

For Lucinda.
Someday soon.
Sorry about all the vomit.

“You know the place between sleep and awake, the place where you can still remember dreaming? That’s where I’ll always love you. That’s where I’ll be waiting.”

— J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Before the late August rain that year, I had never been kissed. Not that I was against the idea or anything — the opportunity never really came my way. I was the furthest thing from against it. I was on the verge of desperation. Internally, of course.

It was a dry summer that year. We saw nothing but sun from mid-June through July and so far into August that everyone kept saying *we might as well move to California if it’s gonna be this dry*. The lack of rain meant the bounty of sun, so I spent months sticky. The sweaty backs of my thighs stuck to whatever surface I sat on, my shirt stuck to the space between and below my breasts, the truth got stuck in my throat. Summer was a claustrophobic thing stuck between a rock and a hard place, trying its best to breathe.

I spent those few months working as a camp counselor twenty miles north of my hometown. Each morning I biked over to the first stop on the camp bus route, tied my bike to a tree engraved with some pair of fools’ initials (EB + MM), and waited for the bus to actually arrive. Once it did, along with the campers that lived closest, we all boarded and drove around for an hour until everyone in the ten-mile radius was on board. I did the same thing in reverse each afternoon. The bike ride, which was refreshing and beautiful each morning, was often miserable by the evening. My legs were sore from running around with children all day, and all I wanted to do was fall into bed. But I biked the three miles home. I tried to find some serenity in the interlocking branches of the trees above me, growing into each other like childhood lovers.

Each evening, I made it home by quarter to six. I would let the gears spin out as I glided around the garbage cans and into the driveway, bike spokes ticking like a heart, like clockwork. I always rode past my little brother, Reg, who was fifteen minutes out from the end of his basketball training. He was trying to make varsity that year. It wasn’t like sophomores never made varsity — they did, and often — but it was unlikely Reg would. He only recently showed interest in athleticism, and it was kind of the guy helping him not to be a prick about it. And I only knew the guy wasn’t a prick because I always spent those last fifteen minutes leaning

against the garage door, green apple in hand, watching as Elliot Bowman tried to teach my brother how to score a three-pointer.

I went to high school with boys like Reg and with boys like Elliot Bowman. In fact, I went to high school with Bowman. There was never anything especially dickwad-esque about him, but it was hard to know with the jock types. We were in APUSH together and often paired for group assignments. He was polite if not a little snarky (in a good way), and he always completed his work on time and satisfactorily, which was the biggest indicator that maybe he wasn't so bad. So when Reg told me Elliot Bowman had agreed to help him out that summer, I at least knew that it was improbable Bowman would ever ditch my brother.

The fifteen minutes I spent eating an apple each day while my brother failed to get a shot in on Bowman were unremarkable. The two of them were awfully quiet whenever they played one-on-one, and Bowman's encouragement when Reg took shots was sincere yet subdued. Once the clock struck six, he patted my brother's shoulder, told him he was improving (hard to tell) and that he'd see him same time tomorrow. Then he nodded at me in some caveman form of goodbye and walked off down the street with his hands in the pockets of his jean shorts. I took the last bite of my apple, high-fived Reg, and glanced at the figure retreating around the corner before closing the door on the outside world.

Now, the picture I have painted thus far is one of a respectable, professional interest in Elliot Bowman.

What I have not told you is that I found Bowman particularly attractive.

His skin, usually the color of sand, had gone bronze from days spent in the sun. Brown hair curled around his ears and fell over his forehead. A newcomer was the pair of glasses he was constantly pushing up his nose, which were so thick with prescription that they enlarged his hazel eyes to a degree that should've been comical but I instead found endearing. Every time he passed or jumped or took a shot, his lithe body contorted in a way that drew eyes. I watched his leg hair blow in the breeze and thought, *This is what it is to be a freak.*

My most notable memory wasn't of Bowman in APUSH, either, no matter how many times his muttered comments made me laugh at the worst of moments. No, whenever anyone brought up Elliot Bowman, I thought of Faiza Alfarsi's party at the end of senior year, and the door left ajar.

I would never describe myself as much of a partier, but I went to every party anyone threw throughout the whole of high school. Every party I was invited to, that is. All my friends were very interested in getting drunk, and after puking my guts out in the fall of sophomore year and exaggeratedly swearing off drinking for the rest of my life, I was made designated driver. My exaggeration thus became truth. I spent every party with my back to someone's wall, eyes on everyone else. Because of this, I knew who was hooking up with who, who was doing drugs,

who was selling, and anything else you could think of. Not that I particularly cared. Our high school rumor mill flourished without my participation. It was just fun to know things other people didn't want me to, and even more fun to know them without anyone knowing I did. To this day, I will catch up with friends from high school who just learned Omari Jengo cheated with Natalina Vieira, and I have to stop myself from smiling.

