

The Willow Tree

A Novel By

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For my Mom and Reg

&

Dear friends Pat and Bill

The Willow Tree

1

Everything seemed lost in shades of perpetual dimming light, fluttering between dusk, the moon, and hell. There had been no heavenly grace period, or spell of good luck with a happy ending like in the movies.

All that I had learned to love I had lost, and the precision of the misfortune that had snatched everything from my fingers seemed to hold there...paused...as if waiting to seize another ember of something good. The ghoulis heartbreak—rapidly beating chests, sullen checks, and sickly morning sunlight—everything was always out of place after he left my bedroom.

I wondered where every slur of “Why me?” sobbed to an indignant God went? Probably teetering upon some hopeless bank, a lonesome stream of faith

floating right past me, seemingly out of sight to those looking for it.

Palms muddy in the thickness of reality that never quite felt real, I had started to sink. It was all too violent and out of my control. Now every relationship, vow of intimacy with a stranger, or sentiment itching to be shared had been consumed by the presence of Adam. I had never known what I was fighting for...to let go of his love or to salvage my own.

What I had wanted was to be loved, and I had wanted a father's love after losing my dad. But what my stepfather Adam and I shared was different. It had crossed boundaries, over my breasts, down past my zipped jeans, and into the striking nerve of my inner being, bearing the brunt of its weight on every fleeting relationship I would later yearn to nourish.

I had asked myself what was consciousness when everything seesawed between the nightmare of his snarling voice, the hinges of his fingers pulling me violently toward him, and the whispers of the willow tree accompanied by *her* name, the wife he had lost. The two phrases had always accompanied each other, a dance partner forever on the turntable of my nightmare: *the willow tree and her name* stuck in the silo of my eardrum.

Something would switch in Adam when he had retreated to the inner space of his long lost thoughts, memories, and dreams. There was nothing stopping him from taking me as if we had belonged together forever. Yet, it was all so terribly wrong.

The pit of my stomach often heavy with the sinking feeling of his body on mine, unexplainably stuck in a moment of time I didn't want to be real—those moments had become more frequent, elusive, and

mystifying. The only thing that I had known was that Adam was always there stripping me of my confidence...and mostly of everything else—my youthfulness that only God would want kept holy, my mom's long hug goodnights, even the waning hope that I would finally have another dad.

And when Adam woke up from the reality he had created with me, it was a thunderstorm of rage and blunt fists. My tiny body kneaded and destroyed, because it was always my fault for triggering him. Mom didn't want to believe it.

So I had done what any fourteen year old could do: fight until the flames went out. The fire in my eyes darkened to ink, a pitch-black blindness. I was slowly dying, my bones, flesh, and soul a sanctified trifecta withering, always fighting, but losing pieces of itself with each tumultuous battle. And so my struggle had begun...

2

I hated myself for living. Every moment of my high school freshman year seemed malicious and unreasonable. I could not take myself out of the waking day pain from every following glance in those school hallways. No one believed me. No one wanted to be near me. I was a loser. Nothing more than a self-proclaimed loser.

“Why you hangin out wit those white girls?”

Every day I stomached a new inward battle. The rants they hurled at me. My black face no longer counting toward our fight.

“You think you white, don’t you?”

“She don’t fuck wit no black niggas, she too good.”

Phoenix High School, the center of Detroit's fallen paradise. There wasn't a day that I perused those stark grey hallways without feeling suicidal and empty. Ally and Kiera didn't understand; physically outcast side by side, they kept close, unified by skin color. I, however, was intolerable. A traitor to my own race, with rock/pop CDs and fashion magazines. They tried comforting me, but it wasn't the same.

I had to find a way out of the slowly rising nightmare, barring me behind a washboard of tears and self-inflicted mutilation. I locked myself into bathroom stalls, too afraid to venture into the school cafeteria when neither Ally nor Kiera shared the same lunch period with me. There was never a saved seat, and most times I was the source of gossip.

"I heard he raped her at a party."

"She probably made that up for more attention."

"Nigga said she went down on him in front of his girlfriend."

I was in a black hole of hatred and anticipated weakness. I had become so repulsive to others and myself. Anger lulled through my veins yielding nothing but spires of venom. God alone could not save my soul from rupturing, and nothing sparked a more poisonous serum than boys.

Home life was no different than school. Mom was perpetually depressed, and my psychopath stepfather, who insisted that I refer to him as "Dad," left me with bruises and malignant lines of reproach. My pop star posters upset him, my stuffed animals triggered volatile attacks, and he thought my nail polish colors were repulsive. He even banned me from

painting my nails again until I was 18 after I accidentally spilled some on my new bedroom furniture. Nail polish remover on painted-on wood only equals a bloody nose.

“You fucking klutz. Nail polish goes on your nails, not the dresser. Look what you did. Don’t you know that I worked hard for this new furniture? Huh? Do you hear me?”

Mom always said that it wasn’t his fault. He needed time to heal after his previous wife’s death, but I took it as an excuse that she didn’t want to get divorced and lose another husband. She was utterly frightened of being 36 and alone. So she excused his bad behavior and left him to his unpredictable tirades.

They typically ended when he locked himself into the computer room, rank and seedy, where he often retreated to watch X-rated Internet videos. And I was left with tears and a fistful of blood, rag to my nose. I buried myself in my closet, too afraid to re-enter into the reality of my home. Finishing off his attack I would grab a brush and thrust it into my legs and arms with my last remaining strength, screaming: “You fucking loser. Not even your own parents love you. Look at you, stupid fucking loser.”

With wet cheeks and red eyes, I washed down another choked back gasp of air and lowered myself to sleep. I never stopped expecting him to understand that maybe I was just a fourteen year old girl.

3

Her smile: a simple rendition of curves draping around pillows of her scarlet lips. Her almond-shaped eyes curiously perused the sky while her fingers hung gently across her mouth. The sun showed subtle interest that day as clouds continued to mask its warming glow.

Her pensive thoughts always lured him in, distracting, yet meditative. Ardently he imagined her breathing, each heave catching a whiff of deflected sunlight, perfectly timing itself with the strokes of breezes and creaking tree limbs.

He loved observing her from a distance. Every shape her body revealed to him: her perfectly arched neck, the mesh of her knees clinging to the prickling grass, her tapping fingers thumping against her thighs.

He traced the tattooed shadows that wavered across the left hemisphere of her body with his fingers.

The shade cast by the neighboring willow trees engulfed her in shadows. The branches dangled in the lilt of the breezes trying to escape the grips of the maple-colored trunk. Each time a limb attempted freedom, it was lured back, releasing a soft cry.

She studied the gathering of the thickening clouds, which imprisoned the sun, punished for being too warm. Its furious gaze perverted the comfort of life below it, adhering to the moisture on the air and laying thickly a pasture of humidity. Only shadows crept through forests of grass, their brave shapes reinterpreting the contour of their environment, becoming a translucent outline of silhouettes.

She was a part of nature, distinctly remedying the backdrop with her fresh water eyes and rouge-lacquered lips.

These were the pieces of her he loved to study, each bound by the barriers of another world.

Once again Adam had let his imagination consume him. He studied the picture avidly, visualizing the landscaping in his mind behind those bulky eyelids, heavy with fatigue. He held the picture of her, and looked at it one more time, trying to recapture the world of perfection he had created from his observations. He delicately pasted the clipping in his scrapbook, among dozens of pictures that he had had of her.

He closed the scrapbook covered in faux leather and embellished with burgundy accents. Sulkily trying to suppress returning to the photo, he closed his eyes, forcing his body to mingle awkwardly with his mattress. His sheets limped over the bed, dusting the palette of the wooden floor, once bare and now occupied with boxes of used tissues and an old newspaper. October 17, 1993, Accident kills wife of software engineer. He couldn't throw away the newspaper clipping. He couldn't trash his last artifact of her, lying exposed under the foot of his bed.

His head lay at rest on his arms with agitated thoughts reeling through him. His rotating desk chair sat solemnly in his closet, his usual resting place of drear thoughts and comfort. He often sought solace there, as he'd try to shut himself out of nightmares so many nights before. The comfort of closed spaces and sweetly re-imagined voices kindled a spirit of tears and longing. Now it was time for other dreams...

4

Thrusting myself into Adam's car, I kicked my overstuffed book bag beneath the car seat, which housed lost pennies and squished leftover fries from a local fast food joint. I sat with my history book on my lap, dragging my fingers across the cardboard of the unraveling spine. I could only see the crack of the windshield, stretching from each end of the window frame, as if it were an indifferent mouth, not directed at me per se, but at some outside force. The accompaniment of rain was near, humidity lingering in the air...lost drops unrestrained. I sat, recounting the words from the others, which were still streaming in my collective thoughts:

“She crazy.”

“Psycho.”

Ninth grade year and I've already accrued a following of rumors clinging to me like a needy child.

More words, more lies, more drama. *That's* high school.

What started as an online chat between me and the freshman sensation quarterback ended with me being labeled as a liar. I was the girl he didn't want to know in public but who privately made up fantastical stories of us being together. Everyone believed the Star Player.

I printed out our online conversations, showing that he fed me a string of stories about us marrying each other and things that only girls hear, but that made my case worse when I tried to show them to "friends."

No one ever saw us together, so no one believed me.

When I got into that car, I told Adam, this vague representation of the guy labeled "Father," what the others had said to me. Their words/his words, somehow the wavelengths crossed paths, and nothing that was said left me feeling intact. I half expected him to possess some paternal instincts outside of the casual, "I love you sweeties" that he dangled in front of me from time to time, but the only thought briskly lining his lips was, "You don't think they're right? I mean you *do* keep a photo of him and talk about him to your friends endlessly. Isn't that a bit stalker-*ish*?"

This stranger, he didn't even know me. He didn't even remember that he was talking to his "daughter."

I closed my eyes as we pulled away from the school, but it wasn't enough. Wetness tugged at my eyelids, prying them open and sticking to my eyelashes. What if he was right? I couldn't counter his claim. I was

always the girl with few friends...the girl being teased...the girl being bullied.

At this thought I cried hard tears...tears that choke you up with hiccups, making you leap for that last breath.

“What are you, a cry baby now!” he yelled from the driver’s seat.

“Cry baby! Cry baby!”

I could hear his sing-song voice prancing about the walls of the car, transforming into a scream, with saliva sticking to his beard and his body rocking back and forth, hands tightening around the steering wheel. I clenched my fists feeling my arms twitch as I drew back my breath. Every tear translated into a yell... deep-rooted paroxysms... muddled in phlegm...sulking with heavy breaths...

Yell.

I lashed out at him for hurting me with phrases that mom would casually mention behind his back when she was mad at him. I wasn’t going down without a fight. “At least it didn’t take me twenty years to graduate from college.”

Silence.

“At least I’m not a loser who got fired from his job because everyone hates him.”

Silence.

“At least I have a mom.”

An old fashioned clamp, that’s what his cold hand felt like across my cheek. It anchored my voice while triggering the tears.

I knew it was over. After clearing his throat of laughter, he shoved out another “cry baby” remark.

This time, I laughed.

Picking up my foot, maniacally, I laughed.

Kicking his windshield...I laughed.

Then came his fists, coupled with more shouts.

“Fucking brat. I’ll kick your ass!”

No more laughter.

I felt his voice on my legs, almost as weighted as his knuckles. People watched from the streets of the corner at the red light, staring into the screen of the car window, watching my life play out in front of them. That’s all they could do, watch my silent movie. I wanted someone to stop him, as he threw his knocking fists into my jawbone.

At the next stop, I opened the car door, dragging it into the lot of vacant air. His hand jerked at the collar of my shirt, slitting it into my neck, pulling at an invisible leash. Finally irritated, he released me. How could he, I thought. But he did not see me. He sped off afterwards; I could hear the muffler slicing through the traffic light, a symphony of thrumming engines starting up and lugging tires sloshing through leftover puddles.

My toes tingled after stepping onto the cool sidewalk; I could feel it through my cloth flats. The thickness of the humidity frizzed my hair, which had taken me hours to straighten that morning just so I could be beautiful. Bass from cars boomed through the streets, and strange men waiting at bus stops blew kisses at me, the sloppy ones that only too much liquor can shape. I retaliated with cold, distant eyes.

Upon reaching my street, I looked at the door of my house five spaces down from the corner.

He wasn’t waiting for me, though, when I entered the side door. Rather, I was greeted by a light show reverberating on the side staircase from the TV in the basement. A swarm of blues, yellows, and reds

harmonized on the wall with the clinking sound from his beer bottle hitting the concrete floor. I had to leave. I already could feel the bottle up against my nerves.

My room was somewhere amongst a plateau of stairs, somewhere amongst his nearing footsteps. I had to make it to my bedroom door. It raced: my breaths, my movements, my eyes. Finally it was there.

The door to my bedroom throbbed like a heavy heartbeat, tugging against my body. My back to the door, I felt it jump, moving against the weight of his thrusting arms and fists as he stood on the other side. The knob rattled, being pulled from its center...its point of fixation. "Stupid...Fucking...Brat...I'm Gonna Kick Your Ass." The door. The footsteps. The words. Those brusque, thoughtless words, barreling through to my consciousness.

I flooded the air with screams as he broke through. His fingers wringing out my neck, choking me. Hands...muscles...teeth...I grabbed and bit hard. I felt his fist slam into my head now, his knees crunching in at my abdomen as he pinned me down to my mattress, striking me. "You think you can bite me!" The air moved with his fists.

I screamed but screams never help when you're invisible.

No neighbors came. Mom was at work.

Fist upon fist, choked up breathless yells...my violet, reddened neck.

Flinging my legs, I aimed for any vital body part. I tried hoisting myself from his arms, hurling about. Then all I could feel was him dragging me through the air, into my TV stand. Mild blood pooling at my nose. His final words "...maybe they're right..." faded with him as his feet, stepping over me, thudded

into the hall, past the injured door frame, back to the basement to watch his program and reacquaint himself with his bottle of beer.

Running into a gallery of grayness under my parents' bed, the frame allowed me just enough room to slip under. Footsteps. I waited for those footsteps again. Quickly, I skirted out just to turn on the alarm system, hoping it would go off if he surfaced from the basement, the place where the security system did not reach. If he did emerge, it would activate, as if he were an intruder, though he had always been all along. Maybe then someone would hear my screams...my sirens.

I crawled back under the bed...my emotions unpacked...Darkness, my childhood friend, dressed in his nightly robes, lay quiet next to me. Footsteps. There were none. So I slept with his words dangling in my ears "Have you ever thought that maybe they're right? Maybe you do things to make people not like you."

5

Scenes from the photo transitioned into Adam's dreams. The one image of his late wife by the willow tree fully developed in the dark room of his unconscious.

He felt his body plastered against the bark of the willow tree, similar to the one in the photo, except this one lacked braided limbs of tiny green leaflets. Instead, there was an outcry of arms, stretching their crippled fingers forward, long howling sounds emanating from the structure of the tree itself.

Mounted upon its bark, he struggled to release himself from the bloodied fingernails and stiff hands that held him to the serrated edges of the tree trunk. His khaki slacks and striped button down were unraveled and shrunken, revealing a shadow that quickly opened to an unhealed flesh wound. He could

not move, nor scream, as each broken blue slit of sound meandered into a pit of silence, heaving and gurgling its lips at the bottom of Adam's feet.

All the while she sat, with the same curiosity in her eyes from the photo. She observed his struggle with such intensity that it was almost as if each destitute organ, each suffocating vein, were a riveting scene of opera, with all of his broken limbs pouring forth soprano.

No deus ex machina.

She was no savior.

Adam couldn't breathe. He now found himself in the passenger's seat of his ruttled compact car. Its tires buckled against the cobblestone path, rocks crushed and afloat in midair as if they were refugees of empty spotlights spinning and caught only in the glow of window light.

It headed free-spiritedly toward the weeping willow she sat in front of, but he had no control. Who was this guy with tousled black hair driving? Shadows leaping from his chin to his eyes, hiding his malice. The inebriating spirit of liquor coated his skin, the smell as sharp and sickly as cough syrup.

This taste of liquor woven within the intruder weakened Adam; he reached for more of this aroma, unable to abate his cravings. He frantically grabbed fragments of the driver's hair, until he felt pain signal through the disrupted nerves of his own scalp.

He released the locks of hair. Yet the tiny strands locked themselves to his hands, roped their

way around his fingers, and prevented any circulation. He could only stare, briefly glancing over to see if any damage had been done to the driver, but instead he was bound to the image of himself. Paralyzed by the drunken sight of him, Adam allowed his car to lead itself recklessly to the base of the willow tree. Nothing interrupted its frenzied path to her death.

Her hair swaddled the banks of her forehead. As her neck lolled forward, pulling down her head by force of weight, only a veil of blood and sweat broke her line of sight to the surrounding world.

She remained pinned between the grille of the car and the bark of the tree, the extending arms tightening their embrace around her, as if to cradle her in her time of death.

He had killed her. He was now locked to the trunk of the bark, absorbed into sultry forests of falling tears, salting every wound. This was her world.

6

By my sophomore year, I was on an anti-depressant. Lexapro. My daily stem of happiness. Yet not even the school counselor could control the torments of my peers, nor explicitly understand my home life.

Mrs. Tot would call and question my mom about how everything at home was going, but mom always lied. *Always.*

“Yes, Mrs. Tot. Everything is fine. She’s always overly dramatic near her time of the month.”

Everything in me wanted to disconnect that line of fury raging between me and that overheard phone conversation. I hated her. I hated my mom for dragging me through pits of exhausting, immeasurable anger, as I only existed in her eyes as an unstable teenager.

My step-dad disappeared, as he usually did, nearing the death date of his late wife. Mom and I

never knew where he went, nor did we bother to intrude on his personal grief.

Afternoons at home were somber, spent mostly completing psychology homework, waiting for mom to get home. Yet melancholy evenings drove her to bitter tears, and many days she refused to speak to me, pulling herself upstairs with ruddy stockings snagging against aged carpeting.

I wanted to scream and pull at the flesh of my arms, moving my nails through my dry scalp, hoping to slip up some of the emotional pain with more physical pain. I could not, dared not call her, wake her from her fit of tears, so biting at my knuckles instead, I inhaled stocky, short-lived breaths.

Taking in air fulls of noiseless sobs, I ventured to my room, dissatisfied with myself. I was completely invisible to her and a fuck-up to him. Nothing was ever quite right.

He showed up after two or so weeks, drunk and distilling an overall feeling of uneasiness. I made efforts to stay out of his way. Hanging later after school, I hid in the library, working on essays, obsessed with schoolwork, anything to help me forget. I dawdled behind literature books and went to tutoring, even though most times I didn't need it. But the curdling riddle in his eyes kept me fearfully from going home before mom arrived.

He would never touch me if she were there.

7

He had forcibly opened his eyelids; a mélange of bricks had been the first image that he'd seen. He had slit his window shades with a pair of scissors the day before. But now he had felt trapped in this construction of pale cinnamon stone and blemishes of amber. Angrily, he had ripped off his sheets, forcing him to view his neighbor's tiny window directly opposite his home.

Through wetted eyes he had absorbed each misshapen strip of sunlight cutting across his white-washed walls.

His phone lay disconnected, just as he had been: barricaded from society. The listless scrapbook had been surrounded by soiled sheets at the footing of the tattered mattress, also slashed with scissors the

night before. Petals of chrysanthemums sat shriveled on his floor. The funeral had been only a week before, yet his home had already been infested with a line of famished ants leading to and from the fruit casserole that he wasn't in the mood to store or throw out. He had decided he did not want to talk to anyone that day or ever again, not saying a word since the day she had died.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to look at the wistfulness of his wife in that scrapbook any longer. It had created too many nightmares. That same burden of guilt heavily stationed in mind's eye when he had recalled his mother and father's death nearly decades before. He had felt that this had all become his fault...only his.

He had remembered those electric blue eyes and soft embers of love. She had entered his room as though she carried the wind. Carefully tucking him in a wicker basket of about four feet tall, she had replaced the matching lid quickly. It had been submerged into the ultramarine blue shadows of a hallway closet, the door shuttered and revealing slit caskets of moonlight. He had felt the warmth of his mother's presence hugging the rim of that laundry basket. She sat gracefully, next to the haven that isolated her son from death.

Time crafted his last minutes with his mother as tears had sedated his heavy fears. A few breaks in between sobs allowed him to cough up saliva as he tried to whisper a few "I love you's."

Everything had become still. He had wanted to feel his mother's last heartbeat as he pressed his fragile chest upon the cylindrical wall of the casing. He had stayed there for two days, paralyzed from shock, even though she was gone within seconds. When they finally found him unconscious, he had wet his pants and was dizzy from hunger after only finding a crinkled chocolate to eat at the bottom of the hamper.

He had kept remembering though, 33 years later, those screams. Six years old and shattered.

All he could hear at night was her relapsing breath. The quick wind pull of the knife slicing through her soft skin, followed by long, trailing, silvery laughs.

His brother, high off of angel dust, had been arrested for the murder of their mother. He felt as if he had been there himself, holding the knife yet victimized by its ridges. So he had hid, afraid to leave until he knew for sure that his brother had gone.

They carried him out, passing by a valley of dried blood soaked into the carpet. From the banisters to the last doorknob on the left end of the hall, an endless reel of yellow tape marked the entrance of his father's death.

There had been photographers in brown suits, their jackets too long for their short, stodgy figures, and men with white gloves sorting through suitcases of investigative equipment. They were searching, these blurred figures, stretching before his eyes, pulling through the organs of his life, while he was being taken away.

They would not let him go, even as he twisted the arms of the police officers, biting uncontrollably and stricken with a seizure of fits. They never let him go...never stopped grasping at his hand as they had led him onto the pavement in front of the house where he relieved himself in his pants one more time and had rendered himself unconscious from his afflicted fit of terror.

Each death had been graphic, yet all together avoidable, and he had known this, dragging to the pits of his guilt a fistful of remorseful riddles and questions. Not a single night could he stop the scenarios from overwhelming him even with the handful of anti-depressants and anxiety meds that he had been prescribed. Over and over he questioned himself in the same monstrous fashion, scratching at his cheeks and arms every time he found some sort of answer.

He had known his brother was using drugs; he had seen the hallucinogenic and strengthening effects. His mother had been unaware of his brother's addiction. And that day, which had darkened his future forever, he had seen his brother do twice as much as usual. His mother had run with him in her arms into the laundry room. Drowned out yells and silvery, slurred laughs from his brother had followed behind them. An hour later, after she had hid him in the lonesome basket, she was dead. His father killed himself with a shotgun bullet to the throat after trying hopelessly to revive his wife.

8

“I think you should tell someone.”

I quivered, nauseated, as I sat on my hands, squirming uncomfortably on Ally’s wooden floor.

“I did. No one believes me, though.” My voice trailed off into a faint afterthought.

“What about the counselor – aren’t you meeting with her every other week?” she asked soothingly, lines of empty curiosity lingering between her words. She knew no one believed me...she knew my mom lied to protect him.

She reached over to stroke my hair, but my immediate jump rendered her apologetic. Her green eyes closed as her long brown curls limped over my shoulder. I sat cradled between both of her arms, as if I were an infant in need of immediate warmth from a harsh winter. “Here’s a blanket,” she said. “You can have Bobby’s bed since he won’t be back tonight.”

I stiffened after I felt the sanctity of her clutch abandon me. I wanted to stay buried beneath her silence and unarrested kindness.

“I’ll leave my door open just in case you get scared.”

I nodded as she kissed my cheek and pulled at my shoulders to help me up. Setting the plaid fleece blanket over her older brother’s twin size bed, Ally held my hand to help steady me as best she could. Yet I was immediately frightened to let her go from my sight, already paralyzed by the click of the light switch as night dimmed on my dreams.

Adam eased his way into my room, uninvited. The floorboards underneath the carpet quivered with his footsteps, my toy dolls rattling with fear as I did. He twisted my wrists into uncomfortable locked positions as I felt his cold, dry hands yield my fingers into suppressed fists. He did not want me to move, as I felt the stubble of his beard draw closer to my chest. I screamed, but I was voiceless, each note silent in a tunnel of darkness. I could see their brightly colored shapes emerge from my chest, surpassing his fingers and scraping my ceiling, only to be hurled into distant fragments by my small whirring ceiling fan.

At that moment, I felt myself taken. Refuge under a swarm of pillows. I bit until a pile of feathers caught my angry fists and my mouth was warmed with the lips of my teddy bear. I careened my way through mounds of unspoken words, tugging me nearer, lurking under shadows of willow branches.

I trembled down that cobblestone pathway, hands tucked under my nightgown, protecting all that could be saved.

**KILL. DIE. LIAR. VOICE. BLAME.
LOSER. STUPID.**

I saw him, mounted under that willow tree, the tree that he always mentioned when he fucked me.

“Don’t hide now. I’ll never forget.” His wet lips and nose tip pressed against my fingers, soon slowly agitating my chest with uncomfortable bites.

“No!” I shouted to myself. This is only a dream...though I could never tell.

I still saw that dangerous look in his eye, fists ready to bruise and lips ready to violate over and over again. I backed away slowly, moving my bare feet faster and faster, until my mind could no longer will them to regress backwards. I was stuck, trapped in sinking gravel that devoured my last chance of mobility. He outstretched his arms, seeking to remove my nightgown...

I woke with a start, huddled underneath the frozen plaid overthrow that Ally had been kind enough to loan me. A slow leak of winter air was drifting through a narrow space from a window at the back of the room. I tugged myself nearer to the wall where the stiff mattress was pushed against in hopes of retrieving some comfort.

Afraid to close my eyes again, I was too shaken to behold another encounter with him.

I peered from the nook of my shelter, into the hallway. A blind darkness crept over the threshold. Ally’s room was next to mine, but I didn’t want to awaken the rest of the family with the disgruntled floorboards, whiny and unkempt beneath my feet. So I lodged myself closer to the unvaried silence. Motionless,

I waited for some signs of daytime so I could exit from my state of fear.

9

I did not want to go back, neither to school, nor home, but I was overstaying my welcome at Ally's house. Her parents didn't know my story, didn't know the real reason I lingered for a week, seeking solace on the couch in the living room after Bobby, the older brother, returned from school for break. Nor did I have any intentions of letting them know the truth. They would simply report it to authorities and I would lose my mom. My life would be replaced with a downward spiral of foster homes and further overlooked abuse. They could never know the real reason. To them, I was just a teen who needed a place to crash when her parents were out of town for work.

I hung my head a little when I saw that black compact car pull into Ally's driveway. Staring through the front screen door, over the dim premature snowfall, I felt her fingers weaken against mine.

“Well, hello, Mr. Hankins.” Ally’s father gestured for Adam to enter. “Have any time for coffee?”

“No, sir, just thought I would stop by to take Emma to school today, seeing as how you guys kept her for the week while my wife was out.”

“No trouble at all sir.”

“She wasn’t eating you out of house and home, was she?” He nudged me laughingly, but I knew what he was thinking behind this interlude of small talk.

“Not at all. Very well-mannered girl you got there. Not sure how you did it. This one here’s my oldest and I can’t even get him to phone when he’s gonna be late.” Ally’s father gestured toward Bobby who had just emerged from the kitchen.

“Glad to hear she wasn’t up to any mischief. You ready, kiddo?” He looked in my direction, and I could only nod, as my spine pulsated with queasy shivers. I didn’t want to get in the car with him.

“Ally should bum a ride with us, too, considering how she did let me stay here a week.” My voice trembled at the end of this statement.

I knew I had made a mistake by his grimace, which he quickly corrected in the presence of Ally’s father. “Sure thing, knucklehead.” He exaggerated the last bit, expressing his feigned approval to Ally’s father, announcing that he was heading back to the car to wait for us.

Ally grabbed her tea mug along with my clammy fingers, kissed her father on the cheek before leaving, and walked steadily to the car, unafraid and celebratory, as if she had just helped me win the battle.

Although it was a new school year, there was the usual blend of tears, work and bathroom stalls. Ally and I rarely had the same lunch schedules anymore.

Kiera had left; her grades were not up to par. Most students received a notice that they had to transfer as well. The new mayor, Kevin Patrick, was revamping the school district, and since Phoenix High was previously a highly ranked school, they wanted the old prestige of the high school to resurface. Maybe Detroit would be on top again...or maybe not. No more sagging pants, daily pulled fire alarms, or death threats written on classroom desks. There was even a new uniform policy—burgundy polos, khaki slacks.

The school's makeover was still not enough to ease my depression, even though the teasing was less. In the end, the only justice that I would accept to amend my soul was to date the guy that I had lusted after. The guy that would save me from my broken home and pent up dreams in one swoop and with just one kiss.

10

He had exited the visualization of the death of his family. Adam had returned to his unappealing bedroom. He had stuck his hand beneath his mattress, revealing an ornamental invitation, the engraved font curled on top of wafer-thin paper. There had been two copies, but the other one was now gone.

The invitation, in distinct cursive, invited a special guest to a small awards function for work. He had created new software for his company and had been promoted. He had presented the invitation to his wife, who had been unable to attend, due to a work meeting with vendors scheduled out of town.

Begging her to change her schedule, he had finally accepted that she was unable to come. He had decided to stay at home, and accept his honors at work the next morning. He had felt incomplete without his

wife there. Receiving the award without her was equivalent to accepting a nameless title: important but lacking esteem.

Without warning, she had rescheduled her appointments and took an early flight home. Realizing that she was his life support since the tragedy with his family and that this award could be a new start for him, she decided to attend the awards function. But, on the way there a drunk driver had killed her, ending his life as well.

11

I think I am finally someone today. I want to believe he has feelings for me. In fact I'm almost certain. It came together the night Lee and I spent five hours on the phone, joking about reality shows and Mike's mom being too strict. Between his voice and sitting in my closet fingering the bottoms of clothes, I felt compactly, irresistibly safe. It was 5 a.m. when I went to sleep, even though he said goodnight around three. I didn't want to forget the way he said goodbye.

It's powerful and amusing to be a teenage girl in love. I've never known that there could be more than one reality, more than one means of hope, and more than one definition of myself. It's like discovering a new taste or sound. And you never want to forget it, so you indulge yourself in more, seeking to imprint it into your memory and hold it forever. That's what I feel like when I'm with him.

Things started going well this year and before I forget to mention, I've met this friend. She's new to the school, and kooky in a shoes-bare-your-soul kind of way. It would take numerous heuristics to understand her.

Although, I do have the tendency to become frightfully insecure around her...Around anyone with confidence.

Whenever she speaks, it's almost as if each word that made its way through her lips somehow passed through a magic veil before entering into reality. They have a language of their own; if you listen closely enough, you can almost feel more than hear them.

I can never speak more than ten words around her, simply because there's always an audience there. I'm more of the opening act, the kind that you don't remember once the actual show starts. So I lodge by her side, hoping her popularity will rub off on me, but I don't think they will ever notice.

I guess I was wrong about her. Yvette.

"You gave Yvette a chance," I whispered into the phone, hoping Lee would hear me, enough to change his mind.

Silence. I curled my fists, and hurled them into the darkness of my grandmother's closet, trying to lower my voice so as not to disturb her and my mom. We were both staying now with my grandmother, after "dad" woke mom with a start, only to insist that I had broken into his computer room and ruined his "private collection of work."

