

FORCED PERSPECTIVE

A THESIS IN
Creative Writing and Media Arts

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This collection of eleven short stories explores the constant struggle between our expectations for our own lives and our responsibilities to others, as well as the unexpected instances of suffering that have irrevocable effects on our worldviews. Set in several distinct locations in contemporary America, and including romantic, familial, and professional relationships pushed to the breaking point, these stories follow grieving parents, drained partnerships, desperate children, and siblings that seem trapped in cycles set in their youths. While the characters vary, there are consistencies in themes that connect these stories. In the title story, a young woman struggles with the fact that her responsibility to her family is choking her. In “Bridges,” a couple’s unspoken discomfort grows too loud to ignore. “Pixelated People” involves two brothers who cannot stop circling each other for weaknesses, even after they are fully grown. Finally, in “This Time Will Be Different,” a college student is unsure if the advice she gives her best friend is of any merit, or is indicative of her own issues.

APPROVAL

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Forced Perspective” presented by Ian Swalwell, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance

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Critical Introduction

The past three years in this program have been productive in a way I had not anticipated, in that there was much more breaking down than building up. My understanding of fiction, whatever that is, had been fairly ignorant and narrow-minded. My understanding about many facets of life were similar, and I'm sure continue to be. However, these stories exist as evidence of my attempts to realize that fiction does not have to come only from a solitary brain digesting itself, and instead can cross lines and explore more varied themes and experiences. The main thing, though, is that it has to be honest. And by extension, honest stories are often upsetting and always need something at stake, some decision to be made.

I still have the same favorite writers I have had for years. I'm not sure if I'm clinging to them out of panic or if I have developed a real understanding for their work, or if there is a difference. Some things just stick in your brain. The novelists I enjoy the most are Oscar Wilde, Bret Easton Ellis, Joan Didion, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, though my opinions on them shift constantly. When it comes to short stories, it's always been Cheever. The consistencies I have found between these authors – some of whom I find myself defending, from time to time – are many. They often write about minutiae. There is sometimes far too much money to justify misery. They reflect the times they write in, but not on a grand scale. The world-building is done through subtlety and details, through realistic dialogue and patience. There is a level of privilege that shouldn't be ignored, as well. And finally, maybe most importantly to me – they write about flawed people, but there is genuine desire for meaning in their work. I never understood a story written about a good person, until I opened up and realized that good people are in turmoil as well. I fell into the self-indulgent idea that all a

character had to be in order to be interesting was unhappy. And often tired. I think I've managed to sidestep this fallacy to a certain extent.

My first year at UMKC was slowly coming to terms with the fact that I was predictable in my taste. Nobody likes to hear that. And nobody said it to me, in as many words. But I could see it in my classmates' eye contact after I turned in yet another twenty-five page story about people in their early twenties blowing cigarette smoke on each other and vomiting. I dived, vainly, into Professor Pritchett's novel writing class and completely exhausted myself; only then did I pull back and reevaluate what it is about stories that I enjoy. His feedback was hugely helpful; he helped me see the recurring mistakes I was making which now seem so obvious. They were many of the same issues writers run into when they get started; many of my scenes were directionless, lacking in both arc and character development. His carefully articulated feedback was instrumental. Another one of the great benefits of that class was how rigorous it was to write, edit, cut, add, and rewrite a piece that was about 100 pages long. I felt like I was really doing the work I had been tiptoeing around for a few years. Through this process, I think I found more compelling stories to tell.

It would be remiss for me not to point out how important both Dr. Christie Hodgen and Whitney Terrell were during my time at UMKC; I took most of my workshops with these two professors, and I can trace much of the progress I made back to their classes and feedback. Dr. Hodgen led my first workshop at UMKC and my first ever fiction workshop. It couldn't have been a better introduction, and not just because of how helpful the workshops were. The readings were also illuminating, and I learned how to come up with useful comments for my peers which, in turn, made me better at giving real critique to my

own stories. Plus, I had one story get mixed reviews and one story which seemed to ruin everyone's day, and when the smoke cleared, it was all okay. I felt prepared to keep trying. Not only did Dr. Hodgen provide excellent feedback for stories, but she introduced me – many in that class, really – to the world of publishing. How to read a journal actively, how to submit in a way that was actually practical rather than just firebombing a random list. Suddenly, the reality of writing as a career seemed less murky and more understandable, if just as difficult.

I took the most fiction workshops with Whitney Terrell and elected to ask him to serve as the advisor for my thesis. The first fiction workshop I took with Professor Terrell was during the same semester as my novel-writing class with Professor Pritchett. As such, I was just beginning to abandon some of the preconceived notions I had brought to UMKC, and was struggling to find my voice and what it was I really wanted to write about. His feedback was so essential to this process because it always entered into a bigger conversation about fiction; this was part of the reason my peers and I paid just as much attention to anyone else's workshop as our own. There were lessons to be learned regarding not only the mechanics of story and character but regarding why anyone would write in the first place. Professor Terrell noticed my tendency to slowly get around to the main conflict of a story and then avoid it, sidestep it, or abruptly end it. Realizing this, he helped several of my stories along from their initial drafts to their final drafts, in which the crux of the story was actually found and resolved, or at least addressed. Also, on a more abstract level, his feedback made me feel like I could actually be a writer rather than just some selfish suburban kid trying to make a point to whomever would listen. This made me work harder and smarter as time went on during these three years.

As I drifted away from the first person and began reading more eagerly, different themes from short fiction began to take precedent in my mind. And, perhaps because I am currently stuck in the very situation itself, I began to become obsessed with characters who were driven internally to move against an external expectation. They are accused of being selfish, and they very well might be. They are accused of being self-obsessed, and they definitely are. They are all some version of one of my favorite characters of all time, the cynical Lawrence from Cheever's "Goodbye, My Brother." They see only blemishes, and are forced to defend their views from the attacks of those who accept their environment more easily. Again, I think back to my favorite novels, and see this reappearing. However, what I found in my own work was that occupying the thoughts of these disaffected characters resulted, more often than not, in flat stories and inner monologues that lead nowhere. Even in conversations that lead nowhere in fiction, there should be more to digest than what is on the surface. So instead I aspired to create situations in which – through dialogue and action – characters put each other's worldview on the chopping block and see who wins out. Through the surprisingly painful process of editing and cutting, I believe things are at least moving in the right direction.

I didn't want all of the characters in the collection to be similar, or even close to similar. The issues they face might be comparable, but I wanted to see these same issues from different angles. I tried especially hard to avoid getting stuck in one social class or one region. The bleak hugeness of Phoenix, the isolation of rural New Jersey, and the failing casinos of Atlantic City all seemed to provide good backdrops for people who wish they were somewhere else. Maybe Los Angeles, maybe New York, maybe just home. I also found that the urge to put my own experience into writing was often a mistake, at least in

terms of the first impulses I had. I had more luck putting characters I share experiences with on the sidelines, or at least in direct confrontation with a different worldview. I can't imagine I'm anywhere close to where I need to be, but this desire to avoid cliché caused me to read more, reading different kinds of novels, and gaining some level of perspective on the types of pitfalls that aspiring writers often tumble into.

I was also lucky to take two theory classes – sort of accidentally – with Dr. Shiu and Dr. Barton. Dr. Shiu's class focused on fiction and one stage play, none of which I had previously encountered. The depth of analysis possible for fiction was surprising, as well as intimidating. It helped me think about my own stories in a bigger way. It also introduced me to novels that I probably never would have encountered, all of which went against the grain in ways it was important for me to see. Dr. Barton's class was a more general examination of the philosophy behind writing and art. I finally learned the definitions of the theoretical words I'd been throwing around for a while. Through these classes, and their final papers, I came to the realization that assessing or making art of any kind can be compartmentalized into a series of debates surrounding opposite theories. Juxtapositions. Whether these are good definitions is essentially irrelevant – do we write dedicated to realism, or imagination and openness? First person or third? Minimal or baroque? Serious or lighthearted, broad or specific? These words all define each other, and there doesn't ever seem to really be an answer. In the same way, these debates are present in the beliefs of the characters I seek to create. Cynical or optimistic? Risky or safe? Personally ambitious or focused on others? I learned that in order for a conversation to be dynamic, both sides need to be at least understandable, if not valid. That is what creates suspense, what makes us want to finish

stories that we start, and why certain stories stay forever lodged in our brains like something stuck in our teeth.

I have wanted to do this for years. But I didn't really understand what it takes. In college, it was enough for me to just be the chain-smoking English major surrounded by Business majors. The crowd didn't set that high of a bar. I realized that is not enough. There is obviously a lot of ego that goes into wanting to write fiction – I don't see how there couldn't be, at least in my case. And as I scroll through my Submittable page of *Declined*, *Declined*, *Pending*, I do wonder how high my tolerance for good work and painful sacrifice goes. But the work that goes into crafting a story, and the feeling I get when – despite everything – it starts to come together, is the closest thing I've felt to real productivity in my life. Being able to participate in the business of writing fiction in any real capacity would be an accomplishment I could always value.

You'll Always Be My Boy

Finn was always in his second-floor bedroom when he got home from another day of school and this afternoon was no different, in that sense. He played with outdated army men – green at war with tan – and arranged them into complicated battle formations. The folds in his bed sheets became weeks-old trenches, and his side table was a prime spot for a capable sniper. Neither side ever won, as he felt he was on both teams, so they made attacks and counterattacks and spun around and around the room infinitely. Everyone was on the same team, doing an elaborate dance; they were opposed, but not really, it was just a game. It was the time of day that brought him the most comfort. This time was marked as decidedly over when he heard the front door shut loudly, more loudly than normal. His father was home. Finn rushed to his bedroom door and put his ear to it and wished that he could lock it, but it could only be locked from the outside, which gave him constant anxiety about being trapped in his room forever, a cannibal with only army men to eat.

He heard the jangle of keys and two distinct voices. His mother's tone was soft and deliberate, as always. His father's tone was loud and energized, optimistic even. That was not always the case, but Finn heard it loud and clear and happy, and so he opened his door – which was thankfully not locked from the outside – and rushed downstairs to see his parents.

“Finn, my boy,” his father said loudly.

The man picked him up by the armpits even though Finn was eleven and was pretty sure that this was not normal anymore. It made his armpits sting but he didn't mind. His mother looked on with a tentative smile, her eyes only on her husband. When he set Finn

down he almost set him right on their cat, Curly, a world-weary and hopeless Exotic Shorthair with brown and white swirls. Curly slinked off.

When the three of them sat for dinner it was just as it always was when it was good. Finn's father told stories about how inspiring his students were and Finn's mother ate in small bites and wiped her mouth often and covered her face when she chewed, smiling lightly through the storm of words being launched around the table by her husband. Finn watched happily. After dinner he went back upstairs to his battlefield, enjoying the bland, anxiety-free numb feeling that came with it. Once it was almost time for bed, though, his eyes glistened in anticipation of school the next day and he was so distracted that his soldiers started dying and he wrapped himself up in his sheets that were no longer trenches, breathing heavily.

* * *

At Most Holy Trinity Elementary the next day, Finn kept to himself as always. His mother had dropped him off at the long, flat, one-story building like she always does. It was a brown and pale yellow school surrounded by a chain link fence; even the playground toys and swing sets were the same pale yellow, and the wind brought light brown dirt and dust from the other side of the road that settled on everything.

He walked the hallways like a ghost, but not a scary one. Just invisible. Some of his peers walked slowly, some with their heads down, some actually in the middle of crying. Finn did none of these. He picked up on a lot; he saw the dynamics at work and at play. His peers' postures spoke volumes to him; and as he approached his favorite and last class of the day, History, his only real friend Marcus came striding across the hall.

"Hey Finn!" Marcus said loudly.

“Marcus,” Finn said quietly.

“Did you hear the one about Jesus?”

“What?”

“What’s the difference between Jesus and a picture of Jesus?”

“Um, what?” Finn asked.

“It only takes one nail to hang the picture.”

“Okay.”

“What, you don’t like it?”

“It seems wrong.”

“I guess you’re one of those.”

“What does that mean?” Finn asked, worried about his status.

“You’re a pussy.”

“Fuck you Marcus.”

“Wow, Finn.”

Marcus walked away, holding his backpack like a briefcase because it was old and broken, laughing to himself. Finn walked into his classroom, feeling really bad about that conversation. He walked in and sat in his assigned seat next to a girl named Katherine. Finn was young enough to think he might be in love but old enough to realize that, honestly, he probably wasn’t. Both feelings existed simultaneously. He planned on smiling at her but couldn’t, so he just stared straight ahead and ignored how good her big wavy hair smelled while his teacher stuttered through a description of the end of the gold rush in California. Everyone was still heading west, she said, not aware of the fact that there wasn’t anything

there anymore. Next time, Finn thought, he would be more open and brave. He would be more loud and present. Next time.

* * *

When his father came home that night things were not good. Finn had figured this would be the case once it was past seven and he was not home. There were basically only two ways a night could go in his house. The front door opened at about nine o'clock and Finn pushed his army men off of his bed so he could curl up and hide, staring at his door and wondering if it would be opened or maybe even locked from the outside. There were loud footsteps.

He listened. There were some raised voices. They start angry and end sad, almost always. But this time his parents' voices sounded more desperate and there was a jarring, abnormal crash. Finn waited, still under the covers, staring at the door, holding a tan army man stupidly, as if the little man's gun might lay down suppressing fire. Cover the exits.

Finn heard his father's discordant footsteps coming up the stairs, his shoulders smacking into the walls a few times. Finn pretended to be asleep, still holding his army man. The door opened and his father stood in the doorway, looking very small. He rubbed his forehead a lot and said "Finn...my...boy," and then he left, walking out the front door and slamming it behind him. Finn waited.

After a few minutes had passed he walked downstairs to see his mother. She was leaning over and picking up pieces of a broken plate, and Finn thought she looked like she was shivering so he asked her if she was cold. She smiled and said no and stood up straight, popping her back and exhaling loudly.

“We have to pick up all these little sharp pieces,” she said. “Otherwise Curly could cut his foot.”

Curly looked into the kitchen from the living room, his scrunched face creased into a frown. It made Finn laugh for some reason. His mother looked at him quizzically with her head cocked to the side just like Curly’s.

“We wouldn’t want to hurt Curly,” Finn said, because he felt that he must.

“That’s right. Help me clean up.”

Finn helped by holding a pan on the ground while his mother swept bits and pieces into it, humming the whole time. He remembered the tune in his bones, but had no idea what it was called. His mother’s mood lifted noticeably while she cleaned. That made Finn feel better, and right then he decided he would clean his room. His mother smiled when he announced his intentions and dashed upstairs, breathing hard, excited at the prospect of things seeming better than they were. He put away his toys and made his bed, he tossed his laundry into the hamper and put it in the closet and closed the door. He pushed his bed perfectly into the corner. He even washed his hands for some reason. But after the vague, optimistic mania of the cleaning, Finn found himself sitting on his bed feeling worse than ever. He withdrew again, he rejected any food his mother brought, and he shivered himself to sleep in the dry night air.

* * *

At school two days later, Finn apologized to Marcus, who shrugged it off.

“It’s okay Finn. It was actually sort of fun to hear you say ‘fuck.’ I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s people who say things like that and people who don’t, I thought you were one of the people who wouldn’t say it. I thought we were different. It was nice.”

“Okay.”

They walked down the hallway. Finn was trailing Marcus, as always. More people waved at Marcus than at Finn. He was a person who commanded attention, like a big planet surrounded by smaller ones. Finn considered himself a small planet.

“Hey Finn,” Marcus said over his shoulder. “What’s the difference between a joke and two dicks?”

“What?”

“You can’t take a joke.”

Finn forced himself to laugh as naturally as possible, trailing after Marcus as he giggled at his own joke. The joke made him feel bad, but he figured he was just being weak. He didn’t want to be weak.

Marcus waved goodbye and Finn broke off to go to class with Katherine. He felt like he was walking into a boxing match in a movie; his hands were sweaty and he felt that if he spoke he might choke on his words. But he only needed to say one word: *‘hi.’*

The teacher started a PowerPoint presentation on the wild west, complete with pictures of cowboys and criminals and sheriffs. Everyone had guns, and she explained how only the quickest hand survived. She was smiling.

Finn didn’t say a word to Katherine.

After school, Finn stormed home in a terrible mood; he had broken his promise to himself. He was too scared to say hello to Katherine or to anyone else. He had imploded

inwardly again. He switched from rage to self-pity with every breath he took. He said nothing to his mother on the car ride home and went straight into his room.

He arranged his army men into terrible situations. The tan soldiers surrounded a single green soldier with no weapon, just a radio, and they took turns shooting him in the stomach. Some tan soldiers fell off of the bed to their deaths. One even got his arm pulled off by a rage-fueled giant named Finn. People trembled when he walked by. He commanded attention and deserved respect. Don't mess with Finn, you just might lose an arm.

His anger continued to fuel itself until the sound of the door opening and closing jarred him out of his world. He looked at his alarm clock and saw that it was just before seven, so he didn't know what type of night he was going to have. He moved to the door and listened. He could tell his parents were both upset but they were quiet this time, their voices hushed into fuming whispers. He heard light footsteps coming up the stairs and he knew they belonged to his mother so he didn't bother hiding anything. She told him it was time for dinner so he followed her down. Curly trailed them.

Everything looked like it would on a good night but Finn couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. The table was set and his father told stories with loud energy and his mother smiled tightly. But it was off. Something in his father's voice.

"One of my kids today," his father said before succumbing to a sigh. "One of my kids today tried to lead a revolt. Happens every year. I have no idea why the administration insists of cramming *A Separate Peace* down these kids' throats every year."

Finn's mother's smile widened slightly and deliberately.

"So this young man, Atticus – real name, by the way – this young man in my class raises his hand and you know what he says?"

Finn's father takes a deep drink of wine.

"He says, 'why don't you assign us a book with a plot?' Can you believe it? A book with a plot!"

He looks around expectantly before settling his gaze on his wife. Finn saw that she was wearing one of those painful smiles that he suspected his father wasn't really aware of. The lines in her face seemed to grow like shadows when it gets dark.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" Finn's father asked.

"Nothing. Dear."

He reached for the wine bottle and poured it unsteadily while Finn looked back and forth between the two of them. Finn looked down at his plate; it was ornately arranged, a selection of chicken with lemon, grilled vegetables, carrot slices, and Perrier to drink. It was pretty to look at but he didn't want to eat any of it and he wanted to ask his mother for macaroni and cheese in the microwave but she had worked so hard he felt like it might be mean of him to do so. So he just sat there stabbing the chicken with his fork repeatedly.

To his left, his father took a deep drink of his wine and then barely suppressed a burp, holding one hand up to his chest in a fist and exhaling loudly before grinning with a wide smile, one of his teeth stained slightly pink from wine.

"Well this is all so nice," he said, in a voice Finn couldn't interpret.

"What is all so nice?" his mother asked. Finn could tell she was upset about something and the whole situation felt heavy and uncomfortable; it felt memorable even though it wasn't over, the way certain memories he had were. First time falling down. First day of school. First time hearing his father's voice sound slippery.

“Well, shit, honey,” he said. “Everything is just so fucking great, isn’t it? Everything is...going...*swimmingly*, isn’t it? Huh? Yeah?”

He then started laughing, but Finn didn’t think it was a happy laugh, and it made his mouth dry up and his stomach hurt like he had eaten too much sugar. Finn’s mother looked at him with lifeless eyes, her face totally still, and then turned back to her husband.

“Get out.”

“I’m eating.”

“Get out of this house. Don’t come back tonight.”

The sad man sighed loudly and rubbed his hands through his hair with his elbows on the table, and then rubbed his eyes, and then looked up with a strange smile. His eyes were red but he seemed very sure of himself. Finn didn’t understand how he could be sure of himself when he was so unhappy.

“Honey,” he said. “Honey. Do me a favor.”

He stood up from his seat, his chair screeching horribly against the floor, and leaned over and put both hands on the table for support. He then continued.

“Shut your stupid mouth. Huh? Yeah? Okay, honey, sweetness, love of my life? That make sense to you?”

Finn’s mother moved quickly; she grabbed Finn by the hand and led him straight up the stairs, ignoring the frustrated, blistering, mocking sounds coming from her husband’s mouth. She led Finn into his room and sat him on his bed. His father continued yelling and laughing, but did not come upstairs. She knelt down in front of Finn, and he saw her perfectly curled hair and her very red lips and her eyes like a hungry bird; she took both of his hands in hers.

“Finn. I need you to be brave and smart. I’m locking the door to your room. I’m going to clean this whole thing up, and I’ll be back for you. Do you believe me? Do you trust me when I say I’ll clean everything up?”

Finn began to cry, even though he was trying very hard not to. It was a silent cry, at least; he knew his father wouldn’t hear him. But his face burned and his mouth felt tight and his nose stung. But he nodded yes. His mother kissed him and left the room and closed the door and Finn heard the sound of the door locking.

He immediately crawled up to the door and put his ear to it, feeling the wood against his face as he tried to get comfortable. He still heard the vague, crazed yelling of his father. It lasted for about five or ten minutes, Finn couldn’t tell. Then, he heard lower voices. It seemed like it was going to pass. Then, it was totally quiet.

Finn tried his best to wait. He sat very still for what felt like hours, but was probably minutes. He still didn’t hear anything. Even though he knew it was locked, he pulled on the door handle. Locked. He moved to his small window and looked out. He tried to open it, knowing he wasn’t strong enough; it was jammed, it always had been jammed. And then he heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairway. Someone jangled the lock for a few moments, and then the door flew open and hit his wall with a loud bang.

His father stood before him, again. His eyes darted all around the room, and he looked as though he had never seen it before. His button-down shirt had what looked like a tear in it on the left sleeve, but he kept his right hand over it. He cocked his head at the collection of family photos that were hung up on one wall. Finn didn’t like them but his mother had insisted that it looked good. His father walked strangely, seeming to sway back

and forth slightly and rubbing his wet face with his free hand; he moved over to the photos and stood with his back to Finn.

“Finn, listen, we only have a minute or two. You’re going to...um...you’re going to understand all of this soon. Well, maybe not soon...but one day you’ll understand it. All of it, all that I have done. You’ll...you’ll do it too, in some way or another. Yeah? Right?”

Finn focused his entire being on not crying again. He had used his sheets to wipe his face clean while he had been waiting.

“Did you know I didn’t used to be a teacher? Yeah. I didn’t want to be one, really. It seemed too repetitive. It still does, actually.”

He laughed again, that unhappy laugh that made Finn feel sick.

“Same thing...every year. I used to have options, you know? I was making myself. I hadn’t finished yet. Then...”

Finn felt his face burn like he had stuck it in front of the microwave. He felt his hands shaking in their pockets, and he looked directly at a blank space on the wall to focus on not crying.

“Are you crying, son?”

Finn stared at the blank wall.

“Don’t do that, please...don’t do that,” his father said, beginning to pace and speak more loudly. “Don’t fucking *do* that! I didn’t make you cry, you just...you just cried, okay? You’re just a fucking crier. I am not a father that makes his son cry,” he said, while jabbing his chest with his finger. “I’m not a crier, so I don’t know how you became one. It must have been your mother. Weak family. They’re all in therapy and shit.”

“Where’s mom?”

“You need to trust your instincts, Finn. Be who you are, follow what you feel. If you don’t, then you’re lying, and it’ll eat you. Even if...people tell you that what you feel is wrong. Do it anyway. Don’t just buzz around cleaning stuff and humming, like your mother. Do you ever...”

The man paused, winced, and began rubbing his hand over his cut sleeve with more fervor.

“Are you too young? Nah, you’re not too young. You know what I’m talking about, right, my boy?”

“Where’s mom?” Finn asked more confidently this time.

“Downstairs,” his father said off-handedly. “Like I was saying...your mother might tell you things, and you might see things and, and assume that I’m this terrible guy or something.”

Finn didn’t understand how a person could ignore everything but themselves. He moved to go to his open door. His father moved quickly, blocking him. The man kneeled down, so they were eye to eye; Finn’s nose scrunched up at the smell from his breath. It smelled like the stuff they used to wash their hands at school.

“You’ll get it one day. Ignore everyone else. Okay? You’re my boy, right? Aren’t you my boy, still?”

“Yeah, I probably always will be. Right?”

Finn’s father’s face lit up, but it seemed temporary or artificial somehow.

“That’s it, Finn. Now, let your daddy go ahead and leave. Wait a minute before you follow me, okay? Do you promise, son?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Then he left.

Finn walked downstairs after half a minute, tentatively looking down from the stairs into the kitchen, his view obstructed by the bannister as he crept slowly on the carpet. His anxiety dissipated when he saw his mother sitting at the kitchen table, looking like an abandoned garden decoration, like the gnomes they had in the front yard. She was sitting still in a way that scared Finn. She stood up when she saw him, smiling. But she quickly turned to the sink as he reached the bottom step and began washing a kitchen knife with her back to him.

“It was quiet up there. He didn’t do anything to you, did he Finn?”

“No.”

“That’s good. Some stuff isn’t good, but that’s good.”

She dropped the utensil into the sink, satisfied that there was no more she could do for it. She sat back down at the kitchen table, and Finn did as well. Her angry bird eyes flashed at him. Curly stalked up to him and rubbed his body against Finn’s leg, stretching and purring, looking up at him with his dumb, smashed in little face.

“I don’t know what to do about dad,” Finn said.

“You don’t have to do anything about dad. Just think about other people; think about me, think about your friends, think about Curly; don’t be selfish and angry. See? I’m fine. See? Everything’s fine. We’re not a family that has to deal with things like that.”

Finn looked at her suspiciously.

“Your father...you see, he’s really selfish sometimes. Do you ever feel selfish? We all do, I guess.”

She smiled at Finn. It was a real smile, he thought, not like his dad's. Even if his dad's smiles were wider and louder they weren't really smiles.

"The key when you feel sad is to get closer to people, not further away from them. Even if it's tempting to do that. Now, enough preaching from me," she said, smiling a little. "What would you like to eat?"

"Mac'n'cheese."

She heated up some macaroni and cheese for Finn and he ate it in silence, unable to process either parent. He was angry but he didn't have an object to direct it at since neither parent seemed to bring him something useful. So his mind just sweltered. He had never been so mad that his stomach seemed filled with something acidic; it just kept feeling worse and worse as he ate, and he felt a confusing sense of guilt and inadequacy.

His mother sat in the kitchen making phone calls pretty late into that night, so Finn brought Curly into his room, carrying him in against his will as the goofy little cat quietly growled. He tried playing with his army men but he didn't care about them anymore, and found no comfort in his old routine, which he now thought was way too childish for him. So he put Curly on his bed and messed with him, pulling at his legs and scratching his head and grabbing him any time he tried to get away. Curly got scared or mad – whatever the difference is – and tried to hiss at Finn. So Finn walked outside and closed the door behind him and sat against the wall, listening to Curly whine and scratch at the door, unable to get out. It felt good.

* * *

The next day at school, Finn felt the same way he had the night before. He and Marcus walked down a hallway, Marcus nodding at people and high-fiving them as Finn

pretended to be in on jokes that they made. Finn had thought of a really bad joke, a grown-up joke, something that would help him gain some mass, as a boy. A guy. He waited until he and Marcus were leaning up against their cubbies in the hallway, and there was a bit of a crowd.

“Hey Marcus,” Finn said.

“Yeah?”

“Why’d the mommy cry and the daddy laugh?”

“Why?”

“Because someone killed their kid.”

Marcus’s eyes grew wide, and Finn could tell he didn’t find it funny. But a couple of the other boys smiled, grinned, said *Jesus, man* or *holy crap*. So Marcus’s face anxiously smiled, and then laughed, and Finn smacked him on the shoulder and walked into class, leaving all the boys looking at him with wonder.

He sat down next to Katherine, his backpack smacking the ground loudly as he did so. He felt belligerent and unafraid of consequences. He turned to her without hesitation.

“Hi.”

Pixelated People

Ned White sat at his desk in the condo he and his fiancé Maggie had just bought, staring at his computer. It was late and Maggie was in bed, probably asleep. Ned took comfort in the fact that there was no longer any real pressure to go to bed at the same time. Now there was a lot less faking involved. Having to act out a lie made his stomach hurt. Better to get away. He stared at his computer, double-checking the time. He logged into the dating site made specifically for people like him. His profile was under the name Greg Yeats. He sent a message to the woman he had been chatting with or a few weeks now, Katherine. Her profile said that she was 23, four years younger than him. She was overly enthusiastic, but he supposed that was what he liked about her. They never messaged each other for more than a few minutes anyway. After ten minutes, he was just about ready to shut it off, but then he saw a message.

Hiii...

His stomach lurched for the first time all day, and he typed back and forth with the woman for a few minutes. They chatted about nothing, suggestively, until Katherine sent him another photo of herself. She was blonde and wore too much makeup, but he assumed that was just an age thing. He knew this was bad. But nothing had happened. She typed *how can I help u Greg?* Before he could figure out an answer, Ned heard Maggie's footsteps, awkward and sleepy, heading his way down the hall towards the bathroom. He muted the computer and took out his headphones and opened his email, minimizing the woman. She had asked him the same thing maybe a dozen times in the past couple weeks – *how can I help u Greg?* – and he never answered, and even though it would have made him

feel worse in some ways, he thought he would feel better if he could just give her a straight answer.

“Honey?” Maggie said groggily. “Honey, why are you still up?”

“Just... finishing some stuff up.”

“You work too hard. Come to bed soon,” she said, closing the bathroom door behind her.

“Okay,” he said to the door.

He opened up the site again, but Katherine had logged out. She must have seen him go offline. Enraged, he closed the app and shut his computer. He brushed his teeth furiously, drawing blood from his gums, and then got in bed next to his fiancé and curled into himself. They fell asleep back to back, looking opposite directions, after shuffling restlessly for an hour.

* * *

Ned’s parents got him and his brother to agree to visit them, but he didn’t know what the occasion was. Old Sean and Nancy had apparently spruced up their house for a week, splurging on flowers, cards, haircuts, and gardening. The house stood atop a small hill in an otherwise densely-populated suburb of Phoenix, and the happy couple, who had recently celebrated their 33rd anniversary, waited on the front porch for their sons, both of whom were bringing significant others for the holiday. Ned arrived first.

His SUV pulled slowly and deliberately up the driveway, Ned and Maggie both waving enthusiastically from inside the car. When he parked and got out of the car, he rushed around to the passenger door and held it open for Maggie. This made the Sullivan

parents blush with pride. Ned grinned with one arm holding a suitcase and one arm draped around his fiancé, who looked up at him adoringly.

“Darlings, both my darlings,” Nancy crooned, approaching the couple with arms outstretched. Sean settled for a curt, prideful nod and a firm handshake for his son, who returned it. Then, they both broke out in grins and hugged unreservedly, slapping each other’s broad backs. The two women laughed at them. All four of them walked inside, talking over each other excitedly about how well every single little thing was going for all of them. Ned and Maggie set their luggage down and Sean ushered them into the living room while Nancy worked in the kitchen.