On the night of Faiza's party, I was especially bored. I was "watching over" friends who were happily groping their significant others. Mediocre pop music blared from the speakers, and someone had thrown red items of clothing over every light so the whole house looked like it was soaked in school dance punch. My boredom turned to discomfort when two bodies, impossibly entangled, thumped against the wall next to me. Trying not to gag, I turned and fled upstairs.

"Upstairs" at parties are hit or miss if you're looking to escape social obligation. Two or more people will undoubtedly be found in the throes, and there may be an empty bedroom that you figure is empty because the room definitely gives you the creeps, but the saving grace is always the bathroom. There, you'll find painkillers for the headache the horrible music has given you, a cup that'll make it easier to drink from the tap, a toilet to use, and plenty to snoop through without it feeling too private. I considered bathrooms sacred.

The second floor of Faiza's house was impenetrable in that each door was indistinguishable from the other. They were all closed, no light emanating from underneath. Nothing was pasted on any of them to indicate it was a child's bedroom, and because nothing had been pasted, there was no remaining residue to indicate it was a child's bedroom. Every door was just white. White, white, white. Every door handle was immaculately polished. No smudges indicated paint or food or anything like that. Behind any door could be two teenagers fondling each other.

I was fucked.

Doing a closer scan, I walked down the hallway, trying to access a sixth sense that didn't exist. And on second glance, I noticed that a certain door had been left ajar. Hope struck my body like lightning. Maybe this was a bathroom that had been recently used, and if not, even just a peek would help me beyond measure. I crept forwards and leaned in close, peering into the room.

The floor was carpet, so decidedly not a bathroom. Before I could look away, my eyes roved up and caught on two bodies: one was the back of my friend Elizabeth, who was easily identifiable by the pink ribbons tied at the end of her two french braids, and the other was Elliot Bowman. He was glasses-less, as he had been for the entirety of high school — I assume contacts had something to do with that one, given his prescription — and his mouth slid against Elizabeth's.

I gasped, a small thing, unheard by the two teenagers. They were most definitely fondling each other. A closer look, which I cannot defend with anything but morbid (horny) curiosity, revealed that Elliot's hands were gliding over Elizabeth's skin. She distractedly removed her top, and I, frozen, watched as Elliot's thick yet bony fingers pulled her into his chest.

Quickly, I shut the door. I didn't much care if they heard it or not. I sped down the hall and the stairs, right into the kitchen. Shoving people aside, I made for the sink. I turned on the tap and splashed cool water all over my face. I cupped the water against my eyes, blinking over and over, as if I could wash away all I witnessed.

None of it mattered. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Elliot's hands on her back, holding the divots of her waist. Water ran down my face, seeping into my white t-shirt. People around me stared and murmured, wondering what the hell was wrong with me. I stood there, panting like a dog, unable to help myself from imagining Elliot's hands on my skin, my waist, my chest.

He had always been pretty. That was when he became something else. Something desirable.

I *wanted* him.

I had trouble looking him in the eye after that. Elizabeth, too.

So I didn't acknowledge him when I biked into the garage, nor did I acknowledge him when he was standing in my driveway, basketball in those wide, powerful hands. The only acknowledgement we ever gifted each other was in that horrible nod he gave me and the tight-lipped smile I gave in return. God, I know I called that nod caveman-like before, but that was because I tried so long to ignore how special that stupid nod made me feel. That nod made me feel like I was in the bleachers and he was on the court and he could only look out at me. It made me feel like we were standing in the middle of Times Square and hundreds of thousands of people were weaving between us, yet his eyes never left mine. Everything that nod made me feel was sappy and disgusting and truly, truly sickening. I'm surprised I didn't puke every time he turned that corner, disappearing into our wretched small town. I came close once or twice. My stomach somersaulted whenever he left.

All of this is to say there was a day that summer, a few days after fireworks had lit up the sky on July fourth, that I missed my quarter to six mark.

Richie Moretti vomited on Cristina Rosario's lap halfway through the returning rounds. Not only did we have to pull over to let Richie properly release whatever he had left inside, he took a few minutes to resettle, and Cristina forced another girl to give her a change of clothes. So then Cristina changed on the side of the road, leaving me to police onlookers. I nodded politely at parental tantrums (*Your being late upsets my entire afternoon*, etc.). Upon arrival to

both the Moretti and Rosario stops, I had to explain the chain of events and why their children had vomit covered clothes. By the time I was dropped off, it was a half past six.