I denied it, afraid to touch anything in his den of filth. And he swung. This was the first time mom saw and actually believed that he was insane, so we left at 4 a.m. and went to her mom's, a petite two-bedroom. I knew a divorce was coming.

Lee refused to say a word. The other end of the phone died. My life died. I could not reinstate my newfound confidence, my state of happiness. I thought he was interested, different from all of the guys. Why wouldn't they stop hurting me?

I hung up the phone, disgusted by his lack of empathy, calling her instead. Yvette. She would understand. I trusted her.

What has happened? Every feeling in me has ruptured, and all that's left of the ashes is tears. I've never known this to exist. Where is that feeling that internalized within me, that feeling of being a teenage girl in love? My heart has dropped a beat, like a dropped call with its fractious dial tone.

Phone. Silence. Thinking. Phone. I tried to ration with this impending voice on the other end. Rapt with anxiety, I spurted, "Why would you do this to your friend?"

The airwaves rested in silence. Then she spoke, but that magic...that confidence strutting from her mouth was like a clothesline of my dried dreams. Words between our conversation had dribbled out of my receiver...I unconsciously tuned them out, fearing to hear that she had liked him too, while desperately seeking to articulate to her that this is not what friends do to each other.

At the other end of the phone, I heard a voice saying, "I live for my friends. That's the type of person I am."

Maybe to her I wasn't a friend, maybe I was just this thought...spinning into some distant quantum of unequalled reality. I could feel my body shifting in the pain: my shaking wrists holding the phone, spitting up of blood from an oversensitive heart, and listening to my now revolving doubts that maybe I wasn't anything to either Lee or Yvette.

I liked him. We both did. Not a good foundation for a friendship. I wanted to forget about it, cut a deal: neither gets the guy while both of us each leave with our friendship fully intact. Wishful thinking, I suppose, when a couple of days later I was internally destroyed, knowing that they were somehow going to be together.

How could she possibly live for her friends when she readily, openhandedly killed me? A death to my rosy-colored glasses and open heart. It happened so quickly and then it was over, like a gunshot to my face, a disruption in all that was real. The buoyancy in my words leaped at her: "I feel like I'm invisible."

Her mouth spitted forth, "You're not invisible. I see you... I see you trying to take my man."

And from that moment, I knew why I never understood her, this stranger, this new girl, this "friend."

Then came an overflow of questions that only a teenage girl could harmonize with. The social politics of high school. Navigating through the relative of what's pretty, what's sexy, what's that *je ne sais quoi* that attracts guys to girls, leaving me with that feeling of being from some distant planet. Yet, it all came down to one

question: “What’s wrong with me?”

I’m starting to believe that it’s impossible for me to reach this abstract goal of normality. The whimsy and rebellion of being with that one guy.

I can only leave a few more words quoted from *White Oleander*, a novel that I find myself reading frequently in hopes that it will serve as a sufficient self-help book: “Don’t ever attach yourself to anyone who shows you the least bit of attention...”

And so it ends...

“Dad” killed himself that same night. The same night Lee had killed me, a blow to my existence as a teenage girl.

Mom didn’t know what to do.

I awoke in the middle of the night to sounds of her puking. She was standing outside of the bedroom window. Under a street lamp, she cried. Orange face, orange hair, she cried. Vomit lay slathered beneath her bare feet, as I opened the window to let in a soft chilling breeze, the winter air still frigid, as if to warn us that snow was on the way.

I cried, too. Not for him but for Lee.

Grandmom pretended not to hear. She hated being involved, hated knowing that her daughter was in danger, similar to my mom. Christmas was going to suck.

12

After being institutionalized, I'm monitoring my smiles and wondering if my life has lost all remaining structure. Although I should feel intact here, I feel weirdly unbalanced instead. Every turn I take, I find it impossible to cry, all thanks to the meds and supervision. The loneliness temporarily subsides while surrounded by others who have withstood druggie moms or several suicide attempts, but I feel the seclusion at night, pick at it, rummage through it, and reopen the wounds, sometimes overriding the high of the antidepressants. Yet, still no tears come. It's a most tragic feeling, knowing that you're upset, but unable to react...express...live. I see that here, the dullness on each face of every medicated patient, and I know that although I can relate to them, there will never be a friend amongst them.

For this reason, I miss the pain, the ability to channel it through me and become an artist because of

its existence. Not the emptying of my pupils on the ears of forced listeners, or the scratches that I left on my legs and arms, coupled with bruises from my own fists that I designated as my ritualistic coping method. But I just miss the feeling of emotions in general.

Being stuck here, I'm out of touch with reality, sheltered in this overly decorated cellblock, housing kids from dysfunctional families who couldn't find a way to express their frustration without hurting themselves.

I couldn't stop hurting myself when it happened, nor could I prevent hating myself, when I saw *them* together. Bathtubs void of water, filled with my thoughts. Scratches like chalk marks drawn on my legs. I sat behind the shower curtain, gouging into my skin with my nails. That's when the self-mutilation started...that's when everything started to fall apart.

I screamed when mom didn't understand: It would be easy to return to school and push *them* down a flight of stairs. *Too* easy. Mainly her. Delicately, I would wind myself through the crowd of people on the staircase and gently press my hands to her back...

Mom, she couldn't understand. She grabbed my hands when I tried imitating with a magazine how I would hurt them, choke them. I couldn't stop. I pushed back her hands, and struck my footboard with the magazine, ranting over and over how I wanted *them* to die.

I felt the skin on my cheek mold back into place after mom had slapped me, but I couldn't express how I would never be normal again. My hand eased off of the mangled magazine cover, which was arranged into a disarray of broken pages after pummeling my bed, and then I couldn't stop. I slid my knobby knuckles into my

left forearm, striking at a slice of bone over and over again, until mom broke into tears, pulling at me to stop.

I ended up in Havenwyck, an institution for suicidal, psychologically-damaged kids, where going to the bathroom requires a supervisor and everyone has to line up to go to the cafeteria for lunch.

Every face from doctors, counselors, therapists, psychologists, or any other insensitive specialist bears a beaming smile paired with a nurturing voice. A bogus reality to ease the scenarios that us...I...have come out of. Everything is perfectly in order, as they feed us “cool” foods like pizza or burgers and push us to one huge table in the cafeteria so we can feel accepted amongst our peers. They give us crayons and markers to color with, as opposed to schoolwork, even though most of us are in high school. Sometimes we even have cheese and crackers and applesauce as an afternoon snack.

I hate it, the constant joke of being locked away in something pleasant. They all know that when we integrate back into our home life where no one cares about us, we’ll be more fucked up, because no one taught us how to be independent. They lie to us and tell us that in here nothing matters. But it *does* matter. People need friends, support, a few hugs. Applesauce can never replace that.

They make it so that only *you* can hurt yourself with self-abusing thoughts, although the meds are supposed to restrict them. It’s frustrating, only being equipped with a coloring book and cut-out stencils to make sense of life...to solve my problems.

As I watch the girl next to me studiously stencil variations of fruits on a sheet of scrap paper and ruffle

through the box of markers, I decided that it's utterly impossible to be happy.

The drugs and this place make you totally void of feeling. Yet, no one seems to notice any of this except for me. And maybe I will never tell them, because they wouldn't understand that this place is a set-up for failure with fairy-tale smiles and preschool policies. "Share the paint," "Line up for lunch," "Gold stars for good kids," are the grotesque comments I hear.

It's inescapable. My being has been put on hold, and I feel as if my emotions are undergoing a disservice. Why am I here? Every word seems rehearsed now...almost trivial. The story doesn't seem to belong to me. I want to forget, and move on. This place *makes* you want to forget. But when will I and how?

My story has become so valuable to my core that I wear it on my face as if it were makeup displaying my wounds instead of hiding them. It belongs to my eyes, and some time ago the tears found ways to break past the barrier of my cheeks and fall onto my lips. The story voiced itself, separated itself from me, evolving and taking in everyone, until there was no one left it couldn't hold. I tell it verbally, hoping to keep the web weaving, making sure that the pain is only marked within my voice, and no longer inside of me. I never want to feel it, but I always want to keep it.

As I write this, I have an odd feeling that everything will be OK. It scares me, but I like it. I'm not sure if anyone in here believes my pain, but it's the most revealing part of me. Occasionally the counselors listen, better than my "friends" who had armed me with these insecurities:

"You with Lee? You're not pretty like Yvette."

"I can see why he didn't choose you."

“Who needs friends like that?” Those same counselors said to me one day.

“I miss out on so much without them,” I responded, dragging my voice downward so they could sense the severity of the situation, the reason I was here.

“That’s OK; you don’t need them.” And I could see his eyebrows that questioned my response, as he lugged his shoulders upwards and shrugged off the idea that I could really be lonely. He only wanted me to depend on myself, something I’m not sure I’m capable of doing.

“Never attach yourself to anyone...” I echoed in my thoughts.

13

I used to tell myself that to have trials of disappointments flung at you in staggering, long strides was the beauty of falling down. I fell to catch dreams. Then I ran. Not out of fear but to distance myself from the prison bars of my life, which I lived behind.

This is the moment in which every tear counts and where every piece of my broken heart is assimilated into a mass pumping vivaciously for nourishment. This is the moment in which I die by incalculable measures I haphazardly unite with. Where is my identity? Simple. It is shuffled beneath an armor of paper and outlined in countless words and sentences stationed together through verses of pain.

I am a rebel, weakened at the core, yet proud of my faults. I aim to find only myself in a crowded arena that I place as high school. I can barely salvage my voice, as I scream throughout the hallways, throwing

myself into a fitful search party for the other pieces of me that have been chipped away by these walls. And through my prolonged searches, I fight, so desperately to keep the rest of me intact so that I don't lose sight of my new inner strength.

Now I have ended at the beginning and I will not forgo a single track of time. Each minute threads through me stitching my soul to another day. Through these innumerable fragmented pieces, eventually, I will become whole. My path through is nearly complete and my well of tears is gushing heavily, purging the many incidents that have ruptured my being.

What was once fate has become doom. I traveled through the hallways restless, bouncing my black velvet bag, bulging with books, on my right shoulder. Peering through the endless crowds of people, I scampered along, thrusting myself forward. I hit the shoulders of others out of pure haste, and continuously shifted the weight of my remaining textbooks in my clammy palms. A few smiles drifted my way, accompanied by loosely hanging waves. I arched my mouth upward and dribbled a few greetings, as I raced to the edge of the classroom. Upon my entrance into biology where I was the only senior due to a scheduling error, I motioned to Jessica taking a seat near her.

"Hey Emma," Jessica enthusiastically greeted me.

"Hey babe," I said, casually draping my head on the communal classroom round table. "I'm so tired. I stayed up until two last night, reading, and even then, I couldn't get all of it finished."

"Same here. Test in Global Issues next hour, and I still haven't finished the chapter," she responded.

I closed my eyes only to be awakened two minutes later by the over animated voice of Mr. Kline. A relatively thin man, he had alarming blue eyes and white hair that wafted through the breezeless air. He stood with his shoulders pushed back and outstretched chest, eventually folding his arms with restless pride. He reconfigured his body letting his left foot dangle over his right leg. Noiselessly, he leaned back on his desk. With great enthusiasm, he announced our lesson plans.

“If I wanted to study the composition of an organism, which microscope would I use, the Scanning Electron Microscope or a Transmission Electron Microscope?” Mr. Kline pushed the question into the pervasive hush of the classroom.

After observing the room he rested his eyes on Rachael, his usual favorite.

“Scanning,” she said without hesitancy.

“Good. Now who can tell me why?”

At the sound of this, I could feel my body luring me into a daydream. Fifty-five minutes of class left and I had no motivation to learn today. I turned my attention to what I would do after school and thoughts of Alan. Would I see him? Would he wave to me today? Maybe I’d even be graced with a hug.

“Senior,” Mr. Kline chortled, “can you tell me what the difference is between the SEM and TEM?”

I looked down at a sheet of paper before me, pretending to ponder, when he moved on to question someone else, apparently aware of my inability to answer. Though embarrassed, I searched through my purse, finding my wand of lip-gloss, anxiously reapplying it to my chapping lips. Eventually, I settled back into my daydreams, hoping someday Alan would

notice me as more than a “cool’ person to hang out with.”

By the end of the hour, I was mellowed out, more than usual, and I had no energy to sit through English class. I wound up trudging down the halls and entering the counseling center, the first door at random, though I’m sure my body consciously chose the destination separate to my mind.

I saw her, the social worker. She looked beautiful today, with her bouncy, straightened hair and rich mahogany skin. I managed to force out, “Good morning Ms. White,” to grab her attention from reviewing some documents. Upon my words, she greeted me with such vigor that I felt it a necessity to talk to her.

“And how’s your day going, Miss Emma?” she asked as I scooted into her office, closing the door behind me.

“I don’t know,” I stated, waiting for a response, but I could feel her eyes wanting more. “I don’t know, I can’t get over the fact that Alan doesn’t like me. I don’t understand. He goes on to tell me that he’s open-minded and loves to adapt to new people, but he fails to see me. And it hurts.”

She shifted her lips in a manner that told me she was bored with the topic. This had been an ongoing issue for several months now. School counselors could only take so much before retreating to their usual state of unhelpful optimism. What could she possibly do? I always had problems letting go.

14

Graduation arrived. Only grandma and granddad came, but I never actually saw granddad. He left before the ceremony was over.

In the end I remember most the June heat, laced with humidity, creeping up my gown, rows of unfolded white chairs parked on our new football field, and parents on the awkward titanium bench seating, struggling to get photos.

I wanted to rip away my white gown, already lined with makeup smears. My knees knocked together, smudging the thick film of sweat sweltering between my thighs, rolling down the sides of my legs in droves of stickiness. The moisture licked between my toes, fixedly adhering the soles of my feet to my sandals.

They called my name.

I approached the stage in a small line of other

students. I received a tiny plaque for being in the top three percent of my class, as well as the leather-protected diploma. Striding across the small stage, minimal applause found its way through the thick sheets of humidity; I returned to my seat.

It was over.

15

Mom decided that we needed a new start. So we left...both of us. A one-way plane ticket to Southern California. In the end, it was best. I was accepted to a university out there, and mom was being laid off from her job in Michigan.

Besides, we hated it when we were there, a place with angry fists, bruised souls, and lingering doubt. And though she'd never admit it, I think she was truly embarrassed to have moved back in with her mom.

It came down to sunshine. We needed it...year round sunshine.

We left two weeks after graduation. I spent one more night with Ally, propped on the floor of my grandmother's living room. The pale pink carpet lay dormant around our bodies, as we watched for the last time *Anastasia*. Leaving Michigan was hard after that...standing at the beginning again.

She finally closed her eyes, and I mine, both

fearing that we would lose each other without sight. I could hear her drowsy breathing when she spoke.

“Sometimes I’m afraid I’m becoming one of those girls,” she whispered, stupor and vapidness draining from her voice. I knew what she feared: being too in love and losing that independence that she staked so much of herself on.

Dark blue enclosed around us, our shadows hidden between the crevices of the sofas. “I always thought that I would get away, but I don’t think I could ever leave James.” She lowered her voice to match the silence. The irretrievable glances of light from the muted TV swallowed into a chasm of darkness. She could never just walk away from her boyfriend.

I lay there, restless, unable to hold my eyes shut. The flicker of the credits scrolled down the television. I wanted to pull myself closer to her, to draw myself near her warmth.

Her body became a mound of silhouettes and lost shapes. I too tried to cradle myself into a ball of dreams. I careened my neck nearer to her shoulder, my damp breath moistening the cotton blankets we shared and I finally fell asleep.

I awoke to a burden of white light passing through the living room window. I slowly rolled over, tugging at the thin cover only to reveal an empty space. Ally was already awake.

It was 9 a.m. and her parents wanted her to be at church. She haphazardly packed her duffle bag and devoured the remainder of cereal that my mom had prepared for her. She insisted on not having pancakes. Twenty minutes later, she was gone.

I never saw her again.

16

Mom and I left the summer blues of Michigan to delve into the upholstery of our new life, constantly unraveling, folding, and shrinking at the mere disruption of our fingertips. I wanted this.

Our new apartment in California was stable and afforded us the luxury of a view of the entire city at night, awakened by orange chips of light and the bustle of midnight workers.

I slept that night on a stiff air mattress beneath the glimmering waves of nighttime heat and palm tree leaf silhouettes.

Mom had already left by the time I awakened. A cab had arrived earlier to take her to her first job interview. Propping my back against the nearest wall, I slowly reeled through all of my thoughts, too anxious to unpack.

Everything was bright.

California light was my soul keeper; the floodgates of the white noon glitz washed my entire body. I drifted closer to it, feeling the leak in its beauty, absorbing each strand. I wanted more of it, to vivisect its soul and keep it as my own.

I rummaged through one of my suitcases, determined to locate my swimsuit. I needed the subtle pressure of the intersecting veins of water to carry me, toss me into the fury of the heat, yet blanket me in puddles of coolness and ease. Spotting my Moroccan inspired swimwear, I grabbed a towel from another hidden compartment in the luggage, threw on flip-flops along with a khaki mini-skirt, and headed toward the pool.

The sky belonged to my eyes, a private show of aquamarine blue, unraveling across an expansive field. The moon glowed just as evenly as the sun, both patting my cheeks, one with warmth, the other with a halo of brightness. The sky was interesting to see, the western and eastern hemispheres divided, each with their own doctrine of light. Maybe a kingdom existed within the division...or so I wondered as I let my imagination sweep through me, while walking toward the pool in my apartment complex. This was one of the most intriguing phenomenon, witnessing both the sun and the moon in the sky simultaneously, since moving to California.

My bare brown legs swallowed the afternoon heat as my flip-flops shuffled across the pavement. I hated painting my toenails. In fact, the remnants of polish from last month's Mediterranean Rouge were still there. Secretly, I hoped the chlorine would chip off

the rest before mom saw it and playfully teased me until I had to manually clear away the scrap polish with remover.

I wound through several streets in the complex, becoming easily paranoid when I saw that no one was outside. I continuously looked for cars to drive past me so I wouldn't feel alone on the street. I tried to remember the self-defense moves from the free classes at the YMCA, in case I was attacked, mom's paranoia creeping into my thoughts, from her usual crime show overloads. When I reached the pool, it was empty.

Most of the kids were probably at summer school, or out tagging some sidewalk or freeway underpass with graffiti. Several were already arrested in my neighborhood for marking up the sidewalks, the neighbors had told me. I saw a few tweens ride by on skateboards, but mainly I was alone. Making new friends in a new state was going to be difficult and I hoped going to the pool would spark up new relationships.

I found a seat by the cola machine, with a book in hand. I had heard of *Wuthering Heights* from a television show and decided the summer was a perfect time to catch up on some reading. So I sat under the canopied lounge area, admiring the text on the page. I wanted to swim, and the lure of the pool was attractive, but I hated when my hair frizzed after emerging from the water.

So, I lingered in the gated pool area, adjusting my sinking towel that kept falling into the rubber slits of the uncomfortable beach chair. The heat had never made me feel so emotionally driven, but locked in a ninety degree apartment with only a fan had turned me murderous. Mom refused to let me turn on the air

because everything in California had a higher cost more than in Michigan, she routinely reminded me, while dropping the “single mom” line to justify why we couldn’t afford a lot.

The poolside grew even lonelier when I stopped hearing the sliding of the skateboard wheels on the asphalt from around the corner. Eventually I felt too academic, almost posing with this book, eagerly peering over the pages whenever I heard someone’s voice pass. I slid the book into the shade under my seat, slinked on my flip-flops to avoid being burned by the concrete, taking them off at the edge of the pool, and dangled my feet in the water. It was an amazing treat. The coolness volleyed between my toes and eventually I escaped into the cradle of wetness, my feet breaking the surface of the water. I hated how it felt on my stomach, *too* cold, so I dunked under quickly allowing my body to adjust to the new cooling temperature.

When I resurfaced, I held out my arms as if I were a free gliding creature, falling backward to float. Each breeze-fashioned tide burying me, as deep as a handprint in a sand bank. And there I floated on my back, water killing the sound of everything above me. The only thing I could hear were the seams of my heart beating and my struggling breath. “Don’t panic,” I told myself. My shallow breaths mellowed with the slinking strut of the tiny waves.

The lilt of my arms and peddling feet kept me mingling in safety and solitude. My lids shut on the ember of my pupils...on the fair moon’s eye...on the rouge sun’s lips. I was alone, with my hair moving in the palpations of a breeze.

I could not feel anything until my arched back slid from beneath the sheet of water with my hair

fumbling for my neck. My feet fell to the bare spine of the cement at the bottom of the pool. My fingers ran up and down the heaving of the waves, hoping to find support, before my already arched back unfurled further. And then I heard his laugh.

After stabling my knees, embarrassed to stand up in the four feet section, I ran my fingers over my lidded eyes, wiping away the chlorinated water that he had splattered on my face from his much too carefree cannonball. He had shaken me up already, my sea legs struggling to find balance.

Once the upheaval of water calmed and my body readjusted to the quaint laps of waves, I heard shouting from his mouth, "That was *so* perfect!" He swam over placidly and hurriedly pulled me into the loop of his arms when my body was at the ideal distance for his pruning fingers to reach. I stood facing his mopped hairdo, and multi-hued eyes. I lost my anger as I coughed up a few chuckles and some of the water that I had been choking on. But he was there, and the comfort that belonged to me moments before returned as I faced his eyes. I pinched my nose for relief from the water and swung my hair away from my shoulders.

He introduced himself, now holding onto my waist with a cocky, yet charming bravado. I thought him immediately attractive, especially after viewing his eyes, wet with dandelion yellows and bleeding into cucumber greens along with basins of cerulean. Each color intensifying after catching a hint of sunlight.

When he challenged me to see how long I could hold my breath, we threw ourselves underwater. I could see his russet hair appear to catch flame, each strand standing off cue as if being ushered up as an offering to the sun. When we broke the surface of the water, he

doubled his hands around my stomach, threw himself back first into the water, and I floated, laying on his chest, as he reeled us beyond the shallow end of the pool.

With a dash of spontaneity, I plummeted myself under that wavering sheet of blue, breaking his hold just to see him. He followed, and we tried to stand under the surface as best we could, our cheeks puffed up with air. The water pushed at us, our bodies resisting its tug, but we faltered, and I felt the strain of every wave pinning me up to the air. My hair broke the boundary of the orbed white spotlights dancing underwater: the offspring of the sun's light as prismatic shapes. I took a gasp of breath.

Realizing that the water was too deep to stabilize myself in, I fell back under, frazzled and panicking because I couldn't swim, taking in mouthfuls of water every time I bobbed my head upward.

Then I felt his inquisitive hand cupped on my waist, as we both resurfaced from the breaks of the waves I had created from my frantically moving arms. I came so close to him, I was sure his parted lips would kiss me. But in a neat moment, he rested his chin on my shoulder, and I did the same, floating in six feet of water. And I thought for a moment that he wanted to be with me.

I don't think I will ever see him again. Days turned into weeks of waiting by the pool, when I finally vowed that I would not return. Books were looking more stylish. It's becoming entirely too disconcerting and disengaging at the way people resort to put distance between themselves and me. Alone again. Not empty-handed, but empty hearted.

17

Restless, I grappled with the thought of being uncomfortable from those forlorn pages. I had a couple of days before I returned to college, wanting to come home for the weekend in search of my prom dress for Halloween. I would be gorgeous.

I looked through the days with mellow haste, hoping that there was still light left in the sun, and that I could become acquainted with its flourishing nature. The days arrived steadily, but I couldn't bring myself to look at their approach: instead, I stayed behind and flirted with my acquired loneliness.

My bedroom, with its indecent proposals and ragged carpet, had become my place of thought as I fuzzed out at the wall of mirrors a few feet from the end of my lonesome bed and tried to look at the gazing figure. I wondered if this was my form, standing behind this glass of constancy. Somehow, I just couldn't place

this displaced figure. The visage seemed familiar and even the distant eyes lured me with nostalgia, yet that day I remained unacquainted with whom I had become.

Through the reflection, I studied my bed: solitary, unforgiving, and heartless. And suddenly I became aroused. This intricate desire to be sexy, to be primitive, overwhelmed me. Gracelessly I mounted my pillow with my bra strap barely clinging to the rim of my shoulder. My hair dangled haphazardly, as I thrust myself forward, imagining I were between his hips...daddy's hips. If only you were here to witness my transformation, I unconsciously thought as I remembered our days, stuck in the rhythm of secrets.

I fell neatly beneath my quilted sheets and imagined his hulking figure adhered on top of my flesh. I could only dream about his fingers lingering in my hair and me finding solace in those sturdy, dangerous eyes.

The sun weakened on my daydreams and the red-orange lips of the sky stretched across the skin of my legs, tangled in lilac panties. I nudged my fingers toward that ever-vast space between my legs. I crawled to my floor and retreated there silently with my chest, peeking out through my bra, scoping the ceiling. Arching my back, I studied my appearance in the wall-length mirror, provoking my senses, wishing I were a dainty French model, gowned in the *je ne sais quoi* of pleasure. I released the arch and rolled over to my stomach, kissing my arm that so neatly folded in front of me. God, how I wish I could feel this from you again.

My eyes returned to listless dreaming and now I could smell you, your hair ruffling against my chin. Indecently fingering the edges of my underwear, I

puckered my lips to the lilting whispers edging from your mouth. Gazing at the ceiling, I caught a whiff of your warmly striking breath on my small cheek, and I inclined to kiss your neck wrought with stubbles from your messy beard. You readjusted, as my hair struck your lips, and now I'm falling away from your eyes and into your stomach, perfectly taut, and too close to your legs. I can taste unknown worlds of your body, and my lips are coated with pleasure, velvety fluid stains, creamy-like, whimsical-like...beautiful. What one can do with their lips and that slither of pinkness embedded behind those fleshy pillows. I raced with the feeling of beauty, with swirls of gold and reddish brown light from the dying sun undressing me. I found myself exposed under your flesh...under your kiss...under your heart. And that's all I wanted, for you to bathe me in your engaging and provocative touches...to love me.

18

I could not help but feel comfortable in patent leather 4-inch heels, black fishnets, and a pleated skirt. Other than my continuously loosening corset, which refused to tighten around my thin ribcage, I felt as though the night was under my influence. Every glance, every strand of fingered hair that I deliciously toyed with, revived in me a sense of pleasure. I stepped, one foot forward at a time, not fearing the fall, but reveling in the progress. Finally, I would be the cool chick.

The stares were liberating, to have a few looks as I purposefully switched down the hall, my tiny protruding hips swinging neatly beneath me. Call me a camera whore, but the photos people wanted to take were nice, too.

Then she entered, with her long, red hair, skimpy garter belts, and pursed lips. Enough to make any girl feel inadequate and awkward. I looked down,

self-consciously eyeing my chest, and decided to throw on another bra, my attempt to relish what little bit of cleavage I could muster. I flitted my average-length brown hair, hoping to attract a few eyes. No cigar. Black skin would never be more valuable than white.

I sunk to a pit of self-doubt, a place where every moment in life decided to throw up in my mind, gushing out ugly images of me being in some uncomfortable place where I would never fit in. Subpar is an understatement when everyone tells you that you're standing next to the most beautiful girl in the room, who happened to be my roommate, Sammi.

I couldn't think of anything to do, while everyone wanted a picture of her. Sure I jumped in a few times, feeling slightly dumbfounded at the idea that I wanted to be more scantily clad. I know it's disappointing, girls taking off clothes, leaving no mystery, but at that moment, I would have gone topless, just to have one eye float my way. I couldn't take it anymore, being alone in front of everyone. I thudded my heels downstairs to Amy and Mike's S & M costume party, feeling unable to reclaim any remnants of my nouveau confidence, existing only twenty minutes ago.

I meandered to the throbbing music pouring from the basement entrance and descended to a flurry of yellow caution tape, red curtains, laser lights, and guys being held attentive by leashes and spiked collars. I danced to "Do it Again" by a synth techno band, moving my body in slow pulsating rhythms, hoping to forget some of my previous insecurities.

My crush arrived a few minutes later with a group of his friends, the sophomores, sporting orange leopard print boxers, Mardi Gras beads, and a feather boa. I floated closer to his movements, the darkness

guarding nothing but my heart, yet Jay moved passed me. I slunk back to infinite jabs of music distorting my depression. I had only wanted to be sexy.

More people came, as the midnight hour wandered past our restless bodies. People packed themselves against each other on the dance floor, sweat momentarily binding us, hands sliding past one another's clothes. I stood, plastered between two guys, absorbing the retro techno beat jolting the thumps of my heart. Jay was lost, anchored between the melodies of other moving bodies, his fingers on the hips of someone else. At this point, I could only dance, certain that I hated my life.

The night had ended in his bathroom: him overshot from vodka, and me massaging his back.

"I've been having a hard time handling my liquor this year. I threw up on the porch at the last party." Jay chuckled to himself, as if everything were an inside joke, his arms resting on the ledge of the toilet seat.

I stood and refilled water from the bathroom faucet into a used cardboard cup from the cafeteria, while he continued to cough up strings of vomit.

"You're really cute," he had whispered, aiming his lips for my neck. Adam had never told me that. Could I really be attractive?

This was what I had been waiting for. I felt special.

His entire body flopped to the bathroom floor. He rested awkwardly in his orange leopard print boxers with bits of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of his feet. He gave me the invite to stay the night, and I had feebly convinced myself that I was obligated to make sure he

was OK. Plus, I needed to know something more than Adam.

After an hour of him bathing under the florescent lights, we had made our way to the bed, his thin body loosely supported on my shoulders.

A side of Jay's bed brushed up against the edge of a window. He had wedged me between him and his protruding air conditioning unit, as he tucked the remains of his pillow beneath his messy curls. Disappointed, somehow hoping for more than a brief, sloppy make-out, I had rested as comfortably as I could, my neck dangling on top of the stiff mattress, my body attempting to pull itself closer to warmth, away from the uncontrollable shivers caused from his air conditioner. His navy blue comforter wrapped easily between his legs, as I tried to extricate it from his unconscious form.

I awoke, the light from his window creeping into my consciousness. I had to leave, my skin frozen from the on-going cold air, him passed out. No shoes, no keys, I walked across the parking lot at noon on Homecoming weekend, parents standing in the street photographing the university's annual parade. Grudgingly, I knocked on the door to my dorm's building, hoping that someone would hear me soon. I started to acquire a couple of stares from my mini-skirt/corseted attire and tangled brown hair.

Later that day, I sent him a quick text with my number. He didn't respond, and when I saw him walk by my dorm room visiting neighboring friends, he shot me a quick smile, and nervously mentioned that last night he'd been really plastered and could not

remember anything, speaking loudly as though he were talking solely to me.

Here I am, once again the sucker.

19

I hated college. I hated feeling powerless. My only means of rebellion had manifested into artistry, my art of coping with freshman aggravations, reeling myself through blended levels of pain. Who could stop me? Stop me from thoughts of killing myself when I stood under the showerhead, alone at 1 a.m., locked out of my room once more. Sleeping on the couch again in the lobby was going to be agonizing, embarrassed to be thrown out without warning, while my roommate, Sammi, drew closer to the guy that I liked.

Wrapping myself in the warmth of the falling water, I harnessed my sanity in that small shower cell of comfort. Extending my arms, I stretched them across the wall, arching my back and existing only as the tiny beads of moisture did, fragile and helpless.