“So Ned...son...how’s the business?” Sean asked.

“Oh, dad, you know how it is, busy as hell. But I’m up for review soon, and I’ve been really going above and beyond, so hopefully I can take the next step up within a couple of months.”

Sean nodded, pleased, and reclined into his favorite leather chair. He wasn’t fat by any means, but he took up a vast amount of space, seeming to have some type of gravitational pull. Especially when he laughed. Maggie sat next to Ned on the couch and grabbed his arm and squeezed it lovingly, smiling up at him. She had long blonde hair and used her whitening strips too much, so her teeth almost glowed. Ned smiled back, interweaving his fingers in hers as Nancy came in with four gin and tonics, grinning mischievously.

“I figured we could have some fun,” she said brightly, inspiring a round of laughter.

They all took their drinks and sat back down to a collective, contented sigh. Ned considered telling Maggie not to have her drink because he knew she would get chatty, but he hesitated too long.

“Where’s the problem child?” he asked.

“Now, *honey*,” his mother said, “don’t even start with that. Michael seems to be doing very well in school. You’re going to have to call him Dr. White here in a couple years. I can’t believe there’s going to be a PhD in the family.”

“Yeah, in *philosophy*. So he can help build...*philosophies*? Maybe pave your driveway with them, or fix your computer? You know, I think Rubio might have been onto something when he said more welders, less philosophers.”

“Even you don’t have a PhD,” Sean said.

“I have two graduate degrees,” Ned said, sitting up a little straighter.

“Wait, really?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah,” Ned said, deflated. “I got an MBA too, remember? At night?”

“Oh, yes! Of course, babe,” Maggie said, squeezing his hand.

“Everyone has an MBA now,” Sean said.

“No they don’t,” Ned muttered while everyone else shared a grin. “Not everyone has an MBA.”

The conversation turned to their local parish while Ned’s face congealed into annoyance. His mother and father went back and forth on Bishop O’Rourke, who stepped down recently due to some kind of scandal he himself was not directly involved in.

“I mean, it doesn’t sound like *he* did anything wrong,” Nancy said. “I don’t see why he gets punished for some...someone else’s perversion.”

“He’s supposed to stop things like that from happening,” Sean said, matter-of-factly.

“How can you do that? It’s hard enough for one person to quiet their own demons...much less keep track of everyone else’s,” Nancy said.

“Wait, so Dad...what did he do?” Ned asked. “Or, I mean, what did *someone* do?”

“I dunno,” Sean said, smiling cruelly. “Something involving kids, probably.”

Maggie gasped, covering her mouth with her hand, and Nancy frowned at Sean.

“That’s not something to joke about, Sean, that’s really not something to joke about...such a...such a disgusting thing. I don’t know how people walk around outside after...doing such a disgusting thing. Living such a lie. You’d think they would just explode or something.”

Sean laughed anyway.

“I think they’re just victims of themselves,” Maggie said. “I mean, they’re sick.”

“Worse than that,” Sean said. “Everyone has some amount of control over themselves. There’s no excuse for some things.”

“I guess some people are worse...but everyone has some type of outlet, right?” Ned said.

Maggie scrunched her face up, thinking.

“Outlet?” Nancy said.

“Yeah. Outlet. Nobody can function highly at all times...everyone screws up...it keeps things balanced.”

“What’s your outlet?” Sean asked Ned playfully, while Maggie and Nancy grimaced a little.

“Mine?” Ned said. “Well, I suppose I must admit to a small...online gaming addiction. It’s tough to kick.”

Maggie laughed.

“Oh yes, Ned and his videogames, you know now you have *no* idea who you’re online with, isn’t that crazy? Sometimes he’s up so late. I mean, normally I—”

“Everyone knows how videogames work, hon,” Ned said without looking at Maggie.

She stopped talking and took a sip of her drink.

“Well anyway,” Sean said. “Michael would have found the whole Bishop O’Rourke thing funny.”

“Michael has found disturbing topics...hilarious...since he was young, I’m afraid,” Nancy said to nobody in particular, swirling her drink slightly, making the ice clink.

Ned didn’t say anything, or betray his sudden, flinching stomach ache. He just kissed his fiancé on the cheek reassuringly and smiled at everyone. The living room was impeccable, the white couches unstained. The curtains were pulled back on the windows and the light shone inside, without glaring, illuminating every face and bouncing off of all those smiling teeth. The sound of a loud radio and crunching gravel jarred everyone out of their silence.

“Well,” Sean said, “here comes the problem child.”

Maggie leaned in to Ned’s ear and whispered “I wonder what kind of woman he brought home this time,” smiling widely. Ned frowned. He knew he shouldn’t have let her have a drink this early, she could embarrass herself. He walked in front of everyone to greet Michael in the driveway.

As Michael opened his car door, cans of soda fell out with a cacophonous clang. He nearly tripped over himself, and stamped out a cigarette butt into the gravel, popping gum into his mouth. His long hair fell aimlessly over his shoulders and even though Ned saw he had haphazardly put on a tie, his shirt was untucked and his belt and shoes didn't match. Brown belt with black shoes. He grinned at Ned and held out his hand.

“Hiya, brother,” he said, and they shook hands.

“Not going to help the woman out?” Ned asked him, gesturing to his left.

Michael's girlfriend was laughing and giving him the finger as she carried both of their large, cumbersome pieces of luggage from the back seat. She was tall and thin, with long black hair not unlike Michael's, and when she had leaned over to pick up the bags Ned had seen what he thought might be a small pentagram tattoo behind her ear. Michael shrugged.

“She's a big girl,” he said.

As his parents walked out the front door Michael lowered his voice into Ned's ear and whispered “she can do a lot with her hands,” before turning back and running to greet his parents like a toddler. This upset Ned, Michael acting like such a baby in front of people. The neighbors might see. He followed Michael and his girlfriend inside.

Michael introduced his girlfriend, Tammy, to each member of the family individually. Everyone was smiling and nodding and shaking her hand. Nancy ran off into the kitchen to grab two more drinks, but Ned noticed that Michael motioned to her to only get one. Ned cursed himself, again, for letting Maggie drink at five in the afternoon. Nancy came back in with a drink and handed it to Michael, who passed it to Tammy, who grinned up at him. Ned

frowned in confusion. He didn't think Michael would really stay sober this long. All six of them sat in the clear, open, brightly-lit living room and looked at each other.

"Isn't this so lovely?" Nancy said, more than once.

"Yes," various people said afterwards.

It was silent for a while, the only sounds were soft winds against the screen door and the clinking of obnoxiously large cubes of ice in their drinks.

"So," Michael said, brushing his long hair behind his ear. "What's the occasion?"

"No occasion," snapped Nancy quickly, looking at Sean.

"The...*occasion*," Ned said deliberately, "is that we are a *family*."

Michael rolled his eyes while Ned smiled a little smugly, gauging everyone's reactions. Nancy beamed with pride but Sean caught Michael's eye and they shared a grin. Tammy looked like she was trying to be polite. Maggie looked down at her feet. Ned was livid.

"We were thinking we could head down to see some live music tonight," Nancy said.

"What's the name of the place...the faux-New Orleans place?"

"Oh yeah," Ned said, smiling. "Sounds good."

"So," Michael said again, more deliberately this time. "What...*is*...the...occasion?"

"You are just too difficult," Ned said, exasperated, as their father laughed with Michael. Nancy turned to look at Sean with a concerned face, and she seemed to Ned to hesitate, to almost say something, before withdrawing back into herself and having another sip of her drink. Sean winked at Ned, as if to apologize for having a different sense of humor, and then stood up slowly and announced that he was going to go get changed. Nancy went with him, and Michael used this opportunity to sneak outside and have another

cigarette. Maggie turned to look at Ned, who muttered that he had to check his email and he would be right back.

He closed the door of the bedroom behind him and opened his computer. He closed the blinds. This room was dark and hazy, messy and imperfect. Their luggage was still sitting out. He opened his computer and logged into the dating site, feeling that rare excitement. This was the only thing that brought him any reaction at all, he had known this for a while now. Katherine wasn't online. He decided to send her a picture of himself looking sad, but when he came face to face with his own green, pixelated eyes, he couldn't handle it. He allowed the shame to wash over him before minimizing the screen and closing the laptop. He could do what he was supposed to for a little while longer, he supposed.

* * *

All six of them sat at the restaurant and listened to the local guys playing top 40 country songs. They discussed how, though the songs themselves weren't the classics, the performers were quality. Actually, four of them had this conversation, while Tammy nodded politely and Michael's head rolled around like a toddler's, his frustration leaking out of his pores, right out in the open for everyone to see. Ned noticed him take smoke breaks every fifteen minutes. He could see Michael out the window, hair blowing, smoke seeming to leak from the top of his head in irregular billows. After the fifth cigarette, Ned pointed out that Michael seemed to not like the food or the music.

"So?" Michael said, confrontationally.

"Just, you know...just wondering what's got you thinking so highly of yourself, Doctor so-and-so," Ned said quietly, brushing off his sport coat.

It was quiet for a moment, and the brothers' parents looked at each other anxiously. Maggie patted Tammy on the knee to make it clear that this was no big deal, smiling and shaking her head.

"What, the food?" Michael said. "The food makes your stomach hurt. Why would you do something that makes your stomach hurt? The music? It's fake, even when it's live. Is that it? The food, the music? Nothing else?"

He sat up and faced his brother squarely, and Ned did the same.

"Mikey, Mikey," Ned said, "take it easy. Maybe have another cigarette. Maybe be less pretentious."

"Ned, what *is* the matter?" Michael said. "It isn't me, so, I mean, tell me. Or...I guess...well, yeah it's definitely you, not me."

"Boys," Nancy said, a little too desperately, "not *now*."

"What is *now*, for fuck's sake?" Michael said, lightly smacking the table.

Ned was about to admonish Michael for cursing at dinner with their mother in public when she burst into loud, attention-grabbing tears. She held her ever-so-wrinkled hands over her mouth and continued sobbing. Even over the loud twang of country music, the customers in the surrounding tables looked over with confused and surprised faces. Sean moved quickly, scooting his chair closer to hers and holding her tight with one arm, glaring at his sons. Tammy and Maggie fidgeted uncomfortably while Nancy sobbed.

"I just...all I wanted was...*ugh!*"

Ned found himself shocked at what an ugly crier his mother was before immediately lashing out at Michael, whispering harshly about how selfish he was, before Sean cut them off with an assertive voice.

“Look, I might be sick, okay? I might be sick.”

The six of them sat there in silence as the song ended, waiting anxiously for another one to start. After a brief guitar and drum solo, the singer started croaking about how “where I come from ain’t no worse than where you come from” and the family found themselves cocooned in noise again, the closest they could get to privacy.

“Why wouldn’t you tell us?” Michael asked.

“Your mother wanted some sense of normalcy while we figured it out, but you two took care of that, didn’t you?”

“Well then...why *would* you tell us?” Ned asked.

Michael looked at him, eyebrow raised, totally disgusted.

“Also, it’s totally unfair for you two lovely ladies to be dropped into this,” Sean said, looking apologetically at Tammy and Maggie. “Absolutely unfair, a thousand apologies...”

“Dad, what’s wrong? What, uh, what do you have?” Michael asked.

“Michael, not now,” Ned hissed, looking at his mother drying her eyes while the singer crooned “where I come from, a man done wrong, but he’ll make it right.”

“No, it’s okay,” Sean said. “We don’t even know how bad it is yet. Just, you know...a black shadow on an x-ray at this point. Could be nothing.”

They all stared at their food and at each other.

“But...” Sean continued. “It’s really big and dark. Hard to look at, hard to look away from.”

* * *

After they had all left in three cars they sat back in the living room of Sean and Nancy’s house. Tammy and Maggie were upstairs pretending to do something, so it was just

the Whites sitting in the living room. The blinds and windows were still open but now it was dark and the curtains whooshed around softly as a breeze came through. It made Michael's hair fall into his face. The brothers sat and listened to their father explain what the procedure was – the M.O. is what he called it – while their mother clenched her tiny jaw and tried not to cry. Ned sat fidgeting and looking away while Michael was perfectly still, leaning forward, soaking it all up.

“So, I mean, we just don't even know yet?” Michael asked.

“Pretty much,” Sean said. “But it's dangerous to sit around hoping shit just gets better.”

“So...what are we even doing, then?” Ned said.

Michael's eyes flared but he took a deep breath and ignored him.

“We're just...we're just looking at the problem,” Sean said.

“But...if we don't know yet...and we won't know for a couple of weeks...”

Ned's mouth moved silently as he tried to finish his thought.

“Then why talk about it? Let's talk about something else.”

That stumped Sean and Michael for a moment.

“No,” Michael said.

“Why not?”

“Because that's bullshit.”

“Wow,” Ned said. “Really wearing out that thesaurus, aren't you Doc?”

Sean rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

“Not everything is about you, Ned,” Michael said. “Just stop being so...dismissive.”

“I'm not being dismissive!”

“Listen you two,” Sean said, finger outstretched towards his sons. “Listen to me. It’s all well and good that you guys know what we know now. That’s always a good thing, knowing what’s wrong.”

Ned fidgeted in his seat.

“But,” Sean continued, “You two need to think about something other than yourselves for a while here. You got two women hiding on the second floor right now, and I don’t blame’em. Go upstairs and be nice.”

It was like the boys were little again. There was no hesitation, they simply looked at each other and shrugged and walked upstairs. Michael found Tammy and they went out to the backyard to smoke cigarettes. Ned knocked softly on the door of the guest bedroom. When he heard Maggie tell him to come on in, he did. She was folding the clothes they had brought and plugging in chargers. She was dusting things with her fingertips that were already clean. She stayed busy.

“How are you, babe?” she asked him, her voice saturated with concern.

“Fine, Maggie, fine.”

She set some clothes down and moved over to him, hugging him and resting her chin on his chest and smiling up at him. He put his arm around her and rubbed her back and forced a smile.

“Well that was weird, huh?” he said.

She didn’t find that funny, she just pouted up at him.

“Probably not what your parents had in mind, babe, I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Well, it’s early,” Michael said. “Too soon to worry much. I don’t even know why they told us, if nothing’s for sure.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t understand what they accomplished.”

“Well...they told us the truth.”

“Well, yeah...and it feels good to be truthful...but it can be pretty selfish too, you know.”

“Ned! This is your father we’re talking about!”

“I know, I know. I don’t know. Just seems...weird.”

“Why don’t you lie down,” she asked him. “Why don’t you just go ahead and lie down, I’ll take care of everything.”

“I guess I will,” Ned said, unbuttoning his tie and kicking off his shoes. “I guess I will. Love you.”

He collapsed onto the bed and she kissed his forehead and ran her fingers through his hair for a little and smiled at him. He wished she would stop. It made him feel awkward. He looked at her quizzically.

“What’s up, Maggie?”

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

He sat up quickly.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said, looking away. “I bet I’m just being stupid. But...you’re working late, and you’re quiet, and I didn’t think anything of it, but now this, with your dad...I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“Look, Maggie, I’m fine.”

“Are *we* fine? We’re fine, right?”

He looked down at her glow-in-the-dark teeth barely showing between her lips. Her eyes were big and nervous and her eyebrows were rising and he couldn't take it.

"Maggie, things are great. I know I've been...a little absent..."

He found himself looking over at his computer.

"...and you deserve better, you do, you deserve better," he kept mumbling. She actually stepped back from him a little, looking up with her big nervous eyes, slowly stepping backwards. He kept muttering how much more she deserved, sitting there on the edge of the bed with his face in his hands.

"Hey, babe, stop that," she said.

"Why? It's true."

"I know you," she said. "You're the best there is."

This made him flinch. He stood up and moved to the door.

"I'm gonna take a walk," he said, shutting the door behind him, only catching a glimpse of Maggie's confused face.

* * *

As Ned snuck out the front door and walked quickly into the soft cold winds of the suburban streets, he heard footsteps rapidly approach him. It was Michael, grinning like an infant.

"What's your next move, brother? You running out on us?" Michael said.

"Just needed a minute."

Michael's smirk softened a little. He smacked his brother's shoulder and said "alright, let's go then."

They meandered down the street, looking up at a sky with no stars, the only light coming from dated street lamps. Ned was surprised Michael was quiet. He normally wouldn't stop fucking with him. Michael's mouth moved like he wanted to talk, and he seemed to really try not to, but he couldn't help himself.

“What's going on with you, man? You've always been wound a little tight, but you seem pretty fucked up right now,” Michael said, still walking, not looking over at Ned.

“I'm fine.”

“Fuck you, you're fine. What is it? Maggie?”

“Of course not,” Ned said quickly.

“Oh,” Michael said, grinning. “So it is Maggie.”

“You're a cunt,” Ned said.

“What's wrong?” Michael stopped walking when he said this, turning to face his brother.

“Leave me alone, man.”

“What's wrong?”

“Just shut up,” Ned said, his voice cracking slightly.

“Aw,” Michael said sarcastically, “is Neddy facing the existential chasm? Is the abyss looking back?”

“I don't know, okay? I'm just, fucking, wound up, I'm pent up, I'm being judged constantly, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing...I...”

Michael looked a little surprised. Ned calmed himself down.

“I think everyone needs something to look forward to and I don't have one,” Ned said.

“Something to look forward to? Besides what you’ve got?” Michael said. “Hell no, man. That’s fucked.”

“I mean, like, a release, man,” Ned said.

“Bullshit.”

“Why? Everyone has something. You have your fucking cigarettes. You have your little mantras from your meetings. You think you *know* everything.”

“Needing a release means something bad is building,” Michael said, avoiding the direct accusations. “Needing a release from life means you don’t have a good life. Needing a release is indicative of a bigger problem, man.”

“There is no bigger problem,” Ned said. “I just need –”

“To stop thinking about yourself because our dad might be sick, you *fuck*?”

“We don’t know yet so don’t use that on me. I just need something to look forward to, something that’s...”

“Jesus, are you fucking someone else?” Michael said.

“Of course not! That’s your M.O. if I remember correctly,” Ned hissed.

Michael raised his hands in the air and said “guilty as charged, baby.”

Ned resented how Michael could wear his own failures so comfortably. Michael took all of the significance out of his various identities – cheater, addict, dropout – and somehow turned them into interesting quirks, and just kept chugging. Michael stopped laughing at his own joke and turned around, back toward the house, gesturing for Ned to follow him.

“Look Neddy,” he said. “You gotta be honest with yourself. You’re a good man, and all...you are. But you got this look on your face like you’re in front of a firing squad.”

“No I don’t,” Ned said. “I don’t show that...I mean, I don’t look like that.”

“Not in front of Maggie, you don’t,” Michael said. “That’s not great. You’re hiding.”

“So why am I taking advice on women from a longhair fuck-up like you?” Ned said.

“This isn’t advice on women,” Michael said. “The women getting hurt are...collateral. That’s what I’m saying. Figure your shit out, be there for dad if he needs it, be nice to mom...calm down a bit.”

The two men walked all the way back to the house in the cold air without speaking. Ned has his hands in his jacket pockets. Michael waved both hands slowly, like he was swimming, and his hair floated in the wind and he did look to Ned like he was swimming. Living in the moment, he guessed. Ned didn’t quite resent his brother. He just didn’t understand him. He remembered about two years ago, when Michael had gotten sober. Even without booze, he still cheated on somebody, and his relationship blew up. When Ned asked him about it, Michael said he made a mistake, and that he had to “keep shame out of his game, man.” Nothing had confused Ned so much in his adult life, as his brother saying that.

* * *

When they got back home they said goodnight to each other and to their parents. Nobody mentioned the x-ray. Not even Michael. Ned walked up to the guest room and saw Maggie lying in bed reading. She smiled and told him to get in bed. He did. He sat up pretending to read while she slowly drifted off to sleep. He snuck out after he was sure she was asleep. He took his computer downstairs to the living room. He poured himself a drink and opened the laptop.

One might as well continue down a bad road, he figured, because that road is honest. How bad could it be to be honest? Even peripherally, or temporarily. He sent Katherine a

message and she logged in soon after, sending her normally overexcited messages. Ned wrote her that he wasn't sure what he was doing with his life. She responded *what's the plan?* He told her he didn't have one. She sent *LOL*. He supposed that was funny. Maybe she had a dark sense of humor. He typed that he was going to lose his mind soon if something didn't change, that he was miserable, that he felt like a fraud and that at any moment everything would blow up in his life. She sent *do you wanna meet up?* Oh, he thought, she's concerned. He told her he couldn't, that things were complicated, that he couldn't quite figure out what was going on with his life. She sent back *LOL*.

He realized that that didn't compute, that isn't how people talk. He sent her a few commas in a row and she responded *how can I help u?* and he slammed the laptop shut and knocked it off of the table, sending it to the floor. He didn't know how he could be so stupid. He had heard of this before. There was no Katherine, there was just an automated bot that the site made. Her messages were probably an algorithm hundreds of guys read. The pictures of her were too good to be real. What would a 23-year-old want with him?

He refilled his glass, shaken, but then suddenly stopped; his face cracked into a sad smile, and then he laughed a little, because this way he hadn't hurt anybody. He could go on a while longer. Katherine would take this to her grave.

Bridges

Deirdre sat in her cubicle, mechanically finishing up what she had just decided would be the last story she combed for the day. It was a big day, after all; her husband Hank wasn't going to be working until midnight. They hadn't shared a Friday night in months. He was the manager at the QuikTrip off of main street. He received an "urban bonus" because an employee had been near-fatally stabbed about three years ago. He would diligently, absent-mindedly do his job for almost twelve hours before furtively stealing a tin of tobacco and coming home. Once there, he would stare at the television – he never changed the channel – and quietly spit into an empty water bottle with surprising delicacy until he fell asleep on the couch.

But tonight he was going to be home early, around eight o'clock, according to what he had muttered before slouching out the door this morning, leaving a stained coffee cup in the bathroom almost entirely full. Deirdre, finding it about an hour later, had scrubbed it for about five minutes, but the dark ring wouldn't disappear. The bottom of the cup had some faded rings from mornings when he drank more. This new one was a little problematic, but she wasn't sure why.

She sat with good posture, holding her shoulders back. She had dedicated herself to this after watching a particularly compelling Ted Talks about body language. The speaker was an attractive middle-aged woman who smiled a lot and insisted that small details such as eye contact and assertive stances could and would dictate relationships, employment, and health. Deirdre scratched her thigh constantly, a tick nobody bothered to notice or point out, for whatever reason. Her nametag read DIERDRE, which bothered her to no end, but she

didn't know who to complain to. It seemed too trivial for her superiors, yet too pretentious to mention to her peers, to whom she hardly ever spoke. So she sat, reading through an article about French politicians involved in some alleged prostitution ring, making sure there were no typos or grammatical fallacies. The big issue seemed to be how old these girls were, rather than what they were, who they were, and why flabby old men were paying to fuck them. "Focus on quotes...people fuck those up when there're translators involved," Timothy had said to her. He hadn't made eye contact when he did this, and his hands were occupied dragging a teabag in and out and in and out of a Styrofoam cup. She honestly had no idea what his job was, besides muttering onerous advice in a tone that was neither helpful nor condescending, as if he were absent-mindedly talking to himself, and drinking ungodly amounts of Earl Grey.

Losing focus, Deirdre allowed herself a moment to look around at her (failed) attempts at making a cubicle seem cozy and try to come up with a plan. She didn't really know what Hank would expect on a Friday night. It brings a certain pressure. Their dates (back when those were a thing) were pleasant enough, she thought, but never very original. Movies. Ball games. Once a year or so, they would go to restaurants they couldn't afford where the waiters stood too close and filled up water glasses that weren't even half empty.

She looked at her watch and it was seven o'clock and she was almost done. There weren't any mistakes except one misspelled name; otherwise the whole article was somewhat banal, given its content. She didn't have much time, and she began to feel nervous; she had been practicing, though, and she caught herself before she slouched, rubbed her temples, or frowned. The attractive middle-aged woman insisted that these were submissive behaviors, and would likely result in her being fired, before Hank left her and she developed late stage

ass cancer. She had dressed nicer than usual, in the little ways she could, because the black shirt and nametag were required for low-level stuff. Deirdre had washed her hair with conditioner, and she had worn a bracelet Hank gave her, and matching underwear that she had bought herself months ago (in retrospect, probably too early of a purchase, but that had been before a particularly desperate attempt). Her brown hair was perfectly straight, gliding down past shoulders that weren't quite bony but close, one or two strands caught on her nametag that said DIERDRE.

She methodically packed up her belongings and put them in the backpack she had owned since she dropped out of grad school. She held it in one hand, grasping that little loop where a child would hang it up on a hook in a classroom under a piece of construction paper that said something like KEVIN or KATHLEEN. She held it like a briefcase, which had made her feel stupid at first, but she got used to it, and it helped her posture and she didn't wrinkle her clothes as much as she would have if she wore it traditionally. She passed through the mostly empty desks and cubicles and offices and all of the big structures and spaces were grey but there were little patches of color employees had imposed, most often taking shape in the form of some children-of-the-corn-looking drawing by someone's kid. Deirdre's heart began to sink for only a moment before – through sheer force of will and good posture and smiling – she kept it stable.

* * *

It must be a movie, she thought. They would stay in and watch a movie. They had a DVD player, after all, and a pretty good television. She was sitting in her car in the mostly empty parking lot and realized she had to go get a movie, which involved both picking a place to go get a movie and choosing which movie. The latter of these two decisions seemed

to carry with it too much pressure; it was too big of a fork in the road. She turned the key and the car started and she drove, but her mind was elsewhere, very far away, in a life she led that didn't involve pressure-cooker situations and potentially destructive decisions. In the car her body language was worse than submissive. Her shoulders imploded inwards on each other, her neck tightened, her eyes strained, and she hunched so much even a slight bump would send her chin bouncing off of the wheel. The attractive middle-aged woman from the video would have been very disappointed, though she would have expressed this through verbal cues rather than aggressive or judgmental facial and body language (such as frowning, furrowing of eyes, crossing of arms, shifting weight onto one foot more than the other, etc. Think of parents when their kids came home shitfaced in high school).

Deirdre decided to go to Wal-Mart – or rather, she decided there was nowhere else to go besides Wal-Mart, which is usually the realization made right before deciding to go to Wal-Mart – and she sped off into the night. She seemed to hit every red light. She reached her destination after developing a small shallow pool of sweat on her lower back and beginning to form under her arms. She transformed as she got out of the car, elegantly stretching like she just woke up from a good night's sleep, rolling her shoulders and flashing a smile to no one. She walked briskly towards the entrance when her route was suddenly cut off by a Jeep with five or six young-looking people yelling. The car's lights weren't on and Deirdre saw one object that she was certain was a liquor bottle.

“Are you tryna get *fucked*, lady?” screamed a bald-headed oafish guy who Deirdre assumed would grow up to be the military general in the movie who doesn't listen to the scientists. She maintained composure, giving a practiced look of boredom as the car drove one loop around her.

“Fuck, this town is boring as hell!” oafish guy screamed. One very somber looking girl in the backseat, mushed between two guys, made eye contact with Deirdre that she interpreted as apologetic (scrunched eyebrows, darting eyes, awkward ectomorph shoulders), which made the whole incident seem a little less horrifying. The car sped off, its destination a mystery, though Deirdre imagined it would wrap around a tree and the girl would be the only survivor, cushioned by the meat she was squished between. Hank always used to warn her about how fast she drove, citing all sorts of statistics and narratives that ended in bloodshed and loss of life. He stopped about a year and a half ago, choosing instead to quietly accept whatever fate would come to him as a passenger. She flinched at the memories of how she used to laugh at him, to let go of the wheel or slam the brakes, giggling at the thought that something bad may actually happen to her. Or her family.

The store was depressing to be in, but less depressing than Deirdre had anticipated. The artificial lighting seemed to exist only to highlight abrasions and rashes on the customers. She wandered through the technology section until she found it. The movie bin was an eye-stinging blue and stood about three feet high. Customers flowed around it like cars around the middle of a roundabout, nobody giving it any notice. She approached awkwardly, and began to work through what her goal was. A romantic comedy was not even an option; Hank wasn't the type. Besides, Deirdre didn't really like those all that much either. Action movies were off the list for the same reason. However, she knew Hank seemed to like what other people like, so she stuck her arm in the “New Releases” section and looked for titles she would recognize from watching television. If other people mostly liked it, she couldn't be blamed too harshly. Not that Hank would speak his mind anyway, it

was all in the eyes now, and had been for some time, ever since words failed them both. She grabbed *Inception* and left.

* * *

Driving home, more nervous than excited, wondering whether or not Hank was going to be home and what kind of mood he would be in, Deirdre thought back to the less stressful days. He used to come home with stories about customers that would have her in hysterics, or at least be able to put on a brave face if it was a particularly bad day. He still asked how her day was, but he did it the same way she flushed the toilet. Even if she bothered giving an answer with some level of depth she was met with that awful glaze in his eye like he didn't care, but she knew that wasn't it, not really. It was normal for people to lose some of their spark over the course of a decade, she thought, but Hank was paralyzed beyond recognition. When they met senior year of college he had asked her out three times before she said yes, and for the next five years, every day he seemed to expect her to turn on him. He helped her write out all of her assignments for school, he helped her deal with her parents, all of it. She had always thought he was a bit of a klutz, but there were serious feelings there. But once they lost the baby (every once in a while she could recall the event specifically, though usually in her mind that time period existed as "before"), they were stuck in a limbo between together and apart; they couldn't bring themselves to call off the engagement, yet they couldn't follow through.

Deirdre was shocked back into reality as she screeched the car to a halt at a red light, her chin barely avoiding the steering wheel as she lurched forward, the DVD falling from the passenger seat to the floor. There wasn't anybody around, and her hunched over body started scouring the trees for the remnants of Jeeps or for bloodied teenagers yelling for help, but

nobody was there. She took a calming breath and, waiting for the light to turn green, raised her hands as high as she could in her small car. They ended up mostly being stuck out sideways, but the Ted Talks had insisted that doing this for thirty seconds would increase her confidence, charisma, and likeability noticeably. She was at her apartment complex fifteen minutes later, her eyes gleaming, holding in one hand a backpack and in the other a DVD with a small bag hanging off her wrist that had microwave popcorn in it. Hank was never home for Friday nights.

* * *

She felt an odd combination of excitement and dread, like she was pulled off the B team and was strolling onto the field for the game of her life. This is the exact type of scenario the phrase *high risk, high reward* is used for. The keys jostled as she pushed the off-white door open and meekly said “hello?”

Hank was home, in all of his glory. His black pants and black-and-red collared shirt were almost impressively wrinkled, and his shoes were on the floor. One near Deirdre, the other next to him; he had shed his skin as he entered.

“Hey,” he said without looking over his shoulder. He was sitting on the couch facing the muted television in front of him, his back to the door.

“Are you *so* excited to be home? You never get Friday nights off!”

“It wasn’t really up to me, you know.”

“Well...well it doesn’t change the fact that you’re here now! Is...is there something you’re watching right now...is your heart really set on anything?”