Oddly enough, I actually enjoyed the bike ride home that day. My thighs ached and my straw-thin hair stuck to my forehead and back of my neck and I had to focus on keeping my eyes open, but all that fighting to stay upright was worth it. Sweet-smelling pollen drifted in the air. The sun swept through the green, painting the cement golden and leaving strange shadows on the asphalt. A breeze danced on my arms and legs. With every passing house, I wondered at the lives inside, the tiny and infinite differences that led them to that street rather than mine.

I turned the corner onto my block smiling for the first time all summer.

For a moment, I closed my eyes, letting the world sweep me up into an elastic daydream. Air tickled my ears and the orange of my eyelids was a warm hug. If I had been confident enough, I would've let go of the handlebars so fate could steer me home.

Instead I opened my eyes, turning into the driveway, and skirted around the trash cans, pedaling a little harder up the incline. The garage door was open. Waiting. I slid off my bike, leaning it against the wall. I glanced at the driveway again, at the emptiness of it. I'd known I would most definitely miss the boys, but I still felt their absence like a bruise. The garage door closed with the press of a button. I watched it whirl all the way down, then stepped into the house.

"Home," I called out, blindly heading straight for the kitchen. I dropped my bag next to the white counter, pumped soap onto my hands. Dipping my hands under the running tap, I sighed, finally letting the exhaustion seep into my bones.

"You're late."

Jumping, I looked up to see Elliot Bowman sitting at my kitchen counter. His black frames had fallen halfway down his nose, allowing me to glimpse the undistorted eyes usually hidden behind the glass. He pushed them up with a finger and a full-body shrug. Then he smiled, small and polite.

"I didn't know you were still here," I said, pressing a wet, soapy hand to my heart.

He shrugged with one shoulder this time. His faded purple t-shirt crinkled with the movement, then fell back into its former position. "Reg was worried. I was worried. Thought I should stay to see whether or not you died."

I chuckled, resuming my hand washing. "Well, I didn't. There was just an incident on the bus home, so it took longer than usual. Hope you guys didn't miss me too bad."

"We missed you terribly," he said. His lips formed a small sort of smirk, ironic and horribly cute. I hated him then for being in my house and waiting up for me like he cared about my wellbeing. Like we were more than acquaintances. If I'd actually died, he would've showed up to the funeral and sat in a row with all his other high school friends who thought they should

be there out of some weird obligation, like they finally owed me their twisted respect. “What happened on the bus?”

“Vomit.”

He nodded, lips pursed. “Scrumptious.”

I blew air out of my nose. “Yeah.” I turned away, drying my hands with a paper towel, and asked, “Hey, can you pass me an apple?” There was no reason I should let Richie, Cristina, and Elliot Bowman completely disrupt my routine. “One of the-”

Turning, I saw Bowman, arm stretched across the counter, a perfectly plump green apple resting in the palm of his hand.

“-green ones,” I finished, like it still mattered.

A smile spread slowly across his face. “I know. You eat them every day, Marsden.”

Slowly, carefully, without touching him in any capacity, I took the apple. Cradled it in my hands. “Thanks.”

“Yup.” He thumped the counter once, twice, with the heel of his palm. With a backward glance upstairs, he said, “Tell Reg ‘bye’ for me.”

I nodded. “Bye.”

His answering smile burned bright against my eyelids. He left without another word.

And so began the days where Elliot Bowman and I did more than just nod and smile at each other. I rode past each evening, earning a ‘hi’ from my brother and a ‘hey’ from Bowman. Once, after he high-fived my brother goodbye, I asked if I was going to get a high-five or not. Laughing, our hands collided, the sound seeming to shake the trees. Then that became a thing — if Reg got a high-five, so did I. If Reg got a fist bump, so did I. I learned to cherish the moments when our skin brushed, tried to memorize the shape of him against me.

I had issues. Lots of them.

Reg and Bowman started to have more conversations during their practices, discussing baseball cards and music and the biggest mistakes Bowman believed he made in high school (*I hung around the wrong people but I never tried to hang around anyone else*, he said one afternoon, and then he came over to thump my back as I quasi-choked on an apple chunk). He started to linger around the house. Reg would offer to show him some trading cards or a new CD he’d ordered, leaving Bowman and I in the living room. Oftentimes I fell onto the couch, grabbing at the bookshelves behind it, and pretended to read. Bowman stood, hands in his back pockets. He swayed side to side. He hummed to himself.