I pulled myself from tears, washing my sloppy, running nose in the water. Feeling powerless, I dried off

in a friend's room, dressing myself in her clean underwear and large T-shirt drooping from my shoulders as my bra strap always did. I threw my pink hoodie over it to combat the November coolness and tossed on cropped black tights and gold ballet flats as well. She would have let me sleep in there if her roommate hadn't been so territorial.

Shuffling to the lobby, I heard the chime of voices float through the staircase. This was good. I needed to be around people. Dragging a borrowed pillow from my friend's room as well as a small blanket, I maneuvered through the staircase.

My bare feet prodded the edges of the cool tile floor, chipped nail polish baring everything but my soul. I glided, refreshed with new excitement.

Eyes empty, heart throbbing, I walked until they came into view: the artists. The cool kids.

The scene of them together was a very interesting depiction of art, their high-strung chatter and poised bodies, as if they were being viewed in a teen sitcom. I listened to the intermingling voices buzz by me. I wanted their approval, as much as I wanted to convince myself that I belonged to a specialized group of freethinkers. Maybe my own thoughts are a free verse of intellectual hoo-hah bonded together with over-the-top language.

I sat amongst them wondering where I existed in this world in which the standards for art are so low? And how do I measure up to those who build craft on a foundation of strong language but poor presentation? The myth of artistry, where most artists classify themselves as open to all ideologies, when we are probably the first to readily slander another art form, simply because we can't understand it. It's all a string of

perceptions for one to understand, and then appreciate...but requiring a sense of reality to accept, something an artist loses in a path to self-justification.

Most who do not label themselves as artists catch glimpses of the true meaning behind our work, more so than we sometimes can. Art, a voice for all who want something more than ritualistic trivialities; ART, a force for fighting trepidation, when one dares not to speak but instead stands to reveal a conjunction of emotions.

Emotions as language, the true artists' slang.

They sat there with their blue eyes, plaid shirts, and tattoos, eyeing me uncomfortably as I validated the life of an artist to myself, sulking in the corner, taking in their judgments. They never understood that I needed them, needed the touch of another artist to feel free, but I was immediately discredited.

I reached...*leaned*...closer to them. Maybe explaining would help. It was a period of heightened sensitivity as I opened myself up to their perceptions, revealing everything but smoke and mirrors.

I could not diagnose my feelings of embarrassment. It was more of an outrageously flustered series of shame. I combed my eyes over the brand name hoodie I wore. Who better to label me than a self-righteous guitarist who's probably pissed off at the world for not giving a damn about his music? I cared about his music, though; maybe he didn't realize. Either way, it was an interesting paradox for the kid who inadvertently desires people to accept his basement produced heavy metal tunes, while simultaneously criticizing them by giving ten-minute spiels about how wrong Top 40 music is.

With a slight eye roll to a guy who appeared to be his sidekick, he openly voiced his hate for my pink hooded sweater. This was a moment in which I expected not to be judged by another artist. I'm sure he didn't take me seriously when I said I was a writer, though considering how most girls who wear gold ballet

flats and listen to mainstream rock (artificial rock n' roll by his standards) are labeled as ditzy, high-maintenance types with only shoe philosophies to live by.

I always classified myself as an introverted type, though.

But I guess knee-length tights and a casual boyfriend-styled T-shirt placed under a pale pink hoodie begs to differ. So I did the only justifiable thing: lie. I shrugged my arms around the blaring pink (another slap to my credibility as a legitimate artist) logo, made up an off-brand and quickly retaliated by stating something along the lines of finding my hoodie in a sales pile at some small department store. His response of "Hmm...sure," was more than a smack to my ego. I hastily tried to explain myself with a brew of words mixed together with "like...ya knows...uhhhs..."

It was over.

I faded out of the conversation, daydreaming to myself, lost in a battle of self-pity...

Inadequacies cause the confrontations in positive emotion. I feel inadequate and misrepresented.

The evening started when I insulted his tattoo. A typical "me" moment. Who knew he didn't like rock/pop music? All I wanted was to practice my flirting skills with a hot guitarist by impressing him with my eclectic musical taste.

I sat, my curly frizzy concoction of hair clinging to my cheeks, as he strutted into the main lobby from a side hallway. I saw a blurred image of his slender build fitted into faded black skinny denim and a muscle tee walk by. This was paired with stringy waves of natural, white-hued blond hair, strikingly stark in the fluorescent

lit, wood-paneled lobby. It would have been a great profile shot if I were at all skilled with a camera.

He joined the inner circle conversation, where I graced the side of a coffee table with folded legs. He sank into the couch opposite my view. His appearance made it apparent he was a musician. I quickly scanned my inner thoughts for a repertoire of cool music I had listened to in the past few months. It would have to be something not highly publicized, and maybe a little retro.

Immediately after thinking this, it all came together when he took off his muscle tee to reveal a freshly drawn tattoo of a skull with a snake winding through it lengthened across his chest.

“Your tattoo reminds me of a band!” I announced, excited that I was talking to an actual suburban, badass musician, someone reminiscent of a 80s classic rock video that only plays on VH1 at 8 a.m.

His friend, Mark, a hulking guy with piercings lurking from his lips, inky black hair with streaks of green, and an array of tattoos painting his arms, chimed in with a laugh, saying, “What, Starship?”

I reaffirmed myself for a moment, feeling as if I was finally “in the loop” and replied with a sly smile, “Yep!”

Silence.

“I was just joking,” Mark stated, completely indignant and slightly grossed out.

And thus concluded my attempted flirty conversation with Evan, the guy who hates cheesy rock bands, including Starship, Dream Academy, and others I decided to mention, which elicited more painful groans.

I decided to learn about heavy metal, more his

style, some of which sounded like it belonged to an 8-bit video game. And then to spike the conversation with notes of humor, I added that I completely sucked at the rock n' roll scream/roar that lead singers yell after performing a guitar solo. There were a few laughs, more of them at me, as if I were the girl trying much too hard to gain their approval. Then they started listing off stupid names to call themselves as a band, in mockery of the selection of bands I had rattled off.

“We should be Blood Feast!” Evan yelled over the series of unbroken laughter.

This led to a string of joking insults referencing my pink hoodie and how it correlated with my personal tastes and intelligence level. Evan recommended some Pink Floyd as a courtesy. I was interested, not because I was attracted to him but because I wanted to be in that world, where their band rallied together and discussed the latest accouterments and phonetics, throwing out technical terms to justify their musicianship.

I never made a point of looking up Pink Floyd, but he never made a point of remembering me. It was all a waste of time, with the essentials of a good conversation poorly packaged in my insecurities and their prejudices as artists.

I left the main lobby of the dorm a little later with our final conversation leading me to believe that I should pick up a series of self-help books on depression, dealing with jackasses, and maybe flirting 101. His final words of “I don't hate your music, I hate you!” shouted irritably over his game of foosball was definitely a cue for tears. But I ended it with a wave goodnight and a shrug. I still didn't have a place to sleep that night.

21

Freshman year steadily worsened. The following morning, after my troubles with the artists, brought on a fresh arena of pain. I slept in a small lobby on the second floor the entire night, still unable to enter my locked door room. By 10 a.m., before my eleven o'clock class, I peevishly walked back upstairs, noticing that the door was finally unlocked.

My roommate, Sammi, with her deep red hair didn't bother to notice as I returned the pillow and small blanket on my unused bed.

"Hey, I wanted to know if you could sometimes sleep over in his room?" I asked. "It's just I'm not getting a lot of sleep before my morning classes and the lobby couches are uncomfortable."

She looked at me with her tiny green eyes, shrugged casually, "that's not my problem."

I couldn't take it.

I couldn't hold back.

I slammed my energy forward, cascading the outer edge of my right hand into my left palm, mimicking a chop, as if to make a stern statement. "I can't sleep, you lock me out of my room at four in the morning on some nights, and he only lives in the building next door. What do you mean it's not your problem?" I wrestled with my anger, as she packed up her books. "I feel like slapping you right now." I hastily stepped forward as she stopped to observe the seriousness of my tone and briskly backed out of the doorway, dropping her book bag.

Yes, I finally have the room.

An hour later, I was escorted from the resident hall by public safety, on the grounds of threatening my roommate. Confused and overcome with anger along with embarrassment, I grabbed a few items from my room, as they told me I was prohibited from returning for 48 hours until they gathered the story and deemed me safe.

In the end, I never fully returned. Only to gather my things, to assemble what was left of my dignity. Rumors already started to trickle down the hallways, buzzing into the dorm rooms, as if they were tiny pieces of static dazzling the airwaves.

22

“You know, your roommate sounded like a whore anyway,” muttered Kiley, my new rooming buddy.

I unpacked everything, moving down to the first floor, listening to the refreshing sarcasm of my new roommate. I couldn’t tell if she was naturally humorous or simply putting on airs to impress my mother, who was helping me maneuver all of my things.

My mom eyed Kiley’s movie collection. “I loved this one!”

They proceeded to discuss the titles of other feature films, while I sullenly eyed all of the belongings I had to unpack and the little space for them. I didn’t have a closet, only a large wooden armoire, both of the other spaces being taken up by my two new roommates, the other I had yet to meet.

I threw my overly large, blue comforter on the

top bunk and walked back to the storage room, where Public Safety had instructed me to move all of my items until I was placed in a new room.

My mom stopped me on the way back upstairs. “Quit acting like this. Your new roommate seems cool.”

I shrugged her off, feeling waves of sadness erupt once again. This was supposed to be a new start and already I had ruined freshman year.

The school year was winding down quickly. Rumors dissipated easily enough for me to try to ingratiate myself back into the social crowd. Kiley wasn't that bad of a roommate, often offering me her beef-jerky and cola. We both worked long hours, her with her mock trial law cases, me with writing. Neither of us complained, and I laughed at her sharp humor that kept us functioning through the late-night mornings.

"I'm an honor's student. Of course, I did speed in high school," Kiley casually mentioned once.

I admired her nonchalant, breaking the spells of boredom.

Laurel, the other roommate, was rarely around, and when she did venture in at night, she tucked herself into bed with headphones, sometimes offering us a wave and a glance, other times not.

By the time April arrived, I had become restless with everything. I expected myself to explore and venture out of my blankets of depression. Though nothing seemed immediately painful, I still felt alone and the blues never stopped tugging sheets of teary-eyed nights over me before I went to bed. I needed a change.

One morning, I was up early rushing around trying to meet deadlines, stopping by professors' offices, and getting homework done at 8 a.m. before my 9:30 morning class. Within my already chaotic world, I ran into Mark again, his decorative tattoos still frightening me, though he had taken out his lip ring. He was listening to music in the lobby, while I checked out a bulletin board off to the side. I didn't notice him, and to my advantage I think this worked out. Maybe because he felt uncomfortable with dead silence while we were both in the space or he had the impression that I was ignoring him, since I'm generally excited to greet people. Either way, he worked up the nerve to say "hi." I waved, a bit thrown off that he would actually approach me first, and continued walking until I located the professor I was looking for.

On the way out after my meeting, Mark still lingered on the couch in the lobby and I figured this was the perfect time to practice my small talk. I started with the dreaded topic of music again, but this time I coated my voice with small notes of apathy. I could never let him know that I cared.

"What are you listening to?" I asked coyly, looking through my purse, as if I were not really concerned with his response.

"Lost Soul Standing. Have you heard of them?"
Yes. Of course, I have!

“I’ve heard a few of their songs. Wanna play me one?” I asked.

He smiled. I thought my heart would rupture from its line of steady beats, as he opened up his sticker covered laptop, drowning out the lobby with the slow, melodious mellow of Lost Soul Standing.

“Hey, I have a flash drive on me, mind giving me some of your music?” I asked, still feigning comfort at speaking with him.

He gave me his top seven bands, including all of the music from the group Lost Soul Standing and tunes from his own band.

I didn’t actually start listening to the music until a week or so later when the campus shuttle left me stranded at The Pancake Shack one night. All I had was my Mp3 player. I turned on an obscure metal band he had given me, Darkest Hour, and listened to “A Thousand Words to Say But One.” This was a song that I had been waiting for. Though I couldn’t understand any of the lyrics from the band’s harsh vocals, the music drew me in. Could I actually like heavy metal?

I couldn’t help but to purchase tickets to see Darkest Hour. Something about the way the music excited my interest, stirring my curiosity. The days started winding in on the concert. Mark and his band mate Dan, who I’d never met, was going, too.

I ventured to my favorite shoe store in search of heavy metal shoes. As I daydreamed on the shuttle ride, I started thinking the best way to go was sneakers. Sneakers were definitely metal.

While flushing these ideas through my mind, the shuttle stopped in front of Shoeman’s Warehouse. Excited to check out the inventory, I bolted straight to

the aisle with lace-up kicks, eyeing a pair with a graffiti design printed on them. Yet they were too expensive. With only a half hour till closing time and \$40, I scoured the aisles in search for the perfect heavy metal sneakers, finally picking my way through the sale section until I spotted silver and black striped slip-ons. I did a quick jump up and down in them to ensure they would stay on my feet. When I got back to my dorm, I quickly headed to my closet to choose an outfit.

I rummaged through my wardrobe of pink tops and other brightly colored scoop necks, V-necks, and empire waist garments. Desperate for advice, I threw on a blue V-neck sleeveless top with a hood, a two-toned red striped tank top layered underneath, black skinny jeans, and, of course, my metal shoes. Prancing through the hall of my dorm confidently and stopping at my floor lobby, I asked “How do I look?”

Of course everyone laughed but decided to take a break from their routine study hours to help me choose something cool enough to wear.

After scooping my entire wardrobe into a laundry basket and dumping everything onto the floor of the lobby, I dressed up as a sailor, with the help of a Halloween costume, and then in all pink when someone suggested that I wasn't extreme enough. I ended up settling for a bright yellow polo and potentially a pop/rock T-shirt. I shot Mark a quick text to see if the band that I had wanted to wear was cool enough. He didn't respond that night, and I was too tired to worry about it until the morning.

24

“You’re not wearing the shirt, are you?”
he asked.

“No, but would it have really been that bad if
I did?”

“People would have talked shit.”

He introduced me to Dan, who did not appear thrilled to meet me. He shook my hand with a feeling of indifference, as I let his dry palms slide from my sweating fingers. He seemed further annoyed while Mark explained the dangers of showing up to a metal concert in a pop/rock T-shirt.

I tried to ignore Dan, his widened dark brown eyes refusing to look at me. His thickly curled hair, flustering for air under his black baseball cap. I searched for conversation topics, eyeing his entirely black wardrobe, no band shirt, no flair of color or skulls, simply black. He lit a cigarette, aiming smoke in my

direction. He stood there consumed in secrecy, detached from this moment and seemingly regretful for coming. I felt myself wanting to be near him, wanting to impress him. If only I could shake off my nerves and think of something appealing to say, but words escaped me. I pulled further away into my thoughts, attempting to avoid looking wounded by his obvious apathy.

We got into Mark's car, everything racing in a silent series. I was still unable to control my excitement, anxious to be thrust into this world of screaming and vengeance. Music had finally become the inexplicable heroin that shot through my soft veins and rendered me numb, extricating each swirl of pleasure into my bloodstream.

"Are you gonna headbang tonight?" Mark asked, his thick shoulders hugging the back of the driver's seat.

I asked him to show me and he did a really quick demonstration.

The conversation fell short after that. Everything fell short, as I sat, distant and afraid to speak, sure to say something embarrassing.

But after driving for a half hour, and only listening to metal, I started to feel increasingly antsy. I jokingly asked if we could listen to some pop tunes.

I knew I had struck the wrong nerve with Mark after he reacted "I fucking hate that shit." He gripped the steering wheel, sat on the edge of his seat, turned to me and asked in a low growl, "You were joking, right?"

I was completely pissed at this point and flippantly responded, "No."

Then the tirade of reprimanding grunts, comments, and indistinct complaints began. Admittedly, I was fighting back tears and did everything

in my power to stop myself from crying, from biting the inside of my cheek to scratching my arm with my nails discreetly.

The silence returned after five minutes of his intolerable mumblings. Dan was already asleep.

The drive lengthened, traffic was always heavy, and we got off track with the convoluted directions, but the mood started to lighten at the first sign of nightfall.

“I think I want to go in the mosh pit,” I said, admittedly trying to be humorous.

“Do you think you can take on a guy Mark’s size?” Dan asked, wakening from his light slumber.

“Uhhh...no, and I didn’t really plan on taking on anyone. I really just wanted to be pushed around.”

“The pit is filled with people Mark’s size.” Dan retreated back into silence.

Mark smirked a little, and further attempted to dissuade me, but now I had to do it, just to prove that I was tough enough to handle my first metal show.

We finally made it to the concert, and I was proud to be standing next to the scariest looking guy there. We waited in line outside, and Mark was nice enough to let me wear his hoodie. Dan still didn’t trust me, which was frustrating when I tried to make conversation.

“So you have a tattoo, too?” I stumbled at the awkward rhyme as Mark so graciously imitated my voice.

“Yep,” Dan responded.

“Did it hurt?”

Rolling his eyes, he said “it hurt a hell of a lot.”

Our interactions grew steadily worse when I asked to borrow his lighter to keep my hands warm.

Mark went to the neighboring building to urinate, and I was left standing there, feeling like a loser. But I didn't want the continuation of silence. I gave the conversation another try and asked him how old he was.

"20," he responded.

"Cool!"

"Not really. I can't drink."

We left the grudging outside line, and made our way inside the Glasshouse.

"Look at all of these scene kids," Dan flatly said.

"What are scene kids?"

"People who listen to emo pop/rock."

Burn.

I left to hide out in the bathroom for a couple of minutes. I needed to relax, to have the excitement rekindle. I couldn't let my cheeks redden any further. I refused to let this experience be ruined by Dan's off-handed comments. When I came out, I wanted to know how long we were going to stay on the second level, because I really wanted to go into the pit. They said the music was better up here. I think it was because of the way the building was designed. They were there for the music, me for the atmosphere.

We went down to the first level after the opening act, though.

"I'm gonna go smoke a cig." Mark left, his keys jingling in his pockets, me still swallowed in his overly large hoodie like I were a rag doll tossed into some open chest of used toys.

Alone with Dan, I tried to make one last joke. "I'm good at getting lost...or maybe people are good at losing me."

Peevishly he threw me a glance and walked away in another direction. I stood facing the stage alone, absorbed in shallow pools of darkness from the concert venue.

After a ten-minute intermission, the music started up again. With my heart racing, I pumped through the crowd to make it to the front of the stage. I came here to lose myself in the music, and I didn't lose sight of my plan. Cephalic Carnage started up. Whipping around their guitars, pig squealing to blast beats, throwing me into a syncopated trance. It wasn't the best metal, but the red stage lights further fueled my fury and energy. Heavy pulsating thrusts carried me into the backs of others, soaking up their sweating long hair that stuck to my lip-gloss and skin. I rested my arms by my sides, packed against the waists of others, knocking shoulders when one small movement from another person pushed me in any wayward direction. I mustered the energy to scream and yell, craning my neck and frizzy hair forward and backward. I was part of this scene.

Near the last song of their set, the guitarist hurled a huge wad of spit into the audience, smacking against my cheek and lips. I was initiated into the metal world. Feeling roused, I pushed forward more, breaking the line of furious teenagers and men that wished they were young again. Finally I could see everything, as my chest thumped against the railing, bodyguards on standby in case anything went horribly wrong. Crushed between the rails and fans, I took heavy breaths, liquoring my mouth with the taste of cigarette smoke and booze. This was the life.

When Darkest Hour finally came on, I tacked on a huge grin, threw up my devil horns, and made haste to move my body as ferociously as others. When everyone knew the song lyrics to every track and I didn't, I felt out of place, but I just moved. That was enough to keep the energy of my mortal soul aflame with passion. I needed to keep moving, to keep going, to keep breaking through barriers of arms, clenched fists, and disconnected hands outstretched, reaching for some Metal God.

Every piece of exhilaration prolonged my feeling of high. Crash landing and bombarding with others I felt myself panic, lose control, and let go. By the last song, little did I know that I was doomed.

"I want everyone to turn this whole fucking floor into a pit. I want a running circle now." I heard the voice of the lead performer ring forth, and audience members obeyed, as I was flung straightforward into my first mosh pit.

My balance slipped from beneath me, taking me straight to my hands. My knees caught the concrete floor as well. Immediately, a herd of people stampeded my way, piling and colliding as if the dance floor were a sick car crash, taking everyone for prisoners. I propelled forward, attempting to realign myself, to stand up and breathe, but immediately, my bare ankle was crushed under the running feet of others, leaving my shoe barely intact on my foot. In pain and utterly frightened, I crawled to the side, feeling the heavy swipe and blows of others following me, until I made it to the safe zone.

The music was over.

I was still alive.

They were gone.

I eventually found Mark and Dan after the end of the show, as they lurked in the parking lot. Their mouths decorated with cigarettes while smoke smeared the otherwise empty air. "I got pushed in the pit!" I yelled enthusiastically. Mark gave me a quick high five, as Dan faced me with his usual empty expression. Nothing that I could do would make an impression on him.

25

Summer came quickly after the last week of the semester. Though I could not find a job, I had enough money saved from working as an editor on the college newspaper to get by.

Most days I curled into a ball on my couch, practicing make out sessions with my teddy bear. Nothing was ever on television, and mom wouldn't be home until evening. Traffic was always bad on the 91.

No one was outside. The heat created a shelter of loneliness.

By the middle of June, I had officially given up on my job search and convinced mom to let me buy a skateboard. I found some lessons from browsing online, deciding that now was the best time to learn how to be brave before my sophomore year of college started. I spent most of my Saturdays at a skate park, playing

around with small tricks, surrounded by 12-year-old boys who always wanted to rummage through my purse.

I didn't want to stop with the skateboarding, though. Summer was drifting by slowly and I needed something more. With a stroke of insight one evening, I scoured through the outside storage room of my apartment complex in search of my half-size acoustic guitar. I signed up for lessons, using the rest of my saved summer funds. I wanted to play heavy metal.

Initially I was a little afraid to tell my teacher that I wanted to learn the guitar solo in Lamb of God's "Walk with Me in Hell." He didn't laugh as the receptionist had earlier but started me off with basic chords: C & G. He also gave me a tablature of "Smoke on the Water," the popular part. Not a bad way to start off on my journey to playing like a Metal God.

I made sure to wake up early and cut my nails. I blistered my fingers after trying to switch my finger positions between G7 and C chords after repetitions of 8. "Smoke on the Water" was tough, especially if your fingers do not have the muscle memory yet, but I have to admit, it did sound cool, albeit a little rough. I'll conquer it, I told myself.

26

“There’s someone here who looks like me,” she squealed, eyeing my fashionable appearance. I sat on the edge of the armrest, draping my arms across my knees. Her winged eyeliner, short denim skirt, and lace-trimmed camisole proved that she was most likely popular in high school, which she later confirmed. Folding her legs, she eyed me attentively, waiting to see any signs of eagerness from me. But I didn’t know what to do. “Oh, can I see?” she asked readily, spotting my photography portfolio from my beginner’s class. I dangled the booklet on the edge of my fingers, as she snatched it hurriedly. “I see...hmm...these are good,” she proclaimed after scanning each page briefly.

Mistaking my awkwardness for confidence, she continued to rush through a confused series of small talk, each time asserting trivialities and stories meant to impress me.

“You know I went to school in Laguna Beach. Everyone hates me here, though; they think I’m some preppy rich bitch, but I’m really not.”

I sat, perplexed by her exuberant personality, unaware of what to say next.

“Everyone’s so ugly here, but you’re gorgeous!”

Smiling, I eyed her exotic Asian and White features. *She* was gorgeous.

I gave a quick “thanks” and packed up all of my belongings from the nearby coffee table, anxiously professing that I had class in a few minutes. I skirted downstairs to my room, feeling relieved to have left, her high-pitched voice still continuing to overwhelm my ears. Maybe I had found a friend.

Over the next couple of weeks, I watched the incoming freshmen unpack and adjust, crowding the hallways in the evening with their nervous chatter. I introduced myself to several shy newcomers, who dribbled back to their rooms in search of solace.

The nighttime heat kept me unraveling under the romance of the lobby’s air conditioning unit. I propped myself up on a pile of mismatched pillows, watching through the glass doors an assembly of people outside in the smokers’ circle. Hmmm, how I longed to be cool.

I crept my fingers across my cheeks, feeling the surface of my skin under my lanky fingers. Closing my eyes to the swirl of sounds outside, I lazily yawned, emptying my energy into a merciful rest.

“There you are!”

I suddenly opened my eyes. She was standing over me.

“Wanna go get food? I’m starving.”

I looked at my watch, feeling reproachful from the midnight hour drowsiness.

“I can give you gas money.”

With a small sigh, and feeling slightly worried that I would upset her, I obeyed. She followed me to my burgundy compact car, energized to direct me to a nearby fast food restaurant.

Piling myself into the front seat, slinging crumpled papers in the back, we left to soak up the midnight air. The cold draft numbed my fingers as I changed the music station. Weaving through stillness she sat tapping through text messages, getting annoyed when I attempted to turn the music up. I did not want to be here. Absorbing her excessively perfumed skin, frozen behind a windshield of red and green lights, I was trapped and unable to make conversation, entirely immobilized by the fear of ruining her recreational phone scanning. How could I be so nervous around a freshman?

“You know that I model right?” She spilled in her overly confident, fast-paced voice.

“Cool,” I quietly murmured, hoping the silence would fill the void better than my voice.

“Do you want my modeling audition at *Playboy*?”

“Uhhh...I don't think I'm the type for *Playboy*?”

“Are you sure? You can have it.” She strung her sentence together in a swift motion, rubbing her petite lips together quickly.

“I'm not really blonde or busty.”

The conversation dropped. I sat tapping my fingers against the steering wheel, touching my nails to the empty corners of air.

“I think we bring out the best in each other,”

she finally announced. “Don’t you think?”

“Uhhh...”

“We’re not like fighting all of the time like I do with most people.”

“Nice.” I could not think of anything else to say as she mentioned several encounters with others that made her severely displeased. “What assholes. I was talking to Wes and he told me that Africa should be destroyed, just because they’re using so much of our economy’s money.”

I sighed unable to contribute. His bravado didn’t surprise me with his old world slacks and bow ties, bright blue eyes, and money.

The air started to cool the tension.

“Don’t you think he’s an asshole?” she said.

Forcing me into an opinion, I backed down as quickly as I could. Though he was callous, Wes was a popular kid, admired by peers for his beauty, wealth, and power, a destructive combination. He made me quiver. “Uhhh...I don’t really know him. I tried doing a project with him once, but he was kind of a control freak. Other than that, I’ve never really talked to him.”

We maneuvered our way through the concrete layout of the drive-thru, her olive knees twitching with excitement as she grabbed her purse that was situated at the base of her feet. The speaker stared at us silently. She huffed with impatience, stricken with the impulse to yell “HELLO.”

Finally a voice rang out from the previously hushed box as she ordered her cheese quesadilla and chocolate cake.

“I think I want to work on being sexy,” I carelessly shaped these words, unintentionally directing them at her.

“Like me!” she perkily responded mounting her bare leg up onto the steering wheel, her miniskirt no longer being an object of concealment. Her deep laugh, much richer than her voice, startled me. I confusedly eyed her leg, doused in sheen and petals of light from the glowing fast food menu. “I’m just kidding,” she said laughing further.

We arrived back at the dorm. With a swift lunge forward, she hugged me and planted a tiny kiss on my cheek. Her darkly painted long fingernails prodded briefly into the small notch of my back.

“Let’s hang out tomorrow,” she asked, walking through the door of the lobby.

I gave a brief nod, and headed back to my room. Being with Jassi was like having a personal sitcom sidekick.

Our friendship slowly waned to nothing by the end of fall semester. Everyone went home for break, and though she lived only thirty minutes away from me outside of school, I was never invited to visit her \$2 million home in Laguna again. It was all too much: her squeaking voice, her pet Chihuahua named Pupkin--a deliberate alteration of the word pumpkin to match her forever cooing vocals--, and the slur of insults that she normally voiced way too loudly in grocery stores.

“Look at all of these poor people. The Inland Empire is such a poor county. Don’t you think?” Her voice matching that of a scream, I embarrassingly looked away, with a hope that I wouldn’t find the eyes of someone who had heard her insults.

“Well, it’s not that bad, it’s just a working class community,” I said hesitantly.

Her laugh unnerved me, revealing a voice of its own, as if to say, “You’re too sweet.”

If she didn't speak about money or how popular she was at fraternity parties, it was always about her modeling career or how she only dated guys who conformed to her standards of beauty, which usually involved having an 8-pak or more. "I just can't date Black guys. I know that seems mean, but I just can't, even if he is a model. I'm talking to this one guy named Christian, and he's so handsome. I want to give him a chance, but he's Black. That's the only problem." She didn't care that I was Black, though.

Things steadily worsened when she continuously begged me for car rides. Her whining temperament coupled with feisty melodramatic anger generally was the deal breaker. She piled into my car frequently, us taking trips to Pet Mart or some other local shop for her vegetarian cuisine. She refused to eat food from the university's cafeteria.

Though she stood up for me sometimes, not fearing to interrupt other's conversations if she heard anyone speaking badly about me, our friendship became a constant battle of me feeling guilty, bullied, then revoltingly frustrated. Tired of taking her pity gifts, which consisted of her buying me dinner at some "expensive" restaurant in the area, I realized that I could no longer put up with her pushiness. I wanted everything to end.

Finally, I started to close the curtain on our friendship after a stint in the main lobby. Her usual spell of fits erupted assiduously around midnight. I shepherded myself to two pushed together couches, propping up my computer and schoolwork. I played some easy going pop tunes, attempting to keep my

music relatively low so as not to disturb the people in the neighboring TV room.

Her tiny, Asian frame bolted into the lobby, upright and stolid as she stood near the decrepit wooden piano and rang out in full soprano her opera vocals. I tossed aside *Candide* and my French literature essay, pumping up my music a little louder. She didn't appear to notice my passive-aggressive defense.

"Hey," I heard the stern yet friendly voice of Collin emerge from the TV room, bound to the lobby by an adjacent door, "Jassi, we're trying to watch a movie. Can you practice somewhere else?" He closed the door behind him, a waft of red hair being the last thing I caught.

She balled her tiny fingers into fists, thrusting them toward the TV room. Opening that binding door that held a portal of momentarily black empty space then sudden shoots of flickering light she blurted, "I'm doing this assignment for class! Homework always comes first. I've been accepted into the highest music program at the university." She huffed, before storming out.

Initially, the movie got louder, as well as my music, when she continued to blast everyone with her strong, operatic voice, the music from the piano only serving as a backdrop to the waves of sound striking her vocal chords and then the air. Then everything paused except for my music when Collin re-entered the lobby, this time more disgruntled with Jassi's antics.

I heard them argue quickly underneath the rise and fall of my pop music.

"Don't try to put this on me, Jassi." He slammed the thick door. She stood pouting, flicking her

mascara-laden eyelashes in his direction, and tensely clutching the bottom of her black dress.

“Ughhhhhhhhhhh! He doesn’t understand! I was accepted into the Master’s program, meaning I have to practice every day for six hours. I can’t miss a day of training only because *he* wants to watch a movie. Academics always come first.” She threw out this string of retorts. I finally spoke up.