Hank looked over his shoulder, the right part of his lower lip a bulge, with one eyebrow raised and gestured at the mute television as if to say *Does it fucking look like my heart is set on silent Duck Dynasty?*

“Oh...well, because,” Deirdre started, the nervousness filling her chest so suddenly and with so much more force than she anticipated that she stumbled on her words, “I got a little surprise for you. I mean, for *us*.”

She stood biting her lower lip slightly, allowing her physicality to express excitement and anticipation, although this was wasted energy because she was again speaking to the reddened, dry back of her alleged fiancé’s neck. She held the DVD so that the cover was easily readable, and the popcorn hung in what she hoped was a tempting way. Hank sort of grunted – or maybe even coughed, which would have been crossing the line in Deirdre’s opinion – so she had no choice but to move around to his periphery, hoping that she was compelling enough to be a distraction from a silent argument between two parties on the screen. She was, thankfully.

“What’s that you got there?” Hank said.

“You like, um, you like whatshisname...”

She frantically searched the DVD box for a director’s name.

“Christopher Nolan. You like him, right? He was in that movie that, like, drove Heath Ledger over the edge...the Batman movie, right?”

Her constant struggle between instincts to stutter, apologize, and slouch and the opposing forces from her brain that commanded her to be confident and charismatic had resulted in her body appearing to be some type of glitch. Her shoulders rolled like waves between submissive and dominant patterns. Her mouth had become a mockery of itself and

was doing far too much work. Thankfully there were other distractions from this, such as her feet being so close they touched at the heel and her eyes shifting endlessly between making contact and rolling away towards anything else, anything but Hank.

“I mean, yeah...” Hank started, but didn’t finish. Typical.

“Yeah, everyone likes *Conception*, it’s the dream movie, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Have...have you seen it yet?”

“Yeah, few months ago.”

“Oh,” Deirdre tried not to sound hurt. It seemed immature to be hurt by something so mundane. “Well, I got a copy! And some popcorn. I thought we could, you know, curl up on the couch and really, uh, really celebrate how lucky this is.”

Hank looked a little confused for a moment, his eyes still glued to the television.

“How luck...how lucky what is?” he asked.

“Well, you know, a Friday night together! A Friday off...you never get those...”

He raised the empty water bottle he was holding to his lips, seeming to smash it against his mouth in slow motion, and very quietly excreted some brown liquid out. It hit the inside of the bottle, but stuck to the side, so a chunky brown streak clunked its way down towards the inch or so of collected spit and tobacco congealing in the bottle. He was leaning back heavily, holding the bottle in his hands against his chest, his legs spread apart childishly, knees almost at eye level. They were both silent for a few moments.

“Yeah,” he said.

Deirdre busied herself in the little kitchen area, taking all of the dishes out of the sink and putting them in the dishwasher as quietly as she could.

“You can, you know, turn the volume up on that if you want,” she said.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Alright.”

She hated how quiet it was, she hated how crazy she must have seemed to Hank, scuttling around the kitchen cleaning stuff. This wasn’t what a Friday night was supposed to be at any age. Every few moments, she heard the faint *glub* of Hank leaking spit into the stained bottle, and she wondered why the hell he wouldn’t just get a bottle that wasn’t clear. The bottom of it looked like those fake anti-smoking lungs she was shown in grade school by the nurse on Health Day. After what seemed like a long time (but was really about seven minutes) she held the microwave popcorn aloft; soon, though, she realized Hank wouldn’t turn her direction, so she put it in the microwave and unbuttoned her top two buttons and took off her nametag that said DIERDRE and placed it carefully in a coffee mug that sat on the counter near the front door.

Hank laughed dryly, once, and it was over quickly. Deirdre’s eyes darted over towards the television to see what had happened, and some old guy in camouflage had fallen on his ass in a puddle, and two other guys pointed and laughed. In glaringly green Matrix text, the word MUTE flickered on the bottom right corner of the screen. Before she could help herself, her eyes rolled, but she maintained and prevented any other snarky body language from happening – if Hank were to see it, she could appear disingenuous. This could lead to an altercation of some kind as a result of him being threatened, although it would be more likely that he bottle it up and slowly grow to resent her, she thought.

“Honey?” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to...want to put that movie on?”

“Yeah...”

The microwave beeped horribly, four times instead of three (Deirdre knew it was four, but the last one always made her wince). She opened it from the edges, hot steam erupting from the bag into her face, making her eyes water. She poured it into a bowl while Hank attempted to lift himself off of the couch.

“Don’t worry honey, I’ll get it,” she said as she brought the bowl over to the little table in front of the couch.

“Thanks.”

He slumped back into himself.

Finally, it was time. She sat next to Hank after turning off the lights and put her head into his chest, even though that made her body twist awkwardly. Hank didn’t seem to notice. When the movie began, Deirdre noticed the light from under the crack in the door to the empty room they never went into.

It was the second door in the small hallway and since the apartment was really dark a small light could be seen searing across the bottom of the door. The walls were a shade of yellow that never should have existed, so whenever the light was on they stung your eyes. Yellow was a gender-neutral color, which had been a good idea, but Deirdre read (too late, too soon) that it was not a good color for an infant to grow up surrounded by. Apparently it left them “on edge.”

Just ten minutes into the movie Deirdre decided she hated it. It was really pretentious and tried to be super deep on account of the fact that nobody knew what was going on. She snuck a few glances at Hank, which was useless, because his face told her nothing. Trying to

read the lines on his face was like playing Ping-Pong alone with the other side of the table folded up.

She was scared to move, she was freaked out by how little was said. They used to enjoy movies more – at least she thought so, it must be so – but this is a clichéd thought so she put it out of her mind. Hank rustled between spitting into the bottle and eating popcorn. When he ate, he held the empty bottle in his left hand so it was only inches away from Deirdre's face, and even in the dim light she could see the globs and mucousish-looking consistencies growing.

Neither of them ever went into that room, but the light was on. It was weak, so she assumed it was the desk light. How long had he sat in there, what had he done? Did he cry? It seemed more likely to her that he looked around like he was watching *Duck Dynasty* on mute, spitting consistently, eyes glazed over, either comprehending nothing or choosing to block any type of acknowledging thought from forming.

Deirdre let out an involuntary sigh of frustration that she didn't notice, but Hank did, and he looked down at her with one eyebrow up for a moment. She thought it was dumb that Joseph Gordon-Levitt's character was just wandering around explaining plot points, and the Asian guy had such a heavy accent she was missing important information, and the deafening horn noises came out of nowhere. But when she looked up Hank seemed to be enjoying it. If not enjoying it, accepting it as a useful distraction.

She itched her thigh and he noticed this time and asked her if anything was up and she said no and smiled. She was interested in why he seemed so inquisitive. She felt the same way.

“Honey,” she began. “Were you...when did you get back? What have you been up to?”

His eyes didn't leave the screen.

“Just a little bit before you did. Didn't do much of nothin'.”

She decided not to force it, so she endured another twenty minutes of Leonardo DiCaprio squinting at stuff and screaming. Hank's eyes flashed to the door crack, or at least Deirdre thought so.

“Honey,” she began again. “I don't know what's going on.”

“Like...like in the movie? Or just, you know, in general?”

At first she was horrified, but when she looked up he was smiling a little bit.

“I guess...well, I was talking about the movie.”

“I know, right?” he said louder than usual.

“Why is everyone risking their minds turning into jelly for DiCaprio?”

“What the fuck is Michael Caine doing?” he said.

“Joseph Gordon-Levitt looks like a douchebag,” she added quietly, smiling.

“I can't understand a word that Asian guy who was in *The Last Samurai* is saying.”

“Right!”

They laughed a little bit, and Deirdre felt warm and relieved for a moment, but it didn't last.

“Did you go in Kevin's room today?” she asked.

“Only for a sec.”

“Why?”

“I thought it was time.”

“Time for what?”

“I dunno. Just time.”

“How bad was it?”

“It was really bad.”

They sat looking at each other for a moment. The water bottle sat on the table next to the couch and Deirdre reached up and wiped a popcorn kernel off of Hank’s lip. He stood up, but seemed tired and his eyes were rimmed with red.

“Come with me,” he said.

She didn’t think about it, not really, and she grabbed his waist and they walked into the yellow room in the hall and the lamp was on and there was a small imprint in a chair where Hank had been sitting. Deirdre slumped down onto the ground with her back against the wall and held her knees and cried for the first time in a long time and her Hank sat in the chair and let her be for about ten minutes. After that, when she had slowed down a little bit, he took her hand and put her on his lap and waited patiently.

“I think you’re right,” she said.

“Right about what?”

“It’s time for something to happen.”

“Hm.”

“Thanks.”

“Thanks for what?” he asked.

She looked around, the light from the lamp making the walls hurt her eyes, just like she had remembered, but she maintained eye contact, and she took a deep breath and she thought – if only for a moment – that maybe they had waited long enough.

Forced Perspective

Tiffany's family, one sister and two parents, stood at her grandmother's gravesite with many other grievors and listened to the woman who was speaking. She was old, but had the same vivacious attitude as her lifelong friend who was plugged in the ground.

"Helen...frankly, didn't give a damn," she said good-naturedly.

People laughed. Tiffany smiled widely through tears. Her father and sister looked sad and confused. This had been the type of woman everyone assumed would live forever. Tiffany looked to her left, at her mother's covered face, and she didn't see sadness or confusion. What she saw certainly wasn't anger, but it wasn't sadness. Her mother's face was contorted into a tight canvas, like she had just been cut off in traffic but her New Year's resolution was to not get road rage. Tiffany found, more and more, that she didn't particularly like her mother. But she knew you couldn't choose family members. You could just choose which ones to listen to.

* * *

Weeks later, Tiffany held her camera in her hands, but she wasn't using it. She was just wandering, the camera held at her chest. She was looking all around as she walked tentatively towards the trees. Even though she lived in a tiny town, she always thought it was strange that there was basically a forest thirty feet from the back of her house. It seemed like an interruption, it made her town seem like nowhere. But then she remembered her grandma Helen used to say that it was important to notice the differences between all of the trees; otherwise it was just one forest and everything molded together and it wasn't interesting anymore. The two of them spent a lot of time out behind the house. Tiffany hadn't been her

grandma's only granddaughter, but she had been her grandma's favorite audience. Tiffany enjoyed being the only one who liked the crazy shit Helen said – it made her feel in on a cool joke her family wouldn't get. The trees bent in the wind, branches waving like arms, seeming to be trying to pose for pictures. She walked slowly forward, trying to find the best way to look at the trees, trying to see the best angle.

“Honey! Tiff! We need you.”

She heard her mother's voice come from inside their house. They lived on the very edge of a small suburb in New Jersey, a place called Bloomsbury. When her grandma had died, she had left Tiffany two things; the first was a Polaroid 600, in mint condition, and a rare supply of film that would probably last a decade. The second was just over \$12,000 dollars in a bag. There hadn't been a note.

She carefully held the camera aloft as she stepped over brush and twigs. A cool rush of wind passed through her hair and reminded her that fall was almost over. This is when normal 19 year olds would be getting their dorm rooms decorated for Christmas. Or the holidays. All across the country they would be balancing on simple wooden chairs that all looked the same, laughing about break and hanging up funny decorations. But not Tiffany. Tiffany stayed home. To help. Because her family needed her.

The wind followed her inside, making the screen door close behind her with a surprisingly loud bang as she glided into the small house. There was always a moment, when she would switch from being outside of the house to being inside of the house, during which her vision seemed to waver and her senses let her down. Her mother was irritably collecting dishes from the table, dumping out unfinished food into the trash can. Her father was still at the table, slouched awfully in his chair, his hair doing that thing Tiffany hated when it would

slowly rise before her eyes. By this time in the evening, the hair around his ever-broadening bald spot looked like someone had rubbed a balloon on it. She would always ask him to put it down before she took a picture and he would smile at her tiredly and then spit on his hand and then push his hair down, which Tiffany knew meant it was T-minus thirty seconds to get the picture taken before it popped back up again. Her mother spoke in a blur.

“Honey, could you help your sister? She’s about to pop, you know, and I’m stuck here with the dishes and the food – or should I call it trash? If I have to throw almost all of it away, should I just go ahead and call it trash?”

“Sure, mom.”

“Thanks honey, thanks. This is still our house, after all, though I’m not sure how much longer *that’ll* be true.”

“Would you relax,” came her father’s tired voice.

“Would I? *Could* I? I can’t! How can *you* relax?”

“I can relax just fine,” he said, a little angrier.

“Believe me, everyone knows you have a *talent* for relaxing.”

Tiffany decided to get out of there before it got worse, making her way towards her sister. Her sister Margaret had been knocked up by an Irish exchange student who went to her high school for one semester. She didn’t tell him because she didn’t want to be a burden. Not a burden to him, at least. Not to that one person, whom she never really knew or would know. Tiffany figured it was easier to burden relatives than strangers. He had already left by the time Margaret had realized, anyway. Tiffany found her sister in her usual spot.

“Oh, Tiff, you’re the *best*. I’m fine though. Mom’s just...having a mom moment. It’s just, I can’t really do anything right now. If I could, Tiff, I would. You know that.”

Tiffany thought that it was easy to talk about moving when you were trapped, easy to act like you would change when you can't at the moment, but then she felt selfish and pushed those thoughts from her head. She smiled and touched her sister's forehead softly. It was warm. Margaret was a little over seven months in but Tiffany thought she looked so pregnant she couldn't remember her not pregnant. Her thin arms and legs seemed to stay the same size as a constant reminder of how not pregnant she was planning on being. Before she got pregnant. It reminded Tiffany of her room – about two hours after she had seen it painted green, she couldn't imagine it yellow anymore. It had only taken two hours. Things can change that fast.

“Honey,” Tiffany's mother's voice carried through the hallway. “Honey? Could you *help* me, please?”

“Sure, mom,” Tiffany said as brightly as she could.

They moved around the kitchen, cleaning and rearranging. Her father looked on haplessly. Margaret was draped on the couch in the living room. It had been arranged with a mass of pillows and blankets fit for a debauched Roman emperor, and now had permanently adapted itself into the shape of her body. As she grew, it seemed to withdraw into itself. She lay on it like she was getting her portrait painted, one arm resting above her head, the other slung across the top of her belly and gripping it. Tiffany felt a sudden urge to feed her grapes.

Tiffany helped clean, but it was her mother who had the natural gift. She was a machine. Tiffany had to admit to herself that the whole house would probably collapse within a week without her mother there to maintain everything. Once it was done everyone moved into the living room to watch *Friends* on Netflix. For a few months – since Tiffany's

semester would have started – this was their routine. She now knew every line to every episode, although it is the type of television show that is so easy to anticipate, she secretly thought that deep down everyone knew every line of dialogue before it happened.

“*Joey*,” said Jennifer Aniston on the screen, looking exasperated. Everyone laughed except for Tiffany and her father. Even her family’s laughter seemed to her to have been recorded somewhere, and then played back. Tiffany at least mustered the energy to smile. Her father apparently couldn’t manage. His face remained stagnant, and he sat with his arms crossed over his belly like a pissed off toddler. She loved him so much for not forcing himself to smile. It made her feel stupid for playing along. Wanting to capture the moment, she rushed upstairs and grabbed her camera. She walked down the stairs, loading film into it very deliberately. She aimed it, holding it in front of her sternum in the awkward way the machine necessitated. She was going to take the picture then, but everyone was wearing television face; Tiffany hated television face. Saggy mouths, empty eyes, crumpled posture. They were stuck. She moved in front of the screen and said “*smile*” as brightly as she could. Her father smiled tiredly and matted down his hair. Her mother’s lips parted slightly. Margaret made eye contact and wore a goofy smile. Once Tiffany sensed that the perfect, temporary moment had arrived, she flicked back the trigger.

Click.

* * *

“Tiffany, Tiffany Jewels, Tiffany the Diamond, how are you this *fine* morning?”

Sal’s nicknames for her changed every week, it seemed, and she beamed at the old Italian as she walked into work. He was the owner of the place, a photography and camera shop called *Images: Professional Photography Needs* that seemed to make approximately

zero dollars a month. They had some loyal customers, mostly older people, who still wanted their photographs and cameras handled with some degree of care. The old man gave her a job as soon as he heard she needed one, saying if he didn't Helen would dig herself up from the grave and kick him in the nuts. Tiffany had deciphered – through faint hints, drunken slips, and the occasional bit of info from her father – that Sal had been madly in love with Helen before she got married to Tiffany's grandfather, who had been a hockey player and had died before Tiffany could remember. But nobody really knew. The old man retreated into his office.

Sal blamed virtually all of his problems – not just professionally – on iPhones, and more specifically, their cameras. If he grabbed his coffee, for example, and it was empty, he would shake his head and mutter “goddam iPhones” and Tiffany would laugh and that would make him smile. They were normally the only two in the small one-floor storefront. Tiffany liked that Sal didn't play any music in the building. She walked her bicycle into the back and leaned it up against the wall in the break room. There was no need for a break room, much less the big couch pushed up against one of the walls. She poked her head into the old man's little office, where he sat with his head tilted back, looking over his glasses at the old desktop computer with a somewhat terrified look.

“What could I get started on today, Sal?”

“I think you could just show the old video cameras a little bit of love and dignity, to get started, Diamond. Remember to be very careful, though.”

“You got it.”

Tiffany imagined that some people would find working in a dying store to be depressing, but she found it inspiring. It meant that she stood for something, something that

other people didn't anymore. She put on tight rubber gloves and took the cleaning supplies from the break room out to the empty storefront, setting them down in front of the video cameras. Different models of Super 8 cameras were on display, outside of the briefcases they always came in.

She started with the Vintage Bolex Paillard 155 8mm Macrozoom Cine Camera, slowly disassembling the eye level focuser and Octameter Viewfinder, cleaning them gingerly, her mind beginning to wander. She was making pretty good money, considering Sal paid her too much on purpose. She was good with cameras, so she didn't feel too guilty about her wage. Her parents got almost all of it anyway. She wondered how long it could last, though; her sense of normalcy was tied intrinsically to a dying store, and her family had no money. Margaret had to be taken care of. When her mother had retired from teaching a little early, it had seemed like no problem, because of their dad's income. But then he quit selling expensive medical equipment out of the blue so he could play jazz with a band of old retired guys at the tavern, essentially screwing everything up for everybody. This is where Tiffany first fully appreciated how hazy and immaterial the difference between following your dreams and being a selfish prick was. However, whenever Tiffany began to see him as pathetic, he showed some small spark of wit or sass that cheered her up immensely, and in those moments she could picture him as a young man with choices in front of him. She worked diligently until her lunch break, which she always took with Sal, even though he began each lunch by lecturing her on how she should spend more time with people her own age.

"You don't want all your friends to be on their last legs," he said.

"Sal, you're gonna live longer than me."

“Humph. Likely story.”

She smiled.

“So,” Sal said quietly. “Have you given any more thought to what I said earlier? About your grandmother?”

Tiffany tensed up slightly, but remained calm.

“Yes, Sal. I have. And I know you and she were very close, and I know you mean well, but I just can’t.”

“So...so you’ve told your family about the money she left you?”

Tiffany was quiet, and took an awkward sip of her Capri Sun.

“A-ha!” Sal said triumphantly. “You haven’t told them yet! Good girl. You deserve your own shot.”

“I just haven’t found the right...way to do it,” she said. “It’ll kill my mother that...that her mother didn’t trust her with money, even when she was struggling.”

Sal wiped his mouth carefully and took a sip of cold, awful coffee.

“Look, Tiffany, Tiff Diamond,” he said. “I mean...your grandmother wasn’t about logic, she was about life! You know within a decade this place’ll be shut down. And I know, deep down in my used up chest, that the very first day after I close this place, I’m gonna die in my sleep.”

“Sal...”

“It’s not sad! It’s quite happy. What more could I want, than this place? I’ve been here thirty years. I watched where the country is going. I saw *2001: A Space Odyssey* in theaters, and I saw *Transformers* on television. I feel more sadness for what you’re going to

see, by the time you're my age, than what I won't. Because you are good at seeing things. People your age don't see things any more, they look at them."

Tiffany rolled her eyes.

"Sal, what does that even mean?"

"You should know what it means," he said grumpily. "Look, I'll drop it. But you should take that bag your grandmother left you, take an unofficial severance package from me, and get out of here while the getting's good. Take that Polaroid 600 – great machine, by the way – take that Polaroid 600 and go to a school that'll teach you how to use it better. Hell, take one of the Super 8s while you're at it. You used to make little movies all the time, what happened?"

"There didn't seem to be any point to it."

"Hey," he said, very deliberately, pointing at her with his pinkie. "*Bull...shit.*"

Tiffany smiled at him and took a bite of her sandwich and said "okay I'll think about it" with her mouth full. She could tell Sal wanted to keep talking about it but he didn't want to argue and so he just smiled, his eyes glazing over with a memory of some kind. She thought it was probably about Helen, so she stayed quiet and let him stay wherever he was, in the moment.

* * *

At home that afternoon, Tiffany was feeling more frustrated than she normally allowed herself to feel. Tiffany was trying to fix a toilet clogged full of her pregnant sister's shit while ignoring the commands being barked at her from downstairs in the kitchen.

"And paper towels," he mother yelled. "Tiffany, baby, you gotta go get us some toilet paper and some paper towels. You...you still like your bike, right?"

Tiffany focused on keeping her mouth shut tightly as she carefully placed the plunger over the hole in the toilet and pushed down forcefully, hitting the right spot. She was wearing thick gloves and trying not to breathe, and began pumping the plunger. She counted in her head, “one, two, three, four...one, two, three, four...one, two, three, four...” and then pulled it out. She tried to flush again, and it worked, and she felt absolutely no relief, because she knew there was always going to be something else.

“Tiffany!”

She put the plunger down and allowed herself to breathe, feeling the same minor disorientation that she felt when she walked into her house. She walked downstairs and forced a smile at her sister, splayed out on her throne, who whined “I’m so sorry, Tiff, I’m so sorry, I mean, I’ll help out more soon” and Tiffany – of course, as always – said “don’t worry about it” and kept on walking. She walked past her father, who sat in his chair reading a two-year old copy of a magazine about jazz music, and he looked up at her and forced a smile, the hair around his bald spot only just beginning to wake up for the night.

“Tiffany, can you go ahead and run those errands?” her mother asked.

“Can I go in a little bit? It’s open until like nine o’clock.”

“Well, what have you got to do that’s so important?”

“I just wanted to go for a walk, is all.”

“A walk?” Her mother looked at her incredulously. “A walk? Tiff, honey, you know I love you, but you can’t just take off like that.”

“Jesus mom, I’m not running away, I’m taking a walk.”

“Running away? Who said anything about running away?”

“Nobody did, mom.”

Tiffany walked outside in a rush, not bringing her camera. She put her hands in her jacket pockets and walked in a lazy twirl towards the trees, looking at piles of leaves laying on top of one another like they were napping. The wind moved them, but the clumps of leaves didn't move. Tiffany realized that when a lot was on her mind, she could find significance in anything, and this made her feel stupid and young. She didn't even hear her father come outside.

"Tiffany?"

"Dad? Are...are you okay?"

"I'm great," he said. "What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Let me rephrase," he said, grinning as the wind blew his hair almost directly up in the air. "What's wrong?"

Tiffany smiled, and could picture him at her age, feeling hopeful about something or someone.

"I'm fine dad, I just feel...like I'm falling behind."

"Look, your mother means well. She's just freaked out. And...sorry to break it to you, but it might be a while before you get a chance to go somewhere else. Why not try your best to enjoy it?"

"Because then months turn into years."

"Was that directed at me?"

He grinned again. So did she, but slightly less.

"Tiffany!"

Her mother's voice came from inside again. Her father shrugged and she sighed and told him to go in and say she'd be right in. But she didn't move. Her mother stuck her head out the back door and stared at her. She still didn't move, she turned around and kept looking away, feeling shaky. Her mother walked outside, exasperated.

"Tiffany, it's cold and we have things to do. Come on in."

"Look, I was wondering if we could talk about..."

"Yes?"

"...about my plans. I can start in the spring you know! Spring semester, it's what it's called, and it's not a big deal."

"And where would this be?"

"I...I don't know exactly, I mean there's a lot of little expensive schools I want to go to but, I mean, Rutgers isn't *that* expensive and I could probably get at least, like, *half* off or something. They have this, like, department – the Mason Gross Program – it's all photography and art and stuff...plus, I mean, my friend Mimi's there and she really likes it and she said that I could, like, move in with her for a while without the school really knowing or anything...just to get my bearings..."

Her mother smiled at her in a way that made Tiffany, all of a sudden, furiously angry.

"No. Not now. And frankly, I mean, what do you really get out of it?" her mother said. "Do you know which career you would want?"

"Not exactly, but I really like..."

"What? Pictures?"

Tiffany fidgeted with her hands. Her mother's tone was less friendly now, and she could see her father's head silhouetted in the window, his hair sticking up right in the middle.

He cracked open the window silently, revealing his face, which was sharp and intense for the first time in a long time. Tiffany felt tears, stupid tears, piling up behind her eyes, and decided not to press it.

“Nothing.”

Her mother gave that sickly sweet smile again, the smile that Tiffany knew was a trap.

“Tiffany,” she said. “It’s all overrated. You don’t need to get off to such a...rushed...start. There will always be enough time. You have family here. A home, a chance to help out. What more do you want?”

“I guess...I want a chance to...*not* help out. Just for a bit.”

“I’m getting sick of your selfish attitude,” her mother said flatly, like she had been practicing. Tiffany saw her father stick his head out of the window to yell.

“*Bitch!*”

Tiffany’s father’s head and shoulders hung outside the open window, his face contorted with rage and his hair sticking up in triumphant anger. Her mother turned slowly, her mouth open, and began yelling.

“Oh, because *you* have so much to contribute!” her mother yelled.

“Yeah, well maybe I do! Maybe you just look at the wrong stuff! Don’t talk to your daughter that way...”

“All you do is lay around and think about all the things you think you *could* have done, you *noncontributing* bastard...”

“Honey, I swear to God, sometimes listening to you talk is like passing a fucking kidney stone!”

Tiffany tried to think of something to say but couldn't, instead turning to run around the house. Once she was back around the front, she rushed inside and bounded upstairs to her room. There was still yelling from downstairs, now louder because of Margaret. Tiffany looked at the hundred or so polaroids she had tacked up on her wall. They were all of her family. Everyone was smiling and happy. She had just said "smile" before taking the photo. That's why they were smiling. After a few minutes she grabbed her camera. Tiffany wiped her eyes dry before her tears even had a chance to show themselves and she walked downstairs, past her parents, who began launching a stream of "thank you" and "we're sorry" and she kept walking, got on her bicycle, strapped her camera bag around her shoulder, and took off down the road towards the convenience store to get paper towels and toilet paper.

She loved cycling and felt better once she arrived at the store about fifteen minutes later. She was tired and a little cold but that was fine with her. The wind in her hair and on her face and on the edge of her fingers woke her up and she felt in motion, she felt like she had momentum. She threw one leg over the side of her bike and smiled as she swerved into the parking lot, both feet on top of the left pedal, and parked right next to the store. She was confused at the number of cars in the parking lot, most of which were semi-full of young people, people her age. It was a caravan.

She walked tentatively into the store, the sounds of college kids being loud hitting her like wind when she entered. They were all dressed alike. The guys were wearing dress pants and shirts and ties, some of them in dark blazers with sunglasses. The girls were wearing different types of dresses and some of them had jackets on to fight the cold but a surprisingly large number of them didn't. It all made Tiffany hyper aware of her puffy jacket and big

white gloves and her oversized red hunting hat with the flaps waving as she walked. They stood in circles, laughing and talking over each other.

“Dude, are we getting *any* nearer to Atlantic City, or what?”

“You’re such a faggot.”

“Hey, make sure to get a few extra handles of Vlad, just in case.”

“You know it, dude.”

Tiffany tried to find a way to the paper towels and toilet paper that didn’t involve any human interaction, but it was impossible, so she smiled awkwardly and excused herself and shouldered her way through a large number of the people standing in line at the cash register. She got what she needed and then stood in the line which grew behind her after she entered. She felt like a needle in a haystack, but without the silver lining of being special and unique. She just wasn’t supposed to be there. The guys had such mean-looking faces. Their jaws and foreheads all seemed too big to her. They laughed too loudly, walked too confidently, smiled too smugly.

“Man, where the hell are we?”

“Who gives a fuck, man, we’ll be gone soon.”

“Middle’uh’nowhere, that’s where we are.”

“We should get a carton of Camels, too. Hate to run out.”

“You aren’t gonna live to see thirty, you maniac.”

“Totally dude.”

Tiffany felt confused as she watch two of them high-five. Did she really not belong here? She thought maybe, under different circumstances, she could know these people. She was sure they were nicer when you got to know them. They probably spent their time in

more interesting ways than she did. Actually, she thought that was a guarantee. Tiffany didn't mind being alone, when she was outside on a beach or surrounded by trees, but here in the convenience store filled with people on their way out of Bloomsbury, she felt really lonely. She felt like she should say something, but someone beat her to it.

“Ma’am?”

She realized the guy at the register had been trying to get her attention and she smiled nervously and handed over her supplies and her money. Her toilet paper and paper towels embarrassed her, next to all the booze, cigarettes, and drink mixers. She didn't dare look to either side to see if they were looking at her. Once she got her receipt, she fled quickly outside, apologizing her way through the small crowd.

Once she got to her bicycle, she set down the toilet paper and the paper towels and slowly removed her camera, facing away from the cars full of kids. She loaded it expertly, unsure why she was so convinced she needed a picture of this, and once it was ready she turned around. She aimed from the chest, pointing the camera at a small group of young people standing around an SUV blaring rap music. As her point of focus, she used a girl with short, pixie-cut blonde hair. She looked hot and angry and confident.

Click.

Two or three of them turned to look at her, including the girl. One arm came from inside of the car, pointing at her, and Tiffany freaked out. She tossed her camera into her bag, threw it over her shoulder, and started pedaling away like a maniac, refusing to turn around even once she realized she had forgotten to pick up the toilet paper and paper towels.

* * *

“Is that you, honey?”

Tiffany walked into her house holding her hat in her hands, the flaps still waving like a penguin's arms. Her mother and father were sitting in the living room waiting for her. She did not feel her senses readjust to the house because there was no commotion. It had apparently been on pause since she left.

"I forgot the toilet paper and paper towels at the store, I'm sorry, really I am."

"Honey," her mother said, slowly rising from her chair. "Honey, you have *nothing* to be sorry about. Nothing at all. Come here."

Her mother approached her with her arms outstretched awkwardly. Her father and sister remained sitting. Her mother patted her hair and told her she was sorry and told her how appreciative they were of her help. Tiffany thought she heard her father murmur in agreement, but she couldn't be sure. He must have been berated into submission while she was gone. Again.

"I'm sorry about the toilet paper," Tiffany said. "I got flustered. There were these kids..."