Eventually, he started to sit, hands awkwardly rubbing his knees. Whenever we caught each other’s eye, we both looked away.

July turned to August. My mother came down the stairs to find Bowman busying himself with *Emma*, which I had been reading until he asked what it was, so I handed it off for him to

read the blurb. He took it and started to read the first chapter. I watched him, fidgeting with the loose threads of my jean shorts.

The slapping of my mother's sandals against the hardwood floors stopped abruptly, and both Bowman and I looked up, two dogs with our ears perked. She stood, brow furrowed, hands hanging by her sides. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Elliot, honey," she said, eyes darting between us, "you're welcome to stay for dinner. If you'd like."

Bowman blinked. Then he looked at me, some wretched purpose in his eyes. His mouth closed and opened like a dying fish. I almost told him to *take a breath*, but then he turned back to my mother with a smile. "I'd like that. Thanks, Mrs Marsden."

She shook her head and waved him off. "None of that 'Missus' stuff, kid." She stepped away, stopped. "It'll be a bit," she said. I knew this to be an out she was granting him, just in case his acceptance was merely polite.

Unbeknownst to me, my mouth opened. "It's fine, Mom. I know something we can do."

We watched my mother retreat into the kitchen. I leaned my forehead against the couch cushion in time for Bowman to look back at me, eyes disgustingly wide behind his glasses. "What?" he asked, and I understood he was referring to whatever "something" I had indirectly offered him.

That's how I ended up smoking weed with Elliot Bowman in the backyard.

"Where'd you even get this?" he asked all startled, laughing as he took a hit.

I smiled against my own shoulder. "I know people. I have my own interests."

He laughed again, handing back the blunt. We spent a couple of minutes like that before leaving it to rest, half smoked (*I don't want to be out of my mind high at dinner with the whole Marsden clan*, he said). I laid back in the grass, inspiring Bowman to do the same. The dry grass crinkled and crumbled beneath us. We laid like that for quite a while.

Staring up at the few winking stars that had come out to greet the sun before it dipped out of sight, I got the bright idea to speak. "You ever think about how hands are kind of like stars?"

In my periphery, I watched him turn to watch the side of my face. He said, "No."

"Well," I sighed, deciding to keep running my mouth, "they are. Look." I held my hand up to the sky, stretched out my fingers. "The five fingers are like the five points. So, if you think about it, every time you hold hands with someone, stars are colliding."

He slowly raised his hand to the sky. I turned my own, and we brought our hands together, studying them as our tender skin met. I couldn't help thinking of that same hand on Elizabeth. On me.

Then I said, "I think about that every time you high-five me."

"Huh."

Realizing I was a stupid fool who just said the most stupid thing of all time as huge idiots are wont to do, I shifted, trying to physically and emotionally disengage.

Elliot stopped me by tangling our fingers together, wrapping his hand around mine. Holding it. Stars colliding.

“Have you ever been kissed, Marsden?”

Agape, I turned to him. His eyes seemed to have never left me. Because I was high and caught off guard and he was looking at me, I told him the truth. “No.”

Something in him lit up. I could see it in his eyes, in the upturned corners of his mouth. He was so unbearably cute. “Do you want *me* to kiss you?”

I glanced at him, eyes wide, before turning back to the sky. My breaths were heavy in my chest and I made a concerted effort to inhale, exhale. I spoke to the sky, not him. “I don’t want someone to kiss me so I can get it over with,” I said, not answering but not not answering. “I want someone to kiss me because they want to kiss me.”

“Who says I don’t want to?” He was still looking at me. His eyes bored into the side of my head like a drill. “I mean, I’m offering. That’s wanting to, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I looked at him, that earnest face, and again, stupidly said: “You can kiss me once it rains.” I finally remembered that our hands were intertwined. I removed mine from his grip, wiping it on my shorts. His hand fell to his side, cradling his thigh.

He blinked. Opened his mouth, closed it — that dying fish all over again. “You know, I’m leaving at the end of summer.” He said it like I was clueless. Like it was a promise. Like it was goodbye, and like he needed to say goodbye to me, like there was something between us other than my dry yard.

“Then hopefully it doesn’t rain before you go.”

The screen door slid open. Glancing back, I saw Reg lit in yellow, forehead creased and mouth all confused. He was probably wondering why his basketball trainer was still at his house and lying in the yard with his sister. “Dinner’ll be ready in five. Mom wants help,” he said finally.

