

# Missouri Youth Write 2023 Gold Key Winners

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**Avery Bennekin**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Center High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Jonathan Danduarand

Category: Poetry

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**november is here**

november is a deep plum–  
horizons leak with shades of the night  
trophies of ice broken by faults fling shards  
of themselves into craters of the blackest waters.

november swallows the echo–  
the wind and its teeth lift a ball from its socket  
exhaling along the marrow until the bone no longer rattles, but clangs.  
banging mercilessly against its formation, slamming itself against numbing flesh.

november is underneath the snow–  
forming rings of frostbitten skin, pressing air back against the throat.  
all around hardened water swells filling nature's geometric decay  
tall shadows hover, cased in the frost.

november is here–  
in the North, there is a drum.  
played belligerent with a mallet is the brutal and taunting song  
of restless wind.

choirs of crackling crystals chant against its pulse  
the guttural bellow calls across the neatly packed curvatures,  
disturbing the ground until the earth is turned over–  
until it has mangled the surface to unsatisfying mounds.

**Clarke Campbell**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Journalism

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## Grading for Equity

(written for the John Burroughs School Newspaper, "The World.")

What should a grade represent? That question is constantly being asked by educators and administrators everywhere, and at Burroughs, it served as the basis for last year's Grading for Equity initiative, a pilot program that enlisted and assisted teachers across the academic departments who sought to improve their existing grade structures. The initiative's existence could be vaguely inferred by students that registered some of its manifestations, but at its core, the program focused on educator development rather than student understanding. "I had no idea it was all based on a book," admitted Lana English ('23) upon learning more about the program, and her lack of knowledge about the multi-faceted project is representative of the entire student body. So, what was the Grading for Equity initiative?

*Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms* is a 14-chapter manual created by author Joe Feldman in 2019 that delves into the history behind traditional grading measures, their benefits and (many) faults, and suggestions for how to improve teachers' assessments of student knowledge. Feldman and his consulting team, the Crescendo Education Group, have since organized workshops for educators that are interested in applying the guide's methods, which is how it entered the radar of the Burroughs faculty and administration. According to Mr. Daniel Harris, Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Engagement at Burroughs, "NAIS, our National Association [of Independent Schools], had been hosting workshops in their conferences for several years... Several of us did a workshop with the writer of the book and saw the goodness in the concepts and said, 'Hey, we need to look into this... This is something we've been wanting to investigate; now, we know someone that can help us do so.'" With that, a Burroughs program was formed in partnership with the Crescendo group in the hopes of exploring what Mr. Harris called the three basic questions of *Grading for Equity*: "How do you pay attention to creating better accuracy around grading? How do you increase bias resistance around grading? And how do you pay attention to how grading impacts motivation?"

Each participating teacher who read the book and consulted with the Crescendo advisors decided what they would implement in their own classrooms and curricula. For Ms. Laura Crowley, who teaches Math 7 and AP Calculus BC, this entailed three main changes: employing 'standards-based grading' in her Math 7 classes, removing the homework grade from BC Calculus, and eliminating the maximum points gained from test retakes. Adjusting the retake point cap was the simplest; previously, Ms. Crowley would allow students to retake tests up to a certain attainable grade, like an 85% (or a B). Now, without that cap, students can earn "a [test] grade that represents what they know – it doesn't matter if they know it on this day or that day," Ms. Crowley contended. Reassessing homework evaluation proved more difficult for her:

"I used to think it was a good thing for students to get a homework grade. But what is homework accounting for?... It's an effort grade, it's not really connected to what you know and understand... Don't you want your grade to reflect that instead? What I also realized was the [potential for] unfairness... A kid might not do their homework for a lot of reasons, and it's not really fair to have that strike against them... All of that was the shift in my mind. I'm not saying that homework doesn't matter, I'm just saying it matters in a different way than a grade."

The most tangible change that Ms. Crowley made, though, was a complete redesign of how she graded her middle school class: "no more percentages or points." Instead, she used a system that broke down assessments into problem types and categories, so students could understand that on "this problem [they] had a full level of mastery, on that problem not as much." This allowed them to see how they performed on problems that required explanations versus

ones based on definitions, word problems versus strictly numerical ones, et cetera.

Despite the changes she was able to make, Ms. Crowley noted that the bulk of *Grading for Equity's* suggestions were oriented towards classes in the humanities, which have one factor that her math sections don't: participation grades. She mentioned, "There are a lot of other things in the book that didn't necessarily apply to us [STEM teachers]," contending that "participation is definitely a different beast to wrestle with." Among those tasked with wrestling that beast was Ms. Carrie Dodson-Ching, chair of the History Department and teacher of American Government and World Civilizations II. Ms. Dodson-Ching, after reiterating the necessity of participation in seminar-style history classes, presented dueling views of grading participation:

"Some teachers still very much feel that participation should be part of the final evaluation because it's part of how students show what they know. Other teachers have been experimenting with perhaps [giving] feedback on participation but not counting it towards the final grade, with the idea that many students know a lot about history that is never going to come up in class; that there are students who are naturally quiet; that there are students who for a variety of reasons are not prepared on a given day but are going to be able to prepare themselves by the end of the unit."

In her own classes last year, instead of an official participation grade, Ms. Dodson-Ching gave students a participation rubric at the end of each unit and kept a daily record of their class engagement. Through her involvement in the pilot program, she hoped to answer the question: "What's it all based on? How do you know if you're doing well? If you get an A for participation, does that just mean that you sit there and smile politely, or has the teacher explained some criteria on which that is based?" She further acknowledged that "there are a lot of things in teaching that are done across the board because they've always been done that way or because [teachers] learned it 20 years ago, so [they] continue to do it..." and postulated that the task at hand for educators "is to keep looking around and say, what resources are there to keep improving?"

A participating teacher who completely redesigned her grading system was Dr. Shannon Koropchak, who teaches English 8 and III. Dr. Koropchak removed homework grades, entirely discarded participation metrics, eliminated late submission penalties, and especially emphasized assignment revisions without point-docking. "It used to be that the revised grade would be a compilation of your original grade and your revision," Dr. Koropchak explained. "Well, [after reading *Grading for Equity*,] that doesn't make any sense anymore. If we're saying your grade should be a standard of where you are...a revision grade just replaces that original grade...at any given time. That grade means *this* is where you are *at this* point."

Each teacher involved in the Grading for Equity pilot program, with their unique grading changes, noticed different responses and had different reactions to the changes in class dynamics. Ms. Crowley, for example, originally felt some pushback from middle-school students who didn't understand the new standards-based system when she introduced it in the middle of the year. Eventually, however, she noticed a clear difference in her students' mindset as a result of the change: "They started responding differently. Instead of saying, 'Oh, I got a 79% on this test,' they would look at it and say, 'Oh, I need to do these three things better.' It really highlighted the content, their knowledge, and their mastery, rather than the score." This encouraged Ms. Crowley, who sometimes felt like she had initially "overwhelmed them with information," and who remarked that maybe "[she] made it worse before [she] made it better." Outside of this transition and eventual improvement, however, she noticed very little difference in the classroom environment or assessed work. In BC Calculus, she noted, "Not doing work is not an issue. People understand that doing the homework is a requirement to do well in the class," regardless of graded homework checks. This generally positive attitude was shared by Dr. Koropchak, who had started the year concerned about the absence of late penalties. She had wondered, "Am I going to have stuff coming in at all hours of the night, well past the deadline?" As it turned out, "that was not the case at all. I think I had less stuff coming in late... People would still come to me and ask for an extension in the same way they had previously." Additionally, Dr. Koropchak noticed a perceived improvement in assignment quality with the no-punishment revision options: "With turning in a draft and revising significantly for the second draft, I've seen that increase, so I'd say that overall quality of writing has gone up. I'm extremely impressed with the work that I've seen ... people [are] getting really invested in the drafts and seeing what [they] are really capable of [with their writing]." Out of the three, only Ms. Dodson-Ching chose to revert one of her changes for this year's World Civilizations II class – reinstating a small participation grade – but not because she noticed a drop in engagement last year. Rather, she realized, "in tenth grade, as students are moving towards [higher history seminars], [she wants to ensure] that a lot of students who are still refining their writing and test-taking skills *do* have ways that they can demonstrate they understand, through in-class participation." These teachers were generally satisfied with the response and how they felt their changes impact their classrooms, and after all, as Mr. Harris noted, the "action research" Grading for Equity program "was not built around us having

any sort of ideas about where we would get at the end of it; it really was *research*.”

But how did members of the student body feel about the grade changes meant to improve the reflection of their academic performance and understanding? Many younger students have no frame of reference for the changes made due to the pandemic-learning years obscuring their understanding of a traditional classroom setting, so older students are the more reachable audience. For example, Macy Goldfarb ('23), who took Dr. Koropchak's class last year, greatly appreciated the penalty-free revision process: she affirmed, “I thoroughly enjoyed the revisions for full points, as they gave me a chance to improve my writing and grow as a writer.” However, for Goldfarb, “the fact that class contribution had no effect on [their] grade was disappointing, and sometimes discouraged [her] from bringing [her] full participation to class every day.” By contrast, Samantha Nelson ('24), who was in Ms. Dodson-Ching's World Civilization II class last year, noted, “without a participation grade I was able to think more deeply about my responses rather than just saying the first thing that came to mind in order to get my participation points in.” However, she divulged, “although I definitely appreciated the lack of graded homework checks, at times it made the class less of a priority for me because I knew there would not be repercussions if I wasn't able to complete all or part of an assignment.” Teachers may strive to transition from extrinsic, “carrot and stick” motivating factors to intrinsically-driven performance, but for existing students, that might take some getting used to.

As Mr. Chris Front, Assistant Head of School for Academics, puts it, “Grading for Equity isn't a one size fits all program.” Every teacher, as they “experiment and collaborate with colleagues on ways to minimize inequities,” will find their own “approaches and techniques that work for their classes.” Dr. Koropchak and Ms. Crowley both noted that the data set for their changes, only one year's worth thus far, is too small for them to be conclusive about the results. Mr. Harris explained, “We are still awaiting a report on our grading [from the Crescendo Education Group] ...that may guide us into thinking about bigger things for the whole school.” As of now, there are no signs of slowing down with these equitable grading changes. In the words of Mr. Harris, “We now have a critical mass, [15+ members] of faculty that have tried some practices and seen their benefits; and they've tried some that didn't work so well... They will keep what they see fit. There are a lot of exciting practices that I think will continue to help us grow as a school community in our grading.” Only time will tell how Burroughs' educators and administrators continue to incorporate new grading practices into their classrooms, either to the benefit or detriment of students to come. But for now, as Dr. Koropchak declared, “We keep experimenting.”

Vant Chadbourne

Age: 13, Grade: 8

Home School, Wentzville, MO

Educators: Veldorah Rice, Jodi Tahsler

Category: Short Story

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## The Evil Prince

### The Evil Prince

Stay quiet, or be killed. That is the way of the forest. And that was what Reglan was doing, being quiet, hiding in the shadowy branches of a pine tree. Reglan was watching the army trudge by, they didn't know how to be quiet. When finally he could no longer hear or see the moving army, Reglan scurried down the tree like a squirrel, looking back and forth checking for any sign of an ambush. As he stepped down from the tree he felt the evil eyes of the forest on him. He drew his knife, and in seconds he was in his defensive stance, listening. Nothing, there was no sound, but Reglan could sense the presence of a predator, wolves. Being in the forest long enough gives you a sixth sense of presence. Wolves stayed in packs too large to be taken on by even the most skilled knight. He could not do it alone. A black wolf emerged from the shadows, seeming to materialize from the darkness. More followed after it. Reglan positioned his feet ready to leap over their heads and dart up a tree. The wolves closed in, jowls drooping. Reglan waited for the perfect moment to jump. As he waited he locked eyes with what seemed to be the Alpha wolf. The wolf tensed up ready to pounce. Reglan jumped.

"Reglan, my friend!" came a voice. Reglan turned around to find a burly man adorned with velvet and satin.

"My king," Reglan replied with a bow. Reglan was dressed in the clothing of the king's advisers.

"Don't bow to me, my friend, you are practically my brother," said the King in a cheery voice. Reglan and the king had been friends since boyhood and loved to play in the woods. Although Reglan was an adviser to the King, he still lived in the old woods, feeling safer and stronger there. He was one with the forest knowing everything that lived in it.

Reglan smiled, "Sorry but it is custom, I must do it. How is Sargon fairing?"

"He is why I am here," said the King, cutting all joy away from the conversation. "He is angry that we had another child. He wanted to be a lone child with no competition. I am worried that he will kill Baron." Baron is the king's newest son. Sargon is eighteen years older than his brother and is bitter that he is not an only child.

"I don't know, my king. Sargon is dangerous. I hope not to anger you but I would have someone always watching him," advised Reglan. Reglan hugged the king and left. That was the last time he saw the King.

Reglan woke up with a start. He sat up and looked around him. He felt a sharp pain in the back of his head. Instinctively, He put his hand to the wound. He felt a wet bandage and, as he looked at his hand, it was covered in blood.

"Stand still," came a gruff voice from somewhere behind him. He felt a gust of cold air as if a door had just opened. A muscular man came into view with bear skin on his back and a cloth in his hands. The man walked over to Reglan and unwrapped the bandage, recovering his wound with a wet cloth.

"Marduk? Is that you?" Reglan asked.

"Same old," replied Marduk. Marduk was Reglan's and the king's friend. They found him in the woods as a boy and they helped him. They also gave him the name Marduk. Marduk, like Reglan, stayed in the forest, feeling at one with the forest.

"That's a relief. Have you heard what has happened to the king?" Reglan asked.

"I have. As soon as the news reached me I went to your house. I knocked and, since you didn't answer, I started walking away, but then I heard a cry from inside and burst in to find a baby in your bed. I brought him here," Marduk said.

"That is Baron, the king's newest son. I was told to keep him safe," replied Reglan. "Can you keep him safe so that I can stop Sargon?"

"I can. Now go, here are your things," Replied Marduk, handing Reglan his cloak, knives, and sword. Reglan

left the old cottage and headed to the main road through the forest.

Reglan turned his head towards the beginning of the trail when he heard a crunch. Three men on horses came over the hill laughing. Reglan jumped into the nearest tree and leaped for the highest branch.

"They were all like 'oh no, they are burning our village, let's just scream!'," yelled the first knight with a boisterous laugh that sounded like a dying cat.

"And let's run around in a circle screaming like goats," said the second, "so funny."

"You idiots! Stop goofing around. You, go send a message to Sargon. Tell him we have destroyed the village and plundered it," said the third knight to the first. He was obviously the leader and the oldest. The first knight spurred his horse and went ahead. Reglan contemplated his options; let them pass and keep listening, or jump them and interrogate them. Reglan was running out of time. The knights were getting closer. Then Reglan heard a crack. The two knights stopped their horses. The limb Reglan was on was snapping. Just as the limb was breaking, Reglan jumped into the air. He threw his knives at the two men, sinking them into their shoulders and dislodging the men from their mounts. The horses reared and galloped away into the forest. Reglan pulled the sword out of its scabbard and pointed it at the older man's neck.

"Where is Sargon and what is his plan?" asked Reglan.

The old man smiled and said, "Reglan, I have waited to tell you this for a long time. I couldn't just turn my back on Sargon and ride away. He would have my head. And he still might, but I don't care. Sargon is claiming his dominance by burning villages to the ground while, at the same time, looking for his brother, Baron, to kill him." The younger knight looked dumbfounded.

"Well thank you," replied Reglan, being cautious of how easily the old man had revealed Sargon's plan. Reglan removed his blades and turned around to leave. Then Reglan stopped. "Go east of here and you will find an amazingly large willow. Turn left and keep walking and you will find a cottage. There should be some supplies for your wounds." Then he walked away.

Reglan found Sargon's army down in a valley. They were camping out for the night. Reglan scampered up a fairly large tree and looked for Sargon. He must have been in a tent because Reglan couldn't see him among the soldiers. Two heavily armored men came out of a tent and stood on both sides like guards. Then a man in the king's robes came out of the tent. He was a handsome young man with flowing black hair and stood straight with pride like a peacock. That was his downfall. His pride was too large for his army.

"Let us ride! Let us ride to the gates of Athelon and take it! They are richer than us and we will take it! We will plunder their riches, as my father should have done. My father should have conquered all of the lands. We will be the greatest army of the century! Charge!" Sargon yelled to his army.

His army gave a battle cry and charged toward the big city, in no formation. The people of Athelon heard the battle cry and greeted them with an army twice the size of Sargon's. Reglan watched for Sargon. He found Sargon in the middle of the battle slaying anyone in his path. Reglan left the tree and made his way into the middle of Sargon's army. Reglan quickly made his way toward Sargon, blocking any blows that came his way. When he finally reached Sargon, Sargon's back was turned away from Reglan. Reglan cut the inside of Sargon's leg and, with a cry of pain, Sargon fell to his knees. An Athelonian soldier went to cut his head off but Reglan stopped him.

"Don't kill him. Go, tell your king to tell Sargon's army that Sargon has fallen. You, Athelon, will take him to your deepest dungeon and keep him there," Reglan told the soldier. The soldier hesitantly turned and went to get his king but his king was coming toward them. Reglan asked the king to stop and delivered his message to the king himself.

"Let us end this battle!" yelled the king, "Sargon has fallen and our army is twice your size. Surrender and we will not take you captive, and you can go home and live in peace. But, we will take Sargon!" Sargon's army stopped fighting and Reglan felt their fight go out.

"Let us go home," said one knight.

"It was pointless," agreed another.

"Let there be peace!" And then all of them went home in silence, angry at themselves for being so thick-headed. Through all of this, Sargon stayed quiet, not uttering a word.

The Athelonian King took Sargon to the deepest dungeons and set guards there. Sargon's army appointed a new leader until Baron was old enough. Marduk returned Baron to his mother, and Reglan went back to the forest.

**Anshu Chappidi**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO

Educator: Erin Fluchel

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## Pearl

### Pearl

I wobble out of bed, my head swimming with nausea threatening to escape up my throat and out of my mouth. Don't throw up.

Darkness threatened to take over my vision, leaving me stumbling into the lit bathroom with my hands grasping the walls.

"Anshu?" Don't throw up, don't throw up.

I reach up and touch my cheeks. They're wet.

"I'm sorry," I choke out, the distorted image of my mom wavering. The throbbing in my head worsened.

"Mom, I'm sorry."

I throw up red all over her feet, the taste of artificial cherry burning on my tongue. Delirious, I wonder if it is blood.

I stumble to the toilet, clinging to the walls as she trails behind me. I note the panic in her voice.

What did she say again?

Her voice bobs in and out of my head as I sit there, uncomprehending. My eyes slip shut, darkness overtaking me, warmth flowing-

"How many?" Hands on my shoulders jerk me awake. "Anshu, how many pills did you take?"

I couldn't remember, and I voiced that to her, my speech slurred. My eyes dipped shut, my head dropping as exhaustion seeped through my bones.

Annoyance tore through me as she shook me awake once again. "Anshu, give me a number."

I didn't know.

How many handfuls had I desperately shoveled into my mouth, chugging water like my life depended on it (haha, I know) to get the red pills down my throat?

Twenty? Thirty?

I gave her a random number and let darkness overtake me.

I have brief visions of sitting in a car, of dragging my feet through a parking lot in the night towards a large lit building, but my memory seems to stutter, focusing only when I wake up in a hospital bed, a sharp, stabbing sensation in my stomach making me gag.

The sinking sensation of disappointment curled low in my gut as I glanced around. The pills didn't work.

Several years later, I find myself sitting in my dad's car with the seat warmers turned up high. What were we doing? Something about dinner and sleepy children, dad driving us home after a football game.

I enjoyed sitting in the car on nights like these. The night chill was just cold enough to give me a reason to turn up the heater. I nestled back into the cushioned seat, the rumble of the engine settling deep into my brain and quieting my thoughts.

We were at the last light, a busy intersection right in front of the strip mall we live beside. I turned to look at my brother behind me. The red reflected in his lidded eyes, flickering as his fluttered, fighting sleep.

One blink. Red.

Another. Red.

On the third, I watched his eyes turn green.

I felt it before I heard the shriek of metal against metal, the jarring lurch shoving our car off its path. The world spun in slow motion, airbags exploding into my face as an invisible force threatened to push me through the windshield. My seatbelt protested and dug into my ribs. The car kept its track as if twirling me gracefully across a ballroom, hand in hand.

But I wasn't graceful, I wasn't at peace. My mind was a mess of scattered thoughts, of I'm not ready to die,



of not here, not now. Panic clawed at me, yet I remained frozen in time; invisible forces (and the seatbelt) kept me rooted in place.

The spinning stopped with a loud thump.

And with it, I found what I had lost long ago, a small but present lightness inside me that I had thought years of tears had drowned. A pearl of hope.

**Will Corbin**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## The King

### The King

My heart pounding, I reeled with all my strength. I desperately tugged hoping to land the fish. The trout in the rapids fought with all its might to escape. My rod tip bent with an immense force inches away from snapping. We were like two lions viciously tugging on a piece of prey never seeming to give up until one of us reigned as king.

My pursuit of the big one began when I stepped outside my great uncle's door and took a deep breath of the warm crisp Texas air. It was a picture-perfect day sunny, not a cloud in the sky. I snatched my fishing supplies from the back porch and started to make my way down the long gray steps creating a path down to the river. The river was as green as an emerald with rapids everywhere. I joyfully ran down the steps onto the concrete with hopes high of catching a trout. To the right, was a white waterfall that we always went down with tubes stood. Small stones scattered in the rapids sticking out of the water. In a matter of seconds, I made my way down to the scrunchy green grass. Carefully, I walked to the river trying to avoid any fire ant nests. The river lay just a few feet away crystal clear with a green tint. I stepped over the concrete ledge into the frigid ice-cold water, pushing my way through the strong currents forcing me backward. After a few more steps, I made it onto the island in the center of the river. I kept my rod down, making sure not to get tangled up in all the different plants dangling with leaves. The island was covered in little streams flowing back into the river. In just seconds, I was across the island on the other side taking a cast.

Joyfully, I threw my arm forward, taking a cast and launching my bait as far as I could into the white rapids. I slowly reeled my bait in while jigging it, anticipating a trout. I took another. This time letting my bait travel further down. I reeled in as I felt the subtle resistance of the current on my small bait. Still nothing. I took another, and another, still nothing. After many casts, my frustration fumed as I took another cast. And slowly I jigged my bait subtly reeling my rod until I saw a slight bend. I waited a moment then yanked my rod setting the hook but felt nothing. *Unbelievable* I thought *I just had a trout*. Furiously, I took another cast launching my bait further than I ever have, until the micro worm hit the water making a small splash almost hitting a little dock built on the other side of the river. I made small jigs hoping for another trout slowly reeling until "Reeee!" my line rapidly left the reel. I yanked back my rod. Yes! I was on once again. I carefully reeled in the trout making sure not to let it get away until "Snap!" The trout broke off. *You've got to be kidding me* My head flaming, I stomped my way back across the island and onto the shore. The currents feeling like a small jet from a baby pool, I stepped over the ledge and set my fishing rod on a green lawn chair. I opened the tackle box and slammed it on the seat. *What felt like an eternity of fishing and still not one trout*. I took a small split shot and squeezed it on my clear line with anger. Afterward, I grabbed a golden hook and tied a knot. *Will this be the hook to catch me a trout?* I decided to give it one more shot.

Next, I walked back to the river and I forcefully stomped into the water making a splash that covered my calves with water. I made my way to the island one last time holding my reel up high hoping to keep it dry. I walked across the island and stepped onto one of the slippery rocks. I stepped on the jagged rocks, some sharper than knives getting further and further into the water. Unknowingly stepping on a slime-covered rock, I slipped backward getting consumed by the frigid river water. Shocked, I gasped for air, my body completely drenched. The water feeling colder than an ice bath and the rock more slippery than a bar of soap, I picked my drenched self off the rocky bottom feeling as if the cold pierced through my skin and chilled my bones. The rod soaked head to bottom covered in water. I stood up and felt a small sting on my right foot. The rock had sliced my foot open causing it to drip with blood. Ignoring it, I thought *will I ever catch a trout?* I sighed in exhaustion and prayed to God. Lord, please help me catch a trout I prayed. Just one trout. *I'm going to catch a trout, and nothing can stop me*

The sun slowly went down and daylight was running out. I walked back onto the rocks this time carefully watching where I stepped, and then I threw my bait further than I ever have: the rapids moving faster than ever and the sunshine reflecting off the beautiful water. I waited for my bait to sink and rapidly jigged. My hands clenched on the slippery handle and rod tip with a small bend I slowly reeled. *Come on bite it, bite it* I kept jigging and reeling still nothing. At one point I lost all hope until "Bam!" I felt a hard tug on my line. This was my chance to set the hook. "Fish on!" I yelled. My rod bent with an unimaginable force as I struggled to keep hold of it. The trout fought with everything it had trying to break free in the rapids. My heart pounded as I reeled with all my might, rod about to snap. I fought hard praying for the fish to stay on. Luckily, I managed to get the trout out of the dangerous rapids. The trout's fin stuck out of the water causing a small wake. Finally, I could see the trout: its upper body covered in thousands of tiny dots, and its middle with an amazing pink stripe. The trout was a behemoth, the biggest I've ever seen. It was beautiful. Closer and closer it got almost to the shore, my hands shaking and eyes glued to the trout. Desperately, I hoped to land it. The trout was just feet away from the shore, giving everything it had. I gave one last tug pulling the monster out of the water and onto land. *Yes!!!! I did it.*

My body was overwhelmed with a wave of accomplishment and joy. The trout exhausted from the minutes of fighting sat there fatigued without strength. I grasped my hands barely fitting them around the slippery giant and picked it up. It was stunning, amazing, shining with a glossy pink stripe and too many dots to count. *God is amazing* I thought and admired this trout for a few more seconds *What a king of a trout* I looked over and saw my dad and uncle running through the water. They ran through the rapids and onto the island near me. "My goodness," my Dad exclaimed eyes wide open.

"It's a giant!" "Wanna eat it?" my uncle questioned. I paused and looked back at the trout It's gills hoping for water.

I shook my head, "Nah it deserves to live another day." Carefully I set the trout down back into the crystal clear water. It sat in the freezing water steadily gaining back its energy lost fighting. Finally, it started to swim slowly, majestically, disappearing in the white rapids never to be seen again.

**Brooklynn Coughlin**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Union High School, Union, MO

Educator: Jennifer Schwentker

Category: Poetry

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**Vague words, violent wounds.**

i am fully aware that i have wasted some of the most crucial years of my life sitting in sadness,  
and i am fully aware of how destructive it is to be so sad at such a young age,  
but i want people to fondly recall my kindness when memories of me appear within their mind.  
i want my loved ones to always feel like i understood them.  
i want them to remember the way i spoke of honey to the suffering because i was fluent in their language.  
every single person has their breaking point,  
even the most soft-spoken individuals.  
there comes a moment when you cannot hide anymore,  
where being polite and smiling becomes impossible,  
where that desperate ache placed beneath your chest is a little too strong.  
and i think suicide is the most beautiful form of art,  
because no painting ever spoke to me quite like watching my own life fall apart right in front of my eyes.  
i know that the next night will come with shallow breaths and silent cries,  
but i never knew that the end would be so desolate.  
i will watch as the sunset dissolves with a quiet whisper  
until only the pain remains again.  
i feel your stares,  
and your lips burning with the question of "are you okay?"  
but i think we both already know the answer that's hiding behind my teeth.  
it doesn't matter what people say to me,  
because at the end of the night,  
when i'm alone and on the brink of despair,  
i am comforted by nothing by a frail piece of metal.  
to live in a body that you loathe is exhausting.  
dread clings onto my bones,  
and i break my own heart by telling myself to give it another shot,  
but i already know that it is time to let go.  
i know that it'll hurt,  
but you can let those tears dry.  
we both know that it's always been the end,  
and i'm way too good at goodbyes.

Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Sellenriek

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## My Father's Princess

### My Father's Princess

I remember when my father held me in his arms, lightly throwing me into the sky so that I could grasp a glimpse of the verdant countryside, a place where, when I closed my eyes, I could see specks of auburn sun glistening against my cornea. Flying high above my father, I longed for my fingertips to caress the blanching clouds, for the sprinkling rain to never crash to a halt. The wind, dominating my braids, colored our surroundings with the shades and resonances of thrilling emotions. *Ma petite princesse* [My little princess], he would say as the cadence of his voice echoed past the wild apricot trees. *Ma jolie petite princesse* [My beautiful little princess]. Without a crown, without gold, and yet to him, I remained a highness. The duke never failed to catch me.

My entire life, I yearned to ignite the gentle flames of pride in my father's heart. When I was elected for the eighth grade student council, that wish of mine fulfilled itself. My father hugged me upon hearing the news; the crimson glow in his cheeks when the eyes above them creased, it was all I needed to feel my veins liquify into golden water, to hear the world silently applauding.

*i. Démarque toi, ma princesse. [Stand out, my princess.]*

Walking into the first meeting, my heart beat excitedly—I will make him proud; *I will stand out*. Suddenly, the world locked my eyes onto a girl. She saw me too, and there for a moment, we were both silent, inhaling the mirroring image before us.

*ii. Montre les ton désir de diriger. [Show them your desire to lead.]*

Exposed to diversity more deeply and over longer periods than many other students, I explained how I had the capacity to generate ideas from different cultural vantage points. My doppelganger abruptly raised her hand. I don't recall what she suggested, but something brilliant enough to duplicate the magnitude of everybody's eyes. Heart of light, flashing hands, and a thinker's brain—we excelled. One syllable and all eyes on us, one proposal and all necks turned, one sigh and a million whispers. Moments later, she had dived into the benefits of her own international upbringing.

At noon, she and I spent our lunchtime cutting out pumpkins and hearts to celebrate anti-bullying month with a compliment board for students to leave notes. We meticulously tied orange ribbons around lockers, hand wrote sweet messages in our best cursive, hung community service announcements and awards as we jammed to country music. Distributing orange wristbands was the funnest part; people kept coming back for more.

Swelling in a high-tide of happiness, we became the best of friends overnight.

