

The Carson Review

Marymount Manhattan College

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The Carson Review

The Literary Arts Journal of Marymount Manhattan College
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Literary Award Winners

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Submission Guidelines

The Carson Review is published once a year in the Spring. We invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and cover art from current students at Marymount Manhattan College. Selecting material for the next issue will take place in the Fall of 2020. *The deadline is October 15th, 2020.*

All literary submissions should include a cover sheet with the writer's name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, and the titles of all work(s) submitted. The author's name should not appear on the actual pages of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Double-space all prose and single-space all poetry. For such texts, we ask that you send electronic submissions as *Word documents* (non-pdf) to carsonreview@mmm.edu. The same cover sheet directions apply to art submissions, which should be at least 300 dpi JPG images. If you have any questions about these guidelines or about working on the *Review* as a student editor, please contact Dr. Jerry Williams at jwilliams1@mmm.edu or at (646)393-4118.

Editorial Policy

The editorial staff of *The Carson Review* is an assemblage of students at Marymount Manhattan College. In order to cultivate an atmosphere of integrity and evenhandedness, the staff evaluates all entries without knowing the identity of the author or artist. To maintain a thriving literary arts journal at MMC, a variety of submissions remains absolutely vital, so please send us your best work.

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Poetry

Tavia Cummings

Accidental Miracles

Iced coffee the color of my skin reminds me of how natural I am. Dante Basco has a voice like a bowl of milk and Cinnamon Toast Crunch. Cinnamon Toast Crunch feels like Saturday morning cartoons. If I'm eating cereal, remind me it isn't 2016, and he is never coming back. Black and bald women, I'm looking for liberation in the buzzing of clippers. But I wonder if I'm a single Coke bottle. One day, I'll run through a field of flowers wondering if this is placidity. Empty notebooks on the bed, maybe I can find reasons to love myself in someone else. Violet and sky-blue dream catchers on bare walls: what are dreams to writers who don't sleep? Dried rose petals in a mason jar, we pick flowers when they bloom, only to watch them wither in vases. Real stars come in a bang of desire red and amber yellow and leave the same. Space is a graveyard of supernovas. Patient tags: in death life becomes simple, and I will only be a whisper of a name. Whisper the names Rose and Eddie in my children's ears, so they are always watched over. Shotgun weddings and the man who thinks he's Superman. How cliché is it that love, Lois's love, is his downfall. And maybe it'll be mine, too.

Kellie Diodato

Minisink Valley Barbeque

Hot summer night at the fire pit.
Drunken laughter echoes unforgivably
across the Budweiser-watered lawn.
Forefathers and foremothers save us the embarrassment
and pretend they can't hear our confidential confessions.

Parents were children once, too.

Asses in foldable camp chairs,
we tell stories of awkward hookups
and inconvenient breakdowns
on Adderall and lukewarm Bloody Marys.

The old tell the young, "It will get you wasted faster."

Yearning to fall in love, we fall apart.
Laughing is nostalgia, fresh air the loopy gas. We cry sometimes, too.
Hearts float in tangerine skies impatiently waiting on the day
one of us falls in love. Love for real.

First one buys the twelve pack and tells the stragglers how it feels.

Our forefathers and foremothers chit-chat
on the other side of the screen door.
Worn-down audio scrapbooks, they ramble on.
Weddings, receptions, open bars.
The late 80s, early 90s.
Their Golden Age.

What a time to be alive—or so I've been told.

Carvel Cake thawing on the back-porch floorboards
reads *Happy Birthday* in drippy blue icing.

No one's born in July. We hear them ramble on about
good days and bad days, employment and unemployment.
"Those were the days." Broken records on repeat.

Can't we just fucking talk about today, please?

Give their koozies a beer.
Dress the dingy dining room table with a bucket
of UTZ pretzel rods and suddenly
forefathers act like it's their job
to solve the world's problems by daybreak.
"I love you" is yelling, chuckling, throwing, clinking bottles
in delightful, drunken stupor.

King Arthur's Round Table, except Tim McGraw and battered 9/11 first responders.

Look at us. We're bookmarks placed between the pages of their glory days.
We still huddle together, legs to chest at the children's table.
Too afraid of change we'd sit there forever, if we could.
Buzzed, broken, batteries dead,
bug-bitten in Budweiser-watered grass, our biggest fear or saving grace:

Us children will have children.

We'll be worn down audio scrapbooks
filling refrigerators with booze and clattering counters
with room-temperature Coca-Cola, family-sized bags of barbeque chips,
the rice pudding recipe, a half-empty container sitting on the stove
as some Yankee hits a home run on the old television set.

Our memories are hand-me-down.

Asses in foldable camp chairs,
plastic forks swimming in melted slices of Carvel Cake.

It's dark around the fire pit, but the blonde, straggling curls framing my face
smell of smoke, and my ribcage tickles from the beer.
My eyes, the white turned red the blue gone bluer, cut through the thick smog.

Look there. Shadows of the past, silhouettes of the future.

Kellie Diodato

Sunflower

With a shimmering, sky-blue, doe-eyed glance, I asked my mama
for permission to dye my unruly gold locks red.
I wanted to be sewn from a different seed; I yearned to change my fate.

I'd make manly men's heads turn;
they'd see me, they'd daydream concupiscent dreams.
Every single rough-handed, quick-witted, well-built creature would fall in love
with the shape of me, the idea of me:
an eroticized romance bundled in white baby's breath.

In suspended animation, they'd make up satin sheets,
soak into my soft skin, soft and saturated like petals.
They'd pick me apart and rearrange me delicately across the bed;
floating in scented bath water—I'd be their rose.

Holding me, they'd learn not to grab; I'd have thorns
capable of scratching calloused love-lines
and releasing their primal urges in ruby rivers.
They'd say they loved me and when I denied the accusation,
they'd love me even harder.

Lust would be my fertilizer.

Then Mama said, No. Mama said,
Your breasts did not bud nor did your legs grow smooth and slender
to balance atop the desires of lascivious men.
Men who pick roses are the first to wilt.

Mama said, You'll never be a rose. Mama said, You're pure gold, baby, a sunflower.

Stunning, the threatening type.
Growing from the weeds, you'll inch farther than the rest.
You'll stretch so far, you'll kiss the sun and sunshine; there'll be days

you'll wish to settle for shade or stiffen in the snow. Lonely,
you'll live among lilacs that do not know your name.

You will bend to no one; they'll bend to you.
You won't turn heads, you'll stroke minds.

Elegy for a Mouth

It's just not fair. Alcoholics can quit liquor and heroin addicts might stop. But you have to eat to goddamn live and so every day I do the whole thing over. A packet of oatmeal makes me want to kill myself. A sandwich asks me if I really want it. And of course, I don't, but then my roommate starts calling and I'd rather not be one of those body dysmorphic girls. If I were a better anorexic, I'd stick to rice cakes and call it a day. But I'm weak and the smell of syrup makes me feel like a kinder lover. A few days ago, I ate dinner for the first time. Then I wanted cookies. My boyfriend lunged across the table and said *you've had enough*. What he meant was *slow down, you'll feel worse later*. That tired look on his face. I crawled into the shower and sobbed like a siren. Then I puked so beautifully. Real colors like an oil slick. It's moments like these that I feel like a woman. All stomachs, apparently, look hideous under caffeine. The colon loves raspberries and apologies from your aunt. How you shouldn't have gone to Weight Watchers at eleven years old. I resented my first crush because his body was like a pipe cleaner. The man I lost my virginity to was big and tall, so I thought I'd feel angelic. I felt uglier. If I had been a tiny thing, maybe he'd have touched me like a tiny thing. We touch things gently when they look like they need to be touched gently: pinecones and hamsters and newspapers. I'm easiest on myself when my jeans feel a little loose. If you see me in the grocery aisle, turn the other way. Head for the avocados.

Resume

The bloodwork showed I had five white blood cells
and an allergy to hazelnuts, that when I'm tired
my eyes shut and my best friend is an animal.
I burst like a suitcase in the nearest aquarium,
bang on the glass and see all the people I've lost.
Now I'm showering and singing
my traumas: my father was an alcoholic
and I have a shopping problem. Some girls
from high school called me a phony
for making a short film. The weather is just wonderful!
Honeybees make a thimble of nectar in a lifetime.
The ocean is totally undiscovered. I'll put a bomb inside
a cake if it means you'll trust me. No one's ever been my muse
or shown up to my birthday party. What are the odds
you'll find me attractive? I want specific human beings.
Big Roman noses and callused hands. Elbows full of snot
and voicemails about the car acting up. If you want to know
the truth, I'll tell you about New England. The tide is always low
in Connecticut, and there are houses made of driftwood. It washes up
and then gets stolen. I think birth might be like that.

Kasey Dugan

On the Upbeat

I was going into surgery when I realized
I don't know what your handwriting looks like.
Should I have known then? I measured time in teaspoons
of sunlight and moles I don't want. You called me once
and said I had a name like a movie star.
And that you miss me.
The dermatologist told me there's no difference
between beauty marks and cancerous moles.
I panicked when I signed my name.
How could you let me die
without knowing how you dot your *i*,
if your words are slanted right
or you leave no space in between?
My doctor writes prescriptions and, somehow, they're legible.

Maya Georgi

Patria

My country whispers beauty across Patagonia
and cradles a city between the mountains,
emanating snow into a white-tipped skyline.

She is brave in unspeakable ways,
more tenacious than Pinochet's tyranny
and a fault-line in disquietude.

In her time of despair,
she guided the poetry and chanting
of a thousand beleaguered souls.

When I walked amongst her dead in Santiago,
I still could not hear her heartbeat—
just the dismal silence of tombstones.

If she cracked open at my feet,
I would shudder blindly,
the earth as harsh as winter.

If I scavenge my memories,
there would only be a glimpse of her:
empanadas in September, a dip in the Pacific.

Even if I keep listening,
I will only hear muffled voices
and the trickle of a faraway waterfall.

We are bound by blood—
a connection that feels more tenuous
than photographs of an American home.

Still, I do not know her.
I do not know how she quakes.
I do not know what makes her cry.
I do not know how she sings.

The Masochist and the Sadist

I hated breaking up but I loved
the way you glowered at me
when his hand slid up my skirt,
envy in your eyes and a hiss at the lips,
so impatient for me to finish.
You wiped fake sweat off
your brow with the back
of your hand and I winked
at you when he caressed my neck.
Then you followed me into the bathroom
and regurgitated the fable of your love,
your fingers wolfish and brash,
the Jameson undressing on your tongue.
I heard the crazy in your voice,
and the crazy in mine.
I exhaled my distaste for you,
and you sealed it with a kiss.

Super Lemon Haze

The high causes the laser show behind my eyes to gleam with pinks so purple they make my head spin. Shadows as cold as the Atlantic wade in and out, pricking my insides, chilling my blood. Yellow. Raining like his smile. Red tension: his bull eyes on my body as I helicopter out of my slip. Orange-hot like his breath against my neck. He kisses me, calls me baby. Blue, my icy feet make him twitch in his sleep. He swims beneath the covers and mumbles in his dreams. I watch them leap in and out of our ocean like rabid dolphins. Drug store wine and mint-flavored tobacco stratify the air. Through the membrane of his cloud, I make my mark. Electric green—he says I’m good-crazy. The kind that makes you make love with your hands tied behind your back. Halo gold—the way he turns to graze my lips with his before falling back to sleep. I whisper in his ear, I want to dance on water with you.

Sara Murphy

Winter's Visit

Winter returned last night.
She came with a passion most unlike herself.
For a brief moment she was filled with fire;
her skin burned and her eyes shined with summer's life.

With a swift movement,
she raised her icy knife against me.
Her fury barely contained,
she pressed it menacingly to my throat.

As quickly as her warmth came, it died.
Her body frozen over, her eyes grown cold,
she was nothing more than a lifeless sculpture
pinning me to the wall.

We stood in our frigid prison,
cursed by our unrelenting stubbornness
and penchant for striking out
to see who will shatter first.

In time, her blade will melt,
coaxed by the warmth of my bare skin,
to give up its shape
and return, dripping, to the ground.

We're locked forever in our scene,
until her fire returns and she finishes her strike
or her ire completely drips down my collarbone.
Eventually, one of us loses.

Joely Phenes

iPhone 3:22

We suck the forbidden apple dry
with fleshless friends that rot our brains,
our hunger never satisfied.

We crave our validation like a high—
junky robots all programmed the same
who suck the forbidden apple dry.

The feeding tubes connected to our eyes
stream content infinitely down the page,
our hunger never satisfied.

Tethered to a mothership that does not fly,
our lips on the breast of an iron cage,
we suck the forbidden apple dry.

Our fingers strum the LCD in time
with the dope swashing through our veins,
our hunger never satisfied.

As the serpent laughs from his high-rise,
feasting on the rest of the food chain,
we suck the forbidden apple dry,
our hunger never satisfied.

Wild Blackbird

For you, my soft caresses
are bars on a cage, my tender
kisses the rope around your neck.
Wild blackbird, born to travel
across the sky, who never rests
long enough to settle.
It is before midnight on a Saturday
and I ask you to hold me.
Echoing underneath the blanket
thumps your restless heart—
a sound I can't ignore.
I wonder if I am trying to break you.
Like a pet, I train you
with punishment and reward.
I lie naked and lure you into me,
hoping that my body
will be the chain that finally
holds you in place.
Still I cannot stop your yearning
to return to the outside.
Even while you sleep
I can see the pictures
flashing behind your eyelids:
wings whipping over the water,
over the bridge, wheels rolling
over cement into the city.
A sweeping array of open doors,
glasses clinking, foamy beer
spilling over the sides.
Sticky, cracked leather booths
in the corners of ill-lit bars,
packed with warm-bellied friends
waiting to buy another round.

Sweaty bodies ebbing and flowing,
slam dancing, nosebleeds,
calloused fingers on a drop-tuned guitar,
yuppie art shows, dance halls
drenched in neon, sudden
invitations into other worlds.
You do not live within the lines
of plans and expectations. You
belong to the unknown.
You want to capture it all, cover every inch
of the underground, discover the secrets
hiding in the shadows of night,
and I want you to stay with me,
trapped in our lover's nest,
until you forget how to fly.

Maria Santa Poggi

I Don't Have Synesthesia

Colors come to mind when I think of you. Pen drawn to paper, my penmanship is chicken scratch, verse by verse, a pallet of schemes compiled, the paint is on my tongue.

Your lips are purple, harbored inside my mouth, the paint doesn't taste good. Chemicals are polluting my airways from oxygen, gasp.

Patterns are written on my skin when you come to mind, traveling with me while I pass East 81st Street.

There's a dictionary held in the shelf of my skull. Big words are floating—fighting to find sentence structure for the small words to be used. I taste you, though I cannot taste myself.

We are just mixing paint, adding in a few white blobs. We altered into a pastel painting; Monet would be proud of our impressions of each other.

There's a sunset when you give me a high five, an excuse for touch. I become pieces of frozen confetti splattered on a canvas; we defy gravity. I never hit the ground when we make a color scheme.

Where do we go when we no longer paint each other? Do I keep the colors you gave me? Do I reset to a blank landscape? Will she taste what was once on my taste buds? What if you were really a shade of blue?

Crayola crayons break when met with too much pressure; fragmented color holds no value in this whole color world.

You were never purple.

Afterword

Today I swear I saw you here
Hollow and whole
Breathing beneath me
I swear I felt you stirring
Our sleepy foreheads meeting

I swear I saw how soft you were
Shifting up inside of me
Love dripped sticky in your teeth
Loved dripped sticky over me

I saw the saw the solemnness of morning
A fraction of breath / An ocean of lust
I saw you bending me over
I saw you parting my thighs
I saw you searching the dresser
That calm sturdy look in your eyes

But you were not beside me
You were miles away
Thinking and breathing in some perfect way
And I am lying here thinking of endings
And why endings must happen at all

How stupid
How sad
To be sitting here thinking of endings
When there is still time to be had

But there are holes in your pockets
That account for our losses
I have seen them and touched them myself

There is a sweater that is hanging
In the place of my longing
And it wears on me perfectly well

And still I am thinking of endings
Stupid
Harsh
Grocery stores and shopping carts

I am lying here thinking of endings
What a sorry sad way to leave you

A stutter
A stammer
A sleazy sleepy kiss good morning

How stupid to leave you at all
How stupid to tell you goodbye

When I am so content to die
Jack with a plum on his thumb
A cherry pit between your teeth
A Roman
In love.

Jane Segovia

February 3rd

I am walking and walking and walking
a marked skin covers the pavement
a pure white sheet gives way beneath my feet
I am walking and walking and walking
though I have nowhere to go and no one to meet

I'm trying to calm my chaos
and trying to find some peace
from the sweet sweet ghost
which troubles me
from the sweet sweet noise of loss

Because in my mind I hear you
and still you say that you don't know
and still you say that you aren't sure
but I know I never loved a fool
I only loved New York
and you

I loved a haunted summer
when I surrendered to a bliss
which took the shape of you
and your sweaty subway kiss

In the winter I ache waiting for it
heaving all the time
with an image in my mind
of a lusty smile on your face
and your hand holding me in place

I loved a breathless summer
when we walked and walked and walked

and kissed and laughed and talked
and when we found ourselves in Harlem
we danced and found some grassy spot
where we kissed and laughed and talked
for maybe a month or maybe a year
singing into summer's ear

And when we parted
dizzy from the humid air
and the sticky love we'd sewn there
danced for the whole of the night
holding my chest to breathe all right
And thinking in metered time

Love is
Love is
Love is
Love is

But then the sky went grey
and you stood from the stoop and walked away
and summer gave way into fall
which I didn't feel or know at all

Now winter's specter hand
grips my arm and holds me back
from moving on or losing track
of all the time
that you aren't mine
and how we held so carelessly
something so good
and gentle
and kind

Sometimes
to be free of the memory
I empty it all out of me
and dance and dance and cry all night
holding my chest to breathe all right
and thinking in metered time

Love is
Love is
Love is

Jane Segovia

Sábado

It is Saturday, Sábado,
the light is streaming in,
and my mother's aching hands
are resting on her hips.

And with her aching hands,
my mother fries the sopa,
grabs another bag of beans,
and throws them in la olla.

We have a holy home,
so we'll have a holy meal,
our kitchen: a cathedral,
adorned with holy oils.

I am my mother's orphan.
I know not my mother's pride,
but I know how to be quiet,
and I know just where to hide.

I am standing here before her,
hips cocked,
knee popped,
one bare foot in the crest of my thigh,
like an egret,
always half-ready for flight.

My mother stands before me,
shoulders in the sky,
grappling
to say something
that might not make me cry.

“Mija, life will beat you bloody,
and it’ll be your fault.
You are small, and not too strong,
and still not worth your salt.”

Her fingertips are dancing
in and out of flame
while she tells me of a lover
(though she doesn’t say his name).

In my mind, I touch her eyelids,
and I play a little game
in which every time she hurts me,
I hurt her just the same.

But I could never hurt my mother.
My mother who is here
like a farmer in a meadow
with the lambs he raised to shear.

I could never hurt my mother.
I squint my eyes to see her face,
muy prieta, muy bonita,
with little moles
all over the place.

In my kitchen, it is Saturday, Sábado,
and I am barefoot
on glossy yellow tiles
that taught me how to count
so that I could be productive
with my eyes turned down.

I am barefoot on the tiles,
keeping quiet, keeping still,
hiding from the cruelty
she throws around at will.

My mother is prattling on
about some war she hasn't won,
about some small indignity,
and I stay quiet
until she's done.

I am nodding now,
assuring her this is a great betrayal.
I tell her now that she is right,
as always, without fail.

The pan pops,
and my mother stops,
pulls the sopa from the flame
and in handing me a plate,
she has finally said my name.

Jane Segovia

The Way Things Are

Look now,
at the window
where the day is meeting the afternoon
and the golden glow
of the morning past
is a shadow that our faces cast.

Look now,
my sweetest dove,
how we have wasted time
(and all the lovely light),
worried by our worrying
and waiting here to pass the night.

And when the dawn came through
I was here, afraid of you,
afraid that you might never say
the words, which I knew were true.

That love had settled over us,
and when our aching passed
(if you let it pass)
that you might see it, too.

Look, the way things are now,
I think, "I Love You"
is the best I can do
(and I do).

Jane Segovia

Thinking of Cancer

I am preoccupied with condensation
which has formed on the sides
 and the bottom
 and below
my glass
I am wiping the dew away with my finger
licking the side with my
soft
 pink
 tongue

I am preoccupied with some spot on my shoulder
which reminds me of eternity
and cancer
I am thumbing the spot on my shoulder
trying to rub it away
I am thumbing the spot on my shoulder
and thinking of cancer

He is ignoring me today
(I have aggravated him in some way)
but I am not concerned with that
buzz
flap
like a flea or a gnat
and it doesn't surprise me
and it doesn't concern me

(He doesn't love me)
I am not concerned

I am concerned about Gaza
and the Middle East
and my crooked teeth

I am preoccupied with worrying about Gaza
and with all the worrying, there isn't time
to be concerned about love
(or the lack thereof)

I am concerned with this piece of hair
preoccupied with its non-symmetry
I am tugging the
tugging the hair aside
I have tucked it behind (behind)
I am nervous and tugging the hair but not concerned and always
(always)

thinking of cancer

Maddy Smith

After Midnight

The dim light makes my head feel heavy. A beer and a water decorate the bar top and my Thursday night lover sits to my left. He missed me when I danced under ocean cabanas. He touches my leg and offers me cocaine for the third time tonight. Chivalry is not dead. He thinks I look beautiful in crimson and caresses my twenty-two-year-old skin as though I were silk. Liquor-induced drowsiness wafts over me like smog. I consider his offer, but instead think about the warm cocoon of my bedroom. Everything in moderation. I keep giving parts of myself away to men who treat me like an in-between. His kiss is a velvet glove. He promises tomorrow, then vanishes for weeks. I crave his instability far more than any substance. I want him to take any piece of me as a souvenir.

Maddy Smith

Darling

In bed, we intertwine like roots.
Tangled and knotted,
we cannot move our redwood legs
under the blanket of night.
This is our nature.
Sometimes you hum in your sleep.
Like dog-day cicadas,
the vibrations buzz
against my flushed cheeks
and travel to the tips of my toes.
Then there are the nightmares,
the flailing limbs and the whimpering:
a side-effect of the Paxil.
I wrap myself around your misty back
to protect you from the storm.
As dawn breaks, we whisper half-dazed secrets.
I think we were lovers in a past life,
you think we were swans.
I weave our fingers together and imagine
floating on a golden pond with you.

Raspberry Red Tears

may chaos run rampant in your mind
because there are so many stars left to conquer and climb
i gave the preacher my last dime and he told me that life
would be sublime . . . i think he lied
i can tell by the raspberry red tears he cried
a bastard turned alcoholic ambien junkie
after the illusion of his wife died
nothing short of assisted suicide
i come from an intersection of lines
where my mother, brother, father like to hide
they have all shown me
both love and suffering
not minding if they make a person cry
because that's called surviving
firing fighting flying
learning how to smile without trying
learning how to write without typing
a gemini-cancer cusp knows how to lie
you can see it every time you look into the crackling ice
of daddy's electric-blue-so-over-you eyes
the same resentment found in the eyes of your brother
despite the voids that he has tried to fill with
cocaine, meth, a countless number of lovers
sure, he's sober now
but the damage still exists
in a place in the past
where he lights up and drowns
in a chemical-scented mist
he wants to save me now
doesn't trust me when i tell the truth
because in other stories, of course,
the truth wiggles like a loose tooth
making its way out of your mouth

even when you're still in your youth
old age doesn't have to creep up on you
to make you want to end it
you have "i miss you" typed out and
all you do is want to send it
firing fighting flying
rinse your load and repeat
because the pain is butterscotch yet bittersweet
and you want to devour it while
lying beneath your familiar bedroom sheets.

