

toogoodtobetrue

by

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ABSTRACT

toogoodtobetrue is a fiction creative project containing a collection of queer short stories designed to examine the unifying and diverse experiences of a modern queer existence. Thematically, the collection seeks to create and explore the practical and affective possibilities of queer optimism, or optimism without futurity.

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toogoodtobetrue is whole-heartedly dedicated to the queer community at Sonoma State which embraced me with open arms even when I was doing my best to avoid those very arms altogether, and to all the queer-identifying folks out there just trying to hold onto the dream in their heart of something whole, something safe, and something happy. You deserve it all.

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Unbury Your Gays: A Critical Intro to *toogoodtobetrue*

The truth about this creative thesis is that it has no beginning and no end; were I to give it my best approximation I'd say it took roots in its formation sometime when I was eleven or twelve and found myself posted in front of library computers at my elementary school, bypassing the school's web security so that I could log on to a website designed for keeping virtual pets of fantastic unreal species and playing Flash-based games of knock-off Tetris. The real pull, however, came from the message boards, an assuming collection of forums that slowly became ground zero for a budding community of collaborative writers. At the time, and still today in communities across the internet, we call this "roleplay" – a word that has been in use far in advance of the conception of these forums. Roleplaying requires a writer to conceptualize a character in its entirety – or at least it does if you want to be any *good* – and then, in a series of volleying posts back and forth between two or more writers, create scenes and scenarios involving characters written by other writers. The possibilities here are, clearly, limitless (and not always for the best, as any seasoned roleplayer will tell you!). This is significant to my creative writing not only because I quickly found my home on roleplay boards focused on writing LGBT+ characters (long before I myself identified as queer or anything close to it), but also because this particular lens of writing within a close community *for* that community and synthesizing characters that by necessity would have to stand on their own and garner outside interest in order to see any use, has influenced my work to put characters first, and given me a strong narrative voice that has only ever been conceived of with some sort of audience in mind. Where other creative writers dabble in writing for themselves, often times reluctant & embarrassed to show their work to others as they are starting out and sometimes even after that, my work and my characters have been public property from day one. This isn't to say that I don't

experience anxiety at being exposed or receiving critique, but more that the voice in my craft has always intended to be heard.

As I approached my college degree, and specifically as I entered graduate school, the key pillars of my work – what I wanted it to be and what I thought it had already begun to take shape as – started to appear in front of me. First: it would be unapologetically queer. First also: it would be happy. I tie these both together as “firsts” because for me, at the time, queerness as a term was interchangeable with happiness, both as an individual and as a consumer of media: if it was gay, I’d watch it, read it, listen to it. If my life’s ideology was becoming more and more saturated with queer theory (as I was taking queer theory WGS courses and learning about literary aspects of it in my English classes), putting that ideology into a living praxis under the context of a growing sense of national and political xenophobia within a heteronormative cisgendered patriarchy meant allowing myself to discover ways to embody a sense of queerness that brought me joy; after all, my partner and I had been dating for upwards of seven years at that point, I was more in love than ever, my queerness had just begun to locate friendships in other queer students: so much of the joy in my life as an individual and as a person in relation to others came out of my queer identity. By contrast, much of the media I was consuming throughout my undergraduate degree, with explicit regard to queer media, was telling me that existing while queer under these circumstances was and would be inherently painful, tragic, and depressive. And for a while, I sought and found beauty in that sadness (I often hear Wordsworth’s words in my head: “Dear delicious pain”, when I feel that sweet, sad ache in my chest). Those films that I did see which broke the tragedy mold were typically “B grade” gay cinema, usually made by gay men for gay men – with the occasional lesbian title, frequently directed by a man or else

critically couched in the male gaze – and left me feeling titillated but queasy, the way one might feel after indulging in too much fast food. Needless to say, I was unsatisfied.

Throughout this time I was still roleplaying online, only this time it was on forums built by my wife and administrated by the two of us. Naturally I had less time than ever to engage in the actual writing aspect, but still found great and singular joy in writing scenes (or “threads” as the roleplay kids say) with my wife and other members. Though our forum itself was not LGBT+ centric – roleplay forum advertising adheres to many common principles of advertising after all, and the LGBT community was too niche to mine for members if our forum was to be considered healthy and “active” – we generally had much of the queer community flock to the space. What was it about us? Our diction? Our forum rules, or lack thereof? Perhaps it was simply the volume of queer characters populating the site as a result of our own personal proclivities as writers that made other queer writers feel comfortable finding a home for their characters among them. Whatever the case, I found myself building the space I wanted to exist in the media off in my own little corner of the internet, where my writing felt good to write as a queer person, felt good to read by other queer readers, and was filled with whatever we wanted to build together. More often than not the results were light-hearted, perhaps somewhat moody or dramatic for the sake of it, but steeped in little domestic pleasures of having queer characters move in a world where hate crimes, foreclosures, homophobic parents, misgendering, and erasure existed only as much as we wanted them to. Hell, even straightness only had to exist as a plot device if that’s what we wanted, and sometimes we did.

The historical tradition of keeping tragedy as a key plot point in the lives of queer characters is colloquially referred to as the “bury your gays” trope. The idea behind this was that queer stories could be told, however veiled or explicitly, if they were indicated to be a

“cautionary tale” to the presumably straight audience. No matter the joy of a queer life, it would be momentary, and ultimately culminate in sadness and/or death. While this tenet is not so ferociously clung to any longer, it is where many origins of queer storytelling lies, and continues to echo loudly into modern understandings of queer lives today, to say nothing of the undeniable fact that there simply *is* more risk, more comparable danger for tragedy, in a queer existence. Much of my early goals for my work were to learn how to take this concept, this ugliness that felt like reality, the “bury your gays” ideology and all its conceptual progeny, and turn it into something beautiful.

As an adolescent and young college student, I found this trick being performed by author Chuck Palahniuk. Mostly known for his novel *Fight Club*, an often misunderstood satire on toxic masculinity under capitalism, Palahniuk is a gay ex-bodybuilder from Montana who frequently includes scenes or bases entire plots around the visceral ugliness of something or other, be it the ugliness of society or of our own mysterious meat-filled bodies. Curiously, Palahniuk rarely writes queer characters (I can recall old interviews where he laments the idea of his novels being confined to the “queer fiction” shelf – the “gay ghetto” as he refers to it). One exception, however, is his novel *Invisible Monsters*, which follows the journey of a former beauty queen after she has her lower jaw completely blown off in an apparent accident and subsequently shackles up with a trans woman by the name of Brandy Alexander (yes, like the drink) whom she meets during her recovery. Together they travel the country with Brandy’s revolving cast of man candy, dropping in on real estate open houses in the richer parts of various neighborhoods and stuffing their pockets with whatever prescription drugs Brandy can find in the palatial bathrooms. Palahniuk’s writing is inescapably funny despite dealing with ontological struggles about beauty and consumerism; I was and still am instantly charmed by both the narrator and

Miss Brandy Alexander. They are not, by most measures of the phrase, “good people”. Their lives are not, by any stretch of the imagination, “good” ones – certainly not easy ones – but they amuse themselves and each other, living in this dream world of other (straight) peoples’ houses, passing in straight society one second and the next hurtling down the highway in a convertible under the stars with Brandy popping painkillers and hormone pills while she chastises her current lover and the narrator changing the gauze on her face-turned-wound. Though I have moved away from this ideology of ugly-as-beautiful as the focus of my creative thesis work, *Invisible Monsters* and Palahniuk’s artistry with disgust is undeniably queer and has undeniably effected this project; for all my happy-for-now endings and cloying first kisses, there is always an element of tarnish, of the vicious heteronormative world just at my characters’ heels and often locked up inside of themselves and being carried around with them as witness or overseer.

If Chuck Palahniuk is interested in the charmingly ugly sense of queerness (in “queering” what can be understood to feel good or valuable or beautiful), Oscar Wilde is definitively on the other side of that line. The quintessential aesthete, Wilde moves in my work at every turn under this particular quote of his: “... nothing is worth doing except that which the world says is impossible.” Wilde delivered this line in his *Lecture to Art Students* and it has stayed with me ever since I read it in Dr. Tim Wandling’s class as a young undergraduate. The context of this quote is Wilde explaining that, yes, the life of an artist is hard and ugly, uglier than it once was for the patroned greats of the ancient world by far – but that this fact only makes the creation of art all the more necessary and valuable. In so many ways I have applied this to my idea of queer happiness (or “queer optimism”, a particular lens of queer theory which I will expound upon later): if the cultural ideology would have me believe that it is impossible to be both queer and happy, than that is exactly what I must be, and exactly what I must write. I, like all the other

English majors, have of course read *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* among other pieces, but Wilde's *Lecture to Art Students* and perhaps more topically *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* have influenced the viewpoint that I pour into my work more critically than all his other texts because of the possibility that Wilde offers to me as a reader. In these pieces in particular, Wilde invites his audience into a world where their hardships become their fortification, where persons who have been rejected and undervalued for nonconformity might become celebrated and understood for their unique contributions. With this in mind I set about imbuing the worlds I built into my thesis collection with elements of impossibility; I shied away from or rejected outright questions of "Could this really happen for a queer person?" or "Would a person like that really get away with this?", endeavoring to build a universe where these elements not only *could and did* exist, but that the characters themselves or the surrounding world would be so enjoying as an experience to my audience that the reader would also reject the urge to kick these proverbial tires, or even overlook the opportunity altogether. What I found in workshop classes was that this was often achievable for a rather diverse spectrum of readers, and even more encouragingly, unfailingly achieved in queer readers.

Outside of Palahniuk, one text which influenced me the most notably while preparing stories for this collection was Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*. In it, Machado offers strictly female and often queer stories and experiences, steeped in intoxicating affect and often echoing a distorted form of fairytale elements as a means to distort the roles women play in these tales. *Her Body and Other Parties* is, like this collection, also a grouping of short stories; one such piece, "The Husband Stitch", features a main character/narrator who has a ribbon tied around her neck which she insists cannot be removed, similar to the fairytale most popularly known as "The Velvet Ribbon" with origins in France circa 1790. Similar to the

French story, the main character's male lover is apparently unable to keep himself from untying the ribbon. While we don't see the end result to the ribbon removal in Machado's story, we don't have to; we know how it ends because we know the fairytale already. She has repurposed the fairytale to new uses; by and large the story is *not* about the ribbon, as many other elements of plot are involved in this short piece, but its presence is important for what it represents historically as a marker of women's boundaries and individually for the character in the piece itself.

Machado is also unafraid to flip the script on form, or throw it out altogether: one of the pieces her collection is presented as a series of episode descriptions for invented seasons of Law and Order, ordered by episode number and season, wherein each episode is steeped more heavily in elements of the surreal urban gothic. There are bloody, screaming apparitions of young girls with ominous bells for voices appearing in apartments of tired homicide detectives, strewn about between cases and late night cups of coffee. This kind of listed exposition was something I had in mind while forming the piece in my thesis collection, "Say Yes", which follows the formatting of tracks on a playlist. Breaking free from the expectation of a linear narrative plot seems fitting for the stories I want to tell, as they so rarely contain much of a classical idea of plot to begin with, and are instead concerned with affect and the shifting of affect. The language Machado uses in this short story and throughout her collection is visceral and gripping, both invasive and gentle.

In addition to Machado's elements of fairytale and divergence from linear form, I was especially drawn to her description of setting, of spaces both real and imaginary and the power that the domestic space has as a place for character and plot exposition. It was while reading this book, under the direction of Professor Stefan Kiesbye as part of a directed writing class, that I

found inspiration for my short story “House Huntress”, which is arguably my favorite in this collection. I felt that Machado, as a queer woman telling stories about queer women, had given me permission to play in this dreamy domestic space, and right away I had visions forming in my head – not least because this is a space I visit often, the fantasy dream home in all of its possible iterations, from should-be-attainable to never-going-to-happen. The kicker in “House Huntress”, though, is that despite the loveliness of each of these spaces that the dreamer Artemis conjures in her head, each of them beautiful and sacred to her for a different reason, it is clear that she’s never going to get anywhere near a reality where these places might begin to look real for her due to her girlfriend’s complete inability to take their relationship seriously. This is precisely where queer optimism takes over; the dream houses are so fun to explore and unravel, it almost doesn’t matter that they’ll never be real, at least within the time span of the story itself. The fact that they can’t exist is simply a bitter shot which, once downed, makes the dreaming that much sweeter.

Wherein the first pillar of my work overlaps queerness with joy, the second is equally as critical and intrinsically tied to the first. While completing my Associate’s Degree at Santa Rosa Junior College before transferring to Sonoma State, I fell in love, like so many others before me, with F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zora Neale Hurston. While these two authors are ostensibly rather different, I was enraptured with the poetic qualities of their prose. Fitzgerald, of course, is touted for his romantic turns of phrase, for the way he is able to cast a particular sort of golden light across an otherwise unremarkable sense of the every day. Most spring breaks I find myself re-reading *This Side of Paradise*, waiting for my favorite line: “There is so much spring in the air. There is so much lazy sweetness in your heart.” Fitzgerald constructs his feeling with short, simple rhythms, that rely on sudden specificity to conjure a vivid emotion where there was once

only something vague and tenuous. An undeniable current of homoromanticism runs through Fitzgerald's prose as well, much like the man himself; the bonds sewed between the "college man" archetype which he was so given to held the sweet unheard melodies (which we know Keats would argue are the sweetest) of a unique sort of fraternal, romantic love.

Hurston too is an expert in creating a sense of romance and dreamy other-worldliness from otherwise simple situations. I read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shortly before transferring campuses, and I still have vivid memories of passages taken from Janie's time spent beneath the iconic pear tree. Hurston succeeds so completely at the orchestration of setting around her characters, especially with regards to nature and animals. Reading about the "kissing bees" that floated around Janie as she passed, without knowledge or permission, from girl to woman, was a joyful, warm experience only made more concentrated for surrounding narrative moments of sharp sadness, fear, or pain.

This was, and is, exactly what I wanted to bring to my readers: not a new world entirely, but rather a new and exquisite way to experience a world that looked just like the one they already knew. Fiction has the unique ability to transform everyday experiences, regardless of whether or not they are "everyday" for the reader, and to offer the reader an opportunity to carry the lens given to them by prose into this world of flesh and plastic and see things differently if they choose to. This is precisely what I aim to give to my readers (read as: queer readers and non-queer readers who are sympathetic to queer narratives). As a result, many of the short stories in my thesis collection have very little "plot" occurring; they are typically portraits of one to two people coming together at a specific time in their lives, bumping up against each other, trying to fit together, or trying to break apart. My prose for this reason is just a bit "purple", that is, a bit affected; I am interested in creating modes of feeling and spaces that are just this side of "real",

building instead a reality that insists on being savored without becoming stagnant in its insistence. To this end I employ metaphor, sound, and rhythm to build a particular mood or tone and let my characters unfold to the corresponding tune. Much of this sort of melodramatic, poetic, sensory language is affiliated with genres that are categorically undervalued: romance & fanfiction certainly come to mind. This is true as well for “happy endings” in fiction in general, doubly so for genres that are understood as being inherently “political” – which I can personally vouch for after my workshop experiences (wouldn’t want to end up in the “gay ghetto” of the queer fiction shelf, after all!). Yet, the proof is in the pudding, as they say. If all of these things can come together – queerness, happiness, affectation – and produce an experience for a reader that leaves them grateful for having had it, leaves them feeling heard or seen or understood, or invites them back to experience it again and again, therein lies the value I am trying to not only create but to *insist* upon as undeniable with this collection.

Furthermore, there is something inherently distinctive about queer happiness which deserves this sort of elevation; at least the very phrase is something of an oxymoron, but more than that, queer happiness requires that it dig itself out of the rubble of heteronormativity. Near the end of my undergraduate career, in doing research for another project that required me to give a book review for a piece of critical theory, I stumbled upon the text *Queer Optimism* by Michael D. Snediker and found so much of what I wanted to say as a writer and queer theorist myself contained within.

Snediker begins to define the concept of queer optimism by setting it apart from other theoretical forms of optimism; it is not Leibniz’s utopic optimism, which crucially depends on attachment to “a future”, as well as possessing, in Snediker’s words, an “allergic relation to knowledge” (2). This sort of optimism is promissory and built on a sense of faith, a combination

of necessities which Snediker points out “has had the perhaps unsurprising effect of taking optimism out of critical circulation” (2). Here Snediker is underlining a feeling similar to the one surrounding the chronic undervaluation of the prosaic happy ending. Queer optimism, Snediker insists, is the opposite: “It doesn’t ask that some future time make good on its own hopes. Rather, *Queer Optimism* asks that optimism, embedded in its own immanent present, might be *interesting*” (2). Not unlike Wilde’s insistence on “art for art’s sake”, this is optimism for optimism’s sake, with the understanding and insistence that it is this very removal from requirements of faith and futurity that might make it interesting to behold. He goes on: “[Queer optimism] wants to *think* about feeling good, to make disparate aspects of feeling good thinkable” (3). That is, it isn’t necessarily the act of feeling good, nor the promise that good things are coming, that may instigate a sense of queer optimism. All of the pieces that make up my thesis collection include elements of this idea of queer optimism; characters move through their worlds either in search of or stumbling into a new ability to think about feeling good, to allow themselves the space to create a private sort of optimism that does not hinge on the possibility of a coming goodness but rather in and of itself creates it just by thinking on it.

Snediker’s points about the concerns of queer theory also echo my own with regards to the typical literary interest of queer lives and queer stories, noting that “queer theory, for all its contributions to our understandings of affect, has had far more to say about negative affects than positive ones” (4). Further in line with my personal navigation of my own “dear delicious pain”, he then describes the typical tantalizing grip of melancholy in *Gender Trouble*, citing Butler’s understanding of the term and her use of the word “magical” to describe it (6). Snediker asks the following vital questions: “...if queer theory positions normativity as heterosexual fantasy (and vice versa), why does it follow that heterosexuality ... necessarily monopolizes optimism? Why

couldn't optimism run in nonnormative circles? Or be conceived of as other than universalized and universalizing?" (8, 9). These questions are precisely the ones my work aims to put pressure on, by offering queer stories about queer lives that grant special permission to the presence of queer optimism; the circumstances and means within which this optimism can exist are inherently and undeniably unique to a queer experience. In this way, the queerness of my characters' lives and experiences is unalienable, without a dependence on or promise of the magic of melancholy; it imagines new ways for queerness to operate, ways which are rooted partly in realism – these moments of queer optimism are happening for real people in the world – and partly in fantasy, removed from the direct pressures and violence of heteronormativity without ignoring them entirely.

My ultimate goal, or not-so-secret wish, is that these stories will both echo whatever cultivated moments of queer optimism in the lives of my queer readers and offer transporting fantasies of how that same queer optimism might unfold in the world of fiction. In doing this, I am offering to my queer readers a sense of validation and understanding, while also attempting to gift them with something bitter, something sweet, something intoxicating, which they might take into themselves as fodder for whatever dreamy optimism they may be able to access away from the page. For non-queer readers, I hope to offer new, yet unheard stories of queer lives that neither deny nor overstate the struggles of queer existence so that these readers can enjoy new perspectives which may challenge them on entry if only to reward them for their work and present an experience of being “the other” which is deliciously uncomfortable for them. As such, much of my work either assumes a queer audience and/or includes characterization and narration which holds straightness at arm's length, centering it as an antagonizing pressure or decentering it altogether.

It may be prudent now to address my own struggles and negotiations with this project; most importantly I want to address the fact that “queer” is, of course, an umbrella term with respect to identity, encapsulating many identities of gender and/or sexuality of which I can only lay claim to one. As a pansexual cisgendered woman, telling stories of gay, lesbian, and/or trans experiences is something I approached with great care. Stories about transness in particular concerned me most; the trans community is arguably our most vulnerable population, and so their stories must be handled with the greatest degree of conscientiousness. Conscientiousness, naturally, can be at odds with the creative drive – there is an urge to shed all thoughts of outside critique during the writing process, lest the author fall prey to stagnation, fearful to write this or that in a cycle of self-defeat. At the same time, I was very aware of complaints coming from the trans community – many of them dear personal friends and loved ones – that stories involving trans characters inevitably had more to do with those characters struggling to accept or love themselves (specifically their bodies) and were, like many queer stories, disproportionately couched in tragedy, misery, violence, and death. I struggled with this question of how to approach trans stories off and on: are they even my stories to tell? What would it mean to leave them out of the collection entirely? What would it mean to include them, as a cis woman? I already had trans characters that I wrote for on my roleplay forum and otherwise waiting in the wings; they would not be invented for the purpose of inclusion in the collection, but still, I grappled with the question of how to handle the function of their trans identity in their lives within a short story. I did not want to make it the center of their stories, did not want to spectacularize it any more than I wanted to ignore it. A trans person is a trans person every day, after all, in the way that a lesbian is a lesbian every day, and while these identities need not

demand their daily attention there is still nevertheless a palpable relationship to it, even if it's palpability is rooted in the absence of that relationship.

Consequently I found myself structuring and restructuring the focal trans story in my collection, "Record Highs", which is part biopic and part typical narrative. Additionally, I inquired with many of my friends who are trans as to how they would feel about a story that went this way or that way with a trans man's relationship to his own transness, and took their feedback into careful consideration. Ultimately I decided to use a narrative voice that refused to misgender my character Ash/Lucky from the jump, instead trusting and imploring the reader to understand and navigate the divide between Lucky's experience of himself and how the world experiences him, especially as he is able to grow his own sense of agency and present himself with more autonomy as he ages. I found that this approach did the trick: it neither negated nor ignored his identity as a gay trans man and the aggressions and microaggressions that he experiences as a result, nor did it twist the point of the narrative into an examination of the great "tragedy" of existing as a transgender individual. Throughout writing it I consistently found myself returning to questions of divulging and withholding information surrounding Lucky's physical experience as a trans man, with great consideration as to what I was including about his journey and transition in service to the character and the story and what I felt pressured to include in response to curiosities and questions which I knew a cisgendered reader would have. This negotiation is another facet of navigating the line between queer spectacle and queer realism, and resulted in many edits and deletions made with respect to my trans audience. This story, I believe, is one I will continue to work on and return to.

My other piece involving a trans identity differs by design and necessity; the character Cait has lead a much different life than Ash/Lucky. Her relationship with her trans identity is

incredibly different, and she feels no need or desire to divulge it. She is, instead, much more focused on her obsessive love affair with her high school best friend. The narration for this piece is first person (something I explicitly wanted to give to my women-loving-women characters who are habitually robbed of voice and identity in preference for sexuality and drama), and so Cait naturally does not discuss this much. The footwork is there – she has a supportive father, the all-girls high school she attended ostensibly has no issue with it, and if she did experience bullying as a result of her being trans she sees no reason or feels no urge to bring it up. These wildly different experiences of transgender identity represent another set of points on the spectrum I am attempting to synthesize of “realistic” and “fantastic”. While there certainly exists the possibility (likelihood, even) of a cisgendered reader finding it hard to believe that Cait might be able to have had a teenage experience like the one I’ve given her, for me as an author, that is all the more reason to include it. Despite my use of the word, nothing explicitly *fantastic* really happens: she is simply allowed to exist as a trans woman, and while that *does* give her a distinctive set of experiences (she names herself, she experiences puberty in a different way, etc.), it is not, for Cait, a significant portion of her life. Whether or not this absence of concern for Cait is due to some degree of internalized transphobia is open for interpretation.

Even still, there were some stories that I had to shelve out of respect for the content – a decision I have not yet come to regret. For example, I had intended to put in a sort of unifying piece that centered around a trans nonbinary person throwing a “coming out” party for a younger member of the community, in the style of queer culture of the 1920’s and 30’s, when gay men would be formally introduced to gay society similar to a debutante’s debut ball might have done. The main character, Zaja, is a former drag queen who uses *zie/zir/zirs* pronouns, and is a pillar of the local queer community and accordingly filled with knowledge about *zir* roots therein, both as

an individual and as a community member. Because community is so important to queer culture, I intended to include this short story as a way to bind together not only the characters across the other pieces but as a way to set some kind of historical context and footing as a finishing touch to the collection. Having recently visited an exhibit on queer history on display at the Oakland Museum (titled *Queer California: Untold Stories*), this historical backdrop was fresh on my mind. However, as my time in the master's program progressed amongst multiple natural disasters, local evacuations, and campus closures, I found that the time and care which I really felt this subject matter was owed was simply escaping me. I have every confidence that this story will be written – the first three pages of a draft are already there – but I am also confident in my decision not to rush something that handles content that requires a certain extra commitment to accuracy on my part.

Despite the absence of this piece, the idea of community was still something that was always on my mind while synthesizing my thesis collection as a whole. Out of my own preference, many of my characters have some sort of connections to one another, sometimes in a family sense (biological or chosen), sometimes as friends, or in other more tangential ways. As a creator this sort of spider-webbing of relationships helps me to make each character as an individual become more whole and realized, but it is also true among queer folks that we tend to gravitate towards each other, often times before any one of us has come out. To that end, there is an easily traceable thread of recurring characters throughout every story. At times this is more overt, still in other cases the connections are more marginal. These connections represent the always present but not always immediately visible ways that queer lives are connected, regardless of which letter or letters under the LGBT+ umbrella someone might identify with. From both a content point of view to a broader craft perspective I am playing with elements of

queerness on the page, queering expectations of feeling and valuation, and occasionally venturing into queering the form and format of storytelling as well.

Creating and organizing this collection has been one of the greatest endeavors and greatest joys of my life. No part of the pre-teen posted up in front of a library computer inside a portable classroom would have ever predicted that she would one day be putting together something like this. The feedback I received in workshops and guidance I was given from my faculty and mentors has pushed my writing from something habitual and timid into a focused, driving force, with as much vision as it has heart. At the same time, the queer and feminist theory I was offered through studying great names such as Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and of course stumbling upon Michael D. Snediker brought a depth of understanding for the kind of service that the stories I want to tell might provide for my readers.

I have learned to structure and re-structure something rather than trying to add or subtract, I have learned not to write for the audience I know I'll have next week but rather the one that the story is really for, learned to trust my readers because they are as smart as they are eager, that editing really isn't so bad (in fact sometimes it's fun), that I am just as much at risk as anyone else to write flat female side characters that require a second look, and not to worry about what fifty year-old straight cis white men say when they complain that writing queer stories seems too "political" or "myopic" in the long run. Since beginning work on this thesis collection, I have already begun to witness a nascent turnaround in the queer stories that are finally seeing the light of day, ones being written by queer people about queer people; films like *God's Own Country*, *Closet Monster*, and the masterpiece that is *Moonlight* are offering entire mouthfuls of queer optimism, and the whole world, queer and otherwise, is gobbling them down with a newfound desire. Here is my contribution to that dream. What follows in this collection is a

symbiosis of real and extra-real, of spontaneous inspiration written down in the notepad app of my cellphone and carefully-adhered-to scheduling, of happy tears and full-on-mental-breakdown mania, but most of all, of “gay” as in happy *and* “queer” as in fuck you.

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Enough

If it's cliché, it's only because it's real. The cliché has to come from somewhere, right? Henry is a walking cliché – he knows this. In these moments, waking up hungover on an unfamiliar couch, he is a doubled-down cliché, a cliché of a cliché. It's this kind of cyclical thinking, this banal toothless self-examination that gets him through the agony of waking up all over again. He likes to think that confronting the cliché head on will help it turn into something else, will keep it out of his lyrics, will keep him from doing just what they all expect him to do. It won't.

And anyway, it's what they expect. It's part of the look, part of the lifestyle, part of the whole folk-rock-singer-slash-drifter gig. You simply don't do that kind of thing without developing a drinking problem; it's practically a pre-requisite to be at least halfway to drunk before attempting *any* Dylan song in earnest. Even your basic college-aged indie youth with an acoustic knows that. Even Henry knows that.

He heaves himself upright on the overstuffed Ikea sectional and in doing so unseats the who-rescued-who shelter cat previously sleeping on his chest. It recovers quickly, and sets to grooming its black fur as though this was where it had meant to be all along. Henry watches the cat without really seeing it, too preoccupied with the way his mouth feels as dry as the ash tray on the floor beside him. The soft gray light filtering in through Pier One white canvas curtains tempts him to go slow, to pull himself into the day nice and easy as though he deserves it and as though he doesn't look like the forgotten member of the Box Car Children all grown up and with the premature graying at his temples to prove it.