*iii. Que tu aimes écrire. [That you love writing.]*

I had always loved to write. So much so that when I was little, I scribbled my own muse, Abigail. From kindergarten speech competitions to my commencement address at last summer's ceremony, Abigail relentlessly pursued me with sprinkles of courage and faith. My every accolade was laced with the colors of her soft red dress and glimmering hair—and the words that she'd whisper, much like my father's, led me to believe that I would forever be crowned a *jolie petite princesse*.

When my new best friend found out about Abigail, she said: "Me too. I have Eirene from Greek mythology."

"The personification of peace?" I asked.

"The *frickin* personification of peace. I can see her in coffee shop windows and at play rehearsals—always there

for me. It's amazing, really."

Doppelganger flipped through several pages. The mellifluity of her voice gleefully kissed the air as she began to read her work. Every poem of hers sounded pretty. Her musical lyrics could ache hearts. The stories she engendered saturated the dullest of places.

"That's cool."

We even owned the same notebook.

*iv. Et ton sourire... embrasse cela. [And your smile... embrace that.]*

Sunlight emerged through the baroque ceiling of our middle school chapel. Eyes fixed on the audience with profound attentiveness, my lips pressed onto the mic agilely. The student council was hosting its hebdomadal assembly. My gaze set on the crowd, searching beyond the paintings and beneath the freckled floorboards before revealing my favorite gesture: A beam. I grinned with the same smile my mother had captured in all of my newborn pictures, the same smile I gave to everyone I passed in the halls, the smile I showed to my classmates and professors.

Besides me, something was radiating a lambent glow. Doppelganger friend's lips were curved into an ablaze charm, too.

"You have pretty teeth," someone approached her after the meeting. Startled, Doppelganger laughed with her adventurous, pure voice that danced passionately inside her chords.

*v. Sois gentille. [Be kind.]*

My favorite place in the world was Doppelganger's house, a commodious construction down the shoreline. It smelled similarly to a status quo apartment; fresh paint, carpets, tired furniture and strong cigarettes that perfumed the balcony. I was greeted by her dog, a curious golden canine. With a step came Doppelganger. She crouched there as a chirping bark echoed.

"Oh," she said, "can I have a kiss?" Soon the dog approached her outstretched hand and, after a few sniffs, gave a lick.

I followed her into the rooms caterwauled with romantic hints, from red carnations in a vase to colorless photography of swans beneath a sun in final compressions of the day. The serene quiet suggested her parents were absent.

"Not sure if you noticed, but we have a new car in the driveway." Doppelganger announced.

"Let me think. Did you steal it or something?"

"The car is *pink*."

"Right." Doppelganger detested that color.

"Well, why don't we go on a ride. We should benefit from the gift."

"No way!"

"C'mon, why not a celebration," we both grinned, and just like that, we were driving by the hasty flicker of men and women from lively crowds in the daring atmosphere of Chicago. That night, the stars were brighter, the music was louder, the urban odors were pungent. They say people get lost in this city while having the time of their lives. I didn't want to go back to paper pumpkin cutting or student council meetings anymore. Forever I'd remain blinded by headlights, drunk from the cries of ecstatic trumpets.

We sang the music of our souls as we spun the metal steering wheel, rode and rode through the cool air, then peered down at the growling waves of an angry ocean. Aquatic animals lay inert in the sand, surrounded by starfish and crabs.

"Thank goodness that Mutual Best Friend couldn't come," Doppelganger sighed. "This fantasy is ours. She's a bitch. Haha, remember when she dro—"

"Are you serious?"

Doppelganger's sardonic laugh crashed to a halt. The dreadful humor that she so arrogantly titled to be hilarious had failed to amuse me. *I stood out. Oh my gosh.* My canvas was no longer blank, but finally painted with the most vibrant swirls of stellar colors, with blotches of my father's green irises and the rose from his cheeks.

I turned my head to the skyline. At the stars that my father tossed me towards; at the distant moon ostracized by the infinity acrobatics of small golden dots. The clouds that I wanted to feel. The smell of apricots. Was he proud?

*vi. Le numéro v ci-dessus était un rêve. [Number v above was a dream.]*

Only in a dream could I stand out; Only without her could I stand out. If people ask me why we stopped hugging and holding hands, I'll say that I have no idea. That I know nothing at all, except that ever since, a *jolie petite princesse* crown has been resting on my head.



Ajay Eisenberg

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Category: Critical Essay

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## Fair is Fair: Affirmative Action Through the Lens of Shakespearean Tragedy

### Fair is Foul Fair: Affirmative Action Through the Lens of Shakespearean Tragedy

Shakespeare wrote dozens of masterpieces, including sonnets, comedies, and histories. However, Shakespeare's most endearing works were his tragedies, marked by the descent of the tragic hero. These tragic heroes begin the play as internally and externally noble. For example, Macbeth began his namesake play as a venerated warrior and a thane, a member of Scottish nobility. Tragic heroes also "miss the mark" and fall victim to *hamartia*, their fatal flaw. Macbeth, despite his strong initial conscience, possesses "vaulting ambition" and pride. As a result of their *hamartia*, Shakespearean heroes gradually succumb to a reversal of fortune as their nobility erodes. Macbeth slowly loses sanity and control as he acts immoral. The hero's gradual downfall often sparks a partial recognition, in which he condemns his *hamartia*. Once-ambitious Macbeth adopts a nihilistic attitude towards the end of his life, categorizing his original goal of ascending the throne as insignificant. Macbeth fails to find meaning in life but remains prideful to the end, ultimately resulting in his death. However, suffering is not contained to the hero, but is widespread. Not only do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth die, but war and grief rampage of Scotland. While the Greeks contained suffering to the protagonist, death sweeps across a nation under Shakespeare's pen. Ultimately, the tragic descent of the hero evokes catharsis in the audience. Macbeth's fall elicits pity: a noble man falls victim to external influences and universal desire. *Macbeth* also instills fear in the audience: even a man as powerful and upright as Macbeth becomes disgraced when fate challenges his dignity. *Macbeth* remains relevant because the play tells a timeless tale of a fundamentally good man who falls victim to overwhelming ambition. However, men are not the only modes of ambition in the modern world.

Oscar Wilde once said, "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life." In this sense, methods of analysis for literature readily apply themselves to the analysis of reality. In particular, affirmative action bears relation to Shakespearean tragedy. Affirmative action aims to affirm innate abilities within individuals who are circumstantially disadvantaged by society. In theory, affirmative action equalizes the playing field for all competitors, reinforcing merit and equality. Racial affirmative action aims to rectify the impact of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and other measures of oppression against African Americans. In this sense, racial affirmative action demonstrates nobility by seeking to elevate the moral condition of society and promoting equal opportunity regardless of race. More recently, the goal of affirmative action has shifted towards the equal distribution of results (Abram 1313). While affirmative action aims to "fix the race," the policy misses the mark of justice and fairness (Abram 1316). Although many universities still practice racial affirmative action, public and legal support for the policy have waned (PEW; Woo 515). The policy's reversal of fortune is ongoing, as both the public and the courts turn against it. While the tide may be turning against affirmative action, society has not reached a final verdict. Due to the lack of consensus surrounding the righteousness of the policy, affirmative action only undergoes a partial *anagnorisis*, largely from individuals rather than the government (Allen 256). Despite racial affirmative action's continued use in admissions, major school systems have repealed the policy (Cancian 95). Though the widespread legal abolishment of affirmative action seems imminent, such a ban has not yet occurred, so affirmative action partially exhibits widespread suffering (Salamanca). Due to its strong relation to the Shakespearean tragic hero, the policy of racial affirmative action is an ongoing Shakespearean tragic event.

Initially, affirmative action exhibited nobility through its elevated goals for an equal society. More precisely, affirmative action aimed to implement a utopian society, free of social injustices on account of race or identity. During the civil rights movement, activists fought against *de jure* inequality. But even once legislative inequalities were removed, Black Americans continued to face fundamentally different challenges than white Americans. In a commencement address to Howard University, President Lyndon B. Johnson explained, "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, and bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, you are free to compete with all the others, and still justly believe that you have been completely fair"



(Johnson). President Johnson argued that a just meritocratic society must implement equal opportunity to compete. He further clarified that “a place on the starting line” does not necessarily guarantee a fair race (Johnson). For example, state-mandated school integration did not initially guarantee diversity in much of the South. Johnson partially measures the righteousness of a society by its access to fair competition, and many advocates for affirmative action consider fairness the primary goal of the policy. In the same speech, Johnson proposes, “Much of the Negro community is buried under a blanket of history and circumstance. It is not a lasting solution to lift just one corner of that blanket. We must stand on all sides and we must raise the entire cover” (Johnson). Johnson proposes that *de jure* equality alone fails to liberate all people because the law is only one aspect of a place in society. Instead, Johnson defines nobility as uplifting people, not only in theory under the law, but as a fact. In the article “Affirmative Action: Fair Shakers and Social Engineers,” attorney and civil rights activist Morris B. Abram names the initial goal of affirmative action. Abram proposes that affirmative action should “eliminate the institutional and informational barriers that stand in the way of the minority individual’s ability to *compete* equally with others” (Abram 1318). Abram outlines the initial nobility of affirmative action, arguing that proponents sought to allow for a fair competition, not to guarantee any specific outcome. Under Johnson’s definition of morality as fairness, affirmative action, which aims to create equal access to competition, should be considered just and morally upright. In this sense, the initially virtuous goals of the policy--to promote justice and equality--exemplify affirmative action’s nobility.

Despite good intentions, affirmative action reveals *hamartia*: fatally flawed, affirmative action misguidedly attempts to create equity rather than equality. More specifically, affirmative action misses the mark of justice when it aims to promote equal results rather than equal opportunity. In the speech referenced above, President Johnson explained how affirmative action aims to create equality: “We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result” (Johnson). Johnson’s primary oversight lies in his definition of an equal and just society. In Johnson’s speech, “equality as a result” functions as a euphemism for a more radical policy: redistribution. No longer concerned with equal opportunity, redistributive policies ignore individual merit and provide reparations based upon group membership. Redistribution misses the mark of fairness, and gives some groups unjustified advantages over others. In his article, Abram clarifies, “This new conception of justice [as redistribution] necessarily repudiates the ideal of the rule of law -- a law that would treat people equally, but... not seek to make them equal” (Abram 1317). Abram argues that any form of redistributive justice fails to achieve the “ideal rule of law” because it aims to equalize “ends” rather than “means.” He argues that the law should protect freedom from discrimination, not promote equal distribution. Though a supporter of reparative action as a whole, in “The Libertarian Case for Affirmative Action,” Andrew Valls proposes that only those directly harmed by societal injustices deserve to be “made whole” through reparative action (Valls 304). Valls writes, “affirmative action, it can be argued, is inadequate as a way to rectify the effects of historical wrongs because it misdirects the payments” (Valls 315). Scholars define *hamartia* as “missing the mark,” and Valls explains that affirmative action misses the mark as a method of historical reparations. According to Valls, only direct victims of social injustices (like ex-slaves) should receive compensation, and only from the pockets of their oppressors (Valls 315). Under his definition of fair reparations, modern African Americans are not entitled to compensation on account of their ancestry. When affirmative action seeks to rectify past injustices by “directing the payments” to members of a group rather than repairing victims of injustice, the policy misses the mark of true rectification. Furthermore, if guilt and victimhood result from ancestry and race alone, as racial affirmative action assumes they do, then the ancestrally guilty Caucasian race should foot the reparative bill alone. Affirmative action began as an issue of Black and white. However, in “Situating Asian Americans in the Political Discourse on Affirmative Action,” Michael Omi and Dana Takagi argue that America has grown too diverse for a bipolar view of race. They explain that at UC Davis, “Chicanos were offered admission at five times the rate of whites and *nineteen* times the rate of Japanese Americans ... [and] preferential policies victimized Asian Americans as much as, perhaps more than, whites” (Omi and Takagi 156). Asian Americans faced historic discrimination in America, so they do not share an ancestral “white guilt.” Regardless of their historic innocence, racial affirmative action redistributes admissions by taking away from high performing Asian Americans. Affirmative action oversimplifies race into two categories, thus missing the mark of justice in a multiracial society. Affirmative action exhibits *hamartia*: rather than promoting true fairness, the policy functions as an imprecise form of redistribution and ignores minority groups that do not support the narrative of rectification.

Despite glaring miscalculations, affirmative action only experiences a partial recognition: society still employs the policy, but some individuals have come to full knowledge of the issue. Particularly, both beneficiaries of and victims to affirmative action acknowledge the unjust aspects of the policy. In their article, Omi and Takagi outline Californian Governor Pete Wilson’s change of heart regarding affirmative action: In June 1995, Governor Wilson stated that “it is not just the ‘angry white males’ who think the time has come for change.” He went on to describe his conversation with a Vietnamese senior at prestigious Lowell High School in

San Francisco. The young woman was 'deeply troubled' that Vietnamese students were admitted with lower scores than Chinese students.

Governor Wilson held a government position, and the government represents society. Thus, Governor Wilson's condemnation of affirmative action represents the *anagnorisis* of the policy in Californian society. Though affirmative action remains prevalent nationwide, the passage above illustrates a partial recognition surrounding affirmative action, as well as a condemnation of redistributive policy. Similarly, in "Was I Entitled or Should I Apologize? Affirmative Action Going Forward," Antia Allen offers a hypothetical apology, fulfilling what she sees as her moral duty *if* society later reaches a consensus against affirmative action. Allen offers a partial apology to a hypothetical victim of affirmative action from her causally "guilty" point of view, while also arguing that the system of affirmative action bears the moral responsibility (Allen 256). She writes, "perhaps I owe, not just an acknowledgement, but an apology. Paradigm acts of apology are addressed to the persons harmed or offended" (Allen 256). After creating an imaginary "victim" of affirmative action, Allen apologizes and shares her perspective: "we [minorities] are not thieves who set out to steal opportunities, but public and private officials have handed us stolen opportunities" (Allen 262). Though denying direct moral responsibility, Allen proposes that affirmative action has caused unintended suffering. She acknowledges that affirmative action worsens society by "stealing" from others, coming to full knowledge of the dangers of redistribution. Allen's authority on affirmative action lies in her direct causal guilt: "my employment at a top New York law firm ... had something to do with affirmative action" (Allen 262). Allen, a past beneficiary of affirmative action, recognizes and condemns redistribution. Though society has yet to come to a clear consensus, Allen's recognition of her own guilt and affirmative action's flaws conveys the partial *anagnorisis* of affirmative action. Affirmative action still plays a prominent role in modern society, so the policy only undergoes a limited recognition. Similarly, Shakespearean tragic heroes often offered incomplete forms of *anagnorisis*. Affirmative action's partial condemnation of its flaw further likens the policy to a Shakespearean tragic hero.

As a result of individual recognition, affirmative action gradually transitioned from good to bad in terms of public opinion. More specifically, the public and the courts slowly moved from accepting to rejecting affirmative action. In his essay "Affirmative Action as a Majoritarian Device: Or, Do You Really Want to Be a Role Model?" Richard Delgado outlines the popularity of affirmative action at the time of publication. He writes that admissions officials "love talking about and sitting on committees that define, oversee, defend, and give shape to [affirmative action.] Almost every major law review has a devoted space to the treatment, usually sympathetic ... of affirmative action" (Delgado 1222). Delgado's analysis indicates the popularity of affirmative action. However, his description reflects the outdated nature of the article, published in 1991. Margaret Woo details a change in the state of affirmative action in her article "Reaffirming Merit in Affirmative Action," published in 1997. To support her claim, Woo cites various court cases in which the justice system strikes down race conscious admissions policies: "the tide seems to be turning against affirmative action in the courts" (Woo 515). By describing support for affirmative action as a "turning tide," Woo implies that, in 1997, courts rejected affirmative action to a growing extent. The "turning tide" represents the legal "turning point" of affirmative action, signifying the beginning of affirmative action's gradual downfall. Almost twenty years after Woo's publication, the PEW Research Center conducted a public opinion survey on affirmative action. Researchers found that 73 percent of Americans believe that race should not be a factor for university admissions (PEW). Racial affirmative action, by definition, includes race as a factor for university admissions, so the survey implies that 73 percent of Americans reject racial affirmative action. Over almost three decades, opinions on affirmative action have shifted from the support of "almost every major law review" to the disapproval of 73 percent of Americans (PEW; Delgado 1222). While a sizable minority of Americans still promote race conscious admissions, a disapproval rating of 73 percent clearly demonstrates a paradigm shift surrounding affirmative action. Due to the gradual decline in the public and legal standing of affirmative from 1991 to 2018, the policy underwent a stark "reversal of fortune." Affirmative action exhibits a gradual downfall, further likening the policy to the Shakespearean tragic hero.

Today, facing a decline in popularity and legal support, affirmative action undergoes both immediate and widespread suffering. Some university systems have already repealed policies of racial affirmative action and now, society awaits a Supreme Court decision that may ban affirmative action nationwide. Maria Cancian weighs the implications of the decline of racial affirmative action in "Race-Based versus Class Based Affirmative Action in College Admissions." Cancian explains, "A number of institutions, including the University of California system, have moved to eliminate [affirmative action]... based on race" (Cancian 95). The California school system includes nine prestigious universities and nearly 300,000 students (Cancian 95). Although the University of California system's blow did not end affirmative action nationwide, the policy suffered. The Californian repeal of affirmative action exemplifies the policy's contained suffering, but a new Supreme Court case poses a challenge to affirmative action nationwide. In the Harvard newspaper, *The Crimson*, Sophia Salamanca outlines the precedent-threatening case in her article "A Harvard Without Affirmative Action." Students for Fair Admissions ("SFFA"), challenged affirmative action's legal

precedent and sued Harvard for a violation of the Civil Rights Act. SFFA argued that affirmative action unfairly discriminates against Asians (Salamanca). According to Salamanca, “the Court ... is likely to overturn four decades of precedent allowing schools to consider race in their admissions processes” (Salamanca). The Supreme Court’s decision in *Students for Fair Admissions* will prove decisive. If the Supreme Court overturns *Bakke*, the policy will fall not only at Harvard, but across America. Affirmative action has already been repealed in California, and now, according to Salamanca, affirmative action has been all but nationally defeated, as society awaits the Supreme Court’s impending final blow. Clearly, affirmative action demonstrates a growing widespread suffering. As the nationwide abolishment of affirmative action looms, the policy approaches the completion of the Shakespearean tragic arc. Affirmative action exemplifies each trait of the tragic hero: initial nobility, *hamartia*, gradual downfall, partial *anagnorisis*, and suffering. Despite virtuous intentions, affirmative action promotes inequality in the form of unfair redistribution, resulting in the increasing recognition and condemnation of the flaw. The gradual decline of the state of affirmative action remains unresolved, but a Supreme Court decision could be fatal. Despite modern misconceptions, suffering is not the be-all and end-all of Shakespearean tragedy. Instead, the five stages of the tragic hero work in tandem to create catharsis in the audience. The term “audience” typically refers to an observer, not a participant. Under this definition, American society constitutes an “audience” for affirmative action. During catharsis, an audience member undergoes purgation or purification after experiencing a tragedy. How can American society experience purgation or purification after witnessing the impending fall of affirmative action? Purgation and purification each imply the existence of an underlying sense of guilt or imperfection. Fittingly, American society founded itself upon enough atrocities to fuel a frenzy of guilt. The debate surrounding affirmative action centers upon proving or disproving one prerequisite for just redistribution: the degree to which modern society has recovered from historical injustices as to ensure an “even playing field.” If society ever achieves postraciality, society will first accept that it is fair enough, rejecting redistributionist policies in favor of true equality. Equal opportunity acts as the cornerstone of meritocracy and capitalism. Uncoincidentally, these values outline the American Dream, the dream that any individual can achieve success and liberation under the conditions provided in America. With the abolishment of affirmative action, society will finally purge itself of guilt and allow for the true, transracial fulfillment of the American Dream.

**Eli Ferguson**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Lauren Ann Williams

Category: Dramatic Script

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**Feathers**

SCENE 1

NARRATOR

Deep in the depths of an unexplored forest lived a family of three.

(The family walks onto the stage, a child about 3 or 4 years old, ARTHUR runs in front of the father, JOHANN. A pregnant woman, CHRISTINE, walks with JOHANN.)

ARTHUR

Look! A frog! Mom, come on!

(He runs further up )

CHRISTINE

Hold on! Be careful before getting near the water!

(She walks slowly)

ARTHUR

Mom, Why can't you go any faster?

JOHANN

Your Mother is pregnant, Arthur, she isn't able to go that fast!

CHRISTINE

Yes, in just a little bit your brother or sister is going to arrive and then after that I'll be able to run and jump as much as I want, with a little time of course.

ARTHUR

Well, it better hurry up because I can't wait any longer!

(He runs off again)

NARRATOR

They were a happy family, escaping the growing bustle of city life and exploring new frontiers. They built themselves a home in this primeval forest.

(They all raise a small cabin-looking structure.)

NARRATOR

And they expected to raise their children in this home. But, the Mother had certain obligations to attend to in order to live peacefully in the forest.

(CHRISTINE and JOHANN embrace outside of their house. ARTHUR is behind the house structure and it is nighttime now.)

JOHANN

Promise me you'll be safe out there, Christine. Don't get lost, and don't let any of them pressure you into staying with them.

CHRISTINE

I know, Johann, I've traveled here before and I know what I'm getting into, don't be worried.

JOHANN

I know you've done this before and I know you can be gone for a while because of it, I'm not sure how to function without you.

CHRISTINE

I promise to keep it short, I just have to entertain them with my company for a while and then they'll let me be off.

JOHANN

Alright...

(They kiss)

JOHANN

I love you.

CHRISTINE

I love you more.

ARTHUR

(from behind the house)

Dad, come on, the popcorn is popping!

(They leave each other and CHRISTINE starts her descent past the pond and into the forest. The set is changed while the Narrator is talking.)

NARRATOR

Christine was a spirit named Gaia. A personification of the life and soul of this forest. She was flora and fauna and all the things in between.

(CHRISTINE reenters in a different, more extravagant and divine outfit.)

NARRATOR

She was obligated to meet with the other spirits whenever they called in return for her being allowed to have a human family.

SCENE 2

(CHRISTINE walks to the center where WATER, EARTH, FIRE, and WIND stand, they all wear divine outfits that match their element. The set is an antique and weathered Grecian scene with an abundance of flowers and plants on each marble structure.)

WATER

(Talking to the other Spirits)

Then I told that fish that if it wanted to swim upstream it would have to...

CHRISTINE

Mother? Hello?

WATER

Oh! My daughter has returned!

(The spirits celebrate)

FIRE

Glad to see you back, Gaia!

EARTH

(Wielding a full glass)

Let us drink!

WATER

We are so happy that you have come home.

CHRISTINE

(Embracing everyone)

I'm only back here for a little bit, as you promised.

WATER

Oh, I know, I have to savor every moment that I have with you.

(Squeezing CHRISTINE)

CHRISTINE

Mom, please!

EARTH

How have you been with your little human boy.

CHRISTINE

Well, he's not little, he's probably taller than you, but, we've been fine. I have a son with him now, his name is Arthur.

WIND

(Gasp)

A son? That's sacrilege!

WATER

Now, Wind, it was bound to happen someday don't act so shocked.

WIND

I am absolutely shocked! How is that child going to live in this world? This has never happened before in our history? You should have more control over your child, Water, she's run amok!

WATER

She hasn't run amok, she's just ... experimenting! Maybe we could learn more about what having a ... semi-spirit is like.

FIRE

The child should stay in the human realm, and you with, Gaia. I don't want it anywhere near me.

EARTH

No, it should be here with us, it has a right as a spirit to live in this place.

WIND

It doesn't have any rights, it's a mutt!

CHRISTINE

My child is not called "it," and the decisions regarding my child are mine, as well as my husband. You all fail to consider my or God forbid, my human husband's perspective!

FIRE

Wind does raise some legitimate questions Gaia. What will happen?

CHRISTINE

Well... I don't know. I hope that the answers come to me when I get there.

(They all pause)

WATER

Well, when we do get there you will make the right decision, I feel it.

EARTH

Gaia... how many feathers do you have left?

NARRATOR

In the spirit world, each spirit gets 3 feathers. Each of them is a wish, a way to change an unchangeable reality in their world, one where they do not possess the powers to control. The spirits have used their feathers in various ways, warranting stories rivaling the mythology of the Greeks. All the other spirits have used their feathers in the past, before Gaia was even born.

CHRISTINE

I have one ... but that doesn't mean anything, I won't have to use it.

(She walks away, holding her stomach.)

WATER

Christine, are you expecting another child?

CHRISTINE

... Yes. But I know that he or she will be my last child. As for my other child, he will stay in the human realm and live a normal life, so far, he does not exhibit any behaviors of being a spirit but I can't promise anything.

WIND

Well that's a relief, it will live and die, and we'll be rid of this mess.

(Christine starts crying)

FIRE

Look what you've done now! Come on.

(He pulls EARTH and WIND along with him)

WATER

(Going by CHRISTINE's side)

Honey, it's going to be alright. These children will live a happy and bright life and then the rest is left to fate.

CHRISTINE

(Still crying a bit)

This is exactly why I left this place.

WATER

I gave you life in the beginning so that you could live it, I allowed you to go into the human world and trusted that you would be safe. Well ... now you have a kid, but this will all heal in time.

CHRISTINE

(Still not convinced)

Thanks ... do you happen to know where Death is?

WATER

Well, he doesn't come here very often now that you left... he's just been sulking deeper in the woods. But I'm sure that he's around here somewhere.

CHRISTINE

Oh well ... I'd like to be alone now.

(WATER reluctantly walks away)

(DEATH walks in the opposite side of the stage)

DEATH

Gaia?

CHRISTINE

Death?

(They embrace)

DEATH

How have you been? I haven't seen you in forever!

CHRISTINE

I've been doing great! I live in the human part of the forest now and have to come here every so often to please the spirits, you know how it is.

DEATH

Why don't you just live with us? Why are you outside in the human part?

CHRISTINE

Well, I have a husband now!

DEATH

What? Is there another spirit?

CHRISTINE

No? I married a human.

DEATH

Oh ... well I'm glad that you're happy.

CHRISTINE

I am! Living with him in the human world is just a dream. We have a child now, his name is Arthur, and we have another one on the way.

(She rubs her stomach)

DEATH

(shocked)

I don't know how to feel about this.

CHRISTINE

No ... not you too! I told the others and they all said that it was a horrible decision.

DEATH

Well ... this has never happened before!

CHRISTINE

I know that already...

DEATH

And I'm not sure if you have any feathers left!

CHRISTINE

I do, one. Out of all the people I expected you to understand me. But, I guess I have no one.

DEATH

Oh please don't put it like that.

CHRISTINE

How else should I put it. It's the truth.

DEATH

I just don't understand why you had to go into the human realm to do that.

CHRISTINE

Where else should I go? It's not like there's anyone here for me.

DEATH

Oh, I didn't know that you felt that way. I gotta go.

(He starts to walk away.)

CHRISTINE

Wait what? Is there supposed to be someone here for me?

DEATH

Me! I felt like we had something!

CHRISTINE

My goodness ... I hope I haven't given you the wrong impression.

DEATH

The wrong impression! You said that you loved me!

CHRISTINE

There's just no way that this would ever work, life and death don't go together.

DEATH

Who says!

CHRISTINE

I don't know ... it's just easier to ... look elsewhere.

DEATH

Whatever, I just need you here ... with me! I'm sure that you could live without me but I can't live without you.

CHRISTINE

Death, I am so sorry about everything, but I can't do that, I have a human family ... speaking of that I should get going.

DEATH

Please promise me that you'll come back.

CHRISTINE

I will, I'm not sure when, but I will.

(She exits.)

NARRATOR

Life and Death had a complicated relationship. Life entertained Death's fantasies but could never be pinned down and kept in one place, while Death wanted her to be kept in one place. With the news that Life had settled without him, he was furious.

DEATH

How could she do this? I thought we had something special.

WATER enters

WATER

Death? I haven't seen you in a while, are you here to see Gaia?

DEATH

I already saw her. She has a human husband now.

WATER

I heard ... and that upsets you?

DEATH

It does!

WATER

Is that because it has never happened before or is it for personal reasons?

DEATH

... Personal reasons, if you don't mind my asking, why do you care?

WATER

Well because I know everything! Water exists everywhere ... and I can feel that you loved my daughter.

DEATH

You knew?

WATER

Of course I know, let's stop this banter, tell me what's on your mind?

DEATH

It's just ... Gaia! We've been partnered up for eternity and now she runs off and marries this human.

WATER

And?

DEATH

Well, it's not like our relationship was perfect before this. She always toys with me, leading me on and I know that she's doing it, but I still feel like she loves me in return.

WATER

You know she is a free spirit, she doesn't seem to be aware of or care for her effect on others but expects empathy in return.

DEATH

That's a nice way to characterize your daughter ...

WATER

I'm just calling it as I see it.

DEATH

I still want her to be with me ...



WATER

Death, try not to get too caught up with her, she's made her decision and we all have to live with it.

DEATH

Yeah ...

WATER

Well I better get going, Death, please don't do anything you'll regret.

She exits

NARRATOR

No matter what Death reasoned with himself, he felt that he had to be with Gaia, forever. He decided that that was what would make her happy, so he decided to bring her back in a way he knew would work.

SCENE 3

(The set changes so that we see the family sleeping in the cabin.

We see a figure in a wolf mask, creeping towards the cabin, opening the door and standing over the family, hanging his claws over each person until he reaches CHRISTINE. He takes his time looking at her and deciding.)

DEATH

(In wolf mask)

I'm sorry that I have to do this, but it is in the name of love. This baby will be cursed for its heart to stop temporarily on each birthday leading up to his tenth. Oh his tenth birthday he will die!

(DEATH walks away quickly, returning to the woods, past the pond.)

NARRATOR

At first, nothing happened. The baby was born healthy and named John. The family continued to live in the forest peacefully. John was now three years old. He had cried on his birthday before but the parents just assumed it was nothing. Now the family was really starting to notice something.

(JOHN, running after a frog.)

JOHN

Frog!

ARTHUR

John, don't go too far! Mom would want you to get hurt.