“You need to leave. You talk about Collin being rude? You didn’t even ask me if it was OK if you practiced in here. I’m in fourth year French, one of the highest levels of a language course at this university, and I have an important dissertation that I’m working on. *You* are being rude to *me*.”

“Well, this is the music room.” Her voice ached with disbelief and further annoyance.

“No, the music room is in the basement, where there’s another piano.” I rashly turned my pop tunes to full volume to emphasize that I was finished with the dispute. She stormed out, and I was left on the soft cushions of the pushed together lobby sofas, my body still shaking from the fact that I had finally stood up to her. No more sporadic car rides, no more crude insults, no more pay offs for hanging out. I didn’t want anymore of her pity gifts or brusque attitude. I was done.

The next time I saw her, her overflowing cleavage surpassing the brim of her shirt’s neckline, she was on top of the guy that I liked. I had to let Jassi go. Death to our friendship.

The evening crept by meticulously. It was around midnight, and though Friday evenings were christened for late night soirees of wine drinking and partying, I found myself in my usual state of loneliness, boarded up in a room with any homework assignment I could find to pass the time with. Whenever I peeked into the hallway, I could not push away my feelings of insecurity.

Eventually, I left the retreat of my dorm to linger by the television room, fumbling through my purse, pretending to be interested in something else. I passed by three times, stopping to unconsciously stare at everyone's darkened silhouette drowned in a fort of blue-green lights issuing from the TV. I tried to stand there coolly at one point, one leg crossed over the other, and shoulder posted against the door frame, but no one bothered to invite me in. When I walked by the last

time, the door had been closed. Taking this as a subtle hint, I mounted the stairs seeking action on another floor, tired of doing homework, and increasingly more insecure and aware that finding someone to hang out with was a dangerous ploy emotionally. Only as I shuffled upstairs, easily riddled by the closed doors of the television room, did I run into him, Evan.

Panicking, my eyes shifted downward. I only decided to look up at the last moment when our shoulders lightly passed each other. I caught sight of his pale face, blushing crimson cheeks, and wavy locks of hair puffed around his shoulders. He awarded me a brief smile and nod.

My feet fluctuated and my voice trembled. I threw out a “hi” and wave, reprimanding myself later for the redundancy. Pushing past the door at the top of the stairs, I made it to the next landing. I stood for a moment, ruminating on how I could integrate into his social circle. Talking to people frightened me, but standing next to him provoked anxiety that resonated all over, especially in my voice. Oftentimes, even an accidental glance from him made me nervous.

Daydreaming of how I wanted to sexily slither into the room where he sat, I walked, locating a seat on an overly large, yet soothing green couch in an upstairs lobby. I plotted ways to confidently waltz downstairs and mutter something profound enough to strike up a conversation. Going over my mental repertoire of our previous encounters, I decided that I would lure the guitar hero in by practicing my favorite riff on the front porch of the dormitory. Nervous to use the main staircase, because it cozily wound its way to the entrance of the television room, I left through another

exit, creeping along the small pathway outside, taking me back to my room.

Grabbing my guitar case, along with my laptop and music books, my entire body shook with anxiety. Stumbling through the door, Eskimo hat in hand, I toppled to the front porch staircase where I dropped everything, hands shaking, and mind setting up a multitude of conversations, preparing and rehearsing responses in case he stopped to talk. Thinking that he would have to pass by the front porch soon, I hastily warmed up my fingers on my guitar, and started practicing the bridge to “Walk with Me in Hell.” He never passed though, and after an hour of running through the same riff, I decided to pack up and leave.

Disappointed, I slunk back to my room using the side door again, miming affirmations to myself, and hoping to find some leak of confidence in my thoughts. Returning to my routine of homework, I busied myself with readings only deciding to leave my room once I heard a general crowd departing, their voices soon drifting through my windows. Floundering to the television room, planning to watch a trashy reality show, I found Evan sprawled on a table, shirt raised, and arranging to have a body shot.

Feeling borderline lucky, I curled my way past the table, facing the attached kitchen, only to find Jassi slapping around a persistent block of iced vegetables in a skillet. Trying to make small talk with her, I tiptoed between his conversation and mine, waiting for some cue to be invited into his world. The checkered black and white floor of the kitchen seemed only a readymade chessboard for me to swiftly navigate, breaking down the barriers between him and me.

Working up the nerve to approach him, I sat on the opposite edge of the table on the pretense that I could be normal, potentially cool. But everyone continued talking around me. I would hasten to nod at a statement that appeared to provoke a response from everyone. I smiled, conscious not to show too much teeth, aware of my fingers strumming my kneecaps and hair skirting past my shoulders. *Posture. Keep your back arched and chest pushed forward.*

I sat uncomfortably still, trying not to attract too much attention, occasionally running my fingers across my right cheek and chin, a nervous habit, or adjusting my shirt every second that my hands drifted apart from their tightened clasp. Overly aware of every minute, afraid of being too stiffly seated, I calculated my movements, dangling my ankles, or placing my hands next to my thighs to normalize my seated position. Every second teetered on the weight of my breath, pulling me into a hyper analytical and internal discussion. Afraid to speak or move, I soaked up every sound. I was not yet ready to be part of the laughter, petrified to embarrass myself.

Finally, I stood up, consciously leaving the table, and finding a spot on the couch next to Catherin, beautifully seated on the sofa, eyes closed and short choppy ringlets falling onto her crossed arms. She jumped a little when I approached the couch. I apologized for startling her and tried to make conversation, but found that to be more awkward, as she was slightly hung over.

Feeling out of control and frustrated, I impulsively asked if I could draw her, even though it was well past midnight. She agreed, as she was known for being obsessed with art, and quickly composed

herself, asking me where she should sit. I knew he was staring at me. I had to find a way to remedy the situation and to set myself apart from those he talked with. I shook off as many nerves as I could, and led her outside of the doorframe to sit on the bottom steps of the main staircase. Running to my room, I grabbed some music and art supplies, cautious not to disturb my now slumbering roommate. Yet, I was unsuccessful not to wake her after I clumsily ran into my grocery bag of recycled aluminum cans and bottles.

My fingers shook when I shut the door behind me and to my dismay it slammed loudly. I chided myself for being careless, and took a few paces forward toward that staircase, plugging in my radio, and loudly announcing that I was going to play my favorite song. Sitting in the doorframe, a foot away from my model, and crooning the lyrics to a slow indie hit, I drew Catherin as carefully as possible with my colored pastels. Evan walked forward while I sat singing, and stepped over my drawing only to disappear up the stairs, past my model.

I knew if I stopped drawing that I would fall into sobs. I finished an hour later, apologizing to my model about not drawing her nose correctly, and left to resume practicing guitar on the steps. After half an hour, I drowsily walked to my room, feeling tired, yet unable to fall asleep. Anxious to move around, I made my way to the building next door where maybe more people would still be awake.

He was there with others I had seen around campus, casually receiving a massage. I walked to the door, too defeated and tired to concoct a plan for conversation. After he let me in, I sat on the couch attempting to follow their talks on World War I. When

that failed and they switched topics, I asked if I could exchange seats with him and his masseuse who shared a swivel chair.

“I’ll trade seats with you,” I said.

“You traitor,” they laughed, making wordplay out of my question.

But something happened at that moment where both of them were inclined to stand up and stretch. I made a dive for the chair. He saw me and raced me there until I ended up partially on his right leg.

“Don’t be shy,” he said softly. “You can sit in the middle.”

I took a breath and moved myself over, excited to sit on his lap, and asked if we could spin. Thrusting my legs outward, I pulled us through seemingly endless circles. The wood paneling of the walls and fluorescent lights morphed into gold, glowing orbs.

We found each other in a darkened hallway, me tightly pressed against him and the wall, his hands stroking through the crown of my hair and pinning my arms above my head. He reminded me of Adam; I was scared, but I missed that feeling of being wanted. I pressed my lips against his neck, shoulders, and mouth, alternating while trying to keep my eyes closed. Then he took my hand, and pulled me into the nearby kitchen, where he dragged me to the floor and we further experimented.

“Seduce me,” he said.

“I don’t know how.”

“Take my hands and put them anywhere,” he said slowly...magically. His words tautly pressed against the navy-hued air.

I laughed a little, overly aware and self-conscious. I wanted to take his hands and wrap them

around my breasts, to move my mouth downward to his small beer-bellied abyss.

“What if I made you pick my nose,” I finally said.

He took his finger and nonchalantly picked my left nostril. We both laughed a little, his smirk making me hopeful. I sat, awkwardly on the floor beneath his legs. He wanted me to turn around completely and face him, asking me to jerk my hips forward. My legs awkwardly dangled on top of his, unable to find a comfortable position because of the wall behind him that was supporting his frame.

I contorted and pushed my hips forward as violently as I could, yet I couldn't feel anything.

“Is this supposed to be pleasurable?” I asked, confused by what I was doing. I wanted it to mean something, but I had felt nothing except a rising resentment. Maybe I would never belong to anyone like I had belonged to Adam.

“If you're doing it right,” he responded casually.

I asked him if we could switch places. He put me on the floor, back first, and wrestled snugly on top.

“I like this position better,” I stated.

“Don't be lazy like the other girls,” he snickered as he wrangled his hips to fit in place with mine. He wanted me to be on top.

We laughed and sat back up, returning to the position against the wall again, and I took my hands and moved them across his chest. He wanted me to seduce him, but I didn't know how, so we continued to kiss. I tried to relax, sliding my hands vertically, first down his pale blue T-shirt, then slowly feeling my way around his pockets, careful not to go too far.

“Was that good?” I asked.

“It was kind of teasing, the way you pressed tightly on my chest, then lightened your fingers around my crotch.”

I sat in disbelief. Why did I want him so badly? Why was he so startlingly attractive like all of the other guys that I had wanted before him? And most importantly, why couldn't I shake these thoughts of Adam?

“Want to try something new?” I posed this as a question, hoping he would want to change something up.

He pulled down my pink cotton halter-top for shock value and to emphasize that he was game for anything. I sat there in his lap speechless. This was what I had wanted. He slowly wound his fingers down the front of my legs. My chest heaved in slow breaths.

“It's really tingly right there.” I broke the silence, as he fondled at the inner seams of my thighs.

“I bet,” he said dryly, unimpressed and irritated.

Finally, I worked up the nerve to ask him. I moved my hands, scoping out the inner regions of his pockets, I wrapped my hands around something cylindrical. Pausing, I wasn't sure if this was it. Apologizing immediately, I asked “Was that your...?” I couldn't finish, exhilarated, heart pulsating, did I just touch his penis?

“That was my guitar slide.”

“Oh.”

He pulled out the thin piece of metal, bulging from his pants pocket and I embarrassingly toyed with it.

“I thought it was...” Before I could finish, he took my rigid fingers, gripping them around something with a much thicker mass, smooth with palpable heat.

“When I wear skinny jeans, I have to let my junk hang to the right.”

I didn't know how to respond, so I bluntly asked if I could see his penis, throwing up the words into the invisible air, hoping that they would catch hold of the magic.

He let me unzip his tight skinny jeans, as I pulled the thick mass of skin forward, velvety and comfortably tepid under my palm. Surprisingly, he let me pull at it and undress him further.

“I can't believe you've never done this. Most girls know what they want by now. You've never given a blow job or been eaten out before?”

I shook my head. The only intimacy I could ever remember was being with Adam, and even though it shouldn't count, to me it did and I needed to erase all of that.

He took his penis from my hands and fingered the clear, leaking slime. Pressing his fingers to his lips, he offhandedly said to himself that he was salty. I almost wanted to push my mouth to the front of the trickling substance, allowing myself a momentary taste. But I shied away.

It was 4 o'clock in the morning, and he was tired, but I still wanted to go a little further. Before I let him escape, I asked “Can I try to jack you off?”

“First you have to seduce me.”

“I don't know how,” I shyly responded, afraid to make any sudden moves that would disinterest him.

“You were close when you said my penis was warm,” he said.

I tugged at him and his penis that he neatly tucked to the right of his pants seam. I pulled his jeans down to the tiled floor. I didn't know what to do, except

pull with my hands forward, watching the skin drag and wrinkle beneath my fingers. I didn't want to hurt him. The folds of his penis rippled under the haul of my hands. Frightened, I immediately thought to loosen my grip, until he grabbed me pressing his lips against mine. Clutching my neck, he slid his hand through my jeans and pushed his fingers inward.

"I don't want to be too forward, but I can go grab a condom," he asked. His voice sunk into my ears.

I paused. My guitar hero was right here, unzipped and beautiful. I stood there teetering on the edge of madness and self-control. I told him I wanted to stop and quickly pulled up his pants. I couldn't go through with this.

"You know, you've blue-balled me three times tonight. Now I'm gonna have to go home and finish what you've started."

"Is that an emotional state?"

"No. It's very physical."

I shrugged, and at that we made our way through the lobby. "Why did you hate me so much when you first met me?" I asked.

"Ehhh...I think I was just casually disinterested."

We stepped outside and before he retreated to his car and I to my room I asked if I could pick his nose to return the favor. "Which nostril?" I questioned.

"I don't care, I'm getting cold," he aggravatingly announced, his small frame trembling in the November wind.

With a small flick, we departed, him to his oversized van, me to my dorm room.

Evan Berry, my guitar hero, was lost in the dawn between highways and the frozen orange California sky.

29

I could not stop reading.

Jane Eyre consumed my entire life, or at least it felt like it. I was more of a *Wuthering Heights* girl, but I desperately wanted to like the cult classic from the other Brontë sister.

I painstakingly eyed my clock every time I finished reading an incremental two pages. But I had to finish. It was my silly idea to brush up on some reading for a few extra credits this semester, and I could not let my faculty sponsor down.

By 2 a.m., I felt like death. My right eye socket floundered in pain, and my blurred vision made full passages of text disorienting to read. Soon I could not comprehend any layer of information nomadic in the canals of my brain. I'm certain neurons were short-circuiting every time I attempted to keep up with the story.

A part of me raged with jealousy. I listened to the copious laughter from outside. It had bulldozed through my remaining concentration, knocking me square in the path of my low esteem and other deleterious thoughts in my unconscious.

If there was nothing more that I had wanted out of college, it was to be part of the infamous smokers' circle. It was the *crème de la crème* hangout spot exclusive to my dorm and right on the other side of *these* lobby windows.

Flaming plaid and charcoal colored jeans flickered past kitschy cabin furniture outside. Ghost-like hands waved cigarettes like wands, orchestrating conversations and keeping listeners spellbound. I wanted to be part of that flame before it died out, before that moment they were having passed. Yet, here I was wasting away another night, nose in my book, frantic to stay on top of my reading schedule.

Two chapters a night. Inhale. Exhale. Two chapters a night.

I folded my legs and tried to let the words of *Jane Eyre* float through me, but I had been reading the same passage for the last ten minutes. To my demise, my concentration folded entirely when Maddie had entered, her evocative blue eyes manipulating the first smile of the day from me.

“Emma! Come outside and hang out,” she said as she rushed from the entrance of the dorm room lobby to a side hallway, disappearing first into the fluorescent lights and then into the shadows.

I had never been invited to join the group, especially from someone as attractive as Maddie. I took several deep breaths and dog-eared my page of *Jane Eyre* to be continued during the a.m. hours of dawn. As

soon as I released my legs from their study position, several people caved into the lobby, their voices loud with passion and youth, side conversations about mixing drugs and alcohol rippling through the once mellow room.

Maddie introduced her friends after she had returned, her golden hair mistakenly brushing the side of my cheek when she leaned in to reveal everyone's names. "This is my good friend Kev," she finally said.

Kev gave me a quick once over and then started to make out with the guy nearest to him. "That's Cody," she whispered. "So how do you feel about your sexuality?"

I suddenly blurted, "I'm A-Sexual."

"So you're pretty much going to wank off for the rest of your life," she asked with mock seriousness. I didn't expect her to be so forward and we weren't even friends yet.

"Yeah, I guess." What else could I have said?

"I know what you mean," she responded.

More people dribbled into the lobby, more of Maddie's friends.

They sat casually on the couch with their tattoos, faux leather jackets, and slicked hair. These were the people that I had wanted to be friends with.

"I'll be right back, Emma," Maddie said.

I wanted Maddie to cradle me in the loose folds of her fast-moving life and to take away every moment of self-doubt. Maybe I could be in the crowd that she had belonged to.

Maddie didn't return that night, but I stayed there with her friends. Aden, a late straggler, propped his tall and lanky body on one of the couches, unaware

of anything but his hunger. Kev closed his eyes; his beau Cody had already left. I stared at Aden and then Perry, both on separate couches.

Raye messed around with her guitar, singing self-written songs of how daddy didn't love her. Her navy blue tattoo stretched across the length of her neck and dripped into her porcelain-hued breast. I couldn't help but notice how heavy they seemed, full and luscious on her small frame as if she were a caricatured China doll. Her tattoo drew more attention to her chest, giving the illusion of being a heavy necklace, permanently there accompanying her and her listless guitar playing. This life surrounding me, the buzz of the people I labeled "cool" had been the life I had always wanted.

I ushered Raye over, luring her out of her guitar strumming and melancholy songs. I joked that we should pounce on one of the sleeping guys. "This will be so rebellious," I muttered, trying to channel another side of me, my inner daredevil.

She laughed along with Kev, his smirk flooding me with energy.

"She's so cute," they both said, amused at my scheme.

Flicking off the lights in the lobby, I mounted a table behind the couch where Perry was snoozing. Before I could jump, Raye went in for a full dive, smashing into his aqua-colored sleeping bag. Waves of polyester and nylon crashed into each other as Perry fumbled to stable himself. Then I made my move, flinging myself on top of him next. But he ignored me, grabbing at Raye instead and pushing away my fake tickles.

His eyes made a beeline toward her chest. Who wouldn't notice those white bulbs of femininity bright and dangling? He wanted them, as if they were carrots strung in front of a horse's mouth. Her brunette hair fell around her round cheeks. Together they held each other and laughed.

I left, finding solace on a nearby empty chair. Back to *Jane Eyre*.

The clock roamed around the 5 a.m. hour. I watched the partial influx of sunlight spill over into the huge windowed wall of the lobby. Raye plastered against the body of Perry, both sleeping. Aden with his dangling feet propped on the couch. He and Kev were the only ones still awake and partially engaged in conversation.

"Shit I can't sleep." Kev tossed his hands around tiredly, his voice flamboyant, dragging out each syllable.

"I'm so fucking hungry," Aden chimed in finally awake.

"I have burnt popcorn and a wafer cookie that I got for Christmas in my room," I giddily stated. "Oh and some chocolates, but my roommate coughed on those."

"Well if those are my only options, sick roommate's chocolate and burnt popcorn, then I'll take it," said Aden. His eyes were downturned with drowsiness. He was going to pass out soon. I needed to hurry because I knew it was my last chance to impress him.

I hastily sped off to my room to retrieve the goods, grabbing one of my roommate's sugary sodas as well.

“I got you a drink too, my roommate won’t care,” I said returning.

“Oh my God, you’re amazing! How is this burnt?” he asked as he stuffed the two-day old popcorn in his mouth unknowing of its age.

“Some of the kernels are black,” I said in amazement.

“It’s all good to me. I owe you my life,” he said exaggeratedly, mouth chomping down and full of squashed kernels.

“Shit motherfuckers, I still can’t sleep,” Kev lazily manhandled the pile of pillows his lean body rested on.

“Want to go snort some sleeping pills?” Aden asked, finishing off the two wafer cookies in the Christmas tin can.

“How are you guys going to snort sleeping pills?” I asked, amused and curious.

“We’re going to crush them up.”

I laughed to myself. This is what I had wanted—life in the fast lane. I watched them leave, retreating to a nearby bathroom to do drugs, just like in the movie *Garden State*.

They came back five minutes later, but they were passed out in ten. I sat, admiring the popcorn kernels that missed Aden’s anxious fingers, burned and surrounding the soda can. Every one was asleep. The perfect time to sneak out.

I left the scene excitedly. Everything that I had seen still resonated. I had witnessed drug taking from kids with tattoos. I felt as though I had just lived in an indie film shot with an off-color filter to give everything a different sentiment than reality.

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I had become a ghost painfully moving through everyone's life riddles. I gathered all motives, collected all intentions, and studied them with my operator-like emotions, unsure of how to respond without a stiff air of pretension.

Hiding behind headphones, I tried to listen, but everyone wanted me to be silent...better yet they wanted me gone. I quieted myself, buried behind the spines and bodies of books.

The couch caught my stiff back. I uncomfortably searched for dance moves to prove that I preferred the company of music instead. I avoided the private talks shared just between those two.

"I lost my virginity to him," she had told me the other day in the car, on our way back from the skate park.

I started daydreaming, blocking out the trails of everyone else's words in the surrounding lobby, retreating to a memory.

"That's sad." I couldn't think of anything else to say. How embarrassing.

I had just turned the music louder in the car. Nothing says silence better than music.

Maybe I am unreal. On a purely physics quantum scale, I am a large body of isolated matter, leaving behind nothing but tiny, insignificant memories, those that don't even create afterthoughts. "What was her name again?" That's what they would say about me. What's life anyway? Nothing. There we go.

Nothing.

Life is nothing, therefore I am nothing.

Music is the only silence, besides broken heartbeats that time traps in slowed perception. Those heartbeats need to be silenced. No pain. No movement. Just silence.

I held my book on top of the solid, thick armrest. My eyes detected nothing further but blurred lines after hours of reading. Yet, the headphones remained intact—solid, unmoved, pumping out sounds and molecules. Maybe I will dance some more, nod my head a few times, close my eyes and soak in everything but them. This will be for them...against them.

"Headphones would be great, this is a private conversation," she had said to me when I entered the lobby prepared to cozy up to the couches with nothing but books and confidence.

I asked if they could watch my things, as I left
feeling discarded and in search of headphones.

Music.

Silence.

Them.

I hated being alone.

31

I went home that weekend from school. Worn and agonized from working on the university's yearbook, my new editorial job after I had quit working for the campus newspaper. I pulled into the new apartment complex that my mom and her fiancé now occupied. I steadily paced myself. Entering into the living room, I was met by an open patio door, my mother in tears, and a soothing string of words coming from Rick by that back door entrance. I stepped in, curiously unaware.

"She can't...she can't even stand." My mom broke forth the last words into an assembly of delinquent, painful screams. "She can't even stand, Emma. Try calling her, maybe she'll come to you."

I walked confidently, sure that she would come to me, but as I called her name, she sat there on the

cement patio. As always, her brave brown eyes beckoning a sense of inner joy though she was immobile.

The three of us tried calling her, lifting her, hauling her away to the car, but she just smiled, offering us no condolences, only more tears. My mom entered and left sporadically. I could hear her teeth chattering sobs in the living room and her mumbles: “I said I would be strong for Emma.”

She would find her way outside again with a diminished spark in her eyes, more afraid, more panicked, more disturbed.

“Can we slide her on the rug to the car?”

Rick asked.

Mom frantically grabbed the rug from the dining room, but we still couldn’t lift her heavy, heaving frame onto the cream colored, knitted rug.

“Let’s see...” he whispered to himself, attempting to culminate new ideas, new ways of transporting my dying dog out of the living room, into the car, to the vet.

“Maybe we can roll her out if we put her on my computer chair,” I solemnly said.

“That’ll work,” Rick announced, as my mom continued to bite her pink bottom lip, her eyeglasses stained with tiny drops of tears.

I lugged my black, cheaply made, supermarket chair from my bedroom. The wheels disturbed the Venetian blinds guarding the patio entrance. Those slender off-white panels frantically shook then relapsed, as I stopped the chair in front of Tina. Her tail still wagging, unbeknownst to her that she would not be returning to her sacred spot of comfort. Her golden brown hair, rich with trapped sunlight, rippled in a

passing breeze still feeding her smile. I couldn't believe that I was letting go of my 12-year-old friend.

He tried lifting her, but her back legs wouldn't completely grasp the rim of the chair, lagging behind and causing her to slide off and land on the ground.

My mom couldn't watch anymore, briefly tucking herself into a corner, crying intensely, handing me the keys to the car.

Finally, supporting the weight of Tina, her fiancé and I gathered her paralyzed legs, moving hastily to load her into the trunk of the hatchback, setting her on top of a pink, corduroy-textured towel.

She sat, panting the entire time, as we drove around the corner to the vet.

“Should I get a stretcher?” The veterinarian hurriedly rushed out.

“No, I can carry her,” Rick said, though his thin legs buckled beneath the stance of the golden retriever's crippled form. I held her paw as he took her in, the car left stationed in the middle of the strip mall. But it was OK considering our circumstances, our dying family member.

My mom raced inside, as the woman immediately offered us a seat in a tiny backroom, prodding us for questions to put together a diagnosis. Tina just sat there, little spurts of urine draining from her inert form.

“You've mentioned that she's not been able to eat for a couple of days now?”

My mom tried to tidy her face for the moment, tried to look brave under the solemn eyes of the woman and her white-robed figure. “Correct. We started noticing at the beginning of the month that she wasn't

able to walk around the full apartment complex anymore. Then she wasn't even able to go to the door. I would come home from work and her dish would still be full. She couldn't even eat." She released a staccato of rapid breaths.

The woman herself inhaled, stroking the fur of the ailing dog dying under her eyes. "It's OK," she crooned, nodding to her assistant to get some wipes for my dog's leaking bladder.

I could only sit, my legs folded on top of the linoleum floors, stroking my fingers across her paws. Her eyes gave me a once over, then rapidly moved from the doctor, to my mom, to Rick, and then to me again. I don't think Tina knew, but I still wanted to alleviate some of her anxiety. She hated going to the vet.

"Well," the vet continued, "we have two options. We can either keep her here and go through an extensive examination to get a better feel of how to treat the infection...or...we can put her down."

My mom sunk into a fluid stream of sobs, pressing her fingers to her lips as if to block the passage of screams that she choked back then released. Moving her head away she nodded, searching for the right words, "I think we should put her down."

"There's no chance we can save her?" I piped up, afraid that we were losing the belief that my dog was a fighter. "Maybe she just needs surgery."

"No Emma, her quality of life just won't be the same."

I looked down at the pink nose and soft, mangled fur, dirtied with leaves. Leaning over to kiss her forehead, my cheeks softened with tears. Afraid to lose my friend. Angry that I couldn't save her.

“All I need is your signature here,” the woman said as she handed my mother a clipboard, the fluorescent lights hanging in my mom’s tears. “We can send the ashes to you if you want.”

My mom frowned at the thought, immediately waving it off. Photos would suffice.

“No, that’s fine,” she whispered.

The eyes of the vet seemed to verbally project an understanding as the woman solemnly said to us, “I’ll be in the back. You can knock whenever you’re ready.” She paused as though to offer an apology. “You can spend as much time with her as you want.” She left, sliding the door behind her.

We looked down at our friend, mom and I, our eyes releasing tragedy and memories.

“Remember, Emma, that one time you got mad at Tina for going into the garden and stealing one of our cucumbers?” mom said, her lips curving into a tiny smile.

“Yeah,” I sighed, laughing back tears. “Or the time when Tina bit that man who was going to attack you?”

We both looked at her. “You were such a good dog,” my mom finally said. “I wish we would have taken better care of you. You know Emma, it’s like we saved Tina’s life.” She looked up at me. “Remember when we went to the animal shelter and they were going to put her to sleep because no one wanted her? We saved her.” She sighed, slightly relieved to come to that revelation, moment’s before her death. “You had a good life.”

I didn’t want to let go of her paw, bestowing several more kisses on her forehead, “You’re such a

pretty girl,” I whispered in her ear, as Rick knocked on the back door.

A few seconds later, the doctor returned, bearing a platter of three needles. “The way the procedure works is that I inject her with three applications, and she slowly relaxes. It’s as if she’s falling asleep. She won’t feel a thing.” The vet enunciated these words, careful to make sure that each syllable was understood. “Do you want to stay in the room during the procedure?”

My mom shook her head firmly. “I won’t be able to handle it,” she said frantically, her voice breaking into more fitful tears.

“I’ll stay,” I murmured, tears like crystal beads rolling from my eyes and onto my trembling hands. I didn’t want to let go, even as my mom and Rick closed the door...even as the vet inserted the needles one by one into the body of my still cheerful friend...even as I kissed the warm head of my dog’s fur murmuring “I love you’s.” When she closed her eyes, it was exactly how the doctor described. She went to sleep: quietly, bravely, and totally unaware that she was losing her family. That we had lost her.

We exited the office, the pink towel still in the trunk of the hatchback, my eyes locked on the window as I watched from the backseat my mom lug her restless form into the car. We drove home empty-handed, momentarily recalling more scenes that we could think of between us and our dog.

“I knew she wouldn’t make it. I could sense it when we moved to California...even when we moved to our new apartment complex. Her eyes said it all.”

I closed mine against the glass of the car, not wanting to see the traffic or machismo of life speed by me. I just wanted to be alone.

“Can i crash in ur room 2nite?”

I sent the text in a flash of fury and streaming tears, my feet dangling on the rim of a toilet. I hid, my body curled in the cramped stall of the second floor bathroom, reading and briefly absorbing the graffiti so close to my shoulders.

I never wanted them to see my face again. I knew they would be looking for me, combing through the darkness of nighttime, Bryan and Ash with their confused eyes.

Receiving no response from Maddie, I ventured into the hallway after a short while. I mounted the stairway to the roof of the building; the actual entranceway was locked, though. Hugging my knees closer to my chest, I sat there. My breathing slackened as I swallowed sticky saliva and silenced my whimpers. I

heard voices becoming louder in the hallway beneath me. It wasn't them.

I loosened my grip on the edge of the stair where I sat. Standing, I used the support of the banister. I couldn't hide here forever. Slowly, I re-entered the world. I dragged my frame through the air and found myself momentarily at the door of my room. Neither of my roommates were in. Alyssa generally left on the weekends for debate and Kelsey had disappeared, as she did on most party nights.

I stood outside of the wooden door of my room, afraid and completely certain that they would look for me there. So I left, climbing out of a window on the first floor landing, stepping outside onto the uneven asphalt and into the evening air. The parking lot became a vision of more tears as I spotted his van, Evan's dark burgundy Astro looming in the parking space before me.

I gritted my teeth and internally fought with myself. It wasn't her fault. But I let envy brew further. How could I trust her, my skateboarding friend, my partner in crime?

Ash and I had left Bryan's room, carrying a bag of cartoon tattoos, excited to see who would put them on with us. Smugly walking down the halls of the dorm with a damp sponge in hand, a bag of snacks, and the Ziplock of cut up temporary tattoos, we climbed each staircase in search of open doors and groups of people. We made it to the third floor landing, my hands shaking, crinkling the bag of assorted pretzels, cheese puffs, and crackers, as I walked past the door where Evan sat cozily between a group of friends.

“Should I ask if they want tattoos? Evan’s in there,” I inquired. Ash and Bryan were lounging near the floor’s water fountain.

“Yeah! Let’s do it.” Ash pulled me forward, her thick mane of hair bouncing behind us as she scooped me into the entrance of the room. I couldn’t speak. I hurriedly scanned the bedroom of silent eyes, eventually focusing my sight on the floor. I feared to look up again.