His feet, though, they know better. They've got themselves on the floor and are walking Henry back to the bathroom, the one that was shown to him when he was still relatively sober yesterday afternoon. It sits on the first floor of the nice little house that belongs to that nice little couple (what were their names? Brian and Jess? Steve and Emma? Polo Shirt and Homemade Jewelry?) who were absolutely besides themselves with sedated, bohemian excitement to put up local folk rock legend Henry "Hank" Darling for the night while he was in town for a couple of shows. The hungover piss into a stranger's toilet is its own kind of ritual. The cat snakes in between Henry's legs as he dodges his reflection in the sink mirror. His head is throbbing as if he can feel the rush of blood looping through it with every

reluctant beat of his heart, and in Henry's bones he knows he'd best be gone before his hosts wake up with their heads filled with fantasies of oat milk and organic goat butter on fair-trade toast, eager to hear Henry's tales of last night's gig.

His stomach turns that old familiar turn, the threat of puke that he chokes back down with practiced expertise and a quick swish of water from the faucet. There's some unfamiliar weight behind it though, that wave of nausea, some lurking itch like a conversation he meant to had or an oven he thought he'd turned off, waiting to be rediscovered. That memories of last night don't seem to want to come flooding back just yet is enough; the haze is good to him, treats him well, lets him know that he doesn't have to look if he doesn't want to see.

The best thing about being a folk-rock-singer-slash-drifter is that it's real easy to pack up your stuff and go when everything you own fits in a guitar case and the pockets of your jacket. The best thing about staying with millennial-hipster-youth is they always put a glass of water out for you before going to bed when you pass out on their couch. He drinks it too fast but keeps it down – a trick of the trade that gets him out, out, out the door so that the little black rescue cat barely has time to sprint for the opening before it's closed again.

Hangover sunglasses? *On.*

Guitar case? *Secured.*

Leering next door neighbor? *Ignored.*

Whenever the walk from the front door to the sidewalk takes longer than five seconds on account of the landscaping, you know you're in a nice neighborhood. Whenever there's someone outside before seven AM in matching jogging clothes or anything that buttons, you know you're in a nice neighborhood. The aesthetic configuration of succulents and perennials dotting porches and hanging from verandas is utterly lost on Henry, but not so much that he isn't aware of the loss itself. What matters now is the motion. Moving one foot after another, so that the little townhouse filled with rare vinyls and unchallenged monogamy and Swedish furniture is only getting smaller and smaller behind him all the time. It's enough to get his blood moving again so that the pain in his head is joined now by an ache in his

back and one on his side, bruises fresh and festering. This isn't a new experience for Henry. As a child he had a tendency to sleepwalk, something that had followed him on the road in his days when he'd just started out, so that often times he'd find himself with bruises from knocking into end tables and sofas, or the occasional concussion after falling down the stairs of unfamiliar houses which had so generously opened their doors to him for the night. It's been a while since he's done that sort of thing, and so he's reluctant to consider that a possibility now, despite the fact that time, Henry knows, means jack shit to his subconscious and hardly exists at all outside set times and travel estimations. He looks closer at his knuckles in the light, at the little lines of red flecked across the fingers on his right hand. Glowing pink cuts only a few hours old – new. Gained most likely in the past twelve hours judging by the blooming blue color on the ones he can see.

Out here in the new daylight, with the sounds of mechanical fits being had by lawn sprinklers and the occasional errant Labrador barking at his footsteps, Henry dips into the hours he's lost.

...

It was like this: the open mic night part of the gig was open to anyone, but only *he – Hank Darling* – would be headlining, listed, and therefore, getting paid. At the best of times it was a “kitschy” hipster bar that had discreetly set up a stage in the back corner for local talent. In reality it was a dive of a place with a lone stool and a microphone older than the yellowing health-inspection paper forgotten on a wall (a wall plastered decoratively with cigarette-scented coasters and questionable stains).

It paid mostly in drink tickets and “exposure”, but that had never stopped Henry before. If there was a place where he was allowed to physically exist that would also compensate him for his trouble, even a little bit, that was where he was going to be.

And Henry had been there for hours already – done a brief soundcheck, wiped his thrift store Ray Bans clean on his shirt, hell he'd even washed his face off in the sink only to say to himself that he'd done it – he'd been there hours already before noticing. In the back of the gathering audience near the bar was a face with bobbed black hair perfectly curled under its ears, with eyelashes too long to be natural and lips too red to be naked and – *fuck, what was he wearing?* Henry was only a few beers back when he'd

recognized the boy in girl's clothing who'd been babbling in his ear these past couple nights, suddenly conjured before him in the modest crowd like a spirit, all glitter and fish-nets and post-grunge-pop-crop-tops that flashed wildly when he talked (and he never seemed to stop doing that).

The boy was like a siren who refused to even bother pretending that he wasn't luring you to your doom in a shirt that said "SLUT" in big holographic letters and a mouth that said, "Come crash on my rocks, baby."

Alexander had told Henry he didn't go by Alex anymore, not since people assumed too fast it was a girl's name, not since someone else's assumptions meant someone else's fist in his made-up face when they didn't find the parts that they assumed matched the name under his skinny jeans or mini skirt or hot pants. (He told Henry this with a smile and a wink and a hand on Henry's shoulder just barely touching). Henry understood something about this; Hank was the man who sang love songs and ballads and odes to nature and was left behind on the stage each night. Henry was someone entirely different. More than anything, Henry understood that he did not understand at all.

From backstage (otherwise known as the corner behind the stage equipment) Alexander locked eyes with him long enough to curl that Cheshire cat smirk on his face before going back to making eyes at a stranger, like he was interested in whatever conversation he was having with whoever was buying his drink currently.

Fuck, maybe Alexander *was* interested in it. It wasn't up to Henry to notice, to look, to care. Alexander swung one leg idly from the bar stool he was propped up on, too short to properly reach the ground even with platforms on.

All this pissed Henry off so that he gripped his guitar a little closer and was grateful for the sunglasses that covered his expression. By all rights Alexander should have stuck out like a glittering thumb, looking like that in a shitty bar like this, even with the handful of riot grrls and nu-goths milling about for want of having something to do on a weeknight. Alexander stuck out in the way that you were either looking At Alexander or Not At Alexander; nothing else was possible. But the confidence Alexander exuded like a neon glow on some offensive sign dared you to want to fight him or fuck him;

either option you chose said something about *you*, not him. Either way it was your problem. Either way he'd still be there.

It was only ever a question of *how long* it'd take Henry to approach the bar in order to turn in a drink ticket for something to hold in both hands, the same way that it was only a question of *how long* after doing that before a newly familiar voice was in his ear, buzzing like a radio or maybe purring like a cat.

“This place is a shit hole.”

The best thing about being a folk-rock-singer-slash-drifter was most fans felt it was uncool to approach you before a gig. But Alexander was not a fan, and even if he was (*was he?*) nothing Alexander did was uncool, anyway.

Henry leaned his torso too hard against the bar for a second so that its sharp corner stabbed deliciously into his stomach, before turning a lazy expression on Alexander. He replied first with a thoughtful sip of his beer, then, “So you should feel right at home, then.” There was nowhere good to look. There was nothing here Henry wanted to see. Henry wanted a cigarette. Henry wanted a Xanax or a hole in the head. He wanted to hide the way he was so tempted to smile at his own shitty remark. He wanted to be done with his set already, but he hadn't even started. Henry rubbed at the tip of his nose, sniffled, and settled on watching some kid with a laptop and a keyboard struggle to find enough plugs for her set-up behind the mic.

“*Ha. Ha.*” Alexander said the words one at a time in favor of actually laughing, but there was a grin on his face and in his too blue eyes that wasn't worth lingering on. “Maybe I should have said something like: ‘Come here often?’” Alexander pushed his lips together in a parody of a flirty barfly. “Would that have been better for you, Henry?” Alexander said it like the set up for a joke, but the punchline never came. Henry answered with a shrug and drink.

“Mmmm,” Alexander hummed, undeterred by Henry's silence, his back to the bar and his elbows on top so that his hands dangled off it with red-rubbed knuckles and bitten-down fingernails. “That's my

sister, you know.” He nodded towards the woman on stage, then, after a beat he added: “You didn’t think I was here to see *you*, did you?”

Henry ignored the question again, or rather he recognized it as rhetorical.

Alexander’s sister was a waifish thing with hair some bottled color of pink and she was wearing enough layers to suggest she had tried to walk out with the whole thrift shop on – if it was a thrift shop for very small drag queens. There was glitter under her eyes (they must share glitter, Henry figured) and when she opened her mouth to sing it sounded like what Henry imagined a dumpster kitten might sound like if it knew how to work a Mac laptop and a synthesizer.

“I can see the resemblance,” Henry noted, and he plugged his mouth with a beer to keep from saying anything else.

Instantly Alexander’s face was as near to Henry’s as their height difference would allow, smug and sparkling, his lips saying: “Oh yeah? Is that because she’s so cute and I’m so cute? You can just say it, Henry. It’s okay. You can. Just. *Say it.*”

There wasn’t anything to say, so Henry listened to himself utter something grumbling and incoherent in response. The sound burned inside him alongside the alcohol, made his free hand ball into a fist now and then, choked him up into communicating with grunts and nods as Alexander carried on the conversation for him – both their parts and then some. Alexander kept flitting back and forth between canned remarks and skirting the edge of vulnerability by handing over personal details in nonsequitur, like watching Mae West coming out of a coma that left her locked in chronic oversharing. The boy was a parody of a parody, as though he knew that the world expected him to be precisely what he appeared to be – feminine and fickle and difficult and hypersexual and too much and not enough all at the same time – and he was mad about the whole thing, just enough that there was always this ounce of vitriol in his inflection but not enough to stop himself from doing it anyway, from being it anyway, from saying it anyway.

One or two dark-eyed boys stumbled on stage with their poetry journals in tow, and they left in the wake of scattered applause for bravery. Now and then Alexander would put a hand on Henry’s

shoulder when he talked, or on his arm, and Henry would flinch then, only for a moment, and Alexander didn't seem to notice or mind. Chipped black nail polish winding around some loose threads of Henry's jacket, winding and winding and Henry ignoring the way his muscles tense with every touch.

By the time Henry was meant to soundcheck, he had already moved on to hard liquor. Alexander's voice was in his ears telling him, "Go get 'em, *Hank*," with that knowing self-satisfied smile that he seemed to always wear as if he always, always, always had something to be smug about. Like merely his *existing* in front of you was a triumph of rebellion.

It was an expression that Henry couldn't dissolve immediately. He instead relegated it to the back of his mind, which was arguably where he kept the majority of things that stuck with him for too long. A therapist had told him and his two older sisters once while sitting in a stuffy elementary school counseling office, not long after Mr. Darling had sunk a kitchen knife into Mrs. Darling's shoulder that Christmas Eve, that trauma makes "us" compartmentalize differently. It makes us wall things off and scale things back so that the focus is on surviving today, she said, *right now*, and everything else gets pushed out of sight as a means to an end. He wasn't sure who "us" was when she'd said it, but Henry liked to think he was acutely aware of what was on the other side of his own mental walls, and that's precisely why he kept them up.

His walls were translucent; fuzzy glass so he could squint and look at the tempest on the other side whenever he needed to, whenever he wanted to, and like a beta fish squaring up at his own reflection it made his colors brighter. By forcing himself to stare down his own monstrous self-destructive origins on a regular basis Henry could justify his total inability to be anything to people other than an inevitable let-down, could excuse himself from being responsible for any tear or sweat stains left behind on someone else's throw pillows when he woke himself in the middle of the night, eyes hot and red from sobbing after his brain served him up another distorted flashback or nightmare. Keeping an eye on it kept it from growing when he wasn't looking, kept it locked out of his waking hours. It made his music ache deeper, made his Hank persona sing louder. It made every true emotion that managed to break through

his haze of cigarette smoke and cheap whiskey drinks sear through him like a hot iron out of control. It wasn't something he would recommend, but it was one way to live.

With whiskey in one hand and his guitar in the other, Henry sat down at the rickety stool amongst casual whistles of approval and *still* out, over the little crowd that had gathered, was Alexander's come-up-and-see-me-sometime smirk leering at him from the bar. Every passing sip made every coming strum of his guitar sound more and more and more like the mewling voice of indiscretion singing:

“Go get ‘em, Hank.”

...

Trying to push further makes his headache worse, and the way the sun keeps getting higher and brighter as Henry puts pavement behind him isn't helping. There are some things that even hangover sunglasses can't block out.

By now there are signs of life all around him as he walks; the front lawns have become invariably shorter and the picket fences have begun to morph into chain-link. Garages turn into rusted-out beaters haphazardly driven onto driveways and forgotten for eternity. The faces he passes aren't glancing away at the last second when he comes close like they do in the nice neighborhoods; they never look at him in the first place.

The cuts on his knuckles sting in his pockets and shifting too much makes his bruises sing hymns of regret but walking with his head down is safe, it's always safe. Hands in his pockets, it's only now since he's dipped back into reality that he realizes what he's been fiddling with in there. The little paper he's been fondling idly, Henry discovers as he pulls it from his the pocket of his jacket, is a small napkin, partially shredded and particularly worn from his idle fingering.

In curling handwriting and black ink that seems too black and thick to be pen but otherwise unidentifiable to Henry, are the words:

5350 S Mryland ave #142

Beneath it, there's the half-smudge of a too-red lipstick stain: a kiss mark done in haste.

Beneath that, Henry's hands feel heavy and sluggish. There's another morbidly familiar tug in the back of his brain like something waiting to be overturned, some face about to come into focus – only if he starts looking for it, it might look back. So he crumples the thing, forgets he knows exactly where that street is, forgets that he's trying to remember anything at all except how to put one foot in front of the other.

He continues on like this in a state of comfortable disassociation for time unknown; it's the crunching of glass under his feet that sends him back to the night before for the second time, sneaking up on him in his state of walking catatonia.

...

It was like being caught in an undertow: wave after wave crashing over him in sweet, slow succession. Or maybe it was like a prizefight with Henry Darling in both corners. The memory of his actual set was gone almost completely aside from picking up on those blue blues occasionally glancing at him from the back of the bar – *occasionally!* – with lazy disinterest and maybe one finger drawing circles on the bar top. That image was clear as sunny skies, but then – nothing.

Henry's typical post-gig ritual was to find a table near the back and make his drink tickets and pocket change take his liver as far as they could. He kept his sunglasses on, mostly to discourage the average bar patron from making the mistake of thinking he was looking for company – if they happened to do anything to hide his own expression, or where his eyes were, that was a natural and happy coincidence.

The level of excitement that this ritual involved tended to vary from town to town, depending widely on the company he was keeping at the time, or lack thereof as the case may be. A small collection of trusted, friendly faces were always welcome but rarely present. If anyone visited for very long that night, Henry's blackout consolidator had efficiently wiped them from the scene.

The only thing that had stuck was, predictably, Alexander: Alexander *not* coming over to sit with him the way he had the night before, or the one before that. Alexander *not* wheedling whatever words he could out of Henry with teasing back-handed compliments and fleeting touches. Alexander *not* saying

things like: “So are you always this grumpy or is it really because you like me so much?” / “I bet all the girls think the gray in your hair makes you look like a sexy professor or something.” / “Henry. *Henry!* Say something nice to me and I’ll share my cigarette.”

Instead it was Alexander and his sister trading cigarettes and mixed drinks, Alexander always *just* in his line of sight giving lingering looks and touches to some pair of ethically sourced sneakers with a trendy haircut and always, always, always with that smile on his over-lined lips.

It figured, Henry made the case to himself from the other side of the bottom of his glass on the other side of the room. It figured that Alexander would lose interest, would find someone who didn’t shut up tight like a vice any time conversation became too easy or bodies got too close. He couldn’t tell you why Alexander had followed him around for a while up until now in the first place, but it didn’t come as any surprise that Alexander had figured out it wasn’t the best use of his time. The best thing about being a folk-rock-singer-slash-drifter was nothing surprised you about people, anymore.

Didn’t mean he wasn’t allowed to be pissed about it, though.

Pissed! Not jealous. Pissed. Pissed that some wet-eared college drop-out with a sob story of student loans had replaced him as the object of Alexander’s chosen attentions as if Henry was interchangeable with that kind of mundane market retail suggested price mediocrity.

From his table in the corner of the bar, Henry considered how utterly forgettable the kid was, how utterly unimpressive. It took him a good full ten minutes of whiskey-fueled brooding to even recall that the face that Alexander was mooning at had also come up on “stage” at some point during the open mic before Henry’s gig, reciting some hack-job poetry that tried to force you to feel something in the name of art or ego or circumstance.

Comedy acts were better live, Henry considered, because you went with a purpose – with the intent to laugh. Same thing with shitty poetry: it flat-out sounded better with a brick wall behind you and the lights down low. Going with the intent to feel. What a fucking joke.

There was the distinct feeling of burning anger in his stomach, brewing and bubbling like poison threatening to get out any way it could. It was the sort of drunken anger that settled on him like someone

had turned up the gravity, made it hard to get up or do anything else except watch and drink (and watch and drink).

In the end, it was the napkin that finally made Henry snap.

For all its best things, the worst thing about being a folk-rock-singer-slash-drifter was how you didn't get to pick and choose what stuck and what the lifestyle washed away. Some things you always lost to the liquor, like exactly when he'd got a beer bottle in his hand or what he'd said when he crossed the room all at once in a silent tempest two seconds later; all that had stuck was the feeling of fire in his chest, the way the bottle felt smooth and tense in his hand like it was about to pop.

Through the drunken lens of memory Henry saw himself snatching the napkin from Alexander's fingers as he'd finished writing on it, just as Alexander was sliding it across the top of the bar over to whatever no-name emotional plagiarist he'd been oozing all over.

Henry couldn't remember reading it at the time, or even trying to; the content didn't matter to that version of Henry who had been marinating in a potent combination of alcohol, rejection, and a new kind of repression he hadn't before thought possible for himself. All this thrown together in the whiskey-soaked body of his daddy's daddy issues and slow-cooked at a cool seventy-eight degrees on a mid-summer night, shaken, stirred, and ready to blow, Henry "What Else Is New?" Darling.

Henry heard his voice say Alexander's name like it was someone else talking, but he felt the words rumble up from inside him as he wheeled on Alexander so he knew no one else could have said it. He watched as he wedged himself between Alexander and this boy, this Not-Henry, like he was watching a movie. A biopic starring Alexander's laughing blue eyes sparkling along with the glitter on his cheeks and six shades too dark from behind the lenses of Henry's sunglasses, staring up at Henry with a fixation to suggest he was watching a car crash, a train wreck, a forest fire. The bar buzzed around them, the dim lights swimming and glowing like fireflies. There was no one else.

Then that sound – that sound of glass shattering, and it was only neck-deep in his own inebriated flashback that Henry could now place the origin of the little bright cuts on his hand. The beer bottle was broken before he could think twice about it; he couldn't recall the upswing of his arm and smashing it on

the bar was a knee-jerk reaction to shut up the sounds of protest coming from the boy he'd cut out when he'd inserted himself in the situation like an expletive on live TV. There was no one else because with that one swift motion of shattering glass, Henry had *made sure of it*.

Shattering the bottle on the top of the bar took less than a second. "*Enough,*" Henry uttered the word more like a spell than a command and then, as if in answer, the bar went quiet. He couldn't be sure for how long because now with bits of glass on his knuckles and his mouth dry from all that he'd shut up inside of it, the seconds stretched on with impossible slowness. It could have been an eternity that he stood there and Henry wouldn't have noticed. Alexander's expression had caught in that moment somewhere between animal fear and sheer, incredulous, exalted excitement.

And there it was: that little smirk tugging at the corners of Alexander's ruby lips, pulling barely up through his cheeks and then finally flooding into his eyes so that he was practically beaming at Henry from where he sat on the barstool, legs still swinging, glitter still flashing and blinking on his cheeks like pinball lights.

He was like a slot-machine jackpot – and Henry was going to get his cherry.

Anyone watching could have told you that Henry was the one who kissed Alexander first, desperate and more than a little frustrated against Alexander's still-smirking mouth. Alexander tasted like sugar-flavored vodka, lemons, and cigarettes, everything Henry hadn't thought to expect. He was warm and pouring all over Henry the way a hot drink once swallowed leaves your throat, your chest, your stomach feeling warm and especially aware of how it has trickled down inside you. At some point Henry must have put his hands in Alexander's hair because it was between his fingers in an instant, threaded through them like the whole scene might squish through them like jelly and ooze out of existence.

The last thing that was clear to Henry was the feeling of someone else's hands in his pockets, and the upcoming rush of the sound of a bar responding to some drunken asshole breaking a beer bottle.

...

Then it's the couch, the daylight, the black cat.

By now he's walked enough blocks to feel as at home as he ever does; the shouts of children and the errant smell of burning tire treads feel more inviting than manicured lawns or minimalist-modern-brownstones. His stomach is agonizingly, nostalgically empty.

There's a moment where Henry has to decide on a street corner: right or left. He can look up, catch the street signs and consider like he's actually got a choice but – what's the point? A simple turn around the corner and he's there: "5350 S Maryland ave".

He folds and unfolds the napkin in his hand, not looking at it – simply holding it.

Number one hundred forty-two is visible from the sidewalk. It's always been visible, each of the countless times he's walked past it during each of the countless times he's drifted through this city. In the haze of a summer mid-morning, it looks transformed somehow. Henry had never before noticed the little Dollar Store paper lanterns dangling from the overhang, partially shredded by weather and age, but they seem appropriate now, with silhouettes of Halloween witches and cats with arched backs. The string of fairy lights wrapped around support beams peeling with paint make even more sense.

Whether or not he meant to end up here and why his feet took him here are two questions that Henry kills with two knocks at the door: one for each, and then they're gone. Seconds pass where Henry is just some guy with a hangover, waiting on a doorstep of an apartment he's never really seen before, and then it opens to the petite pink-haired pixie whom Alexander had identified as his sister. She's either half-dressed or whole-dressed in half-clothes, and her face goes from casual annoyance to screwed-up distaste in record time when their eyes meet.

"What the *fuck* do *you* want?" She demands, her voice going up and down on "fuck" and "you" and she's looking him up and down like he's made of garbage and seeping something worse.

It's not the least hospitable greeting Henry's had – not even the worst he's had in this city – maybe the worst on this block.

She's got her hands and arms crossed over her chest and they're covered in various bracelets and rings and tattoos that are small and black and simple. Henry can see over her shoulder and into the tiny apartment (which is particularly easy, given that she's even shorter than her brother by Henry's judgment)

to where Alexander has flung himself on a couch that's ragged and may have once been a nice shade of green. He's laying there like a ragdoll of Daisy Buchanan, cheeks rosy from the oncoming summer heat or something else entirely.

"Thought I'd drop by," are the words out of Henry's mouth, a cliché, though his eyes are still over the sister's shoulder.

She observes: "How fucking considerate," and from inside in a perpetual whine Alexander calls out without lifting his head and with mock fascination,

"Is that *Hank Darling*? Artemis, don't be *rude*."

The pastel-pink princess Artemis offers him a very un-nymph-like scowl to make it clear she isn't moving out of his way with anything short of reluctance. Henry understands, as his reflection prompts a similar scowl on his own face most days, and as he moves inside he is careful not to brush past her too closely.

The apartment is what nice people would describe as cozy, but is more accurately understood as an explosion of books, clothes, posters, ash trays, lighters, and throw pillows strewn across so many second-hand surfaces, all of which contribute though color and the apparent possession of a Bedazzler to an overall aesthetic kicking somewhere between Lisa Frank and heroin chic. If examined closely, it might be noted that none of the wall adornments are hung in such a way as to leave any structural marks on the apartment itself. For how littered the place it, it's small enough that the two of them could pack it into so many boxes and disappear without leaving so much as a fleck of pink hair dye to mark their history there. Henry would be impressed, if he did that sort of thing.

Alexander pulls his legs up from where he's laying on the couch, tucking them under him presumably to make room for Henry who doesn't have to look to see the pleased smile on Alexander's face. Henry sits. Alexander stretches his legs out across Henry's lap and makes a kissy face at him and the loud sounds of smooching to match, his way of acknowledging that thing Henry has only now remembered.

For her part, Artemis affords them both a passive scowl before disappearing behind one of two closed doors in the place (the one with strands of star-shaped lights carefully balanced on the top of the doorframe and hanging down on either side, as opposed to the other one which is similarly decorated only by some repurposed bar signage now used, Henry assumes, to mark the bathroom, as it reads: “The Boom-Boom Room”). The morning-turned-afternoon light makes the place feel warm and for a little while it causes the yellowing pink bong on the coffee table to throw rosy colors across the room as the sunlight filters through it. Alexander’s toenails are painted some old shade of royal purple and he’s on his back watching Henry, his arms thrown casually over his head to dangle over the arm of the couch like someone tossed him here and then up and walked away.

“How’s your hand?” Alexander asks with a knowing look, and he has to press his lips together to keep from grinning about it. He has the stains of last night’s make-up under his eyes and on the corners of his lips. Henry opens the fist he didn’t realize he’d been making and examines the tiny cuts on his knuckles from beer bottle glass.

“Fine.” Henry answers with the dying remains of a laugh, stretching his fingers a bit. He takes his sunglasses off, and the little section of stomach peeking out from under Alexander’s shirt, and the sun-bleached green of the couch all get six shades lighter, six shades brighter.

Suddenly Alexander is moving, upright and shifting closer to him. “I wasn’t sure you’d get my note,” Alexander declares, that victorious note singing in his words. He’s on his knees crawling towards Henry, and he reaches across into Henry’s jacket pocket and pulls out the napkin like a prize.

Alexander asks: “How much did you drink last night?”

“Enough.”

Alexander puts his head on Henry’s shoulder and Henry does not flinch. He sits. The head on his shoulder keeps him here in his body, here in this moment, sore and sobering up by the second. Alexander is looking away from him, into the sunlight coming in through the blinds and, again, he asks, with a familiar hum: “Mmm... and how much do you remember?”

Henry answers: “Enough.”

Le Temps de La Mort

He meets his sister at the airport. It's approximately a thirteen hour flight from Paris, France to Nashville, Tennessee (not including the layover). His bad knee is even worse for it, screaming at him with even the smallest movement. His walking cane offers no real relief; it is a desperate attempt to mitigate the pain like a lollipop given after a shot. By the time he's off the plane his legs feel like Jell-O, feel like painful nothing, his shoulders locked in the upright position. Angus practically falls into the hug his younger sister reserves for him. She holds him tight and neither of them thinks about anything if they can help it. Arabella is taller than him and stronger than him despite being the youngest of the three Talbot children and he is grateful for all these things. This is not a reunion of choice, nor one of happiness, but it is a reunion nevertheless: a unifying of parts. Arabella comes on loaded with the expected questions, and seems grateful for his ability to answer them.

"How was your flight?" (Long.)

"It's so good to see you." (You, too.)

"Did they feed you anything?" (A little.)

"You must be awfully tired." (Yes.)

"Talk to Thaddeus yet?" (Not yet.)

Arabella is full of pre-programmed things to say, but Angus can see in his sister's eyes the far-off echoes of an apology. If there was a way for her to say something that really meant anything, a way to slice through decades of cultural training and expectation, she would. That's what her eyes say, anyway; like she would love to remember a particularly comforting quote from Keats or Wilde for her peculiar brother in this moment – and he loves her all the more for this imagined desire. The questions she really wants to ask are beyond her just now; the circumstances of their meeting hovering over the both of them heavy and invisible like a ghost and filling their heads and mouths up with buzzing silence.

An airport attendant gathers what little baggage Angus has in exchange for a generous tip from his sister, the way they've seen their father do. The rest of his things will be sent for in due time. She takes her brother's hand and squeezes it, and they are silent on the long ride back home in their father's

slick black European car as it glides through the night like a lesser shark through darkened waters.

Angus's phone sits in his pocket, silent too.