JOHN

Ow!

(He collapses suddenly, clutching his heart)

ARTHUR

John!

(He runs to his brother's aid)

Mom! Mom, come here, John's hurt!

CHRISTINE

(enters)

What's going on?

(She runs to John's side)

Tell me what's wrong!

JOHN

My heart...

CHRISTINE

(puts her ear next to his heart)

NARRATOR

The curse was taking effect, when she put her ear next to his heart she heard a voice.

DEATH (VOICE)

(whisper)

7 years...

JOHN

(Stops writhing and can take a breath)

I... feel better now.

CHRISTINE

Well... let's just bring you inside.

NARRATOR

This was the strangest experience of Christine's life. It was inhuman, so she decided to go to the spirits.

(Christine walks out into the woods at night, past the lake)

SCENE 4

CHRISTINE

(entering the spirit world)

Hello? Are you all here?

WATER

Gaia? What are you doing here?

CHRISTINE

I know you all don't like that I have human kids... but I have a problem. My youngest, John, almost died of a heart problem today and when I went to listen to his heartbeat... I heard a voice.

EARTH

Whose voice was it?

CHRISTINE

I couldn't tell... they were whispering. But they said, "7 years."

FIRE

That sounds like an omen if I've ever seen one.

WIND

What do you expect us to do with this information, go out and resuscitate him?

CHRISTINE

Well- no, I just thought maybe one of you knew something about it.

FIRE

Do you think that we did it?

EARTH

We would never do that!

CHRISTINE

No, not you, but I'm not sure what else could have done it.

WIND

Come to think of it, it wouldn't hurt if the kid died, it would stop your crazy human fantasies.

WATER

Wind! Is there something wrong with you?

WIND

Oh, don't act like we all weren't thinking about it!

CHRISTINE

How dare you! You wish for my kid to die!

WIND

Well I didn't-

CHRISTINE

No! Enough out of you, I've had it! I will never be seeing any of you again!

WATER

Honey, what about me!

CHRISTINE

What about you, you're just like them!

(She runs off)

The set changes to where she is alone deep in the forest, where she met DEATH in the beginning.

CHRISTINE

(On her knees)

Why is this happening? What have I done to deserve this?

DEATH

(walking in slowly)

Gaia? Is that you?

CHRISTINE

Death?

(she runs to him and hugs him)

DEATH

What's wrong why are you crying?

CHRISTINE

I have a big problem.

DEATH

What? I'm sure it's not that bad.

CHRISTINE

It is. I think that something has put a curse on my son.

DEATH

Why would you think that?

CHRISTINE

Well, John, my youngest, suddenly collapsed today out of no where and said that his heart was hurting, I listened to it and I heard something whisper, "7 years."

DEATH

That... sounds really strange.

CHRISTINE

I went to the spirits to see if they could help me and they said  
(she chokes up)

DEATH

They said what? Tell me?

CHRISTINE

They said that it would be better off if my kid were dead!  
(She cries in his arms)

DEATH

Oh... that's evil, no one should ever have to hear that.

CHRISTINE

At least I have you... All these stupid ancient spirits and their despicable behavior.  
(DEATH contemplates)

CHRISTINE

Death, what do I do?

DEATH

You should wait it out, the voice said, "7 years" so something is going to happen then, you don't know if it's bad or good.

CHRISTINE

Well I would assume that it's bad since my kid almost died today.

DEATH

If you don't want my advice, don't ask for it.

CHRISTINE

No, you're right. If something goes wrong... I still have my feather.

DEATH

But it's your last one!

CHRISTINE

Yes, and I'm willing to use it for my kid.

(A heavy pause)

CHRISTINE

One last thing, the voice I heard... it sounded familiar...

DEATH

Are you incriminating me?

CHRISTINE

No, I just-

DEATH

Gaia, you know that I would never do something like that! I want you to be happy!

CHRISTINE

Of course. Thank you so much, I'll see you soon.

(She runs off towards her house)

DEATH

I want you to be happy...

(He sulks off stage, rubbing his hands)

NARRATOR

Death felt guilty about lying to Gaia, but it was the only way to get her back with the chance he had.

SCENE 1

NARRATOR

Deep in the depths of an unexplored forest lived a family of three.

(The family walks onto the stage, a child about 3 or 4 years old, ARTHUR runs in front of the father, JOHANN. A pregnant woman, CHRISTINE, walks with JOHANN.)

ARTHUR

Look! A frog! Mom, come on!

(He runs further up )

CHRISTINE

Hold on! Be careful before getting near the water!

(She walks slowly)

ARTHUR

Mom, Why can't you go any faster?

JOHANN

Your Mother is pregnant, Arthur, she isn't able to go that fast!

CHRISTINE

Yes, in just a little bit your brother or sister is going to arrive and then after that I'll be able to run and jump as much as I want, with a little time of course.

ARTHUR

Well, it better hurry up because I can't wait any longer!

(He runs off again)

NARRATOR

They were a happy family, escaping the growing bustle of city life and exploring new frontiers. They built themselves a home in this primeval forest.

(They all raise a small cabin-looking structure.)

NARRATOR

And they expected to raise their children in this home. But, the Mother had certain obligations to attend to in order to live peacefully in the forest.

(CHRISTINE and JOHANN embrace outside of their house. ARTHUR is behind the house structure and it is nighttime now.)

JOHANN

Promise me you'll be safe out there, Christine. Don't get lost, and don't let any of them pressure you into staying with them.

CHRISTINE

I know, Johann, I've traveled here before and I know what I'm getting into, don't be worried.

JOHANN

I know you've done this before and I know you can be gone for a while because of it, I'm not sure how to function without you.

CHRISTINE

I promise to keep it short, I just have to entertain them with my company for a while and then they'll let me be off.

JOHANN

Alright...

(They kiss)

JOHANN

I love you.

CHRISTINE

I love you more.

ARTHUR

(from behind the house)

Dad, come on, the popcorn is popping!

(They leave each other and CHRISTINE starts her descent past the pond and into the forest. The set is changed while the Narrator is talking.)

NARRATOR

Christine was a spirit named Gaia. A personification of the life and soul of this forest. She was flora and fauna and all the things in between.

(CHRISTINE reenters in a different, more extravagant and divine outfit.)

NARRATOR

She was obligated to meet with the other spirits whenever they called in return for her being allowed to have a human family.

SCENE 2

(CHRISTINE walks to the center where WATER, EARTH, FIRE, and WIND stand, they all wear divine outfits that match their element. The set is an antique and weathered Grecian scene with an abundance of flowers and plants on each marble structure.)

WATER

(Talking to the other Spirits)

Then I told that fish that if it wanted to swim upstream it would have to...

CHRISTINE

Mother? Hello?

WATER

Oh! My daughter has returned!

(The spirits celebrate)

FIRE

Glad to see you back, Gaia!

EARTH

(Wielding a full glass)

Let us drink!

WATER

We are so happy that you have come home.

CHRISTINE

(Embracing everyone)

I'm only back here for a little bit, as you promised.

WATER

Oh, I know, I have to savor every moment that I have with you.

(Squeezing CHRISTINE)

CHRISTINE

Mom, please!

EARTH

How have you been with your little human boy.

CHRISTINE

Well, he's not little, he's probably taller than you, but, we've been fine. I have a son with him now, his name is Arthur.

WIND

(Gasp)

A son? That's sacrilege!

WATER

Now, Wind, it was bound to happen someday don't act so shocked.

WIND

I am absolutely shocked! How is that child going to live in this world? This has never happened before in our history? You should have more control over your child, Water, she's run amok!

WATER

She hasn't run amok, she's just ... experimenting! Maybe we could learn more about what having a ... semi-spirit is like.

FIRE

The child should stay in the human realm, and you with, Gaia. I don't want it anywhere near me.

EARTH

No, it should be here with us, it has a right as a spirit to live in this place.

WIND

It doesn't have any rights, it's a mutt!

CHRISTINE

My child is not called "it," and the decisions regarding my child are mine, as well as my husband. You all fail to consider my or God forbid, my human husband's perspective!

FIRE

Wind does raise some legitimate questions Gaia. What will happen?

CHRISTINE

Well... I don't know. I hope that the answers come to me when I get there.

(They all pause)

WATER

Well, when we do get there you will make the right decision, I feel it.

EARTH

Gaia... how many feathers do you have left?

NARRATOR

In the spirit world, each spirit gets 3 feathers. Each of them is a wish, a way to change an unchangeable reality in their world, one where they do not possess the powers to control. The spirits have used their feathers in various ways, warranting stories rivaling the mythology of the Greeks. All the other spirits have used their feathers in the past, before Gaia was even born.

CHRISTINE

I have one ... but that doesn't mean anything, I won't have to use it.

(She walks away, holding her stomach.)

WATER

Christine, are you expecting another child?

CHRISTINE

... Yes. But I know that he or she will be my last child. As for my other child, he will stay in the human realm and live a normal life, so far, he does not exhibit any behaviors of being a spirit but I can't promise anything.

WIND

Well that's a relief, it will live and die, and we'll be rid of this mess.

(Christine starts crying)

FIRE

Look what you've done now! Come on.

(He pulls EARTH and WIND along with him)

WATER

(Going by CHRISTINE's side)

Honey, it's going to be alright. These children will live a happy and bright life and then the rest is left to fate.

CHRISTINE

(Still crying a bit)

This is exactly why I left this place.

WATER

I gave you life in the beginning so that you could live it, I allowed you to go into the human world and trusted that you would be safe. Well ... now you have a kid, but this will all heal in time.

CHRISTINE

(Still not convinced)

Thanks ... do you happen to know where Death is?

WATER

Well, he doesn't come here very often now that you left... he's just been sulking deeper in the woods. But I'm sure that he's around here somewhere.

CHRISTINE

Oh well ... I'd like to be alone now.

(WATER reluctantly walks away)

(DEATH walks in the opposite side of the stage)

DEATH

Gaia?

CHRISTINE

Death?

(They embrace)



DEATH

How have you been? I haven't seen you in forever!

CHRISTINE

I've been doing great! I live in the human part of the forest now and have to come here every so often to please the spirits, you know how it is.

DEATH

Why don't you just live with us? Why are you outside in the human part?

CHRISTINE

Well, I have a husband now!

DEATH

What? Is there another spirit?

CHRISTINE

No? I married a human.

DEATH

Oh ... well I'm glad that you're happy.

CHRISTINE

I am! Living with him in the human world is just a dream. We have a child now, his name is Arthur, and we have another one on the way.

(She rubs her stomach)

DEATH

(shocked)

I don't know how to feel about this.

CHRISTINE

No ... not you too! I told the others and they all said that it was a horrible decision.

DEATH

Well ... this has never happened before!

CHRISTINE

I know that already...

DEATH

And I'm not sure if you have any feathers left!

CHRISTINE

I do, one. Out of all the people I expected you to understand me. But, I guess I have no one.

DEATH

Oh please don't put it like that.

CHRISTINE

How else should I put it. It's the truth.

DEATH

I just don't understand why you had to go into the human realm to do that.

CHRISTINE

Where else should I go? It's not like there's anyone here for me.

DEATH

Oh, I didn't know that you felt that way. I gotta go.

(He starts to walk away.)

CHRISTINE

Wait what? Is there supposed to be someone here for me?

DEATH

Me! I felt like we had something!

CHRISTINE

My goodness ... I hope I haven't given you the wrong impression.

DEATH

The wrong impression! You said that you loved me!

CHRISTINE

There's just no way that this would ever work, life and death don't go together.

DEATH

Who says!

CHRISTINE

I don't know ... it's just easier to ... look elsewhere.

DEATH

Whatever, I just need you here ... with me! I'm sure that you could live without me but I can't live without you.

CHRISTINE

Death, I am so sorry about everything, but I can't do that, I have a human family ... speaking of that I should get going.

DEATH

Please promise me that you'll come back.

CHRISTINE

I will, I'm not sure when, but I will.

(She exits.)

NARRATOR

Life and Death had a complicated relationship.

Life entertained Death's fantasies but could never be pinned down and kept in one place, while Death wanted her to be kept in one place. With the news that Life had settled without him, he was furious.

DEATH

How could she do this? I thought we had something special.

WATER enters

WATER

Death? I haven't seen you in a while, are you here to see Gaia?

DEATH

I already saw her. She has a human husband now.

WATER

I heard ... and that upsets you?

DEATH

It does!

WATER

Is that because it has never happened before or is it for personal reasons?

DEATH

... Personal reasons, if you don't mind my asking, why do you care?

WATER

Well because I know everything! Water exists everywhere ... and I can feel that you loved my daughter.

DEATH

You knew?

WATER

Of course I know, let's stop this banter, tell me what's on your mind?

DEATH

It's just ... Gaia! We've been partnered up for eternity and now she runs off and marries this human.

WATER

And?

DEATH

Well, it's not like our relationship was perfect before this. She always toys with me, leading me on and I know that she's doing it, but I still feel like she loves me in return.

WATER

You know she is a free spirit, she doesn't seem to be aware of or care for her effect on others but expects empathy in return.

DEATH

That's a nice way to characterize your daughter ...

WATER

I'm just calling it as I see it.

DEATH

I still want her to be with me ...

WATER

Death, try not to get too caught up with her, she's made her decision and we all have to live with it.

DEATH

Yeah ...

WATER

Well I better get going, Death, please don't do anything you'll regret.

She exits

NARRATOR

No matter what Death reasoned with himself, he felt that he had to be with Gaia, forever.

He decided that that was what would make her happy, so he decided to bring her back in a way he knew would work.

SCENE 3

(The set changes so that we see the family sleeping in the cabin.

We see a figure in a wolf mask, creeping towards the cabin, opening the door and standing over the family, hanging his claws over each person until he reaches CHRISTINE. He takes his time looking at her and deciding.)

DEATH

(In wolf mask)

I'm sorry that I have to do this, but it is in the name of love. This baby will be cursed for its heart to stop temporarily on each birthday leading up to his tenth. Oh his tenth birthday he will die!

(DEATH walks away quickly, returning to the woods, past the pond.)

NARRATOR

At first, nothing happened. The baby was born healthy and named John. The family continued to live in the forest peacefully. John was now three years old. He had cried on his birthday before but the parents just assumed it was nothing. Now the family was really starting to notice something.

(JOHN, running after a frog.)

JOHN

Frog!

ARTHUR

John, don't go too far! Mom would want you to get hurt.

JOHN

Ow!

(He collapses suddenly, clutching his heart)

ARTHUR

John!

(He runs to his brother's aid)

Mom! Mom, come here, John's hurt!

CHRISTINE

(enters)

What's going on?

(She runs to John's side)

Tell me what's wrong!

JOHN

My heart...

CHRISTINE

(puts her ear next to his heart)

NARRATOR

The curse was taking effect, when she put her ear next to his heart she heard a voice.

DEATH (VOICE)

(whisper)

7 years...

JOHN

(Stops writhing and can take a breath)

I... feel better now.

CHRISTINE

Well... let's just bring you inside.

NARRATOR

This was the strangest experience of Christine's life. It was inhuman, so she decided to go to the spirits.

(Christine walks out into the woods at night, past the lake)

SCENE 4

CHRISTINE

(entering the spirit world)

Hello? Are you all here?

WATER

Gaia? What are you doing here?

CHRISTINE

I know you all don't like that I have human kids... but I have a problem. My youngest, John, almost died of a heart problem today and when I went to listen to his heartbeat... I heard a voice.

EARTH

Whose voice was it?

CHRISTINE

I couldn't tell... they were whispering. But they said, "7 years."

FIRE

That sounds like an omen if I've ever seen one.

WIND

What do you expect us to do with this information, go out and resuscitate him?

CHRISTINE

Well- no, I just thought maybe one of you knew something about it.

FIRE

Do you think that we did it?

EARTH

We would never do that!

CHRISTINE

No, not you, but I'm not sure what else could have done it.

WIND

Come to think of it, it wouldn't hurt if the kid died, it would stop your crazy human fantasies.

WATER

Wind! Is there something wrong with you?

WIND

Oh, don't act like we all weren't thinking about it!

CHRISTINE

How dare you! You wish for my kid to die!

WIND

Well I didn't-

CHRISTINE

No! Enough out of you, I've had it! I will never be seeing any of you again!

WATER

Honey, what about me!

CHRISTINE

What about you, you're just like them!

(She runs off)

The set changes to where she is alone deep in the forest, where she met DEATH in the beginning.

CHRISTINE

(On her knees)

Why is this happening? What have I done to deserve this?

DEATH

(walking in slowly)

Gaia? Is that you?

CHRISTINE

Death?

(she runs to him and hugs him)

DEATH

What's wrong why are you crying?

CHRISTINE

I have a big problem.

DEATH

What? I'm sure it's not that bad.

CHRISTINE

It is. I think that something has put a curse on my son.

DEATH

Why would you think that?

CHRISTINE

Well, John, my youngest, suddenly collapsed today out of no where and said that his heart was hurting, I listened to it and I heard something whisper, "7 years."

DEATH

That... sounds really strange.

CHRISTINE

I went to the spirits to see if they could help me and they said  
(she chokes up)

DEATH

They said what? Tell me?

CHRISTINE

They said that it would be better off if my kid were dead!  
(She cries in his arms)

DEATH

Oh... that's evil, no one should ever have to hear that.

CHRISTINE

At least I have you... All these stupid ancient spirits and their despicable behavior.  
(DEATH contemplates)

CHRISTINE

Death, what do I do?

DEATH

You should wait it out, the voice said, "7 years" so something is going to happen then, you don't know if it's bad or good.

CHRISTINE

Well I would assume that it's bad since my kid almost died today.

DEATH

If you don't want my advice, don't ask for it.

CHRISTINE

No, you're right. If something goes wrong... I still have my feather.

DEATH

But it's your last one!

CHRISTINE

Yes, and I'm willing to use it for my kid.

(A heavy pause)

CHRISTINE

One last thing, the voice I heard... it sounded familiar...



DEATH

Are you incriminating me?

CHRISTINE

No, I just-

DEATH

Gaia, you know that I would never do something like that! I want you to be happy!

CHRISTINE

Of course. Thank you so much, I'll see you soon.

(She runs off towards her house)

DEATH

I want you to be happy...

(He sulks off stage, rubbing his hands)

NARRATOR

Death felt guilty about lying to Gaia, but it was the only way to get her back with the chance he had.

(The scene changes back to the house)

SCENE 5

NARRATOR

The events kept happening each year on John's birthday, he would collapse and a whisper would continue counting down.

(We see John collapse again, except he is now older, 9 years old)

CHRISTINE

John? She runs and listens to his heart.

DEATH (VOICE)

1 year...

(CHRISTINE starts crying)

JOHN

Mom, what is it saying?

CHRISTINE

Don't worry about it honey, you will get better.

(She goes to see JOHANN)

CHRISTINE

I don't know what to do! John could have 1 year left to live and I can't stop it!

JOHANN

Shh, we don't know that, there's always a way to fix things.

CHRISTINE

We could go into the forest and try to find a medicine, or I could ask one of the spirits to help, though they didn't do much last time.

JOHANN

Whatever it is, John will be okay.

CHRISTINE

I can't think like that... I can't trust that he will be okay I have to do something.

(beat)

CHRISTINE

Johann... there is something that I could do that I know will work.

JOHANN

Well why didn't you say that earlier? We could have saved a lot of trouble.

CHRISTINE

I know, but it has certain consequences.

JOHANN

Christine, come on, what is it?

CHRISTINE

As a spirit I have three feathers... three opportunities to change an unchangeable thing in the world. I only have one left, and if I use it then I can no longer meddle in this world and I will be living with the other spirits for the rest of eternity.

JOHANN

No... you can't do that. You can't leave us here, leave me here!

CHRISTINE

It might be the only way to save our son! Maybe once I make the wish I can find another way to reach you...

JOHANN

Your children wouldn't have a Mother, I wouldn't see you ever again.

CHRISTINE

I know, it's way too complicated. If only we'd never moved to these horrible woods.

JOHANN

There's no going back now...

NARRATOR

The parents lived their next year in fear, waiting for John to turn 10 years old. But when his 10th birthday came around, the time was up.

JOHN

Mom! It's happening!

CHRISTINE

John? Where are you.

(John is suffering)

JOHN

This one really hurts- Mom please make it stop.

CHRISTINE

I will. Please just hold on.

(Johann arrives with Arthur on his side.)

ARTHUR

What's happening?

(Christine holds out the feather and hesitates)

JOHN

Mom help!

JOHANN

Christine!

(She kisses the feather and holds it to her kid. Blackout and one spotlight on her. She walks away slowly, not looking back.)

NARRATOR

Christine had made the decision to save her child, and never be seen again by her family.

(She walks into the forest with the spirits again slowly.)

SCENE 6

EARTH

Gaia?

WATER

Gaia, you're home! What happened?

(Water tries to go in for a hug but Christine refuses.)

CHRISTINE

I did it... I gave my last feather and now I'm in this place forever.

WIND

That's great news! No more meddling in human business.

FIRE

You may not be happy with it, but it's for the best.

CHRISTINE

Did you all curse John?

WATER

What are you talking about?

CHRISTINE

You all did some sick magic to curse my kid in order for me to use my feather and come home, that was your plan, right?

WIND

Well you probably think we would have but we had nothing to do with this, I don't mess with humans.

CHRISTINE

Just admit it already! The voice when I listened to John's heart was familiar and it had to be one of you.

DEATH

(walks in slowly from the other side)

Gaia? Did you use your last feather?

CHRISTINE

Yes... I did.

WATER

Death what are you doing here we haven't seen you in forever!

WIND

I was thinking we'd gotten rid of you...

DEATH

Well I'm here, for you, Gaia.

CHRISTINE

(she walks and stands next to him)

He's the only one that I can trust around here.

EARTH

You were saying that the voice sounded familiar... I don't think that it was one of us.

FIRE

Making ticking time bomb curses isn't in our domain, Gaia.

CHRISTINE

Not this- he didn't do it, he very clearly said that it was not him, right?

(Death pauses.)

CHRISTINE

Right?

(Beat)

CHRISTINE

Oh no- you lied to me!?

DEATH

I'm so sorry Christine, I'm in love with you! I need you here with me!

CHRISTINE

I thought I could trust you... no no no...

WIND

He's good for nothing.

DEATH

I did it because of our love for each other! But any one of you would have done the same thing for different reasons.

CHRISTINE

How do you expect me to love you after you cursed my son to die!

DEATH

It's really not like that, he's just a human-

CHRISTINE

No! Go away, I never want to see you again.

WIND

That's right, Death, skedaddle.

CHRISTINE

You too, Wind, and you all, Earth, Fire, Mother.

(She storms off into the woods. Death tries to go after her but Water gently puts her hand on his shoulder and stops him, and leads the rest of the spirits off.)

NARRATOR

Christine would spend the next decade staring from the other world, quietly observing her family. They never knew that she was there but she always watched them. She occasionally allowed the other spirits to visit her, but she would never forgive them. The family lived on without their matriarch. Taking the time to remember her from every now and then.

SCENE 7

JOHN

(slightly older)

Arthur, did you ever find out where Mom went?

ARTHUR

She left, John, and she's never coming back.

JOHN

Why?

ARTHUR

Because of you.

JOHN

Did Mom not like me?

ARTHUR

Yeah, she hated you, she couldn't stand to be around you so she left.

JOHN

Oh...

(JOHANN overhears and walks in)

JOHANN

Arthur, why would you say that?

ARTHUR

I don't know... I don't know why she left.

JOHANN

She certainly didn't leave because of John.

ARTHUR

Then why did she leave? It doesn't make sense that if she, as you said, "loved us so much," why would she up and leave?

JOHANN

That's a good question ... If I tell you something will you keep it a secret?

JOHN

Of course, Dad, what is it?

JOHANN

... Your mother was actually a nature spirit, and she came from these woods. She was and was a representation of the life that flows in all creatures and exists in the air.

ARTHUR

Really? She was like a Goddess?

JOHANN

She was a Goddess. You were cursed when you were younger, John, and she used her last gift in order to save you, but she had to return to where she came from as a consequence.

ARTHUR

So... she's still out there somewhere?

JOHANN

Yes, and since she, a spirit, was your Mother, you might be able to visit her someday.

JOHN

How do we visit her?

JOHANN

I don't know, it's not for me to know.

NARRATOR

The boys would always wonder what life could have been like with their Mother, what their Dad could have been like had he not been indefinitely mulling over everything that went wrong. So John and Arthur made a vow to see their Mother again one day, when they were ready...

SCENE 8

(Christine is still sitting depressed, peering out into the woods. Death walks in behind her, not saying a word, solemnly and nervously.)

CHRISTINE

(Breaking the silence)

They're getting older you know.

DEATH

Yes, I can see that.

CHRISTINE

John is almost 18! He's gotten so big.

DEATH

It's weird how fast humans grow in their childhood.

CHRISTINE

Yeah... I wonder what it would have been like if you hadn't robbed me of it.

(Beat.)

CHRISTINE

They're planning on seeing us you know, it turns out John and Arthur able to come into our world.

DEATH

Well that's great! You'll be able to see them again.

CHRISTINE

Yes... but I'm sure that they will want to see you too, the person who took away their Mother ... I'm not saying this to be malicious, just giving you some warning before it happens.

DEATH

Alright...

(He walks away)

(We see JOHN and ARTHUR back at the cabin, JOHN is planning on going into the woods to see his Mother.)

JOHN

Dad said that Mom would just walk past this pond here, right?

ARTHUR

That's what he told me.

JOHN

I hope it works. It makes me sad to think that Mom's been watching us this entire time and hasn't been able to reach us.

ARTHUR

Me too ... but at least she's still out there.

JOHN

Maybe...

ARTHUR

Be careful, you don't know what those evil spirits could be up to.

JOHN

I will, see you soon.

SCENE 9

(ARTHUR waves and JOHN treks into the forest. He walks and soon meets WATER.)

WATER

(spooked)

Who are you?

JOHN

My name is John, and I've come to see my Mother, Christine.

CHRISTINE

Oh, you're one of Gaia's boys... I wasn't expecting you so early, please follow me.

(They walk and talk)

WATER

You know, if you are her son, then that means that I am your Grandmother.



JOHN

My Grandma? I didn't know that my Mom had parents.

WATER

Just me.

JOHN

So... what are you?

WATER

I am the water of the forest! I am the lifeblood of everything living and gave way to my daughter, Gaia, who represents the life.

JOHN

Well that makes sense.

WATER

You know, there are some people here that aren't particularly fond of you. Not you, but your ... existence.

JOHN

I'm not fond of them either. Who was the one that cursed me and made my Mother leave all those years ago?

WATER

Oh... that would be Death.

JOHN

Why did he do it?

WATER

The reasons aren't for me to tell. We've arrived!

CHRISTINE

John?

JOHN

Mom, I made it!

They embrace for a long time. Water exits without saying a word.

CHRISTINE

I've missed you so much! Are you and your brother doing well?

JOHN

Yes, I think that he will be able to come later.

CHRISTINE

I'm so glad to see you ... is your father doing alright?

JOHN

No ... he's been a little lost without you here.

CHRISTINE

Oh no ...

(she starts to cry)

JOHN

Mom, it'll be alright, I can be there, I can be the one to connect you two, if there is no other way for him to reach you.

CHRISTINE

We'll figure out a way ... I hope.

JOHN

Have you been watching us?

CHRISTINE

Every day. I'm just so mad that I wasn't actually there to watch you grow up.

JOHN

Water said that Death was the one who cursed me to die, do you happen to know where he is?

CHRISTINE

I was wondering when you were going to ask me that, I'm not sure exactly where he is, but he is usually found deep within the heart of the forest.

JOHN

I'll be right back Mom.

CHRISTINE

Be careful...

(He runs off. The NARRATOR walks back onstage and the set changes. While the NARRATOR is talking JOHN is looking around, he finds that NARRATOR and interrupts him.)

NARRATOR

John began his trek and would soon find Death, but their conversation-

JOHN

Death?

NARRATOR

Hello? Who are you?

JOHN

I'm John, Gaia's youngest child.

NARRATOR

Oh who am I to pretend I don't know who you are, of course I know you.

JOHN

Did you curse me to die?

NARRATOR

Now that's a heavy question ... yes I did.

JOHN

What is wrong with you? Why would you do that.

NARRATOR

Calm down please-

JOHN

Why? Give me an answer why did you do it, why did you want to take my Mom away by cursing me?

NARRATOR

Well ... I did it for love.

JOHN

Love? You wanted to kill me out of love?

NARRATOR

I loved your Mother very much, after spending eternity together, you sort of develop some feelings for one another, though actually ... she didn't really develop feelings for me. She ran off with some human one day and when she came back I saw it as an opportunity to take her back ... so I cursed you in order for her to use her last feather and for her to never leave again ....

JOHN

Did you ever stop to think that when she used her feather, she would have to leave her two children behind?

NARRATOR

No ... I didn't think about that ... and I'm sorry.

(John pauses and decides to walk away.)

NARRATOR

Wait, I think I can find a way for your Dad to come to this place ...

JOHN

Are you sure it's not a trick, or a curse?

NARRATOR

I'm positive, I swear.

JOHN

Well let's hear it.

(The NARRATOR pulls out one wrinkled and tattered feather and holds it close to his heart.)

JOHN

You still have a feather left.

NARRATOR

Yes, I've been saving it for a rainy day.

(he chuckles)

JOHN

Why would you use it on us?

NARRATOR

Because it would make your Mother happy.

(John takes the NARRATOR's hand and gently pulls him offstage. The rest of the cast join the stage, CHRISTINE and WATER as well as ARTHUR and JOHN on one side and JOHANN on the other.)

NARRATOR

This is how the story ends, I've righted my wrongs ...

(He gives the feather to Johann and leads him to the spirits and then walks back to center stage, the others embracing and celebrating.)

NARRATOR

And the one thing I've ever wanted, Gaia's happiness, was found. Though, I'm sure that I am still not forgiven.

WATER

(Walks away from the scene and embraces DEATH)

You made the right choice my dear.

(She leads him off the stage with the others still together and blackout.)