"Look, honey, I'm really sorry," her mother said again. "But listen: things are better here than you think they are. It's normal...it's normal, at your age, to want to move around. And I'm sure you will...just not right now. And once you do, you'll realize things don't really change any. Walking through doors isn't...isn't as productive as it feels. It's better to wait. What with your sister, and me and your dad."

She now thought her mother had a point, in terms of things not being so great elsewhere.

"Mom, I do actually have a little good news," Tiffany said. "Sal gave me a bit of a raise...so I'll have that for you guys within a couple of days."

“That’s so great, honey!”

“Thanks.”

Another awkward pause.

“Let’s watch *Friends!*” Margaret suggested from her throne. Tiffany’s mother smiled and Tiffany’s father smiled and Tiffany smiled but she didn’t think any of them meant it, even her father, who usually didn’t pretend. When Tiffany looked at him, she thought she could see something in his eyes and his manner that was screaming to get out, but she might have imagined it, because all there really was was a blank stare and a smile. They all sat in front of the television. Tiffany paid no attention to the screen (*Joey!*) but instead looks sidelong at all of her family members until television face had taken over. Once it had, she moved slowly upstairs like she was going to go to the bathroom, but returned with her camera hidden behind her back, and she aimed it and took a shot of all of them before she had gotten their attention. They looked surprised afterwards, but then smiled and things continued on. After they were done watching the show, Tiffany went to bed, watching the Polaroid develop into the first real picture she had ever taken.

* * *

“Tiffany’s Jeweler, how are you?”

“Great, Sal.”

“I saw your pops the other night down at the tavern. He’s...he’s got a gift.”

“Uh-huh.”

Tiffany smiled and parked her bike in the back of the store. She spent the morning cleaning and, when a customer actually walked in, she hurried behind the service desk.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes,” the old lady said. “I thought Sal had driven a few towns over to get some film developed for me. Should be two dozen 5x7s? My name is Marla.”

“Let me go back and check for you,” Tiffany said with a smile.

She walked hurriedly back to Sal’s office, told him what had happened, and he passed her an envelope. She carried it back out to Marla, who said thank you and immediately ripped them open in front of Tiffany. They were old photos of a dog, a large Portuguese water dog, from the looks of it.

“What’s his name?”

“His name was Manny,” Marla said, smiling.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Honey, you probably hadn’t been born when this dog died,” smiled the old lady.

“Don’t you worry.”

“So...so why get the pictures developed now?”

“I found...I found that I was starting to forget him. I didn’t want that to happen. I didn’t want to remember him as I remembered him, I wanted to remember him as he was. I don’t wish things had been any different, so a photograph won’t do any harm. Oh! Look at his big dumb ears,” she said, pointing at a print and tilting it towards Tiffany.

Tiffany saw that Manny had, in fact, had big dumb ears. The old lady showed her a few more before leaving with a thank you and a good day.

As she and Sal opened their lunches, Tiffany took a deep breath and looked him right in the eye.

“How’d you really know my grandma?”

Sal leaned back in his flimsy chair, and rubbed his temples with his fingertips. Then he leaned back forward, towards Tiffany, and smiled.

“She was amazing. Inspired. I don’t...I don’t know where she came from. Sometimes I don’t think she was born, I think she popped out of the ground, already twenty-something, already her.”

“But how did you know her?”

“We went to school together. She was a year younger than me. But she seemed older.”

“What was she like?”

“You know what she was like.”

“I mean, back then.”

“Same as she was, to the very end.”

“Really?”

“Yep. That was how she lived. I don’t think I heard her apologize once.”

“Do you have any pictures?”

Sal leaned backwards again. He looked off into the distance.

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

“How is that possible?”

He looked like he was getting some sort of cramp.

“I think it’s best that way,” he said quickly.

“Hm.”

* * *

Biking home, Tiffany remembered her grandmother, laughing at Tiffany's mother. After there would be a small fight – even at seven or eight years old, Tiffany was aware of stuff like that – Tiffany's grandma would pick her up and take her out behind the house and talk to her about how important it is to be able to love someone and realize that they are completely wrong. She always said that loving someone and thinking they're full of shit were not mutually exclusive feelings. In fact, she had said, laughing to herself, they often go together.

* * *

That night, after the family had spouted canned laughter at *Friends*, Tiffany pretended to go to sleep. She waited up for a long time, since Margaret was always in and out of bed, and when the coast was clear, she rose slowly. She got dressed and tossed some more clothes into the bag her grandmother had left her. She put the clothes over the money, except for 500 – no, 1,000 – no, 750 – which she put on the kitchen table. She opened the front door and made sure to close it slowly behind her so it wouldn't wake anyone up, and when she turned around she saw her father sitting upright in his chair. She was so startled she just froze. He was either asleep or pretending to be. She moved outside and let the door close. She peered back inside but he hadn't moved. She got on her bicycle and took off for *Images: Professional Photography Needs*. She had a key. She would ask Sal for help when he came in tomorrow. He could front her something. She could get to Rutgers and see what they could do for her. She could crash on Mimi's couch. As she pedaled through the blackness, down the route she knew too well, she felt a unique rush of adrenaline and excitement; she laughed to herself, remembering how her dad's hair had looked when he was yelling,

remembering how her mother's mouth had hung open, and wishing she could have taken a picture.

Vanity Office

Sophia nearly cried from frustration as she drove with one hand on the wheel, flying down the Arizona highway towards the airport, reaching under her driver's seat for her phone. She shifted lanes every few seconds as the harsh rattle of empty cans jumbled around the back of her sedan.

She had been calling her family to try and figure out how her youngest sister Ava was at the airport when she was supposed to be doing a fashion internship in New York City for another four months. None of them had answered except for her brother Gio, who lived in Las Vegas and built casinos. He had launched into a characteristic rant about how she should “just look after herself and not get bogged down.” Sophie finally felt the sharp, cold edge of her phone under her seat and dragged it out, only realizing she was drifting into the highway's shoulder once she had exhaled deeply.

She had no missed calls. Even though Ava wasn't answering her phone, she was sending texts to Sophia. The last one read, *Gate 53 bitch*. Sophia squeezed both hands on the wheel, livid that she didn't have plans for the night. Everyone else seemed booked. They knew she would make time. When she screeched into the terminal, she saw Ava sitting on just one piece of luggage.

Ava smiled and waved mischievously, stomping out a cigarette that had barely been smoked. She picked up her luggage so easily that Sophia figured it was empty, and bounced towards the car, tossing it into the backseat.

“Hiya Sophie,” she said brightly.

Sophia didn't say anything, but forced a smile as she watched Ava pop her seat into a full recline and stretch her short, wavy body all the way out like a cat, exhaling loudly afterwards. Her head rolled over to face Sophia.

"Nothing for me? Nothing for me at all? Aren't you happy to see baby sis, life of the party, baby sis?"

"Ava," Sophia said, "of course I'm happy to see you. Just...I just didn't think you'd be back west so soon is all."

"Dude," Ava said, running her hands through her thick dark hair, "if you had to make, like, fucking coffee for fucking maniacs all day, you'd get out of there too."

Sophia looked sidelong at her sister, worried about how quickly she was talking, but she decided not to bring anything up until they were back at their parents' house.

"So...fashion isn't for you?" Sophia asked.

"I mean, *fashion* is for me. It *matters*. Coffee-making isn't for me. I mean, unless it is, like, literally for me. I love coffee," she grinned.

"Okay. I mean, you could have tried making buildings, but you're right, clothes last longer."

"Aw, you bitter? Are you feeling bitter?"

"No, Ava, I'm just trying to figure out what to do with you."

"That's not really up to you, is it?"

Ava said this so obstinately that they both fell silent for several minutes. Ava fidgeted the whole time, popping the seat back up, and then back down, and then back up. She tried to turn on the radio and it didn't work.

"What the hell, Sophie?"

“It doesn’t work.”

“Well, what do you do when you drive?”

“I drive.”

Ava, wide-eyed and looking aghast, muttered “Jesus Christ, you’re crazy. And your car’s disgusting.”

“Well I don’t have time to clean, what with work, mom and dad’s house, and picking you up from airports.”

“Fair enough. But seriously.”

“What?”

“Fix your damn radio.”

* * *

They pulled up to the house some forty minutes later, their mother Emily standing out on the porch, her hands clasped together. Her ghost-white hair was pristinely arranged, and she seemed dressed for gardening, but Sophia noticed that there wasn’t even a speck of dirt on her. Ava leaned out of the window, waving backhand, like the Queen of England. Her one-person crowd cheered adoringly. Sophia grabbed the luggage out of the backseat, knowing Ava had forgotten about it already, and carried it up to the house. Sophia always thought that the house took up too much space, like a baroque couch in a studio apartment. It was tall and wide, and seemed to loom in over her slightly the closer she got to it. They grew up in it. The building was solid and strong, and seemed timeless.

“Hello, darling,” their mother said, and Sophia knew it was directed at Ava only.

“Darling it’s so good to see you! Family should be together.”

“Oh *dahling, dahling*,” Ava said as she hugged her mother.

Sophia believed that catch phrase, “family should be together,” but she didn’t quite know why. Her mother and sister began catching up vaguely as Sophia passed them, carrying her own bag over her shoulder and Ava’s in one hand, opening the front door with her foot. They followed her inside after a few moments and they all gathered around the marble island in the vast kitchen to a collective sigh.

“So,” their mother said, taking off immaculately clean gardening gloves and setting them in a basket. “Ava...what brings you back home? Just got to, um, just got to recharge for a bit?”

“Something like that,” Ava said, looking out the window.

“Honey? Are you okay?”

Sophia saw annoyance stalk across Ava’s face before she covered it with a broad smile, looked back at her mother, and chirped, “oh I’m all good.”

Sophia knew that that was going to be the extent of her mother’s parenting duties for the night, and the conversation soon turned into hushed gossip about other families’ broken children. One overdose that nearly killed a boy Sophia went to high school with, one arrest that “just *destroyed*” the O’Neills, so-and-so failed out of Jesuit, etc. Ava fed her mother all the right cues; she lowered her voice and raised her eyebrows and grinned. Sophia sat very still, knowing that Ava would notice, hoping it would piss her off a bit. As they talked, their mother walked around aimlessly rearranging and scrubbing things that were already clean. After about twenty minutes, once it hit five o’clock in the afternoon, Ava stopped enabling her mother.

“Is Dad getting home from...well...is he getting home soon?”

“Why, yes,” Emily said, looking at her wrist as though there was a watch on it, but there wasn’t. “He usually gets home from work around five or five-thirty. You two better get yourselves together. I’ll get started on the spiedini.”

“What do you mean ‘get yourselves together,’ mom?” Sophia asked, while Ava rolled her eyes and went upstairs to her old room. Ava’s old room was gaudy and untouched; her parents had left it – consciously or otherwise – as a sort of shrine, Sophia thought. A shrine to the interesting one.

“Just...you know,” was her mother’s answer, so Sophia defiantly sat in the living room alone, not changing anything. Her clothes were fine, she thought. Business casual. She was almost a year into a remodel of the public housing developments across town. It was a lower paying, decent thing to do. There were certain gender dynamics she had to deal with, although her peers weren’t the skyscraper kind of guys, so they weren’t as bad as the architecture majors she went to school with. Sophia thought that men who felt inclined to design big, tall buildings that jut into the sky might be better off in a therapist’s office. She was clouded by a sudden onslaught of memories from college until she heard her father’s car amble up the driveway. All three women got to the entryway at the same time. Sophia looked skeptically at the dress Ava had changed into and gave her the finger behind their mother’s back. Ava snarled silently and cartoonishly, her hands morphed into claws. Their father Anthony walked in, tall and broad in a thin dark suit, but moving slowly.

His eyes flashed at the sight of Ava, whose melodramatic hug would have been rude for anyone except her. She nearly knocked him down. He awkwardly patted her back with one hand. Sophia knew this would happen. Anthony tossed his coat at the coat rack and it only held on for a moment before it fell and his wife anxiously picked it up and put it back.

Sophia held her frustration under the surface, but it manifested in a terse smile that her father likely recognized.

“Honey,” he said to her, after Ava finally let go of him. “How’s things? How’s work? You look thin.”

“I saw you two days ago, dad, I don’t think I’ve deteriorated much in two days.”

“Deteriorated,” he said, raising his eyebrows and waving his hand dismissively.

“Deteriorated, she says. Okay, then, whatever you say, dear. Let’s get some food in you anyway.”

They all walked into the kitchen together, Ava and Anthony leading the way. Sophia had to endure Ava’s lies, as she pretended to have eaten at all the restaurants their father suggested and met all of the people he knew. It made her angry to be the only one who knew Ava was lying. That she had to bear witness. Sophia had visited New York City years ago, on a few different occasions, and felt sure her father would be horrified if he saw it. He described it as a place people spent their whole lives, a place where neighbors waved. The New York she saw was stocked with mannequin-looking college guys and women who groaned at botched coffee orders while still on the phone. The skyline was just a Facebook profile background. It was all two-dimensional.

After the meal was ready and they sat at the large dinner table, Sophia felt a preemptive anxiety. Her father had been curt with Ava, at best, and everyone was nervous. Sophia looked around at the overly decorated room. The whole house had too much shit in it, she had always thought so, even at a young age. She and Ava used to joke that there were at least six couches nobody had ever sat on. It didn’t look like the public housing she renovated for work; those were efficient. Pretty enough on the outside, but rows upon rows

of minimalist living rooms and kitchens with clean appliances and no huge, self-indulgent couches. They made sense. They were real.

She sat across from Ava and watched her sister's anxious face, as it seemed to sort through different options. Happy. Sad. Contemplative. Smug. It would shift constantly, trying to settle on the right answer for the current moment.

“Well isn't this just lovely,” Sophia's mother said, stupidly.

“Yes,” her father said. “*Unexpectedly* lovely.”

“Lovely things can't be expected, can they?” Ava said, sipping wine. Her face was back to smug.

Anthony didn't say anything, but Sophia saw his jaw clench slightly before relaxing. Her mother just refilled her wine glass.

“Look,” Ava said, “it just didn't work out, alright?”

“What happened this time,” her father asked tiredly.

“*Anthony*,” their mother said.

He turned to look at her intensely and she just sighed and didn't follow up with anything, and Sophia felt like she was twelve again; sitting at this huge table, hating her mother. Because of Ava.

“I'm just curious,” he said, and Sophia actually believed him.

“Look, I wasn't, like, doing anything that felt like it was useful, okay? Wouldn't you have done the same thing?”

“No,” her father said in a condescending tone, “I would have paid my dues. I did pay my dues. You haven't. There's no way around that part of life, and if there is, you are not better for finding it.”

“Dad,” Sophia said. “Look, I was clueless at twenty-four too. New York doesn’t work for everyone.”

Ava winked at Sophia, who sat looking at her father’s impenetrable face wondering why she had spoken up, yet again. But she did feel a child-like joy, looking at her sister’s smiling face. They were a team. For the moment.

“You were finishing up school, Sophia, not clueless.”

Ava looked angry now; her eyes were locked at some point on the ceiling and she had pushed her food away and she gripped her wine so tightly that her knuckles were white. She finished her glass and wiped her mouth daintily.

“I’ll find something else. I’ll find it soon. Not everything goes right at work. Right dad? Don’t you know that?”

He froze for a moment, looking towards Sophia.

“Sweetie, everything’s going so well, let’s not ruin family time...a family should be –”

“Wait, what’s going on at work?” Sophia asked.

“Nothing,” her father said.

“Daddy doesn’t have a firm anymore,” Ava said, grinning now. “Daddy just drives to an empty office and reads the fucking paper all day, doesn’t he? Come on, daddy-o, be honest with us for once.”

“Ava,” her mother started to say, but she was cut off by the sound of an open hand hitting the table. The heavy table was so sturdy none of the silverware even rattled much.

“Dad,” Sophia said with a deliberate tone. “What...what is going on? What’s she saying?”

“I’m going upstairs. Ava, you have one week to get out of this house. I’ll pay for whatever...just get out.”

He stood up and left, trying vainly to hold a dignified posture. Their mother now refilled her glass again. Sophia knew she would be putting her to bed soon. Then her father would be hard on her the following day. Sophia remembered finding out what the difference between “your mother is tired” and “mommy’s in bed” meant. She considered following her father upstairs but decided to try and help by keeping tabs on her sister and mother.

Sophia sat and watched with silent loathing as her sister and mother got drunk and talked about nothing. Pure distraction. Sophia knew distractions were selfish. She was just waiting to get a moment alone with Ava anyway. She’d step outside for a cigarette any minute now. Finally, after their mother had fallen asleep sitting up two different times, Ava stood abruptly, knocking a spoon off of the table, and began to walk out to the patio. Sophia followed her.

The door slammed behind them as Ava’s dress fluttered in the wind and she cupped her hands around a cigarette. It wouldn’t light until Sophia also cupped her hands around it, and then it took.

“Thanks babe,” Ava said, slurring slightly.

Sophia spoke up first.

“How do you plan on accomplishing anything by acting exactly like Dad expects you to?”

Ava blew out a thick stream of smoke and rolled her eyes.

“Look, Sophie’s Choice, the thing is I don’t care if I am doing what he expects me to do. I just don’t want him to act like it’s bad. There’s still money, and at least I’m not a liar like him and Mom.”

“Well...how much money is there?” Sophia asked, a little selfishly. She wasn’t making much, and she was planning on having her cake and eating it too. Doing the right thing for little money, and then just inheriting more later. It made her feel like a fraud, something she avoided thinking about.

“I think the firm still pays him, but he fucked something up, so he just doesn’t do anything anymore,” Ava said, shaking her head.

“What...what does he do though?”

“He does nothing. Literally nothing. He furnished a one-room office and got a phone line put in and he just fucking sits there reading the paper or whatever, so he can pretend he has a reason to get up in the morning. Gio told me over the phone.”

They stood, leaning against the same pillar on two sides, looking past the trees to see a dark sky pierced with stars. Ava’s cigarette smoke went directly into Sophia’s eyes, but she didn’t mind. She never had.

“Can I have one?” she asked her sister.

“Shit yeah, you can,” Ava laughed.

Sophia used her sister’s Zippo to light it and looked at the lighter after she was done. It had a picture of a skull wearing a bejeweled crown. Ava nodded at her.

“I’ve got plenty. You keep that one. I didn’t know you still smoked.”

“I hadn’t in months. So, this one’s on you.”

“Proud to help,” Ava smiled.

Sophia tried to hand the lighter back but Ava smiled and refused, so Sophia just pocketed it.

“Thanks for being there,” Ava said, looking away.

“Hey, I still live here. Just a few miles away. Thank *you* for being here.”

Ava laughed and muttered something.

“Seriously, though,” Sophia continued. “You have to get out of here. And you’re going to have to stop being a bitch about it all the time.”

“Don’t be like them.”

“We all care. They’re just bad at it.”

“Mom doesn’t.”

“Well, yeah,” Sophia said, coughing lightly on her cigarette. “I guess. Me and Gio and Dad do, though. They’re just...I dunno...is it condescending?”

“Yeah...but worse,” Ava agreed.

“Because they’re right?”

Ava just brooded.

“Look,” Sophia said. “Just promise me you’ll find a way out of here in, like, a week? We’ll all help.”

“Yeah.”

They kept looking at the stars in the sky, listening to a faint siren in the distance, carried over by soft winds. Ava looked over her shoulder, through the window, and saw their mother’s head rolled away on the dinner table, one of her hands still touching the stem of her wine glass.

“Jesus,” she said. “Things are pretty bad I guess.”

* * *

Two weeks later, Sophia was on the highway again, this time pulling into Las Vegas to visit her brother Gio about a job with his firm. Ava's stay had gone from upsetting to tragic. She would steal money, she wouldn't look for a job, she would get dropped off unconscious at her parents' house by cab drivers who took the money out of her wallet. Sophia had stopped trying to help as much. She couldn't. She had to stay focused on work. Her and Ava and Gio's inheritance was getting drained slowly but constantly as her father continued to take more and more.

Gio had offered to buy a plane ticket both ways for Sophia, but she found that patronizing and drove four and a half hours instead. He had mentioned that they should talk about an opening at Gillman's, the firm he had worked at for four years. "Last job was the Golden Gate Casino and Hotel," he would say over and over. "Really successful renovation, great place." After talking about his job for twenty minutes, he added that it would be nice to catch up and stuff too. After they talked, Sophia looked the casino up on the web and it seemed like a shithole.

She arrived at his surprisingly tasteful house about half a mile west of the Strip. He was dressed in a full suit and tie, even though it was a Saturday afternoon. Despite his formal attire, Sophia could see that he was still a gym rat. His shoulders threatened to break out of his tight button down. His hair was slicked back and Sophia didn't like the way he smiled. He had always been a bit of a problem. An extremely successful problem, though.

"Sophia, so glad you could come," he said.

They hugged and exchanged hellos before he led her into his house. They sat in his living room, which she thought was way too furnished for a single 28-year-old man. There

were ornate picture frames with art that seemed randomly selected. The speaker system played the tamest playlist in the world: Frank and Tony and Bing. Then again, this was her brother, who gave a ten minute speech to his parents when he was eight, illustrating the many advantages to his allowance being five dollars more a week, and how it was mutually beneficial.

“So,” he said, crossing his legs on his couch and exposing matching argyle socks. “I still don’t know why you had to drive the whole way here, sis.”

“I like driving,” she said. “It feels like progress. Anyways, I’m not letting my big brother buy plane tickets just for a visit that was my idea anyway.”

He chuckled. Sophia noted it was even more pretentious and deep than she remembered. He rubbed his nose with one thumb, a remnant of his college days. Still, she had always envied the way he carried himself.

“So, not to be rude, but let’s talk about this job,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, aware of her body language matching his. “Let’s talk about it.”

“Now, I know you have been, you know...fighting the *good fight*, in your own viewpoint...” he said.

“Uh-huh.”

He leaned back and sighed before resuming.

“Look, Sophia, there’s an open spot. It would be a move up. You could get away from Mom and Dad and Ava and all that shit. I don’t see the problem. You’d have to adjust to a new work environment, sure...but you’ve always been the toughest. I wouldn’t even be doing you a favor. Once you do the great job I know you will, my bosses will be thanking *me*. I’m getting something out of this too.”

She always thought he'd end up selling cars.

"Thanks Gio," she said, watching her brother as he ran a hand through his hair. "I don't want you to think I don't appreciate it. I really do."

"So...well. What the hell? What's your concern?"

"It doesn't...feel like me."

"Ah," he said, standing up and moving to the kitchen. "Well, improving is technically changing. So in order to improve, you're going to have to change something about yourself...right?"

Sophia rolled her eyes.

"Dude," she said, "if you lend me another copy of *The 48 Laws of Power* I'm going to burn it."

He laughed loudly, facing away from her, rummaging through one of the drawers in his kitchen until he found a plastic cylinder of some kind of powder. She watched, a little embarrassed at the interruption, as he poured a glass of milk, dumped three scoops of powder into it, mixed it with a spoon, and chugged it before letting out a self-congratulating sigh.

"What do you think it'll change about you, sis?"

"I feel like what I do helps. Somehow."

"It really doesn't."

"Fuck you."

"Well, fine, it does. Now it's someone else's turn. You wouldn't want to rob someone else of the opportunity to help, would you? That would be selfish."

"Fuck you twice."

“What, you think those housing complexes will just cease to exist after you leave? Come on. Is it Mom? Fucking, ‘family should be together?’”

Sophia took a deep breath and felt Gio reading her face. He walked from the kitchen with his shoulders rocking, his sport coat splayed open. He leaned back into the couch, one leg across the other, and Sophia’s eyes stung at the sight of those mustard argyle socks visible under his tailored pants.

“Alright,” he said, raising his hands like a foul had been called on him. “Alright, I pushed too hard. My fault.”

Sophia smiled at him and genuinely appreciated the break. She had always found him exhausting to be around.

“What do you think of the buildings out here, sis?”

“Gaudy bullshit,” Sophia said. Ava’s words, spoken weeks earlier.

“Now, that’s too easy. That’s a low blow. It’s got its own beauty here, I think. Something very honest about it.”

“Honest? Come on, Gio, for Christ’s sake. No offense to what you do...I mean...I looked up the casino you and your firm renovated –”

“The Golden Gate Casino and Hotel?” he said quickly.

“Uh, yeah. That’s the one.”

He smiled to himself, relaxing.

“It’s all surface, right?” Sophia continued. “I mean, all the flashing lights and liquor billboards. I mean, aren’t people buried in the sand somewhere around here?”

“Hey, I hate those mafia movies.”

“You get what I mean though, right?”

“Nope. This isn’t a lie,” he said, rising from the couch and moving towards one large floor-to-ceiling window in the living room. He gestured at the view. “This is fun. People make fun of it but wish they were here. This is what people want. They built it, after all. Supply and demand. This is where people come to be honest after lying through their nine-to-five’s all year. Fake stuff feels good sometimes.”

“That seems bad to me.”

“Everything seems bad to you. I think it’s getting in your way.”

Sophia gave him the finger in warning, spurring Gio to pantomime grabbing his own heart and ripping it out of his chest. Sophia smiled and moved next to him. The two of them stood together by the window, looking at the waning sun and watching the man-made lights replace its glow.

* * *

When Sophia got back from Las Vegas she felt excited and nervous, a combination that she had missed for many months. She pictured herself leaving. She had been dedicating almost all of her time to busy work, avoiding old friends and work friends alike. She figured planting roots in the ground would just make it harder to leave. She was feeling so energized after seeing Gio that she actually called and told her parents she wanted to come by for dinner. She hadn’t been by since she last spoke with Ava in person, though she had answered a few slurred late night phone calls just to make sure she was okay. Family should be together. Sophia showed up the day after she got back from Las Vegas, a night spent at a nice restaurant and then an early bedtime in Gio’s guest room, despite his protestations that they should go out gambling.

As she drove to her parents' house, feeling good, her phone buzzed. It was Ava. The text read: *don't listen to him please he's bad*. Sophia sighed. Ava must be drunk again. She tried calling her but it went to voicemail, so she probably turned her phone off. Extra dramatic.

She pulled up to her parents' house and immediately her feelings of progress and excitement and self-actualization went right out the window. The house was looming down on her again. Her mother answered the door, holding a can of flavored tonic water that might as well be called *NotBoozeEverythingIsOkay*.

"Darling," she said dramatically, hugging Sophia. "So glad you reached out, we've been desperate to see you. Your brother said you were thinking about maybe moving on from the projects, getting another job?"

"They're public housing developments, mom, not the projects."

Her mother raised her eyebrows and shrugged and led her into the dining room by the arm.

"Well," her mother said, "it's gotten your father very excited. So maybe...adjust your tone a bit."

"Adjust my *tone*?"

"Yes, adjust your tone. For your father. To keep things...on an even keel."

"What kind of mother says that?"

"A smart one. I know...I just...I want things to be pleasant. Don't make this difficult, please. A family should be together."

They walked into the dining room and everything was set. It was too well prepared, and it made Sophia nervous. The great wooden table seemed saturated, overburdened with

unnecessary things. Her father walked in and hugged her and sat at the table. There was some small talk that heightened Sophia's anxiety. She was still angry at her mother's suggestion to "adjust her tone."

"So, honey," her father said from the other side of the table. "How was Gio? Did he have anything interesting to say?"

"He always does," Sophia muttered, which sent her parents into a desperate laughing fit. Sophia figured they were just playing the part.

"So, where's Ava?" she asked, surprised at the bitterness in her own voice.

"God knows," her father said, while her mother glared at her for a moment before smiling again. She was eyeing the bottle of wine in front of her husband.

"Do you know," Sophia said slowly, "where your daughter is?"

"She's out, she's having *fun*, what's the problem?" Her mother said.

Sophia pulled her phone out and tried calling Ava but it went straight to voicemail again.

"Mom, Dad, her phone is off. When was the last time you saw her?"

"This morning dear, this morning," her mother said, chuckling nervously as she stood halfway upright to grab the bottle of wine and pour herself a glass. "Don't worry so much, everything is going so well."

"No it fucking is *not*."

"What's gotten into you?"

Sophia breathed deeply and rubbed her eyes with both hands.

"You guys ignore your fuck-up daughter, and you push me towards shit I don't want, and you lie about stuff...I don't get it," she said. "I really don't get it. She needs help, and I

can't stick around forever to pick her up from airports or bail her out of jail or do whatever it is she needs."

Her father's eyes softened slightly, and he sighed.

"You sound like her," he said.

"Well maybe she's right."

"Think about that. How could she be right? Look at her life."

All three of them sat in silence for a moment.

"Sophia, why are you so upset?"

Right at that moment, the front door burst open, and then slammed shut. They listened in stiff anticipation, waiting for whatever antics Ava was up to. But when she turned the corner, she seemed okay. Drunk, maybe, but okay.

"Hiya everyone!"

They looked at her blankly; her father was terse, her mother was holding wine, and Sophia was on the verge of tears.

"Oh," Ava said. "I've walked into a bummer."

"Why'd you text me that?" Sophia asked, sounding angry. "Why text me that and then hang up, what happened?"

"Nothing," Ava said brightly. "Just warning you about Gio. I'd hate to see you build casinos, that's all. Seems pretty douche. He's never around, and he has a cocaine haircut now. Oh, and my phone died after I texted you, my fault."

Sophia's parents began squabbling with Ava about irresponsibility, bickering back and forth, the noise building up to a cacophony that Sophia couldn't handle. She was twelve yet again. This wasn't ever going to end. She tried picturing herself leaving, but it felt false.

Even if she left, it would continue on. In fact, it would worsen. She would just be lying to herself. It would be the same as renting an office without a job or playing slots all day or building bullshit. She sat quietly as Ava yelled louder and louder. She sat quietly as her father began to match her tone and her mother began to sink into her chair. Her mother reached for the wine bottle and moved to pour some, but Ava grabbed it from her roughly and poured it on the candles, staining the tablecloth and sending small puffs of smoke wisping into the air.

Sophia stood slowly, unnoticed by her family, and moved towards the kitchen. Ava took the bottle into the living room and started pouring it all over the cream colored couches nobody had ever sat on while their father fell silent, just following her and watching, still posing as someone with authority. In the kitchen, listening to the commotion, Sophia soaked a sponge under hot water and squeezed it out. She took the sponge and some paper towels into the dining room and – in front of her deflated, hiccupping mother – began scrubbing the wood that had been stained, listening to the sound of her sister’s delusional laughter echoing from the other room.

Metal That Moves in Wind

I'm sitting next to the windowsill in our summer-rented apartment in Phoenix, reading *200 Monologues under 2 Minutes Each* and lazily smoking a thinly-rolled joint that I don't particularly want. Brian's lying up in bed – a thick mattress on the floor – with his MacBook on his stomach, trying to edit an old short he directed at school. The summer after graduation is almost over and the panic is setting in more tangibly every day. His face is set in frustration, his brows furrowed and eyes blinking constantly. He's biting his fingernails. It's pathetic-looking. I toss him some gum from my pocket and he mutters his thanks before popping it in his mouth. He stops biting his fingernails, he looks more competent. He sighs afterwards and I close my eyes and tilt my head upwards slightly, letting the dry wind envelop me as it crosses through the open window, bringing no sound with it.