His thoughts linger on France despite his body having jumped time zones. He lingers on his half-finished scribbles of verse and prose, on the hopeful possibilities that Paris had once represented to him that now lay dying behind him somehow so predictably, and on those misguided candlelit moments between drinks and clumsy verb conjugation that he had thought to himself, "*Maybe.*" There had been moments when he flicked his cigarette anxiously between fingers and chewed on his lower lip and saw looming just there on the edge of his consciousness the precious thought, "*Could be.*" And there were, as well, moments when the sun was just casting the promise of gray morning over the Parisian skyline and he'd think desperately of home and the cacophonous sounds of summer cicadas and someone's bored brown eyes and think of nothing else at all.

...

Darling, love, should you stand to such a claim,

Would you lie close this night and speak my name?

Do you yet walk this world before my eyes?

Is your name that which lives within my sighs?

I tremble now in the dream of your touch,

Would my heart still skip if shown half so much?

Else trade places, were your heart cruel as mine,

Only when you call me 'love' will I speak unkind.

...

His childhood home is as he remembers it – it's always as he remembers it – shining, radiating white even in the dark coolness of a spring evening, with purple bougainvillea creeping up the sides of the

porch and threatening to spill into the windows. Pillared and balconied, echoes of a Southern history no one cares to look too far back into. This is now the family house, not the one which oversaw generations of bloody inequity and was subsequently sold for its undeserving history, but it leaves a similar taste in the mouth, and it is the house Angus and the other two Talbot children grew up in. It is therefore much more easily swallowed when steeped in pleasant childhood memories, and Angus can feel the call of nostalgia luring him deeper despite the lurking truth in his heart that every childhood home does not, *cannot* hold only pleasantries. All the parlor talk in the world won't change that. Folks can "bless your heart" until the doilies mold and the patio rots and the china turns yellow and it won't change that.

Angus can smell the outside through the rolled down window of the car: the dirt road still stinks of the day's sunshine though it's long since gone. The smell is hot and dry and cloying so that Angus's stomach twists and turns like a drunken lightning bug and when the car stops and he puts his cane on the ground to pull himself out before Arabella can offer assistance he manages to stand up into the roof of the car, banging his head in a characterizing moment of over-eager clumsiness. He lets out only a small groan in response and Arabella, for her part, comes around just in time to have missed the whole thing.

A chorus of frogs announces his arrival as he moves up the path one step at a time: *step, click, step. Step, click, step.* There is no wind in the air, so his hair sticks to his temples in places where he's only just begun to sweat. Every familiar swirling knot in the wood of the patio steps tells him a story he thinks he'd rather forget: the knick on the railing taken out by a clumsy childhood misstep when his knee still required a metal brace to keep it the insides of his knee from wandering and so became weaponized; the creak of the porch swing in the breeze where he'd escape to on nights like this to read poetry written by the dead, first as a deadly sober youth and then later, bourbon-drunk and hurling over the side into the grass until his ribs ached like fresh bruises.

There are figures in these memories that are murky and easily avoided, ones he can easily recognize as his sister Arabella, his older brother Austin, his father, his childhood best friend and neighbor Thaddeus. It's thoughts of his mother in particular that he dodges, like a feral cat just slipping out of reach from eager, destructive hands. For all that Angus lacks in physical agility he has become

quietly adept at evading his own thoughts. There is so much sameness in the outside of the house, inviting him to slip into the past and stay there for good as a welcome alternative to the present. The front door is whitewashed and ominously wide with a brass knocker in the center. Beside the door, neatly hung and covered in dust, is a similarly brass cross tacked onto the wall. It has been there since Angus can remember, filling him with fear or joy and nothingness in turns. The old welcome mat with its frayed corners and gentle discoloration, however, has been replaced. This one is brand new, the color of dried grass, and in black cursive neatly begs him: “Bless This House”.

Arabella’s hand is on his shoulder to interrupt the trance that the house has laid upon him and she squeezes twice – once because she loves him, twice because she needs him to move so she can unlock the door. Angus has forgotten, of course, that he doesn’t have a key.

...

Father is in the sitting room. Angus knows this because he can hear him – not because he is especially loud so much as because Angus’s brain is attuned to the particular lilt, the particular cadence of speaking muffled by white linen curtains and ancient overstuffed couches heard from a room over. Father is in the sitting room with eldest brother Austin, and Angus is in the entry way still, still in the entry way. It feels smaller than it does in his memories, with great panels of oak flooring and paneled walls that seem particularly dreary in the dull light radiating from some yellowing light sconce on the wall. There’s ornamental arrangements of flowers and branches in a vase here or there: on the floor in the corner or on an end table to the side. They must be fake, Angus thinks, or else they just haven’t died yet. No way would Austin or his father bother to keep up with his mother’s decorative housekeeping; that would take noticing it first. His mother had refused to hire help with cleaning the house, a frequent point of contention when occasional bouts of melancholy would keep her from maintaining the standard, yielding impulsive one-time hires from his father who couldn’t stand the mental weight of such a visual deficiency but could not bring himself to personally lay a hand to it either. There is the heavy stench of old wood and unopened windows hanging in the air.

The three Talbot children are Austin, Arabella, Angus, born into a Southern life of luxury and immediately covered in matching outfits and given matching names with matching expectations of gender conformity and an allegiance to the status quo of their income tax bracket. The only figure of exception is the one that's missing, and the reason why Angus jumped on a plane for over fourteen hours after a single phone call. In so many ways, her absence is a presence as strong as her being there once was – stronger, even, maybe. She is intrinsically tied to the house; Angus cannot recall whether or not he had ever seen her out of it – no, she took strolls around the property, surely. Attended church on Easter Sunday one year or another. He can see her standing on the porch, mouse brown hair pulled up high into a bun on the top of her head. She is wearing a pair of sage green loose linen pants in his mind and a button-down blouse neatly tucked in. This is one of the nicer ways he has to imagine her.

She is now the tempest forming over Angus's shoulder which he refuses to acknowledge, instead doggedly barreling down the isolated path he's on, waiting for the inevitable dead end to force an about face for him. The dread he feels in his bones at the certainty that he will, in fact, be forced to behold this monster, is almost as terrifying as it is comforting.

Arabella has disappeared and Angus is transfixed in the antiquated wooden prison of an entry way; antiquated because the décor hasn't changed in thirty years, wooden from the hardwood floors to the real wood paneling of the walls, and a prison because to his right there is a white door with a brass handle that is nearly pulsating with its desire to be touched and turned and opened, yet the voices of his father and brother in the next room have fixed him to the spot.

Polite society demands he visit with his family before doing anything else, certainly before something as unimportant as opening one particular door in one particular house, but he is rooted, unable to will himself to choose one or the other. Something must be done. He waits for the something and so it comes.

“Speak of the devil and he will appear!”

His brother's voice breaks the spell. Now Angus has no choice – a comfortable and preferable state of being for him. The glow of the white door burns in the back of his mind as he moves in his three-

beat gait away from it. His knee is a dull thrumming pain now, less than it was before, but still insistent, tugging at his mind during every quiet moment. The pain is a familiar and comforting distraction.

“Hello,” Angus announces dumbly, half-limping through the archway into the sitting room. It’s a sickly sweet sensation to see he could have drawn the place from memory and been exactly right. He didn’t know what he expected to change since he’d been in Europe – looking at it now he supposes probably nothing – and so, nothing has.

Father sits in an armchair bigger than he is; older brother Austin rises from a leather sofa to greet him with a smile, a big smile. Too big. Angus pulls himself close enough to be momentarily embraced by his brother and then settles on the end of the couch near Father, who is looking older than ever everywhere except in his eyes which remain sharp and bright and as exhausted as any time Angus can remember. His Father nods at him, saying nothing. They all wear their smiles as long as they can make them fit – Angus least of all, as per usual, then Father.

There’s whiskey glasses set out on the coffee table on top of the white doily tablecloth. They’re half full and the bottle sits quietly next to them.

Austin claps Angus on the back from where he sits beside him on the large sofa so that there’s no danger of one brother touching the other, saying – as if it wasn’t obvious – saying, “Looks like you made it after all!”

Austin’s hair is neat and tidy as always, reminding Angus he needs a haircut. Austin’s suit is clean and pressed, reminding Angus he’ll need one of his own soon. Austin’s shoes are polished and reflective, reminding Angus not to look down for too long.

“I did,” Angus agrees, and Austin is pushing a half-full glass into his hand and gripping his shoulder hard enough to hurt and shaking it so that the whiskey stones in the glass clink gently as Angus lifts it to his mouth. They are avoiding the inevitable, the pain in the truth of his arrival and also in his departure a year earlier, and they are using his memory to do it. This is unsurprising for Angus, but stings all the same.

“We were just talkin’ about you,” Austin explains a little too cheerfully, like he’s chatting with a business prospect he needs to impress. Likely, Angus concludes, because Angus the only subject Austin has ever enjoyed discussing with him (other than himself). Under other circumstances Angus might have said as much. As it stands, he hasn’t drunk enough quite yet.

“Talkin’ about the time,” Austin continues, unbidden, “That you spooked that horse doing God-knows-what and it took you for a ride a half-a-mile long before dumping you in the lake.” His eyes crease from laughter and Angus nods and drinks, the alcohol burning down his throat and then still burning heavy in his stomach.

“I remember that.”

Angus idly fingers the crater in his cheek left behind from the chunk of skin that was taken out from that incident, from when he’d come off finally and clipped a branch on his way down. The horse had spooked when a shot went off from the hunting party Angus had left behind some twenty minutes or so before in protest of the sport. Nervous as the animal was to be separated from its herd, it likely wouldn’t have reacted to the shot if he had stayed with the group. Though he had no proof besides his gut and a history of peril at the hands of his siblings and Austin in particular, Angus had always attributed the shot and thus the accident to Austin. Only his mother had ever supported his abstaining from the sport, though the rest of them came around after an extended history of clumsiness indicated that Angus ought to be kept at arm’s length from firearms at all times.

When the laughter clears, Austin rubs at his nose, asking casually and a little under his breath:

“You gone to seen Charlotte yet?”

“Nope,” Angus answers, another name on the list of people he’s avoiding. Ghosts are easier to avoid, he decides, in an instant that dissolves beneath the weight of itself as soon as he thinks it.

Austin pulls the drink away from Angus once he’s drank about half of the half glass, tells him, “You’re still a lightweight, aren’t you? Paris can’t change that. Let me help you there.”

Father says nothing.

...

*O! But it is this fair summer's breeze,
That your wretched tones delight to spoil,
My plans to spend such time alone,
You take such care to soil.*

*From far across a tranquil field,
Sister's girlish cackles pry,
And brother, too, in verse misspoke,
So plainly lumbers nigh.*

*And father, quiet, who's eyes grow dim,
Though he's never raised a hand -
Should do me well to lift them thus,
Say: "Call me Abraham."*

...

Angus doesn't stay in the house that night. Technically, he hasn't stayed the night since he was a teenager, but he's not sure it counts really as "moving out" if you stay within property lines. It's instinct to wander out to the little hermitage that was his since the time he had desired it - since the time Mother had advocated for it, for a little slice of freedom just down the hill from the main house (this is another memory dodged reflexively quick after the first brush against it, like he'd put his hand on a hot stove, having forgotten it was on).

From what few windows his apartment has, the big house is nearly invisible over the hill and through the great hanging branches of the willow trees – save for the tops of the roof. It's enough that as a young man Angus could pretend he'd moved out properly rather than simply moving into a "servant's apartment" that was no longer used. The term 'hermitage' was an affectionate one, coined by two clever boys who fancied themselves even more clever than they were and had, between them, read entirely too

many dated English novels – Angus being one of those boys, naturally. The other was Thaddeus, a name and a face Angus trusts he'll inevitably see so completely that he doesn't even consider it, merely relying on fate to choose when to swallow that pill again. It's been a lifetime of a year since they've seen each other.

The walk down the hill is a struggle, and it's only once he's reached the door to the hermitage that Angus realizes that his hand is in his jacket pocket, that he's been fingering the key for quite some time, now – something Arabella must have given to him before she disappeared for the evening. Arabella was a skilled illusionist: she could blend in or stick out for the right reasons as circumstance desired, could come across just as gentle and demure as the men might need her to be, but her best trick was her disappearing act, so smooth that most people didn't even notice until it was too late. Angus could recall similar disappearances without even reaching for them, could even give a good guess at what she was up to and with whom but is too steadfast and loyal to do so even in his own mind just now. He supposes for a moment with the key in his hand that he too has practiced the art of disappearing, only with far less success.

The key slides in the lock and the door opens with a familiar creak and then, all at once, the smell of old books and dust and stale cigarettes and muddy dog come flooding over him like an upturned bucket. *This is real*, the smell insists. *This is happening now and you are here and it is now.*

Flicking on a light reveals that the apartment is exactly how he'd left it: small, dark, and messy. Nothing has been touched, or nothing can be touched; it's impossible now to know the difference. Plum-colored curtains shut out most of the sunlight in the day and are drawn shut still. There are stacks of books in unceremonious piles left haphazardly across any usable surface: a coffee table, an end table, a faded armchair he would have used for company should he ever have any other than Thaddeus. Flashing jump cuts of inebriated evenings spent reading to Thaddeus with his legs in Thad's lap, or walking the line of debate and argument about Woolf or Wilde over a hand-rolled marijuana cigarette skip through his brain as though they were attached to a spinning pinwheel so that there isn't any singular vision that is

still enough to settle on him and he is instead left with the exhausting mental aftertaste of overstimulation and not much else at all.

Dickinson, Hurston, Byron, Eliot, Hardy, Fitzgerald, Joyce, Rossetti, Lowell, Donne: they lie in piles like orgies or corpses with faded spines of every color, reflecting his inability to ever pick between prose and poetry, and organized only in that once upon a time Angus knew where each one was. He thinks he could probably find them all, now, with only his heart to guide him, but it is another in a long line of depressing thoughts that he releases, as so many dandelion seeds in the wind. The kitchenette preserves like a monument of shame his attempt at tidying before up and leaving the country altogether without a word to anyone: a stack of old dishes sits in the sink, forgotten.

Angus, as with all things, looks long enough to know he doesn't want to look anymore and he ambles to the tiny bedroom around the corner to fall face first into the old sheets of his iron-frame bed, still unmade as they had been when he'd left them on a springtime morning approximately one year earlier. They smell faintly of sweat and some cologne he recognizes, though it's not his own, sharp and just a little sweet. The jet lag or the sadness or something else consumes him and he sleeps, dreamless and deep with the boughs of the willow trees rubbing against each other outside his window in a familiar hymn.

...

In a Southern town, it is hot enough to choke. A God-fearing collective where nothing can grow in the sun, where you shuffled inside and I so courageously set myself out to bake. So arrogant in my bullish naiveté did I draw myself up, faced the sun with stern brow and metal round my body and Jesus in my heart to keep it from quivering. And you, in equal confidence but with lips shut tight and silent, reliable knees and ankles, knew better, stole away into the shade without need or want for encouragement. Didn't I see? Hadn't I watched you go? Why didn't I follow?

...

If not for the thudding at his door, Angus would have slept for days and, were it up to him, possibly forever. And it is *thudding*, weighty and closed-fisted, one-two-three in a way that would have

put fear into his heart should he have been more conscious upon first hearing it, so receptive is his heart to fear in the first place. He rolls from bed with a groan, using walls in place of his cane to pull himself to the door. It's slow going, but doable – his knee is not wailing in pain this morning as it was the evening before. Slivers of light escape through gaps in the curtains. His cellphone is forever on silent and forgotten on the bedside table.

The face on the other side of the door is that of a once-young-and-clever boy, now grown and, Angus suspects, even more clever for it. His hair is black and brushed back neatly, his eyes are brown and distant and perpetually bored, he is dressed in impeccable monochrome of black and gray and he is clutching in his hand a leather leash attached to a large bloodhound lazily wagging its tail.

“Figured you’d want this back,” Thaddeus says, as though he is holding a casserole dish or a pair of underwear. He holds out the leash and the dog bounds inside before Angus has a chance to receive him. The dog is called Frankly, a name given by Angus in his own feverish fit of cleverness; he is a failed hunting dog, in that he was too easily distracted and too happy to snooze in the sun to be considered essential, and so, was passed on to Angus in the way that discarded things are often picked up by other discarded things. The leash slips from around Thad’s wrist and Angus just lets it fall so it drags on the floor as Frankly roots around the house, visiting every corner and reacquainting himself with whatever there is to smell like things might have changed at all. If they have, Frankly will find out.

There is a pause in all of Angus’s inner-workings, the same pause that allowed Frankly’s leash to drag without hesitation, the same pause that holds his tongue and all other muscles in place for a moment, for two moments, now for three- the sight of his childhood friend after being gone only a year strikes him as though they have been separated for twenty and the weight of it threatens to crush him. It’s this threat that moves him forward, moves him to hug Thaddeus tight, Thaddeus who is taller and stronger and better than him in most every way (save for writing, which Angus holds as his last bastion of rivalry). He presses his head to Thad’s chest, his eyes wet and clenched tight, clutches the fabric of Thad’s blazer in his fists and only then does he feel arms around him, and the quickened weight of the stunned silence that follows. The scent on Thad’s shirt is sharp and sweet and makes Angus feel dizzy enough to dream.

Between them are so many drunken nights of holding and being held by one another that seemed to just disappear in the daylight which he dares not talk or think about now, just holding them in his mind like a promise of grateful mistakes he's likely to repeat sometime in the future given the chance.

"Thank you," he says finally, and Angus tells himself it's about the dog, it's about watching over Frankly while he was gone. Someday he thinks he will thank Thaddeus for other things done and undone: for understanding when he didn't write for weeks at a time, for not questioning why ran from all things familiar to be something and somewhere on his own, and for not wounding him with his failure to do so or his many failings before that. But that is not today. Instead he is breathing in Thad's scent and thinking distantly of when they were just kids walking up the path to the Talbot house after Sunday church. Thaddeus is confirming, with confident indifference, Angus's budding fear that having "a little bit of Jesus in you" could be anything and anywhere: an eyelash in your spleen, a fingernail just cradling your kidney, Jesus's little toe lodged in your heart and just centimeters away from plugging it all the way up. Of course as an adult he knows better now, understands what they meant by it, and understands as well the real cut of Thad's childhood confident indifference, wrapped up in his arms.

...

The space between fall and spring when the days suddenly get long and the sun turns golden and creates a hole in you that exists not to be filled. That is what you are.

The heart of summer with scorched nights sizzling under yellow street lights and evening shadows that stretch and stretch over everything in sight in brightest blackness. That is what I am.

I don't know what this means except that we shall never quite touch. I don't know what this means except that it is all very tiring.

...

"Angus!" A feminine voice of forced excitement is calling his name like a conjuring word and it occurs to him all at once how stupid he was to have not realized that she would be here. Angus realizes this only in the seconds before he must engage with his mistake, in one of the many cramped hallways in the house which turn into funnels of awkward social interaction whenever everyone they know is stuck

inside it. A simple attempt to find an empty bathroom has turned into an ambush. Like a car crash in slow-motion, Angus knows he has no choice but to keep driving forward: the decision is already made, the collision has already happened. His knee is screaming at him again, now that he can do nothing to relieve it. Typical. Angus had spend all day before now in bed reading A.E. Hausman poems and ignoring the cars lining up in the driveway to the big house, pretending he didn't know why they were there. Typical.

“Charlotte,” Angus replies, hands fumbling with the drink he’s been carrying until he can decide just exactly how best to greet his ex-fiancée. Charlotte is a nice girl, a good girl. No – a good woman. The sort of woman who had smartly erected iron bars around something strange and soft within her on instinct so as to protect it, whatever it was, unknown to anyone else. Just palpable on the surface was the hint that she had preserved something within, detectable to the discerning man as a promise of something unseen and unspoiled. They had been introduced just two years earlier when Angus had spilled something on her blouse while attending a brunch at the Young household, after which they’d had a blinding conversation about Virginia Woolf during which both of them had forgotten entirely about the blouse, the stain, and the concept of brunch. Angus had seen it then, a glimpse of that inner self, the one Charlotte had learned to keep molded in amber and tucked away. It is nowhere to be seen now, and Angus is unable to work out how to proceed. She decides for him, as is his preference, and goes in for a brief but adequate hug, just barely touching. He has never seen her in black before, not to this extent anyway, and it is not her fault that she looks exquisite in mourning clothes and not his fault that he absolutely doesn’t notice this. Her brown hair is loosely curled and lays in an orderly fashion down her back. Her make-up is subtle and light in color, and almost distracts from the one rogue canine tooth in her mouth that shuffled out of position post-braces, just barely bulging forward more than it ought to, the one Angus likes best. There’s nothing imperfect about her, really, depending on taste.

“I had hoped I’d see you,” she says. It is the sort of lie some Southerners tell each other on instinct; the bold-faced opposite of the truth is acceptable and even expected under certain social conditions. Her hand lingers on his shoulder – she too is a few inches taller than him. Mother often

blamed a childhood of frequent illness for Angus's lack of growth. Today was the day for thoughts of Mother, whether he liked it or not, and he on the whole did not, but he disliked thoughts of Charlotte even more. What a complete failure he had been for her, through and through.

Still she grips his shoulder, says very kindly, "I am so sorry for your loss – I can't believe it."

This is likely not a lie. It twists in his stomach like a knife, the way the truth can even when delivered in such a familiarly worded package. He has heard it more times than he can count today, as though he is a target on a track at a carnival shooter game and every face in town has shown up to play, with condolences where their ammo should be. It had sounded more fake coming from the others, the same women who spoke in not-so-hushed voices about his mother's first marriage – something she never spoke of herself and Angus knew better than to want to ask after – about how little she frequented church gatherings and weekend socials, about the way she wore her hair or didn't. Still they were all too happy to show up and eat in her house and lie to her children about how sorry sorry sorry they were.

"Thank you," is the expected, respectful response, and so Angus gives it. He wonders idly, fruitlessly, if it is still an acceptable response if the one doing the thanking is a man impossible to love who tricked you into thinking otherwise, who drove you to anguish with unpredictable vitriol and then left you without a word half a world away. If it is or if it isn't, Charlotte merely frowns and lets her hand drop away from him.

"No one had any idea. She was a lovely woman. Seemed so happy."

"Yes," Angus swallows hard and the drink in his hand feels heavy and wet from condensation. "She did," he lies.

The glass slips from his hand and like a guillotine crashes down, down onto the real hardwood floor, into fragments of ice and glass and vodka, and all over Charlotte's low black pumps. Even Virginia Woolf cannot save him now.

...

That pink tongue you use with love,

touched venom

settled deep.

Such pretty eyes with filters kind,

found evil,

and did weep.

Your touch so soft, and good, and slow -

was bit,

by skin too cold.

And your heart,

so young,

so pure,

so dumb,

I ate -

and turned you old.

...

He had forgotten the call of the white door in the business of the day. The weeping, the hymns and prayers, and the mad scramble to make himself presentable for his mother's funeral as if it were an event and not, in fact, the ripping away of all that he knew to be tender and patient from this mortal earth and at her own hand had distracted him entirely.

Now Angus stands on the other side of it, perfectly alone, hiding as an adult in the room he had spent so much time hiding in as a child. It is, like his apartment, like the rest of the house, virtually untouched, but Angus finds glory in this preservation wherein the others he found only unpleasant ghosts. Here he is grateful for the fossilization.

There are floor length windows with great white curtains that blow in the wind when opened, *Great Gatsby* style. There are shelves filled with books with titles too memorable for Angus to touch on just now lest he lose himself in one for good. There is a day bed where he often napped beneath the glow of the sun through the windows, and the Kelly green divan which Mother often stretched out on and, gathering Angus into her lap, read verses by Keats and Shelley in a soft voice meant only for him. He can recall afternoons watching his mother and Arabella from the corner, his mother pulling Arabella's brown hair into intricate braids that looped around her head one way and then the other, the two of them talking in loud voices about which of the local girls Arabella thought she might want to have over on the weekend. The two of them, Mother and Arabella, were always happy to let him lurk during their mother-daughter rituals of import. He spent many hours here with her or with Thaddeus or alone, often times as an alternative to whatever activities his siblings were engaged in which he could not or would not participate in. Arabella who could shoot better than anyone he knew and stay aboard even the most spirited of horses all while protecting the waifer-thin egos of the men around her; Austin who so effortlessly charmed anyone he spoke with for long with his square jaw and broad shoulders, be it his peer or his superior and could not for the life of him understand the failings of his younger brother; and Angus, who preferred the neat worlds contained inside his books, who felt only earth-shattering disquiet during Sunday service, who was out of breath before the race even started.

Angus touches all of these bits of furniture as he moves. He drags his fingers along the ridges and spines and valleys, the soft *step-click-step* of his affected gait sounding off through the abandoned room. The empty vase on the side table childishly angers him – it should be filled with flowers: calla lilies or daffodils or anything to fill the space. When he reaches the day bed Angus realizes his hands are shaking. His breath is caught in his throat and growing into a choking lump and his eyes, so defiantly sore and red as they are already, refuse to stop their incessant leaking and so he gathers himself into a ball and lays there upon the bed for some time with his head on the white pillow all tidily embroidered with wildflowers, his back to the big and empty room. Angus closes his eyes and waits until the emptiness to consumes him, moves into him, leaks out of him.

He stupidly, desperately wishes she was here, the way a child might try and wish the moon from the sky. He wants to know why, but he already knows why, feels the answer inside him like a time-bomb *tick tick ticking*. The knowledge threatens to crush him, to crumple him from the inside out like the hand of consciousness inside this sock-puppet body of his might finally grow impatient and crush itself into a tightly balled fist or just withdraw altogether and for good. Where was he when she did it? Was he sitting in a café on Rue de la Paix? Was he wine drunk in a bathtub? Did it matter? It is had been all too easy to remember her the way he wants, to keep that feeling like she was just on the other side of some door somewhere, just around the corner, just in the other room. Now though, laying on the bed, laying in *her room*, in their room, it is inescapable, the other memories. She is laying on this bed and will not, cannot, get out of it for days and days and days at a time and when Angus asks how she is feeling she speaks of her sadness with such romantic clarity it is hard for the young boy with an aching knee to keep from agreeing with her about it all.

“I miss you,” he says to her from where he’s sitting on the floor beside the bed. Afternoon sun floods the room, and with it comes a sense of shame, his Father’s shame, his brother’s shame, that he is not outside with them. It easily ignored but still present. “My knee hurts,” he adds, stretching his leg a little.

“I’m right here,” she argues, a tired smile on her face, her cheek against the white pillow with white pansies embroidered into it. “We can take you back to Dr. Ramsay when I’m feeling better. Or ask your father if it’s altogether awful?” She reaches out a hand to lazily twist a finger into Angus’s mop of dark hair. Her name is Faith. But to him she is only ever Mother – too dignified for “Mama”, too untouchable for “Mommy”.

“Is it really terrible?” Angus asks, his knee suddenly feeling better. “How you’re feeling?”

“It could be worse,” Mother answers. “In some ways, it’s a little sweet – like how it feels when you take your fingers off a bruise, right before the pain is all the way gone.” She’s not really looking at him anymore. Maybe she never was.

“Let’s read until you feel better,” Angus proposes, using a phrase his mother has said often to all her children. His own smile is real and raw; he knows just exactly what she means, and has the bruises on his shins to prove it.

“Good idea, baby.”

“George or Emily?”

“Emily.”

“You always pick Emily.”

“Emily understands,” Mother explains plainly, and she rolls over onto her back as Angus takes his time to stand in order to find the Dickinson anthology that is never too far from reach. It will be several long weeks before Mother leaves the bed again, and when she does, Angus will find himself curiously nostalgic for her return.

There is an invasive nudging at his heels that brings him back to the present reality, something snuffling and wet-sounding which he recognizes immediately as his dog, and at almost the same time the bed depresses under the weight of an oncoming body. Angus does not move, save to allow Thaddeus more room and Thaddeus settles behind Angus with an arm over him as though he had never been anywhere else in his life. Distantly there is the sound of a beast collapsing on the floor and then, in an instant, a familiar snoring from down below. The weight of Thad’s arm over Angus feels like heavy layers of beach sand – not restraining but gently holding him in place, surrounding him, pushing down to keep him still.