THE END

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## **They can't be trusted: How social media and campaign ads enable misinformation**

On televisions across St. Louis, the faces of Democratic Senate candidate Trudy Busch Valentine and Republican Senate candidate Eric Schmitt were familiar ones from August to November. One moment, Valentine beamed in front of an inhumanly green pasture while melodic music floated in the air; the other, created by the Republican-backed Schmitt, featured dark, frantically clipped images of newspaper headlines seemingly backing up claims that she wants to 'defund the police.' Now, these claims were declared false, which means that even though the campaign teams didn't have sufficient evidence for these accusations, they ran the ads anyway. These desperate, lying attack ads are hardly a Democrat vs. Republican thing — back in the 2022 Primaries, Valentine and opponent Lucas Kunce went through the same song and dance. One noteworthy attack ad by Valentine stated that Kunce was “against gay marriage,” “against Planned Parenthood,” and “for more jail time for marijuana,” which was proven false and condemned by the named source, Vote Smart.

Now, a simple Google search would negate these fabrications. But advertisements are on the screen for a minute at most, and the majority of normal, everyday people don't do their homework. With tiny, unexplained captions that “cite” their information, these campaign advertisements take advantage of the fact that there are no laws directly against misrepresenting the truth and aid in spreading misinformation.

Political ad campaigns have only become more extreme over time, with candidates now spending an estimated \$9 billion in advertising campaigns as of 2022. Strangely enough, political campaigns have not always been this way. Opponents have always attacked each other, sure, and they've always hit under the belt. However, this wave of sensationalized campaigning began with the introduction of the television in the 60s, sparking the current movement of gritty, black-and-white attack ads and the flurry of news and local stations overrun with smear campaigns, attempting to run the opponent into the ground.

No surprise, the ad attacking an opponent or an issue distorts information of whichever side they disapprove; however, this also begins the process of misinformation by the way of campaign advertising. Even if political ads aren't that effective, they can still stir up thoughts based on lies and misinform their audience.

Most people don't fact-check everything they hear, especially when these advertisements come during another activity, like watching television, scrolling on the internet or listening to the radio. Campaign teams capitalize on their audience's inattention, utilizing current events and turning them into talking points that they spread rapidly, many times, without correctly using their cited sources. These tactics manipulate a gullible and naive audience to form unfounded beliefs about both ideas and people.

"Truth can be muddled in those sorts of ads because [they're] just trying to attack the other side, and it's up to outside organizations to fact-check to see whether or not the ad is 100% correct," social studies department chair Joseph Mazen said. "Sometimes, ads are just flat-out wrong, but they are effective because they made people think that [it was right]."

Mazen teaches both Government and AP Government classes that are meant to prepare students for the future by educating them about civics and how government works. However, within the past ten to fifteen years, the rise of social media has interrupted this educational flow by the lack of differentiation between opinion and fact. As the so-called 'marketplace of ideas,' social media plays a heavy role in circulating false or sensationalized information, with fake news spreading more rapidly than real news, according to a 2018 study conducted by the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology.

Media such as TikTok is praised for incorporating teaching methods, yet TikTok still has been approving ads that promote misinformation and amplify fake news. Twitter is often used by many verifiable news sites, but there are only so many characters that someone can type into a Twitter post before the post is cut off — 280, to be exact — and this leads to short titles or explanations that do not encapsulate the true matter at hand. When audiences use social media solely for news, this leads to an overreliance on social media and overconfidence in how well people, especially students, can determine information from misinformation.

It has been shown time and time again that misinformation not only causes miseducation but it can create real conflict. One well-known example lies within the escalated falsehoods about the election. Misinformation on social media sites like Twitter is widely regarded as the cause of the infamous Jan. 6 Capitol attacks and the numerous incidents after. In addition, with Twitter at their fingertips, commentators such as Tucker Carlson and Joe Rogan also contributed to the wide misleading information surrounding COVID-19, causing chaos and panic and even resulting in several further hospitalizations from ivermectin, which Rogan promoted on his podcast. Misinformation like this is dangerous and should be taken seriously. To demonstrate this, librarian Rachel Lusch evaluates websites with Honors English 2 students, teaching them how to identify and recognize misinformation.

"Social media, in particular, can be tailored to your preferences, which can become this echo chamber [where] we're only seeing things that appeal to us," Lusch said. "We're not able to see all viewpoints and all sides of things because we're only seeing the things that are curated for us, so it can be a dangerous place [for misinformation]."

The reasonable answer would be to say that misinformation needs to stop, and companies and campaigns that help to promote such misinformation and fake news need to be held accountable. However, we live in an unreasonable world with unreliable expectations, and thus, the burden falls on the incoming generations to reject this misinformation and maintain critical thinking skills.

It sounds simple enough — at first. The truth is that with the increasing reliance on television and social media for information as well as the corporatization of so-called "real journalism," it can be harder than ever to tell fact from fiction.

Students of rising generations must learn to navigate through a world that constantly lies to them, which can be done in a multitude of ways. One of which involves challenging our inherent biases and exploring different perspectives on a topic to make a final decision on beliefs.

"If [an] article that you're reading is reinforcing all the things that you believe, just remember that there's another side out there," Lusch said. "In order for us to be informed citizens, we have to understand both sides and [then] choose the side we want to [be] on."

Furthermore, as much as people can over-depend on social media for news and opinions, technology can be a benefit. Taking time to gain knowledge about current events by researching constantly updated websites and being thoroughly vetted by professionals can prevent misinformation from taking root. Even opposite sides of the political spectrum still have verifiable, credible news sources that write in-depth, trustworthy stories and articles.

"Those [trusted news sources] are the ones that tend to have been around for a while," Mazen said. "On the conservative side, the Wall Street Journal is a great organization. On the [liberal] side, the New York Times has been around for a while and is on a good track."

It's important to keep an open mind with statistics and the sources from whence they came, and, as information is updated, to know the right sources who have the credibility to report it. It is also important to question everything and make decisions about what is trustworthy based on past credibility, timeliness and the types of citations used. Social media and campaign ads purposely exploit inattentiveness, so it's important to be involved and understand what's true and what's false. Some non-partisan platforms, such as Ground News and Politico, work to decrease the amount of false or severely biased disseminated information, which can limit the spread of such news.

Misinformation is not to be taken lightly. As students of a nation becoming increasingly partisan and digitized, we must understand and recognize the effects misinformation can have on not just individuals but a collective nation. We

must learn to differentiate between fact and opinion and better evaluate the content we consume so that the media's dirty, problematic tricks cannot manipulate us.

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Category: Short Story

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## **In My Mother's Hair Salon**

I sit on the back of the couch in my mother's hair salon, long legs dangling onto the cushions. The blazing, sweltering sun makes my legs — slathered with Vaseline — glisten like the shiny, juicy blackberries that Ms. Shay brings to the shop when she gets her hair curled for a special event.

It's summer break, and Mama always enlists my help when a new wave of customers surges through the door with the new free time summer brings. With summer comes vacations, conferences, family reunions, whatever.

The box fan clicks each time a full rotation of the blades is made, but it doesn't do much to stifle the hard-to-breathe air. Surely anyone who rises from the salon seat and dares to walk to the door will sweat out their roots in less than a second, the hair curling back into itself and the ends poofing out into a fluffy mess.

Still, in walks a young woman, around twenty or so. I've never seen her before, but when she writes her name down in pretty, swirly calligraphy, I can see that her name is Eve. The poorly-shaped twists on her head tell me that she needs this short-notice help. Badly.

From the barely-there twitch of my mother's lips, I can tell her thoughts are similar to mine. She calls Eve to the chair. Gently, Mama untwists the thick hair. Eve jerks her neck as Mama does so, twitching every time my mother so much as touches a hair on her head. She must be tender-headed, grown and still acting a fool like that.

"Hm," Mama hums, a smile playing on her lips. She doesn't look at me as she grabs the spray bottle full of water to lessen the effort, but her voice becomes a little louder. "Mya, go get my comb."

I hop up from my seat, ready to go. It's a humid, swampy heat here in St. Louis, but it's a chance for me to finally do something, which is better than melting into a puddle on the couch.

"Get the black and green one!" she calls as I enter the storage room. "It has a little red design on it."

I know which one she's talking about — she's been using that comb for so long, it must be older than Jesus — but as I rifle through the drawer full of combs and hairbands, I become confused. "I can't find it," I say, loudly so she can hear it.

"Try harder!"

I shuffle through the drawer some more, but it doesn't appear. "I still can't find it, Mama," I call back to her.

Mama comes into the back, sucking her teeth, all annoyed. Her hands are still damp from the spray bottle she used to ease the detangling of Eve's hair. "Girl, if I look in here and find this comb..." She finds what she's looking for easily, dangling the metal part in front of my face. "It's right here. *Right. Here.*"

I stare at her. "Mama, that comb is white."

The space between her brows creases as she looks harder at the cheap comb like it'll reveal magic thoughts if she stares at it hard enough. The comb's bright, vivacious color must have rubbed off over the years, flaking into the dull



white that it is now. "I didn't..." she trails off, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. She shakes her head and sighs. "I guess I need to go back to the beauty supply." I trail her as she heads back out to the front of the store, where Eve is flipping through a catalog of our shop's hairstyles.

"I'm going to a conference, and I'm not sure which style to get," Eve admits, digging into her back pocket. "I was looking at this one." I lean over to get a peek at the magazine clipping she brandishes. It's in a braided style that I've only seen once or twice before. The hair weaves in and out like the pattern on a basket. Long braids down to the behind are more popular than Soul-Glos nowadays, but my mother still only offers straighteners and relaxers in her shop. Still, she won't allow me to have a relaxer, no matter how much I plead or beg her, instead telling me that my hair is pretty the way it is.

"It'd look better like this," my mother says, pointing to one of the images on the wall. I know how long she waited for those pictures to come in; she waited three long weeks and spent money on having them professionally laminated. All to fix them on the wall *just* right, the shots lining up precisely in a nice little row. I remember how wide she beamed when she saw all of those pretty ladies up there, smiling with all their perfect, white teeth and their light, light skin. Most of all, though, she liked their straight, silky hair.

I don't like those pictures. It feels like they're judging me for having the audacity to be as ugly as I am. They smile condescendingly at me, mocking my fat nose and thick, coarse hair. My eyes avert from the wall as Eve glances up at it. She absentmindedly rubs a hand through her scalp, probably imagining what she'd look like with hair like that.

Mama is right, though. If she looks like the women on the wall, everyone will be scrambling after her. Men love women like that, and more importantly, *jobs* like women like that.

Eve nods, convinced, and it's not long before the flat iron hisses on her coily hair, a thin swirl of smoke curling upward and dissipating. Mama chases the straightener with her rat tail comb and I watch her, entranced. A distinct odor of popcorn fills the air and within an hour, she's successfully straightened Eve's dark hair to be a perfect reflection of the women on the wall.

The red and green have worn from the comb, leaving nothing but little black specks of how it used to be. Still, my mother pays it no mind, running the comb through Eve's now bone-straight hair. She slicks the edges down with a sweet-smelling jam, making the fine hairs stay flat, just like the women in those music videos on TV do. I watch, like always, quietly mimicking the movements on my own hair with my fingers.

Mama smiles proudly, handing Eve a small mirror. "How do you like it?"

Eve checks herself out in the mirror. She smiles at herself, shaking her head and watching as the hair flies with it. "It looks good," she says. She glances at Mama gratefully. "Thank you."

Mama touches her shoulder, beaming. "Of course, honey." She pulls the cape from around Eve's shoulders, brushing off stray hairs. "Mya will take your payment up front."

She pays in credit, which almost no one does, but luckily, I've figured out how to work the card machine. She leaves and I stand at the front counter, my head propped up in my hand when I suddenly catch a glint of someone walking up to the door. My stomach sinks and I want to scurry to the back, but—

Ms. Clara presses her hand to the glass of the door, scowling at me. "Girl, I know you see me standing here!" She bangs on the door like a lunatic and I cringe. "You better come unlock this door before I whoop your ass!" I fix my face before it can get disrespectful and turn, unlocking the door that Mama keeps locked during the middle of the day 'cause of the crackheads who roam the street asking for money and sketchy men who want to sell pirated DVDs and VHS tapes.

The old woman bursts through, adjusting her purse. "My hair got nappy," she mutters to no one in particular. Her hair looks fine to me, but I know Ms. Clara has always been vain; if even a stray hair pops up, she's back to the salon. "Been out in the sun for too damn long." She cuts her eyes at me like it's my fault that she had been waiting outside for more than five seconds.

Even though she's a church lady and wears those big, floppy, pastel-colored hats that sit on all of the Mother Board's grayed heads, she still cusses like a sailor, her voice loud and clear and harsh. Any of her prettiness has been marred by the persistent scowl on her face, complaining about anyone and anything.

She's a mean old lady.

Mama still welcomes her kindly, same as always, and they sit at the wash bowl. Ms. Clara talks *at* everybody — no one can get a word in otherwise — and Mama hums at the correct times while washing her chemically straightened hair, her fingers deftly working through the tangles and kinks.

When they return to the regular chair and Mama starts combing, Ms. Clara squints at me, the wrinkles around her eyes and lips deepening. Mama dries her relaxed hair, squeezing every droplet from her head. "And what the hell you just standing around here for?" she asks rhetorically. "Ain't you gonna go and play outside?" She takes another look at me, her eyes roving over my dark shoulders, and laughs. "Maybe not." She sucks her teeth like Mama does, clicking her tongue. "Lookin' like yo' daddy."

My cheeks burn and steadfastly, I look away. I thought that my father was handsome. He looks like me, though, and if Ms. Clara said I look like him — dark and unsightly— then to her, he is also ugly. For a moment, I might open my mouth and talk back, but I am interrupted by Mama, who, in her own way, is quietly seething.

"Clara," my mother says sharply. Ms. Clara quiets her chortling but still stares at me out of the side of her eye. The salon is quiet for a moment as Lauryn Hill croons her newest single in the background. My mother looks like a chef in the way that she parts Ms. Clara's graying hair, the metal tail of the comb slicing clean, precise parts for her to roll up. Finally, to make conversation, my mother asks Ms. Clara, "How's your daughter?"

"She's with that lightskin-ned boy who work down at Carl's now," Ms. Clara says. As Mama styles her hair, Ms. Clara continues talking through her drama. Halfway through, I tune her out, her other words about my skin still buzzing in my brain. They sit like lead, weighing my shoulders into a slump and curving my lips downward.

"Thank you, baby," she says to my mother, fluffing the curls out with her hands. She makes her way to the front counter where I sit, ready to handle her cash. She pays, counting the dollar bills and passing them to me. She gives me a mean look. "Mind yo' mama now, you hear?"

"Yes, Ms. Clara," I say, the response deemed for elders automatic. I'm still too lost in my thoughts, anyway. She harrumphs approvingly and turns out the door, the bell above her tinkling with her exit.

All day, everything fades into the background as the thoughts press insistently in my head, whispering about my ugliness. I don't even hear anything until Mama calls my name several times, the last time adamant. I finally look at her and hum my acknowledgment, finally realizing that it's 7 o'clock and time for the shop to close.

"Go do inventory," Mama says, as she counts the money in the register. She doesn't look at me, but she smiles to herself and I know it's a good day for business. "For being a good help, I'll go get a snack for us, and then we can go see cousin ReeRee, okay?"

I bite my thumb before nodding at her, sliding off the couch. "Okay, Mama." I watch the television screen, crowded with beautiful, dancing light-skinned women with their straightened hair past their behinds, for a bit before heading to the back.

Sitting innocently on the shelf is a tidy row of green boxes with cheesing girls and my attention is immediately drawn to them. All of their hair looks silky soft and beautiful, probably so nice to touch. Longingly, my gaze flutters over all of their sweet, smiling faces and, for a moment, I can imagine that I am among them.

My illusion only lasts for a minute before it shatters. Of course, I can never be like them. They've all got good hair, the kind that is shiny, silky, and flies with the wind. They look like Disney princesses; good, kind girls who attract many good things. They attract good boys, good money, and good work — at least, that's what Ms. Clara's words tell me. Nothing bad should ever happen to them.

I trace my finger against the girl's face, memorizing every crease on her light brown cheeks and every strand of her beautiful hair until a lump grows in my throat.

A throbbing, harsh fury overcomes me. Why was I born like this? Ugly and plain and awkward in my skin, when there were so many people who were blessed to be pretty and fair. It's not fair.

I want to be pretty, just once. Then, maybe Mama would look at me with the pride she exudes whenever she looks at the women on the wall.

The fury inside me gives way to a fierce resolution as I stare at my hands. I want to be pretty and I will make a way.

The green relaxer box crushes in my hand, but I hardly pay it any attention as I pull out the plastic gloves Mama uses for application purposes. I've seen her do this hundreds, if not thousands, of times. My hair is all natural and tied up into a poof, so it's easy to just rip open the package and rub the gooey white substance in between my hands, slathering the relaxer on my head like Vaseline.

It's much easier than I thought. The sight of Ms. Clara gaping like a fish at my new look pops up in my head and I cackle. Just wait, I'll look better than her and her stupid daughter's boyfriend. I laugh so hard that I slip, my hands digging a little too deep into my head, touching my scalp.

My heart drops into my stomach before I can feel the pain.

I squeeze my eyes tight, salty, aching tears leaking out no matter how hard I try to keep my lids closed. It feels like a blazing fire upon my head and this must be what Mama refers to when she says "*chemical burns*."

My chest heaves and my lungs can't suck in any more air and before I know it, I'm screaming in pain, my voice like a violent siren in the inky depths of water. I force myself to gulp down a few breaths, blindly reaching for the rag and dipping it in the tub of water. I dab it across my head like I've seen Mama do no less than twelve dozen times, but the prodding sensation makes the pain worse. My hands tremble and for a moment, I think I might die.

I've messed it up.

The bell on the door chimes again, making Mama's arrival known to me. "Mya, I'm back!" Her voice surprises me, and the bin of water tumbles from my hip, spilling all over my clothes. The clatter of her keys and the clacking of her boots become louder as she walks further into the salon. "Come on, I thought you wanted to—"

Mama's twitchy smile falls when she sees me. Her gaze flits to so many places that it's hard to keep track — first, my slathered hair, then my soaked clothes, then the damp towel on the floor.

At first, I think she might yell at me and tell me to pick up this awful mess. But to my surprise, she kneels down on one knee, gently removing the rag from my hand. I tug on it, not wanting to let it go — not wanting to let my dreams and hopes go up in smoke — but she's easily more substantial than me, so the win is quick and simple.

She helps me up from the puddle of liquid that I've spilled, leading me to the wash bowl in the main room instead. She rinses my scalp with cool water, alleviating the burns.

She lifts my head and combs through the ruined hair, examining the skin on my scalp. "Not too bad," my mother says, her first words to me since she came back from across the street. The words come out strangled, all choked up and caught in her throat. The unspoken question gleams in her eyes, but she doesn't ask it.

Even with the question gone unasked, I give up the answer, anyway. "I want to be like them, too," I say simply, my gaze involuntarily fluttering to the women on the wall. There they are, in all of their glory, unaware of the sharp, stinging envy buried deep inside my heart.

My mother looks at the women at the wall and then her eyes flit to me, taking a long, hard look at me in my sorry state. Her head lowers, turning her back away from the wall and her long, worried face toward me.

"I know, baby," she says. She pats my cheek softly and she turns to look at the wall again before halting, stopping

herself before she can turn. Instead, Mama hooks her arms around my shoulder, her warm weight pulling me away from looking at the wall, too. "I know."

"I'm *sorry*," she says.

In my mother's hair salon, there is nothing but the sound of my cries as my mother buries her face into my thick, coarse hair, her soft murmurs doing nothing to satiate my wishes.

**Karyssa Fugarino**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Sumner Academy Of Arts & Science, Kansas City, KS

Educator: Lisa Harms

Category: Short Story

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## **The Painter's Gaze**

Hushed whispers filled the fluorescently lit room, and though it could not be heard, music pulsed under a young man's over-the-ear headphones. There were a handful of people scattered around the hall slowly walking between the paintings. The man with the headphones stood about ten feet in front of me. He was hunched over a retractable, standing easel, looking at me through the upper corner of his eye. I met his gaze, forcing myself to remain perfectly still, even though I was inclined to jeer at him. My velvet gown glowed in a warm light that was nowhere to be seen in the room and behind me stood delicate leaves, perfectly placed. I couldn't see the canvas he was painting on, but the palette he was using was covered in puddles of deep red that almost appeared black, the same color as my dress. Once he finished the quick strokes he was making, he lifted his head, getting a better look at me. As his gaze followed my silhouette, his eyes widened and his brow furrowed. I barely stifled a grin as he picked up the painting he had made a week prior and stared at it, confused.

Based on a card with big, black letters spelling "student", that he showed the guard when he entered, I knew he was here to study me. Most people bearing the same badge immediately gravitated towards the scene across from me. It showed two lovers gazing into each other's eyes, while fluffy clouds and pastel flowers swirled around them. In comparison to them, I was exceptionally plain; nothing special, no great artistic skill, just an emotionless portrait.

The student was tall and lanky, with reddish hair that seemed bright, even in the harsh light of the gallery. The painter, my painter, on the other hand was stout, with thick hands, and eyes that invited you in. The one thing that these two artists shared was the idle way their brushes flicked the canvas. The student continued to visit me week after week, learning about my colors, the way my velvet dress draped, and the techniques that brought me to life. I knew he wasn't my painter, but each time we met, the line between them blurred.

When I was first painted, and my soul was still in a body, the painter came to my home as my father's student. Initially, I barely noticed he was there; our paths never crossed. Occasionally, after he and my father came back from a commission, we would all attend a feast. While he was still my father's apprentice, those feasts were the only times I spoke to him. A few years later, as a final show of skill before departure, and to thank my father for his training, the painter painted me, or more accurately who I was.

It began with glances as he rendered a curl in my hair or a freckle on my brow. At every sitting he would shower me in unearned compliments and random gifts. I appreciated the attention he gave me; it was nice to have someone new to talk to, but I didn't understand why he took an interest in me. Why would this man, a professional painter, treat me in any way besides simply a subject to render then discard? However, I quickly chose to ignore these doubts and to naively take the situation at face value. He was a social and popular person; people gathered around him, creating a jovial audience that hung on each word he said. His eyes coaxed people in. They were inclined to trust him without reason, so I too blindly believed in his eyes.

Eventually, when he was fixing my clothes or hair for better reference, his hands would linger longer than they should have. He would fumble around bumping into me so that his hand slid down my frightened figure. I wished he would stop. I asked him to stop, but instead of minding my words, he twisted them so that he was always in the right, and I was always in the wrong. I wasn't scared to tell people; they already knew, but that didn't mean they helped me. He had their trust, their respect, and anyways, that was my purpose in their eyes. Every hour he painted me was a grating misery. I counted the seconds until he left, but there wasn't anything I could do. He had the power, and I was simply his subject of amusement.

After what seemed like far longer than it was, he left. He had a mediocre career, never reaching fame before or after his death. I married, mothered, and withered like I was taught to, until all that was left of me was a richly colored painting in a gilded frame. Much later – years, decades, or centuries later – I was placed in this white walled hall where people came to stare at me and other paintings. I will never forget the way their eyes swiftly glided over my figure and how they promptly walked to the next painting, believing that I had always been an unremarkable

painting, and nothing more. Though I was a random painting to most of the people who viewed me, I didn't mind since, to me, they were simply random people. They let me be. They didn't pry like they did with the lovers hanging across the hall, digging into the couple's history for some scrap of information. This disinterest prevented them from ever knowing my shame, my powerlessness, my fury which lingered long after the gesso was applied to the canvas on which I now reside.

The student broke this pattern. He was interested in me, in what was left of me. I so disliked being watched. It felt too much like it had when my painter originally stood before me, treating me as his novelty. After a few weeks of the student frequenting me, something snapped. Disdain for my painter merged with my perspective on the student. What real, important difference was there between them? They were both painters, and they both thought that I was nothing more than a figure with a face. In life, there was nothing I could do to prevent my suffering. So, in this two-dimensional existence, I became obsessed with getting another chance to be the subject of a painting, but this time I resolved that I would have the power.

The longer the student looked at the canvas he held in his hand, the more confused he appeared. Occasionally, he would look back at me and then swiftly back down to the canvas. After a while, he sat down and took some deep breaths before apparently deciding that he must have made a mistake. After a bit, he finished his painting and packed up the cart of oil paints he had brought with him. While he was packing up, I caught a quick glance at the painting he had just finished. It was a beautiful replica that effectively mirrored the style of the original painter despite minor errors in proportion and medium use. The only major difference between the student's painting and the image of the original that will forever be burned into my memory, despite my inability to see myself, was the color of a small ribbon in my hair. When I had modeled for the hair in the portrait, I had golden-yellow ribbons intricately braided in my hair, but in the student's new replica, the ribbons were a shade of forest green. This alteration thrilled me and led me to await the student's next visit impatiently.

The next week his reproduction of me had a different design on the collar of my dress than his earlier paintings did. He again picked up his previous paintings and inspected them. This time he looked at the paintings and me with more agitation. This pattern continued for the following weeks; the color of my eyes, a curl that fell behind my ear, the placement of a flower, the embroidery on my sleeve, each of these were discrepancies he found over weeks of painting me. Every time there was a new difference, the student had a fevered moment of confusion where he hectically tried to figure out what went wrong. He would tilt his head trying to find a new angle, in hopes of an epiphany, but it never came.

After a few weeks of this ritual, the student became panicked. He came to see me more often, came closer to more carefully inspect each aspect of my portrait, and the whole time, he had a crazed glint in his eye. As he became more overwhelmed with the changes he was finding, I became more greedy. I loved the thrill. Every time I altered my appearance, he became more afraid, and I held more sway over his thoughts. He spent his days staring at me, interest giving way to obsession with what he considered to be bizarre alterations in the painting. On some days, he would go around to all the people in the gallery asking if they noticed the changes. He scoured textbooks while checking if they matched with what he saw, and even talked to the staff at the museum. When he checked, however, everything was as it should be. No one saw anything out of the ordinary, they didn't even take enough time to really look, and I was always a perfect picture of what was described by textbooks.

I was infatuated with the feeling of control and knowing that I was making him suffer. He deserved it; they deserved it all. I controlled his thoughts, his emotions, his actions, and even his appearance to others. I couldn't stop once I had power over others that I had never experienced before. I had earned it...right? People who had power should experience what it feels like to be powerless, and I was a means to demonstrate that. My judgment corrupted by the righteousness of my actions, I began to take greater and greater risks, making greater and greater changes in my features.

After days of the student arousing suspicion, more guards were placed around me, though it didn't seem to bother him. The student continued with his visits and his seemingly unprovoked outbursts at the museum. People avoided him and guards whispered about him when he wasn't listening. Though I only saw him from the small perspective of the museum gallery, I knew that I was his life. He grew paler and thinner, as though his body was simply an object he carried with him. Bruises and marks began to cover his body where he had banged on a wall or torn at his skin, trying to convince himself that he was still sane, and that everyone else was simply wrong. Others became objects of his suspicion. Were they tricking him, trying to get a rise out of him? Or maybe, this was their way of attacking him. They left him alone and abandoned, trapped in his swirling thoughts. Everything was a threat to him, except for me. It seemed that to him, there was nothing beyond me and my frame.

One day, a few weeks into the heightened security, I was especially confident. The student was sitting drawing me to create another reference of what he was seeing. He rapidly scribbled with his pencil, hanging on for dear life to the activity that had brought him so much joy only weeks earlier. While he was looking sternly at a mark he had made, I decided to change the color of my eyes and to shift my eyes to look happily towards the left. When he saw

this, he cried out and charged towards one of the guards. He stopped short of the guard, just before the guard resolved to violently defend themselves, and stumbled the last few steps up to their feet. Pleading to the guard on his knees, the student asked, "Did you see it? The painting! Th..The.. The eyes... her eyes!" The guard swiftly glanced at me, but there was nothing to see; my eyes were as they always had been. The guard looked back down at the disheveled young man at their feet with disdain. Then, what happened was truly beautiful! The student, he lost all control: begging, screaming, flailing, and then all of the sudden, silence. His eyes, they paled, and when I looked at him, there was nothing. They were simply voids where a soul should be, as mine had been years ago, and continue to be, while my golden frame glimmers in the fluorescent light.

**Shangri-La Hou**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

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## **Second Migration**

### **Second Migration**

Somewhere there was love, a god, an incision bleeding out the belly of life.  
There was a Chinese girl in America before there was an American girl in China.  
There was eye-pulling, hair-pulling.  
There were father's fathers and father's brothers who couldn't stay for some third son's second round of daughters.  
There were gifts from *po-po*: a kiss, a red envelope, a piano.  
There was Florida that gave you a sun-kissed, beach girl tan, but look at yourself.  
There were the parties where the adults played cards and brought dinner in deep, blue-and-white porcelain pots.  
There were all of the other children who piled their plates with *feng zhua*, *peking* duck, tofu, noodles, but you had learned to scrunch your face up in disgust, a towel wringing its weight out.  
There was someone's son who asked you why you could use chopsticks but not your own mouth.  
There was taking your love for one language to feed your hate for another.  
There was moving states twice, your parents finding kinship through the tongue.  
There was your mother explaining to her new friends that if they asked you to pass the rice in Mandarin you would refuse to respond in anything except English, as if there was a choice:  
But look at yourself.

### **Someday, I will be tall**

and beautiful. Not in the way  
Dad knows it, watching me  
get sick on the brim-full glass of milk  
he pours me to down; every gulp, he hopes,  
that will become a millimeter of height.  
I imagine a giant sequoia, fireproof from its roots  
to the ends of its waning fractals, always closing in  
on the sun, climbing upward: an earthbound seed  
declaring its place in a bright, white heaven. *To the light*  
is the only direction trees and people know to go. Tallness  
touches the sun and keeps getting taller—and trapped underneath  
the shadows of these greater beasts, I want to know if my pinched eyes  
are fit enough for even that rare, filtered blade of light. I want to know where we stand  
in the food chain of this god-eat-man, black-and-white world—Dad, do you think that milk can  
turn us tall and pale enough to reach for whiteness, to grasp it, to become it? Do you think we are  
that close?

### **Reunion**

When her father pulls her aside,  
whispers, *Play for us*, her hands are quivering  
because they are proof of her existence.