“We’ll be there,” I called back. The door slid closed again and my brother slowly walked away.

Pushing up to my knees, I glanced at Elliot. He laid on the ground like a wounded bird. *Did I do that to him?* I tried not to dote on the thought. I pushed to my feet, reaching out a hand for Elliot to grab. He stared up at me with the saddest eyes I’ve ever seen. Then he smiled, and all was well again. He took my hand, let me pull him to his feet.

We stood like that for a moment, hand in hand, faces inches from each other. The look in his eyes made me burn.

“It’d be so easy, Marsden,” he whispered. He released my hand, pivoted. Walked towards the porch. I stood there for so long he had to call me from the door, asking all amused if I was going to come in. I did. And like after that inappropriate glimpse at Faiza’s party, I couldn’t look him in the eye all throughout dinner. I couldn’t look at him at all.

Especially not when my mother remarked on the dryness of the summer and all Elliot had to say was, “I’ve been thinking about trying out a good old-fashioned rain dance. Get those sky juices flowing.”

&

I’ve told you about the weekdays. Now for the weekends.

I spent most Saturdays in bed or on the couch, recovering from whatever hell I endured in the daylight hours of the previous week. If I did anything interesting at all on Saturdays, it was either in the evening or at night, and consisted of going out to dinner or hanging out with the few friends I had that were still in town.

Sunday was my day of the week. I woke up bright, early, and refreshed, and started my day with a relaxing bike ride into town. I hit the bakery first for breakfast, followed by a walk down the street as I surveyed my options. Because it was before ten and barely anything was open, I gravitated towards the public library. I spent a variable amount of time in there each week — sometimes I found a really good book, sometimes I had no interest in reading, and sometimes...

Sometimes Elliot was in the stacks.

Whether it was for summer classes or personal enjoyment, on mornings I spent enough time in the library, I always stumbled upon a reading Elliot. He sat right in the stacks, back to one bookshelf and feet touching the other. He crossed his hairy legs all delicate-like. These mornings were how I learned what he looked like when focused: lips slightly pursed, one hand holding his face (thumb pressed to the nexus of jaw and neck, middle finger to the temple, ring finger and pinky bent beside his nostril and brushing his upper lip), eyes a little squinty.

For the sake of the record, I must admit that I spent plenty of time sitting in a row adjacent to him. I would peek overtop the books at him. He never once looked up. Or if he did, I didn’t catch him at it.

I always left the library before he did. I went into the jewelry store, or the thrift shop with the broken jukebox I smacked around in hopes it’d spit out a Beatles tune or maybe some Donna Summer. I tried on clothes in stores that were far too expensive. I ate ice cream and ended up with half of it melted on my face and hands. No matter how I scrubbed at it in the bathroom of the Italian bistro, some remained. When I conveniently bumped into Elliot coming out of the

library at three in the afternoon, he'd gesture to a point on his own face, saying, "You got something, Marsden." He smiled a private smile, one that made his whole face crinkle. It was his best smile by a wide margin. Then he asked where I was going, and I said I had the whole day ahead of me, and he said, "Will you do me the honor of allowing me to accompany you?"

At the beginning of the summer, I scoffed and rolled my eyes. Then the days started to roll like a car down the side of a hill and I said *yes, sure, fine, whatever, hurry up, let's go, why not?* We contemplated our futures in skateboarding inside the skate shop (much to my brothers' friends' dismay, who glared at us with power of ten million dead men). We scoured the thrift store for vintage records and books (I pretended I hadn't done the same earlier in the day), debating what was deemed valuable or worthless or, worst of all, overrated. Elliot made the sorry kids working the ice cream shop give him five samples on a good day, and when I eventually stole from his cup, he pretended not to notice.

This is the part of the story where people say, *so you were dating*. And to that I say: I have no idea. No one dated me before then and no one would come along and date me for quite a while afterwards. I didn't know how dating worked or what it looked like. All I knew was there was a boy I thought was cute who spent a few of his Sundays with me. I couldn't even tell if he liked me. With each passing day I told myself *he likes me*, and with each passing day I told myself *he doesn't*. I almost turned to He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not as a reliable source on Elliot's feelings.

The only time I ever felt sure that Elliot liked me was the day we stopped outside the dog park. August was swelling like the river. The day was hot, so we fell to the ground in a shady spot while dogs and their owners passed us by. Elliot waved to terriers and retrievers and labradors.