Angus pushes back a little, fitting himself snugly into Thad’s shape. He feels his hand being picked up by another, held first gently and then tight, tighter, *squeezing*.

“Will you be okay?”

Thad’s voice is scratchy and Angus can feel Thad’s chest vibrate against his own back when Thad talks.

“You have to be okay. Promise me you’ll be okay.”

There is a quality to Thad's voice that Angus hasn't heard much, if he's ever heard it at all. It's tremulous and shaky, intimate and pleading, and not at all angry or frustrated or any of the other emotions that by rights Thaddeus would be justified in feeling about Angus right now. Part of Angus would prefer that, he supposes, would prefer it if Thaddeus unleashed all his private criticisms and objections to Angus and his behavior because this, this pregnant moment of vulnerability means it is up to Angus not to break it. Anger would be directed, something for Angus to simply weather. This moment is a gift, a chance, an opportunity to hit or miss and it is the thought of missing which Angus fears so entirely that it becomes more painful than the missing itself. The bark and bite measured just the same.

His eyes still closed, Angus just breathes: in, out, in, out. He listens to the soft snoring of the dog and inhales the scent of fresh linen on the pillow beneath him. He feels the pain of the vice-like grip that Thad has placed his hand in, and across his cheek he can almost feel the loving caress of a spring breeze coming through the windows – though he hadn't opened them. There is the feeling of some internal shift inside him, an unlocking as though his heart has opened up like a great wound in order to ooze something thick and bittersweet, filling him up from his center. Soon the tears will follow and Angus will hear the gaping sound of his own anguished disbelief. This promise Thaddeus wants from him isn't a new one; the two have been locked in an unspoken pact of living for as long as Angus cared to remember, back when their mutual scenery was the sterile ascetic white of hospital beds. They two were a pair of sickly children grown into adults somehow equally as sick, only in less treatable, less visible ways. But now Thaddeus is asking for more, for *words*, the one thing Angus has reserved for himself as something he knows how to use.

When Angus finally responds, it is deliberate. It is neither an act of social nicety and nor a perfunctory response. In this moment at least he is not a passenger in his own body; control and all its promised freedoms feels just so close.

Paris is miles away. Thaddeus is still right here. Everything is right here. Angus's hand squeezes back, wordless and silent, and it is pure poetry.

House Huntress

Here's a place where we could live together: an apartment in the city, up some concrete steps with a discolored wrought iron railing that's more likely to impale someone than do any kind of saving and the palms of my hands have the scars to prove it. Yours do not. The building is brick-red, or rain-stained-concrete gray, and the door, although the paint is peeling in places, has a brass knocker and an eye hole for testing whether it's worth ever opening again once we're inside. There are some tiny planter boxes you made with your brother – the oldest one who can do things like that, whose name I never remember – and maybe I said I'd grow vegetables but I forget all about that when I see flowers, so instead of half-dead tomatoes we've got half-dead snapdragons and African daisies that I am clumsily trying to save after weeks of mistreatment.

There's a kitchen just big enough to turn around in, everything that came in it already off-white or fake wood overlay, and the countertops are scattered with unorganized half-used glass jars of rosemary, thyme, basil, paprika, and old husks of garlic cloves that were rubbed clean and then forgotten. The cupboards rattle with too many coffee mugs, thrift-store finds that will never match one another and they rattle and clink against each other when you're trying to select a particular one. The cutlery matches in that it doesn't, so many knives and forks taken home from assorted twenty-four-hour diners to make up for the ones I keep losing and the ones you accidentally throw away with the leftovers. The fridge has at least two different kinds of non-dairy milk in it at all times, and no meat. It buzzes and groans.

Over the half-wall of the kitchen counter we have cobbled together the furniture we retained from past lives. What was once second-hand is now third-fourth-fifth-hand; at least the stuff that I bring is. You bring the overstuffed powder blue couch I love and this is its first time being co-owned by anyone, or even this far away from the nearest dirt road. Nashville is a cool city the way Austin is a cool city: an oasis of metropolitan tolerance in a desert of fucking bigots. In time the couch will be stained with candle wax and wine and what's left behind any time you push my skirt up to discover I've forgotten to do laundry and so I've run out of underwear again. There's books of poetry by Dickinson and Lowell on a coffee table scratched from cups, bottles, keys, lighters. There's two poorly done paintings on the wall

above the couch, portraits of two girls: one yellow-haired and the other a brunette, dressed in some early twentieth-century pink or blue gowns complete with parasol and over-the-shoulder coquettishness. A palette of faded blues and yellows and greens, the girls have the hollow black eyes of distant dreams. We found them on vacation together and had to save them.

The bedroom is small and the bed is smaller, dressed in lilac and crisp white. There's a certain throw pillow in the center of other throw pillows that holds a secret, a zipper in the folds of its hemming to keep it. The nightstand beside my side of the bed I found next to the dumpster at my old place and it's filled with bracelets, multicolored rings, knotted nests of necklaces, and weed in unlabeled bottles. The nightstand on your side of the bed has been in your family for three generations and I don't know what's in it. The bathroom smells like your perfume, like a pre-scented sample on a perfume ad insert that comes in any women's fashion magazine. When I turn the shower on, old love-messages written on the mirror with your finger re-appear like magic.

...

I am drunk and useless on my couch again, sprawled out longways with my head tucked up against the armrest and my face smashed into my arm. I am vaguely aware that she is moving back and forth in my apartment around me. Some people are messy drunks, some people are angry drunks. I guess I'm just a nothing drunk.

"Arabella," I mumble her Disney princess name into my arm where my face has landed. Right now, I am good for nothing. This happens often. We've been 'together' – *whatever that means* – 'together' for exactly four months and thirteen days and this isn't anything new. Why does she stay? Fuck if I know. I'm cute, she says – probably she likes the sound of my voice when I'm pretending like I'm not singing to her and only her in the audience of any given open mic night I might stumble into. I think she likes the flattery, the secret of it. I must be good sober. I must be good to fuck.

She is gathering things that I might need later and putting them near me between the beer bottles: a glass of water; some aspirin; a little glass pipe that used to be pink and has since turned amber brown

and black from use, already packed with weed. I don't remember having pulled my hair back into a bun – she must have done that for me, too, for when the alcohol all comes back up again.

This, her taking care of me, it's *almost* nurturing, but I think I can hear the sighs stuck in her throat, pushing out in short breaths through her nose. It's exasperation-in-nurturer's clothing. It's the 'bless your heart' of caretaking that she's so good at.

A knit blanket settles on my shoulders, oversized and way too many colors to have been anything but the poor decisions of an amateur. Like the rest of the things in my tiny city apartment it is thrift-store chic or else a hand-me-down from someone else broke & queer. Somewhere my roommate-slash-chosen-twin-brother Alexander is giving impossible commands into a cell phone and when he comes close to give me a passing scratch on the head I can hear him: "You tell me what you're thinking about, you're the one that called. Mmm..." I can feel him twisting around a loose wisp of my hair with one finger, twirling it playfully. I imagine the black of his nail polish against my fried hair's washed-out pink color.

"Ooh baby, that sounds like a bad idea. You know how I like bad ideas." He clucks his tongue as he walks away from me and says, "Aww," into the phone like he almost *almost* means to mean it, some little condescending parody of sympathy I've heard a million billion times and I absolutely love him for it. We've been stuck with each other more or less since middle school; the fact that we share a birthday just seems to make sense, but most people believe we're twins even before they know about that. We can't get rid of each other no matter how much we enable and encourage the worst in one another, each of us too fucked up to know how to stop and too fragile to want to risk a replacement. He's both the life preserver around my waist and the anchor tied to my ankle. He's the beer in my hand after I've said I probably shouldn't, and the good time I have after I drink it, too. I have no idea who he's on the phone with, some would-be sugar daddy who thinks Alexander's record-breaking bad behavior is the key to solving a mid-life crisis maybe – probably. Sucker.

I pull my eyes open one after another like I'm prying open stubborn oyster shells. I shift and try to look for her, Arabella. I look for her tired blue eyes. I look for her unmarked, manicured hands. I look for her expression of concentrated concern. She's not there.

She has dropped her blessing and left me, and in my drunken self-loathing I don't blame her so I close my eyes again. Unknown time passes until I feel the ghost of a kiss being pressed to the back of my head. Distantly I am aware of a vibration in my throat, a reaction to her touch, a murmured response of nonsensical noise which will never make it to form actual words. Arabella says to me in her hushed Southern lilt, quietly and through the half-clenched strain of her perfectly straight pearlescent teeth, she says, "Good night, darlin'."

I am up all night with these words in my head playing on repeat in between cuts of what I thought she might have been really saying beneath the layers of Southern manners I never had to know and the learned gender performance she can't give up – a little game I used to think I was good at before I met her. The obvious choice here is "Good-bye."

...

Here is a place we could stay together: an antebellum house in the countryside, maybe close to your family. Close enough that you can walk a dirt path through the dry grass that's tall as your hips. It's a path lined with day-glo orange and gold poppies, and purple nettle flowers that sting to touch. You visit your father, your brothers, whenever you want. The middle brother who you're so worried over all the time despite his being older than you, Angus, he comes over regularly to sit in our cool parlor decorated with see-through white linen curtains where he drinks bourbon and talks about Edna St. Vincent Millay and W. H. Auden and grumbly refuses to show you or anyone else any of his own recent poetry.

The house is smaller than the one you were raised in, and bigger than any house I've ever called home or even been inside for very long. It's an adjustment for both of us. Outside there are columns that sit beneath the second-story balcony. When we bought the place it was all whitewashed, but since then most of it has been painted a muted pink and I've planted ivy and bougainvillea that creeps up the columns in deep greens and explodes across the sides of the house in shades of magenta that refuse to die, despite me not knowing what I'm doing. Errant cats wander the property with dusty brown paws that leave prints across the white planks of the front porch and on the seat of a swing. Light streams in through windows half as tall as I am and onto end tables and decorative shelving to reveal intricate doilies and

gold-rimmed porcelain candy bowls, ancient copies of books thick enough to kill a man with if used properly, and glass vases filled with bouquets of wild flowers we both pick for each other on any given weekend.

The ceilings are so high that I can hear you singing to yourself in the kitchen from the other side of the house; your smoky lounge-singer voice that you typically only show off for family Christmas carols now bounces off of support beams to reach me wherever I am. Our guitar in the corner stays tuned and clean and in the evenings I play and you sing, or the other way around, or we take turns. In the kitchen, brass pots and pans hang from above, over a restored-vintage stove, along with hanging bundles of drying herbs: rosemary, sage, basil, lavender. Storage containers of descending size with painted-on sunflowers contain flour, sugar, and rice separated by variety. The freezer is stuffed with mason jars equally stuffed with jam: blackberry, marionberry, raspberry, orange marmalade, strawberry, blueberry, fig. There is one hook for multiple aprons, there is a multitude of decorative dish towels which are separate and different from the actual dish towels and this is true even when used interchangeably like I do on accident (to your chagrin). Coffee grounds and cat hair and the plastic ties from long-gone loaves of sliced bread fall between the gaps in the counter and the stove.

The stairs will never stop creaking. The second floor has endless guest rooms for friends and family to stay in, the kind of family who will never be introduced to your own, the kind that will wake up early and make breakfast for us to say thanks, and then they say it again with their lips and their eyes and their embrace on the way out the door. Our bed is big, queen-sized, with a white iron frame that twists and turns like it grew that way from nature, and the sheets have tiny blue flowers on them the color of your eyes. We cover rings in the wood on the nightstand with squares of pale green linen. Batteries roll around back and forth against silicone inside the drawers, and we're careful not to be too loud for the neighbors' sakes, but that is half the fun. On weekends and days when I can't get out of bed, you close the curtains to the sun, crawl under the covers with me, and we spend all day trying to come up with a good reason to get up.

...

I am two beers into dressing myself to go out for the night. It's been nearly twenty-four hours since I heard from her last, and twice that many since she put a blanket over my shoulders and walked out. I paint my face and eyes with white powder and pink glitter I've gathered from day-after-Halloween sales over the years, peering into a cracked vanity mirror streaked with hair-spray residue, lipstick, and I don't know what else. My room is small and darkly lit from lamps draped with colored scarves around their shades so the light they throw is pink or blue, depending. It's a poverty pixie's paradise: there's fairy lights around the mirror, strung up over the black iron headboard of my bed which is just barely not a mattress on the floor thanks to some second-hand bedframe I picked up when the neighbors downstairs moved out; the furniture comes in mismatched shades of faded pink collected from Cragislist and Freecycle over years of restless wanderings and everything is lightly covered in stickers that are peeling and glittery, star- or heart-shaped. Making myself up like a discount mermaid junkie on a nightly basis has become something of a ritual, and it is all done to the soundtrack of glam-pop from my laptop speakers, and cop sirens wailing far off and dumpsters rattling with life and indistinct yelling outside my window.

I don't have the money to spend on bar-hopping tonight; waitressing at a chain diner and my part-time hours at the consignment shop don't leave much money for alcohol, and open mic nights don't pay squat except what they get me in girl drama – but I'll go, given that I've started drinking what I already have leftover from last night and I've got girl drama fucking anyway. I was sober some hours ago when I texted Arabella through the shattered screen of my phone to let her know I was alright. It's been four unanswered texts since then and I'm not drunk or desperate enough yet to push it further. My brain idly comes up with reasons for her silence: Angus is sick again, she's out shopping with some family friends from out of town, she's dodging marriage proposals from childhood sweethearts who have learned the worth of their last names as adult men, she's wearing something long-sleeved and white with hand-made lace and seducing the shy waitress bringing her a mojito. I pointedly do not recall anything we've said to each other in the past week. I physically cannot recall anything we said to each other the last night I saw her, and I don't try.

I walk down to the bars. (I bring my phone and put it on vibrate and keep it in the waistband of my skirt.) A girl who I recognize with short black hair and red lips buys me two shots of vodka. Her name is Polly, and Arabella is the only girl I've slept with who Polly hasn't also fucked. This should make me uneasy; instead it just makes me smug. I keep Arabella to myself like she's my secret to keep and not the other way around. Polly and I talk about girls, music, and leather jackets and I try hers on and we make-out in the bathroom for ten minutes before she gets a text she won't show me and has to leave. At the next bar one of my exes introduces me to her new girlfriend and we all make jokes about my name:

"Artemis? Isn't that – like – some god's name?"

"Goddess. *Virgin queen of the hunt.*"

"Ooh, guess I'd better watch out then."

(My phone is heavy and silent and hot against my skin. I check it even though I know better.)

The way she tells it, Mom became a Lilith Faire lesbian around the part of her life that began shortly after I did, which is how I account for my name and the laundry list of her exes that she liked to introduce to me as "Auntie" whoever. Auntie Lisa. Auntie Bobbi. Auntie Butch Hair. Auntie Never Gonna See You Again. Before that? I don't know and don't want to, as she loves to remind me, usually from the other side of something written by Adrienne Rich, or as she's arranging her crystals in the kitchen window to receive optimum charge from the moon.

They buy me two more beers and then they go home together. At the next bar I see a girl with old blonde highlights and new tattoos who is clearly too drunk to type her address for an Uber. I finish the drink for her, a rum & coke, and I ask if she wants me to type it in for her. She says yes and tells me her address. I put in my own but remember hers so after the driver drops me off, I send her home and decide the whole thing was basically a wash, morally speaking. Alexander comes home with a similar amount of glitter under his eyes and smattered across his exposed stomach, wearing a shirt that has the same amount of cloth material to it as a napkin.

"I don't know *why* you care," Alexander explains from behind a cigarette he didn't buy, perched on the kitchen counter with these horrible heart-shaped sunglasses on just because. "She always does

this.” He brings the cigarette to his lips and tilts his chin back when he exhales like someone is watching him that isn’t me, that is, someone that might care what he looks like when he does it.

“*I know that,*” I shoot back, my phone in one hand and an old beer I hadn’t finished from the night before in the other. “*I know that!*” I repeat again, like I’m convincing myself. “Like, is it so hard to just text me? It’s not like we got into a fight or anything. I didn’t *do* anything. She’s probably just,” I breathe in and out once, quick. “Busy.” I finish the room temperature beer with a grimace. “Could you not smoke inside? Maybe?”

Alexander laughs, “We’re never getting the deposit back,” but he puts it out in the sink anyway. “Just go find someone else until she gets bored and wanders back again. *Or,*” he starts, pushing the sunglasses up on his face. He’s rocking that slept-in-smudged-and-reapplied eyeliner look, and it works, it always works, and I hate him for it, really, if I’m honest. “You could hang out with me instead.”

I’m about to respond when my phone buzzes so that I nearly drop it for the four thousandth time. It’s Arabella, her name showing up fragmented through the spidery cracks in the screen. She wants me to come over – so I do.

Some people think women are fickle, the way they think cats are fickle. People see them sniff someone out, drawn to a person or a situation for how it looks or acts or smells. They spend some time getting their scent into a person surreptitiously, and then in an instant they’ve run off to investigate something else or (the truth) you’ve done something to upset them, something that could have been avoided if only you’d stopped to learn the language, to read the signs. Of course, anyone who has ever been successful with a lesbian, or with a cat, knows that you can’t ignore the signs and, more importantly, you can’t try and catch them once they’ve gone.

What looks like fickleness is simply a reaction to boundaries crossed. The judgment you make afterward comes from how you feel about those boundaries, and how fair they seemed before, and how fair they seem in hindsight. This is where the actual “fighting” comes in. This is where you begin to feel like you’re herding cats. Have you ever fought with someone using your feelings? This is where the “*I*” statements start: “*I* just feel-“

“I really felt like-“

“I don’t understand why-“

There’s this overlap of good intention where things get tangled up in the middle, inherently selfish desires to indulge or conform or confide reach out with slithering tendrils and wrap around each another into deep knots and we (as in ‘We’ as in ‘Her Royal Queerness’, *us*) use words about our feelings and experiences of those feelings to try and hook into those knots somehow, to try and pull them apart from the middle. I’ve probably said more to my girlfriends about my feelings than any combination of publically-provided therapists over the years – or even my mom, try as she might, the big lesbian that she is.

And sure, they’re not always spoken softly and with heavily-humbled eyes. They’re yelled or screamed or furiously typed on phones or written with wicked intention on a note left behind. And sure, these things can end any number of ways: the fighting-then-fucking paradigm isn’t impossible or unheard of, we’re just not slamming each other against a wall in anger one second and then in lust the next. Not that I’ve seen, personally. Not yet, anyway. I leave that for the guys Alexander brings home with all their toxic masculinity and internalized homophobia to drown in; ours is a different sort of storm to navigate, though just as ancient, just as loud, and just as crashing and unpredictably lethal; it is temperamental by necessity and swells with the rolling possibility of storms or sunshine.

I know I shouldn’t take it personally, then, when her cat that I’ve been snuggling for the past five minutes unceremoniously decides to leap away from me without so much as a single sound or reason why – not that I can see, at least. For her part, Arabella notices neither that her cat has chosen to cuddle with me, nor his decision to reject me. I sit up and watch him go, ignoring my urge to chase after him, pick him up and somehow try and force him to find a home in me and to be happy with it. The cat is huge, bigger than any cat I’ve ever seen, with some kind of butch-sounding name. I think it’s “Duke”. He brings her “presents” daily, in the form of dead lizards, dead birds, even a dead rabbit once. Arabella is a vegetarian, but I think she’s touched by the gesture, anyway.

We're in her apartment that she keeps away from her family's house in the country, the one I've never seen. The apartment is hers; she brings Duke here on a leash and harness like a dog and smiles so sweetly at the doorman on her way up the elevator. She hired someone to decorate it, I think, and it's filled with the sorts of semi-modern pieces she could never get away with keeping back in the probable-plantation mansion some fifty miles away. As far as I know, her family doesn't know about this place. As far as I know, no one knows about me, not even the girls she brings back here. I guess I'm one of those, though. I think about it often: how many girls have you laid out on this couch? On the bed you let me sleep in? How many of them felt something with you that was new for them, for the very first time, believed the little sweet things you say like crowns of Sapphic achievement you laid on their heads? But then, knowing a number would only make it worse. There are some things that exist only to be unacknowledged – Arabella and I are one of those.

I could list the things I know about Arabella on two hands. I know she knows how to fire a gun but doesn't like to go hunting. I know she likes the smell of cigarettes. I know she never never talks about her mom, but Arabella has this smoky-sweet singing voice like one of those long-gone lounge singers who would drink crushed up egg shells in their water to sound like that. I know her favorite singer is Patsy Cline, and that she drinks her coffee with too much sugar but no milk. I know she has the bluest eyes I've ever seen, bluer than Alexander's even, and that she's discovered the perfect working ratio of length and roundness on her perfectly manicured fingernails. I know that the most important things she has to say are the kinds of things that won't ever be said, only implied, circled around with silence and looks and words next-to-but-not-quite-the-truth. I know this from how surprised she is whenever I say what I mean and she realizes that, no really, that's all.

Arabella's laid out on the powder blue crushed-velvet couch that I love to fling myself over dramatically when otherwise unoccupied. She is twisted up in some blanket that's teal-blue on one side and Sherpa fleece on the other, whatever that is. She's got one leg in and one leg out, long and bare and sun-kissed from sundresses and hours spent at her family's lake house upstate. Her salon-kept brown hair is as messy as I've ever seen it and it sticks to her skin in patches from sweat, turning into unintentional

spit curls that frame her cheeks here and there. The thermometer in her mouth beeps and I swoop in to pluck it from between her lips before she has a chance to.

“Hey!” Arabella protests, but before she’s even finished the word she’s laughing softly.

“One –oh–two,” I’m reading off the digital thermometer, shaking my head. “Dang, girl. You’re hotter than ever.”

She’s laughing again, but not at my joke, which I can tell she didn’t hear by the way her head is lolling backwards over the arm of the couch. I imagine her hair all hanging down beneath it like she’s been electrocuted and then inverted.

On the glass coffee table next to us there’s an assortment of tissues and tissue boxes, both used and new. A few of the crumpled tissues have also spilled over onto the floor in places, much to Duke’s casual entertainment. There’s glasses of water and orange juice. There’s some twice-heated-up condensed soup. All my best attempts at caretaking are laid out on top of a coffee table worth more than two months of my rent. I pointedly do not recall the amount of times she’s ignored my phone calls in the past week, the drunken voicemails she never responded to, or the reasons why I cannot visit the house she grew up in and probably never will.

When I look up from my surveying of the table she’s upright again, her cheeks flushed and her eyes fixed on me with languid interest. It’s a look I can almost recognize beneath the fever haze as tender, maybe even adoring.

“You sure are sweet t’me. You’re the sweetest damn thing I ever saw,” she says, the smile on her lips just this side of delirious. It’s cute, cuter than it should be, cuter than I want it to be, and it makes my heart do double backflips.

“Hmm, I don’t know about that.”

“I sure like you a whole lot, darlin’,” she says, still smiling, and there’s no sign that she’s listening to me at all. She’s laying it on thick, so thick I should know not to buy in to it but the double backflips have turned into an Olympic routine and she’s not even finished.

“Mmmm,” Her voice is extra sweet and scratchy from the medicine and the coughing. “You better stay with me all the time.”

Pirouettes. For a moment, my heart is doing choreographed competition-level routines of contemporary-hip-hop-ballet fusion. All I can say back is, “Oh yeah?”, the kind of “Oh yeah?” I know she isn’t listening to, just a throwaway something-to-say so that I’ve said it. What I really want her to do is take my shoulders in each of her hands and tell me, “*Oh yeah,*” over and over again. *Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah.* She doesn’t.

Arabella giggles, reaches out for me like a child. How can I resist? Why would I want to? With my head against her chest and her arms around my shoulders I can feel the easy drumming of her heart beating. I want a beer. I want twelve beers. I want to believe that people tell the truth when they are sick or drunk or high, the way TV and movies makes it out to be some sort of trick to see the true goodness or the true evil in a person. But I know what I know: I am not the person I am when I’m drunk, when I’m fucked up and I can’t stop calling her and telling our business to any girl that will just stop and look me in the eyes and listen. I’m not that person. And I know outside of this room, she isn’t this person, either. I think it might be worse if that wasn’t true, anyway.

We fall asleep like that: first Arabella, then me. A little while later, the fever breaks. We wake with a cat on top of us, we are tangled up together, with the blanket on the floor. Since she’s feeling better, she tells me, she’s got to go home for family dinner. She calls me a taxi, and before it gets there she’s got her hand between my legs and when she calls me ‘darlin’ that time with her fingers inside me, I come shamelessly, and in record time. She kisses me softly, and gives me money for the taxi. I skim a little off the taxi driver’s intended tip for my own pocket, and he gives me the finger when he drops me off at the bars across town. Whatever.

...

Here is a place where we could grow old together: somewhere forgotten by the sea, away from the dry heat of summer. A house that is wider than it is tall, with new paint and an old garden that we make new again. Everything I plant turns to green. There is sand stuck into the fibers of the welcome mat,

and smooth stones that we have collected and arranged into spirals and borders for garden beds keep everything from touching that we do not want touching. The door has more glass than wood on the front, multi-colored and mosaic so when the sun shines through it makes patterns on the floor for our feet to dance in. There is a backyard with a fence so high no one can see into it, except for the sunflowers which stretch up and up and up and over.

Inside there are bare wooden floors that we cover here and there with rugs collected from our worldly travels, purchased from artisans with a smile and many thanks. The furniture we use is purchased in a similar fashion; it is made of sturdy pine and oak, built to last, and stain resistant, with covers and cushions the colors of the ocean outside. The bookshelves hold volumes of poetic verse written by Keats, the fragmented desires of Sappho, biographies on Frida Kahlo, and lamentations of Sylvia Plath. At night the sounds of the waves can be let in or shut out through the many windows, and when it rains the whole house sounds off with the plunking of drops on glass like the pickings of my guitar.

The bay window in the kitchen over the sink holds flowers waiting to be pressed or dried or just picked in haste and then forgotten: violets, little daisies, hydrangea, and lots and lots of lavender. The counter tops are wooden, like you could cut right on them, and there are knife marks to prove it here and there in collections. There's a china-blue bowl of oranges with only two left. Bulbs of garlic hang in a basket by the sink. An errant smell of sage and sea salt sinks into all our food, and the flecks of soil on the tile near the backdoor can never fully be swept out for good. To drink we make lemonade of all kinds: blackberry, strawberry, raspberry, mint, or water infused with cucumber and lemon, or hot tea with names like Rasperry Zinger and Orange Spice, and Sleepytime for late nights. A glass jar of honey sits on the counter next to the stove and it is always oozing. There is a table for two tucked into the corner, with bare wooden chairs we picked up from antique sales. They don't match, but it's hard to tell.

In the bathroom the shower has walls of tall frosted glass and connects to a bath tub deep and wide, soap scum fitting into the corners of the walls and in the grout of the tile. The rim of the tub is littered with half-empty bottles: baby pink, sea-foam green, and pearly white. It is so good for washing the salt from your hair.

There is no guest bedroom. Our bed is four-poster, with lavish fabrics draped around the beams, all indigo and white and cornflower blue. There are pillows of similar colors that it takes a concentrated effort to remove them before bed each night and replace them again in the gray mornings that follow. And sometimes we don't replace them, and sometimes we do. The drawers of the nightstand beside it are stocked and arranged in an arsenal of silicone sexuality that we never worry someone might stumble upon. We are as loud as we like.

In the winter when the wind howls, there's a blackened fireplace that we bring back to life. It crackles and spits while we turn against one another under the covers. A hamper in one corner is overflowing at all times. There's a dresser that is taller than it is wide, almost to the ceiling, filled with scarves and summer dresses and sweaters; and, in between the socks and stockings in one of the smaller drawers, a collection of love poetry I'd forgotten I'd written to you. Your vanity holds pearls and perfumes, necklaces on silver hooks like branches worked to resemble a dead tree, and the mirror is pristine and round the way all mirrors ought to be. Sometimes in the evenings before bed, you let me brush your hair in front of it even though you think it's silly. You sit on that little white wooden bench in front, with me standing behind you so you watch me in the mirror working the brush through your beach-blown curls. You don't ever have to tell me when I'm hurting you because I already know.