“Hey,” he says. “How's the reading coming along?”

I shrug.

“Hillary, what's wrong?”

“Let's get out of here,” I say, and I close my eyes again.

He closes his laptop like he's been waiting for me to speak up, smiling and pulling on a shirt. I put the joint out in an ashtray I cut and folded out of an old beer can.

“Movie?” I suggest, hopping off of the windowsill.

“Eh,” he says, slipping on his shoes. “Ever since I studied them I don't really enjoy them.”

“Well, I guess we'll just figure it out,” I say.

“Okay.”

We leave the building and walk slowly in no particular direction. Brian has a certain calm before the storm thing going on right now and I hope the storm doesn't sputter out. He'll be quiet for hours sometimes, and I'll get all excited that he's coming up with some big plan or some mind-blowing comment, and then he'll just deflate like a weak balloon and wander off. But when he doesn't, he's a genius. It's worth it. He's memorable.

But now, as I sweat into a t-shirt and running shorts, my hair crisping in 103-degree heat, Brian's silence doesn't seem to promise much.

"How's the editing going?" I ask.

"I mean, I guess I just do it to do it. I should put it away for a while, until I've figured out the next step."

"Directing is your next step, so finishing up that short is a good idea."

"You don't know that. I'm not ready."

"You'll be ready once you've done it," I say, a little annoyed at him. "I'm not ready to act. Nobody is. Even when I played that suicidal chick in your thesis film, I was just flying by the seat of my pants."

"Hm."

As we meander around downtown Phoenix, our hands constantly interweaving in different positions, we both looked only upwards. I decide not to be obnoxious about Phoenix. This bulbous, over-comfortable, existing-despite-god's-will fucking city. Normally he smiles or agrees when I make fun of it, but recently he's been more defensive and I don't want to upset him. He moves slowly and I match his pace, resisting my inclination to run everywhere, no matter how hot. We get on the light rail for no real reason, with no destination. A group of Arizona State students – looking vaguely hipsterish, like we

were at the Art Institute – are talking loudly in the rail car about whether or not Westgate is any fun.

“I know you’re looking forward to Los Angeles,” Brian says good-naturedly, looking out the window at the varying levels of beige outside. “But some part of you is going to have to miss this.”

“Nope,” I say. “I’ll miss the people. And I’ll miss college ...but not this city, not even a little bit. How could you? I’ll miss things despite it, not because of it. Besides, you’re coming with me.”

“Christ,” he says, shaking his head while I grin at him. “We already talked about that...I’m not...ready yet.”

I decide not to pursue that point. But he’ll understand soon, if he really is who I think he is.

“Come on, Brian,” I say. “Where are you taking me? We’ve already got dinner with your parents in the desert tomorrow, can’t we see a movie or something?”

“Not the right time for a movie,” he says. “Why do you always want to be inside? You’ll see where we’re going...you’ve seen it before.”

I pretend to be upset but I like him when he chooses things. We continue on in the car for a while before he leads me off at one of the bigger parks downtown. Then we walk another block before turning the corner and coming upon a large, glowing art installation that seems to float in the sky like a fluorescent vapor.

“Look at it...nothing like it anywhere but here,” Brian says.

“Jesus, Brian, it’s a sculpture. Or whatever. It’s not magic. Plus, I’ve seen it before.”

“It’s different every time, though. Can’t write it off.”

He approaches it slowly, and I follow his lead. I sneak a sidelong glance at him and am a little encouraged by how inspired his eyes look. I turn back to the piece. It’s very pretty, I have to admit. It glows purple and blue at the end of the summer, looking like a wide tornado. As big as a house, it is suspended up in the air by innumerable wires and knots, and as the desert winds flow through, it moves ever so slightly, circles of lines twisting around each other, leaving trails like the streaks of sparklers in the night. Since it’s only getting a little dark out, it doesn’t look like much yet. Night needs bright light to make nothingness seem interesting. We sit on a bench.

“I don’t need to bring anything tomorrow, right?” I ask.

“No, you’re fine.”

“Good.”

“And…” he trails off quickly.

“Yes?” I glance at him and smile. “What’s on your mind?”

“If it’s not rude of me to say, could you try not to, like, directly challenge everything my mother says?”

“I would never.”

“Um, do you not remember telling her that people who don’t leave Arizona might as well self-immolate before they burst in the sun?”

“Oh, yeah,” I say, grinning. “I remember now. She didn’t have a counter-argument.”

“Hill, please stop. You’re lucky my younger siblings didn’t know what that word meant. Just enjoy the food and stuff, please? For me?”

“Okay.”

“And nothing about god, either.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I say quietly, and I mean it. “But your mother would bring it up. She talks to me like I’m retarded. She talks to *you* like *you’re* retarded.”

Brian opens his mouth but doesn’t follow through or say anything, he just looks down and then away, squinting even though there is no light and fidgeting his fingers around imaginary objects.

“Why do you like this thing so much?” I ask.

“There’s something about it. It’s...it’s very natural.”

“No it’s not. I mean, it’s beautiful, but it’s not natural.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s something someone *made*. It wasn’t there before. Now it is.”

“I thought it was just the perfect reflection of what was already here. I read that the artist said it was based on the Arizona winds.”

“Yeah, well, that sounds like bullshit. Dry wind isn’t interesting; big glowing shit is interesting. Hence the big glowing shit.”

Brian doesn’t argue, he just keeps looking up at the piece. I shrug, but take one of his fidgeting hands in mine, looking back up at the art, which seems to glow more with every passing moment.

People who never took a chance always recommend that you do the same. This is something I became fully aware of at about ten years of age. I pieced it together from my parents’ shouting matches which, although uncomfortable, were very honest and I sure learned a lot. Being the only child of two unhappy people – the only *daughter* of two unhappy people – gives you a lot of insight into rationalization. Why you should play it safe,

or take that job that you don't like. These are the same people who mutter awed compliments at the extensive menu offered at chain restaurants. It does one good to be wary of these people.

* * *

We pull up to the large, plain house the next evening. I drove. Brian is sitting in the passenger seat with flowers cradled awkwardly between his knees. The house is located in an incomplete suburban development, which freaks me out. The block the house is on is complete with large cookie-cutter copy houses and green lawns, but just behind the houses are dirt and desert. Construction seems to be halted for some reason, though I can never remember seeing construction workers build anything in my life, things just pop up out of the ground. I park in the driveway that runs in a semicircle across the perfectly manicured lawn and get out of the car.

“Jesus,” I can't help but say. “The backdrop is creepy.”

“It's only creepy 'cause of the house,” Brian smiled. “It was fine before, when it was just desert.”

I sneer at him mockingly and he laughs, chewing gum. I know he changes when he is around his family. One mother, one father, five sisters, three brothers, and Brian. Perfect, perfect Brian. He also gets cocky when he chews gum. That's why I buy it for him so often. We are greeted before we get halfway to the front door; it opens soundlessly as Brian's mother glides onto the concrete front steps.

“My perfect, perfect Brian!” she says, her arms wide.

I notice his shoulders implode in on each other as he spits out his gum and moves tentatively towards his mother. His mother – Janet – is several inches taller than I am, and

I'm a respectable five foot seven myself. Janet is the same height as her son. She's wearing this god-awful outfit – a red apron and red gloves, her hair in an uncannily outdated up-do, her face puffy and proud. She hugs her son like an ocean current will take him under. I fight against the revulsion I always feel at the sight of her, instead smiling and moving in for a hug myself. Janet lets go of Brian and gives me the most brutally awkward one-arm hug, my forehead against her cheek, and then releases me. We move inside, past the kitchen that always seems to be frail and two-dimensional. Everything is already set, but we have to go say hello to all the siblings. His father is out of town but that really makes no difference, as Janet never really lets him talk much.

The family's gathered around in the living room; all of them, I think, except for one brother and one sister, both of whom are in the military. I remember most of the names, and just politely shake hands with the ones I forgot, all under Janet's searing gaze. A short while later, we're all sitting around the dinner table, silverware clinking as the younger kids – most of whom are now in grade school or just beginning high school – joke and laugh at the far end of the table. I feel a twinge of pride in my appearance, compared to theirs. I'm thinner and I'm wearing dark clothes. Some would call that ego; they would call that ego. But of course they would, wouldn't they?

All the kids are in khakis and button-downs, either blue or red. They join hands and pray. I sit without joining, resisting that indescribable pressure to mutter along. Now, I curiously listen to Brian and Janet talk, gauging what was going on, what she is trying to do to him now.

“So, honey,” the big woman says to her son. “Are you excited about moving back home for a bit? Or...or are you not?”

Brian's eyes flickered towards me for a miniscule moment before returning to weakly meet his mother's gaze.

"Well, I uh, I have been giving it some thought," he says. "And I'm not as sure that I uh, really want to move back in, you know?"

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Well, I mean, even if I'm just doing some work as a sound engineer I have enough saved up to get my own place."

"You already have your own place," his mother says.

"I mean, yeah, to, uh, to stay in my own place," he adds quickly.

I stare his mother down, smiling like a villain. I always figured his mom knew we lived together this past summer. I think us living together makes sense in every way that makes sense; so naturally, Janet wouldn't like it.

"Well, honey, you can obviously do whatever you would like to. But keep in mind that there are other people to think about, not just yourself."

This is how my parents talked to me; it's a strange mix of condescension, self-satisfaction, and paranoia, but with enough good intentions mixed in to make it palatable.

"Yeah, mom, I know, I just thought maybe..."

He takes a deep breath as his younger siblings at the end of the table perked up, noticing the tension.

"I thought maybe I would go to Los Angeles and try to, you know, direct some shorts or something. I mean, that's what I studied."

"Los Angeles," Janet says slowly, looking directly at me while I bite into a hunk of chicken. "How *bold*."

“Look, I know it is,” he said hurriedly. “But I mean, I’m twenty-two...I figured I had time to, you know, try. At least.”

He leans back into his chair and takes a deep breath, clearly exhausted. He turns to me. Janet takes a sip of wine and clears her throat.

“Try to accomplish what, exactly? What is there that isn’t here? Fame?”

“Why not fame?” I interject. “Why not? I’ve seen his stuff, it’s remarkable. You can’t just give up on that. What about that film you did for your thesis, Brian, what was it called? The David Lynch-inspired one?”

Brian’s face reddens.

“David who?” his mother asks. “What movie project was this?”

“I saw *Mulholland Drive*,” one of Brian’s sisters says. “It was disturbing. There’s monsters there.”

“It was amazing,” I say, a little too sharply.

The sister shrugs and scoops more mashed potatoes out of the huge, apocalyptic mound on a plate in the middle of the table, leaving off-white droppings on the tablecloth near her plate. Janet stares at Brian.

“What was this movie about? I never saw it.”

“Mom, I figured you wouldn’t like it.”

“Well, I thought I was someone you came to for input, but if not...”

“It’s not like that,” he said hurriedly. “It was a horror piece...sort of. So I know you don’t like that, and I just decided to do it for myself.”

“Did you? Did you do it for yourself?” she asks him, all the while staring at me.

“Yeah, he did,” I say.

“He can speak for himself, dear,” Janet says.

“Yeah,” Brian says, looking at his mother and then back at me, his face contorted in discomfort. “Yeah, I can.”

The conversation is interrupted for a moment when the youngest, a boy, spills milk all over the table, which results in a mix of commotion ranging from excited gasps to nervous shrieks. Janet only has to look deliberately down her nose at the far side of the table, with her beady black eyes, and the situation ends in awkward silence after brief, apathetic apologies as she sips wine.

“Tell me what it was about, perfect,” she says again.

“Well, you know, it was based on this book,” Brian says nervously. “It’s this sort of crazy book where...well, it doesn’t matter. Basically, a few people go into this labyrinth to find a missing friend of theirs, but the labyrinth is, like, self-aware, you know? Anyway, since it knows them, it can manipulate them, and they go crazy one at a time and it...ends poorly for all of them.”

Here it is; he’s about to hit his stride. His self-consciousness is falling away. His eyes are a bit brighter. He gulps some water before continuing.

“So one guy is, like, super paranoid, because he’s scared of violence, right? And he ends up being violent, and using all of his safety equipment to build booby traps or attack the others.”

There are a few giggles at the sound of word “booby,” but they are again stifled by Janet’s glare. I take his hand that is resting on his leg, under the table, smiling at him while he builds up his momentum.

“Another one, this woman, she feels unneeded on the expedition, right? Like, people always talk down to her and stuff – isn’t that called mansplaining? Anyway, so she’s really insecure, and ends up being so needy that she goes off on her own to try to prove herself. But despite, like, knowing what everyone else should do, she can’t do anything herself, and the walls turn into mirrors and she feels so embarrassed at the sight of herself – since she’s pretty incapable – that she kills herself...”

“Stop.”

Janet spoke out in a loud, confident voice. It made me flinch. Brian looks like a deflated balloon, an unearned degree, an unused condom, a bad joke that’s trying too hard.

“Well, it’s clear that you’ve become interested in the negative parts of life,” Janet says slowly.

“Mom, I never said...”

“No, no, no,” the big woman says, scooting her chair back, which makes a horrific screeching sound. “No, no, no. I thought I had raised you to live a certain way, but if you want to wallow in negativity, I can’t stop you.”

“It’s not that, that’s not fair...I just find it really exciting when...”

“You’re acting just like Timothy did.”

This startles me and I watch, surprised, as Brian’s face turns pale and his eyes flash with hatred. I’ve never seen his face do that before. I don’t think I like it. I’ve also never heard of this Timothy they are all referring to. The children at the other end of the table look saddened. Brian shuts down completely. I feel the need to step in, but struggle to come up with something to say.

“Ma’am,” I start, weakly.

But when Janet's beady eyes turned towards me, I find my resolve, and take a deep breath that starts in my belly, ignoring Brian's pleading eyes.

"Janet," I say. "Your son's amazing at what he does, and it would be a terrible mistake for him to not even try."

"Hillary, stop it," Brian mutters.

I keep pushing forwards, but I can almost feel the heat coming off of him. The shame, the shame that he thought he could do something for himself. This is all under the watchful, smug, infuriating glare of Janet.

I turn to look at him, waiting for him to do something, say something: anything. I try to slow my breathing and give Brian room to stand up for himself, but he's not doing anything. It's scary.

"Hillary, sweetie," Janet says. "I know this is a worrisome time, but running off towards failure just to make a point isn't a very mature thing to do. It takes no effort to burn out. It takes courage to function properly."

"Wait, what?" I ask.

"We've all felt like you do. Trying to...I don't know. Trying to be important. Just be important to each other, to the people you already have."

She turns to face her khaki, beige children. She has her soapbox. I suspect that it is time for Janet to preach.

"This leads to pain," she says. "Thinking you're God's gift. It's egotistical and it will lead to complete breakdown."

"What have you done so well?" I snap at her.

"Hillary, be quiet," Brian hisses at me.

“I just thought,” I say.

Now I sound like meek Brian. He spoke to me so venomously that it stings and makes me feel unwanted and useless. He turns to his mother. There is a silence that carries weight; the khaki children-of-the-corn look at me with big eyes. The mashed potato hillock stops reverberating.

“You people are poison,” I say as confidently as I can.

The mashed potatoes wiggle again as I stand up abruptly. I need to get away from fat, normal, average, happy people at any cost. I walk right out of the room without waiting for Brian. I move through the kitchen and the foyer and out into the dry air, out to Brian’s car I had been driving, my jaw clenched and my breathing shallow and quickened. Once out to his car, I realize I might have fucked up just now, and I lean in through the open passenger window to grab a pack of cigarettes, almost screaming in anger after my now-sweaty fingers struggle to flick the lighter. I lean against the car for a moment, blowing out smoke, but soon relapse into anxious pacing, constantly looking back at the front door of the big, useless house, waiting for Brian to come out. To leave his mother behind. I wish I was capable of leaving on my own but I can’t for some reason. I lose track of time in anger, and had smoked three cigarettes before Brian came trudging out. I see him hug Janet through the front window, wondering if the old hag had positioned him there, knowing they would be seen. Brian lopes out the front door and I see the beady little eyes in the window, just above a smile. Brian gets in the car without saying anything and I start it. We’re speeding down the incomplete road, dry wind invading the car as we flew through the suburb that was on pause, when I turn to face him.

“Who’s Timothy?”

He doesn't say anything, just sits fidgeting and squinting out the window, seeming to stare directly into the setting sun.

* * *

I'm back at my windowsill pretending to read *200 Monologues under 2 Minutes Each*. Brian's brooding and I decide to let him. I've made some type of irreparable mistake, but can't pin down exactly what it was. I'd been rude to his toad of a mother before, that's not it. Brian and I have been told our futures were not well thought out, that's not it. Something had shifted. Brian types furiously into his laptop; he had only been taking breaks every thirty minutes or so to make another weak Coke and bourbon in a stained coffee cup. After self-consciously flipping through the book every minute or so to make it look like I was reading, I speak up.

"Brian, who is Timothy?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Hey," I say. "You don't get to do that to me."

"What does any of this have to do with you?" he asks, growing frustrated.

"Seriously. Any of this? What does it have to do with you?"

I toss my legs over myself and hop off of the windowsill, moving slowly towards Brian, whose face betrays his mixed feelings; his voice is angry, his hands are in fists; but at the same time, his eyes are sad and his posture apologetic. He sits crumpled on the mattress.

"If it has to do with you it has to do with me. How have you not mentioned someone this important before?"

"Hey, you never talk about your family."

"Don't turn this on me," I say. "Who...is...Tim-"

“He’s my older brother, okay? Alright? Missing. Last seen by police officers in New York City. What else would you like to know?”

I’m unable to process that he has had an extra sibling, wincing as Brian slams his laptop shut and began speaking with more anger than I’ve seen in two and a half years.

“He is – he was – like, the most insanely charismatic guy ever,” Brian says with a biting faux-sentimentality that hurt me. “He hated Phoenix, just like you. He had lots of interests, just like us. He took off and failed over and over, breaking my mom’s heart, and got involved in some bad shit to make rent and then he disappeared and he’s probably gone. Okay? That enough information for you?”

“When was this?”

“In the past.”

Brian opens his computer again, signaling the end of the conversation, and I’m overcome with something that was uncomfortably close to pity; more of a respect, though. I decide to push it. After all, what was Brian really going to do?

“Is that why your mom is like that? What did you guys talk about when I was waiting? And why *did* you keep me waiting?”

His face flinches with anger for a few moments before he sighs it away, entering his computer password and rubbing his face as a small *ding* came from the speakers. He and I are shrinking and pulling apart simultaneously.

“She does what she does for good reason, and I think she’s right about L.A. and movies and stuff. I know she’s right. It’s just hard to hear.”

I sit down heavily in the old desk chair that had no desk and spin lightly and noiselessly. Brian goes back to his furious typing – probably an overemotional script for something he won't finish.

I spin faster and faster as my mind races downwards, into shadows; I can't act, he won't direct. We would probably stay together, sure, but only after I come back from L.A. with my tail between my legs. We would need to move out to those same suburbs, just in a slightly different spot. That's why they need all that space in the desert, I realized; that's why the roads are never finished. That's why there are summer blockbusters. There is an entire new generation of Hillarys and Brians that will sit comfortably in the newly built houses.

I spin faster and faster. I wonder what Timothy looked like. Was he handsome? Did he get shot? Did he overdose, or did he just melt, give in to despair? Did he not die, just change his name from Timothy to Tim and move from New York City to New Jersey somewhere? Somewhere with a road that never ended.

Feature Presentation

The Golden Reel was a small video store located within the Main Campus building at St. Jude's University in Pennsylvania. It had one full-time employee, a large round man named Andy Jefferies who had been working there for five years. He recently started working from eight in the morning until ten at night, six days a week; even at minimum wage, that was enough money for him to get by. There used to be another employee, a silent old woman who didn't even like movies. Andy hadn't liked being around her, and when she died he just took all the hours. He ate both lunch and dinner at the dining hall that was inside the same building he worked in. He normally ate alone but not always, and he had become good friends with a few dining hall employees. They envied his job because he rarely had to interact with people, but they still used Andy to get free tickets to screenings in the little fifteen-seat theatre attached to the Main Campus building. He could even request movies if no professors needed to screen one.

His job was maintenance and the cash register, even though almost every payment was made with St. Jude's student ID cards – called PayPoints – and, he figured, financed by parents. He would take the Septa train from Wynnewood. There was a quaint little train station on campus, and it was an easy ride. Away from Philadelphia, Andy always said, was better than towards Philadelphia. Then he would limp across the Quad, aided by an obnoxiously ornate cane, into the enormous Main Campus building. He would pull up the garage-style metal door and open up shop. Since he technically had Xbox and PlayStation consoles, there was the vague risk of theft.

He opened up shop and stood behind the desk, playing an approved movie through the screen. It was the first *Hangover* movie, which he felt was actually more harmful than most horror movies. These kids came in every Friday and Saturday and rented movies about blacking out, and then came back with mangled sweatshirts and red eyes to return them on Mondays.

It was Saturday and Andy sat behind the desk after double-checking everything. His right leg seared with pain and was almost always covered in popping blisters, so he lived a sedentary lifestyle, and it showed more every year. He felt grosser with each week that dropped off of the calendar, and being around such exuberant youth only highlighted his disgust with himself. He was surprised when a student walked in at 8:15, since St. Jude's usually woke up around noon on Saturdays.

Andy didn't usually see this type of kid in the store; he was tall and wore pressed khakis and a button-down with an argyle sweater. He had one of those rich guy watches that seems really heavy; it was metallic and jangled on his wrist. His posture was horrific, and he seemed like if he stood up straight he would hit his head on the low ceiling. Andy stood up as the kid shuffled up and down the aisles, grabbing candy and soda and NyQuil. He looked around, confused. It seemed obvious that this kid wanted to ask him a question but he seemed like he'd rather die. Andy liked helping, as it was something to occupy his mind and make him feel like he had a purpose.

"Can I help you, boss?" Andy said.

"Hey," the kid said, as though he was surprised someone else was there. "Uh, where are the, you know, movies?"

“You can look through this binder here boss,” Andy said. “It’s organized alphabetically within each genre. DVDs are all in boxes back here. Is there something specific you’re looking for?”

“No, man, not specific. But the Netflix screen was giving me a headache, you know?”

“Yeah,” Andy said excitedly. “It’s not the same thing. Quantity over quality, Netflix is. I grew up wandering movie stores. But I’m ranting, aren’t I boss? Maybe a specific genre you’re looking for?”

“Uh,” the kid said, leafing through the binder uselessly. “I mean...comedy? I guess.”

“Why comedy?”

“I don’t really want to, you know, think about much.”

Andy was disappointed. All these great films, some of which he had fought valiantly for, and it was just Judd Apatow movies and *Call Of Duty* games. He had lobbied for three of Lars Von Trier’s near-perfect films – called the “depression trilogy” – and only one person had rented the first one and she had brought it back the next day with her face reddening and never returned. That one might have been a little much, especially for a Catholic school.

“Maybe try something else?” Andy suggested.

The kid looked up with eyes that were either sick or hungover. Andy thought that he had a heaviness, a strange sort of gravity to him. He shrugged at Andy, who continued talking.

“I mean, have you seen any of the movies that were nominated this year?” Andy said. “Yeah, they’re a little bit Oscar-bait, but still pretty good. Sort of predictable...I mean, never mind, not those ones. Maybe action? That’s mindless. Horror?”

The kid smiled wryly and, mumbling, asked what was so appealing about horror.

“Well,” Andy said, his voice getting louder, “I was reacting to your desire to not really think about much. Watching people get killed is more of a feeling than a thought...I mean...in movies and stuff. Yeah. Maybe in real life too. I mean, I wouldn’t really know. I haven’t done anything like that. I don’t know...comedy movies always seemed condescending to me. It’s like they know you’re watching them in order to feel better. They pity you.”

The kid shrugged, and turned back to the comedy section. He stopped flipping, settling on *Talladega Nights*. Andy rung up the movie and the candy and the NyQuil in awkward silence as the kid hacked a stream of coughs politely into his arm. He used PayPoints, and Andy saw his balance was \$5,340 which was just goddam ridiculous. He also saw that the kid’s name was Kevin. Kevin thanked Andy with a meek voice. A surprisingly meek voice, actually. And then he left and it was hours before anyone came in, and it was just one of the videogame regulars who stuttered through an explanation of why she was returning *Dark Souls* so late.

* * *

Andy couldn’t get Sad Bro out of his head for the rest of the tedious day. He was still stuck on him when he got off of the train that night and shuffled up the wet wooden steps to his apartment, which he shared with his girlfriend Stacey. They had been dating for five

years, but ever since he had taken the extra hours, they basically just slept next to each other.

Typical pillow talk went like:

“How’s it going?”

“Good. You?”

“Good.”

“Good.”

And then a movie.

He was frightened by how okay with that he was. It was just what he needed. No distractions.

“Hey baby,” she said to him as he walked through the door. “How were the little Privileges?”

“Met an odd one today,” was all he said back after giving her a cheek to cheek air kiss.

Stacey sat back down on the heavy red couch. She was still wearing what she called “adult clothes.” A sweater hugged her tightly and formed a perfect horizontal line where it met her dress pants. Andy knew it was kind of her to stay up until almost 11:00 for him to get back but he wished she hadn’t because she was watching some documentary on the legal system. He would have to watch it too.

“What was odd about this one?”

“He wasn’t one of the artsy kids. Not a forearm tattoo in sight. No dyed hair. No Joy Division t-shirt. Just one of those dudes. Seemed miserable or sick or hungover or some combination. I don’t know. It was weird.”

He sat next to her and she put her head into his shoulder, and he let her exhale into him. It felt good, Andy guessed, but he was disconnected, like he was watching himself live a good life, only lazily registering it. He knew that he had let himself go a bit and now she was noticeably better-looking than him, though she always had been. But he felt pretty good about his new workweek, since he could cover the entirety of their rent. This allowed her to take a full schedule of classes at Harbor University, a little college a few miles down the road from St. Jude's. He felt like he was helping.

Andy hoped beyond hope that Stacey would go to bed soon so he could finish watching *You're Next*, a horror movie he had just barely started the night before when she was asleep; instead he found himself learning against his will, thinking instead of feeling, and even – despite himself – letting out the occasional concerned, benevolent, dishonest gasp of surprise at how unfair the court system was. What a waste of a screen, he thought.

* * *

Kevin returned to *The Golden Reel* a few days later, on an even colder and bleaker morning. He was wearing the same type of clothes as before, Andy noticed, but he looked like he had aged a year. His face was sagging slightly, his eyes rimmed with red and layered with theater curtain bags under his eyes. His posture was still submissive. But Andy figured he only noticed this because he was looking so closely. When he approached the desk, a strong stench of cigarette smoke and what might be alcohol was wafting off of Kevin.

“Hi. How'd you like *Talladega Nights*?”

“It was retarded,” Kevin said, smiling sharply for just a moment. “You were right. Let's try action.”

Kevin took the DVD from him and placed it carefully into its labeled envelope after examining it for any disfigurements.

“Action? Let’s see boss, what’re your favorites?”

“Uh...*Die Hard*?”

“Very solid film,” Andy said solemnly. “I wish that franchise got the peaceful death it deserved. What else?”

Andy was flipping through the binder as he waited for an answer.

“I thought *John Wick* was pretty strong. Actually, basically anything with Keanu Reeves.”

“Anything with Keanu Reeves? Or any action movie with Keanu Reeves?”

“I don’t know man,” Kevin said, looking down at his shoes.

Andy saw how low this kid was; he seemed to be burning up inside with something so troubling that heat was coming off of him. Andy spoke up.

“What’s the matter?”

“What?”

Andy didn’t know why he would say that. It was probably inappropriate, though he never knew how inappropriate felt, he just relied on Stacey to point it out to him by sighing heavily and shaking her head. Here, he was on his own.

“I mean, what’s up boss?”

“Fucking nothing’s up, *boss*,” Kevin seethed.

He walked briskly out of the room, his head hanging low, before Andy could figure out what he had done wrong this time.

* * *

When he got home to his apartment that night, Andy was surprised at how upset he was about Kevin. He hadn't ever really registered any of these kids, even when he gave a recommendation or two. They all veered away from him, a guy with a cane and an obsession with movies nobody has heard of. He felt uglier than normal as he lugged his leg up the soaked wooden stairs.

Stacey was in bed reading and he went straight there after locking up.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Nothin' much. How was class?"

"Ugh," she said, putting her book down. "Required White Guy semester. Philosopher edition. Fucking brutal."

"That bad?"

"I mean, they're not bad themselves...but the professor is a douche lord," she said. "Probably a year or two older than me. Not quite your age. Certain that he's teaching us how to exist."

"Sorry."

"He wears a bow tie."

"Douche Lord for sure," Andy said, smiling.

"How's Sad Bro?"

"Oh, now he's Mad Bro."

She sat up in bed and said, "Oh! Tell me, tell me."

"I mean, the kid looks like he's gonna die, Stacey. He reeks of booze and smoke, his eyes are fucked up, and he has a PayPoint card with five grand on it, so he can just keep watching movies all goddamn day. I don't know, I feel like I should do something."

“Not your problem,” she said.

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true. It’s a school, dude. All you see, all day, is the same thing I see; people with lots of potential slowly losing all of their potential. Before settling. Except for me, because...I guess because I’m aware of it.” At this, she looked up and to the side, like she was trying to do math. “Huh.”

“Jesus, did you do Nietzsche today?”

“It’s true. What could you do anyway?”

“Nothing I guess,” he said.

“Don’t turn this into a thing, baby, please. It’s just you...filling in blanks that aren’t really there. No offense.”

“None taken, you beautiful, studious thing that you are.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Well,” he said, standing up slowly and letting out a gasp as he steadied himself on his cane. “I think I’m going to stay up for a bit. Relax. You know...some medicine for my leg.”

“You’re perfect,” she said, and that was the worst he had felt all day. He knew it came from a good place – the best place, really – but it felt dishonest. She didn’t even refer to his leg anymore.

He hobbled into the living room and closed the door behind him. He loaded up a DVD copy of *You’re Next* and watched as a family dinner out in a house in the suburbs transformed into slaughter and mayhem. Someone killed someone else by shoving a spinning blender on his head until he was nothing but a neck stump.

Andy sat on the couch, splayed out like he was melting. He took off his pants, grimacing, so that he could rub his prescribed topical creams into his leg. It hurt, it stung, it made him frustrated, it made him feel gross; he couldn't get away from it. He turned out all the lights so he wouldn't have to look at it and instead his eyes glazed as he watched the screen. In the movie, people in animal masks arrived at the house the dinner had taken place in, and started stabbing people to death. He watched, letting himself go completely, as his own struggles became irrelevant, intangible, not real. He floated into the screen, wishing only that it was bigger and his apartment was smaller.