“Do you guys want to put on tattoos with us?” Ash spoke up, rattling the bag in midair, her charming Spanish accent grabbing the attention of everyone.

“Of course.” Evan slunk over; his wavy blonde hair caught in the room’s lights. Excitedly he followed Ash over to the water fountain, where Bryan wetted the sponge.

“Have we met before?” he asked. He donned a different voice reminiscent of an actor from a 1950s flick and drunkenly cupped Ash’s hand.

I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t stand being here. Every nerve in me swelled with pain. “You’ve met her three times already,” I said, slightly peeved and grabbing handfuls of pretzels from the bag Bryan held. I slowly licked the remnants of salty crumbs from my fingers, attempting to be flirtatious instead of agitated.

“Ah.” He chuckled. “Well nice to meet you again. So where are you going to put my tattoo?” He raised his shirt, revealing a skull that spanned his entire chest with a snake winding through it, the one that I had mistaken for a cobra when he showed it to me last year.

“Uh, hm. I don’t know. Where do you want it?” Ash asked.

“How about here, in the center of the skull’s eye.”

Ash held the bag of tattoos and the small pair of scissors, while Bryan handed her the damp sponge. Pressing against the front of his small pale chest after Evan had selected which cartoon character he wanted, I felt my dimple of heartbeats become an unwieldy battery of pain. Each second pecking by was a whiplash of blur. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. I just stood there, as more people entered into the hallway, curious about these temporary tattoos.

"Now why would I get a fake tattoo when I have a real one?" Dan asked, his usual indifference making me more frenzied and embarrassed. Abby opted to have one on her boobs, while Trenton with his tall 6'3 frame, hovered over Evan, silent and disinterested.

"I don't know, just get one," said Evan, responding to Dan, as Ash handed me the bag of tattoos. Bryan tossed the sponge in my direction, but Dan felt secure enough to put the tattoo on without help, snatching the moistened material from my lifeless fingers and pressing the sponge and cartoon character to the forearm of his skin.

Right then I could feel it. The panic, the shame, my usual disconnect from humanity.

I was banished from the crowd.

I traveled the hallway, in search of a place to cry.

I wanted to be that girl with thick hair that curled past my shoulders, sponging down guys like Evan with temporary cartoon tattoos. What was wrong with me? I couldn't stop asking myself, my mind becoming a vessel carrying uneasy thoughts. I'm not as pretty as her. I'm not as popular as her. What's the point of even trying?

I hid from them, seeking refuge in a bathroom on another floor, thick slime ballooning from my nose. I recalled the first time that I had met Ash, skating in front of my dorm. I had been ecstatic seeing another girl skate, and I quickly introduced myself announcing that I skated, too. She eyed my vintage lavender pants, black baby doll pumps, and lace detailed white button down. I could feel her silently mocking my girly get up. But in the end, she introduced herself, agreeing to meet later for a nighttime skate session. That was in November, after the Jassi regime.

Ash and I hung out off-and-on for months, doing hour-long skate sessions at the back of the school, while avoiding the rants of public safety officers. But she wanted more, a friendship. During a ride back from the skate park, she told me the story of how she had lost her virginity to a guy in San Francisco, she invited me to the mall, she showed me that she could be a girl, too, outside of soiled jeans and baseball caps. Now I was losing her to my insanity. Or maybe she was just like the rest of them, cunning, beautiful, and careless.

I was locked behind the stall: wetted red eyes, leaking nose, and heart aflame that thumped vigorously until it ignited, lighting me on fire. This had happened so many times before. I didn't want another repeat, another falter into pits of insecurity. Another reminder of Adam and his ability to justify the pain caused by others: "...maybe they're right..." I could still hear his voice lingering in the back of my fractured thoughts.

Yet I had already felt the blows when Evan had raised his shirt. His bright blue eyes struck Ash with palpable interest.

My cellphone hummed, releasing a small glow of white and blue light. A text from Ash: "Where r u?"

I didn't respond. Shaken with sadness, I slapped the phone in the palm of my hand as I stooped on the edge of the toilet. I feared that they would search for me in the bathroom and my feet would give me away.

After I soothed my blaring red nose and puffed cheeks, I ventured out of the oppressive stall. I wanted to curl myself into a ball in the holy ground of Maddie's room, the place of all beauty. I could already see her striking blonde hair and huge blue eyes, as if she were a descendant from an anime comic, the girl that all Japanese girls dreamed of being, the girl that I too wanted to be. But that was impossible. I sent a quick text, wanting to crash in her room, but I never heard back.

Cautiously moving through the halls, I finally stashed away into the TV room. Immobile, and less than intact, I drew closer to the voices of reality show contestants, positive that I never wanted to be part of the outside world again, positive that I never wanted to see Ash again. Positive that I had failed.

Walking away from Michael, my awkward photography professor, into a dome of sunlight after our argument, I learned to trust in my work even more.

“Emma, look...look...look,” Michael’s mild stutter was momentarily distracting, yet always awarded me a brief chuckle as he ran his fingers over his empty scalp then the mole decorating his right temple, “what would be the point of creating art if it were only for your benefit?” He spoke slowly and deliberately to emphasize his point, fanning his fingers like he was attempting to control the delivery of his words.

“I’m not trying...trying to be mean, but really what...what would the point be?”

“Art is created for personal value,” I said. “Art comes from personal experiences and whether an audience member relates or not shouldn’t matter.”

“See...look...look...look, all I’m saying is, and I’m really not trying to hurt your feelings, is that...that’s selfish. People create art for other people, not for themselves. Or else, what would be the point of people having galleries to show off their work. Why...why would people care?”

A blonde girl not too far from me nodded her head in agreement, twiddling with her long, wavy locks. “No one would care if art was just created for yourself,” she chimed in.

I was baffled by the conversation. Several students remained quiet in the graphic design lab, all of us seated around a long wooden table. They seemed to be engaged momentarily in our debate, finally trickling back into their own thoughts after they realized that this would be a prolonged feud.

“What would be the point of creating art if it weren’t for you?” I sincerely asked.

“Emma, not...not to be mean...but that’s selfish. Can...can you see where I’m coming from?”

“No.” I looked down at my printed photography. “I think that’s why I had so many problems with this assignment. It was always what Michael wanted, and that frustrated me.” I knotted my fingers, tense with embarrassment, eyes tipped downward. I tried to avoid showing my mortification at my heated admittance to not liking his teaching style. “I couldn’t connect at all with my work, and this bothered me so much. I didn’t feel comfortable completing the assignment at all.”

“Look...look...look.” He continued to multitask, printing the work of other students, his wrinkled purple polo clinging to him in the stuffy room. “What do you like?” He pointed around the table at different students’ work. I shook my head to each photo that he acknowledged, even mine. Though truthfully, I liked the large print of the blurred tree, taken with a pinhole camera as if for the purpose of adding suspense to the black and white image.

“See, even if you look at Clair’s work, she uses her wooly mammoth stuffed animal in her photos because that has meaning to her,” I said, fighting to provide sustenance for my opinion. “Even in her story she uses it.”

“I’m not saying that artists don’t...don’t use personal experiences, but...but...but only that the majority of artwork isn’t based on personal experience. People just want to create things that are cool. What do you think Clair?”

“It’s interesting because I took the writing class with you Emma, and I liked the majority of your work,” she smiled at me from across the table, her darkly spiked hair accentuating her soft complexion and jet black eyes. “I mean it was really abstract and I had to read it a couple of times, but I liked that it was difficult to understand.”

“Ok...ok...ok, what’s your story about?” Michael asked.

“It’s kind of an autobiographical frame story, about a depressed man who remarries into a family where he sexually abuses his step-daughter. I was never sexually abused by my father in waking life though, only physically abused.” I quickly iterated the last point so as not to awaken my slumbering peers from their

daydreams. “Anyway the main character ends up carrying this emotional damage throughout her life and into most of her relationships.”

“See...see what’s the general message in the story John?” Mark asked of the student sitting next to him. John’s aloof blue eyes mimicked his empty-handed expressions as he answered Michael.

“Emotional baggage.” He shrugged, seeming quite bored and unsure of how to respond without exciting either party.

“And...and...and..?” Mark paused. There was no immediate response. “Family.” Mark uttered the word as if it were the only probable solution to his question. “There’s the aspect of family that I can relate to.” Once again he paced his words at a calculated speed. “That’s bigger than you. Can...can...can you see where I’m coming from?”

“No, that’s my personal experience, and if you can relate to it, then great. But I didn’t write that specifically for you to connect with. It’s like music. Look at pop artists who create art for other people, and they’re not even taken seriously.” My voice began to rise, losing the hesitancy that once lived in my mouth and cheeks. My tongue dripped with backlashes to his nonsensical words.

“That’s not art,” he said.

“My point exactly.”

Michael continued to vocalize his opinion for another half hour, even after students left and class ended. I sat there, feeling diminutive under his scrutiny. He probably assumed that I was just another whiny teenager who knew nothing about life yet. Finally, he stood up, aiming his final words toward my pouting visage.

“How else do you know if you’re writing is good or not if you don’t compare yourself to artists like Danielle Steele?”

“I don’t compare myself to other artists. I just write from what I know.”

He smiled. “That’s...that’s good. That’s probably how you stay sane.” He raised his eyebrows, and with both feet out of the door, he ended the discussion. I sat there absorbing the warm silence from the sweltering graphic design lab, wondering if I should start comparing my work to other artists, making it “cool.” No...that would be wagering my soul. Reese, my creative writing professor, wouldn’t approve.

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I couldn't even fathom being there, agonizing in strips of raw emotion, bare backs of tears gliding down my cheeks. I've never felt so diminished and unaware of time, as if every moment paused and bound itself to my witless, interminably miserable heart. It made me aware of my failures, my routine trip-ups, slamming my lips together in awkward conversation. Maybe *Lord of the Rings* was not my savior. I hunted for those movies at the local library just to impress Evan, to woo him into taking me into the bathroom again like he did with other girls now.

His milk-white hands, fingers dripping around her waist and then running down her back. Already they had the lifestyle, him with his 80s bleach blond hair, her with the denim cutoffs and baseball-styled

jersey tee. I wanted to be her, providing small intimate pleasures near the rim of a dorm room toilet. Being lured in by his whispering blue eyes to the back of his van, crowded with music equipment and empty liquor bottles.

I did not know what to say in a suicide letter, so I tried a cigarette. “Because cancer is definitely rebellious,” Lylah amusedly chuckled, her words a signal for comic relief.

Someday, I will be happy.

Someday, I will be the Antichrist, shaping a future where maybe I will not need God to care. Marking my hands with black Sharpies, spilling my guts on the eggshell cream walls of the bathroom stalls. Rants about how I wanted to ask him out. Star Wars cards with a simple “I Like You,” signed XXX. That’s how it read on the bathroom wall at least, but I would sign my real name.

Calculating faith is like calculating destruction, and somehow I’m on a trapped continuum of depression and demolition. It’s frustrating to remember my first hand job, with his slicked over penis and smooth white hands pulling down my pink halter top. Maybe if I would have done more it would have been real. An actual relationship, an existence to myself, and maybe – just maybe – I would feel real, an actual real where everything is absorbed in warm sex and pushed together fingernails, the muscles on the face of our palms blending together sweat and comfort.

But I’m overexcited; anxieties wielding my fingers into broken shapes like those of theatre kids exaggerating movement in poor performance.

My actual life...it’s shit.

I fumbled for small intakes of tequila, handed to me in a flask during Bible study. The taste of minted vomit branded my mouth. Maybe I can hire a male prostitute if I can't sleep with the one guy that I like.

I made it to his concert, though. Both of us did. The only difference is, I cared. Her slip dress shook by the edge of his guitar. She didn't even understand his music.

Blending her alcohol and his lips, I squinted my eyes to avoid my tears from giving me away. I cared, but maybe I shouldn't have. They were cozy on the couch in the basement of the dorm, lime green lights as if I were caught in the landscape of a video game dungeon, I hungered for him, for the prod of an elbow to accidentally nudge me in the waist. But there they were, locked in the silence of my last breath, grazing each other with looks and later touches. I hated her. With clenched brows and a tightened jaw, I left. A gamut of tears struck my face at dangerous speeds. Evan Berry, I liked you.

Images of Adam collapsed onto my crumbling esteem. I quickly ascended the staircase seeking a private place to cry. My feet prodded the gray, worn carpeting. Again and again, I was always searching for a secret passageway to sanity. Fluorescent lights struck my face, my manmade heaven of blaring whiteness disintegrating into loops of tears. I was not made to be special, only different.

I curled my hands into tight knots, tense and maniacal. Two years had passed and he still didn't notice me. I could feel a barrel of shame rolling inside of me. I just wanted to be noticed and I couldn't let go. Maybe I was lost and out of focus to him, an image

blurred just like I had been to Adam. One drop of emotion would break the seal of tears. I could never find reconciliation. He liked her and there was nothing I could do about it. At best, I was second best, and even that wasn't good enough for Adam. Here I was, lost in another perpetual nightmare.

35

“Do you ever think about hurting yourself?” My therapist’s question flashed through my thoughts.

“No,” I said abruptly, immediately knowing how that answer would lead to another ending I wasn’t ready for.

I hated my life, I hated crying and the tears that flooded my pillow in the middle of the night. I continuously absorbed gang rape porn often at unlikely times, like 3:00 a.m. craving the comfort of something more after my strict schedule of studying. Something about being out of control put me at ease. God, do I want to fuck Evan Berry. Scanning through numerous videos, I found scenes of women performing blowjobs or trying new sex positions.

I shaved every morning with the hopes of being the fortunate one to be lured back to the bathroom stall

again by Evan. But that never happened. He never belonged to me.

36

“I told you I was right.” A sharp whisper buzzed past my ear.

A flurry of gold hair grazed the side of my cheek. I could see Maddie’s wetted blue eyes.

“He fucked her,” she said exhaling, nearly out of breath as if straining to say something entirely different and entirely less painful.

“Oh no,” I mumbled. My mind raced for some means to console her, her beauty unraveling. Too late, she was gone.

“I’ll be back.” I heard her thudding footsteps, heavy and fast, pounding on the same soiled carpet my own feet were accustomed to. She left, hoping to find her own sanctuary.

I moved toward the edge of the cushion, intertwining my fingers, thoughts frozen in a manner that would not allow me to speak, nor communicate

any true feelings. I wanted to be there for her, but how when I wanted *to be her*?

Ten minutes passed. I hurried through ideas of consoling words, feeling utterly empty and useless. She returned, propping herself onto the cushion next to me, red speckles on her cheeks from crying, and her perfectly textured blonde hair falling over her right eye. Her bangs, limp and fatigued, attracted me for a moment as I pulled my knees to my chest. Together, we sat in the second floor dorm lobby.

“That’s why you never sleep with them. You may think you’re in control at first, but you’re not. You’re never in control.” Maddie tightened her fingers around the bottle of beer she now held and a phone charger.

I thought of Adam and how I had never felt in control for a sole moment, neither at the beginning nor now, even though he’s gone. A small spark of jealousy ignited. I had wanted that power over Adam or any guy for that matter, even if it were fleeting. I just needed a moment of control.

I couldn’t tell her about my past though, so I just hugged her instead.

I didn’t feel the return of her arms.

“Thanks Emma,” she whispered, as I let her go. I openly vocalized that she could date anyone. I felt horribly cliché when she rolled her eyes and I shrunk back in embarrassment. But it was simply the truth. Maddie was the most beautiful girl I had ever known. Her slim build that she dressed in dark stockings, smock dresses and dainty black flats. She had long legs that attracted perverted glances from men who couldn’t fathom being close to something so beautiful. But she

never felt that way. In reality she had felt just like me. Helpless.

She crossed her legs, feet dangling as she slouched with her half-finished beer and an unlit cigarette pulled from her pocket in one hand, the other still clenching the phone charger. We sat in silence for a moment.

“Well I’m going downstairs if you want to come,” she offered despondently. I wanted to kiss her forehead and tell her it would be OK. Yet I remained silent, scared to say or do anything wrong. “I know I’m such a hypocrite telling you not to drink and smoke and here I am with beer and cigarettes,” she said a moment later, afraid I was judging her. But I wasn’t. I agreed to follow her downstairs.

We combed through the staircase, racing to get outside, to a place where we could soak up the 5:00 a.m. darkness. We sat in the smoker’s circle, she waving a cigarette around as if she were a mad woman holding a martini glass instead.

“I told you sleeping with them makes it worse. It makes you feel like you put out.”

“But you didn’t put out,” I loosened my tongue, unable to hold back anymore.

“Yeah I did.”

Her voice drifted past the smoke of her cigarette: calm, caressing, and simple, as if I were watching a reincarnation of a blonde Audrey Hepburn withdrawing to a place of despair.

My fingers shook in the frigid air. I looked at her long legs cloaked in black stockings coolly fading into her black shoes. Her naturally pouted lips clasped the end of the smoke.

Wes emerged from the lobby joining the smoker's circle, his shorts and schoolboy overalls complementing his confidence and unapologetic demeanor. He had the same laugh as Evan and that made me uncomfortable. I cringed at his dark eyes.

"Do you think it will ever end?" I asked.

"What is 'it'?" Wes inquired, but Maddie answered before he could finish.

"I think that everything is more melodramatic in college, and that I'm just being melodramatic now," Maddie answered.

"I felt that way about high school though...now college," I responded.

"What is the 'it' that you are referring to," Wes now demanded more loudly.

"Being miserable, feeling like shit, wanting to be accepted by other people," I answered.

"Ahh..." his cigarette stolidly balanced between his two lips now. "Well, my philosophy is not to care. It's like the James Dean effect. I'm a very private person, and yet people are so involved with my life. Try being mysterious. Read a book and not care. Then people will want to be your friend. People thought that I was intimidating and scary when they first met me. And the truth was I didn't care."

"I thought that too, until Meg said you were like a pony," I responded.

"A puppy...?" Wes asked.

"A pony." Maddie corrected him.

"She said you're harmless just like a pony." I made a motion as if I were mussing his hair to go along with the statement.

He chuckled. His dark eyes continued to soak me in, wolf-like against the backdrop of orange streetlights. I tried to relax.

“When I feel like shit, I smoke. And then I like to offer other people a cigarette just so I don’t feel like the only piece of shit smoking. Do you wanna smoke?” Maddie turned toward Wes and his dying cigarette, and then toward me.

“You know, I always feel like the exact opposite. Not smoking makes me feel like a piece of shit because everyone does it,” I stated.

“We all smoke for fucked up reasons.” She took another puff. “Everyone here in college that I know has had some traumatic life experience. In a way, I think it bonds us, but in another way I think it isolates us and makes us self-destructive,” she responded.

“But smoking seems like such a glamorous and luxurious past-time, something that famous people do when they’re bored.” I pushed my fists between my legs, the cold air seeping deeper and deeper into the layers of my skin.

“That’s what they want you to think.” She smiled.

“I smoke because it’s like placing myself into a personal bubble. When no one else is around and you have a cigarette, what else can you do besides think?” Wes shrugged his shoulders while emptying his cigarette butt with a light tap.

I pressed my knees together, frightened to speak up further or even look at the two heavenly creatures poised beside and in front of me, each with their mystical smoke rings. It was as if there was some unseen force of solidarity emanating from their cigarettes,

enchanting like a bouquet of flowers popping up from a magician's wand.

"If you could be anything in the world, what would it be?" Smugly, Wes shot his dark eyes toward mine. I could not look away. He smiled, waving that petit baton of glorious smoke.

"I..." I couldn't catch my words, each sound breaking into a repeated, yet quickly corrected silence. What did I have to lose if I told him the truth? "I want to be liked."

He snickered, that laugh, the same as Evan. Almost ready to vocalize the similarity, I stopped myself, pulling the conversation in another direction.

"I've always wanted to have my story heard. I imagine giving interviews to some overzealous host on TV one day. To chronicle my life story. Everyone would feel so sorry for me, they would have to like me." I spoke candidly into his microphone, waiting for some teasing response, but he just laughed.

"Don't we all," Maddie said.

"Well, I already have it all, though I want the opposite. If only everyone could be like me." His confidence became more indulgent. It frustrated me now. I knew he secretly talked himself down. Recalling last year his private drunken fit outside of my bedroom window to a confidant, giving spiels on "if only I were this much more taller," creating a pinch out of his fingers to demonstrate the additional height he wished for. He could only pretend to be content. Especially when he was near his first love, Maddie.

"We dated once. Everyone finds it hard to believe that we didn't sleep with each other. I broke it off though." I slid Maddie's words into my train of

thoughts, while Maddie and Wes continued chatting. “He still likes me though,” she continued.

I had paused unsure of how to respond.

“Let’s put it this way. He would break up with his current girlfriend to go out with me again if I asked him to.”

I had shuddered; Maddie’s beauty was something to envy.

Returning to the present moment, Maddie slumped over the cushioned chair, hair falling as if an angel had taken a misstep and plummeted in front of her reddened cheeks, legs tossed over the arms of the cabin furniture. Wes sat quietly in his silly attire that looked all too well on him. For a second, I admired his unique handsomeness. No one could escape the charm of that mousy bowl cut hair, white button-down, suspenders, yellow sneakers, and that damned *red bow tie*. I wanted to rip it off, snatch it from the front of his neck and tie it to myself just to feel unapologetic, like he did. He was definitely intimidating but he was far from happy, though he couldn’t stop reminding Maddie and me just how pleased he was with his life.

Everything felt like a joke, far from being funny because it was all so serious...too serious how fucked up we all were.

37

I shuffled into the first-floor lobby of the dorm, frustrated by the day's desert heat, and tired from covering graduation events for the campus yearbook. I contemplated if I should actually retire as editor-in-chief, angered by the apathy of my staff workers who continually pushed their work off on me.

I never could stand up for myself, often becoming violently infuriated or too docile, losing the validity of my argument, leaving them with all of the power. I headed toward the staircase when I noticed Chrissy sitting on the floor, her knees tucked to her chest.

She always managed to look calm, even if the world were collapsing at the borders of her feet.

"Hey," I said making conversation in response to her dreamy smile.

"Hey, are you feeling better?" She asked.

“Ehh...”

“Did you drink some more?”

“Nah...”

“Good.” She gave a heavy sigh, as she toyed with her phone, scanning an incoming text message. “Read this.” She moved the phone into my line of sight. I quickly looked over the message, unable to comprehend what the meaning of it was, until she provided me with the back story.

“Remember the guy I was telling you about? Well he gave me an expensive bracelet today out of the blue. It didn’t fit, so I told him to take it back. Plus I don’t even wear jewelry.”

I looked over her hippie-esque attire: dirtied black flip-flops, brown-stripped tank top and short flowy skirt. She definitely wasn’t the type to wear fancy jewelry.

“He freaked out for no reason and told me that he spent all of his money on a bracelet. I didn’t even want it.”

“Is this the guy that has the secret drug problem?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s Drew.”

“Drew?”

“Drew, the guy Megan used to date.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, “He’s such a nice guy though.”

“That’s what everyone thinks until you get to know him. I told him to never come near me again.”

Chrissy and I lingered in conversation on the floor across from the main staircase. Maddie stormed by wearing a plain gray dress cinched at the waist. Her legs were speckled with acne and that caught me off

guard. I was used to seeing her sporting opaque black tights.

Wes walked beside her, wearing the same outfit from yesterday: suspenders, bow-tie, and yellow shoes. "If it's a good outfit, I wear it more than once just in case people haven't seen it." I chuckled as he continued to waver near Maddie's right arm.

"She's having guy problems too," I said to Maddie pointing to Chrissy.

"Oh no," she responded, as Chrissy recapped her story.

"Hey guess what?" Maddie looked toward me. "There was a random cactus outside of my door with an anonymous apology letter attached to it about what happened last night."

She ran her fingers over the V-neck dress, smoothing out deep lineages of wrinkles.

"Are you going to take him back?" I asked enthusiastically, unclear as to why I was amused by this sanction of weird apology.

"No," she said bluntly. She opened the wooden door to the staircase, flyers for events that had already passed fluttering as she stepped forward.

Think of something cool to say.

"Good because he sounds like a fuck face," I said.

"What did you say?" She asked.

"I said he sounds like a fuck face," speaking louder but with more hesitance.

She seemed frustrated by this statement, but waved it off.

"Are you going to throw away the cactus?"

"No, me and Wes were thinking that we would leave it on the table in the lobby that says free cactus

...and free note.”

I chuckled. Oh Maddie, so dangerously beautiful and she didn't even notice.

They left and I followed soon after, saying goodbye to Chrissy. I was on my way to the Senior Dinner. Another yearbook story that I had to complete before the night ended.

38

My life was always so desperately bare. I struggled to cope with the hum-drums of summer vacation. There was no escaping the emptiness of being alone. Wallowing in a bathtub of warm water, moving my feet in the warmth, I could only hope to wash away the smell of sweaty feet from fifteen minutes of skateboarding at the local park. That's what I get for not wearing socks with gym shoes.

Failed attempts at new tricks, crossing the empty suburban streets with glossy-eyed feelings. Never have I tried more vehemently to convince myself that it's OK to be alone.

The woman smiled at me today at the bank. The teller, with her soft Korean happiness that I could only dream of having. She made me feel wanted for five minutes, complimenting me on my name.

Banana Peels.

That's what my tears remind me of. Banana Peels. Unraveling to reveal a soft, unfertile roll of skin, semi-sweet with nothing but anger and elongated fears.

I can't stop reminding myself of him. I craned my neck toward the fogged bathroom mirror, and then back toward my feet, visually morphed and fattened under the balmy water. Evan Berry. His stupid band's pop song stuck in my head. The fact that he started writing pop music after his metal band disintegrated. The fact that I never got a response from him after I left a note on his car saying "I Like You," with my signature.

I hate him.

I hated me more than I hated him.

This was a perpetual habit of guys not falling for me, as if I were everything short of charming. Maybe I was. Maybe I was no more than a sick loser, pining after lost dreams that God abandoned before my eyes. I could feel Adam's smirk. *Maybe they were right* at the forefront of my thoughts.

My feet still weren't clean. The steam of the thick sticky water bellowed over my rolled up jeans, me hunching over my knees, waiting for the stench of my moist toes to wane. If I jump in now, my life could be like a movie scene. I would silently crouch, fully clothed, in a half-empty bathtub, jeans soaked. If I fall face forward in, I could kill myself. No. The water's too shallow. Mom and her fiancé would be mad. Everyone thinks I'm a good child.

All I wanted to do was give a blowjob. Oh how I dreamed of being with Evan Berry. To fuck his blond perfection. To see him wake up to me on top of him, gliding around his body and the “non-cobra” tattoo across his chest. I hated him for not giving me that luxury.

“All of that was about Evan?” I had remembered Maddie asking me all too plainly the last day of school after I meekly dragged her away from her crowd of followers just to let her know how I embarrassingly stuck the note to his car.

“Yeah,” I had responded.

She had waited silently, holding her breath, and then exclaimed, “He’s insecure. He thinks that everyone thinks he’s a whore because he sleeps around. So he keeps sleeping around out of frustration. The thing is, now he’s afraid that no one will date him.”

“Oh no,” I whispered, feeling quite perplexed. He was too beautiful to be insecure.

I could have been your savior.

I pulled my wet feet out of the tub. Quietly shuffling to my room, pet dander clung to the heels of my feet from my forlorn cat and energetic new dog. I pampered my still malodorous toes in my room, closing the door silently, afraid to awaken mom. I sunk into the folds of the longest pillow that I had pretending it was the warm flesh of anyone pressing their body against mine. A fresh nightcap of tears brewed.

I was always alone after Adam had died.

39

“Watching you is like watching someone have a panic attack.”

I woke up to the silent movements on my flashing television set. I've always had problems with sleeping, bouncing uncouthly through various stages of unconscious reality to in sync hazy nightmares. They were like windows into a state of chaos, other than my usual tumultuous waking life.

I opened my eyes, rendered in a state of panic, to some seemingly comical late night talk show. Not sure if I should jump for the lights first to soothe the vacant, new reality that I have woken up to, or if I should head toward the fridge for my left over fast food hot fudge sundae. The heat from the afternoon was livening in my skin, yet I still undraped my thick burgundy comforter from my cocoon-like state. I

tiptoed into the hallway bathroom, weary to flush the toilet at 4:00 a.m., so as not to disturb my mom, her sleeping fiancé, and his kids who were staying over.

I wound myself back over to the couch, Katy asleep upstairs in my bedroom, her 14-year-old frame most likely filled with something more sentimental than nightmares.

Epistolary...I had learned a new word today.

I hastened through all of my daily activities: reading, writing, skating, guitar for at least 2 hours...oh fuck...chores...and I still had to wash my rapturously curly, frizzy brew of hair that I've been putting off for a week. It will take at minimum three hours to tame. Somehow I did not feel up to that particular challenge today.

My skin seemingly whispered in the heat. I dangled my eyelids over the remote. It's 4:12 a.m. and I have managed to accomplish most of that earlier list, still not washing my hair, and completely obstructing my summer school homework from my memory. My 2D Design and Color course yet another blimp of weirdness to add to my somehow disjointed life. I recalled my pudgy professor's monologue that she had opened the class with this past Monday. She had narrated how certain she was that she'd been exposed to some sort of radiation from a sci-fi movie premier back in '92. She had talked for forty minutes the first day of my six-hour course about this experience and many others that validated her victim status and artist street cred.

Besides feeling derisive toward my art course, I managed to supply myself with a daily dose of rock n'

roll. I remembered running my fingers over the pentatonic scale for Jimmy's guitar solo in "Good Times Bad Times" earlier today, still not quick enough to match even half of his speed. Yet, I did admire my blistered middle finger afterwards, observing the translucent white orb throughout the day.

I eventually started to unravel, running last semester's woes through my thoughts, reeling them in along with my boredom and perpetuating insecurities. Revisiting my graphic design professor's words from last fall, "watching you is like watching someone have a panic attack." I momentarily tried to piece together my cloud of thoughts and whirlwind of activities. I was putting myself on a rigid schedule of mantras and mandated fun time. Goal for this summer: try to relax. I'll play guitar and skateboard just to practice having fun. I'll enact this new ritual tomorrow.

Briefly, I flashed back to previous stints of how I tried to coax myself into becoming more confident. I've been in and out of bathtubs, with lazy water streaks pelting my cheeks, swirls of toothpaste hugging the outer edges of my vagina while I would sit cross-legged and confounded in the bathtub. *I'm a cool person...right?* I relived memories of some of my social mishaps, remembering the time I asked Dan for his lighter at the concert to warm my fingers and he freaked out. Or the time Evan Berry shook salt in my eyes at The Pancake Shack after I admitted my hate for fantasy novels. And I subsequently tried to make it up to him by reading all of his favorite books over the last Christmas break.

Car rides were the most therapeutic though, for the days when I had to lure myself out of trying cigarettes and dumping old tequila into my morning

orange juice. My lips stiff from stuffing the arms of my terry cloth teddy bear down my throat in some sort of attempt to have a sex life at nineteen.

Other than my blues, I had my erratic skate life (driving by the park at 4:00 p.m. to see if a lot of people were out, then returning at 4:15 p.m. only to see if the crowds had dwindled). I had finally mustered up the courage today to skate for a full hour, well almost...4:40 p.m. exactly to 5:37 p.m. I left feeling accomplished. Every trick I performed, I said to myself with the utmost confidence, "Face your fears. You want people to see you as daring and courageous, not wimpy. You are not a loser. Well maybe you are. No. You are cool. You will get a date. You will be asked out."