Record Highs

The sun is down but it's still hot out. It's the kind of hot that leaks out of the ground all night, baking into everything. Florida in late June is like a big sponge, soaking up the sticky wet heat into the asphalt and the dirt, breaking out into five minute rain storms that are warm and spontaneous. Folks get hostile in this kind of heat, get agitated, even with a/c. Palmetto bugs, Florida's beloved cockroach and state pet, grow to the size of Bic lighters and hide in your shoes and under fridges and inside empty cigarette packs. Somewhere a gator is sleeping soundly inside the remains of someone's forgotten, rusted out Oldsmobile.

Cruising down one of the mostly-empty four-lane streets about an hour outside Orlando is a 1994 Lincoln Town Car in Currant Red with the dealer price still on the windshield in faded marker ("450" in Day-Glo highlighter yellow). The interior upholstery on the car's ceiling sags dangerously low. The backend jostles gently at red lights from the way two of the boys in the backseat are shoving one another, frustrated from the heat. It is 12:30 AM, long past sundown, and *still* they cannot escape the heat: three kids packed into the back of the Lincoln so that all thighs are touching no matter who puts what where.

The only reprieve Ash can find is to press his forehead against the glass, which is cool to the touch comparatively, barely. This boy is the middle child, chronologically sandwiched between two older brothers and what most people in his family called an "unexpected blessing": the quiet infant girl sitting in mom's lap in the passenger seat. In the car's seating hierarchy, though, Ash is on the outside, so that his little child shoulder is pushing up against the side of the door. His thighs stick to the cracked leather of the seats in a way that makes him wince silently when he shifts in his shorts. They are shorter than he'd like them to be, shorter than he likes to wear in public for sure, but they were the cleanest things he could find that wouldn't also suffocate him in the heat. Outside the car window, the constant light pollution keeps his world from going dark. It lights his way forward with comforting, familiar names and faces: Popeye's, Hardee's, Chevron, Live Nude, Pawn Shop, and a new hotel-motel-hotel every other second. The signs come in every color he can imagine, sometimes flickering on and off like lit candles under the palm trees.

He is thinking of nothing, as usual. Or trying to anyway, hunting down the blissful nothing held inside the curves of the condensation droplets on the window that refract the colored lights, showing him daydreams of upcoming summer plans to catch frogs at the swamp with his brothers Eugene and Charles. There's three conversations happening at once around him in the '94 Lincoln, but he just rolls the window down and hangs his head out the window, his brown ponytail whipping around behind him between stop lights.

"Ash-" Someone says his name in the middle of a sentence and it could have been any one of them in the car. It doesn't concern him. Ash is thinking of nothing. He is not-thinking. He is not-thinking of the older kid in the trailer next door who got hauled off by the cops this morning for putting a steak knife in his step-mom's arm when she demanded he turn the TV down. He is not-thinking about his own mom passed out on the couch this afternoon with an unlit cigarette, so unresponsive she could've been dead, with CDs and soda cans sticking to the tables; or dad's shitty friends coming over in their shitty thrift store Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirts and sitting on Ash's bed while he tries to sleep through the heat, calling him "princess" and touching his back with his dad in the other room, talking too loud, always too loud. He is not-thinking about checking to see if dad's eyes are fluttering or not behind the wheel right now. He is never-thinking about the baby in mom's lap.

"Ash," Someone is saying again, louder now, but Ash is living out an afternoon in the summer rain under the willow tree that came down on the other side of the trailer park fence right where there's a hole that he can squeeze through, tucking himself into the spaces between the giant roots still reaching out for life in the ground. Ash is looking for corn snakes in the grass and possums under the trailer, following close behind big brothers Gene and Chuck who are yelling at each other over where the best place to look is.

"*Ashley!*" Mom's yelling, "Christ's sake, girl!" and Ash picks his head up and yells back:
"What?!"

...

This kind of heat is new for Kenai, Alaska. In fact, it isn't supposed to be here. Ninety degrees is not a number Alaska is familiar with. The sticky warmth creeps in like a tourist from out of town, hanging low and thick all day and sinking into everything it touches so that even after the sun has gone down and the fat moon is out, the scent of sweat and dirt hangs in the air, in clothes, on bedspreads. Lucky Addams is thirty-four and lying on his back on a humid summer night in the middle of some damp sheets. He is in the bedroom of a house that doesn't belong to him, where the nearest neighbor is over a mile off, and he is memorizing the cobwebs on the ceiling.

Boom!

It is late June, and somewhere outside his open window, far off in the distance, he can hear the echoing boom of errant fireworks travelling over the trees as the locals are already anticipating the coming holiday. Lucky is lying on his back, waiting for the next flush of coming night air to rush over him through the open window. The cold breeze on his skin is like breathing in thankful gasps after being choked by the heat of the day. There is a fan next to him on his bedside table, a table that was already there when he moved in, as was the bed, as were the sheets he is sinking into with every passing moment. The silver oscillating fan blows brown bangs into his eyes over and over again where they aren't sticking to his temples from sweat, as it turns from right to left. Outside in the grass, the singing of crickets has resumed in groups, and frogs are calling back and forth in throaty voices.

Already it has been over three months since he moved in to Horace "Ace" Jansson's little farmhouse. Already it has been over a year since he first met the blonde broad-shouldered man with nicotine stains in his hazel eyes. Lucky had walked into the general store down by the docks and there was Horace called Ace behind the counter, sleepy smile on his face, with a Chihuahua in his lap and a golden retriever who was more gray than golden sleeping at his feet. Lucky made up his mind at the time that he wouldn't make up his mind about the man behind the counter; Ace smiled too much to be entirely trustworthy, but he clearly liked his dogs and his dogs clearly liked him back and that counted for something to Lucky, enough that the two facts seemed to cancel each other out so that he didn't want to consider it any longer. That was before Lucky had walked onto the fishing boat he'd be working on for

the next few months, the little purse seiner that caught salmon and herring, and found Ace and his sleepy smile right there on deck, almost like he'd been waiting for Lucky to show. Ace was everywhere, it seemed, and moving in to his place didn't do much to change that but the room was cheap, they saved gas going to and from the docks together, and the view (outside) wasn't too bad either.

Crack!

Another firework goes off and Lucky isn't surprised; he doesn't blink or shift his hands from where they're resting on his stomach. This heat is paralyzing, but people still love their fireworks, their traditions, their habits. He's known that for a long time, and feels certain that he is no different, with his own traditions and habits. The streaks of golden light that the sun had thrown through his window this morning are long gone, replaced by the dull glow of his tableside lamp, some novelty thing that's got too pink salmon painted on it by a machine in a factory across an ocean. The crickets have gone silent.

The summer air is sweet and heavy and fills Lucky's head with grateful, exhausted silence for the first time since spring when he first moved in and found himself with glasses of whiskey in his hand, listening to Ace talk about his mom up in Salamatof where she sold handmade jewelry or telling stories about how he picked up the former stray against his thigh. More than once Lucky stepped out of the shower onto a wet towel on the floor that had been thoughtlessly tossed down, something he thought of more often than the handful of times the two of them wound up half-drunk and snuggled up close on the couch when Lucky wasn't paying attention. The heat comes in and there's too much sweat to want to get that close anymore, but still there's something nagging in the back of Lucky's head, the kind of thing he knows better than to try and pin down for examination. Anyway, it's easy to not to think of the past or the future when the present is so real, beating down on him in a way he can measure with numbers on a heat index. Outside in the grass, the frogs cease their call-and-response. The fan whirs on, creaking and sputtering as it turns one way and then stutters back the other.

. . .

Everything changes the summer that Ash learns the lady down the street has horses. More like, the lady beyond the freeway overpass behind the parking lot of the abandoned apartment complex, and

two miles over on the other side of the quagmire has horses. The trailer park is surrounded on all sides by green creeping in and taking hold, some kind of grass splitting through the concrete or a patch of open field with a realtor sign stuck in it and half-sinking. The horses are what makes this lady's spot an oasis; they call to Ash with their lazy flicking tails and soft, quiet eyes. The lady, she's got a little pink house off in the distance on the other side of this big open field, and a little half-fallen-apart barn that ought to have been carried off during any of the last seven hurricanes. She catches Ash lingering on the fence, squished up on his stomach and leaning over the top of it to blow into the horses' giant nostrils when they lift their noses to sniff his. He read in a book at the library that horses do that to each other – blow into each other's noses – to say hello. When she catches him, hollering, he tells her this, about what he read. "That's great," she tells him, hands in the front pockets of her jeans. "But horses can't read."

She says her name is Melanie Sullivan, and with how persistent Ash is on showing up at her fence line to blow in her horses' noses with his baggy hand-me-down basketball shorts and unwashed hair always pulled back, she decides to stop hollering at him. Anyway the horses like him, the three of them always coming to the fence to greet him: an old white stallion with a deep swing in his back, so mellow you'd never know he was uncastrated; a little spotted pony with the same name as Melanie ("She came with that name, I swear"); and a young brown thoroughbred with scars on his legs and neck. Eventually when Mel's not looking Ash gets the nerve to hop down into the pasture for the first time and there's hardly a tail-flick between them. Ash is too-skinny, too-gangly, altogether too small with his farmer's tan and scraped up knees but standing in the middle of the horses he doesn't feel small. He feels hidden. Protected.

All summer he stays with the horses in Mel's back pasture, sometimes simply standing around for hours in the field and leaning on the shoulder of the sway-backed white horse, pressing his face into the stallion's mane. Mel puts him to work picking the paddock for manure and trash, helping to give the horses de-wormer and vaccinations, and filling in gopher holes that could be tripping hazards. Ash comes home smelling of dirt and hay all summer and no one asks where he's been the way no one asks who is going to do the dishes or where Dad disappeared to. Ash thinks maybe no one cares, or wants to act like

they do. More likely, he figures, it's that they know better. Between cigarettes, Mom tells him with a dreamy laugh, "I don't have to worry about you, huh, Ash? Just don't get pregnant."

It's the young bay gelding called Trouble that Ash really takes to. Trouble, short for his racing name "Double Trouble", is six or seven years old, Mel tells him, and she's peeling back Trouble's upper lip to show his teeth and how to check them for age. On the underside of Trouble's top lip is a faded tattoo, a collection of dots that are meant to be a letter followed by four numbers but mostly look like a bureaucratic gathering of gray smears. Retired from the racetrack at only four years old, Mel explains how the letter represents Trouble's birth year, how all thoroughbreds headed for the track born under the same year get the same letter. Between cigarettes, she tells how she picked him up at an auction two years ago when he was so full of steroids and tranquilizers that he used to step up from behind with his hind feet and flat-tire his own front ankles, so that she had to take his racing shoes off first thing when she got him because the razor-like edge on them which grips the dirt of the racetrack kept slicing his ankles open without him even noticing on account of him not being able to feel much in his legs or his body at all.

Trouble has a "bowed tendon" on his front leg from his racing days, which Mel explains is like the horse equivalent of a tire blowout only you can't replace it like you can with a tire. His bowed tendon makes the part of his leg under his knee look fat and unnaturally bent like he was drawn by someone who can't draw horses. Trouble is easy-going and doe-eyed most of the time, but Ash learns that a simple too-quick raising of his arms, a rock-dove in the distance taking off, or worst of all a plastic bag rustling in the breeze will turn the ex-racer into a thundering 1200 pound ball of nerves ready to fast-muscle-twitch into a frightened chaos. Trouble is always ducking to the left when he bolts, the direction they run the horses on the track, as though the memory is stored in his body somewhere. Ash is careful with his body after that, more so even than before. He stays on Trouble's right side.

Trouble is especially sensitive around the ears, jerking his head up high out of Ash's reach whenever the boy strays too close to them in his attentions. Mel tells him about "ear twitching", a practice where jockeys twist the ear down from the base to get the horses to move into the starting box at the track once they catch wise and start to put up a fight. Ash instinctively touches his own ear while she's talking

and later when he's walking home alone to the sounds of the freeway on the other side of a chain-link fence, he twists it, hard.

...

Ash is fourteen the summer that Mel lets him sit on Trouble for the first time. She pulls out some dusty Western saddle that hasn't seen the light of day in years and is molding in some places, with Ash wearing a bike helmet he took from Chuck & Gene's room in the trailer, and a pair of black rubber rain boots. The gelding feels nervous beneath him at first, and after some time just waiting, just sitting, there comes a moment where Trouble sighs and Ash can actually feel the horse's back muscle's relax. Ash sighs too, realizing he'd also been holding his breath. Up there on Trouble's back, he feels taller than he ever, ever has. The reins feel like a joke in his hands even after Mel shows him how to hold them properly, like there's no way two little leather strings could make any real difference to a creature this large but as soon as he picks them up Trouble tenses again. When Trouble takes a step forward and Ash's hips shift along with him, he feels like the whole world is moving beneath Trouble's hooves rather than the two of them moving over it. There's a tight, churning feeling deep in his stomach – or maybe lower. Trouble's ears turn back towards Ash, listening, not the angry flat pinned position they do when the pony also called Melanie gets too close to Trouble's hay at dinner time. This is different. For an instant he is reminded of the last time he opened the dollhouse in his bedroom, the one that he never remembered getting, that had always been there, pink with white trim; he opened it and found two black snakes happily dozing one on top of the other. He closed it, and never said a word to anyone, never checked it again.

"Keep him steady, keep him quiet," Mel says to Ash from the ground, jerking him out of the memory, with her hand on Trouble's neck. Ash makes a hasty dismount after five minutes when Trouble's head shoots sky-high, blowing and snorting hard in alarm at the sound of a dog barking from the next field over. Once on the ground Ash discovers little spots of his own blood left behind on Trouble's back, right where he'd been sitting, right there on the seat of the saddle. "That'll come out," Mel says, nodding at the stain on his shorts. Mel takes him inside her pink house in the distance for the

first time after that, and shows him how to work the laundry machine. Ash keeps steady, keeps quiet, from the inside out.

He learns to drive a trailer at sixteen when, after years of pestering Mel to teach him how, she finally agrees. For his first lesson she shows him how to hitch the trailer to her denim blue Ford F-250. Pointing at the open horse trailer, Mel tells him, “Get in.” He does. After thirty minutes of reckless driving on winding country roads, she pulls over to let Ash stumble out on shaky legs so he can immediately vomit into the dirt. “Drive like it’s you back there,” she says from over his shoulder. “Be gentle.” He is.

...

One summer when Ash turns eighteen, he calls up one of those 800 numbers he sees on the backs of semi-trucks, those “WE ARE HIRING” numbers going 55 miles an hour headed out of here all the time, and he doesn’t hope for anything, as a rule. But they send him a bus ticket and he cuts his hair real, real short and even though he’s not hauling horses he still pretends like it’s him back there. For a while he does, at least. He leaves Florida behind like a fever dream.

The truckers are friendly enough, and more than that they leave him alone if he doesn’t react to their bullshit; that bullshit way that most men who drive trucks that could take out a whole crowd of people and who wear Wranglers have to poke at anything new or quiet and Ash is both, on top of being young, skinny, and with all his original teeth. He doesn’t gab on the talk box, doesn’t sit in his cab with a Bluetooth in his ear calling up buddies in Waco or Eugene or wherever like some of them do. Some of them, Ash discovers through conversations overheard in a stall behind the urinals, some of them do this as a family thing. Dad did it, grandfather did it – you turn eighteen and you get a rig, a rite of passage powered by diesel and the rich bastard who hired the guy who hires you. Most of these guys are on speed or painkillers or both; none of them know their kids too well. The painkillers Ash avoids. The speed reminds him of home the way turning left reminded Trouble of the racetrack, so he avoids that too, for a while.

He doesn't keep a dog, only a P.O. Box in California and a burner phone for emergencies. He sleeps in his cab and it's not *comfortable* exactly, but easy. Easy to manage, easy to contain. He keeps the windows down in his rig as often as he can stand it so he can smell the air, keeps sunscreen on both arms because he's seen what the sun does to white skin back in Florida. He keeps that old Alice in Chains: Unplugged CD that he stole from his dad in the CD changer at all times because he's always in the mood. He smells like diesel forever. He learns how to take care of tires that weigh almost more than he does, learns what holiday traffic is like in eastern Louisiana on labor day weekend. He learns that if you buy gas down south in Waco and drive up north to Fargo it'll gel up in your engine and turn to sludge and you'll be stranded until someone else comes along, hoping you don't freeze in the meantime. He makes good money for a kid without a high school diploma and a wadded up crew sock in his underwear, even if he's driving something like nine or ten hours at a time.

Every time he sees a green interstate sign he thinks of his dad's brother who he never got to meet. Not the one who was in and out of various prison cells since he was a teenager until he drank himself to death at twenty-seven with a guitar in his arms like he was some kind of Jimi Hendrix wanna-be, or the one that lives in Clearlake where the Scientologists won't let him talk to the family anymore (or anyone else either). Ash thinks of the one who, at 7 AM one morning after drinking all night, was driving like a jackass on the freeway to the Orlando airport when he was only eighteen, weaving in and out of traffic and driving on the shoulder. He went and flipped his car and because he wasn't wearing his seatbelt the top half of him went flying through the windshield while his lower half stayed behind and that top half landed smack dab on the sign for the airport exit. Someone climbed up there before the body could be removed and covered it in a sheet. Ash thinks about that, about being severed clean through, and he keeps driving and turns the CD player back on, and pops a quick pill, only one.

He keeps his P.O. Box in Oakland, California partly because he eventually he concedes that he needs an address that isn't Florida to pick up mail, and partly as an excuse to keep going back there. He plans his hauls so that he can pick up his mail and have a few days off, and every time he does he explores the city a little further. There are rainbow flags and some he doesn't recognize right away

hanging from off-set balconies of houses built too close together, big city parks where you can get a handjob in the bushes if you're wearing the right clothes and know how to cruise (Ash doesn't but he learns), and the ever-present smell of someone lighting a joint just down the street over the swirling smog from distant factories.

Before the P.O. Box, his first experience at a gay bar was the result of a lumber haul from Billings over in Montana to Oakland that left him with a few days of idle time, which is arguably his least favorite kind. Ash had up and got sick of hanging around truck stops after he'd been propositioned in Nevada by some long-lashed, blue-eyed, lip-stick'd number who looked about seventeen in the light with zero tits to speak of and a skirt so short you'd have to be blind to miss those thigh bruises. The little number in the skirt, he says his name is "Alex". He knows this because immediately after that first night hanging around the back of a gay bar with a card for a doctor willing to give him hormones burning in his back pocket, immediately after that he drives all night back to that truck stop in Nevada, offers the kid a box of condoms, and buys him some pancakes and whatever uppers "Alex" has got on him for the drive coming up – because there's always a drive coming up, and Alex needs the money anyhow. "I don't take charity," Alex explains to him in a haughty voice from the passenger seat in his cab, legs strewn across Ash's lap with his head on the windowsill, but he still lets Ash drive him to the next state over where he swears up and down he's got "friends".

Ash is freshly-turned twenty when he shaves his face for the first time in a gas station bathroom in Jackson with a two-dollar razor, and doesn't for a second think of his dad or his brothers, but thinks of Mel instead. The face in the mirror looks like his as much as it doesn't.

Occasionally he hangs around in the backs of gay bars in blue states, running risk-benefit cost analyses on every Adam's apple and leather vest that stops to chat him up. He is good at this, divining which of them will be satisfied with a quick and impersonal blowjob, which will want to take him home, and which will go straight for his dick. It's in the little things: how much product is in their hair, how much of their ass or abs are they showing, where their eyes linger and what they're really looking for when they do. He is not perfect at it, and every miscalculation reminds him how good he is at fucking

himself, reminds him there is no *need* for extra assistance. Most of them are fine to go without kissing, something Ash knows he doesn't want to do, maybe ever. The whole thing, kissing, it feels more like smothering to him. Feels fake. Feels like they're pretending to be something they're not, to do something they're not. There is nothing romantic about these transactions for Ash, and anyway someone's entitled invasive tongue in his mouth makes his blood run cold, makes him feel like someone else, someone he used to be that he isn't anymore.

On one occasion he green-lights some guy wearing a sleeveless red flannel and sporting comforting, hairy arms and something thick in his jeans who says his name is Jack, and when dodging sloppy kisses Ash reaches inside Jack's jeans for that thick something in a bathroom stall of a seedy honky-tonk outside Nashville, he gets a handful of thick silicone. It takes him a minute to notice, and when he does he can't help it, only says, "*Oh*," and suddenly the routine way Ash has been doing his best not to be kissed or touched or felt too much, suddenly this has turned into something else and Jack is saying "Hope that's okay," and Ash is saying nothing and then he's saying, "Fine. Fine."

But it isn't fine, and a moment later he busts out of the graffiti-covered stall with nothing to show for it but an ache in his gut and a need to see the whole place getting smaller in his side mirrors.

...

The ancient tie-up area in front of Ace's little four-horse barn is modest at best: a simple metal pole grounded deep in the earth with some horseshoes soldered onto it for tying the horses up. It's not exactly the kind of set-up you'd find in a five star reining or eventing barn, only a couple black stable mats all crusted with mud that have been slapped down over some poured concrete, but it's not bad for a little homegrown backyard rescue operation hidden on the Alaska coastline. Clouds of mosquitoes and flies are kept at bay with flicking tails and homemade bug catchers in the form of two-liter soda bottles with their insides cut open and filled with sugar syrup cooked on the stove and apple slices. Sea birds overhead call and wheel and disappear, and the occasional terrier-cattle-dog-something shoots by chasing the birds' shadows on the ground and frantically biting at the dirt.

Lucky's got his horse tied, this little chestnut mare with a half-chewed up mane and the sorriest excuse for a tail he's ever seen. They've been calling her "the red mare" or some variant thereof. Ace being nearly superstitious about names said they had to "come up naturally", which he said had a better chance of happening once the horses had some time on the ranch to come up from their past – whatever it had been. In most cases they never find out, not really. This mare had been pulled her from an auction pit, legs caked with a mixture of mud and manure and stumbling from the tranquilizers her sellers had pumped into her neck. The only evidence left after a few months of meds to clear her belly of worms and some grain to stick to her ribs is the bald patch on the top of her tail, a casualty from the adhesive backing of the yellow and black sticker that had her auction number printed on it. It's the sort of thing that's kinder to let fall off on its own rather than rip off all at once, no matter how long it takes.

On seeing her, Lucky had said: "Quarter horse probably, by the looks of that big behind." He'd sat on her later that week (Lucky was always the one to sit on them first) and they'd found out she knew some things – the basics anyway – like not to buck his ass off over being sat on. Flipping up her top lip to check her teeth, Lucky had said: "Young. Four or five. Maybe." Auction folks called her ten, trying to pitch her as seasoned broodmare, something that could pack your grandkid around, whatever got you in a bidding war against the old men stopping for another body on their way to Canadian slaughterhouses.

Ace has got his gelding tied up next to her, and Ace's gelding? His gelding is really *his gelding*, the puppy-dog kind that follows you around in the pasture begging for cookies, who also came from an auction but this time to keep and is really so, so grateful for it, 'til the end of time. "Willie", he's named, as in "Nelson", and it fits. Willie knows just who rescued him from that long trailer drive to Canada. An older appendix thoroughbred – half thoroughbred half quarter horse – he's got the legs on him to carry a tall bastard like Ace and the years in him to stay steady in the Alaskan wilderness even with a youngster around. The little red mare will go home with someone else for good when she's ready. Today is a test of temperament, to see how she goes when she has to do something for someone else. Mares are usually pretty quick on the uptake, Lucky has found. They're independent, with a maternal brain built to think of bodies outside of their own; they are interested in setting boundaries and they find value and affection in

creatures who respect those boundaries. Geldings, having been castrated of their single-mindedness, tend to be needy, pushy, often insecure and more demanding for attention. Lucky prefers mares.

Over the mare's back, Lucky can hear Ace tell soft-eyed Willie something under his breath with a chuckle, or give a cluck to get the big bay gelding to scoot over this way or that, usually coupled with a heartfelt word of friendly consternation. Lucky had never seen a man smooch a horse's cheek before meeting Ace, and it makes him nervous as much as anything. Lucky stays quiet, but there is no silence on a farm. There are sleepy snorts from the horses and the sound of shuffling hooves, and always a dog going off about a bird or a gopher somewhere in the distance or trying to sneak in and snatch something good that might have been loosened from a hoof. Idle calls from summer birds seem to crackle in the open air without a streetlight or shred of pavement or Plexiglas to bounce off of.

Earlier this week Lucky had the little mare out and had her give the saddle pad and the saddle a good sniff, rubbed both of them all over her neck and back and legs and hind-end until she fell asleep from boredom, assured it's safe and not actually made of teeth waiting to latch onto her guts at random. It's Lucky's instinct to go slow with his horses, as with himself. It's in his nature to want to ease forward. He does the same with the saddle now, holding it by the horn in the front and the rise of the seat in the back (called the cantle) to keep the weight off her until he's ready, and with both the stirrups flipped upward onto the seat so that they don't clap her on the sides and send her into a tailspin like they might be the claws of a bobcat sinking into her gullet from out of nowhere. Horses, being prey animals, are always ready to believe that a threat may have materialized from thin air rather than risk the consequences of hubris. The mare shifts and dances a little under all the production of having the saddle lifted over her back where she can't see what's going on.

He eases the cinch up little by little, doing his best not to hold his breath; he knows she can tell if he does, and that she'll mimic him and hold her breath too. This is the hardest part, this asking to accept tension, asking to accept the pressure around her vulnerable belly. So he goes slow, he checks her eyes and waits to see that they've softened before pulling the cinch a bit tighter. Still Ace is chatting to Willie somewhere in the background, still the birds are calling and wheeling. Time does not stand still, Lucky

knows this. He inhales, exhales, tightens, and as the strap closes around the mare's stomach he smooths the folds of her skin to be sure that nothing gets pinched. Over her back, Lucky notices Ace watching him quietly, patiently. He puts a hand on her neck and breathes in and out again and, a moment later, she does the same.

...

Ash's phone rings and rings and rings in his pocket, in the cab of his truck, a different number every other time but he knows who it is the way he knows what she wants. Every so often he sends home money for the electric bill, for Chrissie's lost textbook that the school wants to send to collections, or to bail Gene out of jail. Ash regrets the times he sends money as often as he regrets the times he doesn't.

The black pavement keeps going and going and going, eaten up beneath his wheels. Sometimes Ash feels like it's going directly into his veins, like he could cough and spit up black pavement, cracked and steam-hot. Once it takes him back to Florida, about an hour outside of Orlando, and there are no horses or pink house in Mel's back pasture. There is no Mel, and no one to ask about her, nothing but the smell of sunshine and hay and dust. The smell sticks to his brain and on the inside of his nose and the only way to get any of it out, he finds, is to go fast enough that it can't catch up. Lucky for him there's a pill for that.

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The real horse ladies of California, the white-tan ones that live on the coast or down south and drop \$100k *easy* on some French warmblood import, or two grand on frozen semen from this year's hottest stallion, those ladies will pay about anything to make sure their precious four-legged cargo gets to the show grounds unmarked and in time for primping. Ash finds out they'll pay even more if, when you're handing them the lead rope, you slip a cheeky bag of biphetaamines into their nicely manicured hands. "Got anything extra for me?" the cowgirl queen might ask after the fourth or fifth time he's hauled Doc's Dapper Jewel and Ain't I So Fancy to the Quarter Horse Congress without major incident; he's hauling a combined worth of nearly a quarter million when you count the sperm hanging between Doc's legs.

Something about the way Ash coaxes the horses onto the trailer with a gentle tug and a quiet word inspires trust and affection, or maybe it's his distaste for eye-contact and next to non-existent interest in their tits (or their daughters' tits) which tips them off that he could be a non-threatening source of danger. The cowboys that hire him, they're the spit-on-the-ground & slap-you-on-the-back type, the calls-you-"son" type, the type to complain about their wives in one breath and the next wax poetic to Ash about what a life he must live, free as a bird on the highway, but "it does get lonely, don't it?" they ask, mouths wide open in laughter before the question even gets out all the way.