Zodiac

my story starts at flushing hospital
a red-faced girl born and not some prodigal
i don't remember the first thing i saw when i came out
but if i were born in the heavens
i know that i would've been surrounded by clouds
my official story starts there
with my father waiting in a hospital chair
my mom, in agony, in the bed
with both of her legs dutifully spread
my real story starts quite before then
in the cosmos, the planets and i decided
that i should come down here
to overhear
the whereabouts of others
of those who are lovers
of those who live in a
constant state of summer
and don't flinch at the sound of thunder
instead their gold-tinted eyes fill with wonder
because i was born in november
i'm forced to warm my hands with embers
and wear a scarf as a cocoon
so that people assume that i'm as
cold-blooded as the moon
it's different with my dad
because he was born in june
a period during the year
when marigolds bloom
their scent spreads from room to room
does it matter when you slid out
of the womb
when you'll likewise end up in a tomb

does the season in which you were born
matter at all
when you still have to learn how
to walk and crawl

Small Town Reminiscing

From what I gather,
self-love is wearing
a recently slaughtered fox
draped around my neck,
a scarf, minx,

I think.

Sitting outside on porch steps with the yellow backlights
exaggerating the murdered fox's passionate orange pelt,
disguising the yellow mold on its white fur still soft,
and out beyond the picket white fence
are a collection of eyes,
greener than the grass,
glaring,
coveting
my dear beastly, old fox.

Dull gray patches appear as the passionate orange fur turns brown
and then blows away in the summer breeze,
carrying with it the wretched stench of decay and wasted potential.
Blood leaks out of the fox's veins and into its tiny black feet, inflating them,
and into the tail as well, turning the delicate white tip pure black.
Its eyes deflate, the juices evaporating and the condensates landing behind my ear,
leaving the eyes to slowly slide out of their sockets and drape on my bicep.
I try so desperately to just lift the burdening carcass off my shoulders, but
each and every time I shift its weight, I hear the tiny shrieks of the maggots,
crying to me about how I'm stealing away their only meal,
threatening me about how they'll start chewing their way to my lungs,
leaving me to drown in our bitter anguish.

The green eyes morph into round balls of light
and fly away into the sky,

nothing more than fireflies.
And as the moon begins its descent
into the morning light,
I kiss my dear beastly fox
right on its hardened, cold cheek.

It's here to stay.
Might as well love it.

Fiction

Wine and Vine

I entered our apartment to find Carol sleeping on the couch with Daniel nestled to her breast. He too was sleeping. When was the last time I had seen them like this? Closing the door behind me, slow to turn the locks as to not make a sound, I took off my shoes and walked over to her. *Mapping the Edge* by Sarah Dunant—Carol's thumb in the middle to bookmark the page—was spread open to her left. I had forgotten how much she loves to read. Getting closer, I saw the empty wine glass on the floor near the corner of the couch and smiled.

Back when we were dating, a few months after I proposed to her at the *Auberge du Soleil* in Napa, California, Carol started going out on the nights I couldn't spend time with her. Every time I would get home from work, I'd turn on the lights and go straight for the marble kitchen island. Written neatly in pencil would be a note saying, "Will be back soon. Don't wait up" or "Went out for some air."

The first time I found a note, it was close to 1:00 a.m. and I was looking forward to coming home to my fiancé after a long day, even though she would either be asleep, outlining lesson plans, or typing on her laptop. When I saw that she wasn't there, I called her.

"Baby, where are you?" I asked.

"Not too far away," she replied. I heard people talking in the background.

"Can you please come home?" I'm sure she could hear how wobbly my voice sounded. I could hear my own breath picking up static on her end.

"I've been going over lesson plans for tomorrow. I'm just out with old friends. I'll see you before work. Goodnight," she said and hung up.

I couldn't go to bed at all and went into the office the next morning feeling like my body was splintering from the inside.

"How do you feel?" I had asked when she crept into the living room at 4:00 a.m.

She turned the light on and removed her shoes, letting the door slam behind her as she did so. "I'm okay, love. Told you you shouldn't wait up for me."

She only had three hours to rest before getting ready for work.

Carol didn't understand that I did want to spend every night with her watching T.V. and ordering takeout or going to the museum by the pier that she liked so much. I just had to work, sometimes, from the afternoon into the early morning because Carol was constantly changing fancies, taking up to three weeks to find another job. By the time we were engaged, she had worked as a baker's assistant; a personal stylist; a proctor for the SATs on the weekends; and, finally, part-time as a teacher's assistant at a public elementary school, explaining to me that teaching was her calling. Sometimes, I wanted to quit my job as a computer support specialist, but with us living together, it was never an option.

"iPendejo!" my mother would call me whenever I visited. "She's a liar, this one. You will not be happy with her."

Carol and I moved in together after my proposal. When my mother found out, she finally gave up on arguing with me. My once pleasant visits to her small studio apartment became momentary greetings. As soon as she'd see me walk through the door, she would fold her arms across her chest, hemming in her body. The long canary hair she'd wind up like corkscrews with her wand was kept in a bun and the gray started to peek through. We spoke in fragments. The worst kind of anger is the silent kind.

I wanted to hug her. I wanted to tell my mother that I was happy with Carol and that, if anyone, Carol would probably end up being unhappy with me in the long run. I first saw Carol at the local Merrick Theatre and Center for the Arts. She was standing in the farthest right aisle, thumb nail between her teeth, her other hand fumbling with something in her pocket. Though it was dark, the stage light bounced off her long chestnut hair, the rounded tips creating soft spirals at her back. I studied her, the way she leaned against the wall, her eyes squinting at the performance, engrossed. When the play ended, Carol joined the cast on stage. As it turned out, she was the author of *Top Shelf*, a play about a young alcoholic trying to figure out what she really needed to store on the top shelf of her life. A bit cliché, but very relatable.

"So what did you think?" she asked me as we walked to the same bus stop three blocks away from The Vine Wine Bar.

"Your perspective on addiction is interesting," I replied.

She smiled.

"Like James Baldwin," I finished, noticing *When All the World Was Young* by Barbara Holland pressed to her chest along with other documents.

"You know," she said, ash-brown eyes clouding the blue sky, "it feels

strange being outside after spending so much time in the dark. There's so much color. So many people."

I followed Carol's gaze towards the Meroke Preserve, where the trees towered over the single-story houses on the open plain. Cedar Swamp Creek ran through it, a meandering stream of water surrounded by overgrown bush gone wild. I felt vulnerable all of a sudden, exposed in broad daylight. I thought of taking Carol's hand and leading her into the green of the preserve where I would kiss her. I had been embarrassed then, but looking back now, she would have loved it.

"Life is a sort of performance, isn't it?" I asked. It was the smartest thing I could think of to say.

"It is," she muttered to herself.

• • •

For a while, after we moved in, Carol and I were at ease. We found a way to spend every night together. She began to work full-time at the elementary school, and I avoided social outings with friends and family to get home as soon as possible in the evening.

"You're the thing I reach for when I get cold in the middle of the night," Carol would whisper to me, a quote from the internet she memorized, night after night as we hid under the blankets, never letting me forget.

Her shift ended at 2:00 p.m. and, from that time to the time I came home at around 6:30 p.m., she worked on lesson plans and, if those were done, she wrote stories that she would then turn into plays. It was all done on her laptop. She sat at the angular table on the side closest to the front door. There was a chair directly opposite her and two on each side. A dining room and a living room had been made from the living space next to the kitchen. There was a tan sofa against the entire length of the wall. Upstairs, both of the bedrooms had queen-sized beds in them. The apartment was already furnished like this when we rented it.

There at the table, Carol would wait for me to come home from work. When she'd hear me jingle the keys, just getting them out of my pocket, I'd hear the chair legs sliding across the floor. The three locks on our door would turn and Carol would emerge from the doorway. She was so beautiful with her glossy face and her hair in a ponytail. Normally, she would be wearing sweats and an oversized tee, the couch prepped with blankets and pillows for our routine viewing of *You* on Netflix. I would hold her, kiss the top of her head, and lead her over to the couch, usually with scones

and hot chocolate from the Spiga Bakery near my job. There we would take turns lying on the couch, crossing our legs over the other's lap. When my hands went under her shirt to massage her back, she was always so soft.

"I'd love to have a family with you," I often whispered into her ear and she giggled. She had already told me that she didn't plan on being a mother, but we still spoke about our children as if they were real. She pouted every time I told her that they'd like me better because I would always be the good cop.

Maybe it would have stayed that way if I had thought about asking Carol what she wanted from our relationship. I was hyper-aware of her beauty and rottenly jealous whenever she talked to anyone in any way that resembled flirtation. I knew the signs. Her hand would place a lock of hair behind her ear and she would bite the nail of her forefinger while smiling. Maybe it was the fear of her meeting someone new that made me grow tired of our routine places and conversations. I started hanging out with my friends and visiting my mother more often. Between my social meetings and overtime at work, I'd find myself getting home later.

My mother, a single parent after my father's early death, got her hours cut back at the adoption agency where she worked as a case manager. She could no longer afford both her diabetes medication and her rent. We had moved to Merrick from Queens when my father was relocated as the store manager at the local Target, and since he passed away from heart failure, I couldn't help feeling that part of my mother's anger towards Carol was because she was the woman living with me and not her. Besides, even though we were white-passing Puerto Ricans with blue eyes and blonde hair, being in a predominantly white neighborhood could get tough.

During one of these times when I visited my mother, I asked her to live with me.

"¿Con esa mujer?" she asked.

"Yes, Mami, with Carol," I grunted, annoyed that the answer was going to be a "no."

"¿Hijo, pero como crees?"

Carol soon stopped opening the door for me when I came home. I'd usually find her on the couch, stooped over lesson plans and coloring in apples, pears, and mangoes with Crayola markers.

"Hey, baby," I'd say, exhausted.

"Hey," she'd mutter, quickly glancing at me, grimacing though she had tried to smile before returning to her work.

Carol was miserable and I knew it. Her ash-brown eyes never peeked

at me when she thought I wasn't looking, not anymore. She had stopped telling me how cute I was whenever I scratched my head in embarrassment. It was a habit I was self-conscious about because it made me feel like those heartthrob pretty-boy clichés on teenage romance movies, but Carol thought it was adorable. Sometimes, I would come home to find her in our bedroom, wrapped in blankets and listening to music on her phone without headphones. So I told her that I wouldn't mind if she went out with her friends, even if she met other people. The thing is, she was already that kind of person. When I first met Carol at the theatre, she had two other partners. I ended up walking her home after the bus ride, and we shared a kiss before she disappeared behind her apartment building's rustic doors. I agreed to it.

I didn't feel like I could say anything to her any of the times she crept into bed next to me at 4:00 in the morning—even if she did smell like another man's cologne. I always feigned sleep, but my breathing was too controlled, my eyelids too unsteady. I couldn't just keep them shut. I'd hear her come home, counting the steps she'd take to our bedroom to steady myself. The lights would turn on and I'd hear her fumbling around, changing clothes and readying herself for bed. I hated not knowing what clothes she wore when she arrived home.

• • •

I felt Carol drifting away from me, so I suggested we shotgun the wedding and head to Vegas. I took two weeks off from my job and Carol quit hers. Within three days we were married. The witness was a passerby we had met there, and we wrote our thirty-second vows the morning the chapel was booked. Then we flew over to Paris for our honeymoon. I thought marriage would fix all of our problems and it did, for a while.

A month after we returned to Merrick, Carol told me she thought she was pregnant while we sat on one of the wooden benches at the park across from the Meroke Preserve. I turned to her, eyes in a wide stare, smile beginning to form as the words sank in, but she wasn't feeling what I was. Carol wore dark blue jeans that day, hugging her slim legs. Her head rested on her knees as she looked at me, pale with a cigarette between her fingers. I saw how thin she was, the sunken skin underneath her eyes showing black.

"How do you know?" I asked gently, afraid to startle her.

"I went to the doctor. I'm a little over my first trimester," she said. "I swear I had no symptoms, David. I'm sorry."

Carol's eyes reddened. I took her hand.

"Hey, that's great news," I told her. "I'm happy we're going to have this baby. Don't be scared. We're going to do this together."

Carol nodded into her knees and I moved towards her, wrapping her in my embrace.

• • •

Once, when she was seven months pregnant, Carol and I went through an old shoebox filled with packets of old photographs. We revisited our boozy brunches, our honeymoon to Paris, the night-time wedding with carpeted floors and white chairs. It was then we found a picture of twenty-one-year-old Carol at the Madrid Barajas Airport in Spain with her parents.

"I'm sure they miss you," I told her as we sat on the floor. She was sitting on a small mat, kind of like a pillow. We each had a glass of wine and we were both notorious for spilling stuff on the couch.

"They remind me of that every time they send me an email." Carol looked at me. I looked at her.

"Here I am at six years old," she said, smiling, choosing another photograph from the scattered piles, "probably telling them I was going to grow wings and fly away to another country."

I found a picture of me with my family at a wedding in Puerto Rico, followed by a photo of me scaling a tree for coconuts with my brother on the ground watching me, a *machete* in his hand.

Carol laughed. "What's this?"

I told her the story of how my family had made their own coconut ice cream to sell to the local kids at one point. She smiled even wider, showing teeth, when I told her I was the one to scale the trees to grab the coconuts.

"We should go there after the baby is born! I could teach reading and math over there, too, maybe even English."

We spent so much time talking about all the places we would visit after the baby was born and to me, it was the same way we would speak about our then non-existent kids, not realizing the magnitude of reality Daniel would bring.

• • •

When I told my mother that Carol was pregnant, she grew quiet.

"Was it intentional?" she asked.

We were sitting at Panera Bread. I watched as she fidgeted with the spoon, playing with the Autumn Squash soup she ordered.

“Mom, your first grandson. Aren’t you excited?” I asked.

“¿Sabes que? No creo que es mi nieto,” she said looking me in the eyes.

“Mamá! How can you say that? ¡Es mi hijo!” I yelled back at her, drawing attention to our conversation. I lowered my voice. “He’s my son.”

“Are you sure?” she replied. She finished her soup and slammed the spoon onto the ceramic bowl, making a loud clink. “*Muchas gracias*,” she said, picking up her grey wool sweater before leaving me there, words in my mouth and angry.

There was never any doubt in my mind that Daniel was my son before that conversation. I remembered the fights Carol and I would have, she leaving for up to an entire night without telling me where she had gone. I had followed her to the theatre once and I was pretty sure that was where she spent most of her time. I assumed she would head to the Wine Vine Bar afterward.

When Daniel was born, he already had a head of curly, black hair and his eyes, when he opened them, were just as dark. My relatives call me *Suco* in Puerto Rico because of my light complexion and hair.

“I can’t believe you don’t trust me!” Carol yelled at me, holding Daniel in her arms. “How could you think I would hide something like that from you?”

“It’s not that big of a deal! Just put my mind at ease!”

As soon as Daniel learned to suckle on a bottle, Carol took to the breast pump and milk formulas. I worked overtime, sometimes doing construction jobs on the weekends because I was so worried Daniel would cry one night for a clean diaper and we wouldn’t have any.

I knew Carol was lying, but I was obsessed with being the one to exonerate her. Daniel was loved from the day I knew about my wife’s pregnancy. Even if he wasn’t mine, it wouldn’t be the issue. I wanted Carol to be honest with me despite our problems, despite our hangups, but every time she wasn’t, I couldn’t get angry enough with her to question our relationship. She had lost her voice with me, had grown quiet and complacent and unhappy, tending to the baby during the day while I was at work. When I got home, Daniel would already be asleep, swaddled in his blankets, bathed, and fed. Carol would be sitting on the couch reading *Elle* magazine, ready to walk alongside buildings and under the stars. The weekends were the only time we had together, but then she started taking French classes on Saturday and worked Sundays at the local hospice, home instead of senior care.

“Il a les yeux rouges. Il a les yeux jaunes. Il a les yeux arc-en-ciel. Et une tête en bois. Il boit du chocolat. . .” Carol would sing colors to Daniel, taking him from the crib and rocking him in her arms, dandling him on her knees.

With Daniel, our two-bedroom apartment was beginning to fill up. A week after we brought him home from the hospital, Carol framed a world map and hung it on the baby-blue wall (which I had painted when we first learned Daniel’s gender) above his crib. From our closet, she brought out all her stuffed animals: Teddy, the photographer bunny with a black hat; Bruno, the traveling dog; and Señor Delfín, the dolphin that lit up and echoed underwater life. Carol had wanted to be a marine biologist when she was young.

• • •

One early morning, I woke up sweaty from a dream where I couldn’t find Carol. I had carried Daniel on my back as we searched through the Meroke Preserve, his wails for his mother causing the birds to leave their nests and dirt baths. I had no shoes on and felt cool mud covering up the cuts on my feet that were bleeding. We found her in the Cedar Swamp Creek, her body as stiff as stone, moss growing where her eyes had been. Daniel started screaming.

The alarm clock read 5:00 am. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the light of the room, the sun just starting to peek through the white lace curtains. Breathing hard, I extended my hand to the side of me and felt the cool surface of the unused bedsheet. I shot up before remembering that Carol normally slept in Daniel’s room.

Sweating through my shirt, my legs shaking, I walked across the hall. Through the open door, I saw Daniel safely in his crib, but I didn’t see Carol. I felt a puncturing pain in the palm of my right hand. I went downstairs.

“Carol?” I called out and within a minute of realizing that she wasn’t home, I ran to the front desk of our building barefoot. I saw her through the glass double-doors with a cigarette between her teeth, white bathrobe around her. She seemed to be nodding along to something a man was saying. He had a wooden tumbler in one of his hands, a shirt with a V-neck large enough to pretentiously show off his chest, and on his wrists were beaded bracelets. The woman next to Carol, dressed in a coral dress with fuzzy slippers, laughed so loud that the man at the desk heard her.

I rushed out to bring my wife inside, my steps slowing as I got closer to

the glass. The nearest I got was a foot from the door. I stood there, Carol's back turned to me, and looked at my feet. I could see my reflection on the glass. My hair was matted to my head, the shirt I wore had a hole along the hem, and the sweats I wore had little blue stains from when I painted Daniel's room. I made my way back to our apartment. Carol walked in an hour later with a tote bag filled with groceries.

"Carol?" I weakly called out to her as soon as I heard her begin setting the groceries down.

From the table where she was taking the groceries out of the bag, Carol looked up the short flight of stairs that lead to the bedrooms. I stood there looking back down at her.

"Oh . . . David?" she said, meekly smiling. "Shouldn't you be getting ready for work?"

"Who were they?" I asked, voice gaining strength. "Your lovers? You're just going to leave Daniel alone?"

"You're here, aren't you?" she countered, walking towards the stairs.

"I have work," I snapped.

"Oh, and that's why you never take care of him?" she asked. Her foot reached the first step. "Why do you work so damn much?"

"I do what I can, but we need money, Carol. Damn it! Why can't you understand that I'm doing everything I can for Daniel?"

"What about me, David?" Carol whispered, going up the steps. "I buy all the groceries, the diapers, the clothes. I know how to save money, too."

I watched her as she reached the top where I stood. She looked at me, our faces closer than they had been in a while, and she kissed me, her hands clasping my neck so I wouldn't pull away. I couldn't close my eyes, couldn't enjoy this moment. I pushed myself against the wall, away from her, and she let me go.

"It's not the same, is it?" Carol asked as she closed Daniel's door behind her, leaving the groceries scattered on the dining room table, which I would put in place before leaving for work.

• • •

The first thing I saw when I arrived home that night were the two glasses filled with melting ice on the dining room table. My cheeks warmed, humiliated, and I slammed the door behind me before perching my eyes on Carol. She sat on the couch working on her French textbook with a chewed-up pencil.

“Carol, what the fuck?!” I yelled. “Who was here?”

She looked at me from where she sat. Her nose reddened before her eyes could. With her hands, she raised her hair from around her neck and tied it in a ponytail. I saw the mark left on her skin and Carol glanced at me through the bangs that were beginning to cover her eyes.

“Why? Why the hell? Daniel is here!” I shouted more at the hickey than at her.

“We haven’t been together for months—” she began, her voice breaking.

“You think that’s my fault? You’re always out fucking other people. That’s how you get them to like you, right? Make them *swoon* with how *refined* you are!”

I never went to college and never had an interest to. Carol said she understood it, said I was more of a “street-smart” kind of guy, but she would always bring home *Institute for the Culinary Arts* brochures after I mentioned my dream of opening up a bar where I could also be the head chef. When I mentioned how much I used to love baking, she signed us up for baking classes on the weekends before she began studying French.

We went for the first couple of weeks. The classes were hosted by a hospitable couple who owned Spiga Bakery. They let us bring Daniel and we left him with the host’s wife, Sylvia, a good friend of Carol’s. She was one of the few other Hispanics in the neighborhood. She had long jet-black hair and skin the color of coffee, freshly pressed, with milk. Sylvia and Michael, her husband and the chef, had been married for about three years and still had no children. I often wondered if Carol and I would have been happier if we didn’t have Daniel and, even then, would we even be married or would I just be an occasional email to her? I should have seen it as time between the two of us, but instead I found myself locking my jaw at the thought of how hard Carol was trying to make me pursue something I thought I had wanted to pursue.

“I’m really upset that you could even think that. ‘Cause I don’t. I don’t do that!” Carol tossed her workbook to the side and stood up. The pink florals on her dress angered me.

“Really?” I asked mockingly. I threw my work bag onto the floor. “You’re telling me, Carol, that you’ve never fucked anybody else?”

“Don’t you dare,” she began, “don’t you fucking dare. You know and you haven’t said anything.”

I grabbed Carol’s wrist and pulled her to me, circled my arms around her and squeezed my eyes shut as she screamed out how much she hated me for tying her down. I waited until she grew quiet.

"I'm sorry, Carol." I picked up my bag from the floor and dug around for a quarter.

"You can't end every argument that way, David. It's not fair."

"What do you want me to say then? That I love how my wife goes around the neighborhood doing god knows what? I can't go outside without hearing people talk about us," I said. For the past few months, I've had co-workers and neighbors ask me how Carol was, leaning their head to the side and nodding profusely when I said she was okay.

The truth is that I never blamed Carol for anything, even if she did have some strange man over at the apartment when I wasn't there. But I didn't like how Daniel, quickly approaching two, would soon understand my relationship with his mother. I led Carol to the couch and began rasping a quarter against her skin, smoothing out the blood clot, watching her eyes wince as she tried to keep her lips in a thin line.

• • •

"*¡Te dije, miijo!*" my mother said when I walked through her apartment door with my shoulders slumped, my eyes red from crying.

"*Mami*, she's not happy -"

"And you're not either," she whispered.

"But I love her, *Mamá*," I said. Catching my reflection in the sun-shaped mirror hanging above the black leather couch, I thought of my father's death. My skin looked waxy and pale, prepped for an open-casket funeral.

"But does she love you?" She guided me to the couch and told me to sit before she went back into the kitchen, her *chancletas* smacking against the black-and-white checkered tiles. I heard a door slam and the stove fire ignite.

"*Mamá . . .*" I whispered. Carol and I had always said that we loved each other, but recently, she would smile as I waited for her to say that she did, too. Sometimes she did, but sometimes she didn't.

"*¿Hijo, que vas hacer?*" my mother called out from the kitchen.

"I have to make her leave, *Ma*." I stretched out on the couch and stared at the ceiling, thinking about how Carol would react if I started my own affair.

"*¿Pero que dices?*" The kettle whistled.

"*Le quiero tanto*. I could never leave her. What if I told her I was seeing another woman?" I asked my mother.

“Would it even bother her?” my mother asked, shaking her head, as she walked into the living room with two ceramic cups of chamomile tea. I didn’t even have to ask. When I was little, my mother always gave me a cup of chamomile tea with a stick of cinnamon to soothe away bad dreams and stress.