She turns away from the dinner table where  
all of her heritage converses in the secrets that she should know.



They tear into slabs of *peking* duck in the spaces  
where she was taught music theory instead of Mandarin:  
dissonance and the consonance where it should resolve.

(Her mother reminds the family about the money  
*her* mother spent on the baby grand.)

She faces it—black bird of prey that commands the living room  
and she a muscled force with the power to shake  
time and language off of her yawning lid.

With one wing to the impossible ceiling  
she clashes string against hammer, skin against polished skin,  
reverberating her vulnerable, electric truth: the same tune which rattled out  
all of their breathing bodies.

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Critical Essay

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## **“Gods and Fear”: Transcending the “Golden Cage” of Silence and Submission within Circe by Madeline Miller**

Madeline Miller’s retelling of Circe’s story from the traditional male-authored *The Odyssey* effectively transforms the narrative of women in literature as Circe discovers her voice and power as she embarks on her own monomyth of self-actualization. In recreating the Hero’s Journey as a reversed monomyth, Miller allows Circe to take back her story, renouncing the patriarchal notions that one must be a hero or a villain, and that a woman must be an angel or a monster, demonstrating that only in defying one’s own silence can an individual truly break out of their self-inflicted “golden cage,” and find their true strength (Miller 155).

Contrasting traditional male-dominated heroes’ journeys, Circe’s story begins already in the realm of a ‘special world.’ Circe is introduced as a goddess--a titan’s daughter-- but in being a woman, she is reduced to “nymph.” Even in the “great wonder” of Oceanos’ Palace, Circe’s only duty is that of a “bride” and nothing more (Miller 3). A life reduced to pleasing men is “the world’s natural order,” and as such, the great pursuit of divinity that defines the monomyth of male heroes, means nothing to a woman whose “entire existence is silence,” confined to the black obsidian walls built only to “reflect” a man’s own divine light” (Miller 5, 7; Thomas 4). Thus, Circe’s years at ‘Home’ are defined only by the “dull miseries” of silence and constraint as she “speaks as little as possible,” having “no autonomy of her own” (Thomas 3-4). In childhood, Circe merely exists as “Helios’ daughter,” believing herself to be, according to Belenky, “mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority” with the resignation that this would be her life “until the end of days” (Thomas 4; qtd. Thomas 4; Miller 13). And so it would be, until she eventually comes to realize that her “voice can exist for herself,” and that she has the power to forge her own away from the influence of her male counterparts or derived by a “millennia of male storytellers” (Thomas 2, 4).

Upon witnessing the gods’ mercilessness to Prometheus--an uncle punished for defiance--Circe acts, for the first time, “in direct defiance of the gods” (Thomas 7). This small act of kindness--bringing nectar to a condemned man-- is nothing more than a whisper of autonomy, yet Circe left “trembling” with all she has done. Finding strength in this defiance, Circe cuts her palm with a dagger, embracing “the pain that would come” as evidence that “her hand is her own” (Miller 23-24). In a way, showing kindness to Prometheus, is a resurrection of Circe as she discovers that she is her own person with her own voice, her own desires, and her own aspirations. Her life would no longer be reduced to the “murk and depths” of others’ desires and aspirations. Circe realizes that she is a “creature within” the depths who has the power to display her own voice, her own desires, and her own aspirations (Miller 24).

Few journeys are clear and simple, however, and that of Circe’s self-actualization is no different. While Circe has become aware that she has a voice, she is often still far too afraid to use it, crouching alone at the bottom of “the great chain of fear” (Miller 32). Throughout her childhood, Circe clings to the presence of those around her -- often men -- as if seeking to survive off of the crumbs they leave behind for her. Circe finds purpose and warmth in caring for her brother Aeetes, only to be left behind “[i]n a whirl of gold” by the “divine son of Helios” the moment “hopes of a throne” come within his reach (Miller 34-35). Circe’s pleas and desperate grasp stand “[n]ot a good enough reason,” thus Circe is left behind, with shards of her trust and openness stripped away (Miller 35).

With her own name marking her to the resolute role of bride, Circe believes herself to be nothing without a man by her side, desperately seeking any of the “ragged men” that “would have her” (Miller 35). Thus, when Circe is met with a mortal man by the name of Glaucos who believes her to be the most “wondrous thing” in all his life, she finds through him the affection she lacks from all others, including herself, and once again, she clings to this warm feeling, making herself smaller in idle hopes that he “would never let [her] go” (Miller 43). While aware of her voice, Circe still believes that she must dampen it so as not to distract from her male counterparts, fearing that anything beyond a silent existence and occasional murmur would leave her to suffer in unbearable solitude.

Circe, in her desperation to “keep Glaucos” by her side, is willing to not only “uproot the world” but to “tear it, burn it, do any evil” necessary (Miller 46). Her own bold determination is met with bold action, and in transforming

Glaukos, Circe transforms a part of herself, awakening her own strength and willingness to act. While Circe is, yet again, cast aside, this time she does not sit in silence and watch, and instead, she chooses to live “through each scalding moment to the next” refusing to merely succumb to the grief that so often reduces nymphs to “be stones and trees rather than flesh” (Miller 55). In an act of fury, Circe transforms Glaukos’ bride-to-be, Scylla, into the monster Circe believes her to be, and in spite of the passion on which this headless act was born, Circe is rewarded with a gift worthy of all “furious screams” and lashes “upon her skin” that may follow (Miller 56). Circe is no longer complacent to the “great chain of fear”; she is willing to speak, to act, to exist in defiance, and in this, she is no longer subjected to the fate of the submissive female bride to which she was born (Miller 32).

These acts, though, arise from vanity and desperation, thus feeding into the system created by the patriarchy that insists that women who “do not behave like angels” must then be “monsters” (Gilbert and Gubar 1932). In facing the consequences of her boldness, Circe revisits the memory of Prometheus and her own ‘Resurrection,’ being reminded of his words that “[n]ot all gods need be the same,” and with these words, she renounces both her complacency and her cruelty, removing herself from the cycle of gods and fear, finally asserting that she is “not like them” (Miller 61).

With Circe’s power defined and her bold assertions apparent, the gods, in fear of upsetting the natural order, cast out the witch who can bend the world to her will. This path, though filled with a new sense of “wonder” would also be filled with hesitation and doubt, but in learning to be “utterly alone,” Circe would be forced to discover who she is beyond the shadows of “divine presence” in a world not built around gods and men, nor silence and fear--a world filled only with herself (Miller 78-79).

Despite her growth while in solitude, Circe reverts back into some of her old submissive ways when visitors come to Aiaia and exert their will upon her. When Hermes reports the news of the world, and mentions Scylla, Circe feels the weight of the monstrosity and all the resulting death like “cold smoke” marked with “[her] name,” but knowing Hermes would expect her to be either “skimmed milk for crying” or a “harpy with a heart of stone,” Circe swallows her softness and chooses to be known as a “bitch with a cliff for a heart” rather than be seen as weak (Miller 98). Believing only “angel” or “monster” to be her options, Circe chooses to seem cold so that perhaps she will not be so easily hurt, but in truth, her guilt cannot be frozen out of her no matter how cold she pretends to be.

Circe is also visited by a ship sent by her sister Pasiphae, urging her to come to her aid, and Circe, despite knowing her sister’s manipulative ways, and despite knowing that “there was no one” who would come for her, would agree to drop everything and go to Pasiphae (Miller 111). Circe is confronted with her demons as she must protect a crew of sailors from Scylla’s grasp, and suffer their gratitude from saving them from the monster she created. Her guilt becomes so great and so unbearable, that she wishes the sun to “scorch [her] down to the bone” (Miller 117). After enduring Pasiphae’s cruel tricks and helping her birth the minotaur, however, Circe comes to realize that despite her own demons, she is not like her sister; she is not like her family. Circe feels “guilt and shame” where Pasiphae would only ever feel “hatred and darkness” (Miller 139, 156). Circe can evolve and better herself, where her divine counterparts can only perpetuate the cycle of fear, “sucking down the bright air until the skies [go] dark” (Miller 159).

When a ship filled with lost sailors seeks aid, Circe prepares to defend herself, but is once again restrained by her desire to be filled by the affection of a man, fearing to speak more than what she is “bid” (Miller 187) and hesitant to “make a fuss” that would likely be deemed a result of the “hysteria” that so often plagues women in literature (Gilbert and Gubar 1932; Miller 187). In a moment’s hesitation, the captain crushes her throat and rapes her. This trauma flips a switch within Circe; she decides that her voice will never again falter, and so, she must “[t]ear down” herself and all her self-proclaimed weaknesses--her sensitivity, her trust, her forgiving nature, and her mercy--and “build again,” forging a version of herself that cannot be wounded (Miller 192). She welcomes visitors, and “savor[s] their confusion” when she turns them to pigs one by one because that is all she can do to not “feel it begin to bleed” (Miller 194-195). Thus, the heartless image of a witch depicted in *The Odyssey* is reenvisioned as an image of a cast-out, damaged girl, doing all she can to not fall apart under the weight of her past.

When another sailor visits, Circe is ready to dole out punishments, but instead finds herself once again enamored by a man, welcoming the inevitable knife to come, reclaiming her vulnerability as she reflects that not all is lost, and perhaps there are some things “worth spilling blood for” (Miller 205). Despite the “portrait” drawn of the “proud witch undone before the hero’s sword,” Circe would not “crawl and weep” nor would she “beg for mercy” (Miller 208). No longer would Circe allow the categories of “foolish gull” or “villainous monster” to define her; she would allow herself to grow close to Odysseus, to show warmth, to be a “golden witch” whole and unbroken with “no past at all” (Miller 208, 215). In recreating Circe outside of the categories of “angel” or “monster,” Miller once again strips away the influence of the patriarchal monomyth that leaves no room for ambiguity. However, Circe is still unable to face herself in all lights--good and bad--and in not doing this, she is still unable to realize her full voice.

The threshold of full self-actualization is marked, in Circe’s journey, by motherhood. Her son is born, and immediately Circe must face a new set of challenges, but in being given a new role as creator and protector, she finds within herself an overwhelming strength as she is willing to “wrestle the veiled gods” herself in order to protect “the

one thing” they could use against her (Miller 243-244). She confronts Athena, finding her voice despite the “strangling fear” to assert that “[y]ou [Athena] do not know what I can do” (Miller 246, 251). With that declaration of power, Circe has crossed the threshold beyond self-preservation into autonomy and self-proclaimed power.

Years later, having armed her son in an ultimate act of willpower and strength, Circe releases him into the world, and she finds herself once again alone on her island, lonely in her immortality -- “a cold eternity of endless grief” (Miller 287). When Telegonus returns having nearly met his end, Circe is struck that one day, her son and his father will “dwell side by side” in the afterlife--somewhere she “could never go,” for she would be stuck in the perpetual cycle of “[g]ods and fear, gods and fear” for all her days with no end to the cruel torture (Miller 293-294). Circe does not long for triumph or some great legacy, she merely wants to live out her days as a mortal, and in this way, she turns the hero’s journey on its head, refusing the call to greatness that male heroes so often seek, instead desiring a life merely of peace, quiet, and happiness.

In this sorrow, Circe finds that a path has opened “sudden and clear” in front of her (Miller 358). No longer would she submit herself to this cycle; with Trygon’s words ringing out in her mind, Circe realizes that if she could no longer bear this world, then she could “make another” (Miller 283). If the hero’s journey, made only for men who can already bend the world to their will, cannot bring Circe eternal glory and happiness, then she need not follow that same journey.

Upon this realization, Circe finds her voice in all its depth. She will no longer subject herself to the binds of “gods and fear,” so she demands her exile be ended, threatening Helios’ power if he does not comply, and with utter strength and resilience, Circe removes herself entirely from the world of gods, wishing to no longer be counted as a child of Helios (Miller 361). Circe’s first act as a free witch is to confront her past as she would allow “no more souls” to die in Scylla’s grasp (Miller 372-373). She would speak of her past in all of its horrible truth, not allowing herself to go on “weaving” cloths by day, and “unraveling them again at night” (Miller 373). Thus, in taking ownership of the girl she was, and in finding that her voice would not make Telemachus “turn gray and hate [her],” Circe realizes that she has been closing herself off from the world for so long because she was afraid--afraid of loving only to lose again--and in this moment, she renounces this fear, claiming that she has “never been a coward,” and tears down the walls forged by “regrets and years,” allowing herself to be loved (Miller 373-374).

With a clear conscience and an open heart, Circe imagines what her future could be in an ‘Ordinary World,’ convincing herself that maybe everything “she hoped would come to pass” if she takes the chance (Miller 382). Maybe she would fall deeply in love with Telemachus, give birth to daughters with someone there to stand by her side. Maybe she will grow “lines upon her face” with flesh that “reaches for the earth” (Miller 384). And maybe she will wake “terrified” by “life’s precariousness” only to be reminded that being afraid of loss and loving anyways is “what it means to be alive” (Miller 385). With possibility unraveling before her, Circe “lifts the brimming bowl to [her] lips and drink[s]” (Miller 385). So, in opposition to the hero’s journey, Circe drinks the elixir of mortality, desiring far more the pain of a fleeting life than the agony of a never ending one.

Miller crafts Circe as a character who has flaws, who comes short, who makes terrible mistakes, and yet also as a character who grows, who shows kindness, and who demonstrates strength. Miller creates a story in which the power of a narrative is stripped from the hands of male author, transformed to allow for ambiguity, and redesigned to create a happy ending that does not come from standing on the backs of others to achieve some legacy of greatness, but instead from finding strength through renouncing this legacy. Thus, Miller allows Circe to reclaim a narrative of heroes and villains, angels and monsters, and transform it into one of strength in spite of softness, love in spite of loss, and voice in spite of fear.

**Max Krull**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: City of Fountains School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Idean Bindel, Brandi McFadden

Category: Poetry

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**Untitled**

**Untitled**

a fish  
on a hook  
can't swim away  
just like the moon  
is stuck in the  
gravitational pull of the earth

much like the moon  
came from the big bang  
a banana  
grew in a bunch  
before it got picked  
and eaten by Jimothy  
age 34  
who lives in  
Canada and really  
loves mangoes but  
today ate a banana.

Why does he feel like  
bananas today?  
Why does he want  
bananas at all?

**Isobel Li**

Age: 15, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Journalism

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## **Do Better, Olathe**

Let's face it— Olathe is under pressure. From the frustrating eliminations of necessary staff positions to drastic budget cuts, saying that the district is in a pickle is quite the understatement. There are a lot of emotions in the air. Discontentment. Disappointment. Anger. But for teachers, the turbulence won't be over even once the district sorts out its entropic financial and legal situations.

In state legislatures across the country, education is under attack. On a local level, even school districts are complicit in this harm. Including Olathe.

An ON English teacher who wished not to be identified sees numerous problems with the district's educational priorities. "It's not about learning anymore. Everything is about 'the data' and not about creativity." You can't "quantify" English classes and assess them so rigidly, they added. "I am not opposed to collecting data or teaching to standards, but when those two tasks seem to be my principle [sic] responsibilities, I start to feel like I'm working at a hot dog factory instead of a school."

This excessive enthusiasm for data does nothing but exacerbate mental health struggles for teachers. When I asked the same teacher if their job was fulfilling, their answer was immediate. "I never read for fun anymore. 'Data-driven teaching' has killed my passion for English."

Of course, a teacher can be defined as one who is hired to instruct, no more and no less. But a good teacher is a passionate figure whom students can trust and connect with. With the stress of budget cuts and position eliminations, it is increasingly difficult to be that person. Lose the passion, and the uphill battle becomes Sisyphean. This year, the anonymous English teacher feels that they aren't as connected with their students as they have been in the past, due to mental health struggles. "I think previous grades liked me more because I was emotionally vulnerable with them," they added. "I've never felt so burnt out."

So what does this "data-driven teaching" even look like? For this teacher, it looks like the exorbitant use of MasteryConnect in all its user-unfriendly glory. It's endless exhaustion. It's feeling unheard. It's losing valuable time in the classroom. "I could be doing activities with these kids that they'll remember for the rest of their lives, but no, it's all about the data," they explained. "The pandemic put us into survival mode so we temporarily stopped doing [these] unnecessary things, but now they want us to start doing them again."

For an organization whose mission statement is to "prepare students for their future", the district is doing a subpar job. I understand that financial strain entails numerous challenges, but the toxic emphasis on numbers and data wasn't devised just last week. The systemic failure to support teachers is exactly why the district is doing the opposite of their mission statement.

If USD 233 isn't worried about education, what are they worried about?

Their image.

Many people are familiar with the book *1984* by George Orwell. For Olathe North students, a mention of the book may conjure up an image of the big white poster hung in a window of the upper 900s. On it is written "Big Brother is Watching" in austere capital letters. Unfortunately, Olathe has adopted this exact pro-censor sentiment.

Multiple news reports have detailed the district's efforts to silence criticisms, such as with money in the case of multiple sexual harassment allegations against the same man. While the recent resignation of the harasser is an undeniable success, it doesn't change the fact that our school district's first response was to pay hush money and keep the harasser in employment.

This censorship trend continues in the context of discontent educators. Critical sentiments toward district decision-making have been hushed. Olathe isn't delivering on their promises to "ensure staff feel safe and supported at work", as said in a statement the district issued in February. In other words, there is a lot of talk with zero walk. Many have become frustrated by it, wanting to speak out.

"Teachers are martyrs," the anonymous ON teacher emphasized. But openly speaking out against district action has never been so risky, especially with the eliminations of more than \$1.5 million in district-level positions alone. Although it might seem Orwellian, teachers have been contacted for saying things barely even reminiscent of criticism. "Big Brother is quite literally watching," stated another teacher.

Ultimately, there's a big problem with our district's priorities, and while Olathe certainly isn't the only data-loving district, nobody should disregard it because it's "the norm". We need to reevaluate what education means to us and return to the basics. At its foundation, schools are meant to teach us valuable lessons and foster imagination rather than restrict work to a mere rubric. "I realize 'writing from the heart' isn't a state standard, but it is the reason I became an ELA teacher." the anonymous teacher emphasized.

Their eyes give it away: they're tired. The worst part? They aren't the only one.

**Anya Liu**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Lydia Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

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## **Block Party**

### **Block Party**

where a white man knocks at our door and asks us to join the neighborhood grill. I bike down the street to their house while my parents walk, wind wild in my hair, autumn cul-de-sac spilling out over the pavement. My father speaks in foreign tones of *nice weather we're having* with the men and they laugh back, calling him *Mike* instead of *Michael*, *Michael* instead of *Youxin*. Blackened tang of barbecue smoke in my eyes, through my nose, shrouding me in reds, whites, blues. In every game of tag we play I am chosen as It before I can even move. I sit in the grass and a mother leans over me, strokes my hair, asks me to *say something in your language*. When we go home I stare at myself in the mirror until the image fuzzes out. I am a bug under a microscope, waiting to be cut open under the lights. I am an alien standing on the driveway of my neighbor's house, 6,000 miles from China, wishing that the weight of ribs and chicken wings clogging my throat would change me into someone else.



**Megan Liu**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## Leaving Neverland

I grasped the tight ropes and fought hard as the gust tried to blow me into the reflective waters below. The cunning pirates who carried blood-dripping swords greeted me as an old friend as I stepped aboard the wooden ship; through the telescopes, mermaids appeared to be a mane of golden hair from afar, their powerful tails swinging back and forth as their scales of electric blue glisten in the sun.

"Captain, are we ready to sail?"

"Onward!" I yelled, thrusting my blade into the sky.

The ringing noise of the bells blared as my ship and its occupants sailed into the Atlantic Ocean. Musical harps filled my ears with melodic notes as I closed my eyes, feeling the wind press against my face. I wondered what delicious dishes the servants would be making down below. I had hoped for those strawberry cakes that tasted so good last time.

The screeching sounds of the broken dishwasher and the faint, yellow wallpaper brought me back to reality. It was suddenly 2012 again, inside the apartment my immigrant parents rented for the year as my dad sought a new job. Broken English, sacks of luggage, and a hot-pot from mainland China were all the items brought from the "Old World" to the new, along with me. I grew up as an only child with a wild imagination, and, being by myself for most parts of the day, I spent my early years very much alone. This was where Neverland, my imaginary world, began to develop.

On the back of my bedroom door hung my iron bow and arrows, crafted from the dark wizards of Azkaban, their ruthless leaders controlling their souls and mind. Neverland was the world first introduced in my six-year old mind: I could choose to go hunting with Katniss in the forest, or make Captain Hook walk the plank of his own ship. Sometimes, I would make him kind instead of greedy, fighting with him instead of against. I had full control over how my world looked and how I expected people to act and that's what made Neverland as special as it was. My fantasy realm served as more than a fun playdate game. It was a form of escape for me, a place I could go without the fear or judgment of anyone. As a child, I only knew how to respect the adults in my life. I had a perfect picture painted in my head of them, one that didn't have a single stroke mistake. It was vital that I kept this picture perfect in my head. I trusted that since older people had "more knowledge", I should therefore "respect my elders" and "learn to be just like them." My parents' relationship with each other strained this concept, but I, with my high expectations of the elderly, was convinced that their harmful relationship was perfectly normal.

An early memory of mine was when a neighbor came over to my apartment one summer afternoon. She lived a few houses away, and from what I knew she had a big, loud family who always arranged fancy family dinners and neighborhood events. Her aunts and uncles swarmed the house like bees, along with cousins who were the kind to make spitballs and throw them at the dinner table. When she came over that afternoon for the first time, she looked around, almost in a funny way and asked me for a mint ice cream bar. I went to go get it for her, but noticed that she was silently analyzing my apartment in greater detail. I slowly unwrapped the ice cream, and asked her what was wrong.

"Where does your family even eat dinner? There's literally no dining table around here," she said suddenly. I told her we didn't usually eat together. She looked at me, her big almond eyes growing wide, and told me how "unnatural" that was. I felt a burn in my chest. I told her that "unnatural" wasn't even a word, and made her leave the house shortly after. She never did get her mint ice cream, and I, too upset at her comment, threw the half unwrapped one away in the trash.

The long, hard-seeking question, however, remained in my mind. What was family? Why was the one I had lived in so different from others around me? I tried the dictionary first. **Family, noun:** a group of individuals who share a common ancestor living under one roof and under one head. Simple. Straight to the point. Direct. Most times I wished life came as easy as searching up a word in the dictionary. Solving a math problem that only has one real

answer brings a sense of relief over completing the quadratic formula and getting two imaginary numbers where you have to plug them both back in to see which solution will work and which won't. It complicates things, making you think and decide and then erase your answer at the end just for it to be the right one. But I knew, even then, that my answer wouldn't be inside of an old, grayish textbook. As the question remained in my middle school mind, I thought back on the interactions between me and my parents. When my parents told me to go ride my bike around the block, I was too young to understand this was a way to get me out of the house so they could finish off a heated argument. I trusted people's judgment and good nature, just like the fairies and animals in my fantasy world did. I had always known that there were those kinds of people who cut you in lunch lines, or the teachers that put you in time out for no reason, but was oblivious to anything more than that. Coming home from third grade into an empty and silent house was nothing new. Celebrating my birthdays with an hour to my mom and an hour to my dad was nothing new. Picking up shattered glass pieces of china plates, making sure the garage doors were locked during a brawl so neighbor's wouldn't hear, and peering across the hill to see if the red and blue lights of a police car had made its way to our house yet wasn't new. It was what I experienced everyday, and that everyday was what became my normal.

As the years passed, falling asleep became harder, and Neverland started to become a sight of fog and clouds during middle school. I no longer had that innocence and carefreeness of a child. For the first time, I felt like I had to face reality and deal with the fact that I was expected to become something in society. I was expected to dress nice, I was expected to get good grades and have good manners. Most of all, I was expected to be practical. Teachers gave me more lectures about daydreaming in class and not paying attention. But what they didn't know was that I was in my own world of happiness, a place where my imagination could run free and I could have things I never had before. A wand, a broomstick, a sister. A big family with loud cousins and screeching babies crying over the last slice of pie while a mother and father shared a kiss during a Thanksgiving meal.

I also wrote stories—many of them. Letting myself put pencil to paper, thoughts into words, emotions into characters was when I truly felt happy because nothing really changed in my world, or the world in books. I could pick up a book and read it over and over again, yet the characters, the plot, and the happy endings never changed. Nobody grew up and realized things that they didn't want to realize, signed their parents' divorce papers, or made up lies when kids asked where their parents were during Holiday choir programs. Certain things, I often decided, should stay the way they are. You should be able to stick time and memories in a big glass jar and just leave them alone.

English teachers always give the reminder to end personal essays with a conclusion or a story with a clear ending that gives readers a theme to relate to. It's been ten years since I boarded my first ever ship to Neverland, yet change, nor a clear takeaway in my life ever truly settled with me. There was never an eye-opening event that occurred and changed my way of thinking, or lifestyle. My parents never got that divorce. I never got a sister, and the occasional shattered glass continues to be picked up from the kitchen floors today. The happy ending I was always dreaming of and writing in my short stories didn't ever happen, and as optimistic as my favorite fairy-tale stories seem, perhaps life simply isn't like an English paper at all.

Eventually, though, I came to terms with the deeper message embedded in my world of Neverland. It was a world of happiness, adventure, and mystery, but it also became a world where I was avoiding reality. And so, as I shoved my stories and dresses into the back closet and replaced my warrior stories with ACT books, I finally began to lose the memories of my dreamland. Captain Hook starts missing a few of his arms or legs, and soon, his face becomes unrecognizable when I travel back. I knew I had lost the pixie dust that enabled me to fly.

It's high school now. Sometimes, when things get hard, I still look out my window and close my eyes, hoping to enter the safety of Neverland. But I know I won't see more than the darkness of my eyelids.

As Peter Pan once said, "Once you're grown up, you can never come back."

**Sophia Lu**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

Home School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Lan Yang

Category: Poetry

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## **A Daughter's Curse**

You asked me to cut off your grey hairs last night.  
I stood in front of the mirror  
And you asked me to count them.  
    one, two, three, four.

*Ai-ya, you bemoan,  
How I have aged in the last ten years.  
If you work too much, YaYa-ah, you will turn out this way  
(you will turn out like me)  
    one, two, three, four.*

What I haven't told you is that  
This morning I found a stand of grey on my head full of chocolate hair.  
Probably from all the all-nighters I've been pulling for chemistry.  
I swore I heard your voice— *YaYa-ah, you sleep too late, under-eyes like a fifty-year-old*  
I used rusty scissors to cut it off.

~~~~~

Let me share a secret with you.  
We are the same, you and I.  
You swear I'm the prettiest girl you know,  
But why do you still tape up your eyelid when it falls?  
My features mirror yours; you condemn them without realizing.  
    one, two, three, four.

We never agree on anything, do we?  
(Remember the words left unsaid when stopping our argument for family dinner?  
My bitter tears spilled every morning in the car? Do you remember?)  
The sculptor knows her work, where the clay is thick and thin.  
My pot collapses before it has time to toughen up.

No other person has hurt me like you did.  
No other person has shaped me like you did.

I'm barely an inch above your height but MaMa,  
How is my head in the clouds that block your sunlight?  
I cannot comprehend your withering crops, your forests void of color;  
You cannot recognize my ultraviolet, my Venus returning with the dawn.  
I'm a gradual ebb of your receding tide, you're a comet in my furthest milky way.

The only time we see eye to eye is when I'm standing in front of a mirror.

What you don't understand MaMa,  
Is that I don't see the world as you do.  
I'm too gullible, too young.  
My rose-tinted vision is not as sharp as yours.  
Because what else would explain our discrepancies?

Maybe it's because I have them too, but  
You see your eye-bags as too many late night shifts,  
while I see them as a manifestation of your perseverance.  
You see your smile lines as signs you are aging too fast,  
while I see them as laughter that has never been bottled up.  
    one, two, three, four.

You see your grey hairs as a life lost to work,  
I see them as a life devoted to your family.

It's a curse, I suppose.  
You look at me and see my blithe emotions, the stars I paint messily on my nails,  
I look at you and see your dedication, your plants that give oxygen to my atmosphere.

You look at me and see all you may have been.  
I look at you and see all I wish to be.

~~~~~

I was online the other day, reading about physics  
(It's your job; I've always hated the subject)  
Something about quantum entanglement, photon interaction—  
I couldn't understand. I closed the tab.

But I've been thinking recently.  
I'll be leaving for college soon, you know,  
And I worried for days on end that I might lose contact,  
that you'll lose your daughter to the distance in between.