The cowboys he doesn't sell to, simply hauls their Skip To My Lou's and their Play Misty For Me's all dressed to the nines in shipping boots and blankets with their manes braided or in tight rosettes, quietly drooling from some over-the-counter tranquilizer for the trip to Nationals. Ash bought a used rig off one of the older truckers headed into retirement when the man's vision started failing him. The guy had nearly run a family of four off the road trying to merge onto the interstate, the 'nearly' qualifier being the next best thing to an actual retirement party anyone in their line of work could ask for after so many decades sat up in that cab with their asses going numb and diabetes threatening to turn their bodies into mush.

"The kids don't want to follow in Dad's footsteps," the retiree had explained to no one with Ash squatting to check the tire tread with a penny from his back pocket, and, the man continued, they didn't talk to him anymore anyhow so someone might as well get use out of it.

Ash gave up the lease on his commercial cab to buy this one outright so that he could make the switch in industry. The pills though, those he keeps picking up from the same reliable spots across the country since he popped the first one coming home from Florida this last time, with visions of not-so-baby-sister Chrissie shut up tight, tight behind the smoke-stained wood paneling of his childhood bedroom in his head, and Dad's friends still visiting with more scars and less teeth.

The pills, little white & licorice black capsules, they turn an eight hour haul into a five minute montage of the American highway with Pantera blazing at a comfortable thousand decibels. The money from hauling is good, better than good when he dispatches a little "something extra" too, and the thing

about rich white horse ladies, Ash finds out, is that they all talk to and about each other so that once he gets in with one of them it's only a matter of time before they're all asking for the same thing. They pay for a new trailer that fits twelve with sleeping quarters right there in the front so he can stay with the horses when they can't find somewhere to unload for the night.

Every so often, a repeat customer who is riding high at the start of a routine weekend guaranteed to produce an avalanche of ribbons will touch him on his bare arm while she's signing the confirmation of delivery papers and playfully call him "Mister" or "Sir" from behind her designer sunglasses. Still, Ash remembers the horse's names better than he does their owners, even eyeball-deep in uppers.

On one occasion the would-be NorCal Hunter Medal Champion, a giant Dutch warmblood who tried to kick Ash about six times, he comes off the trailer outside a giant covered arena in Riverside with a limp and this one horse lady, she loses it, going off on him about what she's paid him for this. Ash doesn't have any answers for her – sometimes horses limp after a long trip, he'll probably be fine tomorrow, couldn't be helped, nothing to do with him. Reminding her that she signed a liability release doesn't help anything. Nothing helps, she doesn't shut up until Ash pulls out one of those cheeky bags of black & white speed, and then another, so that he's only got one left and that one he's saving for himself. He has other stops to make, he explains. He's on his way up to Davis to pick up another load, maybe they can do this another time. She takes her drugs and her limping horse and watches him pull away with a look on her face like she's watching the credits roll.

When the cop rolls up to find Ash asleep in his cab, pulled off with an empty trailer on the side of the road somewhere north of a town called Sandberg just outside of the stretch on Highway 5 they call the Grapevine, this California Highway Patrol officer in his khaki browns might as well be about to make any other routine arrest. For Ash's part, what he remembers most is the *bang-bang-bang* on the door that wakes him up in an immediate state of panic, his brain crying 'cop' before he can even see straight. He has memories, too, of cops showing up at his old trailer door as a kid, at his neighbor's door, at the driver's side door in the Impala, all written into his bones like Trouble had memories of someone walking up to yank on his ear or stick a needle full of steroids in his neck. He still remembers every single time his

dad got hauled off, picked out of their trailer like a rat from a trap or dragged out of the driver's seat for having an expired license on the way to the grocery store; even the time they showed up because Gene had hit some kid at school and the kid's mom thought that meant Gene needed scaring so she called the cops on this elementary school boy like that was the answer. He remembers all these and not by choice.

“What the fuck do you want?” He mouths off at first, half-asleep and still coming all the way down with the can door open, when this baby-faced cop with aviator sunglasses for eyes pulls him out after taking too long with the “step out of the vehicle, please, sir”. When he finally gets to his feet, eyes squinting in the afternoon sun, a balled up crew sock half-filled with Black Beauties cheekily rolls out of his shorts and onto the pavement without a sound.

...

The state of California, Ash is told, considers amphetamines like these a “Schedule II drug” and that, based on his clean history with no priors (“I don't have to worry about you, huh Ash? Just don't get pregnant.”), he can opt for something called drug court if he admits it, admits he has a problem, pleads guilty to possession and all the rest. They tell him this after a week of his sitting alone in a barren jail cell (the officers, having checked and double-checked his dated driver's license, having patted him down for more socks where they felt socks didn't belong, having no idea where to place him in the cells segregated by sex, opted for solitary as a quick and painless solution for themselves).

Every week in a room full of strangers arranged in a circle, desperately trying to be less strange to one another, Ash repeats his situation as told from the mouths of his parole officer, the judge, the county-appointed lawyer who sounds like she's smoked two packs a day since she was twelve. There's mothers, fathers, Reiki workers, tax accountants, students, all listening to him. One of the older guys says he used to be a commercial fisherman for salmon up in Alaska until he'd nearly drowned in the choppy slate blue waters, too much of a fuck-up addict to be trusted to simply manage to stay on the boat anymore even. The support group people tell Ash he's got a Southern accent. No one has ever told him that before.

“I had just unloaded about two baggies more,” he tells his sponsor from the passenger's seat of the guy's pick-up truck, some old Ford that looks like a series of rectangles cut from a larger square and

then covered in oxidizing blue paint. “I mean... *hours* before,” Ash emphasizes, the tiniest hint of a smirk cut into the corner of his lips, like he’s proud of it, and he is, a little. His sponsor, he likes the guy. He’s this ex-con whose been coming to group meetings for a year or so on probation for a meth charge. He’s from some desert town called California City which, he tells Ash, is plagued with dust storms that keep the property value down. His name is Jack. Jack’s got the thickest shoulders Ash has ever seen, a smattering of newly gray hairs that Jack hasn’t noticed yet right now starting to come in through the brown around his temples, and an assload of stupid tattoos: a cross on one shoulder, an angel on the other, and a gun on his forearm are the ones Ash remembers most. He’s got his knee in some kind of splint or sling, an injury from his work as a contractor.

“If they’da caught me then,” Ash has his head leaned back against the window, he’s turned sideways in the passenger seat with his knees up and his feet against the emergency break. He sucks his teeth for a second. “Woulda been five years. *Easy*. Shit, even with my clean record.” Is he *boasting* now? He’s boasting now, surprising himself. He gives Jack a little look to say, ‘I’m boasting now,’ and Jack snorts and laughs and shakes his head.

“You’re just lucky. Lucky, lucky, luck boy.” Jack chants, teasing. Jack starts calling him ‘Lucky’ after that. Ash likes it, likes the way it sounds, like someone new he hasn’t met before but at the same time it’s familiar. Jack’s right, he thinks, rubbing at the stubble on his chin. He hasn’t found a Palmetto bug in his boot in years. He *is* lucky.

Jack’s got a wife who drinks like her father used to and she stabbed him in the shoulder with a fork that last year when they got into it over who was taking out the trash, so he sleeps on the couch now. So he’s got a bad back, and a ten year-old kid, and some chickens on a piece of land back on the outskirts of California City, which is about an hour out but Santa Clarita’s the closest rehab center and anyway, Jack says, he hasn’t got much to do on weekends with his knee out. Jack’s got this goofy smile that just won’t quit, these tired and sad brown eyes that light up now and then for a second if you can get him really laughing, and the biggest hands Ash has ever seen. Somehow he knows how to treat Ash without spooking him. He doesn’t approach Ash directly, doesn’t cross the distance of the shabby little room with

its wood-paneled walls and stained maroon chairs. He waits, dropping lines about the shitty coffee, lines that Ash doesn't have to respond to if he doesn't want to. Jack's patient. He doesn't make any fast movements or loud noises, but after the first few weeks asks with one hand scratching at the back of his head if it Ash thinks it would "be good" for him to be Ash's sponsor.

And Jack, Ash discovers, fucks like he's on vacation: unhurried and easy. He doesn't mind that Ash won't kiss him. He doesn't mind much at all. He goes slow and easy when Ash wants it, hard and fast otherwise. He pats Ash on the ass when they're done, offers him some water too, and gives him rides home to the studio apartment that Ash is barely making rent on with his job at a local feed store, throwing hay into the backs of trucks all day and moving sacks of grain from one spot to the next. He finds a local Planned Parenthood for hormones and he loses the P.O. Box, finally.

Ash dips into savings to buy "nice" clothes in order to look "nice" in court, and tries not to look at himself in the mirror for fear of seeing his dad or any one of his cousins on their court dates. He ditches the crotch sock and orders a real packer off the internet. His probation officer is a fat blonde woman in her fifties with two fat pugs who only eat rotisserie chicken that she has pictures of (the pugs, not the chicken) everywhere in her office. She has this slow speaking cadence like she did too many pills in high school, and likes to ask him questions about what bathroom he uses and is his beard "natural" (with air quotes) in between asking how he's doing, how he's feeling. He pees in a cup once a month and can't so much as eat a poppy-seed muffin. He takes up whittling and stops calling home altogether when mom tells him Chrissie is pregnant. He gets a certificate at his graduation from drug court, tells Jack with a straight face: "I finally have something to hang on the wall next to my college degree," and for the first time since starting the program he talks to the ex-fisherman from Alaska and asks who exactly should a guy call about getting work up there.

A plane ride and two months later he shows up at the docks in Kenai, Alaska, hands the captain a California I.D. that says: Ash Addams Sex Male and says to him with his arms crossed, "Name's Lucky."

...

“You sure you know where you’re goin’?” Lucky calls from the back of the little red mare. They are plodding along in a line through the tall grass, with Ace and Willie in front, going uphill so that Lucky has to stand a little in his saddle to compensate for the angle. Following them is a little pack of dogs, those of Ace’s menagerie who have elected to come with.

“Course I do,” Ace calls back, not bothering to turn around and look at Lucky when he says so. “Or- Willie does, anyhow. Which is about the same.”

“Trust him more n’I do you.” It is summer in Alaska. The sun is near directly above them now, and the clouds are a starchy white and travelling fast across the blue-blue sky. Sweat rolls down Lucky’s cheeks in long, unnoticed drips.

“Probably a good idea.” Ace swats at a cloud of gnats, and ducks under a low branch that Lucky just lets pass over him.

There’s sweat on Lucky’s brow under his cattleman’s hat and at the base of his neck, mingling with the hair he’s been meaning to cut. Before them are rolling hills of dead and dying grass, green and yellow rippling over the horizon and creeping up distant mountains, scattered with the deep forest colors of brown bushes and blue pine and fir trees that whistle when the wind bounces off of them just right. The little red mare freezes where she’s walking at the top of the hill and looks off into the distance like she’s receiving a message from beyond and then, a moment later as Lucky moves to give her a reassuring pat on the neck, he notices her noticing a little white butterfly no bigger than her eye flitting between the white dogwood and the violet forget-me-nots. She follows it with her eyes until it disappears behind her where she can’t see. Up ahead Ace and Willie have come to a stop and are waiting, quietly.

“We’re comin’,” Lucky says, and he clucks to the red mare and squeezes with his calves and she steps forward so he releases the pressure from his calves immediately as a reward, as an example of how this relationship will go. The applied pressure is always released just as soon as she moves in the right direction.

“Almost there.” Ace says it the same way he says it when they’re out on the fishing boat together between sets, when they’re bleary-eyed from exhaustion and their faces beaten red with wind, hauling in

the last load of their long shift. “Almost there,” he’ll say, squinting at the horizon as the docks appear in the distance. “Almost there,” he’ll say, guiding Lucky into position when he’s reversing in the trailer, lining up to unload the next group of equine orphans Ace has wrangled Lucky into helping him transport from the auction, from down the road, from the next county over. Ace’s mom watches the place and the horses and the dogs when they’re out on the boat. She raised him on her own, Ace tells Lucky, and when he’s drunk he explains that ‘Ace’ is short for ‘Horace’, which is about the only acceptable nickname you can get out of a name like ‘Horace’. They’re close, Ace and his mom, close like friends, not close like inmates.

Lucky likes the boat, he likes the way it rolls over the waves without struggle or fanfare, staying afloat because that’s what it was built to do and so that’s what it does. He likes Ace too, the way his straw-yellow hair catches in the sunlight, how little questions he asks, and how he talks to the dogs in a high-pitched baby voice and smooches any horse that will let him. He is an easy landlord to live with, not what Lucky expected when he heard someone on the ship was looking for a lodger. He is easier still to come home to. But Ace has got the worn out look of an ex-methhead, and the stories to prove it. He’s got no tattoos, only a sad story about a dead ex-girlfriend, and the inability to stop taking in strays. Ace is weathered, if not a little sheltered; he’s never heard of RuPaul Charles, wouldn’t know a pride flag if it slapped him in the face, but the weathering has had the unusual effect of softening Ace’s defenses. Lucky doesn’t talk about it, doesn’t talk about much period, but he keeps an ear out always for the sorts of jokes Ace thinks are funny, the sort of people Ace thinks are jokes, and he’s come up with nothing of interest so far.

How Ace fucks Lucky doesn’t know yet, but he does know how Ace snores and how he cuddles: loud for one, lazy for the other. He does know how he handles it when Lucky suddenly pulls away in a quiet moment. He does know what it’s like to show up in the springtime after having left an awkward voicemail on Ace’s phone the previous fall telling Ace he’s trans, and knowing full well that it’s a word that the corn-fed Alaska-born blonde-haired blue-eyed red-blooded Horace “Ace” Jansson has never heard before. Turns out, it’s almost the same as any other springtime (except unknown to Lucky, Ace has

spent the fall and winter preceding this one rapidly maxing out the bandwidth on his shitty internet connection Googling things like “what is trans?” and getting lost for hours afterward).

Lucky is thirty-two, and this is the hottest Alaskan summer on record. In the fall he will go back down south to the address he keeps on the outskirts of California City from when he bought up half of that little plot of land that Jack says he can't manage anymore. It's got a little ranch house on it with a porch and everything, perfect for whittling. Jack's boy Ira visits, lets his chickens wander, and Ira tells Lucky one day after a couple years of this about how his name used to not be Ira, used to be something else, a girl's name, until he told his parents he wasn't the person they had told him he was and refused to answer to anything else until they fell in line. Later this fall when he goes back down south, he will bring Ira a little souvenir for good luck, something he whittles or finds near the back of a shelf in Ace's store. Today he is following a path beaten into the Alaskan overgrowth, the traces of it still there from where the pair came through last year. It was hot then too, but less so then now, by only a few degrees. When it goes up little by little, you hardly notice, Lucky finds.

“Damn it's hot,” Ace says as if they both don't know it, dropping down from his horse who already has his head down to graze on the grass. They stop at a clearing in the grass beneath a shady gathering of spruce trees and Lucky can't help but feel proud of the red mare, for how brave she is, for how far she's come, even though he doesn't really know her story, even though all she had to do was follow Willie and not run off. He knows just how hard that is, to not run off, to want to be close and to want to stay that way.

Lucky plops down in the grass against a tree, puts his hat down beside him, and closes his eyes to take in the sound of the soft creak of leather from the saddles as the horses do a slow shuffle from spot to spot. He listens to the rhythmic clinking of metal at the bits in the horses' mouths as they chew, the tiny sounds of grass being ripped from the ground by their teeth, and the rustle of that same grass as some of the dogs catch up with them or, alternatively, go off to have their own doggy adventures. As predators, dogs come to you when called if you feed them something for their trouble often enough. As prey, horses come when called only if you've proven yourself to be safe company.

Lucky says, without opening his eyes, he says, “She did good.” Ace knows what he means. Lucky feels Ace settle down beside him so that the outside of their thighs are only barely touching inside both pairs of blue jeans.

“Come a long way,” Ace says, reflectively. A cool breeze blows through the trees and neither horse starts or twitches. It catches the sweat on Lucky’s neck and face and turns it ice cool for a few glorious moments.

“Yep. Hardly recognize her from the day we picked her up,” Lucky replies, his eyes still closed, turning himself into the wind and letting his hands sink into the vegetation on either side of him. He pictures the little red mare with her head down to her knees at the auction, her legs all banged up and coated in mud, her mane half-eaten by the horse in the lot next to her, her eyes checked out and glazed over from having overdosed on fear.

Ace has gone quiet, and when Lucky opens his eyes again he is greeted with the sight of some lime-green-and-black spotted beetle making its way across his knee where his legs are outstretched in front of him. The horses are nuzzling their way between wild poppies and switching their tails at endless flies. A couple of grateful dogs have laid down in the shade, quietly panting. It takes Lucky a moment to notice Ace, and the way he’s looking at him, with this self-satisfied smirk on his stupid handsome face. Ace noticing Lucky noticing Ace prompts him to speech.

“Yep. She’s real *lucky*, you could say.” This causes Lucky to suck his teeth and look away, anywhere else, to hide the smile that wants to form.

“*Don’t*.” Lucky warns, but Ace is still grinning.

“You know what?” Lucky knows what’s coming without knowing how he knows. “I think we found her name.”

Lucky thinks momentarily about Mel, and her pony called Melanie. He smiles now despite himself, shakes his head: “No way.”

“Hey,” Ace begins, defensively, but then Lucky feels a hand on top of his. He flinches. The little beetle has crawled over Lucky and is starting up on Ace, now, up his fingers. “When it fits, it fits. Don’t blame me that that’s her name, now. ‘s your fault for being named like a horse.”

Lucky had flinched, but he didn’t move his hand away. He still doesn’t. A feeling like how it feels to get bucked off stirs in the depths of him, those moments before you hit the ground and the only thing you can do is be in your body as it flies. But this is different – there is no tense anticipation of the upcoming smack of solid ground.

It is a record hot summer for Alaska. Farther inland, in the cities, the hospitals are being overrun with folks who don’t know how to protect themselves from the heat, who don’t have the clothes for it, who live and work in buildings designed to keep heat in, to circulate it. They are hostile, agitated by this new unfamiliar enemy. They are fainting, sometimes dying from sudden onset sunstroke, and those who don’t die must go back in to work mere miles away from hydraulic drill bits burrowing deep into the earth. Lucky is thinking about exactly none of this. He is, instead, simply being in his body as it flies. He feels himself move all at once to push his body into Ace’s lap and, decisive man that he is, he takes Ace’s face between his hands to kiss him firmly, sweetly, decisively on the mouth. Ace tastes like water from a hose and this morning’s orange juice. His chin is stubbly and abrasive for how soft his lips feel.

There is moment now of suspension, of breath caught in his chest, where no one is doing anything and they are really *so close* to one another, the kiss having come and gone. Lucky is only barely beginning to hear himself wonder in his head on what waits for him on the other side of this moment, when Ace cracks that crooked cowboy smile at him. Lucky feels hands settle on his waist, keeping him there, and his heart flips and flutters in its want to stay put.

“Should we tie her up?” Ace asks, flicking his head in the direction of the red mare called Lucky. “So she don’t run off.”

Lucky exhales – doesn’t sigh – but exhales.

“Nah,” he answers, not noticing the sweat trickling down his back on the inside of his shirt. “She knows what’s good for her.” And he moves in again for another kiss.

Say Yes

1. Dreams – The Cranberries

If someone asks, I'll say I started it and Joe will say she did: classic. It's not worth arguing over, something I probably shouldn't be so proud of us for having figured out, though it's actually only me I'm proud of since Joe is one of those infuriating types who won't argue. So *what* if I distinctly remember hitting that 'New Playlist' button and dragging this song over to it after staring at that loaded phrase – '*New Playlist*' – for at least one lifetime. So what about that? I remember a lot of things, and frankly, not all of them happened. This one though, I'm pretty sure about. I remember because I was sitting on her bed at a school that smelled like nothing, feeling full up with something I couldn't quite articulate: too full, overfilled, a spill risk. Giddiness and nerves – like how it feels seconds before walking up to a microphone, any microphone.

I hadn't done anything yet, only kind of thought about thinking about doing something, without knowing what that something might be, just *something*. But "Dreams" - it's such a sweet song, unraveling so quickly, with lead singer Dolores O'Riordan sounding embarrassingly vulnerable like she isn't afraid of how afraid she is at all. "*I know I've felt like this before / but now I feel it even more / because it came from you.*" She outright *says it*. I loved that. I still love that. Everyone knows The Cranberries for "Zombie" and O'Riordan's Irish yodel singing but "Dreams" is where they're at their best, line after line of O'Riordan laying her cards on the table over that patient guitar melody. Of course the song was never meant to be heard by the person she's writing it about, not right away anyway. Last year I read something from Dolores O'Riordan about how the guy (or I guess I should say "lad"?) who she wrote this song about finally figured out it was about him years after the fact and sent her some letter to the effect of, "Hey I figured it out, I know you're married now but I'm here for it if you are". Of course it was too late then – it was song about a feeling, so it could never last. I was so excited to add this song though Joe wasn't around at the time, had no idea about the playlist at all, but she had this way of looking at me like she could see all my secret plans, and she still does. Fuck, we were only teenagers. What a nightmare.

1. Birthday – The Sugarcubes

This song came out in 1987, before either of us were born. Bjork sounds exactly like she always has, and it took me years to remember that it is truly Bjork singing and not simply someone who sounds like her. Why did it take that long? True to the name of the band, there's this sweetness to Bjork's voice, so it almost almost doesn't matter what she's singing about. Bjork is so weird, the kind of weird that I think probably isn't as weird as video clips and edited quotes out of context would have me believe, the kind of weird that women get thrown into like a category or a dumpster, so people don't have to think about what you said since it was really so weird.

Did Joe add this song or did I? I don't remember. Probably it was me. I can't imagine I would have sent you this playlist, Joe, with only one song on it. Did I think you'd like it? I have to believe I was trying to impress you. Impressing Joe when I still thought that maybe I hated her was my favorite. It's so hard to decide what Joe likes, what she actually likes. Joe likes to like things, but much to her horror, there's a lot of things that are hard to like. Not this song, though.

It makes me feel like I'm wandering through someone else's prom night, full of glitter and paper stars hanging from the ceiling, with the smoke machine working hard enough that I can't see any of the walls, or any other people. When I was a kid I used to watch that David Bowie movie, *The Labyrinth*, over and over and over because I was obsessed with the ballroom scene where Jennifer Connelly is wearing that horrible dress with the poofy sleeves and everything is dreamy and white like the inside of a dishsoap bubble. Then I found out Joe carried that movie around with her in her lunchbox and I felt like I had to do something about it. I didn't, because what is there to do? But I felt like I should, anyway, the way a shook up can of soda feels like it should explode. It took me months to say something about it, and when I did finally, she just laughed this surprised laugh like "Of course you like this movie, *everyone likes this movie*," and I would have got up from the school bench and left altogether if she wasn't looking right at me. So now every time I hear Bjork's little voice going "da da, da-da-da, d-da da da" I think of Joe and I think of wearing that poofy sleeves dress and I don't think about David Bowie at all, not at all.

2. Ceremony – New Order

This was the last song I added before saying something about it, about the playlist. I wanted to make the whole thing for you – for her, for Joe, I mean – just make this finished thing that I could present her with but I couldn't decide why I was making it and the more I thought about it the less I could remember a single song I'd ever heard even though we spent most of our time talking about music. Joe likes folk stuff; I'd never heard a Simon & Garfunkel song in its entirety until we ended up roommates at that beartrap of a school and I was pretty proud of that fact. Still I can't stand most of it. "Last Living Boy in New York" is a pretty okay song, I guess, if a girl's singing it especially. Back then I was still living my past life in the 80's, as my dad used to call it, and I was sure that no one within fifty miles of that place knew who Siouxsie Sioux was. The fact that Joe did, but still wanted to listen to a sad boy with a guitar instead, made me insane.

Honestly, I don't know shit about New Order, not outside of their music, and I kind of like it that way for them. Keeps things simple, keeps them clean, keeps them in my head as bodiless, faceless, nameless providers of dance-y monotone goth synth beats, that good good stuff that makes my heart thump and the hair on my arms stand up. I'll admit also that when I put this New Order song on the playlist, I didn't know any of the words, and I'll admit that I only know a few of them now, and that every time I look up the lyrics I find that I love the words and then forget them all by the time I hear the song again. New Order, they're not The Cocteau Twins, it's not some nice sounding word salad over some groovy layered track (though "Cherry-Coloured Funk" is some tasty word salad). There's only three verses, with no discernable chorus. It does whatever it wants. It's not a song you listen to for the words, but more the sounds they make together with that tragically bouncy synth. It's four and a half minutes of goth synthwave poetry without an ounce of irony.

Thing is, I couldn't stand that Joe cut her own bangs. I thought that she thought she was a poet because she liked Jimi Hendrix and knew he was covering Bob Dylan, and I couldn't stand her for it, for the audacity to think she could just *be* a thing she thought she was, for playing guitar at school talent

shows and covering songs no else in the audience knew – not even me. Joe never needed permission from anyone to look how she wanted, act how she wanted, make what she wanted. Maybe she didn't think any of that at all. It didn't matter. I sent her the link to the playlist without a word in real life, only that tacked on noncommittal comment, "add if you want to".

3. I Hate the 80's – The Vaselines

God this fucking song. I mean, The Vaselines, they're not wrong – it *wasn't* "all Duran Duran, Duran Duran". Hair metal has been dead for a reason, and it's staying dead. But I was so frustrated that you put this song on here, Joe. How could you come in, after I'd hand-picked so carefully the three songs before this one, so deftly pored over which ones to add that would hit the mark without looking too much like I was aiming at all, how could you toss this on here like no problem? Typical Joe. And of course you did it as a dig, one of those playful funny cool girl impersonal sort of shitty but not really digs, and of course it worked better than you'd expected. It was only that there was so little else to want to focus on, it was so easy to listen to over and over again. "The 80's were shit", fuck you the 80's were shit, and okay, yes, *I know I wasn't there.* If I'm still mad about this song being on here now it's only because I like to be. I can admit that.

It's only because I can see you seeing me listening to it for the first time, those home-cut bangs in eight different directions from the way you keep pushing them up on your forehead the way you do when you're stoned, and then there's this moment when you catch the reaction you'd knew you'd get from me – I don't know what it is – maybe my pupils narrowed the way a bird's does right before they decide to peck your eyes out, and you just laugh that laugh again, that same laugh you laughed when I confided in you that I liked *The Labyrinth*. I'm so bad at enjoying something when it happens. I want to hide inside my hair, like usual, like I wanted to then. I never wanted anyone to have any evidence that I look like anything other than a wall of perfectly straight hair that goes down to the floor and on to forever. But Joe laughed at me, laughed at this Vaselines song, laughed at herself for putting it on, and looking back on it

now from this ice cold snuffbox of a Chicago apartment I can laugh about it too. It's a pretty funny song. The Vaselines are cool forever, and no one can do anything about it.

4. Crimson and Clover – Joan Jett and The Blackhearts

Is there anyone who isn't in love with Joan Jett? If they aren't, it's because they haven't seen her in a pleather belted catsuit. Or they're *wrong*. Those are the options. Joan Jett, Lita Ford, and Cherie Currie are all individually and collectively lesbian icons. Like the original Powerpuff Girls, one of each flavor. Lita would be my favorite, probably, if I had to choose, but The Runaways were a Joe-and-her-friends band more than anything so I didn't feel like I could lay claim to them or any versions of them until we were older and I stopped caring about that sort of thing. Funny how that happens; one day I'm exhausting myself trying to figure out how to run around in my mind the right way to keep something, keep someone, keep some feeling or memory safe or happy, and then the next I'm ready to throw all them away, burn it all down, pretend none of them ever even existed. Hot and cold, black and white. The kind of thinking that might get a person a lifelong prescription from a shrink, or a restraining order, or a long-term girlfriend who feels too much so she acts like she doesn't feel anything at all, you know?