* * *

The next day Kevin returned. His already anxiety-ridden mannerisms were even more on display, Andy saw, as the tall but slouched young man shuffled into the store around nine o'clock. Andy was exhausted because he had been too upset to stop watching movies the night before, and had gotten barely three hours sleep. Twice he had returned to bed with Stacey but the dark and the quiet were too much to bear, and left him with only his thoughts. His leg had felt like things were wriggling into it.

There were two young women in the store laughing and drinking coffee and flipping through the big white binder full of movie titles, organized based on viewers' needs and desires. Movies listed in perfect little lines that Andy resented. Things didn't have to be categorized so strictly, he thought; every genre has elements of other genres. Kevin fidgeted his way around the small space, picking up candy and looking at the packaging like it held a secret of some kind, all the while keeping an eye on the two girls, waiting for them to leave. Andy was waiting too.

"Can I help you two find something?" he asked.

“We’re just looking,” one of them said a little rudely.

They were identical even though they didn’t necessarily look the same. Dark hair, perfect healthy bodies wrapped tightly in hundreds of dollars’ worth of clothes. No jobs to do today. Andy looked over them to see Kevin eyeing the exit.

“Look,” Andy said to the girls, “I have a very important customer here. Can I help you pick a movie?”

“Wow, sir, we’re looking. We don’t even have to be here,” the more hungover-looking of the two said. “There’s always Netflix. Geez.”

Kevin was heading for the exit.

“Well, go and watch Netflix then,” Andy said flatly.

“Holy shit,” the other girl said. “Fine.”

They left, and Kevin looked on in confused awe as they did. Andy knew he could get in some trouble for that but he doubted they would say anything. He and the other employees were just extensions of the building to these kids, anyway. Andy got slightly more eye contact because he was white, too, but not much.

“What can I do for you, boss? I mean, not boss. Just...you know. Not a boss.”

Kevin smiled and then began stammering.

“I feel really awful, man, I really do. I was being such a dick, it’s like totally inexcusable. You were just trying to do a nice thing and I was a total dick...”

Andy was taken aback at how freely words flowed for Kevin, now that the topic was his own uselessness. His confidence seemed to grow even though he was bashing himself.

“...and I was just in my own head, and I mean that’s no excuse, but I wanted to come by and tell you that I’m sorry.”

“Oh, man, no worries. Not a worry. I just, somehow, felt like speaking up. But I’ll just stick to movie recommendations.”

“Please do, man, please do. I, uh, actually have the next couple of weeks or so off. Excused absences.”

“How’d you swing that?”

“Forged a note and forwarded a fraudulent email from a fake doctor. Said I had mono.”

“Wait. You aren’t sick?”

“I really am sick. Just not with mono,” Kevin said, grinning. “Wait, what’s your name again?”

“Andy,” Andy said, trying hard not to point at his nametag and smack the front of his forehead for emphasis.

“Andy. Yeah...okay Andy, here’s the deal,” Kevin said, sighing and rubbing his face with both hands. Andy anticipated a meltdown. “I don’t normally binge movies but I uh, oh boy this is embarrassing...I just...I don’t know. I’m not really up for this school thing. Class is fine, but these people make me feel really sad and tired. They seem impenetrable, like they’re all small pieces in some huge wall I can’t get over. And I can’t go home...anywhere but there, you know? So I just thought maybe some movies could be distracting. That make sense?”

“Oh! Hell yeah, it makes sense,” Andy said, delightedly. “Been there man. Jesus, I went through a phase that had me rewatching *The Sopranos* several times...I mean, the whole fuckin’ series!”

Kevin laughed, a genuine laugh, and it made Andy feel warm. He immediately forgave Kevin for lying about being sick.

“But here’s where you messed up,” Andy said dramatically, and Kevin leaned in to listen intently. “Movies are not for distraction. That’s what television and life are for. Movies should direct you right to your own suffering. I was crippled with anxiety – that’s worse than a bad leg, I guarantee it – and so I watched Tony Soprano deal with shit. I saw how he played it, and I felt how he learned and he grew and he shrunk and he bounced back...I was there for the whole thing, man. That wasn’t a distraction. That was productive.”

Kevin smiled but his eyebrows scrunched up in confusion.

“Look,” Andy said. “You get what I’m saying, right?”

“Sort of.”

“Look, what’s the most messed up movie you’ve ever seen?”

“Uh...I guess *Se7en*,” Kevin said slowly.

“That’s a great one. Why not watch that? You feel sad, you feel mad?”

“Yep.”

“What about?”

“I...I don’t know, really. I don’t know. I bet it’s just your run of the mill, immature little break up thing.”

“Okay, what’s the last thing you want to see in the whole world?”

Kevin’s face sank slightly, his chin disappearing into his chest and his eyes darkening.

“Her with...anyone.”

“Okay, let’s see,” Andy said, flipping through the book. “Have you seen anything directed by Roman Polanski?”

“I, I mean, I might have.”

“I’ll try to get a copy of *Repulsion*. Brutal movie, man. It’s the opposite of the braindead stuff we think will help us but won’t. Still considered a very well-made movie. A little violent. Actually, that might be hard to get shipped here...I’ll do you one better.”

“What’s that?”

“I could probably get the school to show it if I can find some art teacher to vouch for me. They never fact check movies...or directors, hopefully.”

“Okay,” Kevin said, a little hesitantly.

“Okay...okay...let’s see here,” Andy said, flipping maniacally through the white binder.

“Well...oh boy,” he said. “Have you seen *Heathers*?”

He searched through the white binder since he didn’t know what genre it would be located in. He couldn’t find it so he looked up the IMDB page on his desktop computer on his desk and turned the screen to face Kevin, who sighed heavily.

“Dude, that looks like *The Breakfast Club* or something.”

“Kevin, you gotta trust me. It gets weird. But I don’t seem to have it in stock...can I interest you in, oh, *Silence of the Lambs*?”

“That one’s fucked up, right?”

“Yep. So you know it isn’t lying.”

“Huh,” Kevin said, looking up and to the side in the same manner Stacey had the night before. “Deal.”

Andy rang him up, handed him the DVD, and sent him on his way. Kevin smiled and thanked him and stood a little straighter, and on his way out Andy shouted his name to get his attention.

“Yeah?” Kevin asked.

“If I, uh, if I got approval to screen *Repulsion*, you’d see it in the theater, right?”

“Of course.”

“See you later Kevin,” Andy said, trying to contain his glee.

* * *

“I really don’t like you doing this,” Stacey said to Andy.

They were in their apartment on Sunday, his only day off. She was trying to study for her finals in their bedroom while he watched movies in the living room. But she apparently couldn’t bear it, and she had walked into the room defiantly and had spoken her mind.

“What?” he said. “I got the movie approved and everything.”

“It’s weird and it makes me worried for you. You’ve spent way too much time on it.”

“I just sent some emails and stuff, no big deal.”

“You lied to a professor,” she said flatly.

“I mean, not really,” he said.

Andy had contacted a notoriously problematic film professor, claiming that showing *Repulsion* for extra credit would be a victory for art over censorship. Andy lied, saying more and more movie requests were being denied by the administration on account of their dangerous content. The idea had taken hold immediately. The movie would be shown in the little theater for extra credit to whomever in the professor’s Film Noir class would like to go

and write a short paper on it. Andy had told Kevin a few days earlier, and Kevin – looking healthier and happier – had been excited.

“Yes, really, you lied to a faculty member. And you’re withdrawn here at home, and don’t you dare...”

“But my schedule!”

“...blame your schedule again. You chose it. Why?”

“Leave me alone,” he said, turning off the television and standing up slowly and painfully, leaning on his cane. As he did, he saw a brief flash of sympathy – *pity* – evidence itself on Stacey’s face. He felt enraged, which scared him. That feeling rarely made it up to the surface.

“You can’t blame me for not wanting to look around this fucking apartment, and you can’t blame me for trying to help a sad kid,” he said, hissing, regretting it in his bones even as he spoke.

“Andy, please,” she said, following him down the thin hallway towards the bedroom. “Why are you treating me like this? You’re not like this.”

“It’s not about you, helping someone is not a bad thing, and you’re just hovering over me. What is it? Why can’t I get involved, huh? Am I just the bulbous fat movie recommendation guy? Is that it? I can have an impact on people, I can make things different if I try to!”

Stacey flinched at the implication but continued following him, stepping lightly behind him like he was an animal that escaped a zoo.

“I thought he was better,” she said. “I thought you said that he was doing better, like, every time you saw him. You’re being really horrible right now.”

Andy couldn't think of a response so he just tried to pace angrily but with every step he took, the blisters on his skin erupted into spilled lava. His thigh felt hollow and as he tried to move back down the hallway he saw himself in the full length mirror leaned up against a wall. He couldn't tell whether it was concave or convex or totally accurate, but the image he saw was too much for him. He leaned into a cane like Henry VIII, his face was contorted with a childlike anger, and he was physically unable to even pace, much less make any progress in any discernable direction. He leaned against the wall and slid onto the ground. Stacey sighed heavily.

“Are you going to be like this all day? Because I have my own shit to do, Andy. I'll help if I can but if you just want an audience for your little play, I'm not going to do that for you.”

“Fine, leave.”

She set her face so as not to reveal any emotion and packed her books and notes into a backpack. She stepped over him and right before she shut the door behind her, she quietly said “I'll be back before midnight if you want to wait up.” Andy felt the rage drift away, soon to be replaced by numb regret, as he listened to her footsteps thud down the wooden stairs outside the window.

* * *

The showing of *Repulsion* was scheduled for a Sunday afternoon – Andy's day off – because he and Professor Fight for Art both agreed this would be the day students would be most likely to attend. Andy took the train in, as always, this time a little unnerved by being on it at noon rather than early morning or late at night.

He walked past the store, the Main Campus building full of students milling around and buying coffees with their PayPoints. All pea coats and smiles. He took out his keys and opened up the small theater that most students didn't even know about, much less use. It sat twenty-two. There were four rows of five thick, comfortable seats, as well as two handicapped seats right in the front. He went up to the projection room and found a student employee dozing off in there, one hand gripping his phone and the other one halfway down his pants. Andy poked him with his cane and he woke up coughing and apologizing.

“We ready to go at two?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Once you get it going, you can leave if you want. I'll finish up,” Andy said.

Andy went back into the closed store and double-checked the Facebook event Professor Fight for Art had made. A few students had marked down that they were going. He also had an email from professor Fight for Art, saying that he would be unable to make it to campus today, and to write down the names of the students who actually arrived. Basically all that mattered was that Kevin showed up; he wanted to be sure that he liked the movie. Andy needed to know that it wasn't just Kevin being nice, either. He needed to know that this was accomplishing something.

He sat down in the front row, in one of the handicapped seats, about fifteen minutes before the movie was supposed to start. He leaned back into the comfortable seat, and even though there weren't commercials, he felt the initial relief of being in a theater relax him. This was abruptly interrupted when his phone began vibrating, and he checked to see it was Stacey and then he turned it off hurriedly without answering. He didn't want to be rude. One must respect the movie. The lights dimmed as he massaged his leg, trying to get it into a

comfortable position where he could forget it was there. There was still nobody in the theater. He turned awkwardly and saw the silhouette of the student employee getting the movie ready. He felt that vague frustration, that anger, that he almost never felt in a theater.

The movie was about to start when he heard the door crack open and saw the small, heavenly rays of light coming from out in the Main Campus building. Someone had entered. Andy turned to face the entrance, smiling for Kevin, but it was not Kevin. It was someone from the film class, presumably; she took one look at the almost empty theater and then fled before Andy could speak up or say something. She ran from him – he was a big lug, smiling next to a cane in an empty theater. The movie began.

Andy couldn't stop rubbing his leg as the creepy score and black and white image of Catherine Deneuve's beautiful, tortured face appeared. Andy couldn't get into it. He wondered where Kevin was, he wondered if he had done something wrong; he kept thinking about the bored student in the projection room, looking down at him; he wondered what Stacey was calling about and why he didn't answer. All this as Catherine Deneuve had nightmares about being raped as she went crazy in her little apartment, eventually lashing out and killing men who got near her. Andy lived inside the movie.

He was rudely brought back into reality by the sound of the door opening and smacking into the wall. Light came rushing back into the theater.

Kevin came breathlessly into the room, his face illuminated with faint perspiration and wearing a wide grin. He sat in the other handicapped seat and seemed ready for Andy to say something, but Andy's face didn't turn from the screen so Kevin, looking a little confused, looked up at the movie as well.

After forty minutes the student employee left, walking right across the screen in front of Andy with his phone glowing obnoxiously. Andy followed him to the door and then locked it behind him. When it was time, he changed reels, still not acknowledging Kevin, who seemed visibly uncomfortable. With only twenty minutes left in the movie, Andy watched as Catherine Deneuve walked slowly down a hallway that had hands reaching from the walls, grabbing her and rubbing her, and he thought he heard someone trying to open the door. He curled up in the handicapped seat, trying to let the movie wash him away, away from where and who and what he was, but it wasn't working, and he felt it might not work again for a long time.

“Um, Andy?”

Andy didn't respond.

“Andy. What's up?”

“Just watch the movie, Kevin.”

“What's going on? I'm trying to do something nice here...”

“What? *You're* doing something nice? You think this is for you, not me, *you*,” Andy said, turning to face Kevin as the eerie ambient soundtrack still played and the film cut to a close-up of Catherine Deneuve screaming.

“Jesus,” Kevin muttered, grabbing his backpack up off of the floor. “This was dumb. I didn't even want to be on campus on a weekend but you insisted...”

“Don't be condescending to me, you entitled shit. Don't you do that. I was trying to make a point, but you're not going to get it. You just keep watching goofy movies and being miserable, see if I care.”

“Fuck this,” Kevin said, and he walked out of the room.

Andy watched the rest of the movie in silent rage. The kid was wrong. This wasn't about Andy. He smiled to himself and pictured the spoiled idiot spending the next four years in isolation. Andy rubbed his leg and let anger take over. The movie ended with a close-up of Catherine Deneuve as a child staring at her father. The implication was that he was abusive. This is what the world is like, Andy knew it; other people just couldn't handle reality.

* * *

Walking slowly up the soaked wooden stairs into his apartment that afternoon, he still hadn't decided what to tell Stacey. She wasn't an "I told you so" type of person, but still. It wouldn't be pleasant to tell the truth.

"How was it?" she asked in a voice he thought sounded desperately peppy.

"It went...fine."

"Did Kevin not show up?"

"Yeah...I mean, well...no."

Stacey put on a sad face.

"But there were other kids," Andy said, stupidly.

"Well good! You tried, you can't do much more. Now get in here and listen to me complain about dead white guys."

And she did. Andy didn't feel better as he listened to her stories about class that past week – stories that he should have listened to right after they happened, but he was always hiding. After a modest dinner and a documentary, it was time for bed. Stacey was getting undressed and he sat on the bed, waiting for a good moment to say he was going to stay in the living room for a while.

“Why don’t you just stay in here with me?” she asked him, already knowing. He felt dumb at how predictable he was; but he figured that wasn’t a particularly unique experience for people.

“I just have to, you know...”

“Just do it in bed. I have a book for you.”

“Well...no. I shouldn’t.”

“Andy, you’re going to have to –”

“Stop it,” he said. “Just stop it. You don’t get to talk down to me.”

His voice was bloated with the same poison it had had the night of their fight. She grimaced and turned to her book, not acknowledging him as he slumped out to the living room. He sat festering, his leg jutting out to the side as he applied all of his topical creams, placebo creams that carried the illusion of progress but accomplished nothing. Before the implications of all he was doing could begin to sink in, he grabbed the remote and turned on the television.

Costume Design

Shane heard the air conditioner let out a metallic groan as it redoubled its efforts to fight the heat. The mechanical whirring was oppressively loud, but he still heard his wife's footsteps as she came up the stairs. When she entered, she sighed heavily and rubbed her eyes before smiling.

"I thought that we agreed you wouldn't turn it all the way up," he said.

"Christ, Shane," Natalie said. "Lighten up. It's so hot...I mean, I knew it was going to be hot, but I'm having trouble sleeping."

Shane accurately assessed that there was no point pressing the matter, and returned his gaze to his book. He didn't think that his wife looked angry, but the silence was not mixing well with the heat. She got undressed and finished a glass of water that was sitting on her bedside table. Shane could smell her shampoo, surprised that she would shower so late. They were both constantly glistening in the summer, which made it difficult to tell what was sweat and what was water.

"I don't want to stress you out," she said. "But could we, um, reopen that conversation we were having about getting a pool installed?"

"Of course, Natalie," Shane said. "But I doubt I'll ever feel good about it. There are so many risks. I mean, as soon as it's filled our chances of drowning skyrocket."

"I know, I know, you're probably right," she said, looking away. "But it feels good to jump in one."

"I suppose so. Still, that seems irrelevant."

"Good night," Natalie said.

“Good night.”

She hadn't had a chance to get in bed before they heard the sound of Ted bumping into a chair and making it scratch terribly on the tile of the kitchen. Shane lay quietly and she stood still, frozen, holding a pillow she had been flipping over. There were some more discordant footsteps as the man stumbled around, looking for more of something. He found it. Instead of hearing the clink of a bottle against glass – as they had become accustomed to – Shane and Natalie heard nothing.

“Oh,” Natalie said, sounding defeated. “Oh, god, Shane, what are we going to do with him?”

“Don't ask me that, please,” Shane said slowly. “You know full well I never thought this was a good idea.”

“He must be drinking it out of the bottle, now, Shane. Can't we—”

“No. We can't. That's what I've been trying to tell you. We...you...can't do anything for that man. After a certain point, people are completely incapable of change. We should never have let him stay here, Natalie.”

They were quiet for several minutes, and heard nothing from downstairs. Shane resumed reading his book of Ben Bernanke lectures on the financial crisis of 2008. How everyone should have seen it coming, how there were warning signs, how people had gotten careless. Shane had read it five times before. Natalie sat in bed, fidgety with discomfort as she waited to hear something from downstairs. After half an hour, she drifted to sleep. Shane turned out the light and lay awake for a while longer, more tense than he would care to admit; he was glad his wife had fallen asleep, because after she had drifted he heard an

unearthly moaning coming from the living room downstairs, before Ted apparently managed to drag himself out to the room above the garage.

* * *

Ted O'Brien had arrived on their doorstep two weeks earlier. He had gone to college with Natalie back in Pennsylvania, where they had become relatively good friends. He studied screenwriting and she studied English; now she taught high school English, and he had moved to L.A. to work movies. Shane's success in Actuarial Science had led him to California for a short time, where he and Natalie got married. He found more consistent work in Phoenix, where they now lived.

Ted O'Brien had looked like a dead man to Shane, who had never met him before. Although his clothes were trim and crisp, the skin on his hands seemed dry and worn. Natalie didn't seem to see the same man that Shane did. Shane thought Natalie's memory of Ted must have affected the way she had seen him when he arrived on their doorstep. His old self could smile through time, Shane imagined, and inject his new self with enough charisma and charm to talk Natalie into anything. Just like his old self probably could have. He was tall and lanky, but carried himself well. No matter how bad things got the night before, Shane noticed that he dressed impeccably the next day. Between all of the suspiciously practiced stories he told when he had first shown up, he worked in some less interesting but far more useful bits of information. Screenwriting hadn't worked out. The movie business was "too incestuous," so he was trying to sell a pilot script. And of course, finally, inevitably, he had nowhere to stay and just needed a place for a little while if it wasn't too much of a burden on the happy couple. Without much of a chance to argue, Shane found

himself carrying Ted's belongings up to the second floor of the garage. He had cleaned and furnished it himself a year earlier as a summer project.

Ted didn't have a lot of luggage, but when Shane had reached for the last suitcase on the sidewalk, Ted's eyes flared terribly and he said – with much less charm and charisma than usual – that it was fragile and that he would take it up himself.

* * *

Shane woke up early as he always did; he showered quickly and was downstairs fully dressed in a matter of minutes. His coffee had already leaked out of the preprogrammed machine and he stood in the kitchen and drank it slowly, looking around to see if there was anything he had to clean up. There never was, somehow. Begrudgingly, Shane realized he had to give credit where it was due; he had known several drunks in his life, and none had cleaned up more effectively than Ted. Shane remembered his youth, spent scrubbing and rearranging and looking away from things. Even as a child his parents' excuses and promises carried no weight. He just waited for the inevitable to happen. Which it always did. His mother died of cirrhosis and his father died a decade later, covered in blights and blisters, living in a facility and speaking to no one. Even in their last sicknesses they did nothing but lie to him and it made him angry whenever he thought of them.

When he pulled out of the driveway he looked up at the square window of what had become Ted's room and was greeted with closed curtains surrounded by black edges. When he pulled the car back home that night, however, the curtains were drawn back, the lights flicked on, and Ted sat on the front porch, drinking ice water and reading a book Natalie had probably leant him. Shane parked in front of the garage and walked slowly up his own front steps.

“Hey there, Shane. How were the numbers? Or, you know, what some of us would call...*people*?”

Shane forced a smile as he walked up towards his house.

“They never change, Ted. How are you doing?”

“Good, actually, really good. I think I might be out of your hair here in a few days...I think I’ve got something lined up back in the city of angels.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Ted flashed a politician smile at Shane as he walked inside and took off his sport coat, which was practically stuck to his skin. He heard dishes clanging as Natalie set the dinner table and sang to herself. Ted didn’t recognize the song. Something about a large automobile. As he walked down the hall he could actually *hear* his wife smiling. Her voice cracked a couple times but it seemed she didn’t care.

“Oh,” she exclaimed when he walked in. “Honey, how was your day?”

They kissed lightly.

“Good. No surprises.”

“So a day with no surprises is a good day?”

Shane felt a small rush of contempt at his wife’s comment; when she was around other so-called creative people she seemed to change into someone else. Everything was a debate, a grey area, a complicated but beautiful description. He didn’t evidence his feelings. Whenever he made the mistake of calling her out on this, she just dug in and accused him of being hard-headed. He decided against confronting her. Instead he just smiled and shrugged and said he was going to double check something in the garage.

“Well alright,” Natalie said, “but dinner will be on the table in about ten minutes. Ted got some tortellini.”

Shane opened the garage door and pulled his Subaru inside, closing the door behind him. Now he was enclosed in the immaculate garage. All along three walls, about seven feet up, rows of symmetrically arranged pale blue plastic boxes sat with the labels facing out. CHRISTMAS. WINTER. BLANKETS. After popping open the hood and poking around for a minute, he grabbed the tire pressure gauge from his glove compartment and went about his weekly checkup. Nothing had ever really been wrong, of course, but double checking things made him feel better, and Ted’s grin – along with his tortellini and Natalie’s singing – had left him feeling edgy. After ten minutes, he heard Natalie call him in for dinner.

Shane walked into the kitchen and stood quietly to the side. The food was ready and simmering, a delicious smell filling the room. Natalie and Ted were a well-oiled machine, passing plates to each other and making small talk about whether or not Jared Leto was a smug asshole. The two of them were so synchronized Shane wondered how much experience they had cooking together. Natalie smiled at him over a tiny shoulder. He saw that she smiled brightly but it didn’t make him feel better. It actually made him feel worse for some reason. He remembered a few weekends ago when he had been gone on business and had come back and she had been so nice to him he was convinced she had done something wrong. He felt the same way now. Without a way to help them set the table, he sat in his chair and watched.

“Well that’s the thing about male actors,” Ted was saying after they were all sitting down. “They all think they’re god’s gift to the world when they get off the plane. I remember when I was on set for some pilot that failed...the guy who would have starred in it

was this prick – totally unknown – but he talked like he owned everybody. You’d think it would be the girls, but they’re pretty aware of how things work, usually. The ones who don’t have a good head for business end up getting famous the wrong way.”

Natalie chuckled and turned to look at Shane, smiling widely at him. He thought she seemed more relaxed than usual. Natalie’s eye contact not being on him seemed to bother Ted, who began speaking louder.

“You know I was originally hoping to do touch-up for this Pixar movie coming out,” he said. “It didn’t happen, but that’s probably for the best. They ask you to write dialogue after they have already animated most of the movie. It’s pretty limiting. Off-screen dialogue and shit like that.”

“Oh, I think I heard about that,” Natalie said. “Not the, uh, not the Pixar movie, but the whole screenwriting process stuff. I had no idea it was such a headache.”

“Oh, you can’t *imagine*,” Ted said, chuckling.

Shane focused on his food, finding the task of wearing a pleasant face exhausting. He reprimanded himself for letting Ted stay so long. Shane managed to sneak in a few words over the next twenty minutes.

“Well I might have to propose a toast,” Ted said after they were all done eating.

Natalie and Shane looked at him with anticipation.

“I think the day after tomorrow I’m going to head back to the city for an interview. It seems like I’ll probably get it...so that means I can finally leave you two alone.”

Shane forced himself to smile a little. Natalie made a noise between a squeal and a laugh and clapped her hands together. Ted rubbed his tongue on the inside of his cheek, smiling.

“That’s excellent,” Natalie said. “We’re so happy for you! Of course, if things don’t work out, feel free to stay...”

“I mean, I really appreciate you saying that, Natty,” Ted said. “But I have a *wonderful* feeling about this job. I didn’t think Showtime would do this, but they’re trying to get another historical drama off the ground...sort of a royal family thing.”

He took another sip of water, grinning, and then leaned in towards Shane as if he was going to let him in on a secret.

“I might get seizures, being around all that Jane Austen stuff is triggering for Natalie and me.”

This made Natalie laugh so hard she had to clench her jaw in order to not spit up wine. Shane recognized that he was stuck outside of another inside joke. Natalie’s eyes were glued shut and she reached an arm over towards Ted while shaking her head.

“Oh my god,” Natalie exclaimed after she caught her breath. “What was that teacher’s name?”

“Professor Mueller,” Ted grinned.

“You mean *commander Mueller*,” Natalie said, her right arm outstretched in a Nazi salute.

They continued to laugh while Shane examined Ted’s face, looking for something. Natalie caught Shane’s eye and smiled at him again, really making a point of it. He figured this was just to make up for something.

“Well, anyway,” Ted continued. “Here’s to you two. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.”

Shane watched as Ted held up a glass of ice water. The ice water was a lie Shane had seen before. The ice water might as well have been a drunk dad with an old unwanted Christmas toy, yelling through the locked door of a house he used to live in. He found himself wondering just how Ted could live like this. He suddenly realized Natalie was holding up a glass of wine and looking at him pointedly. He raised his glass and tried to smile at Ted, who reciprocated with his flat leer.

Shane excused himself after a while and went upstairs to his tiny office and sent some e-mails, every so often hearing laughter echo from the kitchen. He hadn't heard her laugh that consistently in about a year, he thought. He knew he should go downstairs and try to be social and charming but he couldn't stomach it. Watching Natalie and Ted made him feel like he was uninteresting, the way he had felt when he had met her.

* * *

Shane and Natalie's first two years had been rocky. She struggled to come to grips with her comfortable life, often falling into despair at how predictable it had turned out to be. Shane never understood this, though he had tried; he read books about it and spoke to Natalie's friends from college, trying to grasp a clearer picture of his fiancé's issues. They said to be mindful of when she was quiet, that it wasn't usually a good thing. Natalie had decided to get fully sober when she was twenty-four and it hadn't been nearly as difficult as she thought it would be. She always drank too much in college, but Shane had not seen it personally and figured he knew best, in terms of helping her. After a year, they comfortably kept a couple bottles of wine in the house for guests, confident in their new routine. After another year, she became poised enough to have a glass or two. There were no issues,

although Shane simply couldn't grasp what was wrong with just staying away from it entirely. Her attempts to explain always trailed off with a sigh.

She liked teaching high school, but didn't talk to Shane about it much. She spent more and more time there, volunteering to do before and after school tutoring for athletes who were apathetic or struggling. Shane noticed that the first few months of this affected her mood profoundly; she was either excited to the point of tears or so frustrated and angry that she could not bring herself to talk about it at all. He never talked about his own career, which was tiredly successful. He was good at predicting things like accidents, deaths, and illnesses. His day was spent making effective and accurate predictions as to how expensive different lives would be. Natalie would sometimes ask Shane about work. She didn't much care about his day to day, but she loved hearing about the exceptions; her eyes lit up as he told her about the 100-year old chain-smokers, the middle-aged joggers who dropped of sudden heart attacks, the sick rich kids whose parents' money could not save them. He thought this was dangerous of her. People are almost always the rule, almost never the exception.

* * *

Later that night, after Natalie had finally come upstairs, she blindsided Shane as he was getting ready for bed.

“What is your problem?”

What surprised him was that this question was not a question. He remained silent.

“Look, *I* was right. He's better. He's going to, I mean, he *is* getting himself together. You don't need to be all seedy about it. We just talked for over an hour and he didn't even *look* towards the alcohol.”

She walked tentatively over to the dresser and took her top off, not facing him. She unclipped her bra and put on a t-shirt, still not facing him. Shane felt himself growing sentimental at the sight of her; he was actually a little proud of her for a reason he couldn't seem to place.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I don't...I don't fully understand what I have done wrong."

"I know you don't."

She swirled at him as she said this, and he suddenly realized she was drunk. That's all. That accounted for it.

"There are...*so*...many...things you don't understand," she said.

Shane looked at her patiently, and waited.

"It's...there's, like...there's more things in the world than we can explain, Shane. Jesus. You can't just *explain* Ted. He's been through hell and now he's, you know, better for it."

She mouthed silent words, trying to organize her thoughts.

"I know he's, you know, his behavior can be erratic and all, but it's part of the package, you know? It's his...I mean I don't want to say it's his path, but it kind of is. You hear him talk, you see how passionate he gets about things. There's nothing wrong with how he functions, like, in terms of the big picture."

She put her face in her hands and looked at Shane with more loathing than he had ever seen from her.

"It's just so fucking easy for you, isn't it?" she said. "So fucking easy. You know what being a *real* person is, Shane? It's being unsure. It's...it's messing up and..."

“*Real* person? What qualifies as a *real* person? Tell me that,” Shane said. “Go ahead and fill me in on that.”

She sighed and leaned up against the dresser.

“I...Shane, I don't mean to be...”

“Yes, you do,” Shane said. “Look, Ted's dead. Do you understand me? Ted's dead. I would bet zero dollars on him ever being okay. Do you get it? I would invest nothing in his future. He'll hurt his kids if he has any. People are what they are and he is sad and drunk and eventually he will be dead because of it...it doesn't make him a screenwriter; it doesn't make him compelling. It makes him a fucking drunk.”

Shane watched the regret move through her as she glared around aimlessly. He didn't know what to do with everything he was feeling. He wasn't used to it.

“You don't know all that,” she said sadly. “There is no guarantee that he's not going to change. What's making you say all of this? Why won't you talk to me about why this is bothering you so much?”

“It doesn't matter,” Shane said roughly. “It's not about...I'm not going to be a burden, okay? I'm not a burden, I'm the opposite of a burden. Not being a burden takes consistency, not moments of bullshit inspiration. I...”

Shane closed his eyes and managed not to break. He managed not to make it about himself, how he felt. He knew that was irrelevant. How he felt was irrelevant.

“Nevermind, Natalie. Just trust me here.”

