrote her first story in the fourth grade. She was promptly sent to the principal's office. After refusing therapy she put fiction aside to pursue less threatening creative avenues. She is now safely situated in a remote mountain top lair, where she is able to explore the fascinating dichotomy between self-preservation and morality, free from societal constraints. She has two and a half cats.