Somehow the conversation wound its way back to high school. I was noting how at least Elliot was punctual, and he interrupted me to say, "No one's ever said that before."

I frowned. "You always did our APUSH stuff on time."

"Yeah, because I didn't want to mess with your grade. I turned everything else in late."

My mouth dropped open in what must've been a funny manner, because Elliot laughed. It was a brilliant thing, his laugh. Deep and real and resounding. Sometimes, when I'm cooking nowadays and can hear the television running in the next room, I think I hear that laugh, and then I'm frozen in the kitchen thinking of how Elliot was all teeth when he laughed. His big, crooked teeth.

In the moment, I scoffed, turning away. I felt my face begin to heat. I oh-so smoothly changed the subject. "What day are you leaving again?"

That sobered him. He cleared his throat, running a hand along the back of a bulldog practically dozing as it strolled by. "The twenty-eighth."

I nodded and pressed my cheek to my knee. Curled in on myself like that, I looked back at Elliot, catching his smile before it fell from his lips. "That's soon."

"Still more than enough time for it to rain."

Laughing then would've been good. I would've seem relaxed, unworried, cool. But I inhaled shakily as my heart seized in my chest and said, "Elliot, this whole kiss thing isn't a joke to me."

A crease appeared between his eyebrows. "Do you think it's joke to me?" He sounded so concerned then, as if it was a matter of life or death.

"I don't know what it is to you." I shrugged as best as I could all curled up. "But it's a big deal to me. The deal gets bigger with each passing day. And I don't want you to think you should do this for me out of pity or that you can turn a sprinkler on and tell me it's raining... I don't even know what I'm saying anymore. I just- this just--"

"Do you think I'm making fun of you, Margot?"

I licked my lips.

"If you think the whole rain thing is me making fun of you, laughing at you, then I'm sorry. I'll stop if you tell me to. We can pretend it's not a thing either of us ever said and that I didn't offer to kiss you. But I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. It's not funny to me and I'm not doing anything out of pity. I don't pity you because you've never kissed anyone. I'm shocked because I can't see why you haven't." He took a moment to breathe. I could hear my blood rushing in my ears. "I asked if you'd been kissed and if I could kiss you because *I want to kiss you*." He laughed humorlessly, all frustrated. "I like you. I don't know if you could tell, but I do. I like you, Margot, and I want to kiss you, and you said I can kiss you when it rains, so forgive me for wanting it to fucking rain. If God sent a hurricane our way, I'd consider Catholicism or whatever." Digging the toe of his sneaker into the dirt, he scoffed and said, "Does that clear this whole thing up?"

My throat had gone dry. I swallowed, eyes stinging, and nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you want to forget it? The rain thing?"

It was impossible to look Elliot in the eye after what he'd just said to me and not think he was the most beautiful boy in the world. He was almost frowning at me, so worried he'd gone and fucked up whatever just-born thing was growing between us. I remembered every time my stomach filled with acid when he said or did something that made me think he cared too much, like the waiting around when I didn't show up back when this all began. He had cared. He had cared for far longer than I could puzzle out.

He likes me.

"No," I said, and luckily the word didn't evaporate in the dry August heat. "No. I don't."

Elliot's lips formed a thin line. "Good. Good."

&

Although the days weren't getting hotter — maybe one or two degrees higher, nothing you could actually feel — they seemed to swelter. Each time I wiped sweat from my brow or begged for air conditioning or marveled at the condensation on my water bottle as I gulped it down like death was on my door, I couldn't help but think the summer was the hottest it'd ever been. Weather reports of the time will tell you summer reached its peak far earlier, on July fourth weekend. My heart will tell you that after Elliot Bowman told me, *I like you, Margot, and I want to kiss you*, that we all fried. After Elliot Bowman told me, *If God sent a hurricane our way, I'd consider Catholicism*, no one went outside because the pavement burned your feet through your shoes. Third degree burns. Burns so painful they shocked your heart into standstill.

I spent the rest of August waiting for it to rain.

I spent evenings with Elliot. He lingered longer and longer after basketball practices, often breaking my brother's heart when he explained he wanted to see something I had in my room rather than whatever Reg was prattling on about. We sat in my room, him in criss-cross-applesauce on my rug, me laid across the bed, playing at something between desperate, siren-like, and lousy hooker. We talked at length until my mom called us down for dinner.