Now, I'm back to the basics, watching music videos at 5:03 a.m., dancing on chairs and making airplane wings out of my arms for dramatic effect. In some ways music was the only saving grace from my nightmares that mostly revolved around Adam. Music convinced me that I was indomitable, making it easier for me to fall asleep with my lights off. I nestled next to my soiled teddy bear, his fat limbs outstretched toward me and absorbing the powder blue dusk.

40

The evening waned as I mounted the always-crowded 5 Freeway. Prepared with a tube of aspirin for my indefatigable lower back pain, and a bottle of warm water that had been sitting at the base of the passenger's seat for a few days, I sat plugged into the California traffic. Mainstream radio and my ever unruly hair put me into a funk. I glazed over the solemn dim light, hoping to make it to Mel and Lylah's fake wedding reception before 9:00 p.m. Eventually, the molesting heat cooled, rekindling my hope as I finally made it to the 101 Expressway. I exited the long roused stint of traffic, facing the nighttime blues, trying to build up excitement for finally being invited outside of the house.

My sullen mood never spoiled my attire though. I wore a neon graphic print tank top that could have easily doubled as a dress. The finishing look would not

have spun together as nicely without my pleather tights, rocker zippers stationed by the ankles, which I had ordered from some zany online Japanese store. Topped with baby doll leather pumps and a designer jacket, I meekly pulled up to the high-rise apartment complex off of Wilshire. Dangling my feet out of my small burgundy compact, I stepped onto the warped cement. Paranoid about the parking meter, I shuffled through the thin slice of grass that formally decorated the tattered sidewalk, and checked the meter of the vehicle ahead of me. I was solid.

Prancing up to the “hotel-esque” apartment, I withdrew my cell phone to call Lylah. I peered through the glass doors of the entrance and admired the satiable white and grey marble floors. Golden light drifted down like sun rays, intruding on the gallery of loveseat sofas striped in colors of burgundy and forest green.

“Surprise! That was quick right?” Lylah laughed in her usual giggle that normally ended all of her sentences. “That’s because we’re really on this floor.” She smiled, lunging for a hug. Her red dress engulfed me as I pulled out the Duke Ellington record that I brought for her, wrapped with graphics I pulled and taped together from a magazine.

She grabbed my arm and led me through the debonair lobby. Frames of light continued to mesmerize me with each pull forward. Her twisted locks of dark brown hair shifted in color when we hit a new angle of luminosity. White abstract forms blended with the tightened strands of her pulled back hair.

The indoor lobby boasted an adjacent outside patio where everyone was hanging out. A swarm of evening air and mingling voices greeted me. *Try to be social. Remember, never stop smiling.*

“Everyone!” I heard the sensuous voice of my host. “This is Emma.” She then introduced me to her guests one by one. I shook hands with the guy standing next to me first. “Andrew this is Emma, Emma this is Andrew.”

I smiled and continued to make rounds through the relatively small crowd. Eventually, I meandered away from her and over to the fajitas. I grabbed a small plastic dish, attempting to mask my awkwardness when the scoop of refried beans remained plastered to the ceiling of my spoon, even as I knocked it fastidiously against the rim of my plate. After several more attempts, I decided to go for the avocado and sour cream instead, arming myself with a cup of soda as well.

Walking over to the patio table where everyone was sitting, I continued to introduce myself, taking brief bites of my grilled delicacy in between shaking hands and listening to the side chatter. Mel, Lylah’s best friend and previous roommate, made her way over and gave me a quick, perky hug. Her red beret and newly originated Parisian accent added more splendor to her than I had remembered.

“Emma,” she said, her sharp voice, piercingly beautiful as she said my name, “how have you been?”

I stammered for words while admiring her cotton black dress. “I’ve been good.”

“Yeah?” She asked, her voice no longer harboring its brusque Chicago accent. “What have you been up to this summer?”

“I’m just taking classes at a local community college for art.”

“Where at?”

“Orange Coast. I live in Tustin now.”

“Tus-tin?”

I nodded.

“I don’t know where that’s at,” she said.

“Oh, it’s um, it’s by...” I paused. Her words came out so crisp and fluidly that I had trouble keeping up. Embarrassed by my speech, I grappled for words, eyeing her thinly stretched red lips never ceasing to smile at me.

I rattled off names of popular outdoor shopping malls I lived near. She nodded, though she was still unsure of where I was staying. I furrowed my eyebrows, attempting to show that I was in critical thought, before exclaiming that I lived near the local baseball stadium and tourist theme park.

“Ahhh...I see! I know where you’re at now.” Her smile lengthened and I relaxed a little, knowing that I had made it through one barrier of our conversation.

“So what have *you* been doing this summer?”

I asked.

“Me? Well, I just got back from spending a year in France. Now I’m teaching English.”

“Wow!” I tried to think of something to keep the discussion going.

“Yeah, it’s really fun. I consider all of my students fluent though, but we’re just going over little things to help them pass the exam. I get to design my own curriculum and everything.”

“That sounds really cool...” Stammering for words while she spooned more salsa over her nachos, I blurted out in an attempt to keep the exchange between us going, “Weren’t you interested in maps and geography?”

“Me! Yeah...well, I love reading maps whenever I have spare time.” Her voice lilted through

exclamation then to coy embarrassment. She eagerly stated next, “I would love to do GIS and mapmaking someday.”

Thrilled that we were on the subject of mapmaking, I wanted to ask if she had ever taken a class with McQuest previous to her graduating. But before I could inquire, Mel said “You know, I really like photography too.”

“Me too!”

“Yeah? Have you ever taken any classes?”

“Only Beginning Photography and Digital Imaging....But that’s required for the graphic design part of my major.”

Our conversation was cut short there. Lylah grazed the shoulder of Mel and they whispered to each other making hushed, dainty exclamations.

I left, quickly joining in on another conversation.

“You’re Joslyn, right?” I asked, her thicker build not detracting from the charm of her face. She smiled, though I couldn’t tell if it was sincere. Her dark brown hair, gray under the evening light, fell perfectly in place over her shoulders.

“Yes, and you’re...?” She hesitated. I re-introduced myself. “Sorry, I’m not good with names,” she said smiling again while tossing her hair back. “So how do you know Mel and Lylah?”

“I used to go to school with them.” I answered, “I actually took a class of theirs. For their senior project they got to teach a class about the history of music in Harlem, Memphis, and Los Angeles.

“Really! I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, it was called Art, Space, and Identity in Urban America. It was pretty cool.”

“So did you graduate with them?”

“No, I have one more year to go...wait.” I paused. “Well a year and a half...or something like that. I’m a junior now.”

“That’s a year...well...huh...a junior this fall?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, you’re half way there. That’s the best way to describe it. *Half way.*”

We smiled, laughing at our illogical math and how long it took us to figure out my status.

“So what are you into?” I asked next.

“Well, I got my associate’s in business and psychology. But right now I’m in TV production. I don’t know what I really want to do yet. But I know I want to work somewhere in the entertainment industry. That’s my passion. I’ve always wanted to work somewhere around there in high school. ”

She talked for a few more minutes, trying to convince me of her future career plans, leaving breaks in her story for mock enthusiasm and further explanation of why she didn’t follow through with some plan or another.

“Well, at least if that doesn’t work out, you can fall back on your degrees,” I said when she hinted at her floundering TV production career.

“Exactly.”

The night progressed with more people arriving and leaving. I was promoted to photographer before all was over, courtesy of Mel.

“Emma, I want memories,” Lylah announced handing me her outdated, “digital” camera. So off I traveled, snapping candid shots of visitors.

“I always have a pose ready. It’s my signature one.” I snapped a shot of Sophie, an energetic blonde, who quirkily danced.

I shimmied my shoulders as she slid over and started mirroring my moves. Then she took it upon herself to dangle her hands in front of her, cat-like, as if she were harnessing some remnants of a 90s pop video. She laughed some and kept moving even when the song ended.

“Damn, I always start dancing like five seconds after the song is over.” She chuckled pulling at her deeply sundered and low cut top, the small frame of her boobs revealing more neckline than cleavage.

The next song started up again and I kept dancing, though most people returned to their conversation. Moving my body to the tunes of “I push, I pull, the days go slow,” I yelled to Lylah, “I think I should double as the go-go dancer *and* photographer.”

“Go ahead,” she giggled, “I’ll be the fat kid at the party,” she said to me as she grabbed more fajitas and nachos.

“It’s your party though. You can eat as much as you want. Plus, we’re celebrating your wedding.” She laughed even harder.

“That’s right,” she said proudly. “I am the bride.” She licked moments of salsa from her fingertips looking up toward the glass doors that led to the lobby. “Ahh!” She screamed in her infectiously excitable voice, “Peter’s here. Now we can really get married,” her signature giggle emanated from her voice. “He’s an actual ordained doctor who can marry us. Dr. Peter Thomas. He doesn’t like anyone to call him that though.”

“Well, hello Dr. Peter Thomas,” Sophie said flirtatiously, stretching out each syllable while watching Peter enter into the lobby and head toward the outside patio.

“Yeah, say his name just like that!” Lylah laughed to herself even more, as she went to greet Mel and Peter at the expansive glass door that shielded the yellow light from the restful solemnity of the evening air.

Peter and I nodded briefly toward each other when he entered.

“Everyone, this is Peter. Pete I don’t think you know anyone here, besides Emma and Tony,” Lylah stated. He briefly nodded, gave me a quick point and wink, and sat down beside Tony.

I continued to dance for a little bit longer, momentarily perplexed that a current professor had been invited.

Anxious to take more photos though, I snapped away, generating laughs and crazy poses from my participants, before I finally sought out the table with Peter and Tony.

“Can I join you guys?”

“Sure,” Tony said. Pete nodded while continuing to speak on his cell phone. “What are you doing here anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be in Michigan?” His deep, heroic-sounding voice always made me laugh a little. Tony strove to be lord-like in his demeanor. Sometimes, I would even be graced by his Old English speech. His light-wash denim and plain white button-down ornamented his brown skin and broad frame. With his tiny-rimmed glasses pinned at the top of his nose, he said, “Well, speak!” and he gave

a soft chuckle as I smiled. I was always enthused by his presence.

“Nope, I moved here from Michigan.”

“When,” he spoke.

“Almost two years ago, a month before freshman year.”

“Hm.”

“What about you? I didn’t know you lived around here.”

“Yes,” he said, his voice extending the word so as to make it sound more chiefly.

“So what have you been doing this summer?” I asked.

“Hanging out with my grandpa, and sister, and mother, and reading.”

“I’ve been reading too. Right now I’m on *The Silmarillion*.”

“Good read. How far are you into it?”

“Uh...about half way. Do you remember the part when...I’m not sure if I’m pronouncing the names right, but when Aredhel...?”

As soon as I went into the explanation of where I was at in the book, Peter handed the phone back to Tony, who quickly said goodbye to whoever was on the other line.

“Soooo, what should I do?” Tony resumed speaking to Peter.

“Hi Emma, please save me from this conversation.” He laughed some.

“Hi Pete,” I chuckled some, “How’s your summer?”

“Good. When I’m not advising Tony.” He rolled his eyes a little to feign exhaustion, and went back

to discussing whether Tony should get a Ph.D. or go into teaching.

“It’ll take the magic away,” I heard Pete say before I left, his light voice lingering over his white fingers that clenched the arms of the patio furniture.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” retorted Tony as I snapped a quick photo of them and departed to another table.

The night retreated into further laughs, especially when Sophie and I attempted to find a hall restroom.

“There is none.” A voice drifted a few feet away from us, as a sassy, but polite security guard told us that there was no public restroom.

“What if I had to poop?” Sophie playfully stumbled forward making gurgling congested sounds, and then filled the lobby with laughs that echoed. Our movements disrupted the calm of lights, causing them to disperse and mingle with shadows.

The security guard stood watching Sophie fall into awkward laughter. He cocked one eyebrow to show his sense of humor. “Well then, I don’t know what to tell you.” He left, headed toward the outside patio where everyone else lingered, as we absorbed the fresh silence of the golden lobby.

“I don’t think he liked my poo joke,” she finally said.

Deciding to use Lylah’s bathroom, we mounted the elevator for the 11th floor.

“No princess stairs?” I asked, admiring the marble steps that coiled behind us before we stepped into the elevator.

“I’m a little too tipsy for that,” Sophie responded, slurring her words.

The doors shut behind us.

“I can’t believe I didn’t know this was their engagement party,” she said to me disappointingly. “I thought this was their going away shebang.” She sighed, reigniting her frustration from earlier in the night when it was announced that Mel and Lylah would be getting married in an hour or so. “I’m like the queen of gift giving. Do you think it’s too late to go to Hustler and pick them up a couple of dildos?”

I eyed my watch, although I already knew the answer. “Yeah, it’s already like eleven.”

“Damn, I can’t believe this.” Her drunken form slithered across the mirrored wall of the elevator. I’m seriously the best gift giver. I mean, like my birthday, it’s the day after Christmas, and my parents would always do something lame like buy me an iPod for Christmas and then get me headphones the day after. So I always get people good gifts. Hell, I would have gotten them a dildo for every day of the week if I would have known that it was their engagement party.”

We walked down the empty corridor, sconces fixed to the walls. Finally we approached Lylah’s place, room 1102, the last on the right side of the hallway. The door was open, Mel searching for the right bottle of wine. I headed toward the bathroom. I admired the set up of how I had to maneuver through the walk-in closet first to get to the bathroom.

“So you guys really aren’t lesbians?” I heard Sophie asking as I re-entered a few minutes later.

“No,” I heard Mel respond, her tinkling, dainty laughter making the situation a lot better.

“Oh, well, hmm,” she paused, changing the subject. “What do you know about that Andrew guy with his muscles barely peeking out from that burgundy polo there?”

Mel laughed a little louder saying, “Well I don’t know, I think he’s with Lylah, a little something might be going on there.”

“Oh...well in that case, Andrew the perfectly sweet charming gentleman...” Mel continued to chuckle in the background searching for the wine that Lylah had wanted her to grab.

“Which one did she want me to bring?” She eyed the translucent glass-front cabinets and checked the fridge. “Maybe it’s this one,” she kept whispering to herself.

“I’ll go check,” Sophie announced, launching herself into the hallway.

“Maybe I should go with her,” I said, feeling ridiculous for being afraid to be left alone with Mel, afraid to spark up another conversation and fail at it.

“No, I got it,” Sophie yelled from down the hall, and thus I stayed, anxiously thinking of things to talk about to fill the silence.

“I don’t want to take the wrong wine, you know? Just in case she wants to use it for something special,” Mel said. I stood silently in the doorway of the L.A. apartment, admiring the kitchen’s slender layout.

“I thought you and Lylah were going to room together,” I finally said.

“Well, you know, after I moved to France, Lylah and I just kind of separated, and now she lives with Andrew. It worked out though, I’m like a couple of blocks down, on Sixth.”

“Yeah, I know where that’s at. I passed it a million times before I found the apartment. It’s like the next street over.”

She smiled, as we both left the apartment empty-handed, deciding to have Lylah select the wine that she wanted at the “reception.”

“There they are.” We heard Lylah’s voice echo in the lobby. The party had been moved inside under the reign of the golden lights. “Where’s the wine?” she laughed, moving through the crowd and then into the elevator with Mel. They both returned to the 11th floor going back for the unfound wine.

I sat on the small loveseat and Sophie joined me. The rest of the crowd gathered on the other couches; all of us preoccupied with our own small engagements.

Ten minutes later, Lylah and Mel were back with crystal jugs of Sangria and bottles of wine. The remainder of the fajitas and leftover vegetables were stationed on a common table behind the main couch, along with a platter of picked over cheese cubes.

A few people outside were still cleaning up when I went to grab my purse from a metal-framed chair. As I left through those golden speckled glass doors, I heard Lylah yelling, “Alright everyone, choose one!”

She passed around a basket with down-turned yellow slips. “Don’t look at them until you choose one,” she chuckled handing me a slip as I re-entered.

“Alright everyone, these are your roles in the wedding.”

“What did you get?” I asked Tony.

“I’m not telling you. What did you get?”

“I’m not telling you.” I responded.

“Why not?”

“Because you won’t tell me who you are.”

“So?”

“So?”

We teased each other back and forth for a couple of minutes, until Lylah walked over, handing me the camera again.

“I’m going to need more photos,” she smiled.

“Of course! Besides, I *am* the mother of the bride. Who is the bride by the way?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She danced off, passing out hats and other costumes to the rest of the characters. Tony was the best man.

“Of course I would get this part.” Sophie held up her yellow slip, which read “Drunk Girl.”

Among the other parts were “Emotional Guest,” “Ring Bearer,” “Minstrel,” “Flower Girl,” and others.

“Alright! Everyone we are ready to begin.” Lylah and Mel rushed toward the main entrance of the building, smoothing out their dresses, while the Minstrel, the Best Man, and the Ring Bearer stood on the marble staircase. Peter, the priest and leader of the pack, was stolidly poised in front of a large mirror at the first landing of the staircase.

The Minstrel, played by Joslyn, stroked the tiny strings of a ukulele, while I chaotically snapped photos, yelling dramatically, “That’s my baby.”

Bright yellow and purple flowers were dropped onto the marble floor, thrown by the Flower Girl, only to be immediately trampled by the two brides. They made their way gaily to the front staircase.

“Dearly beloved, I gather you all here today to honor the assembly of Lylah and Mel...”

“I object!” the Emotional Guest swaggered forward. “You said you loved me!” Everyone laughed as Erin improvised more lines.

“Hey! Stop interrupting my baby’s wedding,” I piped in, trying to mimic an angry mother.

“Whoops, I think I need another drink.” The Drunk stepped forward. “Hey, I know you.” Sophie winked at Mel, “We had that thing in Vegas.”

“I knew it, I knew you didn’t love her, I object, object, object,” Erin kept going, eliciting riotous laughter from the audience.

The whole wedding turned into a comedic fiasco, with Dr. Peter Thomas yelling “Is there a bodyguard in the house?”

“Andrew! Why are you on the phone during my wedding?” Lylah screamed.

He gave a smirk.

“Hey, see they’re not even real lesbians. I object!” Another crowd member entered the rings, as I pulled them back screaming “Don’t ruin my daughter’s wedding!” Everyone went into spasms of laughter.

After twenty minutes of more interruptions, the final nuptial bliss was sealed with plastic rings and a brief dance party.

Finally, after convincing the security guard several times that he would not get into trouble for letting her and Mel host their shenanigans in the lobby, Lylah swept him onto the dance floor. “Why would they be mad? They would be happy,” she declared in her habitual chuckle. His dark skin absorbed the light, sharing the golden empire with Lylah’s brown complexion. She could get away with anything.

We cleaned up ten minutes later though, after Sophie spilled Sangria down the front of her shirt. Plus

guests were starting to leave. A few more people came later, but the party had already migrated to upstairs.

“Emma hasn’t experienced the wave yet.” I sat on the tiny couch, confused as to what the wave was.

“Here, plug this in.” Lylah tossed me the cord as I climbed over the arm of the couch, knocking my elbows against the side of the television to reach the plug.

“Is it plugged in yet?”

“It is, but it’s not turning on. Is there a switch?”

“It should just start up. It makes a *WRRRR* noise.”

She went into the kitchen, throwing the leftover peppers and onions on the stove, while I played around with the outlet.

Eventually, with a sharp clap, we were able to start up the wave, and a sequence of blue and green patterned lights drifted over the emptily lit, dark apartment living room. The view of the red Asbury sign from the neighboring building stole into the room, along with a line of solid green lights from an empty city street outside.

“The lights are straight green for a mile,” I said stunned.

Lylah giggled. “That means you just gun it.” The outside world faded into the space.

I stood at the ledge of the window, withdrawn and amazed.

“It’s time for the truth,” Lylah announced, sitting down on the carpet of the living room. “And only the truth, starting with you.” She pointed to a mysterious guest who had just recently arrived. He

raised his eyebrows. "Say something that's true," she insisted, her smile wheedling him into speaking.

"My name is John," he finally answered, "and that's the truth."

"John, just John? Were your parents that boring that they only named you John?" She chuckled more loudly, coaxing him into a more honest answer.

"Alright, my name is Jonathon Banks Webber the Third, and that is the honest truth."

"Good," she smirked. She looked in my direction. "Your turn."

"My turn? Well...let's see." I paused for a moment, looking to John who was seated across the room to the left of me, and then to Pete who was directly in front of me. "I like mayonnaise on my cheeseburgers, and that is the truth."

"I feel you on that one," John yelled from across the room.

Lylah gave another brief laugh, before turning to Peter. "Go," she said.

"Emma is cool."

I smiled.

"We already know that! Tell us something else,"

Lylah laughed.

"Hey, well John said his name," Pete retorted.

"What are you guys doing?" Andrew and Mel entered.

"We are playing the truth, and Peter just said Emma is cool, which is already obvious."

"What do you want me to say?" Pete asked, feigning frustration.

Lylah giggled again. "The truth."

"The truth truth?"

"Mhm."

“The dark truth?”

“Yep,” Lylah said.

“Ok, well what about the cats?” Peter asked, smirking.

“What! No, this is a celebration party, I’m not trying to scare anyone,” she pronounced in excitement. “Alright then, Emma is cool.”

Peter tossed his head back in laughter, as a new guest arrived.

I didn’t immediately get his name. However, I did discover that he was Italian, initially mistaking his accent for a Parisian one. But his flair for Yiddish music made him even more charming.

“What is this music that you Emericans call ‘good?’” he yelled after Lylah put on 90’s hip-hop.

“Davide,” Lylah infectiously giggled while imitating his accent, “what type of music do *you* call good!”

Davide immediately switched out the tunes to a Bulgarian, Jewish, Swedish mix.

“I can’t quite put my finger on what this reminds me of,” I said.

“It’s Jewish,” Mel yelled over the music.

Davide flung his legs outward, shimmied his arms in a windshield wiper-like motion, and skirted across the fluctuating green and blue lights.

“Hey,” Lylah clapped her hands, “time to do shots of gin. One for you, one for you, and Emma do you want one?”

I confusedly agreed, scared to take my first shot, yet restless for rebellion.

“Only a little,” Lylah pinched her fingers together to further persuade me. Everyone assembled

into the kitchen while she poured various amounts of gin in different sized shot glasses.

“That looks like a lot,” I said as she handed me a black glass with fire detailing.

“Not as much as this one,” she laughed.

“Will it be safe to drive?”

“Hmm. Yeah pour some into mine.”

I tipped my glass over hers, yet the steep slant caused the clear liquid to leak onto the wood floor. I moved the glass further over hers until it was completely parallel. Still to no avail, the liquid drained faster onto the floor.

Lylah laughed harder. “Just pour it into here.”

She handed me a partially empty bowl of guacamole where I poured out some of my gin until the glass was only half-full. Flinging my nose over the shot, I inhaled the aroma.

“Don’t smell, just drink it,” said Lylah. And on the count of three, all of us swallowed the lukewarm liquid. “Chase it down with this.” Lylah passed around a bottle of soda, as I held the gin puffed in my cheeks, afraid to let it sink past the passage of my throat. “Men need chasers, too.” She laughed, continuing to shuffle around the bottle. I finally released the pressure of the soda and gin, fortunately not tasting much of the liquor. Then we all piled into the living room, dancing ceaselessly to the Jewish/Bulgarian mix.

“Can I have a smoke?” the Italian guy asked.

“Only by the window,” said Lylah as she stretched out on the carpet, chest facing toward the piercing green and blue-lit ceiling. “Only because I’m leaving in three days. Why do I care now?”

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes along with a clear plastic bag from his front shirt pocket. "Would you like Italian licorice?"

Lylah grabbed it playfully. "Is this ecstasy?" She laughed.

"No...no, no...trust me. It is licorice." She eyed the pieces carefully. "Trust me, trust me," he repeated, his accent thickly coated with persuasion.

"When someone says 'trust me trust me,' it normally means don't trust them."

"Right," said John, agreeing with Lylah and looking skeptically at the clear plastic bag.

"You Emericans no trust. It is only licorice. Licorice."

"What is licorice?" Lylah asked jokingly.

"Look, see." He took out one of the small darkened squares and dropped it in the palm of her hand.

She smelled it.

"Go on, put it in your mouth. Just try it. Even if you just take a lick, it will have no danger."

"I'll get Andrew to do it. He'll eat anything."

"No...no no no, just put it in your mouth. Try. Try."

She hesitated.

"I only offer because of smoke. You eat before you smoke."

"Then you eat it," Lylah said.

He took out another piece from the bag and slowly wound it past his lips.

"Expect four hours of fun," John said jokingly.

Our Italian charmer rolled his eyes. "Look. See? Safe." The small piece of the substance dangled from his lips.

“Why haven’t you swallowed it?” Lylah asked playfully.

“He’s tryin’ to enjoy it,” remarked John.

“Huh huh, see? Exactly. Try. You must at least try it. Just leave it in your mouth for one second. One second. It is fine.”

Lylah took the small, unknown square and placed it on her tongue. “Ugh. This taste like shit,” she exclaimed a few seconds later giving her signature giggle after spitting it out.

“I want to try,” announced John. “Not bad. It’s like coffee.”

“No! It taste like shit. I’m going to give it to Andrew.”

Tempted, I asked for a piece.

“This is gross,” I mimicked Lylah’s displeasure.

“Told you,” she smiled.

“Nah man, you gotta keep it in there, enjoy the flavor. It’s just like coffee,” John repeated.

“I’d rather have an actual coffee bean.” Lylah stood and went to the kitchen to throw away the remainder of her licorice.

“You Emericans. I bring back good food from Italy, and you don’t like.” We all laughed as he proceeded to offer each of us a cigarette.

“No thanks. I’ve never smoked, but I’ll hold one to look cool,” said Lylah as she exited the room to go find Mel.

I sat on the piano bench near the couch where John was at earlier, as the two guys smoked. They offered me a cigarette, but I opted just to hold one as well.

“I’ve only smoked once before and I’m scared if I have another cigarette, I’ll become an addict,” I admitted.

“It’s true,” said John emptying his breath through the window screen and dumping the remains of the cigarette butt into a candleholder. My mom used to smoke all the time, but I would never touch ‘em. Until one day someone saw that I was stressed and offered me one. Haven’t been able to stop since.”

“Wow, that must have been awhile ago.”

“Nah, I started a couple of weeks back.”

I nodded, passing off the unlit cigarette to Lylah.

“Where’s Mel?” she shrilled jokingly, her voice as entertaining as the salsa/reggae mix now playing in the background. “Ah well, she always finds her way back,” her voice lost in the groove of the music.

Thirsty, I went into the kitchen for water, grabbing a wine glass. Mom would never let me use a wine glass for water at home.

The Italian guy and Lylah traipsed into the kitchen. “Where is Mel? Call her,” he asked.

“I don’t know where my phone is at,” said Lylah.

“Then give me the number and I will make call.”

Lylah laughed as if this were the most amusing moment of the night. “I don’t have her number.”

He looked at her puzzled.

“She’s three on my phone. I just press three and it dials her number.” She chuckled again, mimicking the motions of dialing a phone number, as I started to climb onto the fire escape through her kitchen window.

“Is it OK if I go out?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’ll come out with you in a few minutes.”

I stepped onto the white ledge under the window, admiring the “NO LEFT TURN” sign she stuck in front of the glass. Pushing it off to the side, I enjoyed the leak of cool air, my feet shaking as I stood on strips of metal eleven floors away from the street. The entire city was beneath my bare ankles.

“Scary, isn’t it?” Lylah crawled through the window a couple of minutes later, John behind her.

“Yeah.”

The three of us stood.

“Look how beautiful L.A. is,” she admired, draped over the ledge of the railing, as if she were part of the landscaping.

“So you must be from L.A. too?” John asked me.

“Nope. Originally from Michigan. But I moved out here almost two years ago.”

“What part of the city do you live in now?”

“Actually, I live in Tustin. It’s near—”

“Tustin! Ah, give me some.” He gave me a high five.

“You know where Tustin’s at?” I asked. “Everyone I told tonight had no idea where I lived.”

“Of course I know where Tustin’s at, near Santa Ana and Irvine, right?”

“Yep.”

“See. I know, I know.”

“So where are you from?”

“Pasadena.”

“Boooo,” Lylah chimed in.

“What? Pasadena is like L.A., except better. I bet you haven’t even been there.”

“No, I’ve visited. I went to a concert out there, and that was OK. But it’s too pish posh.”

“And what is L.A.? You can’t even drive down the streets without feeling like you’re falling apart.”

“True. But that gives it its charm. Take that alley down there. People shit in that alley. That alley reeks of human feces.”

“Nah, you would never see that in Pasadena. People have their own bathrooms.”

“Exactly. Pish Posh. People should be able to take a shit wherever they want to. No one regularly walks down that alleyway, so if someone has to shit they should do it.”

“Besides, why else would you want to use that alley?” I mentioned. “People probably know that’s the place where you go to take a shit.”

“Exactly,” said Lylah.

“You know what I love about Pasadena? I can just wake up, come out of a fresh shower, and step onto the balcony without the fear of anyone seeing me.”

“You can do that here, too,” said Lylah.

“No you can’t. I bet that people can see you from that apartment.” John pointed to the apartment complex across the way, to the open window stationed below us.

“So? See that window there. A guy sits in that chair naked every weekend. And I’m sure he doesn’t even know that I can see him. That’s the charm of L.A. He’s comfortable in his space. Sometimes, I stand out here naked, and though I know no one will immediately see me, it’s still that chance that someone might look up.”

“And you’re OK with that?”

“Yeah. Why not? I mean how many Cheesecake Factories can you have in one city? It’s all pish posh in Pasadena. Honestly.”

“The Cheesecake Factory does have pretty good food, though,” I interrupted. John awarded me another high five.

“You go there for The Cheesecake Factory and then come back here.” She paused. “Take a look at the building across the street.” She pointed through the bustling cityscape to some aloof corporate building stranded in the middle of the city. “Look how translucent it is. Sometimes in broad daylight, you can see through every window. You can’t even tell that it’s there. It just blends in with the city. Or, on the other days, you may think it’s just a shadow of this building. That’s what I’ll miss most. I mean friends you’ll see again, but this space...I know I’ll never return exactly to this space.”

“Then why leave?” I asked.

“Because you can’t stay in one place for too long. You have to keep moving.”

All was silent between us as we took in each heaving breath of the living creature beneath and all around us. The city, at its most brilliant peak, thundered with vivacity at every streetlight, corner, and empty bristle of creviced cement, lurking to trip up a new visitor or unwatchful pedestrian.

“Can we go up the fire escape to the next floor?” I asked.

“Yeah, but other people live up there, so we have to be careful.”

The three of us climbed until we reached the thirteenth and last floor of the fire escape. Eyeing the ladder on the side of the building they decided to climb to the roof.

“Come on, Emma.”

I looked at Lylah and John scoping the side ladder, thirteen stories up from Wilshire Boulevard.

“I don’t think I can.” I watched them pass over the ledge of the roof and sink into darkness as I stood below.

“You can see everything from up here. The entire city!” Lylah yelled.

“I could die!” I screamed back dramatically.

“You won’t, you’ll be fine!”

No regrets. It’s OK to have fun.