I guess I shouldn't be too distraught.  
Because what are we but twin particles intertwined,  
One forever affecting the other, moving in synchronicity,  
With hundreds of miles and light years in between making no difference.

~~~~~

Gold flashes and the hairs fall to the floor.  
    one, two, three, four.

I look in the mirror and see myself.

**Molly Magarian**

Age: 14, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Andy Chen, Anita Hagerman

Category: Novel Writing

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## If You Could See Me Now

### Brief summary:

Tess is an American teenager with a flare for fanfiction and a yearn for adventure. She longs to be out in the world, rather than stuck under the roof of her scatterbrained and narcissistic mom as the sole protector of Ash, her little sister. However, a year after their dad's fatal car crash, Tess's adventure comes calling in the form of a year abroad at a London boarding school, while her mom juggles speed dating and trying to get Ash into a mental health program. A whole year away from all of the struggles of her normal life to try and discover who she really is as a person. Dani is a cynical Londoner-turned-working girl, thanks to her mom leaving the family after her dad's cancer diagnosis. With her brother hopped up on pills and her dad struggling to readjust to everyday life, Dani's goals are simple. Make enough money to pay the bills. Graduate, get the hell out. School is just a means to an end, especially when she's there on a full scholarship she could never actually afford. Nowhere in the plan did she account for romance, or really any people at all other than her best friend Bradley. But when she is paired with the American exchange student as her roommate, that plan kind of goes out the window.

### Excerpt:

#### *Chapter One - Tess - August 3rd*

The mail has to have come by now.

I decided to walk home from Rett's house instead of taking the bus. Usually, I get a ride from her, or I take St Louis's shitstorm attempt at public transportation, but it's only sixty-five degrees, which does not happen here in the summer. I'm not passing up the opportunity for some actual fresh air.

Rett gave up on trying to distract me three failed tiktoks into our six-hour hangout, and gave up on trying to change the subject not too long after. I feel sort of bad about being so obsessive - it's not her fault, it really isn't. But the second I get home is the second my whole future is basically determined.

Maybe I'm exaggerating a little.

I thought that taking a long walk as opposed to a short bus ride would help distract me from impending doom, but I was very, very wrong. If anything, it stresses me out even more. I glance down at my watch. 4:52. There's no way it's not here yet.

I end up sprinting the second my torn up converse hit our block, and scale the length of it in fifteen seconds flat. I rummage around for my house key, and my phone falls out of my purse, hitting the steps with a loud *thunk*.

"Dammit," I mutter, reaching down to snatch it before pushing the door open with my foot and tossing my backpack onto the couch. "I'm home!" I call out, immediately running into the kitchen and rifling through the mail pile.

"Theresa, I think your letter came!" Mom calls from upstairs.

*Shit.*

I'm still rifling through mom's stupid magazines and various bank letters when my sister slides into the kitchen. I shoot Ash as bright of a smile as I can muster. "Hi, honey."

She points at the pile. "Did you hear?" Her voice is as dull and quiet as ever. I don't think I've heard her tone of voice change in... god, it's been over a year since the crash.

"I think so," I reply, finally reaching the bottom of the pile. There's a big, white envelope addressed to me - my full name, not the shortened version I input when I order something online.

"Holy crap," I mutter, staring at the return address. *Northbank International College.*

Exactly six months ago, I submitted an application to receive a full year of financial aid, as an exchange student at Northbank. It's in London. *London*. I still can't fathom that. My mom said it would be good for my education. Ash said it would be a good change of pace. I mostly thought it would be a good distraction from dad's death and mom's constant mood swings, and an extra good shot at getting into my dream school - Oxford. Yes, I know I'm a nerd. I've been counting down the days since then, and when the big day finally rolled around, I knew that if I wasn't at my best friend's house, I would be by the front door all day.

And despite my nerves and, quite honestly, my white-hot fear, I can't put it off any longer.

Ash nods encouragingly. "Open it."

I slowly tear at the paper, barely able to look at my hands as I pull a packet out of the envelope. "I can't look. Oh my god, I can't look."

Ash snatches it from me. "Dear Ms. Martin, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into our yearlong-

"*OH MY GOD!*" I scream, running a full lap around our kitchen island before grabbing the letter back from my sister. "Oh my god. Oh my god. *Mom! I got in!*"

"Theresa, that's amazing!" she shouts, coming down the stairs and swooping both of us up into a hug.

"There's more here," I say, turning back to the front page of the packet (in retrospect, Tess, they probably wouldn't send you a whole ass packet if they were rejecting your enrollment). "Enclosed are a book list, fees for room and board, a schedule, information for your flights, and anything else you may need when preparing for this new chapter in your life. We are so excited to see you here on September third."

"I'm so proud of you, baby." Mom is smiling, and for once in my life, I reciprocate it genuinely.

...

"*YOU WHAT???*"

I push the phone away from me, laughing as I turn the volume down. "I'm not kidding, Rett."

"You got in?"

"I got in.

"Fuck yes you got in." She's smiling widely, her dyed blue hair falling over her dark cheekbones and casting her face in shadow. "I knew you'd get in. I told you you'd get in!"

"I didn't want to jinx it."

"Fair enough."

"So, this means I'm not going to see you for a year."

She makes a sad face. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you more."

"You'll be too distracted by hot Brits to miss me." Her face suddenly goes serious, and I immediately know where this conversation is going. "Have you talked to Josh?"

"Nope. Not planning on it, either."

"Maybe you should cut him some slack." I glare at her, and she throws her hands up in surrender. "Ok, ok, point taken. I'm just saying, the breakup wasn't just on him. Freya made a move on him, not the other way around."

"He still said yes. Besides, he's been taking this relationship downhill since the beginning of sophomore year."

Josh Gray and I were dating for a year and a half before we broke up on the fourth of July. We met in middle school - I liked him a lot, but I was just the stereotypical nerd with glasses who nobody really talked to, and he was the aspiring football star with friends upon friends upon friends. It sounds so cliché, but we did eventually start dating. I loved him, at least as much as a sophomore was capable of love. We were on again and off again for basically the whole run of our relationship - I was just too blind to notice that he had anger problems until - well, until it was too late.

He got mad a lot. I never really thought much of it; I ended up blaming myself for most of it, to be frank. It came in waves, and he never physically hurt me, but our relationship was never exactly the healthiest. The morning before homecoming, while we were in an "off again" phase, I saw him flirting with a girl by the lockers. Two days later, I drove up to his house to find her car pulled up in the driveway, and his jeans hanging out the passenger's side window.

I went home, called him, and ended it. Permanently.

"I'm sorry you have to go through all this shit," Rett murmurs, rubbing a hand up and down her neck. "He did care about you, you know."

"Yeah, I know." I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I should stop. I don't want to put you in the middle of all this - I know how hard it must be for you." It stings a little, but I know Rett and Josh still talk. They've been in student government together for two years, so of course they're friendly.

"Hey, I was yours first," she says reassuringly. "When push comes to shove, my best friend comes before my vice president."

I smile. "Good. I love you."

"Love you too, Tessie."

...

Later that night, I'm curled up on my bed with Ash, checking our AO3 stats. She and I have an account that - obviously - mom doesn't know about. We're honestly semi-famous on the platform. Ash wrote one of the most popular Once Upon a Time fanfictions ever written about a year ago - it's up to about 150,000 hits, and she's still updating it (it's nice when a queer non-canon ship is able to go this viral). I've got a few with a couple hundred thousand hits - nothing we've written in the last year has completely flopped. Hits can be low, but that's what happens in a small fandom (like Gilmore Girls for Ash, or Firefly for me).

"Check it out." She points at my most recent post. "50 kudos. Not bad, sis."

"Especially considering it's a Winx fanfiction."

"Hey, the more stupid a show, the more satisfying its fanfiction."

"True."

She leans her head on my shoulder, her eyes suddenly absent as they move vaguely across the screen. "Mom says I need to go to a facility. Get better."

"Maybe it'll be good for you, hon." I wrap an arm around her. "Even you know that something's wrong. And nobody wants you to hurt yourself, or drown in this."

"I just wish I knew what the hell was going on with me."

We've been to so many doctors. So many medications. Some said PTSD, some said depression. Some said she was simply using emotional detachment as a coping mechanism. But they all told us behind closed doors that she'd need to be sent away eventually. It's gotten so much worse in the last month - without school, Ash has barely left the house. She screams every time mom suggests getting in the car.

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But Ash is going to get help. For once in her life, mom will have to relinquish control.

I feel a tear on my face, and sit up a little to look out the window to the star scattered sky.

God, I miss dad so much.

I miss him more every day.

### *Chapter Two - Dani - August 3rd*

"Dani, get that food the hell to table twelve! I am running a business here - please remember I can fire you at any time."

I glare at Yana, balancing way too many plates on my arms and flitting from table to table like the fucking Tinker

Bell of waitresses. "God, I hate you," I mutter in her direction. She's been my boss for over a year, and she *still* does not like me. She won't even tolerate me!

"Evil as ever," my coworker Sarah laughs into my ear as we pass each other. I see Yana shoot us a sour look, but we feign innocence and carry on with our shifts as usual.

My days have become so routine that it's actually laughable. Wake up at seven, take a ride with Bradley before he starts his shift. Bookstore from nine to two. Lunch at two thirty running quickly to the cafe to change before the shifts switch. Stay there until eight, and crash at ten thirty. My summer holidays are easy. It's school that complicates things.

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She nods begrudgingly, and I head into the back to check my inbox. Sure enough, I've got the Northbank email waiting for me. I check it without much anxiety - I know they'll renew my scholarship. I meet all the requirements, and there are so many rich dipshits at that school that they're probably begging for an excuse to put their money somewhere other than up their asses.

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I grin when a text from my best friend comes in.

*Call me. Big news.*

'Big news' to Bradley is really 'first world and not very relevant news' to everyone else, but I love him so much that I've never cared.

"Oh my god, Dan, guess who I just dropped off at uni?"

"Hmmm..." I mock very deep thinking. "The Jonas Brothers? A drunk dumbass? The Queen?"

"I hate you."

"You love me."

"Whatever." I can feel him grinning through the phone. "Remember that senior I was pining over all last year?"

"Raven Keller? Of course I do, he was only our biggest topic of conversation."

"Well, he's going to that independent uni by Northbank. It was like a forty-five minute drive, and we got to talking, and - you'll never guess."

"What?"

"We. Exchanged. Numbers."

I roll my eyes, but my face hurts from smiling. "You are so pathetic, B. You really think you have a chance with the hottest student in their year?"

"A man can dream."

"*Dani!*" screams Yana. "Your break is over!"

I scowl, knowing perfectly well it has only been five minutes. "Satan is calling me back to work. See you tomorrow?"

"Of course."

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I'm so tired that I end up giving up and taking the fast route. I grab the mail from our porch before stepping inside.

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My dad is sitting in the kitchen reading the newspaper, a glass of water in front of him and his favourite slippers on his feet. He's smiling - I assume at the comics section.

I hug him from behind. "Hi, dad."

"Daniella." He smiles, turning to plant a kiss on my cheek. "How was work?"

"Sucked." It's really fine - I'm used to it by now. I'm just glad I've still got my job at the bookstore to look forward to."



"I still think you should apply for a job at the music store. I was talking to Harvey the other day - he's started hiring again."

"Yana is gonna be hard to get off my back. Believe me - I would jump on that job if I could."

He sighs. "Maybe someday."

"Maybe."

"Oh, by the way, your brother's check came."

I flip through the mail pile and find it. "Fashionably late, as usual. Isn't it convenient how his pity cash shows up right after the rent is due?"

"Your brother does seem to have it out for us sometimes, doesn't he?" Dad says, sounding tired.

Dad was diagnosed with cancer four years ago. He went through it all, and just when we thought he was doing better, we had a pretty big scare a year in that sent him into surgery again. The recovery that second time was way, way harder - in the end, it lost him his job, his wife and, not long after, his son.

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It's really fucking hard.

"You've only got a few months of treatment left," I say, mustering a smile and trying to brighten the mood. This third round of chemo wasn't as severe a setback as the second, but it was still vital in order for him to hopefully end this someday. "How have you been feeling?"

"Good, I think." He smiles. "I think I may have finally beat this thing."

*God, I hope so.*

"And you've got school starting up so soon! Do you know who you're rooming with, yet?"

"Not specifically - I do know that she's an exchange student."

"Ooh, exotic," he says, smirking lightly. "Might be hot."

"Shut up."

"Not happening."

"I will tell you when I meet her, I promise. I told you, I still want to live here on weekends. I don't feel comfortable leaving you alone for weeks on end."

"I've told you a thousand times I can take care of myself."

"And yet, I'm still living here on weekends."

"I wish you would stop working during school terms."

"Dad." I put a hand over his. "You know I can't."

He nods. He knows I can't.

We both know I can't.

# *If You Could See Me Now*

# *Part One*

## Chapter One - Tess - August 3rd

The mail has to have come by now.

I decided to walk home from Rett's house instead of taking the bus. Usually, I get a ride from her, or I take St Louis's shitstorm attempt at public transportation, but it's only sixty-five degrees, which does not happen here in the summer. I'm not passing up the opportunity for some actual fresh air.

Rett gave up on trying to distract me three failed tiktoks into our six-hour hangout, and gave up on trying to change the subject not too long after. I feel sort of bad about being so obsessive - it's not her fault, it really isn't. But the second I get home is the second my whole future is basically determined.

Maybe I'm exaggerating a little.

I thought that taking a long walk as opposed to a short bus ride would help distract me from impending doom, but I was very, very wrong. If anything, it stresses me out even more. I glance down at my watch. 4:52. There's no way it's not here yet.

I end up sprinting the second my torn up converse hit our block, and scale the length of it in fifteen seconds flat. I rummage around for my house key, and my phone falls out of my purse, hitting the steps with a loud *thunk*.

"Dammit," I mutter, reaching down to snatch it before pushing the door open with my foot and tossing my backpack onto the couch. "I'm home!" I call out, immediately running into the kitchen and rifling through the mail pile.

"Theresa, I think your letter came!" Mom calls from upstairs.

*Shit.*

I'm still rifling through mom's stupid magazines and various bank letters when my sister slides into the kitchen. I shoot Ash as bright of a smile as I can muster. "Hi, honey."

She points at the pile. “Did you hear?” Her voice is as dull and quiet as ever. I don’t think I’ve heard her tone of voice change in... god, it’s been over a year since the crash.

“I think so,” I reply, finally reaching the bottom of the pile. There’s a big, white envelope addressed to me - my full name, not the shortened version I input when I order something online.

“Holy crap,” I mutter, staring at the return address. *Northbank International College.*

Exactly six months ago, I submitted an application to receive a full year of financial aid, as an exchange student at Northbank. It’s in London. *London.* I still can’t fathom that. My mom said it would be good for my education. Ash said it would be a good change of pace. I mostly thought it would be a good distraction from dad’s death and mom’s constant mood swings, and an extra good shot at getting into my dream school - Oxford. Yes, I know I’m a nerd. I’ve been counting down the days since then, and when the big day finally rolled around, I knew that if I wasn’t at my best friend’s house, I would be by the front door all day.

And despite my nerves and, quite honestly, my white-hot fear, I can’t put it off any longer.

Ash nods encouragingly. “Open it.”

I slowly tear at the paper, barely able to look at my hands as I pull a packet out of the envelope. “I can’t look. Oh my god, I can’t look.”

Ash snatches it from me. “Dear Ms. Martin, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into our yearlong-”

“*OH MY GOD!*” I scream, running a full lap around our kitchen island before grabbing the letter back from my sister. “Oh my god. Oh my god. *Mom! I got in!*”

“Theresa, that’s amazing!” she shouts, coming down the stairs and swooping both of us up into a hug.

“There’s more here,” I say, turning back to the front page of the packet (in retrospect, Tess, they probably wouldn’t send you a whole ass packet if they were rejecting your

enrollment). “Enclosed are a book list, fees for room and board, a schedule, information for your flights, and anything else you may need when preparing for this new chapter in your life. We are so excited to see you here on September third.”

“I’m so proud of you, baby.” Mom is smiling, and for once in my life, I reciprocate it genuinely.

...

“YOU WHAT???”

I push the phone away from me, laughing as I turn the volume down. “I’m not kidding, Rett.”

“You got in?”

“I got in.

“Fuck yes you got in.” She’s smiling widely, her dyed blue hair falling over her dark cheekbones and casting her face in shadow. “I knew you’d get in. I told you you’d get in!”

“I didn’t want to jinx it.”

“Fair enough.”

“So, this means I’m not going to see you for a year.”

She makes a sad face. “I’m going to miss you.”

“I’ll miss you more.”

“You’ll be too distracted by hot Brits to miss me.” Her face suddenly goes serious, and I immediately know where this conversation is going. “Have you talked to Josh?”

“Nope. Not planning on it, either.”

“Maybe you should cut him some slack.” I glare at her, and she throws her hands up in surrender. “Ok, ok, point taken. I’m just saying, the breakup wasn’t just on him. Freya made a move on him, not the other way around.”

“He still said yes. Besides, he’s been taking this relationship downhill since the beginning of sophomore year.”

Josh Gray and I were dating for a year and a half before we broke up on the fourth of July. We met in middle school - I liked him a lot, but I was just the stereotypical nerd with glasses who nobody really talked to, and he was the aspiring football star with friends upon friends upon friends. It sounds so cliché, but we did eventually start dating. I loved him, at least as much as a sophomore was capable of love. We were on again and off again for basically the whole run of our relationship - I was just too blind to notice that he had anger problems until - well, until it was too late.

He got mad a lot. I never really thought much of it; I ended up blaming myself for most of it, to be frank. It came in waves, and he never physically hurt me, but our relationship was never exactly the healthiest. The morning before homecoming, while we were in an “off again” phase, I saw him flirting with a girl by the lockers. Two days later, I drove up to his house to find her car pulled up in the driveway, and his jeans hanging out the passenger’s side window.

I went home, called him, and ended it. Permanently.

“I’m sorry you have to go through all this shit,” Rett murmurs, rubbing a hand up and down her neck. “He did care about you, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” I shake my head. “I’m sorry, I should stop. I don’t want to put you in the middle of all this - I know how hard it must be for you.” It stings a little, but I know Rett and Josh still talk. They’ve been in student government together for two years, so of course they’re friendly.

“Hey, I was yours first,” she says reassuringly. “When push comes to shove, my best friend comes before my vice president.”

I smile. “Good. I love you.”

“Love you too, Tessie.”

...

Later that night, I’m curled up on my bed with Ash, checking our AO3 stats. She and I have an account that - obviously - mom doesn’t know about. We’re honestly semi-famous on the

platform. Ash wrote one of the most popular Once Upon a Time fanfictions ever written about a year ago - it's up to about 150,000 hits, and she's still updating it (it's nice when a queer non-canon ship is able to go this viral). I've got a few with a couple hundred thousand hits - nothing we've written in the last year has completely flopped. Hits can be low, but that's what happens in a small fandom (like Gilmore Girls for Ash, or Firefly for me).

"Check it out." She points at my most recent post. "50 kudos. Not bad, sis."

"Especially considering it's a Winx fanfiction."

"Hey, the more stupid a show, the more satisfying its fanfiction."

"True."

She leans her head on my shoulder, her eyes suddenly absent as they move vaguely across the screen. "Mom says I need to go to a facility. Get better."

"Maybe it'll be good for you, hon." I wrap an arm around her. "Even you know that something's wrong. And nobody wants you to hurt yourself, or drown in this."

"I just wish I knew what the hell was going on with me."

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"I've told you a thousand times I can take care of myself."

"And yet, I'm still living here on weekends."

"I wish you would stop working during school terms."

“Dad.” I put a hand over his. “You know I can’t.”

He nods. He knows I can’t.

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...

I get several emails that night about signing up for courses, websites, and online textbooks. I ignore them all. The world will not end if I put all of that off for one day in order to finish my composition.

In sixth form, I’m taking economics classes. They’ll get me an office job that will let me make a living. A life. Will I enjoy myself? Absolutely not. But if I have children... I just don’t want them to have a bad life. *I don’t want to have a bad life.*

And yet, the only thing I ever think about is music. When I’m not singing in the shower or humming at work, I’m composing sheet music on my digital keyboard or scribbling lyrics in one of my many notebooks. And yes, I’ve heard all about the famous, shut down music room in the basement of Northbank - I just haven’t figured out how to get down there yet.

Tonight, I turn on *Nightmare* by Halsey, and open a note on my computer I haven’t touched in a month. I slowly add to it when I just need to vent (vent and rant - it’s a Bradley thing), or when I’m feeling particularly angry and let down. Today is just a day in which I need an outlet. I look at the last line I wrote. *Growing backwards, downward spiral*. You’d be surprised at how hard it is to find a word that rhymes with spiral that isn’t child. I’ve been stuck on it for so long. Rather than continuing on, I go back and edit what I’ve already got, and then start jumping from project to project.

Thinking about the amount of time for writing I’ll lose when school starts up again makes me sad. But I’ll find my time. I always do. If nothing else, sleep can go to hell.

“Halsey, give me strength,” I mutter when I finally close my computer. “Two more years until I can get the hell out.”

Two years of sixth form. And then I'm out. I'm gone. Dad gets a job, we let Damon go, and I can take a deep breath for the first time since I was fourteen.

I mean, what else would I do?

Once dad is on his feet, there's absolutely nothing keeping me here. Nothing ever has, and I don't think anything ever will.

**Chapter Three - Tess - August 26th**

Standing in the Heathrow airport baggage line with a lot of angry old people and young mothers feels like I'm this close to stepping out of the wardrobe and entering Narnia.

The last weeks of summer went by so quickly it almost feels like they never happened. About halfway through the month, Ash finally agreed to go to a residential facility for her mental disorder. The last doctor we went to told us that if she didn't go into some type of treatment, it could spiral into self-harm, and that scared her enough that she herself started researching the best facilities in our area.

It's going to be good for her. I think.

Before I knew it I was signing forms, and packing, and billing the school, and getting shipping notifications from London, and, finally, pulling up to the airport with mom and Ash. It was a quick goodbye - all stiff hugs and "safe travels." Ash and I had our real goodbye the night before, alone in my room with the lights off to keep mom off our back.

"I don't know how I'll last without you for a year," she had whispered, her face buried in my Shadowhunters sweatshirt.

"You'll be fine, baby," I said, attempting to sound soothing.

"I've never been alone with mom for that long before."

"I know. But I really don't think it will be as bad as all that. Besides, you won't be with mom for most of it. You'll be with people that know what it's like to feel how you feel."

"I don't want to relive that day," she choked, a tear tracing her face. She only cries around me, and very rarely. "I can't, Tess."

"I know you don't. But you have to. It's the only way the pain is going to stop."

"I want it to stop."

"Then you're doing a good thing."

"Theresa!" Mom called from downstairs. "Get to sleep - you've got an early flight."

I hugged Ash more fiercely than I ever had. "I love you more than anything. You are my sun, my everything, my favorite person on earth. Ok? Nothing will ever change that."



“I love you so much, Tess,” she said softly, gripping my hands in the darkness.

Now, I stand with my suitcase in an unfamiliar country, still in that Shadowhunters sweatshirt, along with fuzzy pants and my favorite beat-up pair of light blue Converse. I head into a bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. My hair is frizzy and an absolute mess, so I pull it into a bun on top of my head to try and hide the evidence. I didn't go for my normal, crazy colors of eyeshadow, instead just opting to fill in my nonexistent eyebrows, throw a neutral color over my lid and recoat my chapstick about six dozen times on that flight. Makeup is one of my favorite things. I don't do it to make myself look better, though, I just do it because it's fun, and because it calms me down in a strange way. It's my version of art (considering I can only draw stick figures).

Once I have determined that I look at least slightly presentable, I step out and start walking towards the doors. According to my instructions, I'm getting a lift from my senior mentor, who will take me right to the school. He's supposed to be holding a sign with my name on it like something out of a fucking movie. I don't know anything about him other than his grade (thirteen for them, twelve in the US), and his name - Bradley Davis.

My hands shake as I push the door open and step out into the London light. Everything feels different here. The heat is thinner, taking my breath slowly instead of seizing it. The stones under my feet are rough and firm as they spread out to form the sidewalk. The cars are all different, the clothes are all different. Even the sun looks different - smaller and brighter in the sky above me.

I scan the crowds of people coming and going, walking down the side of the street and looking at the taxis. I glance at my phone again - it says that I should head down the rightmost side of the street until I see a black cab with a boy out front. Sure enough, after a little walking, I notice the car, smaller than some of the others, parked a little too close to the curb. A short, blonde-haired boy in a collared t-shirt and khakis is standing next to it looking nervous. There's a sign in the window that says *Theresa Martin*.

God, I hate my full name.

I walk up to him, smiling. "Are you Bradley?"

He nods. "Yep. Theresa?"

"Tess. Theresa's never really been my thing."

"Cool. It's lovely to meet you, Tess." His accent is weirdly calming.

"So, are we heading straight to school?"

"Yep!"

"Great."

He reaches for one of my suitcases, but I grab it myself and heave it into the trunk - or the boot, I guess. Why is it called a boot?

"I got these," I assure him. "I packed them, I definitely know how to lift them."

"Fair enough." He ducks into the driver's seat. Once I join him, he switches on two things - a GPS and a West End playlist.

I smile. "Didn't peg you for a musical type."

"I'm surprised you pegged me as anything, considering we met thirty seconds ago." It's the kind of phrase that would probably seem passive aggressive if it was coming from anybody else, but this boy seems so kind and genuine that it actually makes me smile.

"Ok, well then." I turn a bit in my seat to face him as he starts driving. "We will be spending quite a bit of time together, so. Tell me three things about yourself you think I wouldn't guess otherwise."

"Ooh." He ponders. "Well. I'm planning on becoming a high school teacher someday, for starters. My mom works in publishing, so I go on book tours and trips with her a lot - been all over Europe and the states. My dad is a doctor - a pediatrician, more specifically. And-"

"Hold on," I say, laughing. "That was three things."

"Figured I'd throw in one extra tidbit for you."

“Do tell.”

He smiles hesitantly. “I’m gay.”

From the expression on his face, I can tell that this is the point in the conversation where people usually leave him in the dust. I doubt he assumes that just his coming out to me has already made me ten times more comfortable.

“Me too,” I reply. “Well, technically I’m bi. But I lean female. Had a serious boyfriend for a couple years - that didn’t end well.”

His whole demeanor relaxes. “Well, that sucks, but yay! Believe me when I tell you there are not very many out queer kids at Northbank.” He pauses. “Well, aside from me. And my best friend, Dani. She’s going to be your roommate, actually. Small world.”

Rooming with anyone at all is such a foreign concept to me that I almost don’t register him casually outing his best friend. “Is she out?”

“Yep. Going on six years now.”

“Damn. I’m not even out to my mom.”

“Dani doesn’t waste time with anything. When she has a job to do, or something she wants, she completes it, lingers a little in the benefits, and moves on. Wash, rinse, repeat.”

“Sounds a little boring.”

“You’ve got to get to know her. She’s the best. I’ve known her since I was ten.”

“I’m excited to meet her.” I stare out the window, and we drive in silence for a few moments. I can’t even begin to take everything in. Everywhere I look there’s a new color. Something new to look at. Red buses zip by on one side, tall buildings line the street on the other. There are parks every which way, towers jutting out from far off buildings, water shining in the distance. And people. So, so many people.

I’ve seen so many photos of London. I have read all of the London romance novels I could get my hands on. I have seen Sherlock at least a dozen times. And I know as much British history as an American girl can be expected to know. Basically, I’m your average

superfan-turned-tourist. But I never thought I would be here, not at this point in my life. I always figured my mom would keep me grounded - stuck, rather - in Missouri until I was out of college. But here I am - a full year away from home, with nobody to please but myself.

“You don’t even know how hard it was for me to convince my mom to let me come here,” I remark.

“Why’s that?”

I hesitate, eventually settling on the simplest description of my mom I can think of. “She’s a control freak, and extremely overprotective.”

“AKA, she doesn’t want her precious daughter to make her own decisions?”

“Exactly.”

“That sucks.”

“It’s alright. I’m more worried about my sister being there alone with her for months.” Again, I leave out the majority of the details about Ash. Just because I’m immediately warming up to this guy doesn’t mean I’m going to spill the family drama to him on our first day together.

Lucky for me, Bradley definitely seems to respect boundaries. He asks no questions as we finally pull into the main lot of the school, and...

“Woah,” I murmur, staring out the window with my mouth hanging open.

Bradley laughs. “Impressive huh?”

“That’s one word for it.”

All I can do is stare out the window in awe and think, *I know I’m gonna like it here.*

#### **Chapter Four - Dani - August 26th**

The morning of move-in, I wake up feeling really, really happy. Saturday is my favourite day of the week by far. I get to sleep in, stop for a croissant, and head to the bookstore for a five hour shift. Only five hours! That's unheard of for me.

It's nice to have my school schedule starting up again. While it's not ideal for our rent, it's nice to have a break. School at Northbank lets out at three, no matter what courses you take, so the only work I have time for between studying and my sad attempt at a social life are four to six pm waitressing jobs every day but Sunday, and two bookstore shifts, five hours on Saturday and six hours on Sunday. I get paid less, but boy is it a relief.

If I can ever get Yana off my back, maybe I'll enjoy waitressing half as much as I enjoy being in the bookstore.

When I arrive, Rei is already downstairs setting up a few things, rearranging shelves and obviously second guessing their choices for the main display.

"Here's To Us comes out this week," I call out as I walk in. "You should definitely put that on the display."

Rei is by far the coolest forty-year-old I know. They came out as nonbinary in college, and have maintained a modern style since then. Their bleached hair is always a pixie, their dark skin always complimented by the bright colours of their outfits. Their mom died five years ago and left them the family bookstore, Green Bay Books. I met them at an author event when I was twelve - I've been coming here every day ever since. And when I told them I needed another job, they immediately offered up a position.