Maybe she felt bad about The Vaselines song, I don't know, but Joe putting this on here felt like the victory I'd been waiting for, that I'd subconsciously promised myself when I'd started making this without knowing what that might look like. A collaborative playlist sounds like the antithesis of what I wanted to do as a teenager. I remember Dad asking if he could see the ones I'd made already one day in the car when school was on break and I snapped "No," at him so fast he didn't say another word for the next hour. I didn't regret it then, most days I don't now either. Joe had friends in the older girls at school and because I had nowhere else to go I followed her around and so I knew them too, and they *all* knew this song. Naturally I didn't find out until years after we'd graduated what an iconic lesbian song this is. Joan Jett covering this song is the lesbian transfiguration potion that no one saw coming until it was so stupidly obvious. Breathy and cloistered, like she's telling a secret to herself, she sings, "*I don't hardly know her / but I think I could love her / crimson and clover*", and that riot grrl guitar sound is grinding in

between every line like fanfare, or punctuation, the guts of the song revving up. I think the word “yeah” was made for Joan Jett to say in this song. It doesn’t mean anything like the way it means something when she says it, not even when Kurt Cobain says it, and he was king of the “yeah”s. And that line “What a beautiful feeling” makes me think of nothing. It’s a song that empties me out. *Crimson and clover, over and over* – it’s a fast song that begs to be put on repeat. Over and over. Over and over. Over and over.

Eighteen year-old senior girl Polly Schultheiss says to her fellow senior Lady Morello while walking in front of me across the quad that Joe sang this song the other night when they were hanging out together since Joe’s been learning it on guitar and Joe, Polly says, sounded pretty good. “So I told her she’s in the band now,” Polly says, smacking her lips. I’m angry that I missed out hearing Joe sing, angrier at myself for being angry at all, but the secondhand cover of hearing Polly talk about Joe’s cover of Joan’s cover plays in my head for days. Knowing it happened at all feels like my own little secret. Over and over.

5. Fell in Love With A Girl – The White Stripes

Jack White wanted to be a pastor when he was a kid in Detroit. Had his cramped little bedroom packed full at the time: multiple drum kits and amps, that kind of thing. He was a drummer when he met Meg, actually. But bible camp wouldn’t let him bring the amps, and Meg couldn’t play anything. Jack says that God told him he was meant to play guitar solos. So he stayed home from camp and Meg took up the drums and they got married and told everyone they were siblings because they didn’t want their relationship to have that kind of attention, and because Jack White has never been over what he calls “the death of the sweetheart” so that sort of thing is important to him. It’s a big game to talk coming from a man who has been divorced twice so far and can’t stop singing about cheating on all his solo albums. I saw him live once, out in California visiting Joe’s youngest sister Phyllie since we’d formed a kind of bond over the years of me coming over to the house and she’d gone out to L.A. for whatever reason anyone ever goes out to L.A.. Phyllie is this easily distracted girl with her hair dyed a different color every time I see her and absolutely no discernible life plan, which I respect and admire so fucking much. Anyway it was around the time Jack had just divorced again and he asked the whole crowd to marry him,

which I guess we must have accepted, because he then declared us an official married union. It's funny how quickly something can go from romantic to flat-out manic, whether it's the feeling in my chest or that grand gesture I've been daydreaming about. One second it's cute, the next it's clinical. Jack gets that, I'd guess. His ex-wives too. Joe doesn't believe in marriage the way that some people who don't believe in marriage tell you that they don't believe in it by shutting up about the topic forever and ever. There's got to be a whole generation of queers who immediately felt the pressure to get married once it was, you know, legally permissible. The only thing worse must be the divorce rates.

No way did Joe's dad or step-mom ever expect her to get hitched and start making grandbabies anyway. She's the kind of lesbian who never needed to officially "come out" if she didn't want to. If sharing a name with the universally agreed upon gayest of the Little Women wasn't enough, she goes ahead and slaps that 'e' on the end of it (so that it makes you think Joe Schmoe or Joe Montana or Sloppy Joe or Big Joe) and won't tell anyone in the world what it's short for. This is similar to how she never asks me if Cait is short for anything either, which I liked then. And did you know that statistically speaking, the more kids someone has, the more likely those children are to wind up gay? Somehow Joe came out the gayest right off the bat, the first of seven sisters (two siblings less than Jack White has), and shattered that statistic with a "don't call it a mullet" hair-do and skin so clear it has to be genetic. So this had to be a Joe song. It goes hard and fast from the jump. My favorite is the way Jack says, "I fell in love once and almost completely". That *almost*. It saves him. Joe always talks about herself without noticing it, which is why she added this song. She's a walking projector, one that looks great in a skinny tie but will only wear one to a funeral or a wedding. No one should look good in school uniforms, especially not boney butch girls with stupid bangs and not an ounce not a second not a scrap not a hint of self-awareness. Joe likes horror films and cries if she sees an ASPCA commercial after drinking only one of Polly's beers. She skates with the boys down at the skatepark on weekends, plays me Elliott Smith songs off her laptop and doesn't notice when her eyes are welling up until she's nervous laughing and rubbing at them, still can't ever hit a bong right without coughing like her throat is on fire.

This song is like the uncontrollable urge to bury your face in your roommate's school blazer, the girl you can't stand for looking like she does, for acting like she does, but one second the coat is on her bed and the next it's in your hands and there's that perfect hanging moment when you realize: you could do it. You *could* do it, and she would never know, no one would ever know. Knowing that you could do it is as good as doing it. You're thinking about it doing at the same time that you've done it – how frustrating and predictable. Everything goes dark. There is only the smell of Dollar Store shampoo, men's deodorant that you know is men's deodorant despite it smelling nothing like your dad, and old weed, exactly all the things you could have guessed, frustrating and predictable. Your stomach turns excitedly, the blazer wrinkles in your hands, the song is over. You can only do this for the first time once.

6. Sensual World – Kate Bush

No one uses bagpipes like Kate Bush, let's get that straight. Kate Bush. I'd die for Kate Bush. I named myself after her, but I didn't figure that out fully until I was thirteen or so. Kate Bush wrote her ethereal and endlessly catchy tribute song "Wuthering Heights" when she was only eighteen, a fact that continues to haunt me to this day. I still remember dressing up in this cheap but flow-y dress that reminded me of the one Kate wears in the video, this dress that was leftover from some Halloween costume – maybe an angel I think – and I'd put the dress on in my bedroom and swirl around with this song on loud as I thought I could get away with. I truly felt like I Cathy's ghost, banging on Heathcliff's window from beyond the grave. Dad used to read the book to me when I was small, laying on the couch sick or in bed, but I didn't hear the Kate Bush song until I was a pre-teen. It's a weird choice to read to a kid, filled my head with ghosts and bracing, cold winds, but Dad is like that. Weird. It's what you get when you let the gays raise children.

Cait was a name I'd picked because I liked cats, basically. That's what happens when you let a little trans girl pick her name when she's six or seven, but I had good taste then like I have good taste now. No regrets there. I added this song for two reasons and two reasons only. One: it's Kate fucking Bush. Two: it's the perfect amount of sexy to have felt like a risk at the time, which was all I wanted to do – take safe

risks. Listening to Kate sing “mmh, yes” in between breaths is so succulent and sweet, I didn’t think Joe would notice the actual words, talking about taking a “kiss of seedcake” before going down “deep South”. It’s all very English of her. Kate Bush can use the word “breast” in a song and it’s still sexy. Kate Bush makes mania sexy the way indie directors wish they could make their mentally ill female protags sexy. Kate Bush made me want to take singing lessons when I was still too nervous and shy to even speak most of the time. Joe never listened to much Kate Bush before me, I don’t think, had never heard “Wuthering Heights” or even read the book, the plebian. Instead she’d be laying on the floor in our dorm blasting “Touch Me I’m Sick” by Mudhoney (self ex-fucking-planatory) or The White Stripes’s “Instinct Blues” (*And every bird and bee in the jungle too / And everything in the ocean blue / They just happen to know exactly what to do / So why don’t you?*), with me on my stomach drawing something onto the lime green plaster cast on her arm, and her looking for faces in the ceiling, not seeming to listen to the words at all.

“Oh,” she says one day and this song is playing with the bagpipes beginning to come in, and me drawing an ornate royal dagger on this new cast, the kind of dagger a rebellious young princess might use. It’s piercing a juicy anatomically correct heart, and getting me a little high from the Sharpie fumes.

“Mmh?” I don’t look up. The black heart gets fatter every time I go around the outline.

“Uhh yeah. Shit hang on. Gotta... bathroom.” All at once she gets up, scrambles out the door, leaving me worried about the smearing of my Sharpie heart when I notice the little patch of blood left on the carpet from where she was sitting.

This is not the last time this happens. Another time she bleeds onto my dad’s patent leather couch back at our apartment, over break. The blood is dark and smells faintly of rain-washed metal. It comes up from the carpet red, so red. Her red. Both times I clean it up while she’s gone, with a towel and some water or whatever’s available, and both times I know I could be annoyed or just sympathize but all I feel is stupidly happy to be able to make it go away, to fix it when she’s not around.

7. Good Feeling – Violent Femmes

This is the best song the Violent Femmes have ever recorded, hands down, don't talk to me if you disagree because there is no changing my mind. The singer, Gordon Gano, has that whiney cat-like voice like Layne Staley or Brian Molko but worse, only it works for the band, works harder in this song because he is. So. Deliberate. With. Each. Word. *Good feeling, won't you stay with me just a little longer?* Begging. Pleading. *It always seems like you're leaving, when I. Need. You. Here. Just a little. Longer.*

This was definitely a Joe song at the time, at least it's one she added for sure, but I've taken it as my own since then, mixed it into other playlists, wake up with it stuck in my head on sunny mornings in spring that make me want to die from the expectation that the sunshine brings. It's the longing, I guess. Longing always feels real, always feels relatable, and Joe, who right now is roaming around the country either in her mind or in her van filling up on whatever she thinks looks the most like attainable satisfaction, Joe is always longing. It's the kind of thing you'd expect a girl like her to do; I mean that it makes sense. She's got these unfocused hazel eyes and the crooked smile of someone with her head in the clouds, in another lifetime, on another plane of existence. And at the time she was stuck in an all-girl high school, gay as the day is fucking long, with seven sisters and the most vivid memory out of all of them of what their mom was like before she split. And at the time I'd never had a mom, or a sister, or a boyfriend. I lived in fiction, made whole lifeworlds out of the Austen novels and children's fantasy books about talking cats that I kept under my pillow. So we were both longing, all the time, especially when we were sat next to each other on the grass behind the quad so close that our thighs touched through the scratchy cotton of a school uniform.

And Joe, she's so fucking nice all the time, more so when she doesn't want to be, but especially when she does, always saving things she thinks her friends will like, her pockets filled with novelty guitar picks or lighters or little fun-sized candies that are easy to nick from check-out aisles at the grocery store though most of it ends up ruined in the wash before she gets a chance to hand it out to whoever. She's got that sort of aura that makes people want to tell her their secrets, that kind of big-sister-who-understands expression perpetually on her face. Like, I don't remember coming out to her as trans. I'm sure I did. I'm sure I had to, at some point. The school was cool about it and so it didn't really come up if I didn't want it

to, and anyway most of the other girls didn't pay any attention to me since I'd transferred in and was generally quiet and unreactive. It had to have come up between Joe and I at some point because I remember crying about something stupid in the bathroom – I was always right on the verge of tears those days, it could've been anything, I was especially sensitive to the imagined suffering of animals that I saw on TV or online – I remember coming out of the bathroom finally and there was Joe with her crooked grin and a crisp, clean, new patch sewed onto her denim jacket: pink, white, and blue, the trans pride flag colors. The way she kept trying to play it off like it was nothing made it that much more obvious that she wanted me to notice it. That sort of thing from anyone else would have pissed me off all the way from the bottoms of my feet up through to my back teeth, that kind of pandering. But coming from Joe it just felt kind. Probably I started crying again and we each of us played off both things, Joe with her pride patch and me crying, played it off like it was whatever.

It's cold in this apartment. There's a spot on the rug that I know from experience is the perfect size for you to curl up drunk in, for me to step over you into the kitchen and bring you some water in a Mason jar, only you're not here. "*Good feeling*". Yeah right, good feeling. Good feeling nothing. Stuck feeling everything.

8. Dig Me Out – Sleater-Kinney

Sleater-Kinney is the band that either sounds made up or sounds like a quick and easy way to let someone know you're a lesbian, depending on if the person you're talking to has heard of them or not. If they haven't, and you say it, you say, "Sleater-Kinney" to them, they go "Who?" They inevitably go, "Huh? Sleater what?" And if they have, if they have heard of them, it's because they're a lesbian and so now you are too, basically. One of those silent pacts that the queers have figured out over the years. Thanks, Carried Brownstein. Thanks, Corin Tucker. No, I don't know what the band name means or where it comes from. It's the sort of thing that looking up would ruin altogether.

Remember how I used to come home from class every afternoon and collapse onto my bed and nap for the next two hours, Joe? And you had to listen to your music through headphones even though you hate headphones because of the way they feel on your ears (and earbuds fall out or hurt). I could always hear this song through your headphones though, Joe, but I never said anything. Sleater Kinney is like that. Loud. I used to hate loud, actually. I didn't want to hear loud because I typically always felt loud. And once I was deep in teenage land, deep in the hormones and doctor's appointments, the fear and the anger and the infuriatingly vague urge to do something different, be someone different, look somehow different – once that fatigue took hold and started to crumple me up from the inside, loud was exhausting. Shit, everything was exhausting. Still is some days. But you kept playing it and playing it and I was too sleepy to properly look mad about it, and anyway Joe you were wearing headphones so I couldn't really be mad unless I was mad enough for the anger to take over in a way that would flush out all the tired and that wouldn't happen for a few years yet until you started playing keep-away with your heart like you hadn't already given it to me. Remember when we saw them live on New Years Eve three years ago here in Chicago, and they covered "Rebel Rebel", and we both cried and cried and kissed and cried with yellow and white confetti coming down all around us?

So anyway then I started to like it – started to like the loud. *Dig me out, out of my body, out of my skin*. It's exactly what I wanted someone to do, and this song is loud, yeah, but it's steady and punchy and *going somewhere*. It's got action and motion behind it. It's not a tiger pacing its cage the way you might think, the tiger is out and she is running, running, running towards you. I don't hate my body. I don't hate it at all, most days. But I'm not a tiger, am I?

9. Mouth to Mouth – The Vaselines

Ah yes. Back at The Vaselines, or as I like to think of them: Scotland's Sonic Youth. What is it about post-grunge rock that speaks to slightly alternative straight couples? Remember in the 90's and early aught's when all the hip-hop playing on the radio had some guy with the world's deepest voice rapping in between an impossibly high-pitched hot girl chorus? Feels like the white people version of that: The

Vaselines, She & Him – Sonic Youth at least was never afraid of getting real ugly with it. Ugly is good. Ugly sits in the corner of the room listening, and walks away with all the best stories and none of the mess. Ugly bides its time because it knows that it can demand attention whenever it wants. The Vaselines have never been ugly, but that didn't stop them from showing up on this playlist *twice*.

I'm laying in Joe's lap. Polly and Lady are somewhere in the room too, talking over the music, the occasional shriek coming from Lady when Polly says something scandalous or scathing. It's a small room. All the dorms are small, so I shouldn't be able to lose them in it, but I'm stoned for maybe the third time in my life (enough times to feel cool about it for real now) and I'm having fun pinching off sections of Joe's face in my vision with my hands hovering over my eyes. Cutting out her eyes, then her chin, imagining how she'd look without bangs. I don't remember when I stopped hating her, only that I did. And then I didn't. And then I did. And then I didn't. It's like that.

"What made you so weird?" Joe laugh, watching me. She's looking down at me but I'm holding my hand up still so that she's only eyes. The Vaselines are playing in the background from somebody's laptop.

"You," I say, without thinking. "I was normal before you." My hand falls to my face and I cover my own eyes so all I am is a pair of lips and that big hooked nose I hate-love-hate.

"Oh yeah, sure," Joe sucks her teeth, disbelieving. "You were just a normal girl."

"Yeah, so thank-... thanks a lot." The stutter is because I'm high, probably.

My face turns red under my hand from the way I can tell that Joe's still looking at me, looking at my face. This song is still playing in the background. I added the song to the playlist two days later, having heard it for the first time in that moment, because it's so cheesy and stupid that I tell myself I can get away with it even when I don't know what I'm trying to get away with. *Give me mouth to mouth to mouth, mouth to mouth mouth, mouth to mouth to mouth*. So obvious now I could laugh until my voice gives out.

"Who is this?" I ask to break the tension finally, my eyes still covered.

"Uh, The Vaselines."

“Duh.”

“Duh.”

10. I Know It's Over – Jeff Buckley

My dad always liked Morrissey. Me, I liked The Smiths. Morrissey was, and still is, like a shitty uncle-by-marriage I was never fully comfortable around, always saying something shitty and then pretending like he didn't when someone gets upset. Still, I had a few Smiths songs in rotation. The man has a sense of the language of sorrow, I'll give him that, but nothing else. Jeff Buckley though, I knew nothing about. He sounds and looks like he should have been straight out of the 60's or something, so much that I have to look it up every time I think about him for too long to remind myself no, no, he was a 90's man, despite the look of him. All angular and soft like Jim Morrison's nice cousin, the one who you can trust not to assault you when you're passed out on the bed at 4 AM or whatever. I think Joe put this on for that reason. Familiar but different. A nicer shade of what I already knew. She's good for stuff like that. *“It takes strength to be gentle and kind.”* Morrissey wrote it, Buckley knew it: *“It takes guts to be gentle and kind.”*

I was listening to our playlist when I realized how much I wanted to kiss her. It popped into my brain unbidden, watching her fall off her skateboard after school, one else but us, with the New England sun going down early in October. Really what I wanted was for *her* to kiss *me*, a thought which made sense out of all the gut-wrenching dry heaves my mind had started doing whenever Joe stopped to so much as smile for too long at any girl in our grade. So I started waiting for it. Started baiting her a little, even, just to see, you know, how it might go, what it might take. Could be she simply hadn't thought about it yet. Just inching towards her on that single bed 'til our foreheads touched, or tucking my head under her neck in a haze of stoned silence, my hands hidden under my arms as if I had to restrain them to keep them from doing something on their own.

I don't think about the specifics too much, the individual cases, because it's too hard to sort through since the overlap is so seamless, but looking back on it now I can say that at least half the time that Joe

and I were “hanging out” as teenagers we were basically on a date, one that neither of us explicitly knew about. That’s obvious now. As adults who have both dated and broken up with each other officially, even when we see each other on the one weekend we’re both in town, even now I’m not sure if it’s a date or only a hang out until weeks later. I get sick of the not-knowing, the waiting, the missed phone calls one way or the other. Doesn’t stop me from wanting her though.

So I kissed her. I kissed her sitting on the grass behind the quad, all of us a little drunk from some Goldschlager vodka that Lady had scored from her mom last time she’d gone home, which the four of us had passed around quickly earlier that night back in the older girls’s dorm. They’d just finished band practice out of one of the unused music rooms across campus, and Polly and Lady had gone off to finish the bottle of gold-flecked alcohol together. Joe still had her guitar with her, this acoustic thing that cut up her hands every time she put on new strings. There’s something about a girl who can play guitar, you know? Like *really* play it. Joe, she fucking shreds. Even then she fucking shredded. And I was sitting between her legs in the grass, this sad Morrissey-Buckley song tinkling about in my head with the verses and words all out of order, though it shouldn’t have been there, not at all, and I tipped my head up from where I’d rested it under her chin and I came out and asked it. I asked: “Can I kiss you?” in the calmest voice I’ve ever heard myself use before or since, with Buckley in my head singing: “*Oh, Mother I can feel the soil falling over my head,*” so carefully, so quietly, but steady and deliberate.

“Uh- Yeah,” Joe says with a held breath and a half-drunk smile.

With your triumphs and your charms, while they’re in each other’s arms. I know it’s over – still I cling.

I kiss the smile right off her face. Our teeth clink and she laughs a muffled laugh, teeth on teeth. It’s awkward to try and kiss anyone at the angle I’ve had to twist myself into, but I don’t give up so that next second it’s back again, that smile. Right back again against my lips.

11. Say Yes – Elliott Smith

The thing about Elliott Smith that I can't get over, is that he's dead. There, I said it. Elliott Smith killed himself – but what people don't know, and what they don't tell you unless you look it up or you're friends with Joe, is that he stabbed himself in the heart. Twice. And whenever I think about dying, whenever I'm so tired of being so tired all the way into my fucking bones, whenever my face doesn't look like mine so much that I never want to look at it again, and I think about the wanton victory of vanishing, I think about Elliott Smith stabbing himself in the heart two fucking times. Talk about committed.

Still, "Say Yes" is one of his rarer sweet songs. "*I'm damaged bad at best,*" Elliott confesses, resigned, "*She'll decide what she wants.*" It's a resolution, a capitulation, giving over to the fact that his heart is going to get kicked around but – but, but, but – but, he tacks it on at the last possible second, the last possible place to do it, he lays it out and lets it hang in the air: "*Say yes*". And this girl, he doesn't give any particular reasons for her as being especially special: "*I'm in love with the world / through the eyes of a girl / who's still around the morning after.*" It's that she's still around, it's that she lives inside him now, and people don't get to make decisions about that. Whoever moves in is who moves in, and all you can do is hope they leave eventually and don't trash the place on their way out.

You know what that moment when you hear yourself making sex noises for the first time? How do you handle that? So shocking, so unsettling. You have to decide right away – is it hot or is it weird? Personally I'm still not sure. Maybe that's why I keep going after musicians who seem to appreciate sounds that might be ugly. Just in case.

After we kissed the first time, we kept kissing all the time, every second we got. We should have gotten caught but we didn't somehow, miraculously. I'm sure Polly and Lady knew; they've rubbed it in enough times since then. I'm sure we were too obvious. But there was this feeling, this all-consuming, distracting forever-and-ever feeling like I'd never had – like we were making something completely new, every time I kissed Joe or she kissed me. This feeling like what was inside our kiss had never been seen by the world before, and we were going to keep it that way: secret, protected, this new thing that was ours and only ours, passed between us lips to lips. I don't think we ever talked about this playlist after it was finished, it was just always and forever "The Playlist" and that's the way it stayed. When we graduated

and I went to Loyola as a gender studies major, and Joe started recording her own stuff and putting it online from her parent's basement in Michigan, and I started kissing boys and other girls, it wasn't an invention. It felt like a dance, a step, a place on the flow-chart of what happens now. Paint-by-numbers. Fill in the blank.

Now make our own music, scraping together a meager amount through various online outlets and a network of similarly struggling artists in between day-jobs. Joe writes lyrics that sound like rhyming diary entries, which is nice, because otherwise I'd never know what she's thinking. When we fuck it's like we're seventeen again, it's like we're seventy, it's like my bare skin was made to feel hers or else it wouldn't have been made at all. Nothing else makes sense.

There's frost on the window here and the playlist is over and has gone quiet. There's a sound of keys and the doorknob is turning. Any second now you'll walk in and find me sitting here by the window with the tea I forgot to drink now gone cold and you'll have stories to tell about your last gig or the train ride over to the apartment. You'll put your phone down on the entry way table and flop down on the couch with that crooked smile, that one snaggletooth always trying to edge further and further out since your days of braces and retainers. You'll ask me if I've heard from Polly or Lady lately and, once that's done, once you realize that I've been curled up by the window for the last two hours listening to our old playlist on repeat for the first time in years you'll say something about it. Something you've said before, something like, "Why are you so weird?" But you only ask because you already know the answer, and so do I. We'll never get married and have babies and get divorced. I'll never marry an entire crowd of people on stage. Still, there's always another tour to plan. Always another song to write. Always another playlist to share.

There is a Light That Never Goes Out

He had to get out. Mischa didn't know who to call, he only knew he had to get out. It was late – too late to call anyone and have it be anything other than rude, anyway – and his hands were shaking with a fear that echoed through his body, wave after wave. It made his fingers cold from lack of circulation and blurred his eyesight on the edges.

A persistent ringing in his ears rose and then fell and rose again as Mischa fumbled with his smartphone in the darkness of his childhood-turned-adolescent bedroom with clumsy fingers. The room felt like a cell now more than ever; what had once been a safe space for him, a hideout from the chaos of the rest of the house, had so effortlessly turned into a prison. A streetlight outside his window streamed pale yellow into the room and Mischa tried to breathe through the lump in his throat, through the knot in his stomach, and through the internal repeating loop of Russian abuse that was echoing in his head from mere moments before.

“Disgusting” was the word his father had used – “*otvratnyy*” – also meaning: abhorrent, heinous, abominable. The kind of word you used to describe a hate crime, a child abuser, the worst of the worst, the sort of thing that might make your skin crawl at the mere reminder of its existence. He had called Mischa disgusting through half-gripped teeth and it obliterated everything else: every kind word his dad had ever said or held deep in his eyes, every faded memory of childhood trips to Baskin Robbins for ice cream on summer nights after soccer, every hour Mischa had spent justifying and negotiating and forgetting tight lips, open fists, and casually spoken slurs. There was only the word.

Disgusting – it rolled through him like a mantra, loud and invasive and distracting – *you're disgusting, you're disgusting, you're disgusting*. The word bloomed like ink in water, staining whatever it touched. It didn't matter whether or not it was true, whether or not Mischa *was* gay or whether or not he *was* disgusting or even whether or not these two concepts were linked. Just like it didn't matter what his dad had found that had prompted today's attack: an album, a magazine, a particular cut of t-shirt; you found what you were looking for if you looked hard enough, no matter what it was. The seed had long

since been planted, and words like *disgusting* were like a flash rainstorm on a spring day for the perennial bud of hatred spreading its roots deep down, ripping through him. He *had* to get out.

The glow of the phone lit up Mischa's wild-eyed and fear-stricken face as he scrolled one way and then the other over the names, searching for a name that might mean safety while his heart pounded in his ears. Typically when it came to these sorts of family matters, his go-to was his (only) sister Ludmila. She didn't have a car or a permanent address last he heard but Mila knew things no one else did about what happened inside this house, such that he wouldn't have to explain much, or at all. He hit the little telephone receiver icon that meant "call" and pressed the phone to his hot cheek like it was an ice pack on a toothache. It rang. It rang. It rang.

"Heyyyyyyy Mischka!" Loud. Wherever Mila was at, it was loud. Loud like bad live music being played inside somebody's overstuffed garage loud.

"H-hey," Mischa winced silently. He wanted to hang up instantly, but she'd used his cutesy nickname, and somehow that mattered, even now.

Mila was yelling at whoever she was with, loud enough for Mischa to get most of it: "Shut- shut up! Shut up, oh my god, fuck, it's my brother- *it's my brother shut up!*" Then her voice was in his ear again. "Hi! What's up baby Mischka? Johnny's here. Johnny says hi. Johnny! Say hi! He says hi."

Baby Mischka.

"Nothin', nothin'. Um." Mischa was still surprised she'd answered at all so that he hadn't planned on what he'd say. She must have already had her phone out, or else she never would have heard it ringing.

"You good?" Mila was practically yelling into the phone. "You okay? You're at home right?" She switched now into speaking sloppy Russian. "Is Yuri being a dick, do I have to come light something on fire or what Mischka? You tell me, yes? Who else is there? Is Joey there?" Then, to the room, and still in Russian: "This is my brother calling! The gay one!"

Her voice combined with the names she said, the roar of the house show happening wherever Mila was at, and her announcement to the room about Mischa's apparent gayness even veiled in their first language made something inside Mischa crumple up into itself in an attempt to disappear. The panic he

had felt before had now collapsed into a sense of dread laced with shame. No way was Mila going to be helpful like this. No way would Mischa even want her to try.

“I’m good,” Mischa answered finally, after what felt like forever. When had everyone up and decided his sexuality for him? And why did it matter so fucking much? That shame and doom in his gut begun to shift towards anger and Mischa shut his eyes tight to stave it off like he might have done to escape the pain from a shot, or a piercing, or a tattoo if he’d ever had one.

“You’re good! You’re so good!” Mila was laughing now, some male voice in the distance that Mischa could almost recognize.

“I just butt-dialed you I guess,” Mischa explained despite the fact that Mila one-hundred percent was not listening by now. “I’ll uh, I’ll let you go, I gotta go.” The phone was beginning to feel slippery in his sweating palm as he tried to be heard over Mila’s noise but not so loud as to attract attention from beyond his bedroom door.