I took my feet off the couch to make room for my mother who took a seat next to me. I played with my simple wedding band on my left hand. Carol had placed hers on her right.

“And *Danielito*? What will happen to him?” my mother continued, handing me a cup.

“I’ll be mother and father, *Ma*. You did it and I came out okay.”

“¿*Y ahora*? What does that woman want? What is it that she thinks you can’t give her?” my mother asked, bringing the conversation back to Carol.

“I don’t know.” I blew on the tea and sipped while extreme melancholy washed over me.

My mother told me a story about my father that I hadn’t known. When she was younger, everyone had wanted her hand in marriage, but she was already in love with a man who would disappear days at a time.

“A friend would tell me, ‘Laura, *sabes que* Javier, he’s with some other woman at the ice cream parlor now.’ The dimples on her face made an appearance as she smiled. “I told her, ‘Lola, if you were really my friend, you wouldn’t tell me.’”

They had broken up and gotten together five times before my mother indefinitely ended it.

“Every time I heard about Javier, my body longed to be near his. I prayed to God. I told Him, ‘*Señor*, if this man is for me, bring him back, and if he isn’t, erase him from my heart.’ I waited three months, *mijo*, and then there he was at my doorstep.”

“What did you tell him?” I had asked.

“That I didn’t want him around, that I wasn’t going to be one of his many *gatas*. ¿*Y sabes que*? He asks me what it is I wanted! And I told him, ‘Javier, I want a marriage!’”

“What did he say?”

““¿*Eso es todo*? Let’s get married then!”” My mother’s shoulders shook as she tried to stifle laughter. “We were married within three months, David, and he treated me like his queen, *mijo*.”

• • •

I stopped by the Meroke Preserve on my way home and made my way to the creek. I wore battered cloth sneakers with holes, but I walked on the sponge-like earth, the oozing watered-down mud soaking the bottom of my shoes. It was dark and I aimed the flashlight I carried in the glove compartment of my car at the water's surface. I thought about the nightmare I had and imagined Carol, defeated and tired of being my wife, barefoot and in her white nightgown, walking into the water, picking up stones as she went.

• • •

It was Saturday night. Carol was snuggled with Daniel, now growing fast, on the couch, with *Mapping the Edge* to the side. I checked myself in the full-length mirror that leaned against the wall next to the couch. Its wooden frame, glossed and caved in, was dark brown—the color of Daniel's skin and I was reminded about the conversation I had with my mother hours ago. I crouched down next to Carol and gently touched her shoulder.

"Hey," I whispered, and when I saw her eyes flutter open, I added, "how are you doing?"

Carol smiled, but I noticed the swollen look on her face, her eyelids struggling to stay open. "Good," she said.

Cracking a smile, I took Daniel from her chest. He stirred in my arms. I brought him closer to my own chest and looked at the mustard-colored pajama shirt he wore, the one with a blue pickup truck. It was long-sleeved and his blue sweats kept his little legs warm, it seemed, on this autumn evening. I kissed his forehead, humid with sweat, smelling the *Para Mi Bebé* cologne Carol always bought.

I looked at her and saw tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

"I'm just going to put him to bed," I said and took Daniel into his room across the hall and into the bigger crib we had to buy when he turned one. I had made the other one from wood in the shape of a crescent moon because Carol saw it on the internet and told me about it in such a rush, tripping over the words as she tried to describe it to me. It was in the corner of the room, I noticed. Daniel's crib now resembled a playpen with a fence around it. Sometimes he slept with Carol on the queen-sized bed in his room and I felt a pang realizing that he had never slept with me.

I closed Daniel's door and went downstairs. Carol was on the phone.

"Yes, he's here now." A small chuckle. "I'll put you on the phone with him."

It was my mother. I asked her what had happened and she told me she had called Carol as soon as I had left her apartment earlier.

"Also, won't you, Carol, and Danielito come for breakfast tomorrow?" she asked on the phone loud enough for Carol to hear.

I looked at my wife and she nodded, smiling, and I told my mother we would be there at nine.

• • •

The last time my mother had invited Carol over for anything was when we were still dating.

"You sure you want to go?" I asked Carol as I splashed some cologne on my neck in front of the bathroom mirror.

"I'd love to," she said, smiling at me as she got Daniel dressed in her preferred sailor's outfit. Stripes and the color blue were her favorite.

A little past nine, we knocked on my mother's apartment door.

"*¡Estás grande Danielito!*" my mother exclaimed claspings her hands together and crouching to be at Daniel's eye level. My mother must have missed having Daniel around. She swung him in her arms.

"Faster! I'm flying!" he giggled as my mother jumped around the living room with our son. She soon tired out and returned Daniel to Carol's lap—we sat watching my mother on the couch.

"Come to the table, please!" my mother said, inviting us to sit.

There were dark blue plates filled with scrambled eggs, sausages, pancakes, and *majado*, mashed plantains, with bits of crumbled beef. In front of the highchair was a bowl of cereal without the milk for Daniel. He loved pouring in the milk. Bringing over a pitcher of orange juice and four empty cups from the kitchen, my mother asked us if we liked what was on the table before sitting down and joining us.

Carol helped Daniel lift the carton of milk and pour it into the Lucky Charms.

"I've been thinking," my mother began, "and I've decided to try to live at your apartment, David," and seeing the face I made, "and your apartment too, Carol."

"Why the sudden change of heart, *Ma*?" I asked her. The last time I had asked my mother to move in with me, I hadn't told Carol anything about it at first. When I did tell her, she was relieved that my mother had said no, but now looking at her, she seemed happy, her hand resting on top of Daniel's curly black mop of hair, asking him the name of the charms.

"Rainbow! Clover! Horseshoe!" Daniel called out.

"I don't want my son to be a single father," my mother said, her gaze smiling on Carol, nodding every time Daniel gave an answer to the charms. "I want Danielito to have both his parents even if he is not my grandson."

"Mom!" I screamed. I remembered Carol at the park, holding the cigarette, the hickey on her neck, the notes on the marble kitchen island. I dropped the spoonful of scrambled eggs I had been moving towards my plate, splattering egg chunks onto the table, staining the red tablecloth with oil. Carol grabbed my right hand with her left and I noticed the wedding band on her finger. My breathing hollowed, fearing the worst will finally be said, but I took Carol's hand and kissed it.

"Last night, as you know, I called Carol. Tell him what you told me," she said, staring at her. "But first, let me take Danielito for a little walk, okay? *Ven miamorsito*," my mother said as Carol took him down from the high-chair. My mother picked him up and walked out of the apartment, closing the door behind her.

"I'm not going to tell you what you already know, but the biological father of Daniel—" Carol started, staring at the door.

"Is not me."

"Daniel's biological father—I don't know who he is. I'm so sorry, David," Carol said, the words matching her rapid breathing, her voice almost at a whisper, "but I don't know who Daniel's father is."

I stood up from the chair. It fell behind me. Not bothering to pick it up, I walked into the kitchen, turned on the faucet, and splashed the water onto my face. Then I walked right back out into the living room, drying myself on a paper towel.

"You never wanted to know?" I asked the woman in front of me.

"I didn't want children, David. I just knew that if I had to, I wanted it to be your child. But the timing's all confused and I just don't know," Carol trailed off, looking anywhere but my eyes.

"So you got married to me so you could have a man to support you? When did you figure out the baby wasn't mine?" I had never wanted to have this conversation. My palms were sweaty.

"I don't know who the father is, David."

"Carol, just look at him! He doesn't look like me!" Memories of Daniel's birth came back to me. A hospital bed, my quiet wife, eyes sunken in from the lack of sleep. Her smile was ghostly compared to the pictures of when my mother held me after I was born.

"Do you even love Daniel?" I asked her.

“What are you saying?” she asked me.

I looked down at how she played with her pancakes, poking at the syrup with her fork.

“Of course I do, baby. I love Daniel. And why does it matter who the father is? You always told me you wanted a family. . . .” Carol trailed off, her thumb nail between her teeth while the other hand trembled as she tried to pick up her glass of orange juice.

“It’s important because I want to know,” I told my wife.

“Okay. Okay, baby. Okay.” Carol stood up as soon as I let myself fall into a chair by the table, resting my head in between my hands. Carol stroked my back with the palm of hand. She kissed the outer corners of my eyes when I began crying.

I phoned my mother a little while later and told her that what needed to be said had been said and to return with Daniel whenever she felt like it. I wanted to be infuriated with Carol for not knowing, for not being faithful, but I had a sense all along and never said anything to her. Only once did I ask, and I had swallowed her response -another question- as if that would kill this very conversation and bury it in the ground. I was disappointed, but I was scared. She was right though. I always knew. What right did I have?

• • •

My mother stayed at her place for two months to finish off the lease and then moved into Daniel’s bedroom. She taught Carol how to *bachata* and *cumbia* when she had the time, music blaring from the phone speaker, their footsteps in rhythm. Carol went back to her assistant teaching position, quit her Sunday job at the hospice, but continued to learn French on Saturdays. I stopped killing myself at the job.

“You excited to see Paris again?” I asked her after I booked a flight for the entire family, Carol paying for half of the fare. I turned around in my seat to look at her, her hands on my shoulders.

“I’m excited that Daniel will finally have a place to practice his colors.” Carol leaned down and kissed me.

I don’t know what sort of arrangement my mother and Carol made, but I didn’t ask and I don’t plan to. My mother stayed home with Daniel during the days when Carol and I worked and during the nights when we tried to make “us” work. We picked up on our weekly trips to Sushi Island again, our favorite Japanese restaurant, but we didn’t take Daniel because my mother thought that cold rice and raw fish would make him sick.

Carol and I normally arrived home at around the same time after work, but it was inevitable that, on some days, one of us would end up waiting for the other. If Carol did go out, she told me with whom and where. I did the same.

"Is this really necessary, David?" she asked me once as she clipped her hair to the side in front of the full-length mirror.

I didn't respond and instead made a whining noise from the couch where I was watching the early morning news.

Carol chuckled. "Okay, okay," she said. She began asking me if I felt comfortable with the people she went out with, past lovers included. The first time she'd asked, I was seething.

"Carol, what the hell?" I asked her, squinting and holding my hands up to my face in an I-can't-believe-you-would-ask-me kind of way.

She sighed and I took a step back, remembering that she didn't see relationships, friendships, maybe even people the way my mother and I did. I apologized and told her gently that I wasn't comfortable with the idea. At this, she smiled and told me that was all I had to say.

• • •

Sylvia and Michael invited us over more, too. It was mostly to watch the latest movies, but once in a while I would bring over a bottle of wine or two and they'd provide the food. Carol loved their breaded salmon. In the kitchen, Michael was teaching her how to make it. He was a tall man with blonde hair, towering over Carol in the kitchen. The fine lines around his eyes accentuated when he gave a deep-bellied laugh.

"You know, I'm so happy you two are working this out," Sylvia said to me as we both sat on the couch with the patterned knitted cushions in front of the T.V., mindlessly watching reruns of *Friends* for background noise. As a one-bedroom apartment, their place was smaller than ours.

"It's my mother who's helping us with Daniel," I admitted to her. "She and Carol still get into arguments, but my mother is having a hard time hating her now." I had confronted her once about her change of attitude and she told me Carol had cried on the phone with her that night and had told her that she loved me more than she's loved anyone. She loves the way I scratch the back of my head when embarrassed, my smile, the sound of my voice on the phone calls when I called her, even when she was out. Carol had never stopped loving me. The only thing, my mother told me, was that Carol loved her freedom, too. I had to stop being so jealous. It was driving her away when she wanted to stay.

"You know, Carol never wanted to have children."

I grimaced. "Sylvia, please."

"She wanted to have a relationship like me and Michael. I'm sure you thought about it too, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I, uh, thought about it." I fell back into the couch.

"I can't have children," Sylvia said, looking at the T.V. screen. "But I want to. Carol decided to keep the baby after I told her. I mean," she explained when I turned sharply away from the screen to look at her, "she was always going to have the baby, but was considering adoption. I told her she would regret it. Told her you'd make a wonderful father and that you wouldn't appreciate it if she left for the next six months." Sylvia laughed and turned to the T.V.

From the couch, I could see directly into the kitchen. I saw Carol. Her hair was behind her ears. She had cut it short herself, tying her hair into a ponytail and cutting it off from the base.

"Carol?"

"Yes?" She looked up from the oven where Michael was meticulously placing the salmon with oven mitts,

"You look beautiful with all that flour on your forehead," I poked.

"Yeah?" Washing her hands and forehead with the running water from the kitchen faucet, she called out, "Yeah, what about all that shit in your hair?! It looks like a camel licked you!" She made a face, scrunching up her nose and sticking out her tongue.

I smiled as Sylvia and Michael laughed. The quiet had been deafening.

• • •

"We're home!" Carol called out as we came back from our evening with Sylvia and Michael.

"Shhhh," I hushed my slightly tipsy wife. "They could be asleep."

"Mommy! Daddy!" Daniel yelled. My mother was helping him down the stairs.

"How was it?" my mother asked. "Did you enjoy your time with your friends? How's Sylvia?"

I laughed. "Everything is great. Sylvia is great."

"I wanna see Aunt Sylvia," Daniel chimed.

"Next time," Carol said, picking up Daniel in her arms, "but now it's time for bed. Thank you for bathing him," she said to my mother.

"Of course, dear," my mother replied.

“Carol, it’s a Saturday night. Maybe Daniel would like to see some T.V. with us?” I smiled at the little guy.

“Yes T.V.!”

“I guess it’s okay,” Carol said, retracing her steps from the stairs to the sofa. “Come sit, Laura,” she said to my mother as she let Daniel choose his spot, which was at the far left corner of the couch, next to the armrest.

I sat next to Carol who sat next to my mother and turned on the T.V. Changing from cable to Netflix, I chose *Despicable Me 3* to watch. We had juice cartons and bags of chips on the floor, but within an hour into the movie, everyone fell asleep and everything was left unopened.

“Carol,” I said, shaking her awake. “Ma.” When they opened their eyes, I got up and took Daniel into my arms, holding his head against my chest. “Let’s head up,” I said. My mother and Carol followed me up the stairs, leaving the floor a mess.

“And that’s why we find ants in the house,” I said as I handed Daniel to Carol.

“Give me Danielito. Carol, go downstairs and help David, si?” my mother said. She took Daniel into her arms and gave Carol a kiss on the cheek and a kiss on mine.

Carol and I both went down the stairs, me holding onto her waist as she descended so she wouldn’t fall headfirst.

Silently, we picked up the juice boxes and bags of chips just to leave them on the kitchen island.

“*Te quiero, David*,” Carol said to me just as I was turning off the kitchen light again. I loved when Carol spoke Spanish. The syllables strolled from her mouth with an exhalation of breath.

“We have to plan a trip to Spain, darling, so I can meet your family,” I said.

“It’s long overdue. FaceTiming isn’t enough.” She laughed.

“And by the way,” I added, taking her hand, “*te quiero, Carol*.”

A Burning Starr

I am a corporate slave. Nine to five, five days a week, I'm trapped within the confines of the dark gray cubicle rented out to me by my capitalist masters so that I may conform to society's vision of an everyday "working man". Given my childhood filled with dreams of making music that could change the world, my current lifestyle is extremely depressing by comparison. Luckily, my soul had been coaxed out of me in college where I took a few electives that fostered a childish passion for my musical dream while I slowly accumulated piles of debt that could only be paid through practicality. Straight out of school, I ran into the nearest Warner Music Group facility with my freshly printed musical production degree, begging on my knees for the sweet mercy of a job offer. That was when I first met my current supervisor, Jared. A middle-aged, balding demon of a man with a beer belly in progress. Hiding his rattlesnake fangs behind a pitying smile, he happily placed me in Accounting. Now, every morning, I wear my coffee-stained brown suit jacket from Men's Warehouse, pack a couple of bagels and an iceberg lettuce salad for lunch, and I spend the rest of the day typing up a new Excel spreadsheet with that week's album sales. Each time I walk by the only window on my floor, the one with the view of the Statue of Liberty, a piece of my heart begins to rot off, and by lunch I can taste it with my iceberg lettuce. As my workload increased, the chains around my ankles grew heavier, and the dream of music never made it out of the garage.

My dead-end accounting job leaves me about seven hours of freedom before my suggested bedtime (11:00 p.m. once seemed so early), and my subway ride takes up about an hour of that on a good day. Today was not one of those days. My ass was stuck to the orange seat of one of those subway cars left over from the nineties with ten-minute delays at each station. On both sides of me slumped two fellow generic office workers in matching middle class suits glaring at the soiled metal floor. The poor bastards had left their Air Pods at home, while I had on my bulky but unforgettable Sony headphones that I had gotten as a gift from GamGam when I was nine. The hideous headset was my gateway into rock music, from early Chuck Berry all the way to Rage Against the Machine. Even after years of abuse

at full-volume, these bad boys can still shout at teachers to leave those kids alone, producing a bittersweet case of nostalgia within my thirty-something self. So, I abandoned the standard hunched-over, head-down position and reclined in the seat with my eyes shut, ignoring the dark, syrupy residue grabbing onto my brown suit jacket.

As Roger Waters finished up his bass line and the imaginary crowd shuffled out of my dream, I noticed the smell of sweat and piss starting to ease up. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I noticed my two brothers-in-handcuffs exiting the subway car along with the rest of the passengers. I wonder if they had been ordered by the conductor to switch trains. Before I could merge back into the crowd, a startling breeze brushed past my neck. I paused Pink Floyd, and for the first time in months I took in my surroundings: everyone had gotten off the train except for me. The rarity of such an event left me stunned in my seat—that is until the door dinged shut and the train continued on its premeditated path. I was left alone with only the harsh scraping of the train's wheels against the curves of the track to keep me company. With a heavy sigh, I once again leaned back in my seat, started up Apple Music to drown out the screeching wheels, and closed my eyes.

The shrill screech of the train's brakes terminated the resounding sitar accompanying the softly spoken description of a black heart. The jolting flung my tranquilized body three seats down the row, like a sad rag doll, knocking my trusty headphones off my head and onto the grimy floor. The train car's fluorescent lights stuttered, plunging the car into darkness and then bringing it back into the light repeatedly. I lay dazed for a few moments, vision blurry, ears ringing, and my head lying in another seat's gummy stain. As the train came to a complete stop, the lights ceased flickering, and I could hear the wearisome voice as it stated, "This is 125th Street and Lexington Avenue. Next stop Third Avenue and 138th Street. Please stand clear of the closing doors." I slowly picked myself up, rubbing the mysterious substance off my cheek. Grabbing my headphones, I brushed the short, curly hairs off and readjusted them on my head, lowering the volume so as not to worsen my new headache. Back in my original seat, I glanced up as the train doors slid open. Then, I nearly shat myself.

An alien. An alien swaggered onto the train and took a seat directly across from me.

Extremely unexpected, and also quite uncreative, this alien had the same beady, black eyes and gargantuan head as every cartoon rendition; however, unlike the usual short, neon green creatures everyone has grown

accustomed to, this alien stood about as tall as a basketball player with skin the color of a freshly minted quarter. Still frozen in place, my eyes shifted back and forth between the alien and the open subway door, waiting for someone, anyone, to stroll right in and drop everything in their hands at the sight of this creature, confirming that I hadn't suffered from a concussion. No one came, and once again the doors dinged shut, and the train lurched forward.

Despite my gawking at it, the alien hadn't even acknowledged my presence. I wrenched my eyes away from its egg-shaped head and blinked hard a few times. In its lap rested a Banana Republic fashion magazine. Still ignoring me, the alien nonchalantly picked up its magazine and started thumbing through the pages of preppy teen-wear. After a minute passed, the alien let out a large sigh, tossing the magazine onto one of the empty seats. I don't blame him. Banana Republic is abhorrent even to us humans; only the middle-class kids with no personality would ever think to wear the same pair of khakis with a striped polo every day. Without the bland fashion magazine, the alien brought its tentacle up towards its face to look at what appeared to be an Apple Watch. I focused in on the device and noticed small boxes stacked on top of one another, exactly like an Apple Watch. I questioned whether this was an actual alien or just some guy in a freakish latex suit—that is until the alien tapped on a box with its tentacle. A holographic lilac-colored screen popped up, displaying unreadable white symbols. The alien tapped on one of the corners of the lilac screen, which produced several small red boxes covered with the white symbols. It swiped through several of these screens as humans do with potential Tinder dates. Then, the swiping abruptly stopped, and the alien squinted at the symbols before tapping on one of the red projections, bringing up a baby blue screen that displayed the only aspect of this whole situation that I could actually grasp: sound waves. I remember the symbolic wave from one of my music-recording classes (I got an A-). The waves started out long, almost straight, and then every second a slight bump occurred where the waves became taller and thinner, creating a solid beat. The alien nodded its bulbous head a few times and tapped at the screen.

A few seconds passed when nothing happened. I couldn't even hear the squeak of the subway wheels. Then, the sound of bones cracking and readjusting their joints filled the air as the alien shrunk in size, its head deflating like a balloon while releasing a gust of air that reeked of chlorine. Along with the air, some kind of gelatinous brain fluid leaked out on the sides of its head and gathered in two respective globs, forming makeshift

ears. The cracking got louder and sharper as parts of the alien's monstrous skull broke away, protruding outwards in front to make the nose; the remaining bone formed a soft, oblong visage. A pasty layer of skin emerged from the top of its contracted head, stretching down over the entirety of its body, appendages and all. Growing out of the fresh skin, a simple button-up paired with red bell bottoms, a brown corduroy jacket, and worn-out Beatle Boots covered everything up in seventies style. An outline appeared around the alien's nonexistent mouth, which then puffed up into a pair of luscious, dark pink lips. Patches of dark brown hair pushed through the scalp, quickly growing out into long, wavy locks that framed the face.

Despite all of these instantaneous horrors, I stayed wide-eyed, mouth agape, while the finishing touches were applied: the black of its eyes receded into pupils, leaving behind an expanse of white, and a small explosion of gray emerged from the black, creating a sharp pair of irises. A new sense of shock overcame me; the thing in front of me, the man, needed no introduction. One single look at this new appearance and anyone would recognize the boredom in his gray eyes, despite his life of anarchism, arrests on drug charges, and four thousand love affairs—from American model Jerry Hall to Italian singer Carla Bruni. Every teen who ever wore a leather jacket while skipping class and listening to hard rock in a beat-up Chevy got those ideas, that whole look, from *him*.

Taking a look at its new appendages and attire, the alien gave a satisfied smile and then returned to swiping at the red holographic screens, again completely ignoring my presence. I knew the thing in front of me was an alien in disguise, but every detail from his jaw to his choppy bangs came out absolutely perfect. Hell, I could even hear him sing, even though his lips hadn't moved an inch. Clear as day I heard the rhythmic "hmm, hmm, hmm" from the song—wait. Wait a damn minute. My headphones were still on, music still playing. He really was singing, albeit only in a recording. I probably should pull out my phone and start videotaping all this, or at the very least pause my music so I could give my complete attention to studying this creature, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that any scientist would sacrifice her newborn kid for, but I was stuck. If I moved my hands, they only trembled in fear of drawing the alien's attention towards my actions, dropping my phone in the process. So I stayed put and hoped that the shuffle option would keep giving me his melodic voice.

"What a drag it is getting old. . ."

My head shot up. There was no mistaking it, someone, something, sang along.

The alien's mouth moved, pursing its lips and enunciating the lyrics in perfect synchronization with the song. Holding my breath, I steadied my hands and cautiously lifted them up to slide my headphones off my head, the steady blues beat disappearing but not the soulful voice.

"What the . . ." I whispered.

The alien's head whipped upwards, every colored screen dispersing from sight, and it looked straight into my terrified, childlike eyes.

"What?" Its voice had the same faux-cockney accent as the original. "Well?" it asked again, louder. It kind of reminded me of Jared, authoritative and cocky, but British.