I mounted the ladder like I was in an action scene from a movie. Lylah and John screamed above me, “Whatever you do, don’t look down!” I didn’t. I just kept climbing, waiting until both feet were each on a rung of the ladder before stepping onto the next thinly shaped cylinder.

“Make sure to take off those ridiculous heels, too!” yelled John.

“She’s barefoot.” I heard Lylah’s voice in the background.

“What do I do now?” I said, as I noticed the punctuating gap between the ledge and myself.

“Just climb over.”

So easily could I have been lost into the unknowable machine that drilled and thrived beneath me. But I stepped over, my feet clinging to the sandpaper textured roof.

“See that wasn’t so bad,” Lylah said.

“No, but going down will be the hard part.”

“Yeah, but we’ll worry about that when we get there. In the meantime, look at the city.”

We walked from one edge of the roof to the other, taking in everything.

“Look at those people down there in the parking lot. Hey!” I yelled, “welcome to Los Angeles!”

“Hello down there!” Lylah yelled “To Los Angeles the beautiful!”

“And the brave!” I finished.

“Do you think they can hear us?” She asked.

“Yeah. We can hear them, and they’re not even yelling.” Bits of their conversation flew at us from the evening air, soothing our notion that Los Angeles is home to everyone.

“Wouldn’t it be scary if someone pulled out a gun right now?” she asked.

“I was just thinking that,” I said and imitated how I would duck behind the ledge if gunshots were fired.

“Bullets couldn’t reach us from there though,” she said.

“Unless we’re in an action flick,” I responded.

“Right,” said John cocking his fingers, and throwing his arms to demonstrate a bullet curving to meet its target.

All of us laughed.

“Hello up there.” The group below us finally looked up and waved. I blew kisses into the night, continuing my ramblings of “Welcome to L.A., the brave and wonderful.”

“What if that was our apartment,” asked Lylah pointing toward a small shack on the roof with a huge sign that read “Authorized Personnel Only.”

“We should go look inside,” I said walking up the four rickety stairs toward the door.

But just as John pushed it open, we heard several strange creaks and thumps, as if someone were already there, and bolted.

Climbing our way down, Lylah went first, then me, and lastly John.

“Oh, you guys gonna leave me up here alone? I see how you are. Leave me here with the mystery murderer,” John joked.

“OK fine, we’ll wait,” Lylah exaggeratedly huffed. Both of us waited at the bottom of the ladder preparing to make our final getaway down the fire escape.

When we all returned, Peter, Mel, and Andrew stood on the outside ledge.

“We just saw a ghost on the roof!” I announced. “It was so scary.”

“After how many Sangrias?” asked Pete who was seriously concerned about my level of intoxication, though I only had the half shot of gin.

Everyone else returned inside except for John and me.

“Oh God, I’m still shaking,” I said.

“From what?” John asked.

“Climbing the side of the building, duh.”

“Yeah, that was scary, but I live for adrenaline.”

Lylah had cozied herself into the kitchen, admiring the mess made inside her apartment. “It was so clean earlier. How about this, we leave all things not useful outside, like dirty dishes.” She casually piled everything together. “Eh, I’ll figure it out later.”

“I can help,” Matt, another latecomer who also went to school with Lylah, Mel, and me chimed in. He turned on the water, running the dishes through with soap.

“What if I just give you a hug and call you my hero. I’m sure when I’m hung over tomorrow, I’ll have nothing better to do than dishes.”

“Nope, I got it.”

“OK,” she said and made her way back into the living room.

“Hey, did you really take all of these street signs?” I asked re-entering her apartment and admiring the neon signs that she had stashed in various places of her apartment.

“Yep.” Lylah grabbed the camera and started taking more photos.

“Do you carry around a screwdriver with you and unhinge them?”

She responded with a quick chuckle. “Hey Matt,” she said. “Show me what you’ve got. You’ve been talking for years and now I’m leaving in three days, and I still haven’t seen you dance.”

“Alright, alright. It has to be the right music, though.”

Lylah quickly turned off the Yiddish music to switch on more 90s hip-hop, prompting Matt to break dance.

He stole the floor for a couple of songs, catapulting himself in the air, lifting himself with bare hands, the swirl of blue-green lights seemingly mimicking his motions.

“That’s all I got,” he said, sweat tacked to his forehead and under his budding fro.

“So how did you get into breakdancing?” Lylah asked.

“Well, it started in high school. All these kids were pop locking or raving.” He did comedic imitations of both. “But if you could break, then no one could touch you. You were automatically the coolest at the school, until you went to another school and battled

their dancers. You know? But it's all about keeping the culture alive."

She nodded, giving her sign of approval.

"Yeah, me and Carmen were the one's that brought it to campus, pre-URBAN."

"Cool," she said, totally entranced by the mood.

"Weren't you ever scared of stealing the street signs?" I interrupted awkwardly.

"That's part of the fun of it. Besides, I only take the ones that are partially hanging off anyway. And they have hundreds of them. They'll have it replaced within the next three days."

"I almost want to try taking one now."

"It's definitely a rush," Lylah laughed.

Everyone finally sauntered into the room. They scattered either on the couch or floor.

"Do you think I could give you a few bucks for one of your Deep Blue Soul CDs?"

"You never got one?" she asked, surprised that I had never received one of her band's CDs.

"Nope. Do you have any on you that I could buy?"

"No, but I can give you one. We'll have to walk to my car to get it though."

"That's fine. I should probably be heading out anyway," eyeing my watch and noticing that it was already 2:00 a.m. I gave everyone a hug goodbye as we both walked downstairs, John behind us.

"I'll walk you to your car," he said, though Lylah was by my side. He asked for my number on the way down.

"I'm glad you guys let me take the princess stairs. No one else wanted to use them," I said.

“Nah, I think we’re just drunk enough to let you persuade us into taking the stairs,” John said.

We finally made it to the bottom and headed to the lot across the alley.

“Is this the alley that people shit in?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“Why don’t you use the apartment’s parking?”

“Because it’s \$150 a month,” Lylah responded.

“Damn,” John said.

We climbed through a hole in the fence, a shortcut to her car, and she handed me a CD of her band’s music. “The case is a little…” she held the broken plastic fixture in front of me, “but the CD is still good.”

“It’s fine. They’re love marks,” I said. “Thanks so much, I can’t wait to play it when I get in the car.”

“Take care of it OK? Since you have one of the last remaining copies.”

“Trust me, I will,” I said, honored that I had a premium Deep Blue Soul CD.

They walked me back to my car a block away.

“Thanks for coming.” Lylah and I hugged.

“Man this is so sad. I’ll never see you again since you’re moving away.”

“That’s not true. I’ll be back. Plus my sister will be a freshman at the university in another year, so I’ll have to come back. And I’m on the Alumni Network Board.”

“Awesome. I’ll have a little sister.”

“Yep,” she smiled. “She’ll be there when you’re a senior.”

“Cool! Well thanks for inviting me.” We hugged again, the CD case cupped in my hand.

John briefly nestled up to me next, sliding his hands across my back and fondling me. Then I got into my car and departed.

“Be careful cutie!” John yelled. I gave a brief wave and hit the highway, grateful that there was no longer any traffic, tuning into the funky soul jazz music of the Deep Blue Soul.

41

Knowing that something is impossible to change is agonizing. I woke up this morning with an intense hate for both God and humanity. When the pain strikes, it strikes immediately and intensely.

I am cheated out of a relationship and out of myself. I thrust the bristled edges of my hairbrush into my cheeks and legs. Every day has started as if it is a race to the edge; falling farther away from myself, Adam's callous words ricocheting as I let go.

I am tossed, a grenade harpooned into the streets of Barbie faces. I have a detonation of hair and mutilated features: wide nose, thick lips, and boogie man eyes, deep when they hit the soul. I am enough to be a monster by society's standards.

It hits the fan when I realize I can't afford a wig to cover up the frizz and tangles that combine to make

a fro, enough to separate me from the slender white features of my friends and colleagues. No one will understand, save for my future teenage stepsister. She always wears a slouch in her shoulders and locks herself in the TV room when the family goes to the pool.

Mom has the whiter features of the family. I wasn't that lucky and Adam would always take notice. He would routinely point out, "Too bad you didn't get your mother's hazel eyes. She really does have pretty eyes, you know. I bet you wish your hair were a little longer don't you, so they covered your boobs?" I was just a sick comparison.

Besides my nightcap showers, where I have the luxury of a shower cap, it is a debilitating sentiment to have this mane of hair. After visiting the pool, the futile attempts to resuscitate the smooth locks I had just moments before stepping into the water, hours spent long with a hot comb to revive the movable hair that I had for a couple of weeks. Hours spent long pressing the flat irons against the base of my scalp to soften the new growth of hair that had not yet been touched by the creamy fingers of a perm. Hours spent long convincing myself that no one will notice, but unconsciously they do.

People will see me as insecure. It's more. It's being humiliated. It's the immobilizing thought that if I looked different, I could be someone else.

"No one can see you through the window. They probably think it's tinted."

42

We left my elementary school bathroom and the funeral that had followed in the neighboring auditorium. We wanted to make it to the party, where Madame X had turned the luxurious three-bedroom loft into a burlesque parlor. Acknowledging that everyone had left, in his or her dark purple and gold velvet smocks, we departed as well.

Trailing time, we climbed the remnants of an old highway, my mom in the passenger seat of the turquoise hatchback. We drifted forward, rolling through the lazy canyon. The walls beside us flickered from shades of gold to terracotta brown.

As the road narrowed, the sunlight steadied. We found ourselves in a small town, where white picket fences were on the borders of willow trees, and fog was an opaque blanket. Our clean shaped path became dirt roads and trees encroached above us. Moisture clung to

their disfigured branches and droplets of water pelted the ground.

Twilight was upon us. The fog settled even lower, and the humidity was tangible, sticky in the crevices of my fingers. The road was not void of other vehicles and even it had been, nothing seemed haunting. Mom sat tranquilly, enjoying easy strokes of air trickling in from the rolled down window.

The car ahead of us continued, hitting a curve deftly. My tires sloshed through the apparitions of shadows and muddied water. Without warning, a grey snake appeared, centered under the tracks of the previous vehicle. He coiled his body close, leaping into the banks of the trees after our tires had startled him.

We came across a dock on the driver's side, and a darkly lit pond. Other vehicles led the way into the water. Everything around us had deepened in shade signaling nightfall. The fog lowered; the air forewarned a storm.

We followed the other cars, color variations of black. Everyone was sure that it was something more. It was their way out.

I could feel the safety of the other path, though.

We crawled forward, our hatchback hovering under the waves' cadence. It was no use gripping the steering wheel against the rickety hands of the water.

"Stop! Just let go." I felt my mom's voice shaking, the panic settling in. The cars ahead of us, one a convertible with a dropped roof, were doing no better; they struggled not to be overturned.

I wanted to pull their vehicle nearer to me, to rope them in. The driver's son was loosed on the edge

of the passenger seat, as his father tried to sturdy the vehicle without losing him.

I looked in all directions, the frustrated grunts of the water slapping the lifeless hatchback, the mansions stationed at the periphery of the water's shore. Everyone was in trouble.

A revolt of waves sprung beneath us. We saw, as did everyone else, small tremors rolling in our direction from the opposite shoreline, catapulting each car backwards.

43

I prolonged my shower visitation yesterday morning just to convince myself that water was good-natured. I tried to fuse my tears with the downpour.

Internally I jotted down notes, something I would have to reference later. At that moment, I was a convict.

I watched my reflection bud around the base of the metal showerhead, blooming as if it were a fresh tulip.

I thought about them, the way he looked at me when the three of us were in Kiley's room preparing to watch a movie. I went to sit down on her stiff, white futon next to him as he pushed away his dull black hair from his forehead. I could see his rawboned fingers quivering, briefly glancing at the form of her adjusting the TV and then back to me. I understood. He was waiting for her.

She sat down on the two-seater couch; I awkwardly stepped backward. “There’s room on the bed.” The remote rested between her fingers.

Then there was Maddie, sleeping perfectly on the shoulder of Evan, a tiny part separating her lips, *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* playing in the background. I sat with Lynn’s feet curled cautiously under my neck, both of us at opposite ends on another couch. I wanted to relax. It didn’t matter.

“I don’t want to be one of those girls,” Sammi told me, alive with sparkling red hair. We stood side by side in the mirror. I remembered Lee and Yvette at that moment and then looked back at her, face to face, her Judy Garland innocence.

Out of the three significant things that she had said to me, that weighed the heaviest, because I had trusted her. The other two were just divine sayings, forming this Holy Trinity: Two – “Great, this means I can’t give head,” in reference to her jaw pain. She had her wisdom teeth removed in the following weeks. Three – “That’s not my problem if you’re not getting any sleep.” She was in bed with whom I had wanted to be with and she knew this. She *had* become one of those girls.

“Oh my gosh you scared me!” I stumbled backwards when I stepped out of the bathroom. My mother’s bedroom door opened. “I thought you were a ghost.”

“Nope, it’s just me,” she responded, hair pulled back and pajama shorts lounging easily around her waist.

“Do you not have work today?”

“I have the day off, but it’s considered flex time, meaning if I do have work, then instead of enjoying time off, I do it.”

“Oh. Well at least they’re paying you for it. I have to go into the yearbook office today. They don’t pay me during the summer, though.”

She slid back into bed, an excess of assorted documents spread out before her with her laptop crouching among them.

“I’m glad I didn’t burst into your room singing and posing playfully in the mirror like I do every morning,” I said laughingly.

“Now that would have scared me,” she responded. “What if Rick were here, he would have been so mad,” she jokingly admonished.

“Yeah, I guess. I normally try to wait ‘til you guys are gone though. Oh I have your change left over from the parking. It was only two dollars, but I bought lunch and had to pay...”

“What! That money wasn’t for you just to spend.”

“Oh...I...” I was stumped. I couldn’t think of anything to say, as she sat there eyeing her computer screen furiously. “I didn’t know. I was going to use the rest of the money today to pick up lunch since I have to be at the yearbook office in an hour.”

“Fine, keep it,” she said exhaustingly.

“No, no, no. I still have the change. It’s about twelve dollars.”

“No, go ahead and keep it,” she said.

44

Muses of depression: That's how I'm accustomed to waking up, with a pain in my left pinky toe to top off everything.

In my latest dream, I had stepped on a twig. It looked like cosmos surrounded by fluorescent orange leaves, thousands of them funneling and crisp. Ally, my friend from high school, and I couldn't escape from the looming disaster. When I climbed up the small hillside, I blistered my pinky toe on a twig. I felt the pain in waking life, though it was only for a moment.

"Emma?" My mom saw that I was finally awake. "We're leaving now. We're going to catch a movie."

"Without me?" I asked.

"You were sleeping."

I looked at the clock. 10 a.m. Who goes to the movies at 10 a.m.?

“There’s food downstairs on the stove, and you can take my cell phone since yours isn’t working.”

I sat up in disbelief. For the past week she’s been on a money diet, leaving me leftovers of stiff chicken for dinner. Now she’s going to the movies with Rick, her fiancé, some excuse about hard days at work.

I had pulled all-nighters the entire week, prepping for finals in my summer school course, begrudgingly completing my last art project four times because it found some way to get ruined, and being troubled by constant emails in reference to yearbook work. No one ever found time to treat me to the movies.

I sighed. “I’m a wreck, a psychopathic wreck,” I said aloud to myself.

I stood in the shower.

Every day I prayed, vowing to myself that I would experience one good fuck. No shame, no denial, only full-on penetration. And most importantly, I didn’t want Adam to be there.

I was ashamed to ask for this, imagining the face of God behind my temples. But, I wielded my thoughts and placed an order as if I were in a tunnel seeking a restoration drive-thru.

One. Good. Fuck.

I shouted internally when he didn’t answer. I wanted this to be like a Moses transaction. I wanted him to trust me. Where was my miracle?

Furious and dragging water across my dripping palms, I burst the life out of tiny bubbles resting on a nearby soap dish.

I can handle the pain. That was my justification, my privilege in response to the silence that God had so viciously wrapped through the manes of my shower curtain, the tombs of my bathtub. I pounded the neighboring wall.

At the end of the day, He knew he was my prosthetic father. He was left, and I wasn't sure how to stop or start believing.

“The three things that people say about you after you leave, are one you’re gorgeous, two you communicate well, and three you have good work ethics. So I thought to myself, ‘Hmm, why is she having a tough time getting a date?’ and then I figured, maybe God didn’t want you to be distracted.” I fingered the edges of the pillow, drawing it over my stomach, the cool sting of the zipper pressing against my thigh, while I listened to my mother speak. “Think about it, what did the neighbor say when she met you?”

I sat.

“Come on. It was just yesterday,” she excitedly pleaded. “She said ‘Oh my gosh! She’s absolutely gorgeous!’”

“Yeah, but don’t adults say that to everyone they meet? It’s just being courteous.”

“Nooo,” my mother cooed, “how often do you hear people say that just to be courteous?”

I sat drifting into a stir of daydreams. I felt bad for hurting her the other week, for calling her inconsiderate, telling her she could never be motherly. I couldn't even see the tears hit the banister, but I knew they were there. The plastic-covered carpet crunched under her feet.

“You know,” she stammered, “I said the same thing to my mother when I was your age. But now I realize that she had tried her best.” She shook her head, pounding pieces of crumpled paper towel to her nose. “She really tried her best, and now I can see that.”

“Mom, I...I didn't mean...” My voice faltered, wavering in the dry atmosphere. “I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry.”

“Forty-two years.” She rested at the top of the stairway. “That's how long it took her to say ‘I love you.’” I sat downstairs, feeling as if the world had collapsed on my heartbeat.

I snapped back to our current conversation. The reality is, she did care about me.

“You are going to go far. Forget about the people at school, and their theories and philosophies on capitalism and whatever. Think about it, we're not socialists. We're not making attempts to help out everyone. We are capitalists. Your school is a business. How else would the university be making their money? Parents are paying the school for their kids to go there.

“In the end, they sound like freeloading hippies who are not contributing to tax revenues. They're not going to want to work in their protest of ‘the man.’”

They just take up space. Don't let them make you feel bad, because you don't philosophize or understand their theories. In the business world, no one cares." Mom spoke free-spiritedly about "the artists," the people I tried to befriend in their abject plaid shirts.

"Yeah, it was really funny when they tried to protest a local grocery store being built," I responded.

"See, money coming into the community, supplying jobs for individuals who need them..."

"And their prices are really cheap, especially if you can't afford a lot," I interrupted.

"What is the main objective of a business?" My mom asked abruptly.

I hesitated. "To make money."

"Exactly. You understand that concept. Employers will love you. I train so many of these college students who come in with their theories and book smarts, but they have no experience, no practicality. You have that. You know what people want."

I let go of my mother's voice. She had went to bed hours ago, but I was still awake at 4 a.m. The remains of the yearbook were on my desk as I towed myself off, giving a pretend voice to the lips of my vagina. I let out a soft note of "feed me."

46

I drove toward the freeway, warmed orange juice in my sticky cup holders, while white light pounded the windshield. My teeth chewed away at my lips, dragging chapped skin that had absorbed the saline of last night's tears. I wound fresh bubblegum through my mouth, popping the cheeky flesh of its pink skin through the solid air, hearing it crack in the tense silence.

I remembered that flask, "To help you cope with it all." The silver text had read under the image of a cross on the front of that carafe. The stiff Tequila, rich and decrepit, emptied through the neck of the container, falling onto my void lips. I took several swigs, the steering wheel heated under my fingers, battling an internal range of emotions and mood swings.

I returned to school feeling groggy, eyelashes melded with preserved gunk.

My mother yelled at me for frightening her. I didn't mean to, but the tone of voice that ascended her throat and bellowed out made me feel stupid. Sometimes I wondered how she could be so distant and uncaring.

"This behavior would be horrible in France!" she screamed to me through her bedroom doorframe, slamming the thin piece of painted wood afterwards.

"No, it wouldn't!" I yelled back, injured, demeaned.

I held the cup attentively, looking at the half-filled bathtub, speckles of lint and dirt gathering near the back edges, the remains of unknown bacteria pooling together at the tips of my shower curtain. The green, chalky water held the cadaver of some unknown insect, as I tried earnestly to scoop it out with the

cupped base of my toilet scrubber. Each time that I had missed, I let out a tiny yelp of panic.

“You are being disrespectful! There are other people living here.” The walls were not thick enough to hold back my mother’s screams. I nudged the edge of the white base against my leg; tears formed near the rim of my eyelids. They were warm and searing against my cheeks and ceaselessly chapped lips. I hated this. I hated being the backlash of all of her energy whenever I did something “wrong,” leaving me to feel apprehensive and shaky.

The pain of knowing that every mistake I made conflicted with her standards of perfection, anchored me deeper into sadness.

I headed toward the freeway the morning after I realized that maybe if I had let go...*if*...nothing would break inside of me. The pledge of motorcycles thundered past my roaring car as I cranked up every bass backed beat of music to the max.

I watched cars spin past me, hitting the open atmosphere as if they were lost pinballs, funneling into the distance of dotted lines and broken cloud shapes.

I adjusted mislaid scatterings of papers, receipts from fast food restaurants, documents from last year’s yearbook. Everything became a dangerous tornado caught in the open trap of my rolled down windows. I threw my favorite shoe over the riotous debris to prevent their escape from my car and drove forward. Existing could be a means for sovereignty.

I would never forget Crystal, though I had never officially known her. The one occasion that we did meet, she forgot my name after the first mention. I'm sure of it. Those sharp eyes tingled with rage after I took a seat on Mandi Sunshine's couch, the rest of the crew drinking and lighting something to smoke in the backyard.

"Not for your innocent eyes," Rondy smiled, ushering me into calmness while everyone filed into the distinctly gray backyard. I sat on the disturbed green cushions in the living room, still active, holding their contorted shapes from the bodies that had been previously sitting there. The paintings on the wall were turquoise girls made to look like monsters.

Raye with her necklace drawn tattoo sat next to me. "I did some of these myself."

"I draw some, too. We should get together sometime and just jam out in our different art forms."

“Yeah,” she casually responded, making room for the incomers, Crystal, Lance, Rondy, and a few others.

I couldn’t stop staring at Crystal, though, lounging in the restful arms of Lance.

Easily, I could see her spine buckle and contort under the shirt that she wore as a dress, partially backless. Her ripped black pantyhose that wrinkled around her ankles and knees, and headband devoid of elasticity by the pale of her ears made her a protruding image in my memory. I’ll never forget those angry eyes, tiny sockets of fists coming at me. But she relaxed eventually, careful to remain silent the whole night as if a mouthful of words would consume her.

“Sorry about your car,” someone whispered to me.

I thought back to my wrecked car parked outside of their apartment, exploded airbag on the passenger’s side, but Rondy was high; it didn’t matter. He barely felt anything.

The Black Sabbath song “Heaven and Hell” filled my car, as Rondy and I lost ourselves in the swells of the mountains in search of an overhead helicopter. But my car had been tripped out of control; our adventure landed us in a snowplow when I didn’t know that I was supposed to switch gears to maneuver down the slopes and back to campus. My burgundy compact car had spun out of the midnight air and into a crushing bank of white solidity. We managed to move the car with my front fender tailing the asphalt, headlight buzzing into the rattling winds.

“Can we go to your friend’s house? The one that we passed on the way here?” I asked. My interest

had been piqued when I saw Evan's van there as we drove by earlier that night.

Rondy stared, not saying anything. The white puff of the airbag shielded his head from the thick encasement of glass. He rested for a moment. "I'm not sure if they'll be OK with that."

"Can you call them? We may have a better chance of making it there than back to the university since they're on the way." Truthfully, I really wanted to see Evan, announce that I was in an accident, but that Rondy and I had triumphed like Metal Gods.

"They don't really know you, but I'll try calling."

Neither of our phones had reception in the mountains, though, so he just decided to give the go ahead.

Eventually, after moving the car and getting it to start up, we left the chilling ridges and that harsh yellow line divider to re-enter into the world. His phone started working again, although I later realized, due to my usual forgetfulness, that my phone wasn't even charged. Mom would be upset; she always told me to keep my phone powered up. He notified his friends that we were coming over, and they waited for us at the corner of their street.

Damn. No sight of Evan's van.

I was excited, though, to see Raye. She embraced me. "Big Spoon! I was so worried when Rondy called Manda bear. He said that you and him were in an accident and I immediately thought, 'No, not my Big Spoon.'"

"Oh, Little Spoon," I said in my most cooing voice. "You must be Mandi?" I looked toward the stark

red-orange hair that flitted in the mumbles of the breeze.

“Yeah, I remember you. I met you awhile back at a party.” She assessed my car. “The only way to stick the airbag back in is to cut it and shove it through the ceiling, except it won’t be functional anymore.”

I hesitated. “I don’t want to do that. Maybe I can watch a video online on how to fix it. I just don’t want to file a claim through my insurance.”

“You won’t have to do that. Just take it in to the car dealer. It’s still under warranty, right?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, then just take it in and tell them you want a new airbag. You don’t have to tell them what happened if you didn’t hit another car or anything.”

“Really?” I inquired, feeling rather satisfied and at ease now.

“Yep, and another tip, you won’t be in trouble with your insurance company unless you’re the last one to hit in a pile-up...in case that happens.”

“Huh....I didn’t know that.”

She invited me inside and that’s when I was introduced to everyone, including the beautifully deranged Crystal, frumpy headband on her dark reddened hair. It was a rat’s nest of gel and spray-on burgundy dye, but green mood lights turned her into a fantastical being.

The evening was long and caressing. Everyone sat in front of the television, glossed over eyes, sickles of laughter, chimes of smoke coming from every direction.

“I can’t breathe.”

The breakthrough of a voice alerted everyone in the room.

“You OK, honey?” Lance grabbed Crystal’s arm. She sat on the dirtied white carpet, shivering, her back was snow colored and thin as if a twig had substituted her spine.

She was choking. “I feel like I’m on fire. I can’t breathe!” Crystal’s voice became harsher, prismatic with pain. All the while I sat, soaking up the image of the sickly body as if I were witnessing a scene from an independent art film.

Lance lifted her nearly weightless form and put her in a back room.

“Is she going to be OK?” I finally asked. I wasn’t really concerned, but I wanted to sound like I was.

“She’ll be fine,” Mandi’s roommate came in from a closed door at the end of the hall, answering my question rigidly. I never got her name, but she wanted me to leave.

Mandi briefly gave me the scoop as her roommate left to go to the other room with Lance and Crystal. Apparently, after a year-long stint with a boyfriend who had broken up with her on Valentine’s Day, Crystal decided to crash on the couch at their apartment. She did shrooms because she didn’t want to be in her mind anymore. Crystal was having a bad trip. It was suggested that Rony and I leave before Mandi’s roommate re-entered. She wasn’t a fan of uninvited guests.

I thanked Mandi and Raye for their hospitality, devouring the morning air. 5:14 a.m. After dropping Rony off, I headed toward my dorm room, setting my morning alarm for 8 a.m. I had to make it to the car dealer before my noon French course.

Five-hundred dollars later, covering the cost of my insurance deductible, and explaining to my professor over the phone that I would miss class due to crashing my car, I sat in the collision agency waiting for the news. The auto repair shop could not fix the airbag, I would have to file a claim. Fortunately, mom wasn't too upset. I explained to her that the \$500 would come out of my savings, though she tried to convince me to let her pay, and I would owe her the money later. I didn't want any debt.

"Were you going up to the mountains to make out?" she asked playfully over the phone.

"No! Rondy's just a friend. We went because we heard search helicopters, and I always wanted to follow them. So we did."

"Such a goof. You know what I think? I think you were going to make out with him," she said evermore teasingly.

"Ha ha. Look, I have to go. I need to fill out a form for a temporary rental car. Apparently we have the platinum coverage."

"Actually, this is going to sound so strange, but I upgraded our insurance a couple of weeks ago.

I had this odd feeling that something was going to happen...hmm...spooky."

We sat in silence.

"That is strange," I finally replied. "Hey, I have to go, they need me to sign something."

"Alright, love you."

"Love you, too."

I had to admit, things were finally starting to get better with mom. Maybe her fiancé would finally be the one to change things.

I made it back to campus in my temporary new car, dodging any waves from peers and sneaking into the side door of the building to get to my room. Everyone was outside, and I looked horrible, still wearing yesterday's clothes and a hat to shroud my tangled hair. I was not going to class, even though I could still make it. I climbed to the top bunk, the sheets losing grip from the corners of the mattress. But I didn't mind, as I spared no time shutting my eyes, absorbing the welcoming presence of sleep.

49

Having mom around this time when I came back from school was different. Maybe it was Rick, or maybe it was the fading 100 degrees weather, either way, our explosive conversations were less. Rick didn't have to wait in the doorway before entering the home or leave to find a neighboring bar when he heard us yelling. Most of the time, I still kept him at an intentional distance, though, out of my life. I didn't want him to turn out to be another Adam.

I cannot say if I loved him. I just had to figure it out. I knew he fought to be in my life and that made me sad, because I could not reciprocate something as easy as admiration, especially when everything became vulnerable and too deep, like a dugout suddenly turned sinkhole.

I liked Rick. He played music with me and he gave me classic rock CDs. I could fit in with the guys at

school if I had wanted to. He made me feel like his daughter, the complete opposite of how Adam had treated me. But, of course, I never told mom how I felt about Rick.

I was too scared to touch him. Afraid that one hug might change everything. I couldn't take that risk for mom's sake.

Mom was still a firecracker, though. On most days, she knew what she wanted to communicate; on others, I just had to be certain what I was doing or sacrifice time for a lecture later.

She was funny in some ways, letting me stay out late to skateboard, or even visit Kiley, my previous roommate who lived a couple of cities away. She knew I was starving for friendship. But, on the other hand, she was still protective.

When we fought, we cut each other deeply with our words, resuscitating the past. Neither of us stayed angry for more than a day though. In the end, she believed it was devotion to God that saved us.

I had stopped believing in God.

50

I couldn't think outside of myself. The summer was consummate. I felt undeniably exhausted. I arrived at my location shortly, picking up a pair of boots from a local shoe repair shop, gladly admiring my freshly painted heels and the new soles.

"Alright, the total is \$16.54."

"I think I owe you an extra \$5. You see, last week you only charged me for five shoes, but when I got home, I realized there were six in the bag."

He tapped numbers on a nearby calculator, the small frame of his glasses bouncing away from his eyes as he stopped to stare at me.

"Ah ah ah. Speak no evil, see no evil, hear no evil." He smiled. "We'll let God worry about it."

"You can never be too sure," I said solemnly.

“Really? Unsure about God up there?” He pointed toward the ceiling. “I think that He has the will to know right from wrong and judge people fairly. Leave it up to God,” he repeated laughingly to demystify his previously wrought tone of seriousness. “I appreciate your honesty, though.”

I slid my plastic card into his small, stodgy fingers, worn with the care of dedicated work. He charged me for just the boots and returned the debit card to me.

“Well, I just didn’t want you to lose any money,” I said, placing the shoes back inside of the brown bag, disguising them from the outside light.

He chuckled, soft tufts of gray hair straying from his head. “See you again.”

Maybe I should have said goodbye. I had already started walking, searching in my purse for my keys.