“Bye- ... bye Mila.” Then he hung up, and was instantly back at square one. He was running out of options; he had to either figure a way out or...

Staying in this room, in this house, now felt like a death sentence and every inch in his body was focused on one seemingly simple directive: survive. Mischa was now cornered in a bedroom inside a house with a carefully distracted working mother, three brothers and a father interchangeable in their capacity for cruelty, and a Doberman pinscher who only growled at strangers with hats on. Survival came in the form of a four-letter name on his phone screen without a contact photo or recent call history: Joey. When Mila had asked about him, it had sent an invisible fist into Mischa’s stomach which he had momentarily been able to ignore. Now it was back, but Mischa couldn’t let it matter, couldn’t let himself notice.

He hit the green call button and held his breath until it burst out of him by the second ring, so he was back to breathing hard and shaky, eyes unfocused on the various posters that decorated his room; one poster read “Meat Is Murder”, and Mischa kept tracing the “M” in “Murder” with his eyes as the phone rang for a third and then fourth time.

Please, Mischa pleaded to himself, or maybe to some god he wasn't sure he quite believed in.

Please.

Then – a click, some shuffling, the muffled sound of dazed breathing on the other line and finally a voice that was groggy and deeper than he remembered: “Mmmh. ...hello?”

“I-it’s Mischa. C-can you come get me?” Mischa didn’t hesitate to ask. He didn’t think, wasn’t worried over word choice or apologizing first for calling so late like he would have usually under any other circumstances. It would have felt nice to hear Joey on the other end, should have felt nice, but that was stolen from him now. “*Please?*” The prayer had made its way out his lips.

“Uh-“ There was the sound of a yawn in Joey’s voice; he was clearly trying to process all this at once while Mischa sat on the other side in a state of vibrating adrenaline. Every sound like a footstep outside his door shot another wave of icy fear through his veins, the reptilian portion of his brain sounding klaxon sirens of *get out now or die* over everything else. Sometime later Mischa would look back on his panic and wonder if he wasn’t being overdramatic, a symptom of his ongoing inability to trust his own judgment. Sometime after that he would side with himself.

“Yeah- sure-“

Thank you thank you thank you thank you-

“You at home?” Joey’s question interrupted his thankful follow-up prayers.

“Y-yeah,” Mischa blurted the word along with the rest of the air in his lungs. “Do you know my new address?”

“Oh- uh, no man, can you text it to me?” Joey still sounded like he was half-asleep. He had never been good at being woken up, whether it was for school or just because Mischa couldn’t pretend to sleep any longer when he had stayed the night in Joey’s big, quiet house.

“Sure. Sure. Thanks. *Thanks*, Joey.” Mischa knew he was repeating himself, but somehow the repetition made it sound real, some kind of audio cue he could hang on to as proof of his coming escape from this hell. He would need it: the drive from Joey’s took around two hours. Mischa knew it well, kept it in his memory like a failsafe or a scrapbook of where he came from and where he’d run to given the

chance. Until then, he was stuck in a lazaretto-bedroom that held all the relics of his childhood as a monument to his struggling individuality.

“Hey, of course.” Joey’s voice broke through the cold cascade of dread that had poured itself over Mischa at the thought of having to wait – but it was worth it. It would be worth it. He was getting out of here, *tonight*. Joey didn’t even ask what it was that Mischa needed, knew to save Mischa the pain of having to come out and say it. Joey was good. He’d always been good.

“It’s gonna be okay, Mischa. I’ll see you soon, dude.” The ‘dude’ almost had Mischa smiling – it was weird the way Joey sounded so much like himself but also so different. Older. Taller, somehow? Just by hearing him through the phone. Mischa’s heart leapt into his throat and there wasn’t anything he wanted to believe more than what Joey had told him: it’s gonna be okay.

“See you soon.”

Then the line went dark.

Joey got there in an hour and thirty-three minutes. Mischa knew it from the timestamp on the texts between sending his address and the one from Joey telling Mischa he was waiting down the block, and he knew it from the way he couldn’t stop himself from checking his phone every few minutes. He had waited by his window, phone gripped in one hand, the other hand on the windowsill in case the footsteps and drunken voices outside his door threatened to come close again. It hadn’t always been like this – had it? It was hard to tell what was real anymore, what was true. Everything felt like a story Mischa was telling himself, even now.

Climbing out the window was a simple enough trick since his only sister had shown him how a couple years ago, “just in case”, but he had never had to use it before now. He hadn’t known how valuable the things his sister had to show him were until this moment, either. Wherever she was now, whoever she was with, Mischa just hoped she was still surviving just like she’d shown him to do, even before he’d known what that meant. It was hard sometimes not to be frustrated with her for aggravating their parents; where Mischa was just trying to live without calling any attention to himself, Mila seemed to jump at the chance to cross any and all lines in the sand that she so much as imagined her parents as

having drawn. All that felt different now, somehow, like he couldn't believe he had even for a second thought she might ought to change her combative behavior, her vitriolic tone, her cropped hair, any of it.

Safely on the ground, Mischa pulled at the old navy blue zip-up hoodie he was wearing so that it was tighter around him. He had gotten it second-hand, though he couldn't remember from where exactly, and he more or less lived in it most days; having the same thing to wear every day was a safe choice that he didn't have to make more than once. His room was on the second story, but the trip was doable with a little courage and the big maple tree that stretched just into reach from his window. Though they hadn't lived in this house long, it had once annoyed him whenever Mila barged into his bedroom at some odd hour, black on her legs and arms and eyes, just so she could scramble her skinny self through his window without a word for when she might be back. He wanted to call Mila and tell her he thought her shaved head was the best thing he'd ever seen.

Throwing the hood up on his jacket, Mischa headed in the direction of the hazy headlights shining towards him through the late night fog and tried to steady his breathing. For some reason he was worried about showing up and seeing Joey for the first time in a little over a year and being out of breath, like that would be a sign of failure, or weakness. He wanted to hide it the way he tried to hide it when a flight of stairs winded him in public – like Joey was a stranger who might judge him for something arbitrary like that.

It wasn't until he was a few feet away from the car that Mischa recognized it for what it was: the same old Toyota mini-van that Joey's dad had always driven Mischa home in from sleepovers or from school when they carpooled. It was older than he was – older than both boys combined, probably – but the figure in the driver's seat was far from the one Mischa was used to seeing there, far from the tired collection of loss and worry that made up Joey's dad.

Suddenly Mischa's heart was in his throat again, but the adrenaline had been replaced with raw nerves and the realization that he had no idea what to say now that he was here with his hand on the peeling gray paint of the van's front passenger door, now that he had woken Joey up with the first phone

call since he'd gotten that phone some months ago and made Joey drive all the way down here in the middle of the night.

"Made it here in record time," Joey bragged as the door opened without missing a beat, his face all tired smiles and quiet concern.

"Y-yeah you did," Mischa nervously laughed out a reply as he scrambled into the van, his fingers cold at the tips and palms sweaty. For a moment while the door was open, the light streamed in from outside and revealed a version of his childhood friend that he'd never seen before. Joey's face had lost its child-like appearance in every way: his cheeks had become sharper, his chin strong and defined, and the shapeless generic little boy haircut that he'd sported for so long had been exchanged for something neat and defined and maybe just a little too long in the front to be considered respectable. He was wearing a leather jacket – black – and some similarly colored bracelets on one wrist so that altogether he looked like he should be driving a motorcycle or leaning with his hand against a locker over some doe-eyed girl in a high school hallway somewhere, not driving his dad's minivan at nearly two AM on a weeknight. The Joey that Mischa knew was hyperactive with moments of sudden and striking melancholy.

The Joey that Mischa knew took competitive figure-skating lessons, had been doing it since second grade after he'd caught the Winter Olympics and became obsessed. He liked chocolate syrup sandwiches, 80's hair metal, and walking home from school in the rain no matter how cold it was. Joey and Mischa had met when Joey moved to Mischa's school midway through the first grade; Mischa spent most recesses hanging on the swings by himself, the ones nobody used because they were older and further away from the rest of the playground amenities. Joey must have seen his chance to make a friend easy with the loner kid. Mischa couldn't remember now what Joey had said to him that first day, only that he'd been effortlessly kind to Mischa, and hadn't screamed or anything when a ladybug flew onto his arm in the middle of swinging. Joey had just let the ladybug crawl on him as it pleased.

Mischa reflected in turn on how little his own appearance had changed: he was as skinny as ever, had mostly the same clothes he'd worn in middle school, and he didn't think his voice had changed very much. His hair had only gotten longer, past his shoulders now, which was about the only thing his

brothers didn't give him shit about – go fucking figure. All of this reminded Mischa how long it had been since the two had really seen each other; Mischa's family moving away had essentially been a death sentence to what had become a way of life for the two of them, and though it had been heart-breaking at the time he hadn't realized how much he had relied on it until he was too far away and too closed off to anything about the loss. Why Mischa's family had to move was irrelevant to him as whatever it was his father had found of Mischa's that incriminated him and led to tonight's blow-up. None of it was within his control, none of it made sense to him all the way, none of it was about him. But here they were, now, and the memory of moving and his parents' desperate attempts to assert control over everything in any house they lived in were all mixed up in the darkness of the night.

Mischa closed the door behind him and everything was dark again except for the soft light on the dashboard through the windshield. He silently settled into the splitting fabric of the passenger's seat, which felt much smaller than he remembered from the days when he was strapped in behind it.

"Figured your folks might get weird if I parked outside the driveway," Joey offered, his voice confident and steady in contrast to the way Mischa's hands were wringing themselves in the pockets of his hoodie.

"Yeah, probably." Mischa hadn't even thought about it – but Joey was right. No doubt one of Mischa's brothers – Yuri or Yvgeny or Sascha – would have come out to investigate any strange vehicle that lingered for too long with the lights on, if they were still up to see it. Whether or not they would have recognized the car or the driver was a different question entirely; they seemed to only pay attention to Mischa's life long enough to disapprove, but never to take notes. It was a strange but familiar experience to be teased for bands & television shows he hadn't liked since he was a child, or things he had never liked at all.

More than a few moments of silence passed between the two of them as the car idled and so did they, some directionless force hanging in the air and paralyzing Mischa now that his plan had run its course. He'd done it, he'd survived – so what now? Still Joey wasn't asking why Mischa had called, like it was just obvious. Probably it was.

“...so where do you wanna go?” Joey asked finally, rubbing at his nose a little. There was a little stubble on his chin like he’d missed it shaving. His tired smirk soldiered on through whatever awkwardness Mischa was likely radiating. If Joey noticed at all, he didn’t let on. Mischa didn’t think he’d ever seen Joey awkward, or fumbling for words, so of course it wasn’t different now. On the other hand, Mischa had always been awkward, always been fumbling for words, so of course that wasn’t different either.

Mischa naturally struggled to find a response, his eyes darting all over the van as he searched for an answer. The little sun-bleached plastic rosary that hung from the rearview mirror looked black against the silhouette of the streetlights behind it.

Finally Mischa’s eyes settled on the upstairs light of his house at the end of the street, cautiously like it might catch him watching and trigger some alarms.

“Can we just sit here for a second?” Mischa asked, fiddling with some hole he’d worn near the cuff of his jacket sleeve and only succeeding in making it bigger. “I just want to make sure they don’t notice and come out looking for me.” Mischa couldn’t say why he wanted this, just that he did. It didn’t make much sense to wait, but there was something about having the knowledge that he was undetected – or, alternatively, the knowledge that there would be a hunt out for him shortly – that mattered more to him than the sense it made.

“Oh yeah, yeah sure, man.” Joey was trying to smile at him like they weren’t waiting to see if a group of homophobic Russian men were going to pour out of Mischa’s house and come searching for him like a pack of bloodhounds after a hated fox. Joey killed the motor and the headlights and then the van was filled with a screaming stillness thick as the fog that surrounded them.

The light of his father’s room in the distance paralyzed Mischa with intent as he tried to will it into darkness from afar the same way he had tried to will his own salvation into being earlier that night.

Please go out, please go out, please don’t check my bedroom, please go out. Let it go. Let me go.

Now and again Joey tried to make conversation, tried to offer something kind or comforting, but the boy was sleepy and more than that it was hard to find small talk when you hadn't really spoken in close to a year.

This wasn't how Mischa had planned on seeing Joey again – and he had always planned on seeing Joey again – but in a way that he could control, so he could manipulate the circumstances to seem as put-together as he possible (whatever that looked like). Staying in touch had been nearly impossible in a way that filled Mischa with shame. The older Mischa got, the more his parents regulated what he did, who he talked to, what he listened to or watched, and his brothers – eager to win approval and maintain their status in the house – were more than happy to act as watchdogs should the opportunity arise, as much with Mischa and his sister as they did with one another. What his parents were condemned seemed to change from week to week; websites and media that were safe one week were off-limits the next, and never with any sort of real explanation, though Mischa had given up asking. What seemed to matter above all else was that Mischa's time was not his own. Mischa hadn't given up easily, and he had the stories and the scars to prove it: he had been systematically banned from social media and though he knew workarounds and how to delete internet history, Mischa could never lie convincingly the way his sister could. He could never throw a punch like she could either, and after enough time spent essentially radio silent Mischa felt too guilty to reach out to Joey again, too sure that Joey would be angry at him for disappearing, or that he wouldn't believe how hard Mischa had tried to make contact, or simply that he would have just moved on despite their long history together. Joey had always been more popular than Mischa in school, and it only seemed to make sense to have increased that much more with Mischa out of the way.

For a while they had been able to text each other, but after Mischa has his phone suddenly confiscated for “texting too much” for six months he had been too embarrassed at the thought of having to explain his disappearance to text Joey out of the blue, certain that Joey had found more accessible and less stressful friendships. He'd only recently been given phone privileges back after it had become too much of an inconvenience for his family to have to go talk to him in person every time someone in the

house wanted to ask him to do something for them, or interrogate him about Mila and if he'd been contacting her whenever she showed up again and inevitably started causing trouble. The phone came with a new number, and a loss of all his contacts, except for those he knew by heart.

All these facts buzzed beneath Mischa's skin as he watched the second-story light on the house at the end of the street. He realized that at some point Joey had gone quiet, or, Mischa thought, maybe he'd fallen asleep. Mischa glanced to over only to find that, much like himself, Joey was also watching the light, his brown eyes wide open as though it also held some sort of question of freedom or safety for him despite the fact that he could drive home any second he chose and crawl back into bed like none of this ever happened.

"Hah!" Joey exclaimed, breaking the silence in a cold car on a lonely street dotted with fire-hydrants and forgotten newspapers. His eyes were still forward, and they shone and reflected all that was around them like mirrors or stars. "Night-night, motherfuckers."

The light had gone out, and Mischa was free.

Without a word, Joey started the engine and pulled away from the curb like a man on a mission. He sped by the house of oppression with two middle fingers up, his knees under the wheel like he'd practiced for this exact moment, and whooping like a dog released from its cage.

Mischa widened the hole in the sleeve of his hoodie an extra few centimeters with his anxious fiddling and turned his gaze and a smile to the floor, his face flushed with emotion: both his own and second-hand from Joey's victory howl.

"So where do you wanna go?" Joey asked again. As he coolly cruised down Mischa's street, the empty road and the brightness of the moon seemed to suggest that it was Joey's confident presence that had cleared the place and brought the glow out in the stars, rather than simple coincidence of timing.

"I don't know," Mischa started, his forehead pressed up against the cold glass of the window as they passed front lawn after front lawn. The seatbelt strained across his chest. Now and then the yellow eyes of a feral cat would flash at him before darting under an SUV or leaping over a fence. "Just not back there." He sniffed, then added: "It's not my home, it's their home."

Joey was quiet in response, just clicked the radio onto something old and familiar, and Mischa let the cool feeling of glass on his skin cure the heat in his cheeks, let it settle into his bones. Now that he was out and there was no question of his safety, the quiet of the van began to drive him into his memory – of all the times he’d thought about calling Joey before now, and hadn’t. Of Mischa’s old house back in the town where Joey and Joey’s dad and older brother still lived, and the times they had spent in it, always careful to greet Mischa’s parents politely on their way up to Mischa’s room, and to not leave any handprints on the leather furniture downstairs should Mischa’s parents arbitrarily decide to ban Joey from the house for a time. He recalled blurry scenes of stealing vodka together at one of his family’s warm and dizzying parties, only thirteen years old and right there in plain sight behind one of their white leather couches. Mischa’s fingers curled around the armrest of the van’s passenger chair and he thought then of crawling into the trunk together in the stillness of Joey’s garage the night that they put Joey’s mom in the ground after she’d joined the ranks of suicide statistics.

“I want to see *people*,” Mischa was talking before he knew what he was saying, but it was true and he realized it as he said it: he was done with death, and he was done with the dark. The glass had begun to fog up from his breath. “I want to see... lights.” He leaned back in the seat and gave Joey a look that he hoped wasn’t as pathetic as he currently felt. What he’d said was terribly, unhelpfully vague, but it was all he had in him just then.

Joey contemplated Mischa with dark brown eyes still glinting from the streetlights that zoomed by in silence except for the quiet background synth of the eighties song playing on the radio.

“Got it,” Joey nodded, grinned, and gave a thumbs up at Mischa for good measure, clearing Mischa of any responsibility for explanation further in that way Joey had always been good for, just like he’d always been good at knowing when to change the subject.

“So you climbed out the window, huh?”

They joined the freeway and Mischa counted the spare taillights of other cars in front of them, beside them, few enough to count on one hand if he wanted. Joey merged lanes like he had a plan. And he asked questions like he actually cared.

“Yeah,” Mischa answered finally, and he clasped his hands between his knees to stem their nervous bouncing. “Ugh. Tell me you didn’t *see me* do it – I figured the fog would be too thick.” In Mischa’s opinion there was no way he could have looked anything other than a spasmodic mess climbing down from a tree, or doing else that required physical dexterity for that matter.

“It was,” Joey replied with a smirk and a chuckle. “I just figured since I saw the tree when we drove by, unless they’re keeping you on the ground floor.”

“Yeah, Mila used to climb out it all the time.”

“Oh yeah? Sounds like her.”

Silence again. *Shit*. Mischa knew just what was coming before Joey even opened his mouth. Too late now.

“How’s she doing?”

Joey’s childhood crush on Mischa’s sister was a well-known thing to him by now, but Joey probably would have asked anyway – he was just nice like that, Mischa figured, and it didn’t bother him at all, in any way.

“Um- she’s okay... I think,” Mischa explained. Then he added, “I haven’t heard from her in a little bit. ...but you know how she is.”

“Yeah, right,” Joey said it with a smile but Mischa wouldn’t have guessed it if he hadn’t seen it himself. Mila was a painful person to love, but Mischa was starting to blame her less and less for it. He hadn’t really thought too long before, about growing up a girl in their house. Seemingly arbitrary things like that, like being a girl or liking the wrong music, Mischa was learning, could be weaponized either by you or against you.

They pulled off the freeway and Mischa felt the invisible hand on his chest loosen its grip if only so it could tighten again. In another several minutes they were in what appeared to be a downtown area – somewhere Mischa had only driven through with his brothers a handful of times since they’d moved. The buildings looked older, storefronts designed for beauty rather than simple functionality. The restaurants were closed but still glowed with security lights meant to deter burglars or maybe to entice passers-by to

come through during business hours but none of them had names Mischa recognized: not a single Applebee's or Olive Garden to be found. But there were certainly a lot of lights.

A few blocks further and a vaguely familiar theater came into view – it was old and graffiti'd and seemed forgotten during daytime hours, with a dusty marquee and weather-beaten display cases holding posters for attractions long gone by. The few times Mischa had passed by had given him the impression that this place was deserted or defunct, but now under the luminous sheen of the moon it was exploding with life. People of all sorts milled out in front of thumping front doors and curled down the sidewalk in little groups sharing cigarettes or lingering near booming portable stereos. They had hair of all colors that often stuck out in different directions, teenaged bodies dressed in leather and glitter and platform shoes, all pierced or tattooed or shaved in some way that Mischa had reserved for witnessing only through a television set. They laughed with open mouths at jokes he couldn't hear, called to one another from the other side of the street like long-lost family members reuniting. He half expected to see Mila mixed in with them somewhere, with combat boots up to her knees and starting some fight with someone twice her size just to give herself another chance to hit rather than to be hit for once.

The theater building pulsed with the *thumpa-thumpa* of the music inside so that Mischa could feel it vibrating under his feet as Joey rolled by slowly. Occasionally the big double doors would open and flashes of purple, blue, electric green light would strobe out behind whoever was entering or exiting. There were three big letters backlit above the currently blank marquee: "*U.F.O.*"

A couple of kids with cool haircuts (cooler than Mischa thought was fair or right for kids their age to have) seemed to recognize the van as they slid by and they waved and they looked past Mischa's face, trying to find the person they thought was inside – Joey, if Mischa was any good at reading lips. Obvious. Obviously they were looking for Joey. It was loud enough that he couldn't hear what they were saying, but it didn't matter. The excitement that had washed over him at seeing new life was quickly turning into bitter isolation.

“What is this place?” Mischa asked, rubbing at the beloved hole in his hoodie sleeve with one hand and turning his face away from the window. Joey looked brighter than ever, and he honked the car horn in response to some of the whooping teenagers who seemed to recognize him.

“U.F.O.,” Joey answered, his grin gleaming in the street-lit van. “Universal Freak Out. It’s pretty cool.” Then his eyes focused on Mischa’s face, stopped looking past him through the window. “You wanna go in? *I can get us both in.*” Joey sounded proud. How often did he come here? How close was this place to Mischa’s house? Mischa couldn’t remember. How close had they been and just not known it, Joey wrapped up in music and lights and Mischa casketed inside the sterile white ceiling of his upper middle class home?

“No.”

The idea of going in somewhere for the first time where Joey was known and loved and accepted somehow made Mischa feel sure that he wouldn’t be any of those things. The lights and the people were nice, but there would always be this barrier between them, he felt – be it a minivan window, a judgmental look, or an arbitrary word of exclusion. It was so obvious that Mischa would never fit in inside a place like that. He couldn’t afford to look that cool, even if he could fake it like he was, which he couldn’t.

“Alright.” Joey held in his sigh – Mischa heard it catch in Joey’s chest and then die – and instantly Mischa wished he’d said yes, felt like a complete and utter mistake of a person to have said “No”, but it was done now, no going back. The shifting rainbow of lights and hair and smoke that was The U.F.O. sat safely trapped in the rearview mirror, where Mischa could forever contemplate his missed opportunities rather than risk having lived them. It felt bitingly familiar.

As they drove on, the artificial lights became fewer and fewer until it was altogether black outside other than the spackling of stars thrown across the sky. The roads became dirt, trading pavement for rocks and potholes, and all the while Mischa would catch Joey glancing over at him with this confident expression of calm on his face like he hadn’t worried once in his life about anything. It was enough to convince a person to try and do the same, enough at least to drive away for good the voice of Mischa’s father in his head urging him to self-destruct. There were a million things Mischa wanted to ask Joey:

about Joey's older brother Johnny whom Mischa had practically grown up with, about school and what it was like for Joey now that they weren't going to the same one, about them and their friendship and what was different and what wasn't - but instead he just rolled the window down and let the wind whip his long brown hair across his face. The feeling was consistent and comforting and the way the cold air nipped at his cheeks held him here, in this moment, saved him from the temptation to drown in the circumstances which had created it.

Joey rolled to a stop under a freeway overpass and at the end of a long, flat road, so long that it disappeared out of sight against the horizon and so flat that Mischa could see all of the little semi-rural properties on either side of it. In the daytime there would have been sheep and chickens here and there amongst the yellowed play structures for children who had since moved out, but now the two of them seemed to be the only ones around for miles. The hood of the overpass threw them into darkness but even still the moon hung low in the sky, fat and full of endless mystery. It flashed and sparkled in Joey's eyes and against the reflective hood of the van where it stuck out.

Mischa felt unspoken words linger on his tongue, and he was momentarily seized by the feeling that here in the darkened underpass was his big chance to ask all those questions he wanted answers to. New ones flooded through him unbidden: did Joey ever think of him anymore? Had he missed Mischa the way Mischa had missed him? *Did Joey also think he was disgusting?*

Disgusting.

The word caught Mischa in its vice grip and the fear swallowed his words and his voice entirely, closing around him like a claw so that in that instant he felt sure he would never make a sound again. Joey was looking at him expectantly. The motor of the van idled ominously. The radio distantly wailed some male voice of longing and regret.

"You up for this?"

Joey's eyes flashed again as he looked from Mischa to the road suggestively, and he revved the engine of his dad's minivan once, and then twice. Joey was watching Mischa's face for a response like he was shining a searchlight, and Mischa chewed on his bottom lip as though he was chewing on the words

he couldn't get out, like he had when he thought he might never get out of that prison cell of a bedroom which was so many miles away now, a lifetime away now.

Heart pounding like a hummingbird in a cage, Mischa stopped chewing and answered:

“Hell yeah.”

Joey instantly slammed on the gas and the little minivan that was older than the both of them lurched forward and shot off like a comet in the night – it was stupid and reckless and a teenaged spit in the face of death, all the things that Mischa had never been allowed to be before, had never allowed himself to even dream of being before. The window still down, Mischa's hair whirled around behind him like the streak of light that their zooming headlights left behind. Every bump on the dirt road launched the van upward, as though it was trying to get closer any way it could to the fullness of the moon. And Joey the whole time hooting and hollering like he hadn't done this a million times before seemed to spark and catch in the moonlight, and Mischa hanging one-handed onto the handle above the van's window let out a howl he didn't know he could make. This wasn't just surviving: this was *living*.

They were racing down the road in a wake of dust and noise complaints and up ahead Mischa could see the dead end of an empty lot fast approaching when, from the corner of his eye, a twin pair of rapidly growing lights blinded his vision and all at once the little van came to a screeching stop. Mischa's seatbelt bit into his chest and he felt his head lurch forward over his knees before thudding back against the headrest. The monstrous bellowing of a truck's horn flooded his senses and then a wall of metal flew past them on the cross street so close that they both felt the minivan shake and shudder as the hulking vehicle ghosted by, creaking and groaning under its own weight in a momentary ear-splitting *whoosh*. It disappeared again into the darkness just as fast as it had come, the sound of the horn mournfully lingering behind it and then everything was silent again.

Mischa's face was pink and he was breathless, and weightless, and floating. He should have been scared, should have been *terrified* – should have probably pissed himself right there and then but all he felt was *alive*, every cell in his body humming and buzzing with excitement for this moment and anticipation for what might come next. Joey looked at him with an expression of euphoric dizziness, his

mouth slightly open to catch his breath, and his fists still held curled around the steering wheel with white knuckles.

“That... was... awesome!” Joey blurted between breaths, the quintessence of teenaged eloquence.

Outside Mischa could hear the scattered far-away sounds of disturbed citizens coming out to try and get faces and names for whatever hooligans had been racing down their driveway again. He said nothing, except, breathlessly:

“Yeah. It was.”

Joey laughed, and then Mischa did too, though he didn't know why he was doing it. The laughter just poured out of him like a dam had exploded from the inside and for a little while the two of them just sat with flushed faces and laughed at the absurdity of at their luck, to be alive at all. Joey was the first to manage words again, with a sigh and one hand rubbing at his eyes.

“Man. Can't believe you still wear my hoodie.”

“I... what?”

“That hoodie. You took it from me like three years ago, right before you had to— remember? You brought over that Smiths CD or something and when I came back from the bathroom you had it on, 'cause you were cold. By the end of the day you'd worried a hole in it so I was like – keep it.”

Mischa looked down, wiggled his thumb through the hole he'd worn so large over the years, and then back up at the way Joey's face seemed to look at him with knowing pride in the way no one else's really had. Joey's eyes were still glinting in defiance of the dark, and Mischa felt like maybe his own were too.

“Yeah. Yeah—,” Mischa fumbled for a reply, something warm and easy settling over him all at once and easing him into a quiet feeling which he had almost forgotten could exist at all. “I remember now.” Somewhere in the quieter depths of his fluttering and frightened teenage heart he felt a light flicker back into life had nearly gone out.

FIN