"I-I uh . . . it's a real pleasure to meet you." My voice kept cracking as if I were going through puberty again. "I just . . . uh . . ."

"You just what? Stop wasting time."

"I-I just wanted . . . wanted to ask . . . why did you become a musician?" So, so stupid. The one chance I had to talk to a rock legend, and I asked what has been asked since he first appeared on stage in London.

The alien paused for what seemed like hours before replying, "I did not choose it. It chose me. Quite literally." The iconic plump lips formed a polite yet unnerving Cheshire Cat grin, and the alien returned to staring at the wristwatch, the holograms appearing once more.

"That's it, huh?" It's not like I expected anything else, but I still ended up disappointed. Per usual, I guess.

"What do you mean 'that's it'? Of course, that's *it*. What else is there? When one is chosen to be something, then he must be it, and be it as efficiently as possible. Such is the way of all life."

My mouth went dry, and I dropped my head down, staring at my lap. The alien never looked up from its holographic boxes. Despite the blunt reasoning behind its words, it still didn't make sense. If people were chosen to be something and had to stick to it, then the man in front of me would have stayed as an economist instead of becoming a rock legend. A soft "Hey!" emitted from my headphones, and then a single guitar played its unforgettable chords before the other band members joined in. Mellow yet strong, the repetition of "hello" slowly started its majestic ascent to the climax, just as the alien shifted in its seat. Once again, a loud snap of bone resounded throughout the train car. My hands mindlessly gripped the edge of the seat as if it could somehow help save me from this edgy horror show that I had somehow fallen into.

The jawline pop, pop, popped as it widened, converting from an oblong face into a sharp-edged diamond. Little pricks of blond stubble appeared

along the freshly formed jaw and above the top lip, which deflated, leaving a thin mouth that slowly became a lighter shade of pink. Starting at the roots and moving down, straight, dirty blond hair replaced the dark waves, growing past the chin to the top of the shoulders. The shirt collar developed an inky black stain that continued to spread throughout the entire shirt, onto the bell bottoms, and then covered up the boots in dark, shiny slime. The slime produced a striped long-john shirt, worn denim jeans with two cosmic holes in the knees, and a pair of Chuck Taylors that looked as if they were worn in the trenches of World War I. The grunge ensemble was completed as the irises turned to a tragic sky blue, and there he was. A boy from a broken home who was “gay in spirit” and sang at pride rallies; a man who loved all but himself before the fatal bullet that followed his last shot of heroin.

The alien itself continued to stare at its wrist-watch’s holographic projection of the light blue square with the sound waves next to the lilac square with the mysterious alphabet. I guess this was normal, but why did it change so quickly after creating the first disguise? Didn’t it hurt, bones shifting in and out of place while the skull breaks apart? And why exactly did it disguise itself as legendary musicians? That’s not too smart of an idea for an alien who wants to blend in, but I guess it didn’t want to conform. I glanced back over at the blue box of sound waves. I ran over the beat of the waves in my head. I recognized this rhythm—wait, god damn it, of course I recognized it. The beat from the blue box was coming out of my headphones. The low chorus of hellos went through its second run, and as it built up, I, too, built up my resolve. Taking a large gulp, I raised my voice: “Can I ask you another question?”

Instead of cracking its neck upwards, this time the alien only glanced in my general direction, one dark blonde eyebrow raised.

I continued, “Your music is utterly amazing, but you were going through so much while creating it . . . how’d you manage to get as far as you did?”

The alien’s stolen face twisted in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Your musical career. Despite your drug addiction, your depression, you managed to continue touring and performing live. I just wanted to know what kept you going?” My voice slowly quieted and my body receded back into the orange seat, head hung low, as I realized the gravity of what I was asking.

Still, the alien responded, “That sounds counterproductive. In order

to fully complete my assignment, I must remove all and any complications that may arise, so that I may provide every client with the expected contentment, as should anyone when presented with their own assignment.”

As an adult, I don't cry. The last time I cried was when I was eight years old and sprained my wrist after falling off my bike. However, right then I felt the salty pricks of water fill the corners of my eyes. It was his face, his mouth, his eyes, his everything. Everything except his words. Those weren't his; they couldn't possibly be his. The alien swiped away the last of the red boxes and slid the blue box out of sight, and then it stared at the lilac screen, giving it the occasional tap. I stayed huddled, keeping all thoughts and questions to myself. Then, I remembered the baby blue box with the sound waves, and an idea popped into my head as the last of the “hello, hello, hello, how low” faded out. I let go of the sticky seat and slowly reached into my front pocket for my phone, shifting my eyes back and forth from the alien to my hands. I stared down at the screen displaying the song information, and I quickly tapped “next” with my thumb, as my head bobbed up fast enough to give me whiplash. My heart ran a marathon, while my cheeks twitched to keep the tears from falling, all while I waited to see what came next.

Like I predicted, the readjusting of bones sliding against one another tingled in my ears as its mouth pushed outwards revealing a centimeter of front teeth. Without looking back at my phone, I knew the acoustic guitar and drum pairing as Deacon and Taylor set the rhythm for the entire song, the song about wanting to break free. The stubble beard disintegrated into thin air as it's replaced by a nicely trimmed, raven-haired mustache. The long, blond locks receded back into the scalp completely, and then reemerged with the greased black hair of a Wall Street investor. The slime returned, swallowing every inch of body below the neck, and created a pure white wife-beater, light blue pants with studded belt, and a pair of classic Adidas sneakers. A studded black strap arose out of the bicep, and short curls of dark hair jumped out of the chest. And the eyes, the piercing cold eyes were flooded with a soft warmth as the irises become ebony. Those eyes were the same pair that stayed bright stars throughout the whole twenty-five minutes in the spotlight at Live Aid, despite the brutal onslaught of AIDS.

It took all the strength left in me not to break out sobbing. Out of everyone I could have seen, he was the one who knew the right thing to say, the right phrase that could keep me going through the stale days at the office filled with fake, bright lights and even faker ficus plants. The man

never stopped emitting style and confidence after his harrowing end; that doesn't even count for his music, which will always unite everyone of different sizes, ethnicities, and sexualities with its steady, clap-along rhythm.

Taking another deep breath, I spoke. "Hey."

The alien gave me an exasperated glare. "Hello," it spat with its thick British accent.

"So . . ."

The alien turned off the holographic screens and placed its hands in its lap, and then looked me dead on. "What's your question?"

This was it. My last chance. With nothing left to lose and a whole new life to gain, I bit my lip to stop the trembling, took a large gulp, and steadied my nerves.

"I feel trapped. I've always loved rock music; it inspired me to learn the drums and piano when I was a kid, and it kept me going to practice every Tuesday afternoon. I even tried to start a band in high school, but that never really went anywhere. I was hoping that when I got to college, I could find other rock lovers who knew a few guitar chords and weren't afraid of a gymnasium full of people. I found those musicians, and we did great for a couple of years. We played bars, college campuses, you know, small venues. However, when it came time to complete a senior thesis, we sort of fell apart. No, we really did fall apart, totally and completely with nothing left to show for it. Our lead guitarist actually did go on to medical school. And our bass player got married, went to Vermont for the honeymoon, but never came back. I still see our lead singer though, Andy, but he only asks for money and his voice got that ugly grain from smoking three packs a day. As for me, I got my production degree at the very least, so I thought that even if I couldn't do anything, then at least I could help whoever could, but my employer and current supervisor, Jared, only saw my minor in economics. So, now I can only leave my cubicle for an hour lunch break."

"There are no windows, no personal decorations allowed, even bringing in a cake for someone's birthday can potentially put you on probation. When I get home, all I can do is sleep, and when I wake up, it's time to go back to that hellish job. So, I guess, my question is . . . what should I do? How can I escape, and if I do, what then?"

The alien offered one slow blink and replied, "Why would you want to do anything different? It sounds to me like you have everything you would ever need: a job to earn currency that you can then exchange for basic necessities. What else do you need? You should be content as is."

That was it. That was my last grasp at hope for my future. There was nothing left for me but to return to work the next morning. I sat back in the orange subway seat, defeated. The sterile stench of medical supplies started to fade back to the usual rotting odor of dead rat and decaying dreams. Why bother leaving the train when I'll be back in a few hours? Why bother going to work when I won't actually be accomplishing anything? Why bother at all?

That deafening, shrill shriek of wheels scraping against the rusty metal tracks pierced the air once again, while the lights of the train car flickered on and off as if there were a rave party going on. The laws of physics propelled me down three seats where my cheek reunited with the pasty stain, my headphones launching off my head. I saw the stars of the Milky Way galaxy as the ear-splitting shriek flooded my ears and black spots appeared around me.

I slowly opened my eyes, still awkwardly lying on the mystery syrup stains with a soft ringing in my ears. I propped myself up on my forearms, trying to regain my vision. I turned my head towards the other side of the car, and my jaw dropped open as in a Tom & Jerry cartoon. Right across from me sat a twenty-something-year-old man with a fat, bumpy nose, crooked teeth in an awkward smile, and a small set of Dumbo ears all under a bowl of light brown hair. Out of all the musicians, out of all the legends, how did he show up?

Ringo. Ringo Starr, the drummer from The Beatles.

I whipped my head around, scanning for my phone, and retrieved it from the dirt-covered floor, brushing off dust bunnies and more curly hairs. This time a crack ran across the screen, but it was not enough to obscure the song title: "Come Together". What? That didn't make any sense; Ringo only played the drums for that song, Lennon and McCartney contributed way more than him. So why was *he* the one the alien transformed into? The subway car doors dinged open, and the alien, Ringo, stood up.

"Wait," I called out in a painful moan.

The alien paused and looked down at me, still on the repulsive floor.

"Why *that* look?"

"Appearances are irrelevant."

With that, the alien turned and left through the open doors, which then dinged shut. The train lurched forward. Once again, not a single person had come onto the train, not a single person had witnessed a young Ringo Starr walking off a subway car. Once again, I was left alone with my thoughts and chunky headphones.

I gathered my composure, readjusting myself in my seat. I gazed down at the headphones in my hands. So—that happened. Within a short span of time, I saw, even spoke to, the greatest musical legends of all time in their prime, a dream come true. But I was glad it was over. Whatever that was, it wasn't them, and it could never be them. Those legends are irreplaceable; not even actual humans could act like they acted; speak like they spoke. And who would they be if they were replaceable? Just another advertising ploy that big-name companies create to sell the fake concept of “edgy” to people who genuinely want change? Aliens, holograms, robots, they could never change anything they weren't programmed to do, and even then, whatever is accomplished is artificial. It was foolish of me to think that something inhuman could recreate a real person with his own unique personality and mindless passion.

That's probably why fate or whatever the hell stopped the train—to smack me upside the head for being so stupid. Despite it being a different century, the influence of those legends continues to permeate society, but those old guys can only do so much. It's time for something new. Forget work, I can take a couple of sick days. It's not like Jared would know or care. Besides, my drum kit is calling me, and it's about time I answer it.

Creative Nonfiction

For the Love of Omissions

I had been starving for weeks and the world was starting to melt for God knows who—not me—when Kurio called. I didn't answer at first because I hadn't particularly enjoyed talking to Kurio since I began college. I was a junior and he was a senior—we both were studying creative writing and film—yet Kurio spoke with the dull intensity of a retired mechanical physicist. I used to enjoy talking to him about poetry and cinema, but now the subjects had become sciences: the mechanisms of a poem's syntax are both violent and romantic, the camera movements coupled with the editing transitions will enhance the character's emotions. I didn't disagree with these declarations, but I wanted to hear from the Kurio I had met five years earlier, the one who taught me how to use turmeric root in my sauces and said goddamn a lot.

I let the phone ring. Then I let it ring again. The third attempt came in through Facetime instead of the phone. *He wants to talk face to face*, I sighed to myself. That's how I knew that something awful had happened. I was half right: my high school poetry had been stolen.

"By Roose?" I asked.

"Yes, Roose," Kurio confirmed. I looked at him on the screen. His eyes widened in glitchy pixels. "I mean, are you surprised?"

I shook my head as I fiddled with a barrette in my hair. It was spring break of my sophomore year of college. Just outside of my New York City apartment loomed the East Village: a group of gay allies was roller-skating to Washington Square Park, the Astor Place cube was spinning, and a tiny milk tea bar was celebrating its grand opening eight floors below me. My high school, a wealthy New England institution with a swanky basketball court, was way behind me. I was all about Manhattan.

But nobody really forgets where they came from. When I was thirteen, I watched Neill Hillborn perform a slam poem on obsessive-compulsive disorder. He screamed about his heartbreak and blinked every time he said *light switch*. I was mesmerized. I worked on slam poems for a year before applying to a magnet school program to study creative writing near Yale. It's here that I met Kurio, who was a senior in high school at the time, and

Roose, an eighth grader with shaggy hair. It was my sophomore year status that made me the glue for an unlikely trio; I was two years younger than Kurio and two years older than Roose.

I loved our trio. We were cringe-worthy slam poets trying to find our voices in the quaint streets of Connecticut. We yelled in libraries and embarrassed ourselves in coffeehouses. For a brief moment, we started a band called Nudes. I was decent with the violin and terrible with bongos. Kurio wrote the lyrics, his dark fingers scrawling feverishly across yellowing papers in my attic. Roose played the guitar or claimed he could, but I never saw him in the act. He usually paced around the room spitting ideas for potential songs, the guitar case collecting dust by the door.

"It's Roose," I said. "I'm not surprised. There's just a lot going on right now," I said. "I'm having a hard time with food again. A full-blown relapse. And my Siberian Husky just died."

"I'm so sorry about your dog. Losing a pet possibly hurts more than any heartbreak," he said. His voice edged toward that uncomfortable persona again, the wise, blind, mechanical physicist.

He leaned into his laptop camera and lowered his voice: "And I am troubled to hear about the anorexia. We'll talk about that later." He ran his fingers through his curly black hair and adjusted the collar of his shirt. "But what are you going to do about Roose?"

Am I supposed to do something? I thought. What could I do? Roose is three years younger than I. His middle name is Morrison after the singer in The Doors, and his parents were eclectic artists who throw buckets of paint at rocks and string together spatulas with dental floss. He seemed untouchable. And Kurio knew that Roose Morrison Butcher was a thief. The local grocery stores did, too, and stapled posters to the bulletin wall of the town plaza. There, alongside coupons for cornbread and the telephone numbers of tween babysitters, hung a photo of Roose shoving beer under his upcycled leather jacket, the image taken from the store's video surveillance footage. Above the photo, the text reads WATCH OUT FOR TEEN in a huge font.

"I'm wanted for theft," he had told me, once, before our poetry workshop started. He was panicked. "How the hell did this happen?"

"Well," I had said. "You know how."

"Yeah, but it's freedom of speech on, like, capitalism." It was always freedom of speech with him. Roose was good at hiding all kinds of loot under the upcycled leather jacket he wore the year we were in the writing program together. He smuggled fruit taffy from the local deli into our

prose classes. During the fifteen-minute break we were given between our memoir and humor workshop, Roose would snatch other customer's orders from a small fast-food restaurant. His jacket looked like a parachute on his lanky frame. He could shove anything under it, and no one could tell.

The jacket, of course, was also stolen. I knew this was true because the thrift store it was taken from stapled photos of Roose's face on the New Haven telephone poles. They had caught him on the surveillance camera as well: long brown hair, hands covered with Band-Aids, the ugly blue and brown leather jacket balled up under his arm.

Kurio's pixelated face watched me on my computer screen. I felt useless. "What am I supposed to do?" I asked him. "I'm not going to sit here and ask, 'Why me?'"

"You don't need to. He's a fuck up." Kurio scratched his beard and turned on a lamp. His image on my screen grew brighter. "But I never thought he'd plagiarize. He was a good writer. I'm sorry to be calling you like this. I just don't know. Did you think he'd do something like this?"

"Not to his friends." I rolled onto my side and hugged a pillow. My laptop bounced with the mattress, no doubt shaking Kurio's image of me.

"Jesus Christ, what a mess." Kurio covered his face with his hands while the static of our call sizzled like a fried egg. "Well, I could talk to him if you want."

"Don't do that."

"Okay. How are you, otherwise?" he asked. "Wanna talk about the eating problem that's troubling you?"

"Not really," I said. I fiddled with another barrette in my hair. "Are you still seeing Diamond?"

"You mean Julia?"

"I thought her name was Diamond."

"It's Julia. Why are you avoiding this Roose situation?"

"Because he stole my shit teenage poems. He's now a senior in high school and we're in college and it's all drama."

"The poems weren't shit. And that's not an excuse to plagiarize." Kurio wheeled his computer chair backward and stood up to close a window. The image of his dorm room glitched on my screen: a plaid comforter and a nightstand with book titles I couldn't make out.

Kurio went on to tell me that he had recently been interviewed by a radio program in upstate New York for his poetry. "It went terribly," he said—not because of his shyness but because he was now experiencing all of the woes and insecurities of his unwanted fame. His college kept inviting

him to speak to the English Department, and he didn't want to. He was paranoid that the majority of the English Department already knew, and he would come across as a bragger. "I didn't know *Ploughshares* was going to actually take my piece," he complained. "I submitted it as a fluke and now I'm here. I want to get out so badly. I'm pursuing my MFA in Iowa next fall."

"Congratulations on Iowa and the lit mag," I said. "I'm proud of you, you brilliant little fool."

"Thanks." He blushed. He moved his laptop from his desk to his plaid comforter and hopped onto his bed. "I started thinking about how the program you and I did really helped me get to where I am. And then I started looking for this piece that you wrote in 2016."

I didn't ask which piece he meant. It was either a poem on guilt and grilled cheese or a memoir on working in a laundromat.

"Instead, I came across a blog with a lot of your poems. Only they weren't by you. They're posted under some pen name I think he's trying to pull off."

"Wait. How do you know it's Roose?" I asked. I sat up and saw the mirrored image of my bony ribcage on my laptop screen. I immediately pulled my shirt down.

"There were pictures of his horse. That's how I knew it was Roose."

"Roose has a horse? I didn't know he had a horse."

"You did. Remember that piece he wrote on Nashville and the weird cousin?"

"The weird cousin?" I had no memory of the piece, but I assumed something sexual had happened.

"It doesn't matter," Kurio said. "I think you need to call him out on this. He probably curated this to reference on his college applications. It's not fair."

I pulled a sweatshirt over my arms and opened the blinds. It was early in the morning and the East Village was starting to churn with its skateboards and Doc Martens and everything else that was ugly-pretty. I wanted an espresso that would starve my cravings for the day. I had nowhere to be and no one's hand to hold but my own.

"I'll call you later," I said. I hung up and immediately thought of calling my mom, but she was in Florida on vacation with my father and my brother. I started asking myself why I didn't tag along with them, but I hate long car rides and cigarette smoke. I was over the family's annual road trip from Connecticut to Orlando. I would rather anemic and bored in the city than pose with Donald Duck for another picture.

I headed out for espresso, but I wound up in a DVD store. I used to think, when I was younger, I'd work in a Blockbuster Video. It seemed like the kind of place that had been around long before me and would be around long after I'm gone. Now, on my college spring break, it was the perfect place to wear my misery and be mindless. Wandering the aisles and tracing the faces of 90s heartthrobs and sun-faded movie posters made me feel like a better person. Like my work hadn't been plagiarized. Like an addiction to counting calories or stealing beer hadn't wrecked a friendship.

Roose and I were not the kinds of friends who got coffee and told each other secrets. He was the type of friend who once invited me to join him at a Planned Parenthood event because there would be free snacks. He was the kind of friend who called me and demanded I come down to Wooster Street because there was a dead frog I just had to see. He suggested that Kurio, he and I communicate on walkie-talkies rather than cell phones. He liked the smell of mothballs and convinced me to taste a pumpkin pie that he found in a trash can.

Maybe he's stolen Kurio's work, too, I thought. But I knew, somehow, that he hadn't. This was a personal slight against me. What had I done wrong? We both had not reached out to each other since high school ended, but it wasn't because of some epic fight. The age difference between us began to swell underneath everything. When I was in the middle of applying to college, Roose was in the middle of picking out a tie to wear to his sophomore homecoming dance. When I arrived as an undergrad in New York City, Roose was only just beginning the dreaded junior year of SATs and college prep. He was starting to actually like girls whereas I was three relationships through. We had lost touch with what was real between us.

I had been told that Roose moved to Brooklyn for his last year of high school because his parents divorced. But even that knowledge hadn't made either of us reach out to each other. No plans were made to catch up. We were never romantically involved or interested in each other, so it wasn't like there were old feelings hanging over our heads. It simply came down to pure nothingness. I was doing my thing and he was doing his. Perhaps we were never real friends—only people who were supposed to cross paths when they were teenagers trying to make sense of themselves.

A woman, as tall as the list of all my anxieties, looked at me in the comedy section. Her hair wasn't brushed, but she looked clean enough to trust. She pointed to a poster for an upcoming horror movie that I hadn't

heard of, and before she could start a conversation with me, I offered her a mint and turned away. I wasn't in the mood to do anything but feel sorry for myself. When the air began to feel heavy and stale, I walked out of the DVD store and sat on a stoop. My stomach rumbled repeatedly and not a single stranger noticed. It must not have been as loud as I thought.

I had a problem with eating long before I met Roose and Kurio. At twelve years old, I had decided I was ugly and shaped like a man. I began skipping meals in an effort to see my waist. When I started dating a fifteen-year-old a few months later, I started eating only four days a week so that I would feel prettier in his hands. I always dated boys that were too old for me because it made me feel smaller in an entirely different way. I joined the track team to stay lean and wrote poems like confessions.

My time in the writing program was the only place I felt comfortable discussing my disordered habits. Roose told me that he felt like punching things the way I felt like not eating things. Kurio held me in a coffee shop, one night, and told me his mother had the same issue as me. The three of us were once connected, even if it was through circumstances. My poems, then, were also written under strange circumstances. They reflected a past version of myself that didn't entirely align with who I currently was. Yes, the scar of an eating disorder would always be with me. But I wasn't fourteen or fifteen anymore. I was twenty. I was no longer heartbroken as a result of high school boyfriends or running track. The poems that Roose had taken, though written by me, were not by *me*.

I pulled out my phone. *Hey*, I typed. Then I deleted it. *Thought you were better than that*, I wanted to say, but that would have been pretentious. Reaching out to high school friends that you hadn't spoken to since graduation was awkward enough. How do I tell someone who was once in my Facebook profile picture that I am somewhat upset with him for secretly stealing my crappy high school poems?

The situation felt impossible. Had I become the victim of some elaborate prank to spark our friendship again? Or maybe the plagiarism was his cry for help. On Instagram, I pulled up Roose's account. He looked the same: messy hair behind a pallid face, clothes splattered with paint and stabbed with safety pins. Roose still looked like the kind of guy he truly was: slurping Slushies and greasing bike chains with a kitchen rag. Sometimes he brought cassette tapes to class to advocate for his eclectic, retro taste for old music. One time he made me a playlist of songs for "when you want to punch someone but underneath the punching is a lot of love". Only Fleetwood Mac songs appeared on the playlist.

I wondered if Manhattan had depressed him or pushed him further into his poser ways. But where did he see himself in my poems? We weren't even opposites of the same coin. If I were a bathing suit, he'd be a sea urchin. One time, there was a woman knitting beautiful scarves outside of the building that hosted our writing program. There were cyan wools and vibrant magenta silks, all of the colors you never see when it comes to neutral-toned winter accessories.

The woman said she was giving the scarves away for free. I reached for a pink one and she slapped my hand away. "Do you really need one?" she asked.

Fifteen-year-old me felt ashamed. I hadn't considered that I could be taking a scarf away from a person in need.

But Roose was not at all touched. He lifted up his sleeve to reveal a deep gash from a skateboarding injury a few days earlier. "My father beats me. Can I have one?" He seized the pink one I had wanted from her cart and skipped merrily down the street. "Here's your scarf," he sang as he thrust it into my backpack.