"Shit," Rei mutters, running into the back to grab it from stock. "Dan, you're a lifesaver!"

"I try." I put my bags behind the counter, and check in on the computer system.

"You move back on campus today, right?" Rei emerges completely overloaded with a stack of Here's To Us by Adam Silvera and Becky Albertalli.

"That time of year," I confirm.

“Can you believe in America they have three months of summer?”

“Can you believe in America they have to be stuck with each other in school for more than six weeks at a time?” I shoot back, causing them to burst out laughing. “I’m really not quite sure how they do it over there.”

“Me neither.” They glance down at their turquoise watch, an always-present staple of their everyday ensemble. “Get yourself together, I’m opening in five.”

The morning is busy as usual. Green Bay Books is the only indie around here, so we tend to be flocked with customers basically all day. Rei works the counter, my coworkers Adam and Toulane run around with customers recommending books left and right, and I work on stock.

About halfway through the day, a girl who looks about thirteen comes up and taps me on the arm. “Excuse me, miss?”

I turn around, smiling. “Hi! What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for a book.”

“We’ve got plenty of those.”

She nods, looking nervous for some reason. “I’m looking for a fantasy. Something... romantic. But not the normal kind of romantic.”

It’s only at that moment that I remember the small pride sticker I always put on my nametag. I glance down at it, then back to her. She gives me a small smile, fiddling with a cross necklace around her neck.

“I think I’ve got just the thing,” I say, beckoning for her to follow me into the YA section. I scan the shelf until I find *Of Fire and Stars* by Audrey Coulhurst. “This is a royal fantasy about two princesses who fall in love,” I say quietly. “It’s one of the first books I read after I came out. I don’t read much, but when I do, this is my genre.”

She smiles, clutching the book tightly. “Thank you.”

“Of course. What’s your name?”

“Jade.”

“Well, Jade, I hope you love the book, and please know you can come back any time.”

She blushes shyly and turns away, heading for the counter.

Moments like that make me happy to work here.

People are always surprised when I tell them how little I read. They ask me how it’s possible that I work at a bookstore and don’t read new releases. And the answer? Rei doesn’t expect me to, for multiple reasons. My schedule, obviously, but also because of how I read. When I find a book that I love, it becomes a part of my soul. I’ve probably read less than 100 books since I came out, but I’ve read almost every single one multiple times. I don’t read to find out what happens next; I read to immerse myself in another world.

Because with the right story, real life doesn’t matter.

And I really need that sometimes.

When my shift ends, I thank Rei, hand my coworker, Toulane, the laptop for online orders, and catch a cab to Northbank. I hate taking cabs - the unnecessary expense is downright idiotic - but I have to take one to school every time I’m there. It’s almost a two hour walk.

I text Bradley when I get there.

*D: Do you know when you guys are getting here?*

*B: I just got to the airport. Her flight lands in twenty minutes. So you’ve probably got three hrs*

*D: Perfect. See you soon!*

*B: Can’t wait*

I climb the stairs of the dorm building. Living on campus isn’t required at Northbank, but almost everyone does. When it’s an option to be away from your parents as a teenager, most people will be over the moon. I, for one, didn’t want to live at school, but dad insisted that I at least try to become a part of the community and not just worry about my jobs and his health.

I brought my bags yesterday, so now I’ve just got to unpack. I scan the scene. The room is simple enough - two beds, two desks, a closet separating the two sides of the room.

Nightstands, shelves on each of our walls. Everything is annoyingly cream coloured, which I

guess makes sense. Why would the school with approximately one shit billion dollars bother to give their dorms a vague sense of colour?

First one here means I get to pick my bed. I pick the one closest to the door. Sometimes I take late night walks to clear my head - being closer to the exit is probably better for both of us. Besides, Northbank has a great view, and I'm guessing the American chick will want the window.

I start to unload. I didn't bring much with me. I hang a giant Halsey poster directly over my desk, so I can see it from my bed. I hang my sweaters in the closet, fold up my jeans, put my shoes at the bottom, carefully sticking to one side.

I also hang up the three uniforms the school provides us with. It's much simpler than most uniformed schools - just a sweater or blazer with the crest, navy pants or a skirt (your choice - thank god it isn't enforced by gender), and a white button down. The dress code is never really enforced, and a lot of teachers don't ask for you to wear your uniform to class. We have to wear them to assemblies, school events and any exam, but last year I only wore my uniform about twice a week at Northbank's lower school.

Going back to the suitcase, I pull out my blanket, a heavy, blue, fuzzy one I've had since I was six years old. It's huge, and I cannot sleep without it. I don't travel, ever, but I do bring this blanket back and forth from sleepovers and school. If it requires a suitcase, so be it. It's the most comforting thing I have.

Lastly I plug in my lava lamp, hang my toiletry bag on a hook in the entryway, place my textbooks and favourite novels on the shelves, and add my last few personal touches. Then I curl up on my bed and wait for Bradley's text.

I'm not quite sure how I feel about having a roommate. I've never lived with anyone before - I really don't have a ton of friends. Obviously I have Bradley, and I have all of my coworkers (many of whom have become friends of mine, at least to an extent), but I've never been very social in school. School just isn't my life the way it is some people's. Honestly?



Nothing in particular is my life. I haven't found my *thing* yet. I'm not really sure when - or if - I will.

Thank god Bradley texts me at that moment - when I get sucked into my thoughts, it's very, very hard for me to get out.

*B: Her name is Theresa, but she goes by Tess. She's very nice! We just stopped to get a snack at that bakery near my place, and should be there in about half an hour. See you soon!*

*D: :-)*

I stand up, fold down my blanket to make it neat, and finish tidying up the last knick-knacks in my suitcase. Gotta make a good first impression to the American chick - Tess, I suppose. If we're going to be living together, it's probably better if we don't die tripping over each other's things.

I make a last minute decision and blast Lorde at top volume on my phone while I wander. After today, I won't really be able to do that anymore, will I? Unless Tess likes Lorde, which I doubt for some reason.

I walk to the window, and I try to imagine someone looking out over the quad for the first time. I'm struck by how green it is, and how starkly the red brick buildings contrast the bright pre-autumn colours. I decide that maybe I will walk around the quad at night, sometimes, instead of trekking the twenty-five minutes I usually do in order to have my own space.

Then I wonder if my new roommate will be more social than me, and if she'll try to accompany me on things like my walks and my weekly drive home, putting me in too awkward a position to say no but too personal a position to say yes.

I sigh, collapsing back onto my bed. One thing is for certain: this is going to be an interesting year.

### **Chapter Five - Tess - August 26th**

The building is absolutely *massive*. It's red brick everything, with gold and deep brown accents of polished wood that sparkle in the sun. Everywhere I turn there's something to look at - giant sets of double doors, trees that stretch up into the sky, low hanging clouds and low hanging fruit (literally - how did a *school* get fruit trees?).

Good lord, I am falling in love with this school already.

Bradley doesn't have time for much of a tour, but he does try to point out main landmarks - each building, the dining hall, the library, the easiest paths to get from class to class. He ends with our real first stop, the dorms.

The first thing I notice about the dorm building - there are a *fuck* ton of stairs. We have to climb up four long flights just to get to my hall.

Bradley knocks lightly on a door about five from the stairs. "Dan? It's me."

The door opens, and a girl immediately launches herself at Bradley. "Oh my god, I missed you so much! We have so much to talk about!"

He's smiling, and when she pulls away, he presents me overdramatically. "May I present, Ms Theresa Q. Martin, from the far-off land of St Louis, Missouri, USA."

I stare at him. "My middle name is Elizabeth."

"Well, I wasn't sure, and Q seemed like a safe bet."

"Why?"

He pauses. "It's... unusual?"

I smile, turning to Dani. "Call me Tess. Always hated Theresa."

"Always hated Daniella."

I look her up and down, trying to take in as much about my new roommate as possible. She's a little bit shorter than me, but has a slim, athletic build much different to my annoyingly obvious curves and lines. Her dark hair is in a loose braid over one shoulder, long enough to extend down past her shoulders. She has gray blue eyes that are impossible to read, but there's

definitely some light behind them. Almost like a rainstorm. She's wearing a lavender sweater and high-waisted jeans.

To put it plainly, she's hot. Aggravatingly hot.

I shake her hand. "So. Roomies, huh?"

"Guess so." Her accent is thick, even for a Londoner. "I already picked a bed, I hope that's ok."

"All good." I step inside and survey the scene. I don't say aloud, but I'm glad that Dani left me the bed near the window. I always prefer as much light as possible.

She's hung up a few posters and placed some things here and there, but from the look of her side of the room she's much less... eccentric than me.

"I gotta run," Bradley says, glancing at his watch. "I've got a lot more drives today. Dan, see you tomorrow? Noon?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Perfect. It was so lovely to meet you, Tess." He grins, and runs into the doorframe on the way out.

Dani laughs quietly. "Fucking dork." She then looks at me. "I'm going to take a wild guess and assume you've got more stuff than me."

"Hey, simplicity isn't a bad thing. Just not my taste." I hoist one of my suitcases onto my bed and start digging through it. "Well, tell me about yourself," I say, transferring my pile of t-shirts directly from the suitcase into the bottom of the closet. I probably overpacked, but I'll find room. "Hobbies? Favorite music? Girlfriend?"

"So you know I'm gay, then."

"Bradley told me. It's cool, don't worry." Yeah, not coming out to this random girl right off the bat. Even though she's queer, I don't quite get the same welcoming vibes from her I did from her best friend.

“Well, as far as hobbies go, I don’t have a ton. I mostly work when I’m not studying. I dabble in music. I read sometimes. I *love* true crime. And I journal. That’s about it.”

“Work? You’re a junior.”

“Don’t have a choice. Dad’s in cancer treatment - I keep us going.”

From the look on her face, she hadn’t initially planned on telling me that.

“My dad died a year ago,” I say, and her eyes immediately dart straight to mine. “Car accident. Traumatized my sister.” I’m not telling her the whole truth yet. I just met the girl, after all.

“Damn, I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” I try to brighten my expression and change the subject. “You never answered my other questions.”

She points at her desk. “I think you can guess the kind of music I listen to.”

“That... is a lot of Halsey.”

“Yep. And no, I’m not dating anyone. Not really interested, to be honest. Romance is all well and good until it distracts me from working hard and staying on track.”

I squint at her slightly, trying to piece all of this together in my brain. “Yeah. I guess that makes sense.”

“What about you?” she asks. “Answer your questions.”

“Well,” I say, “I’m a blogger and an avid fanfiction writer.”

“Did you just use the word ‘avid’ unironically?” She smirks. “You sound like the inside cover of a self help book.”

“Shut up.” Back to the suitcase, this time to pile my posters on my bed and start shelving my books. “Anyways. I write on AO3 a lot. I actually get paid for my blog sometimes - I’ve done some sponsored posts with authors before. I love makeup, I love reading. And I love traveling.” I pause to consider. “I listen to a lot of obscure music.”

“Like what?”

“Stella Donnelly?”

“Nope.”

“Kathryn Gallagher?”

“Never heard of her.”

“Maisie Peters?”

“Ok I guarantee you made that one up.”

I laugh. “I also listen to Taylor Swift.”

“My respect for you just went down several notches.”

“Oh, excuse me, are you and your emo punk music too sophisticated for Taylor Swift?”

“She’s been writing the same shitty love song for fourteen years.”

“I... no.” As retaliation, I put up my T Swift poster first.

“What about the last one?” she inquires. “Got a guy back home?”

I hesitate. At that moment, I had almost said yes. I had almost forgotten the pain of the summer.

But reality smacks me back into my place. I shake my head. “No. My boyfriend and I broke up in July.”

“What’d he do?”

“Cheated.”

“Screw that.” She looks down at my suitcase and her eyes bug out. “Goddamn, that’s a big makeup bag.”

“It’s nowhere near everything - some stuff is too fragile to travel with.” I pull it out and put it under the sink in the bathroom. This room has its own bathroom. Boujee school. “I don’t even do it to look hot - honestly it makes me look like a mess half the time. But it’s fun.”

“I wish I had the time. Makeup can look pretty sick.”

“You will someday.” After hanging some things in the closet, I throw the suitcase on the

floor and collapse onto my bed. I've got two more bags, but my feet are dead already, and jet lag is starting to get to me.

"This is me reminding you that you have most likely got a meeting with your advisor at some point this afternoon," Dani says from across the room.

I groan, staring at the ceiling. "Crap, I forgot. I definitely do."

"When?"

"Now ish?"

"Big building, in the double doors and down the hall to the left. There's a big sign that says *main office*. They'll tell you where to go."

"Thank you."

"No problem. See you later?"

"Definitely."

...

"Welcome to Northbank, Ms Martin." My advisor Ms. Underwood is seated across from me at her dark wood desk. She's fairly young, but somehow still manages to be intimidating - silver-blond hair swept on top of her head, long fingers constantly tapping on the desk, glasses perched right at the edge of her nose, looking as though they could fall off at any moment.

"Thanks. I'm honored to be here." I start looking through the papers she's handed me. "So I'm taking how many classes?"

"Our facility requires eight periods a day, not including lunch or your break period. Students not living on site are required to leave the premises by four, unless here for an extracurricular or granted permission. You, on the other hand, can come and go from campus as you choose, so long as you are back by curfew. Weekends are at your own leisure."

I nod. "Makes sense."

Her hands are folded on the table, right next to a copy of my schedule, a map of the school, and a list of “big dates.” Apparently British schools run year round? But they get a weeklong break every six weeks. I honestly like it better this way.

“So, my two required econ courses, a math class, an english class, a history class, an art class, a French class, and my elective?”

“Yes.” She studies my schedule. “It says here that you haven’t actually selected your elective yet. That decision needs to be made within the first week of courses, or you omit that credit.”

“Oh, right, sorry. I actually meant to email you.” I smile a little. “I’d love to take your creative writing class. I checked - it does fit into my schedule.”

“Perfect!” Ms Underwood peers over her glasses at me. “A bit of an odd choice for an Econ student, but a wonderful class.”

I bite back the urge to say, *If I had it my way I would only take writing classes.* Instead, I say, “Is there anything else I should know before my first day?”

“Just a few things,” she says, pulling out a notepad. I sink back in my chair. If she’s pulling out a whole ass notepad, I’m not getting my lunch for a while.

But despite myself, when I catch the London map on her back wall, I remember where I am, and feel myself start to smile.

## Chapter Six - Dani - August 29

Tess is already awake and getting dressed when I open my eyes on Monday morning. Her blankets are strewn all across the bed, there's a half eaten croissant on her nightstand, and her pyjamas have been tossed haphazardly in the corner of our room. I roll my eyes. Of course I got a messy roommate.

"You're up early," I say, surprised. "Nobody gets up before me. It's what I pride myself on."

"Thought I'd try to get a lay of the land before I go to class," she says, turning around and bending over, scooping her frizzy auburn hair into a messy bun.

Tess is... the absolute spitting image of a stereotypical arts nerd. She has a lot of hair and no clue what to do with it, big hazel-gold eyes, and a sprinkling of freckles across her always-flushed cheeks. Her wardrobe consists mostly of fandom t-shirts, leggings and jackets, all of which are being sported today. She's wearing a shirt that says "no power in the 'verse can stop me," which I do not understand in the slightest. Maybe it's a Star Wars thing?

She's also taller than me, which is infuriating for reasons I cannot explain.

Tess sits on her bed and scrolls through her phone, smiling occasionally, and at one point bursting into a full on laughing fit. When she sees me watching her, she stops. "Sorry. Best friend back home - we're used to seeing each other every day. Just gotta go with the next best thing."

I nod absentmindedly, my eyes rising to the wall of posters above her bed. Mostly TV shows I've never heard of, though there are a few that I have - Gilmore Girls, Veronica Mars, Firefly, Criminal Minds and -

"You watch Buffy?" I ask, smiling a little. "I watched it religiously in middle school."

"Me too!" She smiles, a little embarrassed. "That was the first fandom I published in - god, it was so bad. I should delete that."



I'm about to respond with god knows what sort of sarcastic comment about the culture of fanfiction when my alarm (which is *fucking* loud - thanks a lot Bradley for stealing my phone) starts buzzing on my nightstand. I grab the phone and turn it off, pushing off my blankets and standing up slowly.

Getting ready in the morning isn't very complicated for me. Bed made, teeth brushed, sweater on, boots laced up, bag packed for the day. Still, Tess is out the door before me.

I shouldn't be surprised that she doesn't wait for me. I probably wouldn't have waited for her, either. So why does it sting a little?

...

I rarely see Bradley and Tess throughout the day - the school's only got two buildings used for classes, but they're big. I know I shouldn't feel responsible for Tess's wellbeing. In fact, it annoys me that I am even a little bit. I guess that's what comes from two years of carrying a family. I try to push it all out of my head. She's a grown ass girl and she can handle herself. I'm a roommate, not a mentor. That can stay Bradley's job.

After a couple periods, I run into Kiki in the hall. Kiki is my only other school friend. I don't get to see her nearly as much as I wish I could. She's always smiling, always lighting up rooms. I had a crush on her for four years - although primary schoolers don't *really* have crushes - but we finally became friends in secondary school after I came to terms with everything (and after she started transitioning).

"Dell!" Kiki grins, running up and linking arms with me. "I haven't seen you in weeks! How's sixth form treating you so far?"

"We've only been here for a few hours, Kiki. And I still have no idea how you got "Dell" from Daniella."

"I wanted a different nickname than Bradley!"

"Bradley calls me Dan. Everyone calls me Dan. This is not unusual."

"What can I say?" She drums her fingers against her leg. "I'm an innovative spirit."

“Whatever, stupid.” I kiss her on the cheek with a smile. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too. Who’s your roommate? I got Nova Gesiakowski - she’s nice but she’s so moody. Like does she not get that emo was so 2019?”

“Emo phases are universal.”

“Nobody likes black *that* much.”

“I like black.”

“You like more dark colours than just black, though.”

I roll my eyes and grin as Kiki carries on. Kiki and Bradley are so different from me, but honestly I love that. It’s a nice change of pace. And they’re the sweetest people - they just get me. They almost never interact with each other, though - when they do, it’s always funny. I kind of wish they were better friends. I think they’d really get along. I mean, who knows? Maybe this is the year.

We split at an intersection of hallways, but not before she’s tried to interrogate me about crushes and girlfriends. I tell her the truth - that I don’t like anyone, and almost never do. Obviously she doesn’t believe me, but that’s her problem. Romance is overrated. Always has been, always will be.

...

When I go home that weekend, I am not expecting my brother to be the first face I see. And yet, when I walk in the door, there he is, sitting at our dining room table with his feet kicked up like he owns the fucking place.

Which he kind of does. Goddamn, I hate having to admit that.

“Damon.” I refuse to call him Dame - Dame was my brother.

“Dani. Hey.” He stands up, stumbling a little. As usual, he’s drunk.

“Why are you here?”

“Um, I live here?”

“No you don’t. You don’t have a bedroom, you don’t have a toothbrush in the bathroom, you don’t have leftovers in the fridge.”

“I pay your rent, so there’s that.”

“You only pay our rent because our cancer-ridden dad guilt tripped you into it and you can’t say no to him.”

He smirks. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Get the hell out.”

“I think I’ll stick around.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. Got a problem with that, sis?”

“I’m not your sister,” I growl. “Your sister is gone.”

“C’mon, Dan. Why do you gotta be such a bitch to me? Live in the moment!”

“You expect me to live in the moment? That’s cute, broski.”

“I am very attractive.”

“You’re sick is what you are.” At this point, I’m shouting.

“Hey, *hey!*” Dad is in the doorway with a grocery bag. “Calm down, the both of you.”

Damon smiles. “Hey, pops.”

“Why’d you come back?” he asks.

I blink. “Back?”

“Your brother left something here last week.”

I glare at him. “Was this something a bottle of beer?”

He ignores the question, pointing at the door. “Damon, leave. Now. And don’t come back.”

“Aye aye, captain.” He gives an overdramatic salute, tripping over the door jamb on the way out.

I turn on my dad. “You’re not seriously letting him keep his beer here.”

“We all cope in different ways, Dani. He’s family.”

“He’s addicted. He needs help.”

“I thought you never wanted to hear his name again, let alone get him help.”

“Did you ever think that fixing one of his problems might help fix the others?”

“Honey, he doesn’t want anything to do with us, or our help.” Dad looks so tired, and it just makes me feel all the more guilty for fighting with him.

“Then why does he keep coming back?” I demand. “You know, if you put your foot down once in a while maybe it wouldn’t have escalated this fast. Maybe he would still be living at home, not in an alleyway with a bunch of rat bastards trading beer and getting high.”

He looks like I’ve slapped him, which sends a stabbing pain into my gut. “How could you say that?”

“How could I not? You didn’t try to stop him to begin with, and now you’re letting him prance around here whenever he wants and keep his beer in our fridge? And not once have you played a father card. Not once have you tried to get him back. The real him.”

“Dani, it’s hard for me -”

“You think I don’t know that?” I’m almost screaming now. “How can I be our only hope dad? Huh? How can you expect me to do so much? You’re my *dad*. Have you even *started* looking for a job? Your treatment ends in a couple months! And you’re still sitting home on your ass!”

“That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” I realise that, at some point, I’ve started crying. “I love you so much. But it can’t just be you that needs me. I have to be able to need you, too.”

I turn and run out of the room, locking myself in my bedroom and bursting into sobs that rack my whole body. I collapse onto my bed, tears streaming down my face and filling my ears. I can’t stop crying. My brain is moving too fast. My life is moving too fast. The chances for reinvention are slipping by too fucking fast. I could be doing something - anything - to fix the night I just wrecked for my dad.

But here I am, crying hysterically on my bed in this hideously purple bedroom I'm too lazy to repaint.

It's a full moon that night, and I eventually find myself at the window staring at it. My whole body shakes when I breathe, the bright rays of the moon reflecting harshly against my shining eyes. My hands tremble as I reach for my phone to turn on *Manic*. The music lulls me into a trance and helps me calm down. I try to text Kiki and Bradley, but words have left me.

Then I try to work on my song.

But words have left me.

## Chapter Seven - Tess - Undetermined Date

The first month of school is quite honestly the biggest blur of my life. News flash: going to school in a completely new country is *hard*. Even though you're technically in the same level you were back in the states, everything is different, from teaching style to homework distribution to test dates and formats. It's overwhelming.

Good news: I've been meeting people! I made a couple of friends through my econ classes, Kiki and Atlas, and I spend most lunch periods with them and Atlas's partner, Nova. They're cool, but not as cool as Rett. I spend a lot of my lonelier weekends with them, hanging out in Kiki's room watching bad romance movies and complaining about how single we are (me and Kiki) and how bad the writing is (Nova and Atlas).

I haven't been seeing much of Bradley lately, which is why I'm thrilled to get a text from him on a Friday in early October as I'm leaving my economics class.

*B: Hey hey heyyyy. I've got a day off on Sunday - want to go on a mini London tour? We can drive around, see the sights, eat some food, maybe see a show?*

*T: OMG*

*T: Yes please! That sounds amazing.*

*B: Yayy! I shall pick you up at nine milady*

When I get to my dorm, Dani is already packing up her stuff. She hasn't told me why she goes home every weekend, and I don't want to pry into a life that is *that* closed off. Still, it doesn't stop the curiosity that ebbs at the edges of my mind.

"Any plans for the weekend?" I ask, trying to sound casual as I lug textbooks back onto my shelf.

She eyes me warily. "The usual. Dad, assignments, work, rinse, repeat."

"Anything fun?"

"Do I ever do anything fun, Tess?"

I shrug. "Probably."

She stares at me, then goes back to packing, as if unsure how to respond.

"I'm hanging with Bradley on Sunday if you want to come?" I offer.

"Work."

"Ah. Right."

We sit in an awkward silence that I don't particularly want to fill. She zips the suitcase and climbs into her bed, scrolling through her phone and nodding her head along to the music I can faintly hear through her earbuds. I give up on any attempt at conversation - I don't know much about this girl, but I do know that once her music is on there's no pulling her out.

...

Saturday is a bore as always, so by the time Sunday rolls around I am practically begging for human interaction. Bradley shows up twenty minutes early because he's Bradley, which is fine by me, and I jump into the car next to him.

"Follow that car!" I shout, pointing at the very obviously empty drive ahead of us.

He blinks. "What car?"

"Dude, can you not appreciate a joke?"

"Fair enough," he says with a laugh, backing out and heading onto the main road.

I scroll through his phone until I find The Prom and I put it on shuffle, blasting it with my window down.

"The other cabbies hate you for that, just FYI," Bradley remarks, swerving onto a cramped road with charming buildings lining it on either side.

"I'm simply checking 'blast music with the windows down in a foreign country' off my bucket list." I shrug. "Let them judge me."

"I... can't really argue with that."

"Thank you."

We start off at a brunch spot he loves, about half an hour from school and right in the middle of the city. It's my favorite sort of London restaurant - a little basement space, five stories of flats on top. It's across the street from a beautiful little white corner building that kind of reminds me of the Flatiron in New York City.

As we're walking down the block, window shopping and chatting about nothing, it hits me for approximately the thousandth time. Like. Holy shit. I'm in London. I am in my favorite city in the entire world. I am walking down the street next to my new gay cabbie friend, drinking still-warm coffee to-go from the corner shop we ate brunch in. The hustle and bustle is present, but it's quiet. It's not like walking through a residential center in New York - those streets are still clogged, stores shoved in haphazardly, angry people shoving past you no matter how small the area may be. But here it feels... peaceful, almost.

Bradley tells me that there are two bookstores on our list, but one is a surprise. The other is two blocks past our brunch place, and on the way, I pick up the largest raspberry macaron I have ever seen in my life from a bakery. Once inside, I'm immediately taken with the place. It's pretty small, and is also a basement space of sorts, as you have to take a few steps down. It's set up almost like a little Barnes and Noble, with tables of recommendations and different themes scattered around the front.

The owner rushes to give Bradley a hug - Rei, as they later introduce themselves - and I realize that this must be where Dani works. I squint at the other employees, trying to imagine Dani here. It's actually not hard. Her small frame fits in well, flitting from shelf to shelf, putting up books, doing inventory, stopping customers to ask "are you finding everything ok?" I know she's not a huge reader, but this job still fits her somehow.

Not sure why my brain gets stuck on that, but I suppose it's not entirely unpleasant.

"Earth to Tess." Bradley waves his hand in front of my face. "You gonna buy anything, or are you ready to go?"



“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.” I shake my head a little bit, and then head into the middle grade section to look for a special edition Percy Jackson book my sister asked me for. Once I’ve found it and paid, we continue to the next part of our day, which is just a couple hours of drive bys. Bradley takes me to several important landmarks and makes sure that I learn how beyond mediocre each of them is.

“It’s literally just a fucking clock.” Bradley points to Big Ben, sighing and inching the car forward in the early afternoon traffic. “Like I know there’s all this history behind it, blah blah blah, whatever. But like. It’s just a fucking clock.”

I can’t help but giggle. “I kind of always expected it to be bigger.”

“Exactly.”

“Like it’s big, but...”

“Just a fucking clock.”

“Exactly.”

An idea hits me then, and I grab his shoulder, startling him into honking the horn by accident. “Jesus, Tess. What is it?”

“Any chance you’ve got some room in the itinerary?”

He glances at his watch. “Yeah, we’ve got some time. Where do you want to go?”

“Just turn right up here and trust me.”

I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me before to visit Blackfriars Bridge, but come on, Tessa Gray is my AO3 namesake. I have to do something for her. Bradley parks us nearby, and then indulges the mini photo shoot I want to do on the bridge. Staring out over the water, it’s pretty easy to imagine that I really am some brave heroine, not just a clueless American tourist that wants to honor her.

In the car, I upload the pictures to Instagram with the caption “words have the power to change us.” I tag Ash in the background of the last picture and hit post. Then I put the phone away and let Bradley lead me through the rest of the day.

The surprise bookstore turns out to be a little indie place called *Gay's The Word* that only sells queer books. I buy five different volumes, as well as a few stickers and a tote bag. Bradley looks on fondly, laughing when I can barely lug everything to the front of the store. After that, it's dinner and a show, which turns out to be a production of *Les Miserables* that his roommate bailed on. Call me classic, but I fucking love Les Mis. And then the day is ending, and it's all blurred together, and Bradley is dropping me off in front of my dorm and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

And after all that, I still haven't woken up.

It's not a dream.

I'm in London.

Chapter Eight - Dani - October 18th

“For the thousandth time, no!”

Bradley pouts at me. He’s lying on my bed at home, his feet in the air behind him. “Come on. You have *got* to get out more - this is the perfect plan!”

“How is clubbing the perfect plan?”

“Well, it’s my birthday, so I can drink now.”

“Which affects me how?”

He groans. “You’re my best friend for life! I want to hang out with you on my birthday.”

I shoot him a look. “You are *not* guilt-tripping me right now.”

“Oh but I am.”

I growl. “You are a bully.”

“I’m also the birthday boy.”

“*Fine.*” I throw my hands up. “I will go clubbing with you, as long as you let me leave when creepy men start hitting on me.”

“Yep, yep, yep.” He pauses, then says, “Oh, also, I invited Tess, too. Figure it would be fun for her to get a real London gay bar experience.”

“That’s cool. You’re friends, it makes sense.”

He looks puzzled. “Are you not friends?”

“We’re not *not* friends.”

He grimaces. “Well, you should hang out tonight. You really need to put yourself out there, Dan! We only live once - be in the moment! Be sexy! Be alive!” He glances down at his watch. “I have to go, but can you be there by seven?”

“Yep.”

“Dress to impress.”

“How about I dress to distress?”

“That... is a very you thing to say.”

I ruffle his hair and shove him towards the door. “Bye B.”

“Bye Dan!”

When he’s gone, I sit down at my desk and glance at my phone. To my surprise, I have a text from a number I don’t recognize.

*Hey. You prob don’t have my number - it’s Tess. Got this from Bradley. Can you send me the address for tonight’s shebang?*

She uses the word shebang. That’s so fucking weird.

And also strangely adorable.

Huh.

*D: hey. yep - just emailed it to you. my phone kind of hates sharing files. or pretty much anything other than messages and pics*

*T: Haha. Thanks! :-)*

I walk over to my closet. I haven’t really got anything most people would describe as ‘sexy.’ The closest I’ve got is the black dress I wore to my grandma’s funeral last year. I pull it out and study it carefully. It’s cute, but definitely not my style. Dresses in general aren’t my style.

I’m not sure when I made the decision to start snipping away at the dress, but before I know it, it’s at least six inches shorter, and has a slit running up the front on the left side. I study it, my face flushing. There’s no way I can wear this in public. I should just wear a button down and jeans.

But then I think back to Bradley’s words. *Be in the moment! Be sexy! Be alive!*