I realized belatedly, at the end of the summer, that everyone assumed we were hooking our bodies together like trucks and trailers, grinding against each other until our metal nuts and bolts were dust. I doubt any of them would've imagined the four feet of Turkish weaving that divided us. We were hungry, yes, I especially so as I marveled at his joints and how they rolled, so clinical in my desire. I don't know what his hunger for me looked like. Did he admire the pop of my hip, the long lines of my legs? Or was it my gummy smile and loud snicker? Part of me tried to analyze myself through his eyes, but most of me was looking at him. Most of me was falling for him and waiting for the clock to strike midnight and both of us to turn to pumpkin and rags.

Our Sundays turned into less of a game. We no longer danced the dance we had in the weeks prior: I found him in the library, practically fell on top of him in a chaste yet desperate way, and we went from there. We ate together, laughed together (I soaked up his laugh like a sponge), rode our bikes down the street, and squealed when anyone we went to school with looked at us funny. The whole town was looking at us. They had been our whole lives. When we caught their eyes, we jumped, feigning fright. We ran away screaming, hoping they'd waste their time questioning when exactly we'd gone insane instead of gossiping about the way we danced around each other rather than directly collide.

There was even a Saturday spent together. He came by in his clunky red car and we walked towards the river, bumping shoulders the whole way. Each time we did I laughed, catching my lip between my teeth, and looked away. I spent so much energy tucking hair behind my ears and then untucking it until finally tying it all back into a ponytail, which he tugged on like a five-year-old before breaking out into a sprint. I chased after him, though I never quite caught up. He got to the river first. I was a minute or two behind. I playfully swatted at him once there, calling him various names for daring to pull my gorgeous ponytail (which was now dead), and he grabbed my hands. He let one go quickly after, but the other remained in a tight grip. I squeezed his hand just as hard. I remembered laying in the grass, surveying the stars, telling him that our hands were shining balls of hydrogen. I tried to memorize how it felt for our pulses to interlock and forgot to try once he started toeing his shoes off. We swam, and I pushed him in, and he pushed me in, and I pushed him in again. We smoked while drying off, and I watched Elliot turn red as he got properly high. He took me home and we leaned against each other outside his car. Our chests brushed. I looked up, almost thinking I could catch his lips in mine. He smiled and said, "It's not raining yet, Marsden." The smile was that private one again, too large and too vulnerable. That smile could eat the world.

Watching him go made my stomach turn.

It was the best Saturday of the summer.

Forgive me for wanting it to fucking rain. I did, I had. Easily. *Forgive me for wanting it too,* I thought, maybe for God but definitely for Elliot. *Forgive me,* I thought, hoping he could hear me across town, a grown man in his teen boy bedroom. I could picture him in the window — I'd never been inside, only glimpsing it from outside — with his thick glasses and horrid hair and lithe limbs, studying the back of a record. I could picture him glancing out the window at the perfect summer evening, checking for clouds.

Forgive me, I wanted to say, *for not letting you kiss me when you asked. Forgive me for this stupid deal. Forgive me for betting on the weather. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me.*

On my own porch, I decided to forgive myself, despite the utter lack of satisfaction it provided.

&

It rained on his last day.

Summer camp ended a few days prior, allowing me a few weekdays to spend at my own behest. I wanted to spend them with him, going so far as to call him about it, offer my heart up all casual. "I'd love to," he said, "but my parents carved out this week to pack. I'm sorry." His tone was genuinely full of remorse. So was mine. He went on to say we could find slivers of

time, and we did. They were gloriously unsatisfying. For fifteen to forty-five minutes at a time, we held each other's gaze, smiling sorrowfully at the lack of rain. I wanted to renege on my bet/deal/ultimatum/whatever. I could never find the words. We found very little words in those minutes together, instead holding hands and touching knees and laughing until our eyes were teary for reasons neither of us cared to decipher. I tried to memorize all of it, then, and I hope it shows. In some ways I can recall everything, every deep-bellied laugh or private smile, and in others he is but dust in the wind, cadence and arrhythmia lost to the greedy thing we call time.

"I leave tomorrow," he said one evening. We were in his bedroom for once, laid on his bed with a sliver of space separating our bodies. I'd been studying the band and movie posters on his walls, the books left on his shelves, the empty closet left open like a bared wound.

I turned my head to look at him. "You're really going," I said redundantly.

He nodded. He had a five o'clock shadow that I ached to touch. "Yeah."

I smiled, cushioning my head on my hand. He tucked my hair behind my ear.

"No rain," I muttered.

"We still have tomorrow." He continued to tuck away my hair, running his finger along the shell of my ear. "I leave at one, so we have the whole morning and a little after."

Part of me yearned to apologize. I pushed that part into the sea. "And if it doesn't?"