Natalie's mouth and forehead scrunched up like a toddler's and she swayed where she stood; Shane composed himself, rubbed his face with one hand, and sighed.

“Look at me,” he said softly. “Honey, look at me.”

Natalie's eyes raised up to his and they looked so sad to him he couldn't bear it but he felt that he had to be honest with her for her own sake.

"Ted's dead."

Natalie sighed heavily and wiped her eyes and crawled into bed, falling asleep almost immediately with her back to him. Shane tried to remember how many glasses of wine she had but he didn't know. She had been down there with only Ted for a while. Shane didn't feel like reading Ben Bernanke or anything like it. He felt like reading something they assign high schoolers but he didn't have any of those books. He lay in bed and listened for noise from the first floor but didn't hear any, eventually falling asleep a short while later.

He awoke, confused, early in the morning before the sun had shown itself. A deafening crash had jolted him out of sleep and he thought the room had moved. He was sitting upright in bed, holding two fists up absurdly. Nobody else was in the bedroom except for Natalie, who was groaning and rubbing her red eyes.

"What happened? What's happening?"

"Stay here," Shane said sharply, putting a pair of sweats on and heading down the stairs. The kitchen and the dining room looked fine, but he heard rattling from the garage. He opened the door swiftly and was, for the first time in a long time, completely surprised.

His own car was in the middle of the garage, as if nothing had happened, but the door had been smashed through, wind howling through the jagged opening. Shane slowly approached the running car and peered in the window. Ted was in the driver's seat, crying and hugging himself with his hands. There was a little bit of blood on his face and a paper bag in the passenger's seat with a bottle of liquor and a bottle of Coke in it.

“I...I...I found them. Your keys...you left them...on the kitchen table,” Ted muttered, shivering.

“Shane,” his wife yelled hoarsely from inside the house. “What’s going on?”

“Garage,” Shane said over his shoulder, looking at Ted with the cocked head of a terrier.

Natalie came running in and let out a scream when she saw what had happened.

“Ted...”

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry.”

“You fucking asshole,” Natalie yelled, and Shane looked around in disbelief at what was happening around him.

“I’m...I don’t have an interview,” Ted said. “I don’t have a job, I’m not even a, I’m not really what I said I am.”

Natalie looked at him with an eerily blank face.

“I just like bring stuff to people...well...fuck. I ran out of money, you know? I ran right the fuck out of money, and everything’s so awful, it’s like a slow motion avalanche, my entire life is. Things aren’t ever gonna...aren’t ever gonna get better.”

Natalie started to scream at Ted over the sound of the wind through the hole, but Shane thought there was more panic and concern in her voice than there was anger, like she was yelling at her own child for almost drowning in a pool. That happens sometimes. Shane knew that in America in the past five years, not counting boating accidents, almost 4,000 people drowned annually, many of them pool owners. Ted managed to open the car door and stood shakily before Shane who now had calmed down enough to notice that his car was damaged.

“I’m nothing but a...nothing but a...a *leech*,” Ted wailed.

“Listen,” Shane said. Both Natalie and Ted stopped moving and yelling and looked at him with surprisingly tepid faces. “Save it. Nobody wants to hear it. Don’t...don’t *feel* so much. Let’s just see what we can do here.”

Natalie hugged Shane and started apologizing furiously and saying she would find a way to pay for the door.

“You know I have a bit of money put away for emergencies,” Shane said, “don’t you worry.”

Ted looked at him with an odd expression somewhere between revulsion and admiration, like Shane was his best childhood friend and was outperforming him. Shane grabbed Ted’s shoulder and told him to go into the kitchen and get some water. Natalie followed Ted, hissing at him the whole way, while Shane assessed the damage in the garage. It wasn’t too bad. His front bumper hung a little loose on the left and there were some scratches, but the suspension looked fine. The real problem would be fixing the garage door. He might have to get an extra bit of security for the door into the house, also. He had just taken out his tire pressure gauge when he heard harsh screaming from his wife and the slamming of a door. Shane moved to open the garage door and then remembered there was a gaping hole in it and peered outside at Ted, who was stumbling down the street, yelling something about a bus stop and how he wasn’t worth anything. Natalie was crying and trying to grab him and Shane acted quickly, catching up to them and pulling his wife off of Ted, assuring her that he would come back soon, and getting her back inside. The front door was locked so they walked back in through the hole in the garage door.

Shane knew there was no chance of getting back to sleep so he put on a pot of coffee. Natalie sat on the couch in the living room, looking out of the window with her face shadowed. Only after very careful consideration did Shane decide not to press her about how she was feeling or what she was thinking. He thought it would be better to wait until he got back from work that night. She would be back a few hours before him, and would get some time to herself. He made breakfast for both of them and ate all of his while Natalie shivered and looked anxiously out the window before kissing her on the cheek and leaving, telling her not to worry. He cautiously drove his car around his block a few times before deciding it was safe to take it to work.

Shane found comfort at the sight of his office building as he pulled into the parking lot. He walked inside, smiling, and said hello to a few of his coworkers. They asked him how he was and he good-heartedly said that he was just fine, thanks. He responded to e-mails in his office and then set to work examining the possible liabilities of purchasing insurance for people who had spent more than 25% of their lives qualifying as obese, obsessing over spreadsheets telling him how long all of these different overweight people had lived and how much it had cost for them to die. Food, booze, self-deception, lack of accountability...it was all the same, he knew. Different dresses on different pigs. He set his coffee cup on the coaster he kept on his desk and remembered his morning routine before school as a boy. Up at 5:30, clean the living room, put the glasses in the sink, put the bottles in the recycling and take them out to the garage so his father wouldn't see them. Around 6:15 or 6:30 he would shake his father awake on the couch and then sprint up to his room to get changed before his father's eyes were fully open, red as stop lights. He picked the coffee cup back up and took a sip. The workday went by without incident.

He pulled back into the driveway around seven o'clock, as it was getting dark. He parked right in front of the hole in his garage door. The window into the room above the garage was closed but the light was on. Shane walked in through the front door. The house was silent. There was no response when he called for Natalie. He looked around all of the rooms and didn't find anything, except Natalie's side of the closet was open. He went to the garage. A bit of light was coming down from the stairs leading up to the room Ted had stayed in. He opened it and walked up into the room. The light was flickering slightly and all of Ted's belongings were gone, even though he hadn't packed anything the night before. Natalie was nowhere to be found. Confused, Shane walked back downstairs into the garage and stared out of the hole in the door, eyes furrowed, holding his briefcase stupidly. It just didn't make any sense.

Shane felt a sadness, a frustrated misery that was entirely unfamiliar to him. He tried cleaning, he tried double checking the damage done to his car and garage door. It all felt beside the point. He tried to think back to any signs he had missed but was overwhelmed by how many there were. There were too many to count. It was silly to even think about. Ted's stuff was gone with her. Shane walked into his house from the garage and left the door open behind him, sitting at the kitchen table for a while, just looking out the window. He tried to remember the song Natalie had been singing the night before but he had never known it. He paced. He had a glass of wine. He had another. He sat very still for a long time.

Late that night he stood in the garage, listening to the wind hissing through the hole in the door, opening the third bottle, and couldn't help but laugh. He couldn't stop picturing 4,000 people a year drowning in their own pools.

Recessive Genes

Daphne was standing on a chair and holding a duster she had just used above her sleek black kitchen cabinets, unsure what her next move would be. Her white button down shirt was clinging to her hips and her lips were pursed and her eyebrows were skeptical.

She took out the already-cooked lasagna and set it on the counter and heated up some broccoli and grabbed wine out of the fridge, one bottle of white and one bottle of red. She tried to set the table the way she remembered when she was little. Almost all of her furniture was black and her walls were white and her carpet was a grey so light it might as well be white, and she felt worried for a moment because it looked like a hospital, complete with the lingering smell of bleach. She didn't want to remind her parents of hospitals. Her iPhone buzzed on the kitchen table. Her parents were outside.

"Oh *honey*," her mother said as she glided in dramatically, handing her jacket to her husband without looking. "Oh *honey*, you take such good *care* of it. It's so lovely."

"Come on, mom, it isn't...it isn't that big of a deal."

They kissed lightly on the cheek and Daphne took her parents' coats and moved to her bedroom while talking over her shoulder. She thought they might give her trouble for the way the shirt fit.

"How was the drive?"

"Well, you know how it is," her father said. "Idiots ramming into each other with their trucks."

Lee was the type of big that Italian American fathers often are, maintaining the muscles in their arms, necks, chests, and legs, while simultaneously touting a belly that hung

confidently over pressed khakis. His shoulders moved vertically as he walked and his sport coat was held wide open by his size and he breathed audibly. He looked like a cop. He was a photographer.

Daphne entered her bedroom and threw the coats on her bed. She saw her bedside table's second drawer was slightly open and askew and she closed it. She walked back into the living room.

"Would you two like a drink? Some wine?"

"Why, thank you dear. I would *love* a glass of red," her mother said.

"What about you, Lee?"

Lee just held aloft a bottle of bourbon he had brought and moved over to the kitchen.

Daphne's mother, Margaret, sighed.

"Every single thing is just so *lovely*," she said desperately.

Margaret had begun saying this with a disturbing regularity since she and her husband pulled Daphne out of her senior year at Rutgers. She had finished up a semester late, working quietly, meeting no one, eating all alone.

"I'll heat dinner up. I'm capable of that much, at least," Daphne said.

Her mother laughed a little too loudly and her father clenched his mouth shut. In a few moments they were all seated while Frank Sinatra crooned about what a bad boy he was over Daphne's speaker system. Lee picked up his fork and held it like it was an icepick he was going to shove into someone's eye.

"*Honey*," his wife said. "I believe you are forgetting something?"

Daphne watched as he set the fork down with a clatter and leaned back in his seat, making his grey sport coat open up even wider. Her mother bowed her head and began to

say grace audibly but quietly. Instinctively, Daphne joined her with a meek voice, but at the sight of her silent father her voice trailed off before asking *lead us not into temptation*. Her mother realized her voice was alone and desperately started speaking louder as she finished.

“This, this looks so delicious, dear,” she said.

Daphne was painfully aware of the fact that in a matter of two generations the women of the Moretti family had gone from making their own pasta to double-checking microwave directions.

“So,” Lee said, jamming his fork into the lasagna, “how’s law school going? Learning anything?”

Daphne was prepared for this.

“Well dad, it’s going well. Even better than I had hoped. This first year, we’re focusing on torts, real estate, and civil procedure. Real estate seems to be one of the more consistent focuses in terms of income.”

Lee stared at her suspiciously as she took a sip of sparkling water, regaining her breath.

“My professors are great, not only as teachers, but as individuals. While they really love their work, they would never go against their own, *personal* codes of ethics in the name of profit and gain. I think this is great. Sometimes law gets a bad reputation. I blame Pacino.”

After Daphne finished this little speech, which she had based on a pamphlet from the campus tour she took, Lee’s anger was apparent. Her mother, on the other hand, rested her chin on her palm, while her eyes seemed to glaze over.

“Sounds...lovely...dear.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself. You feel sure of yourself?” Lee asked.

“Yes...yes, *Lee*, I do.”

“Well, that isn’t the first time, is it?”

“Lee! What...what *is* the matter?” Daphne’s mother asked, while Daphne covered her mouth and breathed deeply.

“Apparently, nothing is,” her father said.

“The lasagna is amazing,” Daphne’s mother said to her glass.

The silence hung heavy, shifting its weight from person to person at the table.

Daphne made a point not to return her father’s gaze.

“So mom,” Daphne said, “how are...how is everybody back home? The Petersons still...having troubles?”

Lee stood up and walked to the kitchen counter to make himself another drink.

“Oh!” Margaret exclaimed, not even attempting to hide her excitement. “They are in the middle of quite the nasty divorce! There’s been a lot of talk.”

Daphne raised her eyebrows mischievously, and nodded at her mother to continue.

Mission accomplished. This would take some time.

“Well, you know how Mr. Peterson – Jack – has had his...his struggles in the past. First it was, you know, this and that. He just couldn’t seem to stave off boredom, and now it’s finally tearing his family apart.”

Margaret Moretti lived for this, as two of the three people in this room knew. She always had. Lee accepted his temporary defeat, sitting at the table and glaring at his daughter.

“Ever since he had his...his little *dalliance*, shall we say...he’s been living in a Best Western over by his office, quite the embarrassment. I mean, a babysitter? What a cliché! Anyway, apparently his daughters are handling it pretty well, you know, they still go to school and...and play soccer and all...”

Lee finished his drink as Margaret continued to swallow and choke on the failures of her peers delightedly.

“...but his son, oh! His little boy! He’s a senior over at the high school, or at least he’s *supposed* to be, but he was using Jack’s slips that he had accidentally left at the house to write himself prescriptions for painkillers and when he ran out of pills he threw a brick through a pharmacy window to try and steal some and fled the police on his bike and broke his arm pedaling downhill over a hobo.”

Daphne and her father remained stoic, eyeing each other.

“So he’s all, you know, screwed up now...what was his name? What is his name? Daphne, he was much younger than you, but you went to school together, what was his name?”

“Anthony,” Daphne said out of the side of her mouth.

“Ah yes, *Anthony*! He was such a good kid...I suppose he still is, of course, he can claw his way back, but it won’t be easy, not a lot of people can do that. But those that can,” she said, looking at Daphne, “are made better for it.”

She finished, out of breath. She looked around and knew nobody had been listening and finished her wine with a loud gulp.

Daphne’s strategy had worked. Her father was silent, her mother seemed depressed at the temporary moment of clarity. Daphne remembered now, there was always a heavy

silence after. She got a text from Marcus, whom she had gone to high school with. He asked when her parents would be gone.

“So, honey,” Margaret started. “How’s...how is school?”

Daphne felt that pulling at her chest, the awkwardness of a child she remembered from her youth.

“Good, mom. Really good.”

Her mother’s tired eyes were reddening with wine, her mouth smiling stupidly as her whole being began its slow, inevitable descent deeper into her chair. She seemed to be gaining density. Daphne, for the millionth time, promised herself that she wouldn’t end up like her mother in any way.

“That’s...great.”

Lee, who had been holding his drink close to his mouth, set it down.

“So,” Daphne started nervously, eyeing her father. “How are things...actually...going?”

“Fine. Good,” Lee said sharply.

She texted Marcus back saying *they’ll be gone in like an hour so head over around nine and bring everything you got*. The music had stopped and so had Daphne’s mother. She sat with her eyes rolling softly from husband to daughter, her mouth ever so slightly open. She lifted up her empty glass and shook it slightly at Lee, who didn’t react in any noticeable way. Daphne was pretty sure he had seen it. Margaret set the glass down and shrugged.

“So. How are things? School’s going...well? Do you like your friends? You’ve always had such good friends...” Margaret slurred slightly, eyebrows up. “You’ve always had such great friends...”

Neither Lee nor Daphne responded. Margaret breathed in and rubbed her face.

“Hello? Am I even...are you even...”

She laughed exasperatedly – Daphne remembered that laugh, she had heard it plenty of times when she was younger, but she had been far too young to really understand all of the repercussions it brought with it. Once heard from the wrong mouth, in the wrong room, or at the wrong time of day, it perverted and distorted so many memories.

“Are you even listening?” her mother asked her.

“Yes mother.”

“*Mom*,” Margaret hissed. “I’m your mom.”

Daphne sat with good posture. She felt the tight chest and breathless silence of her childhood; a childhood spent lurking through the huge gothic house, trying to figure out why everyone was miserable. And why they wouldn’t tell her what was wrong. Since then, she figured everything was wrong.

Lee was no longer angry. He was just destroyed. He could handle it, though; Daphne guessed he was destroyed anew just about every day.

“Margaret, let’s...let’s have those Italian Ices,” Lee said, doing his best impersonation of an optimist.

“Lovely,” she sighed.

After only twenty more excruciating minutes, Lee made up a good enough excuse for the two of them to leave with a little dignity. Daphne gave full credit to Lee’s uncharacteristic restraint and forgiveness. When they left it was 8:45 but Marcus never got anywhere on time. Daphne knew she would have some time to herself.

She walked slowly over to her stereo and changed the station and turned the music up very loud (only after watching out the window for her parents' car to disappear). Then Daphne cleared away the food, nodding her head, but left the dishes in the sink. She threw the books and magazines into a bin in her room and pushed it under her bed. Floating around the apartment, she thought about nothing except for Tom. Marcus would probably bring some people over, she thought, there's a really good chance at least one of them would have gone to Rutgers too. She allowed herself to fantasize for a moment. Maybe someone that knew Tom. Maybe if enough people came, he would hear about her? She shook away the thought, muttering how immature she was and going to her room. She cracked a window and grabbed a cigarette out of the drawer which had been closed earlier...she blew the smoke out the window but it seemed to come right back at her. She didn't care. When the cigarette was almost down to the filter, she rolled up the bottom of her left pant leg and put it out on her ankle, on a pink patch that stood in contrast to the tan of her skin, and she only clenched her teeth together for a moment before letting a relaxing shudder go throughout her body. After that she went to the kitchen and took the bottle of bourbon her father left and pressed it to her lips without swallowing any, just letting the burn and taste and smell get on her.

Ten minutes after nine there was a knock at her door and Marcus and two other guys walked in. Marcus had dark whiskers all over his face and longish hair that hung in front of his right eye, but a beaming smile that always threw Daphne off and unsettled her. She didn't recognize the other two.

“Hey you,” Marcus said, hugging her. “How were the parents?”

“Harmless,” Daphne said in a voice not her own. “Who are your friends?”

“Oh, you never met Keith and Andy before? Well, this here’s Keith and this here’s Andy, and they aren’t half bad.”

Andy was clearly too fucked up on something. He had the guttural *huh huh huh* laugh of every weed dealer Daphne had ever known.

Marcus stretched out on the couch while the other two deadbeats found chairs and sighed heavily and looked around.

“You, uh, invite anybody over?” Daphne asked.

“I mean, not officially, not yet. I wanted to, you know, check with you.”

“Go ahead. How many people can we fit in here, at least forty right?”

“I’ll text some of the old crew,” Marcus said, bright eyes glistening.

Daphne knew he meant *his* old crew.

“So how have you been, like, doing in school?” Marcus asked. “What’re you doing again? Nursing?”

“Law.”

“Well, either way you’re helping,” he grinned.

Daphne flinched at a guttural *huh huh huh* from Andy’s chair, which in her mind may as well be empty. She poured everyone drinks so that she could make hers virgin without anyone knowing. By eleven her little apartment was full of people she didn’t really know but she posed expertly, sipping imaginary booze, even dancing; she lied and told everyone she was high and tried to work where people had gone to college into the conversation.

Eventually, after about ten tries, it paid off.

“Rutgers, you know? You know Rutgers? I went to Rutgers,” some tall blonde moron kept saying after she asked.

“Really? Me too!” Daphne said, before regaining her composure and looking bored.

“What year?” the guy (Tony) asked.

“From 11-14.”

“That’s...that’s more than one year,” he said, drunk.

Daphne summoned the will to laugh coolly.

“I meant, when did you graduate?” he asked.

“Last year,” she lied, “you?”

“I didn’t.”

“Oh...” Daphne was moments away from trying to ask who he hung out with, to find some clue, but he burped and walked away.

She checked her watch and it was only midnight. It would be hard to get everyone to leave for a while so she pretended she was going to pass out and went to her bedroom and kicked a few people out of it. Soon, there was a knock at the door.

“Hey, Kelly! Kelly? It’s Tony. Open up Kelly!”

“I’m not Kelly,” Daphne yelled.

“Kelly...Kelly come on...”

“I’m...not...*Kelly*,” Daphne screamed through the wood, holding her hair in her hands.

The swelling of memories, saturated with more detail than her heart could bear, drove Daphne to sit upright in bed and swing her legs over to one side. She opened the drawer fully and took out a half liter of McCormick’s and before allowing herself even a moment of introspection or doubt, started to drink it down, coughing and choking, her stomach filling

with welcome bile. She had another cigarette to get the taste off of her and didn't fix her hair from the pillow static and unlocked the door and went into the living room.

“Well look who it is,” Marcus said, his arm around a girl with a pink streak in her hair.

Daphne paraded herself around the room, her head becoming foggy, her mind becoming optimistic; it was almost one now, so everybody was friends with everybody. There was dancing and laughing and a card game that resulted in Keith vomiting in his hands while Andy's *huh huh huh* echoed through the room. Once he stood up to run off, Daphne walked over to his seat and took his spot.

“What's up?” Andy asked, not looking at her.

“Well that depends,” Daphne giggled, her eyes brimming red and voice getting slippery. “How are you?”

Laughing on Purpose

Jeremy Browne stood behind the curtain at yet another small comedy club – this time it was a place in Phoenix, a single room with about a hundred seats and poor lighting. People in the audience stood and got drinks in the middle of his opener’s act. They talked amongst themselves instead of listening. Jeremy peered around the curtain and figured there must be around sixty or so people there, but the spotlight – weak as it was – made it hard to make out faces. He let the curtain fall back in front of his face as he took the final sip of his gin and tonic he didn’t pay for; he assumed they wouldn’t comp him another one. Bastards. Jeremy hated his opener, a guy named Carl who did a physical, hacky act. But Carl was killing on stage, no denying it.

“So,” Carl screamed into the crowd, holding the microphone with both hands. “So if a girl goes down on her friend, it’s hot, but if I blow my buddy, all of a sudden I’m some kind of homo? How’s *that* fair?”

Jeremy watched in disgust as that got a decent laugh. They must be drunker than he imagined. That, or Phoenix is just more Midwestern than he originally thought. Jeremy flinched as he remembered when he used to do a similarly awful bit about blowjobs. Carl had about five minutes left. Jeremy had been listening to this act several times a week for almost a month now; they started in Texas, did a week or so moving out west, had a great show in San Diego, and were now about to begin the long crawl across the protruding belly of the country. Jeremy ran his hand through his thinning hair, exhaling loudly and trying to will away his headache so he could have the focus to do his act properly.

“Jesus, men are gross during sex, huh?” Carl said, pacing cartoonishly on the stage. He was a little man in a yellow sport coat and loose, faded jeans. His goatee always made Jeremy think of a pedophile.

“So we men, you know,” Carl continued. “We just...we just do all the gross parts of sex, you know? Women do the cool stuff.”

There were a few laughs and Jeremy prepared himself for Carl’s big moment, the joke that always did the trick. And then it happened; Carl lifted one short leg up and put it on top of his stool on stage. He began humping the air and howling like some sort of animal, all to the sound of cheers and laughs and groans rising from the audience like it was separate from them. Then: *applause*. Jeremy held his cold, empty glass up to his forehead as Carl finished his act, throwing in a couple minutes of crowd work, mocking some guy who showed up in sandals and socks, calling him “something between Euro-trash and a faggot, not that there’s a difference.” Jeremy set down his drink and adjusted his tie and tucked in his shirt anxiously, wondering why he even fucking bothered. 34 years old, following a no-talent clown named Carl who did fart jokes. How did this happen?

Carl waved his goodbyes to the crowd and walked off stage, giving Jeremy a wink and a double thumbs up. The MC walked on, thanking Carl for a killer performance. He then announced Jeremy, who took a deep breath and slowly approached the microphone to tentative applause.

He felt the spotlight mess up his vision for a few moments as he tried not to squint; every time back onto a stage, however small, felt a bit like being born all over. He reached the microphone and held onto the microphone stand with one hand, the other in his pocket, and sighed heavily.

“The entire country has ADD, man,” he started. “And you know how I know? Because here’s proof.”

Then he stood completely still and completely silent, staring out into the vague faces of the audience, some of which were lit up by their phones. After about twenty very long and awkward seconds, someone in the audience let out a disgruntled yell.

“Well there you go,” Jeremy said, getting some light laughter. “But even more than that, here’s how I know. Have you seen the animation on the news? Like Fox, MSNBC, CNN, any of them? It looks like an action movie. *Tonight, at 8:30, we’re taking you into the heart of the battle for America. Coming next summer...*”

The light laughter he had died out.

“I mean, what’s the point of the news? To keep you watching, or to keep you informed, huh? Is it supposed to be animation, to be porn, to be something to let your eyes glaze over? Because that’s where we are.”

Nothing.

“Oh, am I not distracting enough for you,” he yelled. “Am I not doing a good enough job making you forget how much you hate your fucking lives? Huh?”

Murmurs of anger, now; except for one. A lone voice, beginning to laugh infectiously towards the back. It was a man’s voice, but Jeremy couldn’t see him.

“How good of a joke do I have to tell to get you to forget you never became what you wanted to be, huh? That you have to go home and get drunk enough to sleep with that wife you hate? You bastards. Can’t we just have *one* honest moment together before we start the bullshit?”

The room was soaked in silence except for the now hysterical laughter from the man in the back, the man who was on the same page.

* * *

After the show, which went very poorly, Jeremy was sulking at the bar and making it very clear that he didn't want to be interrupted by human contact in any form. His tie hung loose and he spent a not insignificant portion of the money he had just made on a stream of over-priced and probably watered-down gin and tonics, listening to Carl against his will. Carl was a few seats down from the bar, regaling young drunk people with stories of blackout sex and getting arrested and pissing in his pants. They picked up his tab and eventually it was just Jeremy and Carl watching the bartender close up; neither of them wanted to go back to the shitty motel.

“So,” Carl said, slurring slightly. “What happened up there tonight?”

“I tried doing comedy,” Jeremy spat back.

“Oh, a little sensitive tonight, are we? Let's not go to bed angry, *dahling*,” he said, laughing into his drink.

Jeremy managed to cool off, to not show how he was feeling. Carl – even Carl – would eat him alive for letting a bad show get to him.

“When are you gonna throw out those bits you've been doing for the past two years, man?” Jeremy asked Carl. “I mean, really? Doesn't it get old?”

Carl shrugged drunkenly.

“It doesn't matter how it feels to me,” he said. “It matters how it feels to them. It's our job to make them laugh, even if we have to shit on the floor to do it. Even if we have to

wear a bonnet and make fun of our own families. Everything else – everything *beyond* that – is just pure egomania.”

“We have a responsibility,” Jeremy began to say.

“We have a responsibility to make people laugh, because the world is stupid and shitty and won’t get better. So fuck off,” Carl said. “Jesus. You’re what, trying to be Lenny Bruce or something?”

“Alright, alright,” Jeremy said. “Jesus. I guess it wasn’t the right crowd.”

“Never the wrong crowd, always the wrong act, you know that.”

“Oh yeah? Why don’t you just shit on the floor, Carl,” Jeremy said, throwing some money on the bar and walking towards the door.

“I will. To a standing ovation!”

Carl raised his glass to the empty bar. Jeremy let the door slam behind him as he walked out into the dry hot air of the night. He walked for a few blocks, feeling himself get drunker, until his phone buzzed in his pocket. It was another comic friend of his, Nicoletta.

“Hello?” he said.

“You in the middle of something?”

“Nah,” he said, feeling his voice’s drunkenness.

“Philip had a stroke, Jeremy. It finally happened, the stupid bastard. He’s alive but unconscious. A vegetable. You have to get to Jersey as quick as you can, so have a water or something and get back here.”

* * *

Jeremy didn’t get to the hospital until two days later, very early in the morning. Nicoletta was there, in the white waiting room. James was there too; he sat with his hands on

both knees and with perfect posture. He wore a full suit – always – even though he was another road comic. His opening joke used to be about how he looked like a pastor in an Atlanta church. A full suit on a 280-pound black man, sitting next to the tiniest Italian girl in maybe the whole world, Nicoletta; Jeremy wanted to laugh like he normally would but found that he was unable to. Nicoletta rose quickly and moved towards Jeremy and stood before him.

“It’s the very worst thing,” was all she said.

“I just,” James said from his chair, his eyebrows rising and falling. “I just can’t tell...how much he’s, you know, aware. What’s he going through?”

“He’s going through the very worst thing,” Nicoletta said over her shoulder. “How are you Jeremy?”

“Fine. Who gives a shit.”

“Good point,” she said, turning away and leading the two men down the hall. “We’re going to go see him again. His wife has been in there reading to him.”

“Can he hear?”

“No.”

“She’s an angel,” James said.

“Lots of people can read, James,” Nicoletta said flatly.

“Jesus,” James said. “You’re Lucifer, girl. That’s what you are.”

“Yeah,” she said, smiling up at the big man’s shoulders. “You’re right. I’m Lucifer. I’m talented, historically significant, and charming.”

Jeremy laughed – a hesitant, apologetic, honest laugh – and Nicoletta winked at him as she led them down yet another hospital hallway, weaving in and out of an army of tired,

decent nurses holding clipboards. They finally arrived at the door – room 623, Jeremy remembered for some reason – and they entered. There was a curtain around another patient to the right, and Philip was to the left. His body was, at least. His wife sat next to him, wearing business-casual clothes she must have had on for days; she was reading a book to him but randomly her voice would stop and she would continue on mouthing the words silently in her own head before picking up later when she had found her vocal chords again.

Philip Barry was still a person who had a certain gravity to him, even when he was wired to a hospital bed. Jeremy moved behind James and Nicoletta in an attempt to hide, but she glared at him and pulled him up next to the hospital bed with her tiny arms. Philip was a big man with a barrel chest and forearms the size of most people's legs. Jeremy knew he had had issues with his weight and his diet and with drugs, but the man could talk his way out of anything. He could justify anything with a wet smile. So he was a great comedian.

Jeremy stared at Philip's big face as Nicoletta talked quietly with his wife, who still held the book up like she was reading it. As Jeremy looked on, he felt his hands losing blood and he tried not to think about all of the memories he had of Philip lighting up the room, or going on a three day bender, or how he had the biggest laugh in the world; a laugh that if you earned, it meant something to you forever.

Jeremy felt the room began to feel oppressively small, but he refused to be the one who walked out, who looked away, who couldn't handle it. It turned out he only had to wait a few minutes before James, the big teddy bear, exhaled loudly and walked out of the room very quickly and deliberately. Nicoletta hugged Philip's wife. Jeremy awkwardly avoided eye contact with the tired woman he hardly knew. He had always wanted to be like Philip, had always looked up to him; but Philip's wife had always looked sidelong at Jeremy and it

made him unnerved. The two of them had never really shared a moment before and this didn't feel like a productive first moment to get to know each other, so he left after James, with Nicoletta following him with little steps.

* * *

That afternoon the three of them sat in a bar they used to frequent years before. It used to be a dive bar with some character, but it had been renovated and Nicoletta was more pissed off than Jeremy had seen for years.

“Fucking trust fund kids,” she kept muttering.

Jeremy had to admit that the clientele was much different than it used to be. Every single person in the bar seemed to be made from the same factory; mid to late twenties, well-dressed, gripping an expensive beer and pushing their glasses up the ridge of their noses.

“I guess things are just different now. Doesn't really mean they're worse, right?” James said. “That would be cheap cynicism, and that ain't that productive.”

“Different means worse most of the time, Big Cuddly,” Nicoletta said.

“Don't call me that,” James said, readjusting the brim of his hat.

“Okay, Big Cuddly.”