Heard you're in New York. Let's hang sometime? I sent the text. It felt hopeless.

• • •

A few months later, my phone vibrated while I was standing near a refreshment table at a photoshoot. The models, including myself, were fussing over the moon-drop grapes and sliced brie and grapefruit-tequila cocktails. We were starving and unsure of the zine we were being photographed for, as none of us were old enough to remember what 90s club kids really looked like. But we stood there anyway, in our neon green prom dresses and black lace corsets.

"Miss you, bud," my phone said.

Bud? I thought to myself. After so many months, just *bud*? A few weeks after the plagiarism announcement, Kurio had informed me that someone saw Roose shooting up in a parking garage outside of Temple Street. I had asked Kurio, "Heroin?" and Kurio said, "Yeah, what else can you shoot?" I pictured a substance like honey being forced into my former classmate's veins or giant Easter baskets on morning dewy porches. Posters with corners that don't bend upward. Only beautiful things that didn't make any sense at all. The kind of poetic images Roose and I had dreamt up during classes with our angry professor. *If a word seems wrong or even*

boring, replace it with 'window,' the professor once told us. *Replace anything that seems meh with something even odder—especially if you don't like the image.* I pictured Roose in a window shooting a window into his arm.

I posed with a taxidermized pigeon on the 90s club set: splattered walls and cardboard mansions and disco lights. The entire room reeked like a box of Crayola. It made everyone nauseous and then excited. Perhaps we would all throw up and feel prettier, if only for a second. I continued to flash sultry eyes at the photographer and part my lips. I didn't feel like Kate Moss and modeling always made me feel fat and insecure. But because I was a college student and, therefore, impoverished, I had taken up a whole series of odd gigs. I had wrapped mugs at a tourist attraction, taught English to children in Chinatown, sold my clothing on various websites, wrote a manual for a laundry machine, lint-rolled sweaters at a dry cleaner and, occasionally, modeled.

"Wonderful," the photographer said. "You're our very own Winona Ryder. You look just like her with that hair in that movie."

"You mean *Girl, Interrupted*?" I asked. My hair was nowhere near that short, but I ran with it.

"Yes, that movie! The big anxious eyes. Good work." The girl posing next to me looked like a fawn. She had a generous splatter of freckles across her nose and pointed ears. She smiled in my direction as if to say she agreed with the photographer. Or maybe she was waiting for the photographer to compliment her.

"No one better touch these photos," the photographer said, her lens opening and shutting. "They're just too good. Allie will be so pleased with these."

Who the hell is Allie? I thought. We spent another fifteen minutes posing in clown collars and carrying Prada bags before I reached the limit of my patience.

"Oh darling, darling! No. Not yet," the photographer said when I asked her if we were done. "I, like, totally have this vision of you standing against a wall and all of these hands writing around your head. Wouldn't that be edgy?" She didn't wait for my answer. I was moved up against a white space and told to pout while five crew members took Sharpies to my silhouette. Then I got moved over to a window, then a red loveseat, and, finally, I was asked to hold a candlestick.

The photographer said, "I'm going to have you stand here with this melted candle and look deep into the glass. Look at it as if you're looking at a person who has wrecked you. Start there."

I moved into a room made entirely out of cardboard boxes and stood tall. The candlestick made noises in my hands. The flame danced—I let the wax melt into my fingers and down my wrists a little bit. It wasn't hot enough to burn me, just warm enough to crust over before it did any damage. *Miss you, Bud.* Why did he text me? With each camera flash, I thought back to the photos Kurio, Roose and I took on the last day of our writing program. Roose had confiscated a bag of dehydrated onion chips from a closet, and Kurio was apologizing for his crappy camera. We took mock-graduation photos in the streets of New Haven. I even held the onion chips as a prop, and Roose posed with his arms crossed right next to me. *Miss you, Bud.*

The shoot ended a half-hour later. I walked out in my normal clothes, and the doorman winked at me as if I were a big star. For all he knew, I guess I could have been. Outside, it was cold, and I looked up to see the sky in Queens and I recoiled; I hated seeing the entire sky in New York. I was used to climbing up the subway stairs and being welcomed by a horizon of tall skyscrapers. Out of my apartment window stood a collection of fat and pointy buildings punching holes in the clouds. I liked to save the image of the entire sky for my trips home to Connecticut. I never realize how long it has been since I've left the city until I sit in my woodsy backyard and watch the sky touch the Earth again. Seeing it now was like cheating myself out of some miraculous experience.

Most New Yorkers have told me that they can't stand Manhattan, that they love their designated borough. The skyscrapers and the bright lights don't do it for them—they prefer their quiet bodegas and polluted sky. For me, I couldn't stand any place other than Manhattan. I had spent a summer in Brooklyn, once, where my father had grown up, and I swear the birds started talking to me.

"You look really thin," a voice said.

I glanced up. I could see my breath and Roose in front of me. "Holy shit," I gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Not stalking you. Promise," he said. "My mom knows Allie. They went to art school together in Rhode Island." There was that name again.

"Who the hell is Allie?" I asked.

"She does props and sets for photographers. My mom does her weird art shit.

They're friends." He shoved his hands in his pockets. His hair was still brown and long, curling around his frostbitten ears. "She did the 90s set you were in."

"That's so weird," I said. "Did you see me?"

"Yeah. I'm actually helping her out on a lot of these shoots. She pays me under the table." He had a fresh scrape running from his upper lip to his cheek. "It's weird running into you like this. You still talking to Kurio?" he asked. He then awkwardly leaned in for a hug.

"I am." I choked from his grip on me. He felt warm against the harsh December air. He smelled like peach candy. "Are you good?"

"You *feel* thin," he said, still hugging me. "Are *you* good?"

"What's going on, Roose?" I asked as I pried myself from his grip. I couldn't help myself. We were standing outside an arts center on a busy street like we were high schoolers again. We were in Queens—a place far from Connecticut and far from my beloved Manhattan—and, therefore, we were in a purgatory that warranted our odd circumstances. Of course, we would run into each other here; of course, I would confront Roose, not through text or a video call but randomly, by chance, on a street full of commuters in a borough I never travel to. He looked like a cartoon character in his purple windbreaker and green sneakers. His face hadn't aged, but his scrape made him look sadder. His shoulders slouched forward like a sunken garden.

"What's going on with what?" he hissed. Then he collected himself. "It's all bullshit. I don't know. Things are weird. I hate college. There's not even a good movie about college students." He pulled out a pack of gum and put a wad of peppermint in his mouth. A red sedan then drove by and the driver rolled down the window to yell asshole! to a driver in a red hatchback. No further comments were made and the two drove off. People continued to walk and the Chase Bank beside us continued to open and shut with visitors.

During this incident, neither of us said anything. I suddenly realized that I didn't have the strength to ask him, outright, why he did what he did. Not addressing it meant it didn't have to be real. Or, it did. Maybe this is what I needed to happen to finally have the courage to start submitting to more literary magazines. Maybe I needed to be plagiarized in order to work up the guts to finally put my work out there before someone else did.

I imagined a scenario in which I sat in a sparkly open back dress on the velvet couch of some talk show. I would tell the dark-haired host how my work was stolen from me when I was only twenty years old, and then the show would cut to a montage of Roose's sad backstory. Faded Polaroid pictures would be shown as a voiceover echoed, "Roose Morrison Butcher grew up on the streets of New Haven. The son of two dirt-poor college students, Butcher was often left to entertain himself. He discovered *Infinite*

Jest and began writing poetry at the age of eleven. When his parents abused him and he started experimenting with drugs, he stole the teenage poems of his best friend. You can read more about it here.” The audience would then be told to buy my latest book or check out my latest movie.

But I didn’t want the sparkly talk show fame and I didn’t want to hurt Roose. I wanted to know why he stole my work when he was a brilliant writer himself, one who was admitted to an intensive writing program as a mere eighth grader. Why did he do it? I wanted an answer that would undo the betrayal and take us back to our high school years. His answer needed to be a promissory note confirming that everything was good, that we were still the same people who once drove down the highway with the sunroof open, cackling about the awkward audience at the last open mic. I missed our pretentious conversations on the success of metaphor in prose or the way Roose used to roll his eyes and smoke cigarettes on New Haven staircases while Kurio lectured him about nicotine and lung damage.

“I’m thirteen,” Roose would tell him. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Well I’m nineteen,” Kurio would say. “And you’re being a little asshole. Put it out.”

“Fuck off,” Roose would say.

“You’re not a greaser,” Kurio would mock back.

“It’s out, Ponytail.” Roose would laugh as he stomped it out.

“Wow. You really are an idiot,” Kurio would say.

But none of these memories or the current circumstances could explain why people do what they do. Childhood traumas or heroin addictions would still not excuse what happened and learning Roose’s answer would not make me or him a better, happier writer. So I left it there.

He finally said, “See ya?” and zipped his coat up to fit him snugger. Just like that, our transaction was done. I didn’t even say goodbye, just nodded and watched his body fade down the avenue and float down the subway stairs. Luckily, MTA had whisked him away by the time I approached the same subway station a few minutes later.

The saliva started pooling in my mouth, and I threw up in the trash can just in time to make the next train. On the ride home, I played with my earbuds—they were broken, anyway—and scolded myself for not getting the answer to why he plagiarized my work. I couldn’t think about it for long or else my stomach wanted to empty.

An email came a few days later from *The Ink*; an article had been posted: “An Afternoon with Kurio Acharya.” It was only a few lines into the interview when Kurio was asked what he thought of modern-day poets.

“We have too many secrets,” he had said. “When will we run out?”

Mushrooms in a Vegetable Fajita

At the end of October of our senior year at Marymount Manhattan College, my friend Maddy and I met for dinner at our favorite taco joint, El Cacto, toasting the end of midterms with an extra round of tequila to cure a broken heart. El Cacto became our favorite restaurant at the beginning of our junior year when we first became friends. On a typical night at El Cacto, Ricky Martin's voice blasts through the speakers during every meal, and customers' laughing can be heard from a block away. Maddy and I spent every holiday, birthday, and heartbreak under the fluorescent green lights and the fake cacti that adorn the bar and backroom where the loudest parties congregate. We fixed our hair in the horizontal mirrors that line the wall of the main dining area and wiggled around in the rickety wooden chairs that felt like they could break at any moment.

"How was dinner with Andrew the other night?" Maddy asked, carefully sipping her cocktail so as not to smudge her red lipstick. She wore red with a sort of confidence I lack even though she guarantees the color goes perfectly with our matching dark brown eyes and hair.

Andrew was my ex-boyfriend that I had recently sparked up an innocuous fling with. He was tall and slim, with the most captivating olive-colored eyes I had ever seen. Andrew's laugh was hearty, just like mine. Our relationship was easy: although we never fought, I found fault in the simplicity. I had broken up with him the previous June, only three months after making things exclusive. He had been my middle school crush and after eight years of not seeing each other, the relationship felt new, exciting, and fun. However, I had grown exponentially since the age of fourteen. I replaced my thick, black-rimmed glasses with contacts and learned how to tame my knotted curls. I grew five more inches vertically and cut my circumference down by a third. As I found a love for exploration and a desire to run, I grew up and out of my home. Whereas I now live in New York City on my own, he is still playing *Escape from Tarkov* on his mom's computer, live streaming his every move.

"It was fine," I said. I had reconnected with Andrew once I moved back to New York to begin senior year. Being back in the city made me miss him more than I had thought I would, so I called him to meet up for dinner. I

agreed to meet him inside of Grand Central Station—Manhattan might as well be a foreign land to him; he views the subway system as a labyrinth and I'm always afraid that he'll knock himself unconscious one day from hitting his head on the grab rails.

"That guy from Hinge called me after Andrew left though," I continued. Hinge was the only dating app both Maddy and I swore by. The algorithm behind each match seemed always to make perfect sense, plus it was a bonus that men had to put their actual height in their descriptions.

Maddy's face perked up and the dimple on her right cheek deepened as she stifled laughter.

"What?" I asked. "What'd I say?" I watched as she curled her mouth into a grin, and she shifted in her chair the way she does when she's hiding something.

"And do we love him, too?" she asked.

I rolled my eyes and held up my thumb and index finger in the universal symbol for a smidgen.

"Just a little bit." I smiled back. "He has a cute dimple and some pretty blue eyes." I pulled out my best Southern accent. "Plus, he's a sweet boy from the South; Mama's gonna be so proud."

We both hunched over laughing. Maddy and I share the same loud cackle that sounds like a barking seal. She had a cute laugh when I first met her but must have adopted my awful guffaw somewhere along the line just like I adopted her nervous babble. That's what happens when two chameleons become best friends.

"Remember last September, right around the time you went on that date with Rob?" she asked. Rob was the first guy I dated back when I moved to New York City in September of 2018. I also met him on Hinge, which claimed Rob and I were each other's perfect match, and quickly found appreciation for his terrible jokes, messy haircut, and beet red face. We shared a magical two months together before I realized that a Connecticut prep donning his daily best in a Patagonia sweater vest wasn't my perfect match—like, at all.

"After that first date," Maddy said, "you texted me saying that you absolutely loved him, too." She scooped guacamole with a tortilla chip and shoved it into her mouth. She coughed, a frantic glimmer lingering in her eyes for a few seconds before she finished her thought, and I wondered if she needed the Heimlich. "And basically, because I didn't know you all that well, I remember being like, wow, I guess I'm losing my new friend to a relationship now." Maddy has lost her fair share of friends to various dating

scenarios. She hates when people merge with their significant others, and she cannot grasp why anyone would want to do that. I feel the same way. Ironic, considering we never spend more than two days apart.

The thought of Rob made me laugh. He managed to snag my heart after our first date concluded with a surprise thunderstorm, a painfully exhausting sprint to my building, and a kiss in the rain. He had told me he lived in Manhattan but revealed shortly after our first date that he lived at his childhood home in New Canaan, Connecticut and commuted into the city each day for work. It didn't matter that he shared a white lie with me before our date; he was sweet and funny, and I wanted to spend whatever time with him that I could. We spent nearly three months meeting for coffee during his lunch breaks, drinking too many gin and tonics at diners, and dancing underneath the arch at Washington Square Park. He made me laugh to the point that I would snort, at which point he would look at me with a kind of amused disgust. Our quick affair came to a grinding halt just before Thanksgiving when we realized we were not as compatible as we had originally thought—or maybe it ended after I asked him if everything was functioning properly after our third failed attempt at making our emotional intimacy physical.

As my first New York City fling, Rob occupied a special place in my heart even twelve months later as I began my final year at Marymount. About a week before the fall semester began, I moved onto my new apartment downtown. Unpacking box after box, I unloaded my heavy book collection into my bookshelf. As I placed my assorted selection of Stephen King novels in alphabetical order, I found a crumpled note wedged in between the pages of King's *Joyland*—a novel in which the main character lands a job as a carny in a haunted amusement park after a disheartening breakup. Rob had scribbled sloppily, "Your nose gets all scrunched up when you think too hard. It's kind of cute. R." I don't know when Rob wrote that note or when he decided to slip it into my favorite book. I do know that was the first time I had thought about him in months and the little crooked R made my heart flutter.

I lifted my drink to my lips as I stifled a smile at the thought of Rob's note. It had been forever since he moved back to Pennsylvania to finish out his bachelor's degree, and I thought about the possibility of him moving back to New York. Just for the fun of it.

"It wasn't until like two new first dates after," Maddy said, "that I realized you saying you love someone is the equivalent of me saying this margarita is the best I've ever tasted." Maddy motioned towards the below-av-

erage drink sitting in front of her. “And being the tequila connoisseur that I am, we both know the irony of that statement.”

I understood what she was saying, but at that point I just wanted Maddy to choke on another chip so we could stop comparing my relationship with love to her relationship with margaritas. We were here to discuss her. I wasn’t on my second margarita to talk about Rob, and I certainly didn’t want to talk about the mess my relationship with Andrew was becoming. I was fine. She needed the drink, and I was not going to let my fellow chameleon drink alone.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “So tell me about the lawyer.”

Maddy had been dating a thirty-year-old lawyer on and off for about a year. When he was not abusing Adderall, he was calling Maddy to meet him at a bar near his apartment in Midtown. The lawyer was a semi-intelligent guy who knew how to flash his smile to get what he wanted, and he had hurt Maddy more times than I could look past. He had a way of maintaining his beard at the length Maddy admired most and always had the pizza guy on speed dial for when she arrived at his apartment. She always left something at his place, and I am still not convinced he’s not hiding something of hers every time she comes over. She isn’t the forgetful type. If we are being honest, I was not, and am still not, a fan of the lawyer. But I will always be on Team Maddy—even if that means the lawyer has to be in our lives for another year.

Whereas she usually spoke with a song in her voice when telling me about her fun affair, Maddy had tears in her eyes as she looked anywhere but in my direction. When the lawyer acts up, he reminds me of Jesse, a retired frat-star who stood over six feet tall with jeans tighter than mine. I dated him in the months after breaking up with Rob. I think that’s why I disliked the lawyer for Maddy so much; I knew the kind of game he was playing, and I recognized the hope of commitment he would offer with zero intention of following up on it. I fell for Jesse and his perfectly gelled hair after our first interaction—I’d call it a date, but it consisted of him in my apartment at two in the morning, and I don’t think anyone can qualify post-midnight activities as a date.

I spent four months or so craving Jesse’s unrequited attention. My hair split at the ends from the excessive heat I applied in order to straighten my curls for the third, fourth, and seventh times. Jesse liked it when my hair reached down to the dimples on my lower back. My legs, splotted with pink dots, were raw from shaving already smooth skin because Jesse liked that I was soft. I never talked about Stephen King or the poem I just could

not write because Jesse had had a long night working at one of the many clubs he promoted. And when I mentioned the old man on the subway who shouted and praised my hour-glass figure, Jesse laughed and said, “Well, can you blame him?” He definitely was not the nicest of guys, but when he cuddled me at four in the morning—he had his moments—I convinced myself that my infatuation with him was more than just hormones. I felt something for him, something more than simple lust. He never told me he had feelings for me, and he never took me on a date, but I felt beautiful every time he smiled at me. And that was enough.

While Maddy collected her thoughts and tried her best to choke back tears, I noticed how evenly drawn her eyeliner was. It was rare that she even attempted to amp up her usual mascara and concealer—another trait we shared—and she looked pretty in the jade light.

After a minute or maybe five, Maddy locked eyes with me; her previously drooping face lifted in a forced smile. “Well,” she said, “I brought up how I don’t want to just see him after midnight anymore. But I did what we said I shouldn’t do and tried to talk to him at his apartment. After I got off work at eight, I ran right over.” Maddy paused as the waiter place her chicken enchilada in front of her, and she thanked him. I looked at my vegetable fajita begrudgingly. I should have ordered the chimichanga.

“Should I assume he definitely didn’t want to talk about the argument last week?” I asked, carefully removing the mushrooms from my plate with Maddy’s fork, disgusted—heaven help us if they touched my own fork.

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

Maddy looked everywhere but in my direction, taking sips of her water and her margarita interchangeably.

“Hello?” I pushed further. “Did he mention the argument at all?”

“Well,” she took another sip of her drink, “he may have been a bit drunk.”

Maddy giggled and cut into her enchilada. When she looks down, her bangs tend to shield her eyes from anyone trying to guess what she’s thinking. But I knew a drunk lawyer meant an affectionate lawyer, and Maddy must have spent the night amongst his six plants named after presidents—including Sam Adams.

The lawyer and Jesse had an incredible number of similarities, not in appearance but in personality. Both worked in challenging careers that required an average of ninety percent commitment—the only type they could handle—and both depended heavily on alcohol and drugs to keep

them afloat. For the most part, these dependencies were the only constants in the lives of Jesse and the lawyer, but when there was room for a little extra fun, Maddy and I would get a call.

The last time I saw Jesse he came to my new apartment a few days after I moved in, smelling of drug store pinot grigio and cheap cologne. He wore a pink tie-dyed shirt that read IBIZA in white block letters and light blue jeans with rips at the knees. We baked chocolate chip cookies and talked about the past six months, what had changed since we last saw each other, what remained the same. We sat on my bed and watched *Criminal Minds*. I took my top off expectantly. He looked at me and said, “No, I just want to talk. I missed you.” I put my top back on. Then, he looked at me, one eyebrow raised, and said, “Well, I can tell you more about that later.” That was the last time I heard from Jesse.

“So,” I tipped my chin toward Maddy, “are we going to see the lawyer again?”

“Oh, yeah, fully. We still haven’t actually had our talk, so it’ll probably happen this week or next.” She poked at the onions that had found their way into her food after she explicitly asked for no onions. “But enough about that; you need to tell me about Andrew. Hinge boys are irrelevant right now.”

Bandaged and bruised from past romances that beat me to a pulp, I will either divulge every heartache to the newest love of my life or pick fights to compensate for my weak emotions. In Andrew’s case, I did both. In the beginning stages of our relationship the previous spring, I took him on numerous adventures to explore Manhattan. Andrew was a suburban boy, born and raised, and watching him navigate New York City always amused me. There were days that I thought he was the sweetest thing that has ever walked the planet; on others, I resented his lack of knowledge about urban life. I fell in love—a real, true love I had never felt with anyone before—with him after our second date when we studied dinosaur fossils at the American Museum of Natural History. I remember the way his eyes lit up when he saw the recreation of the Tyrannosaurus Rex and the way that his mouth curved into a perfect circle. Andrew loved me more than I ever thought someone could. I called him once I returned to the city after a weeklong summer romance with a co-worker turned out to be a waste of time. He took me to lunch and held my hand across a bar table littered with crumpled napkins and crumbs from his chicken fingers. His eyes, darker since the last time I had seen him, stared at me. I think that was the first time that I understood how much he cared for me. There was something

in the way his large hand gently overpowered mine that I could not place. I realized how nice it was to feel loved in the way I had loved so many people before him. The reciprocation of intense emotion was foreign to me, and I had no idea how to properly grasp it.

"Like I said, he's fine," I answered.

"Yeah," Maddy replied with salsa on her chin, "but did you tell him you were done?"

"Not exactly."

Maddy remained silent, hoping I would finish my explanation without having to grasp at straws. After Andrew and I had lunch in early September, I felt at ease knowing he was not as sad about the breakup anymore and I could move on with a clear head. We would stay friends. Or as close to friends as two ex-lovers could be.

"I just kind of told him to stop sending me flowers," I said, finishing my thought.

"At least maybe he'll chill out a bit now," Maddy said with a laugh and an eye roll. "Oh, I meant to ask, have you heard from Payson at all?" I flinched at the sound of Payson's name and felt like she thumped me on the forehead.

At the end of September, I was at a bar on the Lower East Side named Whiskey Town and I met Payson, a Brooklyn bad boy who had life-ruiner written all over him. He possessed the same lanky stature as Andrew with black, curly hair that fell in loose knots at his shoulders. When he smiled, his whole face lifted. Even under his navy baseball cap I could see his eyes twinkle when he talked about music. His nose is big and crooked, just like mine. When he touched me, my body felt electrified.

Payson and I clung to each other in the only dark corner at Whiskey Town and surveyed all of the seemingly underage drunk people yelling for beers at the bar or bumping into one another on the dance floor. On silent comfort, we found each other. Payson's hands were cold from holding his beer and calloused from years of bartending in the city in addition to yard work back home in Phoenix, Arizona. We talked for four and a half hours and kissed each other for an eternity. I felt a connection with him that I had forced myself to feel so many times before, but this time it was there, really there. It smelled like stale beer and tobacco, but it was as beautiful as his shiny brown eyes and the tattoo on the back of his left hand.

In the few hours that I spoke to Payson, I felt like a kid again. He made me laugh so hard that I snorted. When I did, he laughed and kissed my forehead. I can't remember a time when I felt such fire. I wanted him,

desperately and hungrily. I told him it seemed like I had known him forever. He smiled, cradled my face with his cold hands, and said, "I feel like we're gonna know each other for longer than that, little lady." I never saw him after that night.