He shrugged. "Then it doesn't."

Groaning, I shoved my face into his mattress. "It better."

"It will," he said. From his tone, I knew it to be a lie. He was too chipper. "It will," he lied again. I forgave him for it, just like I forgave him for everything, and hoped that lies could undergo the alchemy that lead did in myth.

The next day, I sat in the living room, reading *Dune* because Elliot loved it. I hated reading that book. I finished it halfway through September. I hated it. Each page was a punch.

Every so often, I glanced at the window, hoping for rain. Eventually I wasn't even reading. When I caught myself at this, I abandoned Paul Atreides on the couch and stowed away in my room, closing the blinds so as not to trouble myself.

I must've fallen asleep, because I blearily woke to someone knocking at my door. Rolling over, I so kindly asked, "*What?*"

Reg appeared in a crack in the doorway. "Elliot called," he said, and at my frown continued, "I asked if he wanted to play basketball and he said he couldn't because he has to go, which I knew but I was just trying to figure out why he was calling--"

"Reg--"

"--and he said to get you on the phone and I said you were sleeping and he said, 'Well, wake her up.'" Here I have to admit that Reg's Elliot impression was so spot on that I properly

opened my eyes. “I asked him if it was for a good reason and he said ‘A great one.’ So I asked, ‘What’s the great reason, then?’ All he said was, ‘Tell her it’s raining.’”

I sat bolt upright.

“Now, I don’t see how that’s a *great reason*, but that’s all he said. He hung up. Sorry.” And he closed the door.

I swung the door open almost immediately, setting off down the hall. I grabbed Reg, kissed him on the forehead, blabbering a triad of *thank you thank you thank you*. He was flabbergasted (we weren’t often affectionate) but I kept running, barreling down the stairs and around the staircase towards the front door. I tripped on a pair of shoes that had fallen off the shoe rack, which reminded me that shoes existed and I needed some. I slipped into my sneakers, half-heartedly tying them, and opened the front door.

Elliot’s red car was already turning into the driveway.

The rain was only a drizzle at that point. Light and refreshing, almost a mist. I ran through it, leaping off the porch and into the driveway. Elliot slid out of the car like butter, and in the second that he shut the car door behind him, I slammed into him, pressing him back against his red hunk of metal.

With that, Elliot and I kissed.

It was a collision of all sorts: hands, bodies, lips, tongues, teeth. It was a car crash in slow motion, impossible to look away from despite the knowledge it will only end in devastation. It was two stars exploding in time, birthing a black hole with an insatiable hunger. Hands traveled all over skin. I was in a tank top and shorts, the least I’d worn that entire summer, and Elliot took advantage. His hands cupped the small of my back, my hips, my everything. Maybe it wasn’t skin to skin like I’d been imagining for months, but it was contact. It was satisfaction.

Most people say their first kisses were horrible. And maybe mine was, but all I knew is I wanted to kiss Elliot forever, that it was happening, that I maybe could’ve loved him if I didn’t already, that I had to make this last. All I knew was nothing but Elliot. Elliot, pressed against me, Elliot, mouth interlocking with mine, Elliot, Elliot, Elliot.

Had I ever been kissed? Yes, now I had, and there was no way I could forget it.

I ran my hands along the lines of his arms, under his shirt, anything I could get my hands on. I moved quicker than I should have. The whole thing was quick. It was hungry and desperate and us begging the universe for one more minute before Elliot drove off, unlikely to return. Because it was unlikely if not bordering on ridiculous. We both knew it. We’d never get to foolishly carve our initials into a tree like the one I locked my bike beneath every morning for the past two months. There was no future here besides the lives our parents had lived. He dreamed bigger. I hadn’t yet dared to.

At some point that I do not remember but can't forget, his hands holding my face, he pulled away. He softly pressed his lips to my forehead, whispered the word *goodbye*, and slid back into his car.

So long ago I'd laughed at the idea of him owing me a goodbye. Now he'd said it. Now he was leaving.

I watched, drizzle turning to downpour, as he turned in his seat to roll backwards out of the drive, readjust once in the street, and set off down the road. I watched, soaked by the rain, his car become a dot, become nothing.

Like it did every time he turned that corner, my stomach did backflips in an attempt to make it to the Olympics. It did a back handspring, a roundoff, a somersault, an aerial — the works — in the same way Richie Moretti's had all those weeks ago, all the way at the beginning.

I walked to the curb, opened our garbage can, and finally let everything come back up.

Written from December 2023 – January 2024. Published here is the third draft.