A silence fell over the three of them. A series of excited shouts and groans came from a pool table in the corner of the bar. A pop song with the expletives edited out bounced off of the metallic ceiling of the bar. They were waiting each other out. Jeremy, after the initial feeling of panic and sadness he felt in the hospital, now had no idea what to feel. He guessed he wasn't alone.

“What's going to happen to him?” James asked quietly.

Nicoletta rolled her eyes.

“What?” Jeremy asked her.

“He’s going to die. Hopefully sooner rather than later.”

“You’re not a damn doctor,” James said. “Why would you not want to see if there’s a way out for him?”

“His brain,” Nicoletta said. “His brain is still in there, unable to express itself. He is in the middle ring of hell. He is in the frozen over place, the place made of tears. If there was any sense of decency or respect, they’d unplug the fucking guy. Remember when he took on the heckler in Philadelphia? I think, like, three years back? He was opening for someone big.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said, smiling as the nostalgia condensed.

James nodded too, but Nicoletta was going to tell the story, Jeremy knew that much. They all needed to hear it.

“So Philip’s up there, all huge, with a beer sitting on his stool and a cigarette in his mouth even though it’s illegal now – he was always melodramatic. He’s up there doing a bit on why girls should go down on guys but guys shouldn’t go down on girls. And this woman in the audience screams something about being misogynistic...so Philip, instead of just calling her a bitch and continuing, he stops. He lets her speak. She says something about sexual politics doing damage to young girls’ views of themselves. Philip nods solemnly the whole time, and I was thinking, ‘shit, are we losing him?’ But of course not. He waits for her to finish, and then he takes a deep breath, and he says: ‘this has everything to do with you and your failed life, lady. You don’t give half a fuck about the confidence of young girls. You don’t know shit. You’ve been dry as a desert for years. You’re dryer than that bitch that wrote *Atlas Shrugged*. So shut the fuck up.’”

All three of them burst out laughing, even James, though he was quieter than Jeremy and Nicoletta. She was wiping her wet eyes and smiling widely, her little shoulders shaking with mirth.

“That crowd went so wild,” Jeremy said, “that woman left. If I remember correctly.”

“Yeah, she did.”

“Jesus.”

They sat in silence again, another edited pop song ringing in their ears. James began fidgeting more and more. He was rubbing his face slowly, like he was drying himself off. Jeremy noticed that Nicoletta was totally still, like a tiny Easter Island head. She and Jeremy were waiting for Big Cuddly to burst. He did not.

“So. What are they going to do to him?” Jeremy asked.

“I think it’s up to his wife. I hope she stays tough and does the right thing,” Nicoletta said.

“Stop trying to be so fucking... *durable*... about this,” James said.

“He’s trapped, James, he’s fucking trapped, they’ve got to finish him off. This is very wrong in a way I can’t fully figure out.”

James turned to Jeremy and said “Is that how you feel?”

“I...I don’t think I can give up on seeing him as himself ever again,” Jeremy said.

“His face moves for no reason, did you know that?” Nicoletta said, her small jaw clenching and her eyes betraying emotion for the first time as she wiped loose hair from her brow. “Just randomly. He’ll smile for a second, or frown, or look terrified, or grin – yeah, the same grin he always had – but this time for no discernable fucking reason whatsoever. He’s gone. This is disrespectful to him. He knew he wasn’t healthy, he didn’t give a shit.

It's like watching someone with cancer quit smoking. Just ride it all the way down. Jesus. He was honest his whole life, now you're both downloading bullshit onto him."

Jeremy sighed and said nothing and James shook his head.

* * *

Jeremy had no choice but to rejoin Carl on the road through the Midwest. Philip's condition didn't change, and Jeremy and Nicoletta spoke on the phone about it every day, since she was doing shows at a casino in Atlantic City for the next few weeks and she could visit him easily.

Jeremy found himself in St. Louis, at a relatively big show. It was a large room; the stage was raised by several feet and the audience sat in rows, not at tables. There were very few faces illuminated by the glowing screens of iPhones. Again, he was backstage, watching Carl hump his stool and howl, the crowd going crazy for him. He couldn't think of anything except Philip's blank face in that gray-white bed. A smile. A frown. A grin. For no discernable fucking reason whatsoever.

The MC walked on as Carl waved and did the jerk-off hand motion at the crowd, which made sense to Jeremy. It's basically what he had done. Carl gives Jeremy two finger pistols as he walks off stage on the other side of the curtains, grinning. His face grinned like a robot barely out of the uncanny valley and Jeremy felt sick and shaky, more so than he would get out of simple nerves, as the MC introduced him. Jeremy thought back to his failed set in Phoenix, to his awful feeling afterwards. The silence of the crowd.

He walked on to the stage, the lights very bright this time. St. Louis was a pretty good comedy city, although there seemed to be a pervasive discomfort or insecurity that

hung over everyone, constantly. He squinted into the light and waved with one hand, which he never did. He reached the microphone. And then something happened.

As he looked into the expectant faces of the crowd, still grinning from Carl's douchebaggery, he sighed. *Everything beyond that*, Carl had said in Phoenix, *is pure egomania*. Jeremy glanced over his shoulder to see Carl holding a drink and looking at him intensely – intensity was a rare thing to see in Carl's goofy goatee. Jeremy turned back into the bright light and began doing a three-year-old routine he had promised himself he would never do again.

“I did the unthinkable,” he said. “A few years back. I went to Olive Garden.”

There were a few laughs. He turned back to see Carl smiling widely; he had always liked this bit.

Jeremy continued on, telling a completely fake story about his grandma – he had never actually known her, she had died when he was little. It was a totally bullshit story about her getting drunk and being racist in an Olive Garden, full of lazy jokes and semi-stolen material. The crowd ate it up. He soldiered on through the ten-minute story, milking some extra time out of it, before doing some predictable jokes and then, realizing he couldn't change the tone safely, he worked the crowd a little and took his leave to a standing ovation. Fifteen minutes for a twenty minute show; he doubted the club owner would try to fuck him out of his paycheck or anything. Especially when everyone laughed so much. For no discernable fucking reason whatsoever.

“That's my man,” Carl said offstage, raising his hand to slap five. “They're laughing hard as hell. You did real good, man, I forgot that part in your bit about your grandma calling the waiter a Negro.”

Jeremy had forgotten that he had said that.

“Carl, I appreciate it, but I think I need a minute in the back room.”

“No sweat, I’ll have them send you a gin and tonic, free of charge. You earned it baby.”

Carl gave him finger pistols. Oh great, Jeremy thought, seething at himself for his cowardice; he had finally gotten his finger pistols and his free drink.

* * *

It was a month before Philip Barry died. Nicoletta told Jeremy on the phone as he chewed nicotine gum outside of a small but historic Philadelphia comedy club. He had a gig in an hour.

Nicoletta said Philip’s wife had been on the same page as her this whole time, and that Philip had been in one of the worst possible vegetative states. No way out. Apparently the two of them had talked about it – well, Nicoletta said, Philip had joked about it – and the consensus was not to go broke and cling to false hope. Pull the damn plug. She told Jeremy to remember Philip as a big old bastard, and to forget the man in the bed, now that he’s gone. Jeremy hesitated, and considered telling her about how bad of a thing he had done in St. Louis, but decided against it. He couldn’t make his friend’s death about himself. Nicoletta would take the Septa train into Philly and castrate him.

Jeremy popped more nicotine gum in his mouth but all it did was sting. He looked up, past the top of the tall brick building in front of him; it was some club, some disgusting thing that belched out house music and laser lights and strobes. He bummed a cigarette off of the guy working the door at the comedy club, who didn’t seem to mind. He smoked it very slowly and, after allowing himself to process the tremendous sense of unfairness and

misery, put the cigarette out and took a breath. He walked back in, shouldering his way rudely through a small crowd at the bar. He bought his own drink and took it backstage, the loud chatter mixing pleasurably with whatever passed for country music at that time. He found Carl backstage, with one leg up on a small table, stretching it out.

“Almost pulled a hamstring in Kansas City, before you got back,” he said, laughing. “What a way to injure yourself! *Pretending* to have sex.”

Jeremy forced himself not to smile or laugh. Instead, he drank slowly and leaned against the wall, collecting himself like a boxer. Carl was up in a few minutes, so he didn’t mess with Jeremy at all. Even Carl had to gather himself to some extent.

The noise from the room died down slightly and the sounds of tables and chairs being rearranged became deafening. Jeremy felt the nerves hit him hard, but that didn’t surprise him, not this time. Carl started running in place as the MC did a few minutes. And then, before he knew it, Jeremy was watching Carl take the stage. He didn’t listen to the jokes at all this time. He figured Carl did the air humping routine because the room exploded after a while, and soon after that, Carl was beaming, sweating, and walking off stage, giving Jeremy the finger pistols. The MC introduced Jeremy. He took the stage.

He walked confidently into the noise, he didn’t squint or wave. He grabbed the microphone and glared directly into the light.

“Listen up, you needy little motherfuckers,” he said.

The crowd pulled back. They were quiet, they were on edge; this wasn’t what they were looking for. Jeremy felt a rush of confidence. He was going to find an honest laugh, even if there was only the one.

This Time Will Be Different

Alice stood behind the check-out counter with a bemused grin, looking across the store at the Men's section. She was watching her lifelong friend and co-worker Cassie, doing what it was she did best. She was lying to men to make them feel better.

"Okay, I mean, this looks fantastic on you," Cassie said to a portly customer.

"Do you really...I mean...*really*?" he asked.

"Of course! Look in the mirror...see how good that big collar looks?"

The man frowned skeptically, but pulled the pea coat tighter on his body and looked in the mirror. Alice leaned over on the counter so she could hear better.

"Now," Cassie continued. "You're probably going to want to go with a dark scarf, right? Do you have some dark ones?"

"I actually, um, I don't have any scarves."

"Well that won't do. Come over this way!"

Cassie bounced off towards the back of the store, where several displays cut her off from Alice's view. The man walked after her, smiling nervously and pulling the pea coat even tighter around himself as he walked. Alice smiled to herself, but at the sight of someone approaching, her face fell flat and she leaned back off of the counter and stood straight up.

"Did you find everything today, ma'am?" Alice asked in monotone.

"Yes, thank you," the customer said.

Alice didn't say another word as she scanned a thousand dollars' worth of clothing and printed up a receipt. She folded it carefully into two bags and handed it over the counter.

She didn't smile at the woman as she left, because the woman was on a cell phone held between her shoulder and ear. Without any real people left to look at, Alice was forced to listen to outdated pop music and stare at the familiar posters of hot people looking bored with the huge letters BANANA REPUBLIC covering them. She readjusted her dark blazer and brushed off her pants at the thigh. A sharp, charming bout of laughter from the back of the store told her that Cassie had probably made the sale and, soon enough, the man with the pea coat came around the corner. Alice actually smiled at him, but it was more because she pitied him than anything else.

“Did you find everything today, sir?” she asked.

“Sure did,” he said happily.

Alice looked down at the man simply out of necessity, since she stood six inches taller than him. Cassie appeared behind the man's shoulder and grinned at Alice. She smiled back as the man paid and left. He wore the coat out.

Cassie leaned up against Alice's counter, her tiny frame making her look like a small child at a too-big desk. She was in a white shirt with a rainbow scarf swirled around her neck.

“Hey,” she said brightly. “How's it going babes?”

“Same as it ever was.”

“Ooh, you're so dark and compelling,” Cassie laughed, jumping up and sitting on the counter, legs swinging. Alice took a sharp breath but decided against saying anything. The store was practically empty.

“So...you know that pea coat didn't look good on that guy, right?” Alice said.

“I mean...if he thinks it does, then it does.”

“No. No it does not.”

“He feels better when he wears it. Isn’t that what it means to look better?”

“No. Looking better is looking better.”

“Oh gosh,” Cassie said. “You’re in a mood. Tell me.”

She hopped back down and looked up at Alice’s dark eyes.

“Nothing,” Alice said, pretending to fidget with something on the keyboard.

“Babes...tell me. Tell me now.”

Alice insisted nothing was wrong again, and before Cassie had a chance to respond the front doors opened and a tired-looking family walked in. Cassie took a deep breath, told Alice they should get a drink after work, and then molded her face into customer service mode, whipping her hair around and jauntily approaching the family.

* * *

“Margarita please.”

Cassie’s bright voice echoed through the nearly empty Mexican restaurant half a block down from Banana Republic, making Alice flinch a little.

“And for you, ma’am?”

“Um,” Alice said, “Bud Light.”

“Coming right up.”

After the waiter walked away, Cassie began looking around the room quickly. Her fingers drummed the table. Her eyes darted all over the red cushions and yellow walls, stopping at the glowing signs for El Tecate or Negra Modelo or Corona. Alice sat very still, watching with raised eyebrows. Finally, Cassie broke.

“So how you doing, babes?”

“I’m good. I’m fine. How are you?”

Cassie smiled widely.

“Great. Cole has been, like, such an angel for the past couple of weeks.”

Alice didn’t say anything. The waiter came by and set their drinks down, smiling at Cassie. She smiled back.

“Alice,” Cassie said more seriously. “Is the Cole thing still bothering you? You look like you have IBS.”

“Of course it is,” Alice said.

Cassie sighed.

“Look, I know he and I got into a bit of a...a bit of a fight...but he’s like, totally recommitted. Like, you don’t even know, he’s so good to me.”

“Well, now he is,” Alice said. “After three weeks without you he’s going to do that for a while, yeah.”

“Look, I know I told him to leave...and he left...but that’s not what either of us wanted,” Cassie said, taking a sip of her margarita and puckering her lips afterwards. “So now he’s back.”

“Cass...this guy isn’t a good plan. It’s not going to...it’s not that he’s a bad guy or anything...”

Cassie raised her eyebrows at her over her drink.

“Well, fine. I don’t think he’s a good guy. He totally took you for granted.”

“*Took*. He *took* me for granted. He’s not taking me for granted *now*, and he won’t ever again. I can feel it.”

Alice looked at her skeptically.

“Plus,” Cassie added. “I mean, he didn’t do anything *wrong*. He just got a little complacent, that’s all.”

“He sat around playing videogames all day. He was fucking worthless...for a very long time.”

“He deserves a break every once in a while. Maybe you should take one too. Did you know...and I read this, it’s true...did you know that just the physical act of smiling makes you feel happier? Like, instantly.”

Cassie snapped her fingers in Alice’s face.

“You trust people too much, Cass. It’s not a good plan.”

“Well, babes, you don’t trust anybody. I mean, anybody except me.”

Cassie fluttered her eyelids and pouted her lips at Alice, who couldn’t help but smile a little before hiding it and looking away. Cassie laughed loudly, once. They each took another sip of their drinks, their eyes wandering around the room.

“Look,” Alice said. “I don’t want to be a dick. But...when you two made up, how did he sound?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, literally. What did he sound like?”

“Oh, I wish you could have heard him. He was so sincere, so sweet. He sounded a little...a little frantic almost. His voice was cracking. It was really sweet; you could tell he meant it.”

“See? Right there,” Alice said, perking up.

“What?”

“He *knows* he’s full of shit.”

Cassie's normally ever-present smile faded. This didn't happen often. She clenched her jaw and cocked her head. Alice continued on, though.

"Listen...his body was betraying his words, Cassie. He's desperate because he fucked up. And he'll fuck up again. That's what people do. I've...I've heard that voice before."

Cassie's face relaxed slightly, and she sighed.

"Babes. Not every person in the world is...well, never mind. But it's true. Just because some people are awful doesn't mean they all are. It's easy to tell yourself they're all bastards. But they're not."

"I'm just saying," Alice said, unfazed. "I've heard that voice before."

"Well," Cassie said, grinning playfully. "You're gonna get another chance. You're getting dinner with Cole and me after work the day after tomorrow. And don't even think about trying to get out of it."

Alice had tried to protest but it was futile, she knew that. They finished another drink each, eventually leaving on a good note as they always did. They talked about how parties at Rutgers, where they went to school, were way too crowded. They had a productive debate about the ethics of selling pea coats. On the drive back to her apartment, Alice thought back to her freshman year of high school. Her father had given her two tickets to a concert and told her to just sit tight and trust him, he told her they would go together. She hadn't cared about the band or anything, she had just wanted to do something fun with her dad. He told her he was going to change and his eyes were glistening and his voice was full of emotion and she had waited in the living room until the concert was almost over. There was nothing she could do. Last she ever heard from him.

* * *

Two days later, after work, Cassie, Alice, and Cole sat at a Houlihan's in the same mall as Banana Republic and the bad Mexican place.

"So Alice," Cole said, folding a napkin in his lap. "How the heck are you doing?"

The lighting in the steakhouse was minimal, the small lamps on the walls casting weak shadows off of faces and furniture. Everything was flickering. Cole's forehead seemed to glisten. He was in a tie, which Alice found totally pathetic, since he didn't need one to drive a Lowe's truck and unload shit. He was 23, two years older than them. College hadn't worked out. He said he ran out of money but Alice figured that was bullshit.

"Fine," Alice said curtly. "Good."

Cole looked sideways at Cassie, who patted him on the arm.

"So this has been, like, a flippin' *brutal* couple days of weather, right?" Cassie said as she took a sip of her vodka tonic.

"Yeah," Cole said, smiling at her. "I mean, wow."

"It's Christmas break. It's usually cold during Christmas break," Alice said.

Cassie couldn't help but laugh at Alice's bluntness, though she stopped when she saw how nervous Cole looked. It was quiet for a few moments until the waiter stopped by and they all ordered. He smiled at Cassie who smiled back and then he walked off.

"So how are you ladies liking Banana?" Cole asked. "Any worse than school?"

"It's, like, way better than *school*," Cassie said. "Don't you think Alice?"

Alice preferred school to clicking a register. Everything about retail upset her. It always struck her as completely dishonest and fake. But before dinner, Cassie had begged

her not to be “as, you know, cuntty” as she could be, so she smiled and nodded politely. Cassie beamed at her.

“Cole, you know how Banana is. Tell Alice about what happened at work yesterday!”

Cole grinned bashfully, which Alice thought looked weird on such a big guy with a big head. He and Cassie looked into each other’s eyes and couldn’t stop giggling as they tried halfheartedly to talk over each other. Alice managed not to gouge her eyes out during this little display of *look at how well we’re doing*.

“Well, okay,” Cole said. “I was driving the truck back to the store, and I pulled up so I could start unloading stuff, right? Right. Anyway, I get back into the driver’s seat and I heard this tiny voice say *wee-oh, wee-oh*, like a police siren, right?”

Alice focused on looking at Cole’s glistening forehead, thinking if she looked in his eyes he would be able to tell how little she cared, and that wouldn’t be good for Cassie.

“And I look out the window but I can’t see anything, so I open the door and there he is. Little guy, must have been three or four, in his leftover cop costume from Halloween. Little tyke was pulling me over.”

Cassie laughed so loudly it made Alice flinch again; she didn’t remember her laughing this desperately when they were at school, and they spent almost every minute together.

“Did he concuss you with a Mag-Lite?” Alice asked.

Cole smiled.

“Nah. Let me off with a warning. His dad came and swooped him up, man, it was the cutest. Just flinging him around, swinging him back and forth...they were both laughing like maniacs.”

Cole and Cassie resumed their impression of a happy couple while Alice angrily fidgeted with her hands. Her face felt hot – but she could hide that well by now – and she wanted to get them both to stop laughing. She wanted them to stop smiling. She thought the smiling should come after the happiness, not the happiness come after the smiling. She didn’t want to think about the little cop laughing hysterically while his young, strong, grinning father played with him. Despite every instinct she had, Alice smiled weakly.

Cassie’s phone buzzed face down on the table, but she ignored it.

“So, yeah, this family that came into Banana the other day, Cole...*not* quite the same vibe. Their son looked like a little Dahmer in training. He was such a brat.”

Her phone buzzed again. She flipped it over, sighed, and excused herself, saying “mother dearest beckons.”

So Alice found herself, after just barely recovering from the faux-cuteness overload, sitting across from a visibly frightened Cole. The fact that he seemed worried made her feel better. It made her feel in control.

“How are you, uh, liking classes?” Cole said stupidly.

“Listen, you and I might not have a lot of time, here,” Alice said before finishing her beer, exhaling loudly, and glaring directly into Cole’s eyes. “So listen to me.”

Cole looked over at the window, and Cassie bounced up and down from outside, holding the phone to her ear and waving. Alice allowed the anger to rush back, opening up the floodgates for her noble cause.

“Cassie and I have been friends forever. I owe her everything. I think she owes me back,” Alice began.

Cole opened his mouth but Alice’s eyes shut him up assertively.

“We both know you’re not up to par,” Alice said simply.

“What?”

“Not. Good. Enough. The longer you’re with her, the more damage you’ll end up doing. So cut it off.”

Cole sat up straight, his huge body leaning forward, his mouth curled in confused anger.

“Look, Alice, I know you’ve got this whole ‘tough bitch’ thing down to a science, but you don’t get to talk to me like –”

“Cole. Stop. I know who you are.”

He looked at her, and then out the window, and then back at her.

“I know who you are Cole, and you aren’t much. Oh, by the by,” Alice said, rubbing her chin as he looked towards the window. “She wouldn’t believe you if you told her. So don’t.”

“Alice...I know I...”

“Cut it off. Do it,” Alice hissed as Cassie came back inside, heading towards the table. She sat down heavily.

“Man. I knew she was crazy, but *geez*,” Cassie said.

She looked at the two of them.

“What’d I miss?”

“Well apparently, New Jersey is thinking about letting people pump their own gas within a few years,” Alice said. It sounded too peppy in her own head, but Cassie just beamed at her again and said “*Really?*” while Cole’s face remained catatonic.

* * *

That same night, after convincing her mother that she was sleeping over with Cassie, Alice pulled into Atlantic City at about midnight. She had started sneaking onto casino floors a few years earlier, pretending to be in search of a rush, but really thinking this was a place her dad was likely to show up. She figured he hadn’t remarried, wasn’t dead, and wasn’t in prison, so Atlantic City was next in line. He hadn’t been too much of a drinker but her mother often referred to his “compulsions” before giving herself the sign of the cross. Alice figured if he had been buttfucking little boys or something she would have heard. It must be gambling. He was just a loser, he wasn’t evil. Evil takes consistency.

She had gotten her shift covered for the next day and ordered a pretty cheap room because it was a Wednesday. She felt the bittersweet rush as the Jersey turnpike gracefully careened left, bringing all the gaudiness into view. The few lights that still remained on the softening erection formerly known as the Trump Tower Hotel fired off at sporadic angles. All the billboards said FUN or WIN. Hot, ethnically diverse models smiled out from the tall signs down to the highway. Alice knew that the backsides of these very same billboards had hotline numbers for various addictions. 1-800-BETS-OFF. Alcoholics Anonymous. DEBT HOTLINE. Alice clenched her jaw angrily as she drove.

She checked in with her debit card and washed her face in her room before taking the mirrored elevator back down to the casino floor of the Tropicana Hotel. She listened to the sounds, she took in the sights. Bright golds and piercing reds assaulted her eyes from every

direction, the loud pre-recorded cheers and bells and whistles came from the slot machines with old women attached by the arm like plankton, waiting to die and get tossed into a dumpster out back, another old woman taking her spot before the seat lost its warmth. She allowed the rage to surge back again. She went up to the bar and ordered a tonic with lime, ignoring the shaky, spotted heads of old men watching her pass. She knew, for a Wednesday night in AC, she might as well be Giselle. Then, finally, she picked a perfect spot by the card tables nearby. She sat and watched everyone lose. They all lost. Even when they won, and their eyes lit up and they cheered and hugged, the money went right back in. If they left the table and cashed out, they spent it in the hotel. People like this never win.

She was nestled into a warm chair, and felt drunk even though she had stuck with tonic water. Watching these people get what was coming? Nothing better. She stood up to go to the bathroom but stopped in her tracks, frozen, at the sight of the back of a man. Probably in his late fifties. Balding a little. Sport coat that was too big. She froze at how familiar he looked, and allowed herself to think, just for a moment...

But no. Of course it wasn't him, she thought, as he turned around to reveal reddening Irish features. He was overweight and dressed poorly, rubbing his hands through his thinning hair at the message he saw on the ATM. *Insufficient funds. Not good enough.* She was lucky: she got to see it firsthand. His eyes were watery and he was fidgeting with his ring finger, which, presumably, had not been bare forever. A group of young, rich-looking guys in suits was behind him in line, laughing, offering up their debit cards, and he looked tempted for a moment before scampering away.

"Yeah, that's fucking right," one of the douchebags yelled after him. "See this card? This fucking card won't run out, loser!"

Filled with confidence and comfort at what she had witnessed, Alice walked with impeccable posture back to the elevator, went up to her room, and fell asleep smiling peacefully.

* * *

Two days later Alice and Cassie were back in the Mexican restaurant after a particularly awful day of work. They were both on their second drink.

“Oh my gosh,” Cassie said. “People were just terrible today.”

“Surprised?” Alice said.

“I mean, yeah. I’m sure something was, like, *up*, though. People aren’t like that. I mean, that little blonde woman? With the daughters?”

Cassie was referring to yet another woman, attached to her cell phone, whose kids had run around moving things unnoticed for five minutes before Cassie stopped them.

“Yeah,” Alice said. “That’s pretty much par for the course, you know.”

“Hm,” was all Cassie said before taking another sip of her drink.

Alice looked out the window at nothing. Cassie stared at her, looking nervous.

“Look Alice,” Cassie said. “Cole told me about your little rant the other day.”

Alice turned her head slowly to look Cassie in the eye.

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad.”

“You can’t just go sticking your nose into everything,” Cassie said.

Alice was pleasantly surprised at how bitter Cassie sounded. She thought she must have struck a chord. She managed not to crack a smile, knowing that deep down, Cassie must know that she was right about Cole.

“Cass, I won’t say anything more if you don’t want. But I’m not sorry, and I think I am right. How’s he been?”

“Great.”

“Uh-huh.”

They sat in silence for a minute before Cassie spoke up.

“This is all you, you know that right? This is all, like, your own personal bullshit. Has nothing to do with Cole. So leave him alone.”

Alice was livid but reminded herself that it wasn’t Cassie’s fault she was so clueless. She took a deep breath and rubbed her forehead.

“Cassie. I’m done, I’ll be quiet.”

“He’s great, Alice. Don’t worry about me. But I do think you should worry about you. When was the last time you, like, felt happy?”

“I’m happy,” Alice said.

“No, you’re fine. When was the last time you felt, like, *euphoric*?”

Alice rolled her eyes before she could stop herself.

“Euphoric? I guess the last time was when I was four, and Santa came.”

Cassie tried not to laugh but couldn’t help it. Her cracking smile made Alice feel much more comfortable with the whole conversation.

“Alice, you bitch, why do I like you so much?”

Alice smiled at her, and blew her a kiss, and finished her drink.

* * *

When Alice was walking out of work the next day she saw Cole standing by his car in the parking lot. He looked determined and seemed to look better than usual to Alice; he had done something with his hair. He smiled as she approached, but it seemed forced to her.

“Hi Cole,” she said. “Cassie doesn’t have a shift today, you know that, right?”

“Of course I do,” he said.

“What’s, uh, what’s going on?”

“I wanted to talk to you, actually.”

Alice felt a brief moment of anxiety in her stomach, but steeled herself. She knew that she was right and had nothing to be worried about.

“Okay Cole. What’s up?”

“I told Cassie about what you said. And...I think I get it. But you have nothing to be worried about. And it’ll be better for Cassie if you and I aren’t bad to be around. She seems to really love you more than anything.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So just, please drop the whole protective thing, and leave me alone.”

“You’re the one stalking me,” Alice said.

Cole flexed his jawline, looked away, and sighed.

“Alice. Stop.”

“No, Cole, *you* stop,” Alice said, viciously, getting closer and closer to him. “*You* stop lying to yourself. You aren’t going to change, you idiot, you’re just going to fuck up again and I need you out of her life.”

Cole let out a groan, rubbing his nose with his hands.

“Why are you such a bitch?” he said loudly.

“You’ll see. You’ll know. Once you blow it...*again*...you’ll know. You should give up. Every day you spend fueling this bullshit façade, the harder it’s going to be for her to take it when you get drunk and tap some bimbo or fall back into your lazy bullshit.”

He looked at her, shocked. His mouth was hanging open stupidly, and Alice feared for the first time that maybe she was going too far. She figured she had no choice but to double down, finally finding a release.

“Alice...”

“Cole. You aren’t just hurting yourself, you’re hurting my best friend. Take a good, honest look at yourself in the mirror. Deep down, you know I’m right. You aren’t good enough for this.”

She walked away at a brisk pace, got in her car, and drove off, leaving him standing alone in the parking lot.

* * *

A week later, Alice stood behind the cash register, trying to call Cassie for the third time in a row. She was never late for work. Her manager told Alice to get out on the sales floor, and that he could do the register. She was too worried about Cassie to care. Poor Cassie. Alice always felt she had to go out of her own way to make sure nobody ever hurt her. She was easy prey.

When Cassie finally arrived, she was a mess. Her makeup was crusty from crying the night before. Alice dragged her into a dressing room because the store was almost empty, and asked her what happened.

“Cole left, he just fucking left...I don’t know...I don’t get it...”

Alice hushed her and pulled her close, resting her chin on the top of the little blonde head.

“He said...he had this weird...like, breakdown or something. He had been a wreck for almost two days, sitting in front of the TV, skipping work...he kept saying he was doing his best...he said something about his mom, too...that he should just get out of my way...that can't be it, can it?”

Cassie looked up at Alice with moistened eyes.

“Right, Alice?”

“Look, Cass...that definitely was *not* the reason he left. I bet he just did something bad and didn't want to deal with the repercussions.”

Cassie burst into a fresh bout of tears and hugged Alice closer. Alice held on to her for a while before putting her hand on Cassie's chin and looking her in the eye.

“Look, let me take the floor for a while. Take some time.”

Cassie nodded, wiping her eyes. Alice hugged her again and then turned to leave, but before she could go, Cassie spoke up.

“You were totally right. I guess...I mean...he might not be who I thought he was. Thank you so much Alice. For being here for me.”

Alice blew a kiss at her and left the dressing room, walking out onto the sales floor and trying to contain her excitement. She paced aimlessly, feeling a surge of adrenaline. To her irritation, a customer waved her over.

“Yes?”

He was a middle-aged man, with a belly and thin hair. He was wearing a beanie that he was far too old for. The tag was hanging out.

“So,” he said, laughing self-deprecatingly and pointing at the beanie with both hands.

“What do you think?”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s for you,” she said bluntly.

“What?”

“Here, I’ll put it back for you.”

She held her arm outstretched. Stunned, the man handed Alice the beanie and slouched off. Alice set the beanie on top of some sweaters and went back to the dressing rooms. Cassie was sitting on a little bench in one of the stalls, looking defeated but not crying anymore.

“Hey babes,” she sniffled, smiling weakly. “Making some sales?”

“Yeah,” Alice said. “They’re putty in my hands.”

VITA

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