"No, I haven't," I said, forcing a smile as the waiter cleared away our plates and another brought us complimentary tequila shots. The vigorous smell of bottom-shelf tequila filled my nose and made my stomach turn. We both stared at the small glasses reluctantly.

"But whatever," I said, lifting the shot glass to my lips. "His loss."

Maddy smiled, nodded, and we inhaled the liquor in unison. The tequila scratched my throat and clawed at my insides as we vowed to refuse the shot next time—like always.

We left the restaurant full and dizzy. Maddy hugged me and wobbled toward Union Square as I buttoned up my coat, hoping to walk off the buzz by the time I got back to my apartment. I had a paper to write.

On the walk home, I passed by a man and a woman holding hands and kissing under the yellow box adorned with a glowing red hand at the crosswalk. When I paused to wait for the light to change, I smiled nonchalantly at the woman. She was pretty, her blonde hair cut short right beneath her ears. She wore a big, furry coat splotted with cheetah print and a red beret positioned crookedly on her small head. Her pale face made her look like a princess. On the periphery, I saw her snuggle into the man's chest, as if trying to crawl under his skin to get closer to him. I felt eyes light my hair ablaze. The man, short and wide, unworthy of his beautiful counterpart, looked at me over the woman's head. I noticed a bald spot toward the back of his head aging him terribly. He smiled and winked at me as the red hand turned to the walking man, and the couple disappeared in the dark.

I thought about the blonde woman the rest of my way home. I considered different lives I could put her in and how many men I know that would admire her blonde locks curling beneath her beret. I pictured her in Paris drinking champagne at *The Café Procope* with her animal print coat slipping at her shoulders. I stumbled next to a band of overflowing trash bags as a rat leaped out of the pile and ran across my feet. Sometimes I hate New York.

Shuffling down the final blocks of my journey, weary of adventurous mice, I still could not get the blonde woman out of my head. I wondered how many times she's tried to talk to the man about her favorite song or the painting she just could not squeeze out of her brush. How many times she's said *I love you* in Morse code under blankets of false comfort. I thought

about the man, balding and round, feeling completely unsatisfied with this seemingly perfect woman pressed against his chest. Whether the blonde woman was, in actuality, as beautiful as I was making her out to be or if, despite her obvious beauty and assumed kindness, she only spoke of the color of the sky instead of the way the shapes of clouds made her feel. After all, the man needed a writer, not a painter.

I paused and closed my eyes in an attempt to clear the thoughts of the couple out of my head—and to prevent the dizzy spell I felt creeping up from taking over entirely—but instead, I pictured myself as the woman: my long brown hair tangled in the straps of cherry lingerie as I pined breathlessly for Jesse's unrequited affection. My arms wrapped tightly around his torso as he scanned through various dating applications on his phone, paying no attention to the half-naked girl beside him. When I opened my eyes again, Andrew was there, a blurry mirage with a smile as bright as the yellow tulips in his hands and his arms outstretched, beckoning me to come closer. I wanted, more than anything, to reach out and grab him, but in a whirl, I was the man: small, inferior, indecisive and fearful of everything other than the comfort that partnered with my instinct to flee. I was, at the same time, the man and the woman wrapped up in one twisted figure. I understood the need to hold tight onto something you were terrified to lose and how suffocating it can feel when someone clutches you too hard. In that moment, I don't think my concept of love had ever been more skewed. I shook my head and kept walking, slightly faster now—I desperately needed a glass of water.

Back in my apartment, I sat on my couch taking off my sneakers, trying to recall the majority of my conversation with Maddy. Was she smiling when she left the restaurant? Was her mascara running a little at the sides? Did that mean she allowed a tear to fall while I poked and prodded my fajita? God, why didn't I get the chimichanga?

I looked toward my bookshelf and thought about Rob's note. I wondered if the lawyer had ever slipped a note into Maddy's bag that she has yet to find. I stood up, lost my balance, caught myself on the couch's arm, and walked the few steps over to search for *Joyland* in the sea of Stephen King that occupies an entire shelf. The small gun illustrated on the spine stuck out as one of his only True Crime novels—a theme he dabbled in for a select few years—amongst the remaining mysteries on the shelf. I thumbed through *Joyland's* pages until I found one that felt thinner than the rest. The messy R still gave me the same flutter I felt the first time I saw it. I thought back to my first date with Rob and how easy it was to talk to him as

I deconstructed my BLT, picked out excess bacon, and anxiously divulged my love for King. I saw his face, shiny red and amused after my ten-minute rant about the mistakes in the Hulu adaptation of King's 11/22/63. Rob was the first man I was able to be completely myself around without fear of judgement, even if it lasted only for a brief time.

As I slipped Rob's note back between the pages, I realized that it wasn't the men, specifically, in my relationships that I cherished so dearly, but everything I was able to discover about myself while being with them. Being with Rob made me feel light and giggly. I sang by his side and made him twirl me in the street. I told immature jokes and held his hand on crowded subways. He was my first friend in New York City, and he reminded me how to take each day for what it is and be happy with what you have. When I met Jesse, I felt like anything was possible. He brought out a more mature sense of love into my life. I purchased red lingerie and painted my exotic lips. I went to parties and learned about the ins and outs of the club scene and the difference between love and lust. I cried. A lot.

When Andrew came back into my life, I felt full in places that I had no idea were empty. He reminded me that I didn't have to take everything so seriously and that, although today might be great, tomorrow could be even better if I wanted it to. I discovered a frivolous infatuation that felt eccentric and otherworldly. I beat him in air hockey and whispered secrets under blankets of genuine and luminous comfort. I was a lady to love, and I had never known that until he came around. And regardless of the fact that I never heard from Payson again, I still consider Whiskey Town to be the most spellbinding place on earth because it made me feel electric.

My cat, Dexter, cooed as he rubbed against my leg.

"Hey, little man," I said, caught in a trance. "Did you enjoy your dinner?"

I bent down to stroke Dex's light brown fur and my phone buzzed twice, bringing me back to reality. Maddy's name popped up on the screen.

"Hey." Her voice crackled through the speaker. "Tonight was weird; we never get that emotional."

"I know; I guess we needed to let it out."

I paused, giving the both of us time to collect our thoughts and figure out what exactly it was that we needed to let out so desperately tonight. I heard Maddy shuffle around her room and pull her cat, Penny, onto her lap. She cleared her throat a couple of times and let out a small breath.

"I know you're going to do the right thing with Andrew. Once you're ready and all," she said.

“Thanks. You, too, with the lawyer, babes.”

Our restaurant discussion lingered like fog. Silence can be comforting: two chameleons trying not to get lost in their dating lives. She coughed twice, let out a small burp, and I knew she was smoking her dab pen.

“I think I’m gonna start telling people I love them more,” she said, half-laughing, half-dazed. “Or maybe I’ll give onions another try.”

(Something Like) an Operation

“You have a talent for causing things pain. Son, be a dentist!”

—Howard Ashman, *Little Shop of Horrors*

The time was 11:55 AM. In my mother’s dark blue SUV, outside of the Clara Maass Medical Center which housed the Belleville Dentist Office, I stared down at my phone and did not think to worry about the inevitable. My mother sat in the driver’s seat, tapping her fingers against the wheel. We were parked in front of the tan, angular building, staring at it together.

“It’ll be quick,” she said, smiling. I believed her because I didn’t have another frame of reference. I trusted my mother, and this appointment was entirely her decision.

In the summer of 2016, Dr. Llamera, my dentist, found two impacted wisdom teeth on my bottom jaw. Me, a freshly graduated teenager with my face buried in my phone, expected, and secretly wished for, an easy operation at a professional surgical clinic. I had never gone under anesthesia, never really understood all the pretty prose about surgeries I’d read, and somewhere, deep down, I was curious to experience the forceful rest and groggy awakening that surgery provided. I was even kind of excited for the pain that came after the numbness and the pain meds wore off as I had never truly felt anything worse than a slap to the face or the burning ache of arthritis I’ve suffered from since my freshman year of high school. Things I had never truly considered before suffocating sleep, fine knife cuts, sutures tightened and snipped free. I wished to experience and understand.

When Dr. Llamera, a middle-aged Filipino-Japanese man with a thick head of black hair, recommended I simply come in on my day off from work and get the two teeth out via Novocain-numbed-just-barely-a-surgery surgery, I was somewhat put off. My mother, ever the protective skeptic, asked if that was safe.

A nurse assured her: “Of course. It will be quick and painless.” And we, a family visible on the wall of Christmas cards the office seemed to pride itself in receiving, believed them.

In the car, I pulled my knees to my chest, locked my phone, and

nodded. Then we both pushed open our doors and headed up the concrete stairs and into the office.

The time was 12:06 PM when I was brought down the white hall of the dentist's office and into a door marked by four plastic, colored bars which indicated occupancy. The room I had sat in since childhood for cleanings and fillings remained unchanged as I took a seat in the center of every appliance and sink and the television blaring daytime talk shows. The clinical walls, the white and blue tile floor, even the old dentist chair beneath me which held the shape of everybody in it before me seemed ageless, untouched by the passing of time. A large lamp shined down on me, wider than my head, brighter than the sun.

A dentist I've known my entire life leaned over me with a pair of pliers in hand and said, "Tell me if it hurts." My mouth was too numb to register the brush of latex against my teeth. I lay there, tiny mouth forced open by a cheek retractor, my fingers in a death grip on my mother's wrist, and I remember wondering how I would tell him if it hurt. How would I even be able to buck up against him with the nurse's arm across my chest?

A mouth full of fingers really knows how to keep you from screaming. Perhaps Dr. Llamera was aware of that and was merely required to say such a stupid thing to calm my nerves. Maybe he was playing a cruel joke on me. I considered it all there, on the pale blue chair with my chin tipped up and my eyes screwed shut, if pain existed when it was not felt thanks to the aid of Novocain.

The tapping of metal against bone rattled my skull. I heard it more than I felt it, like he was dropping coins down onto the crowns of my teeth. My eyes were shut tight enough to see streaks of illusionary light behind my eyelids, and I squeezed my mother hard enough to earn a pinch on the back of my hand.

After poking around with his pliers, Dr. Llamera straightened his back and let his hand glide over his displayed tools to our right. Silvery instruments of childhood torture glittered under the surgical lamp, all wrapped in plastic. Each time Dr. Llamera needed another tool, I had to wait and listen to their extraction.

My one free hand pulled at the torn, leathery blue seat beneath me, and the nurse, keeping an eye and an arm on me, glanced down at the faint squeak. Her dark skin refracted like a diamond under the stark light, giving her a fantastic lazuli undertone. She was pretty enough to be the Tooth Fairy.

"We will have to cut," Dr. Llamera said, either to me or the nurse or my mother. I'm sure we were all equally unsure. He turned, slow as a

sixteen-wheeler, and assessed his cutting options. The worst part of being awake for surgery might be waiting in between each act. With each decision my dentist made I was forced to lie in numb silence as he fiddled around with his table of tools, picking the right one. Even the nurse above me might have been impatient, what with her eyes rolling whenever Dr. Llamera turned his back. Eventually, he lifted a scalpel with intent, and I witnessed the beauty of the curved blade, the thin handle, and my stomach swooped as if the chair beneath had dropped. My rubber face was reflected in the clean metal of the scalpel's blade, and I forced myself back behind my eyelids just in time for his fingers to creep back into my mouth.

The smell of latex and dry skin filled my nose and I felt, no, heard, with impressive insight, the slicing of my gums. It was the slow rip of a page from a notebook so as not to disturb the class, the split second of wind whistling in your ear when you open a window. The slicing of my gums was the ringing after an explosion in all those war movies, the fuzz you feel in your legs when you stand up after sitting on them for too long. Somehow I was millions of miles away and far too present all at once, stuck in a horror movie carnival mirror maze. I heard my mother distantly complain about the circulation in her hand being cut off, and I loosened my vice grip on her. At that same moment, I realized the slicing was done, and my mouth was too wet, too full, too much. Something inside me tried to steady my radiator heart by forcing me to think it was just saliva, but how would spit ever taste so purely of pocket change? I opened my eyes and watched the swimming lights fade into the overhead lamp.

"Very good, Frankie. You didn't even budge," the nurse said. I gurgled a thank you. Dr. Llamera had his back to me and was going through his tools again. I imagined the sight of myself on that chair. Did I look like a Lynchian corpse, mouth spread open for onlookers to seek some deeper meaning to my death? I thought of the show *Twin Peaks* and Laura Palmer's blue skin, blue lips, gently shut eyes. In *Twin Peaks*, an entire town in Washington state is rocked by the mysterious death of Laura Palmer, and her haunting, plastic-wrapped visage felt so familiar that I swore I could be her. I thought of her hands as if they were my mouth, being tilted back and forth by a forensic scientist. His eyes would be hidden behind his safety goggles, his mouth covered by a blue, blood-stained mask, and he would see me not as a human being but another cog in the wheel, another piece of the puzzle. Would the cutting of my gums reveal a secret letter as they found beneath her nail bed? I'm fine with being cut open and looked at; just don't go shoving tweezers into my bits looking for clues.

"Your brother would've bitten my fingers off by now, you know," Dr.

Llamera said with a chuckle as he turned back around, pliers back in his hand. I imagined my little brother Johnnie arching his back against the nurse, teeth snapping like a wild animal. It wouldn't be the first time he'd bite some sort of medical professional. I choked out a laugh and my mother giggled.

"He'll be pulling on your teeth now, Frankie," the nurse said, "let us know if you're in any pain." I managed a nod and let my tongue tuck itself down against my bottom teeth as Dr. Llamera reached back into the bowels of my mouth. Again, I shut my eyes tight and let myself grasp at and fiddle with the self-devised horrors. I was entirely enamored of the image of my body and surgery. Even now, medical operations and pain are not interests of mine per se, but they cross my mind more often than the average person probably. Being methodically torn apart became my favorite daydream. What I experienced in that sterile room was not surgery; it was much too messy, too improvised—but it was something nearly surgical in practice. To say it wasn't a fulfilling experience would be untrue as well; I was and am completely fulfilled by my now lack of wisdom teeth and the pain that was given to me that day and week after. To me and the apathetic teenage Frankie of 2016, experiencing pain was the closest thing to feeling I could manage.

Dr. Llamera pulled on my gums and my head snapped forward. *Ow*, I thought and gurgled. My imagining turned to reality quite quickly. The nurse pulled me back down again and I squeezed my mother again, leaving crescent marks in the thin skin on the back of her hand. Dr. Llamera twisted his wrist. I felt the cold, slippery metal of the forceps against my cheek but I couldn't feel what it was grabbing, and then I heard a deep crack in the back of my throat.

The taste of my own shattered tooth, though dulled considerably by my useless tongue, permeated the chill of the numbing agent. I was tasting my own dentine, the flavor of it like dimes and gore and candy cigarettes. The clinical air, just as clean as the counters to my right and the sink to my left, was shot through with the coppery reek of blood, malt, and baking soda. I was shaken and intrigued.

My mother made a sickened noise behind my head, "You got it?" she asked. Peering back, I saw her dilated pupils swim towards the only door in the

room. Something heavy dripped down my chin and landed on my covered chest. I couldn't help but think it was my tongue, cut free from the back of my throat.

"Got it. I'll do the next one, too," Dr. Llamera said. He pulled his hands

back and shook out his wrists, and I saw the gore smeared on his gloves, on his tools. He looked like Dr. Frankenstein hidden behind a surgical mask and a hair net and a pair of thick glasses, all smudged by the faintest mist of red. He loomed over me, the monster, ready to finish the job.

My tooth was scraped out of my mouth with a gloved finger and I started at the sound of it clattering against the metal table.

My mother tapped my wrist and said with a terse smile, "Is it okay if I go wait in the other room?" She looked nearly translucent, shocked white, and even if I was annoyed at the idea of writhing underneath this nurse and dentist alone, I wasn't some cruel overlord. I let go of her wrist and waved her off. She'd be handling the brunt of my recovery later anyway. I was still naïve to the prospect that maybe my mother didn't have enough strength left to guide me through the experiences we didn't truly share. She left the room, the white door closed behind her as loud as a pin drop, and Dr. Llamera leaned back in to start wrenching out my remaining tooth.

The agony was nonexistent or merely dampened as he pulled and squeezed and yanked at the dental deformity beneath my gums. I kept my eyes shut, opening them only to ensure that I was not suddenly in the clutches of some torturer or monster and, in those glimpses, I witnessed blood staining my bib, thick specks of white wetness on my glasses, and my burly and completely unwavering dentist.

Another snap, crackle, pop, and the tooth shattered. Dr. Llamera jerked back and revealed the perfectly broken shard clasped in the bloody maw of the forceps.

"Very, very good, Frankie!" the nurse said, easing off my chest. "I thought you fell asleep for a moment." Her laugh burned in my ears, replayed as my body tried to come to terms with the end of this operation. Dr. Llamera was back in my mouth before I could even groan out another thank you. His arm moved in a see-saw motion and by the time I realized he was sewing my gums back together he was gone, out of my mouth, out of his gloves and mask, and leaving the room with a tray sprinkled with my teeth crumbs. The nurse leaned over, removed the cheek retractor, and stuffed my mouth with cotton balls. My face was a wet clay sculpture, hanging loose and heavy now that the support beams had been removed.

"Well, you're all set. I'll go get your mom and your prescriptions. Did you have any medicinal allergies?" she asked.

"Penicillin," I tried to say, though my tongue made it sound like Pen-ithilin. The nurse laughed again and left the room, left me alone. I sat up and ripped the dental bib from my neck, hanging it over the back of the chair. The clock above the door ticked monotonously. The time was 12:34

PM. I pressed a hand to my cheek and felt skin against a buzzing void where skin should be. It was wonderful, somehow. I felt cut open and raw and blissfully at peace. I vividly remember thinking, *If I could be awake for any surgery I had, I would be. I want to be awake.* In fact, years after that day and that week of dizzy spells and choking on my own blood, I still want to be awake. I want to experience it all, not just the dark and the light, but the gray in between.

When my mother entered the room with her ageless face, her fluffy brown hair, and the ever-present crease between her eyebrows, she said, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” I said, ever truthful and, for once, actually feeling something.

Purring in a Paper Gown

I am lying on a gurney in the back of an ambulance on the way to a psychiatric hospital. It stinks like the middle school nurse's office. Think gauze and thermometers. My body has been strapped down because I'm a danger to myself, at least according to the doctors in the emergency room in Manhattan that we just left. Through the back-door window, I can see the sky. Blue as ash. The cars clogging the FDR are orange and red and beautiful. The East River screams. We weave in and out of traffic. The paramedic has black, bouncy curls and white clothing. She could be anybody. She refuses to play Beyonce. Lana Del Rey comes on instead, her sultry voice guiding us to Westchester. A woman throws her drink out of her car window at high speed. The buildings along the river look like knives. Clouds pucker, a chorus of crying children. I watch it all with my eyes.

Two weeks before this, I began to get a familiar, hollow feeling in my stomach. A candle was left on inside me. I told anyone who would listen that my DNA was being rewritten at that very moment. I skipped classes and kissed strange mouths with as much love as I could muster. I was a goddess, suddenly. Beautiful and shedding everywhere. Nobody could get away from me. I didn't sleep for more than an hour at a time. I hid from paparazzi that I was sure were there. How could they not be? When I began taking random pills, my friend brought me to the ER.

We finally stop. I hear the gravel beneath the tires as the lights inside the ambulance go off. The paramedic opens the door and hauls me out onto the ground. The hospital campus is bricked and decorated with small dead shrubs. We are let into the evaluation center by someone invisible. The paramedic wheels me down a plush and presidential hallway obviously meant to impress concerned parents. All the rooms are empty as skulls.

The paramedic smiles at me with her teeth as we go through another pair of doors that lead into another hallway. This hallway is orange and lined with ugly plastic chairs. The doorways are lousy with doctors. Several girls wearing white gowns sit numbly alongside their parents. They all turn to look at me. I am so powerful. I command spaces. I'm that bitch on the gurney. I could bite somebody's face off. Could bite yours. The paramedic starts to undo the straps around me. I hurry to get out of them. They burn.

"Shh, calm down," she says, gently helping me off the gurney.

My psych ward socks are showing. Within the first few seconds of being in the ER, a nurse exchanged my cat-hair-covered clothing for blue paper scrubs, so I could be heard everywhere I go. Along with my clothing, they confiscated my backpack and my phone and gave me a gaudy hospital bag to put a book and my journal in.

I take a seat on one of the ugly chairs and watch the paramedic leave. I watch the other girls and bite my nails. A girl paces up and down the hall with a big bruise around her eye. A black obscure band t-shirt hangs off her frame. Her hair is short and spiky, as if cut in a rush. She smiles at me and I look at the clock. It is five in the afternoon.

I haven't eaten all day, haven't slept in three. But I am a fluorescent goddess, a charming man. Cool as a syringe. I am the angel on top of the tree. I can give you anything you want.

From inside one of the rooms, a mental health worker comes towards me with hair as red as lobster. "My name is Angela. We're gonna go upstairs to the unit now, okay?" she says, motioning at my bag.

I stand up and she leads me to the elevator at the end of the hallway. She pushes the third-floor button with her knuckle and within moments the doors open upon a hallway. It smells of hand sanitizer and burnt hair. I trail behind Angela, eyeing everything.

"This is six south, our women's mood disorder unit," Angela explains nonchalantly.

A girl sits between her parents, talking about hypersexuality. Another girl walks to the edge of her room and then goes back in, never fully committing. Most of the doors are closed. The floor shines with polish. Everything is so bright. The nurses' station is at the end of the hallway, a glass box full of people in dark red clothing. They ricochet off one another like goldfish. Boxes and mountains of paperwork imitate castles and bridges. In the cafeteria, given the circle of foldable chairs and quiet conversation, I assume group therapy is happening. I want to linger, to eat the words like an alley cat could. But Angela keeps moving ahead and eventually stops in front of a door at the end of the hallway.

"This is where you'll be staying. You have two other roommates," she says, leading me inside.

It is a clean enough space: a bed near the flimsy, foam bathroom door; a bed against the wall; and another bed beneath three giant windows overlooking the grounds of the hospital. A lawn of untouched silk. I am assigned to the bed near the wall, which is made up neatly. My roommate wears a pink sweatshirt. She doesn't speak to me, just walks out of the room when we come in. I place my bag down at the foot of my bed.

"All set?" Angela asks, a smile deep in her face.

I nod, unsure of what else to say.

"Dinner is in an hour, okay?" she says, departing from the room.

I venture out into the hallway. There is a water fountain with plastic cups stacked beside it. Every few feet, a framed painting of either a house or a dog hang idly. No mention of illness or urgency. To the right of the nurses' station is a big brown room containing a row of beige sofas, a television, two circular tables with black chairs scattered messily around them, two iPad stations, and a piano, seemingly thrown in as an afterthought. This kind of space is typically dubbed the living room of the unit. I try to go in, but somebody taps on the glass of the nurses' station and gives me a head shake. There are six green armchairs lined up in the hallway. I flop down into the one closest to me, crossing and uncrossing my legs. Group therapy lets out and the hallway fills with the other patients. A swarm of medicated locusts.

Half an hour later, the cafeteria door opens again, and everybody rushes to line up. I stand behind a woman wearing silver hoops in her ears. How did she manage that? I'm almost impressed. The cafeteria consists of several circular tables, a table offering caffeine-free ginger ale and cranberry juice, and a window that is now dark. Everybody is waiting to pick up a tray from the kitchen where a man wearing a black apron is handing them out. This costume seems a bit dramatic considering we're being served microwavable portions. I get my tray and sit with three other girls who do not try to talk to me.