I took the steering wheel between my hands. The skin around my eyes tensed, wrinkling with anger. With the help of my sunglasses, I drove forward, tiny spurts of tears surfacing and falling onto my skin. I tried rationalizing. I had done something honest, something that most people would have been scared to do. True, I was short on cash, but he could have needed the money just as well. Why did I feel so disturbed, so ridden of moral goodness?

At a nearby stop sign I studied my inner disconnect when feeling the sudden, invasive push of a car behind me. Furious, my eyesight climbed toward my rearview mirror. I wound my eyes around the nonchalant, sniggering figure behind me. With raised hands and a quick shrug, he smiled and put his hands back on his steering wheel.

I thought back to the gestures of the redhead, a woman who I had accidentally nudged on the freeway a month ago. Fingers shaking a half-smoked cigarette, her pale arm had swung from the window signaling me to pull over. I copied the gesture sans cigarette, cars lining up behind us. I turned off my ignition and stepped into the street, angry tires pulling off in different directions to avoid further hold ups.

Slamming my door, and arming myself with a Sharpie and an old folder, I eagerly took down his license plate number.

“You should do this off of the road,” a woman with graying blonde hair yelled as she sped away from the scene. I barely acknowledged her. My voice scaled a diorama of rage.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I said. “What were you thinking?”

He stared at me startled by my fury.

“You can’t just run into people like that.” I had a fleeting flashback, recalling the redhead who had let me off easily, but that moment slipped as the gentleman opened his car door.

I moved my fingers over the bumper, noticing a small ding. “I’m sorry, sir, for yelling, but I’m just...I’m just a little shaken. Look at this.” I knew it was nothing, but insisted on turning the situation into something explosive.

“Ah this, see it is just small,” he said moving two of his fingers over the “damage.”

“Look! It’s a ding from your license plate.”

He climbed back into his car, the traffic continuing to route around my frenzy. “I’m sorry,” he continued, his voice wavering.

“You should get his passport number!” A woman yelled at me from the side. “No matter what, get his passport number. I would!” She shouted venomously before another haste-driven person sounded their horns in her direction. She sped off.

I walked back to his car feeling sinister. “Look, I have your license plate number, what is your name?”

He spelled it out to me, his thick accent causing him to repeat some of the letters several times. “Do you want my number?” he asked. I nodded. He took out his cell phone, reading to me off of the small screen. “I’m sorry. I don’t speak much English. I’m sorry.”

I held up my hand, as if in peace, though I’m sure my mouth was still scowling. I returned to my car eventually pulling off and surrendering myself to the highway. I didn’t check to see if he was behind me. In fact, I felt distant and criminal, scared to look at the effects of my anger on his face one more time in that rearview mirror.

I pulled into the parking space at the apartment complex. *I am a shitty person.* I felt my teeth lodge into my bottom lip, every wit in my body shaking. I didn’t want to be like Adam. *I am a good person.* It’s settled. I’ll call and apologize.

51

“I must be strong.” I dangled that statement in the womb of my bathtub letting the hot strokes of shower water thwart me. Stiffening under the heat, I loomed forward to adjust the faucets and lower the temperature.

“I must be strong,” I repeated, almost silently.

I knew everyone had returned to the university. I was stuck here. I would be in France on Wednesday, though.

Months had passed since the accident and I felt terrifyingly alone.

Could I move on? Or would Adam always be present in my nightmares?

I puckered my lips into one of the poses he would give me whenever he had wanted to take my photo.

But in the end, I belonged to no one. Not Adam, Lee or Evan.

Past...Present...Same.

I propelled forward, hurrying through my shower, yet cautious not to disturb Rick who was sleeping next door, or mom, who lazed on the couch in the living room, attempting to disobey the winding heat of the summer. My vigilance was yet interrupted when I anxiously fumbled the soap bar. “Great, both of them are light sleepers. I’m sure this is the reason why Rick wants to live alone again.”

I pulled myself away from those nonperishable thoughts, assuming responsibility for my actions with an anvil of guilt.

I exited the bathroom, even more concerned with the thick noiseless void of the apartment, my thudding wet footsteps on the carpet as perturbed as the whines of my bedroom door. I eyed my companion on my bed, my lone teddy bear cupping his stomach in the shadows.

I can’t sleep with him tonight. I’m so used to his thick fingerless arms pushed against the back of my throat, mimicking oral sex positions, but he never came. I needed to stop, to distance myself from any thoughts of perversion. They were starting to take over me. *Adam* was starting to take over me.

I was a mess.

I remembered those stalwart blows from knotted knuckles, fists aimed toward me. I started to see Adam in everyone’s face. Most of all Evan’s. I couldn’t rescue him, though. Only the woman under the willow tree could.

I cried. I cut my thighs until the blood wound through the wood crevices of my closet. I fucked my teddy bear with a photo of Adam over it. All the while her photo was still under my mattress. I wanted to be her: Adam's only love.

Some nights, I'm sure the devil himself was avariciously after my own heartbeat. I have, ungrateful soul, left sanctity for the lunacy of my own reality. If I couldn't have my stepfather, I would have Evan.

I love him. I could feel the cheap thrill of saying it on my breath.

The words, perilous as if they were the last stamp, the last engraved epithet on a tombstone.

“There are sticks in the forest that are cleaner than he is...He’s the type of guy who will cheat on you while you’re in the room.” The words of Kiley were momentarily reminiscent.

A variance of sounds bustled into my thoughts as if it were a raging whistle of stops, crowded subway stops, launching into streams of empty corridors, chugging at incomprehensible speeds into darkness.

I am illogical.

“Don’t leave me,” I would eventually call after.

If only I could wield my heartbeats into a bracket of sufficiency for survival, the way he had

opened his pants that evening, thoughtfully, fully aware of the swiftness of the moment. I could have walked away freely, a clean woman.

For compensation, I have conjured an honest soul out of thin air, imagining him as I would an idol. But he is no savior.

Do you think he will miss me?

Stop these thoughts.

If God had words that's what he would say to me, a private repertoire of syllables.

STOP. THESE. THOUGHTS.

Perfectly punctuated. Perfectly acoustic. Perfectly timed.

Perfect.

THE FINALE (if at all endings have truth): I cannot stand this loneliness. I want to die by bulbs of fire so intensely situated on the surface of my flesh. That is the counter, the argument of rage that drowns out potential hilarity from providence and myself.

Now. Ineffable. Or maybe I can only describe what I'm feeling with silence. The empty licks of my breath beating inside of my eardrums. No writhing, no monotony, no perfection.

I have to stop now. I must stop. I will stop.

Goodbye Evan. I never loved you.

53

I opened my eyes to the soothing darkness, the breathing of my roommate floating past me. I hugged closer to my pillow, brief shoots of pain plunging into my eye socket and deeper into my head. Congratulating myself for bringing ibuprofen, I tucked further under the cover of the morning air, my eyelids moving languidly. Holding onto my hotel room bed, I could feel the earth on its axis, the reclining hutch of the intuitive cosmos. France was another universe. I had finally made it here.

Sometimes I feel as though I am from some distant planet, covered in moon waves and icicles.

« Dans le réveil du soir », I dreamt my lover was from another planet as well, but I sensed he was going

to die in a plane crash. I awoke before I could completely register the eruption of another loneliness, the simple elongated horror of knowing. I gripped the edge of my bed again, now absolutely certain that I was being pushed along by some unknown force, dropping me off in a bundle of the distance, clanging my rigid body along lucent awakes and civil moments of unrest.

By the time my roommate awoke, I saluted my eyes, opening them wide enough to measure her distance from me. She was in the shower. I went in after she finished.

Washing strange odors from my body, I pulled closer to the strength of my hands as there was no washcloth for bathing. I buried myself in the thick shield of the bathtub, my feet surrounded in deep, impenetrable white. I wanted the small gaps of water to take me in their arms and free me from my still slumbering consciousness. I needed to be awake. The leaps and bounds of le lumière welcomed and hurried me through the shower curtain, as I slid the length of its fabric against the handrail. I made hasty attempts to keep the water all to myself, sparing none to the laminate wooden floors. I watered myself graciously, injuring my knee on the high ledge of the tub as I moved my feet through the navy blue carpeting of the hallway when I finished.

Today there would be bicycles. Stirring myself through the remedying health of the wind, I would be touched by no one.

54

Last night I dreamt about a woman who forced herself onto me. It was rather unnerving at first, but my body quickly adjusted under the duration of her breasts beating against my own as we drew closer to each other. I knew with certainty that I was being criminalized for some unknown matter. Where was the justification for this punishment? I became mortified by my nonresistance, eventually giving in to let her ritualistic seduction consume me.

She called our position the Holy Trinity. She spread her arms outward in perfect unison with mine, forcing them into the position of a cross. Our naked bodies centered on the carpeting, awkwardly smashed against the entrance to a closet and an overturned

mattress. I was to be cruelly punished. I had no self-control.

55

I have come to a conclusion: Effervescent blonde hair and distinguishably bright blue eyes will work well in your favor. I lack these essentials.

People like to search for the closest thing to heaven and they often find them in the features of others.

If I were to have a choice, I would be autumn, a daze of red hair and green eyes. Yet, even then, after the onslaught of winter, everything would be white, snow-lacquered, and purified. Just like Crystal, I would always get washed away.

There is no justice in this punishment.

My day is spoiled by fatigue. I am nastily tired and dreadful, with uneasy usurps of effort

inappropriately used for keeping motion in my eyelids.

I slept through most of the day. An accumulation of books awaited me on my desk, mounds of homework poured through the operating systems of the airwaves, French books were overturned near fresh tampons.

If only I had someone to help me through the excess rigor of weariness, my energy drained through the capsule of expended life.

I just wanted to sleep, to nurture my weakness of womanhood.

I masturbated last night. Sexuality crept into my covers and extended me a foreign hand of power. I am always a nymph before my period. Finding myself on smutty sites, I eventually felt aroused after rubbing my palms on the tops of my thighs. I felt in control, authoritative, and embraced.

The power was in the possibility of having four guys at once stretching and bending me under their violent directions, thick flesh of skin inside of me, no reverence obstructing my morality. Imagining someone's penis cocked inside of my cheek.

I felt guilty at first, but then I typed in the word "bondage"...then "drunk"...then "gang rape," all lavishing my rituals of being a vicarious victim.

I slowed myself down when I felt a climax, afraid to let everything slip by me too quickly, though I never orgasmed. In fact, I'm always too afraid to actually penetrate past the lips of my vulva and just resort to fast, heavy, external strokes. It's really just the exhilaration of the act. It's the pretending to be the girl tied to a table at a military base, while having a guy plug my nose so I can only breathe through my mouth

as he advantageously thrust his penis in when I open for air. Maybe this is how I conjure Adam when everything else seems slightly out of skew in my life. I needed control...*I needed to be controlled.*

Inserting two fingers on the surface of my tongue, wanting everything to be real, I tried to strap my body down and mimic the forceful “interrogation.” I occasionally un-muted the sound on my laptop, careful not to let the family I was living with in France detect the low subservient groans.

Then I finished. My legs overturned on the thickness of my blankets, more escalating tension on my computer screen. I cleared off the page, and made a quick bathroom run before I dimmed out everything and fell asleep.

I’m awakened, a surge of liquid startling me. It’s always blood, thicker than cum. I’ve started, stained panties wet and stuck to the hairs of my vulva. I find a tampon, switch out of my clothes and scamper into bed, hoping I didn’t ruin the sheets.

56

Situated in the same place.

I haven't cried in a long time, yet I've decided to freshen the air with warm completed tears, fleeting treats of despondency. *I am not the face you want to wake up to in the morning.* I laughed a little.

It is difficult to understand how everything can render itself so miserably into an existence. But, as always, I achieved the unprecedented.

On my off days, I have dreams of churches, God sneering at me when I imagine myself in some clichéd, turn of the century sex position, stealthily masturbating at French Opera houses when the main character has her breasts groped.

Fingering with the idea of lost sentimentality between father and daughter, I have become the peep show in a cigar box.

I tried pulling myself in, ensnaring a bit of the white light that carves into the foreheads of the devout. They are true lovers ripened and harmonious. Inexplicable.

I cringed under the fresh orange morning light of my curtains.

The posted church bells tolling outside of the window. It was rainy, omnipresent, and foreboding. I wrangled my fingers around my neck, the scent of last night's odor still lingering.

The moon walked ominously to her tomb, taking her final steps from the earth. I sunk into a stupor.

How long will it take until I am loved?

Under the overcoat of the sun's awake, I guarded my body closely, resting my hands in nooks between my thighs.

Channeling my femininity, I drew back my mouth attempting to inhale the dainty scent of my womanhood, faint, yet withdrawn in the chambers of my room. My French "mother" stirring diligently outside of my bedroom door waited for me to turn on the morning light.

I was too unctuous to move and utterly feeble.

57

I studied my thoughts, shoulders shuddering with anger, as I pulled closer to the wall of my room. I couldn't help but remember several nights ago: the feeling of my arms being lashed behind my back, the quick movements and thundering voice behind that wiseass smile. I wrestled, pulling away from his thick black suit, his hand taking advantage of my weakness. I felt the assiduousness in his fingers, raising my mangled body, dropping me into darkness. It felt like *him* again, Adam's stupor, the intoxicating syllables of hate.

I wanted my purse from coat check, but my friends had the ticket. I couldn't miss the last bus home, yet they were nowhere to be found. The cashier had understood my motives, though my tongue had been

weak with response in her native language. I threw out awkward combinations of French and English. She shook her head, as I stood speaking hurriedly. But my efforts were overwhelming and ineffectual. It was midnight. I needed to get home. But she was rigid in her refusal.

Forcing myself onto the counter, I sat, refusing to resist politely. I watched her walk to the door and call for back up.

I was the target problem.

A slew of profanities filled the gated nighttime air, while passersby stared at me, the foreign girl... that silly, feeble American being hoisted out of a nightclub. I was the main attraction.

I hated her for that. Something about the power she provoked all from behind that coat check counter, preventing my escape, completely out of sync with my reality.

Security brusquely placed me on the sidewalk, telling me to leave. I couldn't have walked away. I could not have gone back to a shroud of darkness, that oppressive closet space where I had hid from *him* so many years before. I had nothing. So I ran toward the entrance, elbows swiping the chest of the security guard as he continued to block my means of access to the club.

Another guard of my native tongue approached, his dark skin a perfect canvas for the moon's light. I stepped forward when the original guard released me.

His thick African accent pulsed between us. He ushered me to "be cool." His soft demeanor calmed everyone. I told him my story and how I was simply

stuck searching for a way to obtain my belongings. I could never stop fighting.

He escorted me through the club in hopes of seeking out my missing comrades, pillows of smoke separating us from sight, but his hand never lost way of my arm. With no hope and free-moving people disobeying our sturdy steps, we exited the perimeters returning to the coat and bag check counter. The woman provided more resistance, her careless tone reaching the crevices of my understanding.

My punishment, spoken from the mouth of the bodyguard: “Go! Dance! We can do nothing. Too many bags in back! Come back at 6 a.m. and then we look.” He gave me a soft nudge and then left.

58

“Where’s the bathroom at sweetie?” someone behind me asked in a thick accent.

A stranger pulled me into a dimly lit hall after I left the dance floor. I downed a few drinks of soda and apple juice courtesy of tokens I had saved, but this guy was intoxicated and he looked like he needed my help. Unable to shake him from holding my wrist, I stepped ahead of him and led him to the restroom.

The sepia lighting in the hall made it hard for me to recognize the drink he held in his other hand. He had wanted me to have it, though. I amicably refused as we continued toward Les Toilettes. His fingers became relentless and he grabbed my waist now. He wanted me to drink whatever it was that he was holding. I couldn’t

get away as he pinched my cheeks together with one hand and sloppily poured the bitter concoction into my mouth with the other. I couldn't tell what drink it was, but I knew I was in trouble.

We finally made it to La Toilette. He forcefully shoved me in, settling his neck on my shoulder while re-gripping my waist. To my demise, the restroom and stalls were empty. He put the glass on the counter and then sunk his teeth into my lips. His hands started to dig into my underwear. I tried to forbid their entrance. I wanted to leave. Everything felt wrong in this darkroom of unresolved photos, the rancor of his breath stinging my cheeks. I wanted him gone.

I could feel sick settling into my stomach, my thoughts sinking into the black puddle of his slurred profanities, hissed in broken English.

He pushed me into the chipped counter of the sink. I murmured a prayer.

“Suck dick?” His French accent chewed away at my ears.

I slid down a little, my head knocking against the back mirror.

He took off his pants, his jersey lingering at the top of his penis. I moved away incrementally, but not enough as he pulled me closer again.

“I...I...” stammering, I kept talking to prevent him from kissing me, his slimy tongue and dried lips uncomfortable against mine. “I don't even know you. I don't even know your name.” My French wasn't resonating. I could barely understand myself.

“It's OK,” he accentuated the last word angrily, while pummeling my body into his chest. He tugged at my underwear.

“Let's fuck.”

I rustled with my black faux leather jacket. I had nothing to defend myself with, but I was slipping away regardless.

“You’re fucking cute.”

He let me fall back into a stall, resting on the toilet, this time grabbing my fingers and pushing them against his penis.

I retreated into myself.

“Vas-y, FUCK.”

I could barely move. He yelled, closing the stall completely. The small space was pockmarked with graffiti and maybe cigarette burns. His searing hands on my neck led me down past his waist.

“No,” I said this time more quietly, but no one heard and all I remember was hitting the bathroom floor. This was nothing at all like what I had watched on my computer screen.

I never told anyone. When my host mom asked me why I wouldn’t go out anymore, I told her I couldn’t keep up with my classes. I needed time to study.

The bodyguard wasn’t even looking for me the next day. Why would he? The only thing the club could offer was directions home. He didn’t even realize that I had been assaulted.

No one had found me; I had just woken up to a ring of black footprints around a toilet engraved with pencil stabbings. My stockings had been torn, and my faux leather jacket ripped in the back. I had both of my red velvet shoes, thankfully. My dress had only been pulled down, so I could manage when my host family saw me.

My friends had left earlier the evening before and had taken my purse with them assuming I had walked back. I still had my cash and a couple of tokens in my jacket pocket, though. I met up with them later that day. My dark skin didn't bruise easily and I didn't have any cuts, so nothing was noticed. I left after taking my purse with bus pass, 20 Euros, and lip-gloss still intact. I'm glad something was.

Truthfully, I was miserable.

It wasn't the fuck I had idealized. It was painful. It made me more ashamed of my body than when Adam touched me or looked at it through his camera.

All I wanted was ice cream and ibuprofen. I didn't want my teddy bear, the way I rubbed his paws over my chest, the way the stranger had done the same thing after my dress had slid down. I didn't want to look at the photo I had stolen from Adam because I knew it would bring back the wrong memories. In fact, I didn't want to see anything.

The church bells outside of my window blasted like warfare air grenades. I never knew a more truthful time than when I had lost religion.

59

I saw a girl who reminded me of Ally and I shrunk, becoming more withdrawn. It wasn't her, though somehow I had wanted it to be desperately. But she wouldn't be here. Not now, not at a French street corner at midnight. So I moved away, shifting my body in the bus seat, further adjusting my headphones. I silently said goodbye to that memory. She would have protected me if she had been here.

What hurts are Sundays and my dry mouth. Gum didn't take out the taste of cum, and some friends rarely saw me again after school.

I lied to my host family. I never left the house. They were worried, but I liked the orange paradise

inside my room. It made sense to me, the walls, the comforters, the curtains, everything felt fantastical and earthly. I was stuck in some sort of dream and all I wanted was to be clean again. I had even thrown the teddy bear under my bed.

Sometimes I missed the territorial pushes and pulls of life. I moved the backs of my nails against my thighs. I couldn't even turn myself on anymore.

That dark room, the lounge of vivisectioned injury...

"You know, it's silly," I still could hear her soft chuckle, "I didn't even get the apology letter until this year."

"Oh," I remarked, toying with the developing photo under the Dektol solution, orange lights igniting everything. Her red bangs swathed one eye, a mark of phantom appeal.

"Yeah, I got a message that I had something waiting for me in my mailbox."

I felt even more awkward. Sammi, my first roommate in college with her Judy Garland appeal, poised next to the tray of solution, me pretending to be overly conscientious of the development of my photos.

"I'm sorry about everything," she continued.

"Me too," I whispered.

She packed up and quietly left through the first door of the dark room, careful not to let any light through, and I sat, pacing the tongs, keeping the rapids of the liquid.

That was in May.

Maybe I'll wake up one day and let go.

I have always felt like a gross form of a person compared to my counterparts with their long hair and softly colored eyes. They were perfect, empyrean beings. I wanted to be that. I wanted to be Adam's vision under that willow tree, then he would never hurt me.

I cried when I saw her brown wisps of curls. She was always there, surpassing the boundaries of my normalcy, denouncing my morning work as the student French librarian. Whenever she took a subtle sigh from the corner with her readings, I was extinguished.

And then when the start of theater class ventured close and I was allowed the reprieve of a character, reciting my French lines with a small air of confidence, she was there as well.

My body will never be the same.

61

My period came, and I coped with French nems and caramel ice cream.

I couldn't shake the habit of the blues when night crept into the spine of my window, milking my sorrow.

I rekindled the relationship with my teddy bear, unaware of the ease in which my depression captured me. My eyelids slowly moved, steadying themselves for sleep. But my mind refused me the pleasure of escape, recalling so intrusively his presence, Adam's, always so close when I was fastened to loneliness. Then I felt shameful when I thought of the guy from the bar. I remembered, once again, how I wasn't in control.

The way I slid my hands through my sheets trying to make sense of everything. The way I pervaded the space of my pillow with my neck, cocooning it into

an arc at the first inclination of pleasure. It was all too much and too heavy for my existence to understand. I wanted Adam to wash away the guilt, so I made him up with my fingers.

The clammy hands of the guy at the bar, leading my head down past his chest. I'll never forget the discomfort of his warm, sweaty touch forcefully maneuvering me like I were his puppet—hollow and disfigured.

The coffin-grey evening drained the color from my skin.

I was the living dead.

I could still remember Adam's hand and the threat of those fingers, as if the fire of his existence raced toward a stopping point on my body. The sureness of our attraction, the denial I prolonged.

I hated him.

I wanted him.

"But I never got the guy," I whispered to God, "even if it was my own stepfather."

"I only get parts of them, pieces of skin or dirty nails when they want their fingers at the back of my throat. I get pushpins and swallows of willows."

I meshed the phrase together as if it were an ellipse of some antiquated prayer.

I couldn't imagine.

I liked to tell myself those moments didn't exist.

True love didn't exist and I was no exception to that rule. This much made sense.

Oftentimes, I said it the most when, by some chance, there was the presence of a couple, their reliquary of love displayed right in front of me.

I simply couldn't.

I simply couldn't forge those moments of endearment...those relished "ticks" and "drums," those lost "thanks you's" on the midnight bus that no one will ever hear.

I tucked my feet nearer to the inside edge of my comforter, shaming myself with an imbalance of thoughts, lost tissues on the floor from last week's sickness. I am the dream, I murmured.

62

I hate stock-still air: the resurgence of loneliness.
I'm not ready to forget.
Everyone's just an imprint now, so close to
being barely gone.

And then there's the letting go.
But I had to say goodbye.

"My depression isn't situational. I always need
to be on my meds. I went off for one day and by the
time class was out and I walked back to my dorm 150
feet away, I had already planned out every detail of
how I wanted to kill myself."

...

“Yeah, I need my meds,” Kate responded to my silence.

Kate was the only person I ever told during the trip. She knew depression and she knew me. I never told her about my stepfather, just about the guy from the bar. We could never track him down, even though she once tried to convince me to report it. I never did, though.

I remember the crawl of air functioning between us, our mechanic life source racing to the fault lines of our mouth for another exhalation. She sat cross-legged on my bed, dribbling out names and memories of friends from back home, people she knew I would like: Skipper, Dr. Coreblair, and Stan, who was a complete softie, but much too fat to ever consider dating.

“*This* guy, he always wears a cape. And guess what he’s a doctor of?” referencing the majesty of the name Dr. Coreblair.

I arched my eyebrows in the accumulating whirlpool of frown lines on my forehead, unsure of what to say.

“Poetry,” she responded. The bus light smile of hope cracked beneath her hunched shoulders and socked feet, orange and wooly. She knew she could get a reaction out of me.

“That’s so cool,” I remarked. “Maybe I should become a Doctor of Poetry.”

“Do it,” she challenged, but by then I had already let the idea go.

What I really wanted was just to be remembered.

“So I’m totally in love with your bedspread,” she said after a few moments of silence. “These are exactly the colors I want my house to be decorated with.” The burgundy, magenta and orange peel shades snaked their way through her fingers. She smoothed the shifts of their wrinkled skin, totally unaware of how every speckle of energy pooled right at her fingertips, surrounding her.

“It’s from Ikea, isn’t it?” she mused.

I never fully slipped away from her presence, even while anchored at my computer pulling up pictures of past crushes and other empty relics like she had done earlier.

“Yeah,” I responded.

She spent the night that evening, my host family loaning her the spare room with two twin beds and a small, square, notched window. I joined her.

“I think I would have preferred this room,” I said, evening the distribution of chatter, revealing my voice that I had withdrawn earlier just so I could hear her speak. “I’m not sure why.” I answered myself in retrospect.

“Maybe because it’s square,” she responded, folding her body in the direction of the window, her back aiming toward the ceiling-high armoire. I slept in the bank of the light, choosing the bed nearest to the outside world.

“Maybe,” I responded as the revolt in her eyes dribbled away to a muddle of tiredness and drool. Every design ritualized in her face, contrasted against the blare of moonlight. The leak of intrepidity from her inked eyes.

I watched the process of sleep envelop her. Her mummified fingers, chalky and bright against the hum of the navy night air, left little moments of glitter, and her breath buzzed about me softly like lightening bugs, lighting my way to a peaceful sleep. She turned away to face other worlds under her eyelids.

I miss her the most already...

“Sometimes too, I’ll just want guys to bite my wrists...because there’s always that itch there, just under the surface. It’s as if I should slit them...but I can never do it.”

The last bit of dialogue made its way into my compendium of thoughts.

I can feel the obscurity creeping out of my bones again, the magic of the night staying behind. My last memory of Kate in a slice of flashback. Her voice, a dull ring, fighting to stay present, a souvenir. But how could I ever forget her when we are the forgotten?

63

It had started with one lone photo.

The film was never developed in those aging disposable cameras of mine, thrown into shoeboxes years ago with my usual “I’ll get to them later” remark. I would never get to them later, even though I still treated myself to a healthy dose of denial whenever I felt nostalgic for the past.

There was also a junk box cramped with useless sentiment, things I had forgotten about, until I opened up this collection of college acceptance letters, Islands of Adventure souvenirs, including a map and napkin, and a paper Valentine, unsigned, of course. Other memorabilia crammed itself into that compact box of things that I had picked up from somewhere in life.

A few pictures were there as well shuffled

between five or six community service awards and a frail package of negatives. I shimmied my fingers through the blend of images of myself posing on couches and a huge branch that fell from our crab apple tree in the backyard. They were the ones Adam took of me when he used to play “photographer.”

There was something about the way he positioned me, though, that felt awkward, and I was intuitively sure that the photos would always be wrong. Even his direction with the superficial photographer’s dialect indicated that he didn’t know what he was doing.

“Fold this leg over the other.”

“Drape this hand over your cheek.”

“Hold it! That’s the money shot!”

“No smile! You have chubby cheekbones. I want serious, like the models in the magazines.”

And so with slightly parted, very serious lips—never a smile—I recalled contorting myself into this commercial idea of what he felt was the perfect picture.

The shots always came out with me frowning, and some awkward object in the background destroying the scenery. We tried submitting them to local modeling contest and swindling agencies, which promised to have me booked in a week if we paid the upfront fee that could go anywhere into thousands of dollars. He was interested, only because he wanted me to be famous.

The shoebox hid a few other photos. Nice ones of mom and me, with Adam always behind the lens, out of the scene. My favorite one of mom still sat there unharmed, showing her on a dock, elbow on a railing, and fist supporting her chin, the perfect daydream caught in her eyes as she faced the sea. This was it...all

of my photos. The majority of them had been burned, our laundry hamper of memories, when Adam had gone into a psychotic fit and decided to eliminate us from his memory after mom announced she wanted a divorce. We should have never left them in the house with him, but we could only carry so many things while sprinting to the car at four in the morning, the night mom stopped denying that he was dangerous.

We telephoned for the photos the next day, after moving in with mom's mom, and he laughed, because he knew he had a chance to save them, and he wanted the joke to be on us. The garbage company had called him earlier that day, asking if it was a mistake, did he really mean to drop off a laundry basket of photos in front of the local dump? He couldn't have possibly wanted all of those photos to go into the incinerator. But he hung up the phone that evening, leaving everything...our past...in a trail of flames.

A couple of nights later, he killed himself. It wasn't enough to erase our memory. He couldn't hold onto us, just like he couldn't hold onto his last life.

Even to this day, mom still misses my ultrasound photo the most.

But it was when I noticed her old photo, sticking out from the cover of my journal, that I realized I was never the one for him...for that elusive clot of shadows and vague space that I tried wholeheartedly to acknowledge as "Dad." I could never belong to him as much as she did. His one lone photo of her under that willow tree.

I had found it one night under his mattress while hiding from his usual tirade. There it was, wrinkled at the corners with a sharp frown line down

the center, as if it had been ripped in anger then repaired in a frenzy of guilt. I had taken it that night and hid it from him. I had wanted to be his beloved, just like he had imagined me to be when he took off my clothes.

Of course he panicked when he couldn't find the photo, disappearing again for a couple of weeks. Mom never knew why.

And then he returned, angry and vengeful. He threatened me first with his thick, poignant fingers, going into their usual mode of closure around my neck, a clasp of fury. Mom was next, though the pain was never physical, leaving a few slanderous remarks to lure in her frailty: "You're such a whore!...Why the fuck would anyone ever love you?" Everything was a spindle of emotion, though most times he knew it hurt her the most when he came after me. That was his revenge.

He tore the house upside down for weeks trying to find her, even threatening to leave mom if she had anything to do with the missing photo. I knew he would never do it. He was too lonely to be separated from anyone permanently.

He had never found the photo. I never intended him to.

I had kept it in the floorboard of my closet, under the broken edge of darkness and madness, my place of comfort. It was my secret, my envy, my will to be there, to be at the center of everything just like her.

I studied that picture for years.

The sharp angle of her chin, her soft hair, each strand looping past her shoulders, mimicking the same frolic of the willow tree, the poise in her frame and palm on her chin. She was beautiful.

I could never be like that.

I *would* never be like that...
His dream under the willow tree.



(Photo by Mark Roddenberry)

A born creative writer, Elan Carson started crafting short stories at the age of 6. With help from her grandmother who worked as an English teacher, Elan excelled in reading & writing. Though she was shy in person, and oftentimes too scared to raise her hand in class, she passionately channeled her voice on paper and through her fictional characters. She learned how to use her imagination to a playful advantage.

It wasn't until college, and with a stroke of fate that she landed a spot in the completely full Fiction Workshop I course, that Elan began to flesh out the full story of *The Willow Tree*. With help from peers and mentor Patricia Geary, as well as encouragement from her mom, Elan had finished the first draft of her first book by senior year.