Dinner is inedible and brown. I chain-drink ginger ale and ice. Everybody else eats quietly, nibbling on meat slush and cookies. I throw my food away and head into the living room. *Say Yes to the Dress* is playing on the television. I laugh at the commercials. I don't feel the time passing until Angela pokes her head into the room.

"Jasmine, wrap-up group is happening soon, okay?" she says.

Wrap-up group is the final act of the day; we gather in a circle and discuss our goals for that day. Did we meet them? And, if not, why not?

I made no goals that day, so I leave the couch and go to my bathroom. Every fifteen minutes, a nurse checks on everybody to make sure we are safe from ourselves. I forget about this. The bathroom has a sink with a button and blue light bulbs. The mirror is dirty with fingertip tattoos. I look at myself and my paper clothes. Officially too much to handle. They had to hand me over to the white coats. I pretend to laugh and stretch my pink mouth with my fingers like an early morning cartoon. My teeth are bruised from a decade of illness, yellow from coffee and cigarettes. I love them because they tell the truth. There is a bloodhound in my head, foaming at

the mouth. I want to go home, I decide with my mirror self. Can't stop my head. Can't stay good. They're trying to take my talent. I am talented. I look around for something to open the bathroom window with. A bar of soap and a toothbrush won't do, so I try to open the window with my hands until they hurt. I will jump from the third floor, from the roof. I am lucid enough.

A nurse walks towards the bathroom. She opens the flimsy door and I am caught white-handed. The nurse has eyes the color of marble. She takes my hand and walks me to the nurses' station. She explains the situation to another nurse, who looks at me.

"Have you taken your night meds, Jasmine?" the second nurse asks.

"You're lying about me. I'm not suicidal," I insist.

The first nurse looks white. "We're a few floors up. I saw you trying to open the window with the intention of jumping out."

I make an animal noise and try to get away from her. She lets go of my hand.

"Do not move," she says, pointing her finger at me.

She thinks she's scary. I laugh loudly. A girl looks at me. I'm a celebrity. I better get used to it. I wipe my nose as if it's bleeding, but it hasn't ever.

That night, I am put on status which means somebody has to watch me every second of every minute. They feed me Lithium and Seroquel until I drool. I'm moved from my original three-person bedroom to my own room down the hallway. I fall asleep with a woman sitting at the edge of my bed.

For the next couple of days, I am kept subdued and strange beneath the blanket of Seroquel, unable to hold a conversation or do much outside of look around. When I meet with my treatment team, which consists of a social worker and a psychiatrist, the third morning, I tell them I refuse to take it any more pills.

"You have to behave, then. We don't want you putting yourself at risk," my psychiatrist says, an accent I can't identify lifting up her syllables.

That night, I fall asleep feeling sober on just Lithium.

In the morning, I wake up feeling much more alert when a nurse named Lori comes in to check my vitals. She seems to be the favorite among the other patients.

"Is that good?" I ask her when the blood pressure machine beeps. She glances at the screen and nods, her mouth pulled down.

"It's normal," she says, moving past Camille, the woman on status with me.

I sink back down into my bed, glancing out the window. It is raining today. The rain comes down. Buckets get emptied. Like somebody is being

careless. I hear my name being called loudly and jump. Camille meets my eyes.

“What?” she asks, touching one hand with the other.

“I heard somebody say my name,” I mumble, getting up to use the bathroom.

She follows me. My hair is washed from last night when another nurse watched me shower for twenty minutes. At least I have that. I stay in the mirror for a few moments.

“What are you feeling, Jas?” Camille asks, meeting my eyes in the glass. I feel like I don’t exist. Like somebody has filled my body with static. Somebody who knows too much. I shrug.

“Bad,” I say, the truth a bullet. “Agitated maybe. My thoughts are racing.”

“Wanna get breakfast?” she asks, her earrings dancing. I think about pulling them out but nod instead.

It is as dark as a secret in the hallway. Which bothers me. I make up a poem in my head as I sort through the plastic scrambled eggs and randomly placed pound cake. Above me is a painting of a dog lying outside of a battered house, boards across the windows and door. Dead grass and a bucket thrown about. I don’t know what is therapeutic about that.

Everybody is sleepy at goals group. Gentry, the group facilitator, annoys me. I imagine her going home at night to her friends, gossiping about us. Her curtain of blonde, clean hair goes back and forth as she asks us to go around and state our goal for the day. Gabby mutters her goal with the cadence of a child in trouble.

“I want to draw something and not tear it up,” she says, the bags beneath her eyes like swings.

I play with a plastic cup, throwing it from hand to hand like a football. I am my own father. Marie begins her usual rant about how bipolar disorder was created by Pepsi. As ridiculous as it is, I have to leave. My goal is the ungoal. The never want. Not from you. Camille follows me down the hall, crossing her arms.

“Irritability is a symptom of mania, Jas,” she says, her eyes on the floor. “You just gotta push through it, right?”

I nod as though it is that easy and go into the living room to sit down on the floor. Camille gets a chair for herself. We watch *Teen Mom* until I can feel my blood again.

That night, the moon is right outside my window. My silver dollar. My sliver of pearl. I want to dream of dragonflies. I think of my aunt instead.

Savior of shelter dogs and one-eyed cats. I stayed with her the night before I got here. Clad in a cheetah print fur coat and Hollywood red lipstick, she rolled a blunt for me as we sat in her back yard.

"This will help whatever you're feeling," she said, pressing her thumb on her lighter.

"You're such a genius," I said, watching her inhale hungrily. "Just like me."

She told me how I need to get a boyfriend and all my problems will go away. I think I laughed. When I told her I took a handful of Uncle Harry's pills on impulse a few minutes earlier, she almost laughed. Told me I'd be fine. A few pills wouldn't make a dent. I felt like a saint. No, really. I left her house in the early morning, sleepless and covered in cat hair. But I was holy. And now who's sick?

I've been in the hospital for a little less than a week.

It is Sunday and I am bleary. Thinking about Easter candy again. Tender chocolate wrapped in pastel blue foil. Cookies with Jesus on them. To be so sweet. My teeth ache for the rot. The windows let gentle light in. I look down the hall, lazily. A woman with black boots comes towards me and stops. There is a grand pause.

"You okay?" she asks. I look up at her.

The woman with black boots is my mother. I stand up instantly, exclaiming. This is the woman that raised me. She gave birth to me. I was in there. She hit me when I was thirteen and she'd do it again. We hug like magnets.

She has not brought me candy but soda which is better. My mouth sips the cola, washes my teeth down to my heart. We do not speak for a long time. Dead cells float all around us.

"I really wasn't expecting you" I say.

We talked on the phone a couple of days ago, but I had to hang up because she kept asking why I felt this way, as if it was a choice I made. Maybe she's here because she feels guilty for not knowing something was wrong when I called her three weeks ago, speaking quickly of all my new plans. I had to hurt to be believed, to walk the line between amusing story and eleven o'clock news report. Otherwise, my illness doesn't exist to her.

The next day, the same thing happens. I don't expect anything, but my mom comes and surprises me anyway. Brings a poetry book I can't yet read and a burger I don't finish.

Flipping through my journal, scrawled and punched with racing thoughts, she says, "I thought you had schizophrenia at first."

I drink the coffee she has brought me, which technically shouldn't be

allowed, considering caffeine can worsen mania or, if nothing else, decrease my Lithium levels. She wouldn't know any of that. And I'm not saying anything.

I wonder if she'd rather it be schizophrenia. You can explain that without having to. Everybody thinks they know what it means. You go crazy; you can't be touched. But what is bipolar disorder? You steal from a pharmacy because you're God, and then you're okay for October. You can say hello sometimes. I'm sorry I couldn't be sick in an easier way. You deserve better. This must be so hard on you.

When my mother leaves, I stay.

The next day we're all together, listening to music. Lorde's teenage siren rings throughout the living room. As a teenager, she was the awkward forever, summer goddess I prayed to. Diary entries with blood on them. Posters of her ocean hair.

Elena, the only other patient on status, is dancing in her seat. She loves this song, too. Anything to get her out of here. Us, I mean. I'm getting out. The wood of the living room looks more like plastic every day. It seems the longer I stay, the more the ward changes. Gabby got off status years ago. Marie still only has one sweater. It is an orange afternoon.

At the edge of my second weekend on the unit, I realize I am able to think much easier. My thoughts have slowed down into streams I can understand. My hands don't shake all the time. I have more of an appetite which is unfortunate, considering the trays of slop. I'm able to hold longer conversations, to understand sarcasm. I'm getting better—even after I am forced to take an Ativan because I screamed at the nurse who wouldn't let me go outside with the other patients. It could have been worse.

The weekend passes without celebration. The doctors have the weekends off so there isn't anything to look forward to except eating snacks while watching TV.

Steve Harvey is the mascot of our ward. He makes us feel real. Every plush blue evening, as we wait for our medication to kick in, we gather in the living room and watch *Family Feud*. He is stupid and cynical, but nobody ever changes it. We love our man. The trees outside whip around in the rain. iPad screens glow in the dark. The clock could have stopped a decade ago. Our machinery is familiar. We've known each other better than most people in our lives. We bond over secrets.

The following Monday, I am finally taken off status. Free to shit in peace.

Two days later, my psychiatrist says I am being discharged in a few hours.

It has been three weeks since I arrived on the unit, crazed and unreliable. The day I leave, the ward is quiet. Breakfast is the same meal I had the first day I got here. I tell everybody this, but nobody cares. It doesn't matter because they are staying here. I don't care either. I gloat and glow, gather my bags and put on my shoes quickly.

My dad comes to pick me up and asks the woman leading me downstairs what he should do if I start to feel manic again. He doesn't even know what that means. She preaches medication and therapy. But I am itching for sky. I don't hear her. When we can finally leave, I dig for my phone. I've forgotten what it looks like. Where did I get that sticker from?

Then finally, the sun bleaches my skin. I want everything.

The first thing I do in the real world is go to the pharmacy. I get out of the car and stumble across the street. It has been so long since I have walked farther than the end of the hallway. I am a baby again, it seems. I pick up my medication and my hands shake like paper in the wind. I want so much but decide on chocolate pretzels and then I go back out into the sun.

My second night home, I get off at 42nd Street to throw my confetti all across Times Square. Let's celebrate freedom. I watch the lights dazzle on and off: red, green, purple. Animated bruises. They look as if they have been crushed in my palm. A child drew them with crayon. The smell of everything you could ever want. The unwanting of it all. I finish my pack of cigarettes and focus on the warmth inside me. All that blood swimming and swimming. I'm a pool of gross and I want to touch it.

Down the avenue, the sun starts to blush again.

The Girl in the Green Sweatshirt

“No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky.”

—E. B. White

It's been almost a year since I met my fairy godmother on the standby line at the New York Film Festival, right next to Alice Tully Hall. It was the end of September, practically October, and I was trying my luck at scoring a ticket to the premiere of *The Favourite*—you know, the Yorgos Lanthimos period piece that helped Olivia Colman beat Glenn Close for best actress, leading to one of the funniest Oscar acceptance speeches of all time?

It seemed as though there were a hundred people in front of me. It was 9:25, and the movie was set to play at 9:30. I'd been waiting since 7:00, and the line was barely moving. The honking taxi cabs nearby and dropping temperature seemed to put everyone in a dour mood. And to add to the misery of the situation, I was feeling terribly self-conscious. I've been to a few film festivals since September of last year, and now know the proper film festival dress code. You should be wearing your Sunday best or, if you're at the New York Film Festival, *at least* a cocktail dress. Because I figured attending NYFF would basically be like walking into a movie theater, I was wearing chunky black sweatpants, sneakers, a green beret, and a bloated green sweatshirt which bore the insignia of Maine's Acadia National Park.

“Discounted tickets to Hamilton! Get'cha discounted tickets to Hamilton right here, right now!” shouted a wifebeater-clad senior man who smelled like he hadn't showered in weeks. He walked up and down the line, holding a cardboard sign that read, Front Row Seats to All Your Favorite Shows.

“Please go away, sir,” groaned the middle-aged man in front of me. Everyone in line shifted right, closer to the wall of Alice Tully, so he could get the message that no one was interested. I checked my phone screen: three more minutes till show time. There was no way I'd make it. I came to see Emma Stone and Rachel Weisz passive-aggressively duke it out in 1700s England, and instead I was listening to a possibly homeless carnival barker trying to sell me a ticket to something I'd seen two years ago. Eventually, the man decided to sell his tickets elsewhere, and as soon as he was gone, a

platinum blonde woman clad in a pinstripe blazer and a sultry black dress took his place.

"Is anyone here alone?" she asked in a graceful English accent.

This woman must have been in her mid-thirties. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun with tiny strands hanging loose around her ears, and her mermaid lips were coated in a tomato red color. For some reason, her pale, dewy face seemed frantic. In her right hand, I noticed an envelope with the NYFF logo. Why she was appealing to the masses on this line, I had no idea. But it was easy to infer that whoever this woman was, she had an appearance and posture that denoted great wealth.

Five seconds passed. Maybe it was because of the sour taste the wacky man before her had left, but everyone on-line was silent. I couldn't help but stare.

Fuck it. It was a Friday. What else did I have to lose?

"I'm alone," I squeaked, raising my hand like the innocent college student I was. The people ahead glanced back to see me shivering in anxiety, or from the autumn chill, or possibly both. Then the woman identified me, and her fish lips curled high.

"Oh, fantastic! Here you go."

She handed over the little white ticket which, at the moment, felt like gold in my hands.

"Thanks! Um . . . do I have to pay you back for this? This is my first film festival. I don't really know how this works."

She gave a hardy laugh and waved her hand. "Oh no, no! No worries. This is my good karma for the day. Follow me." I glanced back at the line I was leaving behind, and all its jealous faces. So long, cinephile suckers! I'd be watching this Oscar bait-y film after all. And possibly in a good seat.

Following the woman in the crowd ahead, I realized people parted for her like she was Moses in the middle of the Red Sea. When she approached the ticket takers at a table ahead, they gave her full, pearly-white smiles.

"Two tickets to *The Favourite*," she said, motioning back at me in my frumpy attire while everyone next to us wore tuxedos and full-length gowns.

"Of course!" replied the young volunteer girl at the table, "just go through the double doors there."

I trailed behind my new platinum blonde friend as we entered the esteemed theater. The inside of Alice Tully Hall is a diet version of the David Geffen Concert Hall across the street. It's grand, boxed in by polished wooden beams and floors, and one of those places where you can see every little thing happening all at once. Our seats were towards the middle-back, right in the heart of the excitement. In the balconies above,

tuxedo-clad men mingled and shook hands with each other in a circle jerk of networking. An usher handed me a glossy program with the film's poster on the front, and I flipped through it while the woman settled into the seat on my right. I could feel her eyes look me up and down—as though she were analyzing where on earth I had come from.

"This is your first film festival, eh?" she asked, pinkie finger pressed to her lip.

"Yup. I wasn't expecting it to be so extravagant!"

"Oh, of course. The New York Film Festival is one of the most prestigious in the world. You don't hear about it as much as Cannes or Venice, but it's just as classy."

A young Asian man wearing a snazzy red bow tie approached us. "Hey, Alexis! How are you?" he chirped to my new friend. The man stood in the middle of our aisle with awe, blocking the next person from scooting through.

"Oh hey! Doing fantastic." She looked in my direction then turned away, as though she expected me to be someone else. There was a weird flash of sadness in her blue eyes. The man nodded at her, then me, then went on his merry way.

Before I could get the question out of my mouth, she posed it to me first. "So, what do you do? Do you live in New York City? Do you work in film?"

I closed my program and placed it in my lap. "Actually, I'm a college student. I go to Marymount Manhattan." Her face remained blank. Clearly, she'd never heard of it.

"I am studying film, though. I'm also an actress."

"Oh. How nice!" She seemed intrigued, or at least as intrigued as one can be when meeting a stranger for the first time. Before I could return the question and ask what role she played in the film industry, a brunette woman wearing a green silk gown stopped in front of us.

"Hi, Alexis! Are you going to the after party tonight?"

Alexis quickly shook her head. "No, I can't. Have to go home right after this." And once again, the woman nodded, then went on her merry way.

There were a few beats of silence between us. Now I was bursting to know who the woman beside me was, considering she had been invited to the after party of this prestigious film premiere. But I kept my lips shut tight, since she looked a little unnerved. Whatever reason she had for declining her invitation, it was not a good one.

I shifted forward in my seat. "So, can I ask a weird question?"

Alexis, who was reading a bit of her program, lifted her chin to look at me. "Go ahead."

“Why were you giving away an extra ticket?”

She crossed her legs and gazed at the floor. She said, “My husband wasn’t able to attend tonight,” but deep down, I knew she was really saying, *my grump of a husband didn’t want to drag his ass over here, and now I’m stuck seeing this movie all by myself.*

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be!” she perked up, “I’m just happy I was able to fill the empty seat. Didn’t want to waste a good ticket.”

The lights dimmed. A wave of applause roared through the house, and the Executive Director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center, Lesli Klainberg, gave a heartwarming speech at the podium on the stage below the screen. When she finished, Yorgos Lanthimos, Emma Stone, Olivia Colman, Sandy Powell, and a few other crew members filled the stage and took some bows. Yorgos Lanthimos gave a brief introduction, and then the film began.

At first, it seemed as though Alexis and I were the only two giggling at the movie’s jokes, but once everyone warmed up, the theater was a non-stop laughter fest. Periodically, Alexis would clear her throat in such a way that made me believe she was trying to hold something in, like tears or vomit. While everyone sat stone still, Alexis had no qualms with shifting in her chair however many times she pleased. Sometimes she sat so low in her seat, I wondered if she was going to stick her feet up onto the occupied chair in front of us. But the whole time, her index finger was draped across her lower lip, and her thumb rested just below the point of her chin. It was like she was caught between wanting to leave and wanting to analyze every ounce of the film. Maybe she saw herself in it somewhere.

Two hours and a minute later, the cast and crew of *The Favourite* appeared on one of the overhead balconies and received a tremendous amount of applause from the audience below.

When the credits rolled and all the lights flicked back on, Alexis swiftly turned to me. “I have to go home and put the kids to bed. There is an envelope with two tickets to the after party at the Tavern on the Green in my pocket. Do you want it?”

My jaw dropped. Was this actually happening? First she gave me a free ticket to the United States premiere of a highly anticipated film that must have cost her a good hundred dollars, and now she was giving me two priceless invitations to an event where only elite movie executives and stars were allowed. And she didn’t even know my name. Of course I wanted to say ‘hell yes,’ but there was one complication.

"Thanks, but . . . considering everyone's appearance right now, I don't think I'm dressed appropriately to go to the after party." I motioned down at my pajama-like ensemble. "And I'm all alone. What would I do with an extra ticket?"

"Bring a friend!" she smiled. "Don't worry. You have a memorable look. You'll be the girl in the green sweatshirt."

The Girl in the Green Sweatshirt. Well, for some reason, that title was enough to convince me to take the envelope. I held it tightly in my hand and wrapped her in a big fat hug.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I squealed.

She gave me a generous smile. "Of course! Have a great time. Maybe you'll meet some other actors."

I pranced out of the theater in a state of euphoria. I felt bad not knowing Alexis's profession, or surname, or who her husband was and why he'd missed such a hilarious film. But the same thoughts kept repeating in my head, and they propelled me forward. *What on earth is happening right now? Am I dreaming?*

I pulled up a Google Map that displayed the directions to the Tavern on the Green and followed it. After passing two crosswalks, however, I realized it was unnecessary. I was already in the middle of a fancy flock heading in the same direction. The majority of this crowd was made up of elderly white men and women, all dressed to the nines in bourgeois suits, sequined gowns, and those crazy hats you see British women wear at tea parties. Standard patrons of Lincoln Center and its various societies, no doubt. I tried my best to stare straight ahead with a proud look on my face while they silently judged my unusual age and appearance.

After walking through a few neighborhoods lined with Sotheby's brownstones, we reached the edge of Central Park West. Past a large parking lot was the Tavern on the Green. My mother had told me she'd gone there once in college, and it was one of the best places to eat and drink in the city. I wanted to know why it possessed such a respected reputation.

I opened Alexis's envelope and pulled out one of the glittering silver tickets. I handed it over to the tall security guard blocking the entrance and said with pride, "I'm here for *The Favourite* after party."

The lines on his face sharpened, as if to say, *Nice try, bitch.* He looked down at the ticket, then at my sweatpants, then back at the ticket, and finally, at my zit-covered, clearly underage features. And hey, I didn't blame him for being suspicious: just like him, I had no idea why I was there.

He squinted. "Hey, Janae," he said, turning back to a tiny Latina

woman wearing a *maitre d* outfit. “This *girl* handed me a ticket. Can you check it for me?”

She checked the ticket, then me. “Nope,” she said, as if to dowse his fiery suspicions regarding a counterfeited invitation. “She can go through.”

The security man nodded, then, wordlessly, pointed to the long entranceway where the party was waiting. I passed through the main Victorian gothic foyer, with its chestnut-colored ceiling beams and glass tables decorated with pastel flower bouquets and entered the crowded outdoor space.

Since high school English Lit class, I had dreamed of attending a New York City party this glamorous. I could understand F. Scott Fitzgerald’s quote about the Big Apple promising all the mystery and beauty of the world. And looking at this extravaganza, well, it was like being inside Gatsby’s very own mansion. A net of yellow hanging lanterns tented the garden premises, acting as a curtain between the paved ground and starry sky. Tuxedoed so-and-so’s shook hands while greeting everyone with the phrase, “Hi, I’m a member of the Academy.” Like butterflies flying from flower to flower, waiters walked up to guests with trays of shrimp cocktail, pumpernickel bread with hummus, roasted figs, bacon kebabs, and crackers adorned with mozzarella and chopped tomatoes. Most attendees stood and mingled while sipping glasses of red or white wine. A few lucky partygoers sat in garden chairs complete with pillows and a small table to place their food on. One of these lucky people was Taylor Swift, who sat next to her boyfriend, Joe Alwyn, an actor in *The Favourite*. Surrounded by security guards, she nibbled her shrimp cocktail while conversing with starstruck guests.

I couldn’t seem to close my mouth, or breathe, or blink. It was all too surreal. There were various dining halls where partygoers could traipse into, then head back out into, the garden commons. Entering one, I found myself standing next to the tall, dark, and handsome Nicholas Hoult. Hands in his trouser pockets, the *Skins* actor had a humble grin on his face as he accepted compliments regarding his performance in the movie. It was weird seeing Nicholas Hoult with a sharp navy tux and gelled hair after watching him bounce around the screen in a large powdered wig and stockings. I wanted to pay him a compliment but found myself too intimidated to move forward. Would he take my praise seriously while I was wearing a green sweatshirt and sweatpants? On top of that, one of his security guards kept a close eye on me. I guess my choice of outfit gave me the appearance of a crazed fangirl who’d just hopped the fence.

I escaped back into the outdoor area, taking refuge near some empty

dining tables just a short walk away from the packed bar. I wasn't the only one wearing comfy clothes; a young man clad in a gray, tan, and pink track suit breezed by me while I crossed the commons. If he could get away with such a bold outfit, so could I, although his ensemble looked far better on him than my green getup looked on me. I'd later learn this young man was none other than Barry Keoghan, the star of Yorgos Lanthimos's 2017 film, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*.

I slumped in a chair while watching a lonely, frizzy-haired man stab his fork into parts of a leafy salad. No, I would not be wearing this ugly getup for the rest of the night. I wanted to blend in, be a part of the action. Tonight, I was Cinderella at the ball, and I needed a bomb-ass dress to go with my starry-eyed excitement. Problem was, the security guard at the tavern's entrance took my ticket away, so I couldn't just run to Target, buy a dress, and come back.

Wait! I had forgotten about the envelope wedged between my fingers. I could phone a friend to help me. The night was still young. There was plenty of time to invite a plus one, like Alexis encouraged. Might as well keep spreading the good karma while it lasted. But I couldn't invite any old friend: it had to be someone who could deliver a dress on time and someone who would appreciate the luxury of this historic party. Above all, it had to be someone who would believe my crazy story.

Without much thinking, I called my new college roommate, Chloe Solomon.

Chloe Solomon and I met at Marymount Manhattan College through our mutual love of Harry Potter. She was a Hufflepuff, I a Slytherin, and due to our other shared love of web series—namely, creating our own—we thought it best to room together during the 2018 fall semester. An Atlanta native without the Georgia drawl, she had tangled, black hair just above her shoulders. She wore flannels, beanie hats, and the same pair of black combat boots every single day. Chloe was a proud Jew and a proud lesbian and a proud musical theatre nerd, but she wasn't outspoken and opinionated like the other kids at our college. Truthfully, she was more like the Cameron to other peoples' Ferris Bueller. I would learn in my first month of living with her that Chloe didn't like to go outside her comfort zone. She was an indoor cat. She liked watching Team Star-kid videos on her Ipad and believed the best place to eat dinner was on her bed. We weren't the best of friends, but we more than tolerated each other. As they say, opposites attract. And I knew at that moment, my opposite was the closest person to a dress that fit me.

I called Chloe on my dying cellphone, finding a quiet, dark spot in the

packed, prismatic party. Three rings, then the muffled sound of the other phone being pressed to her ear.

“What’s up? You okay?” she said.

“Chloe, what are you doing right now?” I looked out into the tavern’s vacant parking lot, just past a black metal fence a few feet away.

“Um . . . watching Netflix. Why do you ask?”

I drew a deep breath. “Okay. You’re not going to believe this. You know how I told you I was going to *The Favourite* screening at the New York Film Fest?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, a lady gave me tickets to the after party. I literally just saw Nicholas Hoult.”

A beat.

“Wait, what?”

“I’m literally standing in the middle of the Tavern on the Green in my sweatpants while everyone’s dressed to the nines, drinking wine and champagne, talking to members of the freaking Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.”

“Hold on . . . *where* are you?”

“It’s a restaurant near Central Park called the Tavern on the Green. I think this is the fanciest party I’ve ever been to. Ever. The lady gave me an extra ticket. Want to come?”

I could hear the sounds of a clicking keyboard on the line’s other end. She was probably typing the location up onto Google Maps.

“Uh, well, I dunno, Katy. It’s getting pretty late.”

She didn’t believe me. It was in her tone. I turned around and gazed longingly into the sea of Hollywood juggernauts. It was like a calm mosh pit of materialistic wannabes that, rather selfishly, I wanted to fling myself into.

“Chloe, I don’t usually say this to people, and I know you’re more of a theatre person than a film person, but I’m telling you, you might regret it if you don’t come to this party. They have the fanciest food I’ve ever seen. It doesn’t even look real; that’s how crazy fancy it is. If anything, just come for the food.”

It was like I could hear the gears turning in her head. I didn’t realize it then, but my hands were balled into tight fists. What would she say? Did she think I was a lunatic?

“Well, I haven’t eaten dinner yet.”

I repeated the location to her again, then asked if she could reach into my closet and bring the first dress she saw. Chloe promised she’d be there in twenty minutes, and I waited. In the meantime, servers in white

waistcoats brought out the main courses. Before I could peek underneath the grey catering dishes on the tables where they rested, my feet carried me over to the tavern's front entrance. Best to be near Chloe when she came, in case something happened. Mr. Security Man stood silently beside me.

Then, like a tiny speck in a moonlit desert, Chloe's silhouette appeared on the other side of the spacious parking lot. As she drew closer to the divider separating the outside from the in, I noticed she wore a lacy black dress and little wedged heels: the most dressed-up I'd ever seen her. To my surprise, the sight of the glowing tavern put an incandescent smile on her face. A large grey tote was slung over her right shoulder.

"Woah," she said once she reached the red awning that separated the concrete from the cobblestone. "You were right. This is fancy."

I handed her the second silver ticket, which she passed over to Mr. Security Man.

"Chloe, you ain't seen nothin' yet."

But first, my transformation. To the left of the main Victorian gothic foyer was a gift shop, its windows currently decorated with pinecones, pumpkins, and other crafty fall colors. Past the gift shop was the ladies' room. You know that scene in *Pulp Fiction*, when Mia Wallace "powders her nose" in the Jack Rabbit Slims bathroom, and all the women are pressed up to the mirror, applying makeup? That's kind of what this bathroom was like, only Chloe and I were the only females with bare faces. I claimed a stall. After changing into the perfect ensemble she had brought me—a tight black frock with round gold studs trailing down the sides—we exited the room, handed over Chloe's tote to a bag check, and commenced with our "fashionably late" arrival.

Leading her into the garden commons felt like personifying the white rabbit that put Alice in Wonderland. Her expression was priceless. It was the same kind of face someone makes when slipping into a hot tub.

"Oh," her eyes widened, "*oh my*." She looked at the lanterns above, then the neon red bar, then the catered food in the distance. "Okay. I'm liking this place. I don't know any of these people, but I like this place."

I slung my arm around her shoulder and together we passed through the whirlpool of fame and fortune. Past grey-haired gentlemen with Alexander McQueen glasses, models, mavericks, and young men who rocked Jim Morrison hair with their dinner jackets. It was an ecstatic extravaganza, and in the middle of it all, Chloe held our baby blue camera tightly in her hands.

If you know me well, you know an odd hobby of mine is to snap Polaroids of dear friends and family. Before that infamous blue camera was

completely in my possession, Chloe dug it out of storage and brought it with her to our residence hall. When I mentioned my interest in polaroid photography, she told me, "It's yours. I'm not going to use it anyway." I insisted we share it. This night was the only time we ever did.

"I brought it for you. We should take a picture!" Chloe said, and as if on cue, a quartet of partygoers—three women and a man with slicked-up frat-bro hair—approached us.

"Oh, a polaroid camera!" chirped a woman with dark hair, diamond earrings, and prune-colored lipstick. "Can you take a picture of us?"

"Yeah, sure," Chloe replied. The way the woman spoke to us, it was like she thought we were event volunteers. Was it *that* obvious we were broke college students? Well, it didn't matter. We were all in the same place enjoying the same things. We could say we were rich heiresses, and no one would know we were lying. We were strangers, after all, and we had made it through the door.

Chloe got in her best photographer stance. The group struck poses with duck faces and peace signs, and when their picture printed, the prune-lipped woman looked amazed.

"Oh my god! Thank you!" she squealed, holding the developing photo up in the lantern light. The group scurried away, and Chloe and I gave each other a look.

"Well that was kind of cool, actually," she said.

"Maybe the camera will help us make friends," I added.

Finally, we made it to the bourgeois buffet. Awaiting us on silky white tablecloths were trays of fresh fish: salmon, sea bass, tilapia. String beans sautéed in garlic and rosemary. Chicken francese and bowls of quinoa. And of course, the salad that frizzy-haired man from before was munching on. It was a kale dish mixed with baby tomatoes, chopped carrots, and seasoned croutons.

Chloe and I carried our plates to an empty table near the bar, our mouths watering the whole way. There was so much happening on the ground, I had forgotten to take a good look at the view above. As we shoved the succulent food into our mouths, I examined the towering skyscrapers with their wee yellow lights hidden behind the enchanted trees of our garden party getaway.

"This is heaven," I gushed.

"I can get used to this. This food is fancier than anything I will ever be able to afford in my life," Chloe said.

"Better than Ramen and cafeteria grub, that's for sure."

After we vacuumed up our meals, Chloe eyed the bar with a curiosity

that was different than what I'd usually seen in her. A dangerous, flaming, mischievous kind of curiosity.

"Hey," she said, "if you need an invitation to get in here, do you think they'll card us?"

My spine straightened. That was a good question. We were both under twenty-one. While Chloe and I shared our differences, we both hung around friend groups who were more on the prudish side. Alcohol was hard to come by and a nuisance to hide in our residence hall. And the drinks looked better than the food. From the bar, people carried out olive green cocktails, bloody Marys, tequila sunrises and old fashioned with tiny plastic sword picks and dark lime wedges on top. I'm pretty sure there was a drink for every color of the rainbow.

Gingerly, we approached the bar's red glow. A brown-haired tapster man wearing a white suit coat and thick black glasses noticed us immediately. "Can I help you ladies?"

We had expected him to turn us away instantaneously or, at the very least, ignore us. But he looked at us with such an intensity, like we meant something at this party. "I'll have a rum and coke, please," Chloe blurted, clearly not knowing all the options. Neither did I.

"Yeah," I added, "I'll have what she's having."

He filled two tall glasses to the brim, ice cubes and lime wedges included, and slid them over to us. Underneath the lanterns and moonlight, the liquid almost looked purple. Holy shit, it worked. We had illegally acquired alcohol without trouble. And we both looked like sixteen-year-olds.

Giggling, Chloe and I scurried back to our garden table away from the posher people. We didn't talk; we just downed our prized liquor like the little troublemakers we were. It was the same kind of feeling Robin Hood must have had when he stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Or the feeling vultures must experience when they find a fresh antelope carcass on the savannah. We clearly did not have the right to this liquor, or this party, or any of this magic. But it was all ours for the taking.

The drink was so strong, it felt like a punch in the face just to swallow it. But it was delicious. Chloe and I drank and laughed and kept repeating, "How on earth is this happening?" and when we asked the bartender for two more rum and cokes, he gave us a wink and made us two more. I am not just saying that for dramatic effect: he actually winked at us. At the time, my naïve brain believed it was a flirtatious trick for tip money. But looking back, I think it was because he knew we were underage. He knew we weren't supposed to be there.

Cocktails in hand, Chloe and I strutted through the sea of socialites

once more, then stood in the center of the garden commons, underneath the tip-top of the lantern canopy. We rocked a bit like ships on stormy seas, but almost everyone at the party was drunk by that point.

"Hey, let's explore a bit." I said. "I've got to know if Emma Stone is here."

Chloe nodded. "Yeah, definitely. And if I see Nicholas Hoult like you did, I'm actually talking to him."

"Hey! You weren't there in sweatpants. It was embarrassing!"

She didn't actually do it, but it looked like she could have stuck her tongue out at me. Seeing Chloe's dark side was oddly satisfying. Amazing what good food and Hollywood glamour can do to the timidest of people.

We traipsed through more Victorian gothic halls as though we were queens perusing our new castle—like Olivia Colman in the movie we celebrated. There was one big room with a large, circular bar in the center, surrounded by black Corinthian columns and a matching hardwood floor. A dining hall with several golden chandeliers and outdoorsy paintings fresh from the Romanticism movement had been cleared of its tables and chairs. We took a peek into another empty dining hall next door. With glass walls that showed views of the garden outside, it was adorned with a floral carpet and a matching soft pink ceiling. Like the former dining hall, there were several chandeliers above, but the largest in the center was an opulent emerald green. With its late 1800s, early 1900s look, I wondered if it was a place Michael Stewart used for inspiration when creating the fake restaurant, Harmonia Gardens in the musical, *Hello, Dolly*.

After that, we ended up in the same room where I'd seen Nicholas Hoult earlier. It was another glass-walled space with white 1950s diner booths. The scent of ice cream, cake, and other sugary treats wafted in from the kitchen behind us. We'd made it just in time; as if on cue, a line of waiters burst into the space, silver trays in hand. On them were bite-sized deserts: carrot cake with the vegetable painted in orange and green icing on each square, little brownies, chocolate-covered strawberries, and Chloe and my favorite—churro bites with a hard shell outside and a warm chocolate center.

Napkins of miniature churros and rum and cokes in hand, we took silly Polaroids of our fancy selves living the life next to classy bar setups and flowery décor. Passersby smiled as they watched us enjoy ourselves, and one woman with white short hair even exclaimed, "Oh, how adorable they are."

And the whole experience made me wonder—she had to put the kids to bed and all, but why had Alexis been so willing to give up her tickets to *this*?

The last stop on our tavern tour, Chloe and I wandered into a secluded

little hedge garden, far away from the foyers and bustling commons. There was a photo station sponsored by American Airlines. The wall was draped in glittering gold streamers, and a photographer with suspenders worked the flashy machine that took pictures.

"Want to do it?" Chloe asked. I nodded. Our camera was running out of film anyways. I placed my half-empty glass on a high table and hopped on the short line with my roommate. A few seconds later, a heavysset, olive-skinned woman wearing a hot pink dress and a spring green shawl came up behind me. With her curled caramel hair, a champagne glass in one hand and bedazzled smartphone in the other, she had the stereotypical look of most of the moms of my high school friends back when I lived in New Jersey.

"Oh, what pretty dresses," she said to Chloe and me. "What brought you young ladies here tonight? Are you festival volunteers?"

Giggly from alcohol, Chloe and I exchanged cheeky looks. "Actually, no," I smiled. "It's a really funny story. A lady at Alice Tully Hall gave me two tickets for free."

"And I'm here cause she needed a dress," Chloe added.

"We had nothing to do with the film. We're just two broke college kids who got lucky."

Wide-eyed, the woman gave a rich laugh. "That's incredible. Well, it's a great party to be attending. I get invited to these kinds of things all the time, but I'm happy I came out for this one. My name's Maria, by the way."

Maria extended her arm for us to shake, then realized she held items in both hands.

"Why do you get invited to these things all the time? Are you a filmmaker?" I asked.

"No, I'm a women's entertainment blogger and dabble in real-estate. I'm from Massachusetts. They always want people to write about these black-tie events. When you go to so many of these, you see the same things and the same people. You get sick of it. But it's good that you two are here to experience this particular party. Very fun."

I could never imagine getting sick of anything so fantastical, but I nodded in agreement. It made me wonder how many after parties Alexis had attended in her career, whatever it was.

"You see the same people?" Chloe asked.

Maria nodded. "Oh yes, all the time. They're all so fake," she said. "Like that woman right over there."

She pointed to a busty, bleach-blond female in front of the photo station's gold drapery who was blowing kisses into the camera lens. Her

white cocktail dress and pastel-colored beads made her look like a cupcake with sprinkles.

"Sometimes that woman sneaks into these events without an invitation. She's an actress," Maria said, making quotation marks with her fingers while saying that seven-letter word. I was surprised by how loud she said it. Clearly, she didn't care who heard, and it made Chloe laugh. Then a pencil-thin man wearing a grey fedora hopped into Ms. Actress's photoshoot and started doing ridiculous poses next to her.

"Ah, and that guy." Maria shook her head. "He's always at these things, too. Total phony just like her. And he lies about everything. Apparently, he's straight," she said with more quotation marks.

Although Chloe and I were just humble virgins to the film festival after party scene, Maria made me realize we weren't the only "fakes" at the event. Not all of these people were involved with film. Some of them were schmoozers, and others, like Maria, seemed to be invited to fill up space. There was fantasy in this robust tavern, just like the movie itself. Pure delusions.

Finally, it was Chloe's and my turn to pose in front of the gold drapery. "Give me your best poses, girls." said the photographer, and we did just that while Maria cheered us on. In four shots, we did a back-to-back pose, a mid-air jump, rock n' roll signs with our tongues loose, and a 007 finger gun stance. The photographer printed our iconic looks onto a glossy rainbow sheet and handed them to us.

"Spectacular," he said. "Glad to see guests truly enjoying themselves for a change."

We cheered on Maria when she went up next. With her champagne glass still in hand, she posed like a sultry movie housewife who had just murdered her husband. Strangely, I don't remember saying goodbye to her. We all sort of slipped away, looking for our next adventure in the tavern.

But by that hour, the festivities were drawing to a close. At around two in the morning, when most people were starting to pack up their Gucci bags and go, Chloe and I found ourselves picking churro bites off a large tray we had convinced a waiter to spare. We sat on cushioned seats near the circular bar in the room with black columns. Close by, a few guests were trying to cheer up an emotionally drunk woman.

"Do you think our friends are going to believe us when we tell them this happened?" Chloe asked. There was leftover chocolate on her face, and I'm pretty sure some was slathered across my face as well. I drank the last of my rum and coke, which was now mere ice cubes.

"Maybe. We have pictures," I said, "but that doesn't mean they'll believe us."

I thought about our time spent at the party thus far and how, out of sparkling hundreds, the only person we really got to know was Maria.

"We need to take some food home with us," Chloe declared, "like a souvenir, or something. The food here is too good not to take home."

Problem was, we had finished the last of the churro bites. After approaching the kitchen and talking to a chef, we learned that they hadn't made any more. In our tipsy splendor, Chloe and I stole four fancy metallic bottles of Sprite off a mini-bar in the glass-walled Nicholas Hoult room. We ran away quickly for fear of getting caught, but the bartender didn't seem to care.

After reclaiming Chloe's grey tote from the check, the party was over. Mr. Security Man was gone, and the cold autumn temperature had dropped. We walked through a pitch-black Central Park, back to the nearest subway station. While waiting for the A train, we saw a trio comprised of two gown-clad girls and a tuxedoed guy. They were clearly wasted, almost falling onto the tracks while skipping and spinning across the platform. Rather unfortunately, my roommate and I were sobering up.

As we got onto the subway car and sat down, there was a somber silence between Chloe and me. I knew it wasn't just a tired silence or a sober silence. It was a back-to-reality kind of silence. Our feet were now aching, and the thought of having nothing to do the next day made us slump gloomily.

Chloe said it before I could find the right words. "We're never going to a party of that caliber again, are we?"

She stared straight ahead, drab as paint drying. As it sped ahead through the deep, dark tunnel, the subway seemed to whirl in agreement.

"I mean, never say never. We don't know what's going to happen after college," I muttered, "but yeah. In our lifetimes, it's unlikely."

To that, Chloe cracked open a Sprite bottle and took a swig. I reached into her bag and thumbed through the treasures we'd collected that night: our Polaroids, the rainbow photo station picture, and last, but not least, the envelope which had contained our two silver party invitations.

"So who was that woman? The one who gave you the tickets?" Chloe asked. I flipped the envelope over and there, in black ink, was our answer.

"Her name is Alexis Bloom," I said, her full name tasting like champagne in my mouth. "I don't know who she is, but people at the screening seemed to know her."

I pulled out my phone. Upon searching for her name on Google, I saw the lineup of independent documentaries she and her husband, Fisher Stevens, had produced. There was one about Wikileaks she'd made in 2013, an Emmy-nominated piece about Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds released in 2016, and her newest film about Roger Ailes and his harassment of women at Fox News. Turns out, Alexis Bloom was a badass truth-seeker, and I'd had the pleasure of receiving her good karma. She deserved the thrilling night far more than I did.

As I woke up the next day, I felt like one of the lovers at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Nothing that happened the night before felt real. Chloe and I would reminisce over our fantastical night on occasion, but as the days passed by, we went back to being silent acquaintances. As fall turned to winter, she suffered through a sleep disorder problem, and New York City became a cold, lonely place for her. Although she decided to stay in town, she transferred to another college before the next school year began.

And as for Alexis Bloom, I scoured the internet for an e-mail address or postal address which I could use to send a proper thank you note but found nothing. I reached out to her husband's production company in Los Angeles, asking them in a short email if they could provide me with any of Alexis's contact information, but received no reply. Since September of last year, I've found the Facebook account of her agent, but I've been hesitant in sending him a message about Alexis. Would anyone close to her believe what she did for me, a total stranger, a nobody? Would anyone care? I've accepted that some moments in life are meant to be spent singularly. They are meant to come and go. I'm happy for the bubble that was that night. I'm glad it exists. It's a contradiction, but I think luxury tastes better when it's rarer and also when it's earned. Maybe I'll see Alexis again someday and thank her for the tickets in person. As the next New York Film Festival approaches, I wonder if she's going to be there, arm in arm with her husband. I wonder if she'll keep the invitation to the after party for herself.

California Before and After Drought

When I remember my mother's house, I remember the oranges first. I remember their waxy green leaves, their perfectly blemished skin. My mother made a Saturday task of orange juice. Every Saturday began the same way.

Beneath a light blue sky, a long reach, on tiptoe, up into the fruiting branches. A full hand of fruit. A decisive yank. And then, like some little plague, the ants would tumble, startled by the sudden shift in gravity, from the long, twisting fingers of the tree and land, anxious from the fall, scrambling on my arms and head, tickling my skin.

Violated as I was, I considered it a fun sort of game; and as I picked, I waged war on the ants. With my fingers wrapped firmly around some tiny tendril of tree, I stood an uncomfortable arm's length away so that the branch, when yanked, recoiled so violently from the tug that the displaced ants flew wildly in all directions while I, tactfully, kneeled below, covering my head with my arms. I'm sure the ones that found me wished they hadn't. With a merciless slap of my palm, I slaughtered five, maybe ten, at a time, never considering them worthy of more effort or calculation. The whole thing smelled like a dream.

When the massacre was complete and the big brown bag was about full, I would take it into my arms, careful to tuck my hands underneath it so that it wouldn't tear, and enter the big stucco house.

The kitchen in my mother's house was covered wall to wall with hand-painted tiles. I am trying now to remember what color they were, so that I can paint some pretty picture of light gathering on their glossy yellow faces and dashing about the walls. It's true that they might have been yellow. But I know, somehow, that they were blue, too. And green.

At this point in the memory, wrapped up in the refracted light of the glossy tiles, I would take the bag and turn it over violently into the large empty sink, fruit cascading here and there before settling over the drain and becoming suddenly calm. As the water rushed over them, I watched the earth fall away, grabbing from beside the stove a large wooden cutting board which I lay over to one side of the sink. The hollow sound of the steel

knife meeting the face of the wood punctuates the silence. I would move towards the record player and put something on. Now, while the music drifted by, I began to juice the oranges.

My mother, were she there, might have danced in and asked me to turn the volume up before taking an orange into her own hand and joining me. Or not. My mother had bad days and good days. "You couldn't pick any that weren't green?" she might say (on a bad day). Though, it's pointless to wonder what she said on this *particular* day because this *particular* day, the time I am remembering, I was alone. and the ancient, 1960's model juicer waited in the cabinet of soft chestnut wood. Twenty years ago, my mother bought it used at a garage sale for five dollars and so she was proud of how well it still worked.

"The mechanics are simple enough. Aged well," I might have said, if she were there, just to say something.

"I didn't ask you about the mechanics" or "I swear, all you do is blow hot air around" or "I'm going out," my mother might have said (on a bad day) if she were in this memory.

But she isn't.

At that point, I would place the fleshy side of the first halved orange on the juicer's dull beige cone and apply pressure and from the small spout, thick, sweet nectar would flow into a short glass. Years ago, one halved orange might produce enough juice to fill the whole glass and I might have filled the big plastic pitcher with fifteen or so oranges. Nowadays, with the drought and all, might take thirty big oranges to only fill it up halfway. The rest I would have to fill with water and lumps of white sugar. Dilution. I liked it better before, when the juice was pulpy and sour. But I suppose I only half remember.

With a big brown wooden spoon, I stir and stir the juice, enjoying the sound of the spoon scraping the sides of the plastic pitcher. Now, filling a small cup, I watch myself in dizzy memory, take a sip. The cool liquid slides across my tongue and perhaps I go outside and make a home on some little patch of grass, squarely in the sun.

When I remember my mother's home, I like to remember it this way. With the small cup in my hand. Sitting squarely in the sun. In this memory, I do not imagine what she will say when she comes home to the mess in the kitchen (which I have temporarily abandoned). In this memory, I do not see her gritting her teeth at me. She does not remind me whose house this is (not mine). I forget, for now, that on a bad day she might grab me by the hair and drag me inside, hurling curses in English and Spanish. In this

memory, she does not make me cry. She is glad to have a glass of orange juice, too. She sits out in the sun with me too.

Or, better: in this memory, the orange juice is finished, the day is dragging on, the sun is moving slowly across the California sky, and the whole time, my mother—*isn't* there at all.

Contributors' Notes

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