So I put the dress on, and study myself in the mirror. It’s not low cut, but the length and the slit are definitely starting to scream sexy. It hugs my figure - I haven’t got many curves to speak of, but it does make the ones I’ve got look nice. I have to admit - I like how it looks. I don’t normally have an occasion to dress like this. And I’ve always kind of hated girls who go near-nude in public - you do you, but you don’t have to shove it in my face.

I grab my one pair of non-sneakers out of my closet - black combat boots. They go nicely with this - despite Kiki's feelings, I can't deny that black clothes look nice with blue eyes...

I put on the boots and sit down on my bed. I've decided. This is my look for the night. Will I regret it? Probably. Will it be a good experiment? Hell yeah. Will I accidentally flash the world? The jury is still out on that one.

For some reason, I wonder as I put in my earbuds what Tess will be wearing tonight.

And I wonder if she'll like my dress.

...

I get to the G-A-Y Bar in Soho at 6:55. Tess and Bradley are already in line, and frantically wave me over.

Tess gives me a once-over as I approach their cluster. "Damn. Different outfit for you."

"Decided to go more bar-friendly."

She smiles. "It looks good."

I ignore the little flutter in my stomach when she says that.

Bradley hands me his promised gift - a fake ID. "Congratulations. Your name is Heloise, and you are a freshman at Oxford in town for the weekend."

"Sweet." As we approach the front, I glance inside, and am immediately overwhelmed by bright lights and the smell of old beer. "B, remind me again why you wanted to come here?"

"I am officially of age! Not about to pass up my first opportunity to legally get drunk in public."

Tess shrugs. "That's fair. Besides, I don't do this at home. Who knows? Could be fun."

I finally take in her outfit. She's wearing a pink, sequined t-shirt, a tight black skirt over fishnets, and a pair of white, platform converse. "How many pairs of those do you have?" I ask, indicating her shoes.

She considers, and the fact that she even has to think about it makes Bradley and I laugh. "...Twelve? Thirteen? I only brought six with me."

“Oh, only six,” Bradley says sarcastically. “That's practically microscopic!”

“Shut the hell up,” she laughs, shoving him.

We make it to the front of the line. The guy takes Bradley's ID, checks it, and nods the three of us in. He doesn't take either Tess's or mine.

“Don't you want to see our IDs?” I ask, eyeing him narrowly.

“Nope. You're good.”

I roll my eyes and walk in beside Tess. She nudges me. “Fuck the patriarchy, right?”

I'm surprised to hear her curse, but I nod. “Yeah. Fuck them.”

The club is packed full of people, mostly appearing to be in their twenties. G-A-Y does tend to be a hotspot for college students, from what I've heard. The music is much too loud everywhere but the actual bar in the far corner, where it is a bit muffled by distance and tile. We all make a beeline, but only Bradley actually plans on drinking.

After he orders, drinks it down, and orders again, all while Tess and I watch in disturbed fascination, he turns to me with a sloppy grin. “I'm gonna go dance!”

“You do that.” I watch him run into the crowds of people, a little bit jealous. I've always wanted to be that type of girl. The type who can just run into a crowd of drunks without thinking and dance her heart out for nobody but herself.

“I gotta pee,” Tess says, standing up and tugging down her skirt so it skims against her mid-thigh. “Be right back. Don't leave, drink anything you don't recognize, or die.”

“I think I can follow those guidelines.”

She laughs, running off. I pull out my phone and open Instagram. Not like I have better things to do than doom scroll. Kiki is spamming her private story with pictures of random Target displays, Damon is getting high (and posting about it like a dumbass), and I discover that apparently my dorm floor is having a Halloween party soon? I immediately scroll past that - anyone who thinks I would go to a voluntary social event doesn't know me very well.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn around, assuming it's Tess. It isn't. It's a burly dude who looks about twenty-five, brown hair gelled up from his forehead.

Dammit. Fuckboy alert.

"Hey, baby," he slurs, clearly drunk out of everything in him other than hormones. "Wanna come dance? I've got a motorcycle outside if you want to -" he sits next to me, his legs splayed wide, "take a ride."

"Fuck off," I say, looking back to my phone. He grabs my arm, and I yank it away. "Don't you dare touch me."

"I'll do a lot more than touch you," he says, grabbing me around the waist and trying to force me into a kiss. "I'm prepared to buy in bulk."

I spit in his face.

He splutters, looking really pissed now. "Fuckin' slut," he says, his eyes raking up my body. "You're gonna pay for that."

"Hey. Leave her the hell alone."

It's Tess, who has come up beside me looking furious.

The guy grins, standing up to approach her. "Ooh. Hot best friend? I can accommodate."

"Yeah, see," Tess says, advancing on him, "I don't think you will. I think you're going to run right back into that crowd with your tail between your legs, or I'll beat you so hard you won't remember the last month."

He growls. "Why should I be scared of you?"

"Because I'm sober and you appear to have the strength of one sugar cube - maybe two on a good day."

He's still pissed, but he's starting to retreat towards the crowd, where I see a group of tall guys (presumably his friends) watching the display and laughing their asses off. "You're gonna wish you hadn't said that."

“Please, you won’t remember this even happened tomorrow.” She gestures to the ogling boys. “Go on. Go back to your jackass buddies, you perverted ugly bitch.”

He flips her off over his shoulder, but scurries away. I turn to Tess, a little shocked. “I could have handled that.”

“Is that a thank you?”

I sigh. “Yeah. Thanks. I owe you one.”

“Don’t mention it. He had it coming.”

I take her arm and lead her back to the uncomfortable red barstools. “I can’t believe you actually scared him off. You are *not* usually that intimidating - no offence.”

She feigns hurt. “I’ll have you know, many people have run from me in terror. But it wasn’t that hard - men are such babies.”

“True, true.”

She looks around. “I know it’s been, like, ten minutes, but this isn’t really my scene, and I don’t think it’s yours either. And Bradley seems a bit... preoccupied with other things.” I look in the direction she’s pointing, and oh my god. Bradley is crowd surfing.

Crowd. Fucking. Surfing.

I shake my head in a mixture of awe, disgust and respect.

“Do you want to get out of here?” Tess finally finishes.

I smile. “Sure - there’s a great park trail near here. Really pretty at night.”

Her eyes light up like stars. “Lead the way.”

...

I lead Tess onto a trail of pebbles, and the cold air runs a deep shiver down my exposed spine. Nevertheless, we’re both grinning.

“I’ve always wanted to frolic in a foreign country late at night,” Tess says, spinning in a circle and breathing in the crisp October air.



“This is more of a hike than a frolic,” I note, shoving my hands in my pockets and kicking up a pile of rock dust. “But point taken.”

“So, how often do you take late night walks?”

I look up at the sky as she speaks, my eyes closed. “To be honest... more than I should.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Clears my head. That’s why I took the bed by the door when we moved in - I don’t want to continuously bug you.”

She shoots me a little smile. “That was thoughtful.”

“Well. I try.”

We walk in silence for a while.

Tess eventually brings us to a stop. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“What’s really going on with you?”

I blink. “What?”

“You put on this front of being a badass who doesn’t let anything get in the way of her success. I know there’s something under that.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on.”

I look at my shoes. “I mean... I’ve had to be the strong one my whole life. Not exactly gonna stop when I’m almost out of here.”

“London?”

“My life.” I try to fix my eyes on something - anything - other than her. I can’t face her while talking about this. “Look, there’s things about me you don’t know. Ok? Let’s just say being strong is the option that gets me out of situations quickly. Don’t judge what you don’t understand.”

Tess throws up her hands. “I wasn’t judging anything, I promise. I met you a month ago - you really think that you know everything about me?” She stares at the stars, and they reflect in her eyes like magic. “We’ve both got secrets, Daniella.”

I’m totally caught off guard. She’s never said my full name before.

For the first time since Damon left, I like how it sounds out loud.

And for the rest of that night, I can’t get over the way her eyes shine, or the way her cheeks flush when I poke fun, or the way that her hair falls out of her bun around her face, blood red in the light of the moon. And when we say goodnight, her headed up to school and me back home, I’m smiling.

Because this is the first night in two years I haven’t spent at home.

And I’m actually really glad I came.

## Chapter Nine - Tess - Fall Break

*Dani, I like how you laugh, and how you looked in that black dress. Will you go out with me?*

*Dani, I'm a useless bisexual and I don't deserve you.*

*Dani, I'm a dumbass who can't figure out if she likes someone or just admires them, please send help.*

*Dani, please fuck me.*

“Gah!” I collapse back on my bed, staring at the ceiling and tossing my phone down the bed, away from me. I’ve been at this for a good twenty minutes, and I haven’t sent one text. Not that I was planning on it to begin with. I don’t even know if I like her! I’m not just gonna throw my feelings in her face like an unsolicited dick pic.

Ooh, that was a good comparison. I’m going to use that in a fanfic.

I watch the ceiling fan go around, letting my eyes circle with it. I try to hypnotize myself out of thinking about all this confusing crap, but it really isn’t working. I really can’t figure out why I’m lingering on this.

The image of Josh flashes in my mind. His warmth and kindness when we were younger, and his hostility as we grew up. And that night...

Sophomore “study” party, which was really just an excuse for people to drink before midterms. We went together, right before we decided to take that break. Made out, made some other things, basically stayed in bed the whole time. Eventually, we got to talking a little.

“Are you excited for Christmas break?” he asked, his hands resting on my stomach, arms twisted around me.

“Sort of. Although it’s just more time with my mom, so that’s not great.”

“I’ll bet. Isn’t she going to make you take care of your sister?”

“Probably.”

“Fuckin’ retard.”

Those words hit me like a sucker punch. “What?”

“Just...” he lowers his voice. “I didn’t want to say anything at your house last weekend, but your sister is *off*. Like... something wrong with her head or something? Cus she’s clearly a few eggs short of a dozen.”

I wriggled out of his grasp. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

“Yeah - babe, what’s wrong? Baby?”

“Don’t fucking touch me. I’m done here.”

And everything from there is ancient history. Break, clinging, longing, Freya...

I’m going in circles. I need to clear my head.

I dial Rett’s number, and she picks up instantly. “Hey, Tessie!”

“Hi!” I push Josh out of my thoughts.

“It’s been so long!”

“Dude. It’s been, like, a week and a half since I last called.”

“Well, I’m used to seeing you every day,” she argues, and I can hear shuffling and the slamming of a door as she heads into her bedroom for privacy. “I need updates. How are classes? How’s the whole “get to know the roommate” thing going?”

“Classes are good, and Dani...” I pause. It’s not like I haven’t told Rett that I like girls, but it doesn’t come up very often, and it’s still so new that I feel awkward talking about it.

Besides, I don’t have a crush on Dani.

I don’t think.

“Dani’s fine,” I say eventually. “Still quiet. We went out to this bar for Bradley’s birthday last weekend - hung out afterwards. I think she takes some time warming up to new people.”

“Sure seems like it.” I can feel Rett’s eye roll through the phone. “So, any guys? I mean - shit.” She starts over. “Any hot people?”

So much for not going into an awkward discussion of my ever changing sexual orientation. “Nope.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I mean, I haven’t met a ton of people. I’ve got a couple friends with significant others, and all my other friends aren’t really my type.”

“That’s sad. You have to at *least* go friends with benefits with one of them by the end of the year if you don’t get a boyfriend.”

I don’t bother correcting her on her gendered language. “Didn’t know you were this invested in my libido.”

“British people are too hot to pass up! Besides, you’re basically in a college with high school classes. Have some fun!”

I think about that. I have considered asking Kiki out, if for no other reason than to settle whatever my mind thinks I feel for Dani, once and for all. Would I get drunk and hook up with her? Probably not, but who even knows at this point?

“I will consider your suggestion,” I say, laughing a little.

“Damn right you will.” She sighs. “Now, out with it. Have you been stalking Josh?”

“What?” That throws me off so much I almost drop my phone. “Of course I haven’t.”

“Then why did you like one of his instagram pics?”

“Because Viola was in it, and she looked badass.” This is why I hate social media. One innocent click can turn into an entire conversation or relationship crisis. “Seriously, Rett, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Ok.” She doesn’t sound convinced. “Hey - you know if there was more to the breakup you could tell me, right?”

Of course I couldn’t. “Yeah, I know.”

“So he really just hooked up with someone while you were broken up? That’s the only reason?” The tone of her voice makes it clear that she knows I’m hiding something.

But I’m too stubborn for my own good.

“Yep,” I say, staring out the window as rain starts coming down. “That’s everything.”

...

An hour later, I get a frantic text from Bradley.

*B: Help, help, help, help, help.*

*T: Oh no*

*What have you done?*

*B: I ASKED HIM OUT*

*T: RAVEN?*

*B: YES*

*I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO*

*T: AHHHH*

*B: AHHHHH*

*AGAIN: HELP*

For some reason, I feel a twinge of jealousy in my gut. I ignore it, running out of my room and heading over to the boy's housing. Bradley's on the second floor, and the door is flung wide when I get there.

I stick my head in, smiling as usual at how Bradley the space is. There are posters, ticket stubs and polaroids hung *everywhere*. His bed is piled high with pillows and blankets, his bookshelf is full to bursting, and there are dirty socks strewn every which way. His roommate is a guy named Yosif - typical senior jock, but he and Bradley have gotten along surprisingly well. His side of the room is mostly trophies, framed jerseys, and photos of him with his girlfriend.

Bradley is hanging over the edge of the bed, staring at his phone.

I laugh. "A watched pot never boils."

"Shut up, I'm really nervous." He sits up, and lets me take his phone. "You know how much I like him."

“Believe me, I do.” Dani told me that Bradley met Raven through theater at Northbank before he graduated, and basically fell in love with the older boy on sight. “I mean, I see it - he’s hot.”

“And funny, and cute, and smart, and talented, and-” He’s cut off by the ding of his phone.

I glance down and see that a text from Raven is flashing on the screen.

He pushes his hands through his hair frantically. “Oh god. I can’t look.”

“Do you want me to read it?”

He shakes his head, taking the phone back in a trembling hand. He scans the screen, scans it again, and then lets out a squeal. “He wants to get coffee next week!”

“Oh my god!” I cry out, jumping on him and hugging him fiercely. “That’s amazing, B!”

“I finally got the guy.” He looks dazed, his expression purely hopeful. “I never expected that to happen.”

“I did. You totally deserve it.”

“Thanks, Tess.” He pushes up off the bed and walks to his closet. “Now. What the literal fuck am I supposed to wear?”

## Chapter Ten - Dani - October 31

Halloween is always a very interesting day for British students.

I don't know where the idea that Americans take holidays more seriously came from, but for some reason, teenagers around here are determined to one them up. I'm talking giant parties on every block, full cosplays, decorated hallways, terrifyingly on-point pranks.

I'll admit, I kind of dig Halloween. At least the costume part. When I was little, I dressed up as Raven from Teen Titans as a Halloween costume, and I remember so clearly how excited I was to go out and trick or treat with Damon, who was finally old enough that we could go without my parents. I practically bounced from house to house, and everyone told me how adorable I was, but the most important moment of the night was coming home to my dad and feeling him scoop me into his arms, telling me how proud he was for making the cape myself.

"You look just like her," he had said, and I grinned wider than ever before under that white face paint.

This year, I went all out with my Harley Quinn costume. I have a soft spot for any villains, gay-coded comic book characters, or flat out lunatics - it's the true crime lover in me - and she checks all three of those boxes. I tried to go subtle with her *Suicide Squad* outfit, but I did go as far as buying her jacket, using spray paint on some denim shorts, and watching a fair number of hair and makeup tutorials. I don't get many chances to look like an absolute psycho for fun.

On the day of, I get dressed up after class, and go as insane as I can with the makeup. I refuse to bleach my hair or wear a wig, but I do put in colourful extensions and tie my hair up on both sides. I admire my handiwork in the mirror - this looks pretty great.

Tess spent the afternoon with friends, and left her costume over there, so I don't actually know what she's dressing up as until she walks back into our room around four.

I do a double take, and so does she.



Um.

Oops.

Tess is currently the spitting image of Poison Ivy. She's got sections of her fiery red hair pulled back into a thin braid, with the rest of it spilling over her shoulders. She's in a green leotard, tights, and red boots, and has wrapped her torso and arms in fake ivy. Her makeup is perfect as usual, and the level of badassery she is currently exhibiting almost makes up for the fact that I have accidentally dressed up in a couples costume with my hot roommate.

There's a deep, awkward silence.

Finally, I say, "Wow. Great job."

"You too."

More silence.

She clears her throat loudly. "So, ah, are you going to the big party later?"

"Probably." She looks me up and down slowly. "So. Roommates in a couples costume. Funny coincidence."

"Yep." I can tell that my voice is absolutely emotionless. "Hilarious."

...

Every year, Kiki and her brother hold this *huge* Halloween party at a venue that their mom owns. It's a ten minute drive, thirty minutes on foot. I usually walk when I go to any of her events, or just to hang out after school, but Tess grabs me by the arm before I leave the dorm.

"Need a ride?" she asks, smiling a little. "You could come with my friends and I."

It's laughable that the exchange student has more friends than me, but I don't say that out loud. "I was going to walk."

"Come on, it'll be fun. We can take the scenic route. Besides, you should know better than anyone that London cobblestones weren't made for combat boots."

I roll my eyes - she's made a fair point. "Fine, fine."

She leads me outside to a big blue car, where I see a group of four waving at her. There is a girl with dark skin and a buzz cut, wearing what I recognize as a Hamilton cosplay. Then, there's a slender girl with a pink pixie cut wearing a shirt that says *Camp Half-Blood*. Next to her, there is a guy in a full suit of armour that looks homemade - I have to admit, that one's actually pretty impressive. And then there's Kiki, dressed to perfection in some sort of anime outfit, her black hair braided way too intricately for me to comprehend.

Funny. I didn't know the two of them were friends.

We reach them, and Kiki throws her arm around Tess. "Hey, TT! Ready to party?"

"I guess we'll find out," she replies, turning back to face me. "Dani, that's Nova, their partner, Atlas, and Kiki's twin brother Evan. Guys, this is my roommate Dani."

When she introduces Nova with they/them pronouns, I curse myself internally for assuming they were female. I really need to stop doing that.

Kiki gives me a quick side embrace - I can tell she's a hugger. "Great costume," she says. "I'm kind of a DC nerd."

"Please, bitch," Atlas says, smoothing down the skirts of her pink dress. "Marvel superiority."

"Hell no," Kiki, Tess and I say at the same time. We all look at each other and burst into giggles.

Evan looks at Kiki with a *let's get going* face and hops in the car. I notice he's frantically pressing at the cogs of a blue fidget cube, yet his face is pretty calm.

We all pile into the car, and Nova turns on the radio. As if the universe knows how stressed I am, Halsey comes on first, and I relax into the seat back. I'm squished between Atlas and Evan - Nova is driving, Tess is in the passenger's seat, and Kiki (being the shortest) climbed into the back.

"So, are you guys going to this shindig with anyone? Nova asks, elbowing me in the side a little.

I blush. “Nope. No special someone. Sorry to disappoint.”

Kiki laughs. “Did you guys intentionally wear a couples costume, or -”

“Accident,” Tess says, staring straight ahead. “I mean, I guess that’s what happens when you stick the comic book nerds in the same dorm.” She’s drumming her fingers against her thigh, which makes me start thinking about her thighs, and I’m so desperate for a distraction that I practically hug Evan when he asks “How long will this go for?”

“Probably all night, but you can take the car,” Kiki says.

I twist to face her. “This is your car? It’s fucking huge!”

“It was our joint sixteenth birthday gift. Pretty sweet, huh?”

I nod blandly, feeling guilty about the annoyance circling in the back of my brain. I hate how much money people in this city have. They’re driving around in their expensive cars while dad and I can barely make ends meet. It’s not fair - it’s never been fair.

When we pull up to the venue, I climb out of the car and head into the hall. Unlike the hot, stuffy mess of a bar from Bradley’s birthday, Kiki’s family venue is big, air conditioned, and well kept. There’s already students everywhere, “dancing” to some rap song I’ve never heard before. There are tables set up against the far wall, and a buffet against the opposite.

I turn to say something to Tess, but Kiki has pulled her into a crowd of dancers. She mouths *help* over her shoulder, but I just laugh and look at where everyone else has gone. Atlas and Nova are leaning against a pillar, holding hands and bobbing their heads to the music as Nova sips what I assume is champagne. And I notice that Evan is standing in a corner, his forehead pressed against that of another boy, slightly taller than him, with tan skin and a warm smile. The boy whispers something in Evan’s ear, and Evan giggles, grabbing his hand and pulling him out of the main room. I have no doubt as to what they plan on doing.

I try to dance for a while, but eventually it becomes a sensory overload, so I sit at one of the tables and watch Tess from across the room. She’s tripping over herself, laughing as Atlas

tries to keep her upright. I could have told her not to wear heels to this, but hey. It's entertaining.

I don't notice that Kiki has slipped away from their group until she's sitting next to me. I can tell she's drunk, because her eyes aren't staying on me for more than a few seconds at a time. "Great party, huh?"

"Same as usual - just a lot of dancing and drinking." I look around at all the teenagers, and it's honestly depressing how many of them are pressed up against each other like they're just having a quick standing fuck. "Good lord, this place is a cesspool."

"Yeah," she says, kicking her feet up. "But it's fun. Nice distraction from stress. School."

I nod absentmindedly, and she scoots a little closer to me. "You know, sometimes it's nice to just do something reckless for a while. Something you'd never, ever do. And then, when the high dies down, you go back to real life."

"That... is weirdly wise," I say, smiling. "But if you're suggesting I get high, I'm not down."

Her eyes hover around my lips, and I instantly know what she's thinking.

I take the tiniest of glances back to Tess, who is totally lost in the magic of the harsh lights and loud music. But then she bends down, and her skin is exposed, and I just can't think about her anymore.

So before Kiki can even make the first move, I slam my mouth against hers in a long kiss. She gasps, but doesn't break away, instead shifting into my lap and letting her hands rest on my lower back. I push my breath into her, sending sparks through both of us. I am making out with a girl I have known for literal years for absolutely no reason.

I never would have done that last summer.

I break away, but she tilts my chin back towards hers, a fiery look in her eyes. Her hands are up in my hair, and the whole time, all I can think about is how good this feels, and how desperately I want to do it with someone real.

Someone like T-

*Fuck.*

I slowly break away, and she doesn't look surprised. She adjusts her skirt where it's gone lopsided. I glance at the big clock on the wall. It was only thirty seconds.

That was my first kiss. Gone, just like that. All because I was too scared to tell a girl how I really felt about her.

It begins to dawn on me that the room is still completely full of people. I whip my head around frantically, but nobody seems to have paid us any mind.

Nobody, that is, except for Tess Martin, who has stopped dancing, and is staring directly at me.

Again I say: *fuck.*

Chapter Eleven - Tess - October 31st

The car ride home is awkward. Dani and I are steadily avoiding each other's gazes. I don't think Kiki knows that I saw them, and I'd much prefer to keep it that way. Doesn't stop me from wincing when she asks me what I did at the party. I make up some lame story about talking to a guy at the bar, and attempt to sit in as much silence as possible for the remainder of the drive.

"Hey, do you want to spend the night?" Kiki asks us, but we both politely decline. Dani's going home to see her dad, and I need some time to think.

"You sure, Tess?" Evan asks, fiddling with the pendant that's always around his neck. I've asked him before where he got it, and he just gives me a small smile and shakes his head.

"Yeah, I'm sure," I say. "I'm just going to crash. But I'll see you guys tomorrow?"

"Definitely," says Atlas, hugging me goodbye.

We part ways, and I run up to my dorm.

As I wash off my makeup, along with a few stubborn tears, jealousy begins to boil in my stomach. Kiki and Dani have been so platonic for so many years, and now they're suddenly all over each other? It's not like I care who Kiki dates - she's quite possibly the most pansexual person I've ever met, and there's literally nobody I can't picture her with. But one minute Dani is all "I don't have time for romance, blah blah blah," and the next...

Why do I care? I don't. I don't!

But the jealousy is still there.

And no matter how much I try to stop thinking about Dani's lips on hers, and the brief flash of myself in Kiki's place that burned the backs of my eyes, I can't.

I'm very tempted to text Kiki. *I need a distraction, come over.* I know she'd come. But I can't bear to see either of them right now. Thank god Dani will be gone for the weekend while I try to sort through this shit.

I'll call Bradley in the morning. That's what I'll do.

...

Except that I don't call Bradley in the morning, and I don't call him on Sunday either. Because how am I supposed to talk to him about this? Dani is his best friend - I can't in good faith tell him any of this. I almost call him roughly ten times, but, let's be honest, I'm a fucking chicken.

I do have one nice distraction. November 1st marks the beginning of NaNoWriMo, and I've decided to write and publish a new one shot every day of the month. On Saturday morning, I sit down and write a quick Firefly one shot - there's no way I can write any decent romantic fics today, and Simon and River are a pretty safe platonic bet. Besides, Simon is adorable as hell, and I take any excuse to rewatch scenes with him. I swear to you, I will dedicate my death to the unjust cancellation of Firefly.

On Sunday, I'm stuck with writer's block. I'm about to start googling Rory and Paris compilations - another generally safe bet - when the door clicks open. I sit straight up - didn't I lock it?

But it's just Dani. "Hey," she says, pulling her home suitcase behind her.

I'm a little taken aback. "Hey yourself. Why are you back so soon?"

"Dad's going on a little impromptu road trip to see a high school friend. He doesn't get out very often - gas costs money. Anyways, he told me to just come back so I wasn't alone at the apartment." She heaves the suitcase onto her bed, and starts unpacking completely mindlessly. It's not surprising - she packs the exact same stuff every time she goes. If I made the same commute with the same requirements every single weekend, I'd have my storage committed to memory too.

"Ah. Good for him, though."

"Yeah. I would have gone with him, but school."

"School," I agree.

She glances at my open computer, and smirks. “Fanfiction rabbit hole?”

“I’m writing one every day this month.”

“How do you have that many ideas?”

“I don’t right now, which is a problem.”

Dani plops down at her desk. “You’re doing better than me - I can barely write one fucking song.”

“I can only write when the characters are fully fleshed out and for the taking.” I open AO3 to check my stats - and to keep me from staring at Dani. “I wish I could write a book of my own.”

“You’ll get there someday if you keep practicing.” Dani opens her own computer. “What’s your @? I do occasionally go on there myself.”

Now I’m *really* shocked. “You? No way.”

“Yes way! I do read, you know.”

“That’s nice to hear,” I say with a smirk.

“I read weirdly, that’s all. Not many new books - when a book sticks with me I tend to reread it over and over again. Comforting. Especially in the romance department - don’t exactly get much action there.”

I try to hide my passive aggressive tone when I say, “You and Kiki seemed pretty cozy at the party.”

She goes a little pale - or maybe that’s just my imagination. “That? That was nothing.”

I shake my head. “Bullshit.”

“It really wasn’t anything.”

“That’s what I said about gay fanfiction before I came out to my dad - that was a crazy time.”

It’s only when I see the look on her face that I realize.

Shit.



“I never told you I’m bi, did I?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No, even though I told you.”

I wince. “Sorry. I’m not used to being able to talk about that stuff openly. Back home everyone is either straight or my mom.”

“I totally get you. I didn’t have any queer friends until Bradley came out to me. It was pretty lonely - just me, my thoughts, and Halsey’s music videos. Oh, and my fourteen-year-old self’s fever dream where I had a threesome with her and Alanis Morissette - at least I think that’s what happened? It’s also possible that we were in a car being chased by the cops. Shit gets blurry in dreams.”

I stifle a laugh, and she blushes furiously. “How did you confuse “threesome” with “car chase?””

“How should I know? I told you - I was sick and raving.”

This time I can’t stop the laughter. She glares at me, leaning over the side of her bed to push the suitcase underneath. Her loose sweater slips down her sternum, revealing quite a bit of skin, and I quickly (if unwillingly) avert my eyes, feeling myself flush.

“Well, anyway,” I say, still refusing to look over at her, “the only people I’ve told back home are my sister and my best friend. And dad, but... well.”

Dani nods somberly. “I really am sorry about him.”

“It’s alright. You should feel more sorry for Ash than for me.”

Dani looks at me, a little strangely. “You never did tell me what happened with her. Sister, right?”

“Her brain went to shit after dad died. We think it’s PTSD, but nobody can give us a straight answer. She just went to a rez, so hopefully time away from mom with people who get it will help her. At least a little.” I fiddle with the hem of my shirt, twisting it around my fingers over and over again. This isn’t the whole truth, but hopefully we’ll get there in time. “I’ve never

seen anything like what happened to her. It's like... it's like all the happiness and joy of a child has been ripped out of her. She's already growing up too fast... it's heartbreaking."

"Sounds like it." Dani is quiet, and I can see in her eyes that there's something she's not saying out loud. I want to push her, but I resist the urge. Her business is her business.

Clearly, though, whatever it is has some sort of effect on Dani, because she stands abruptly. "I gotta go."

"Oh-ok."

If she notices my hesitant tone, she doesn't let on, because I stare at her as she exits the room quickly.

"Dammit, Tess." I pace the length of the room, looking up at my wall of crap, and at my poster of Taylor Swift.

Fuck emotions. Who needs them when I have the best distraction - creativity.

I put Taylor on shuffle, and sit down at my computer. When *Don't Blame Me* comes on, I smirk - Spotify really does know my brain.

I'm there with that song for no longer than thirty minutes, and end up with 2,000 words and a brand new post on AO3.

*"now i'm your daisy" by tess\_a\_g(r)ay*

*Poison Ivy/Harley Quinn*

*Rating: E*

*Additional tags: College AU, Halloween night, I wrote this instead of sleeping, wlw, lesbians, only one bed, smut, gay sex, NSFW, cuddling, soulmates, true love, coming out, everyone is gay...*

Chapter Twelve - Dani - November 2nd

Tess's story put me in a funk for the rest of Saturday, and by the time I next see Bradley, I've got one main question.

"Did you know she was bi?" I ask as we walk through the gardens behind the school. He's holding my hand, and looks a little nervous when I ask.

"Uh."

"B?"

He sighs. "Yeah. I did. She told me the first day."

I snort. "Wow. Talk about trust."

"To be fair, I did come out to her within the first ten minutes of knowing each other."

"So did I!"

"No, because I outed you."

"Fuck you."

"Love you too." He smiles. "So, you seem awfully interested in Theresa Martin. Anything going on behind closed doors?"

I sigh. "Are you asking if I'm into her?"

"Well, are you?"

I hesitate. "Yeah, a little."

He punches the air. "I *knew* it!"

"Look, nothing is going on. Even if I wanted to ask her out - which I *don't*, you asshole - I kind of doubt she feels the same way. She asked me about Kiki yesterday - seems pretty invested in us getting together for real."

"I know jealousy when I see it, kind miss, and it was written all over our resident writer's face at the party."

Something inside me stirs. Something I haven't felt in a long time.

“Ask her out.” Bradley is studying me carefully. “I really do think she’d say yes.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I have my sources.”

“Are your sources your gaydar?”

He shoves me, and I laugh, pulling him into a tight embrace. “You’re the best. I don’t say that enough.”

He grips me tight enough to set off a fire of memories behind my eyes. Memories of being held by mom. Dad. Damon.

Back before everything fell apart.

I push images of them out of my mind and bury my face in Bradley’s shoulder.

“You know,” he says as he pulls away, “people who don’t know us probably think that we’re in love.”

I take his hand again. “I mean, come on, we *would* make a hot-ass couple.”

...

The week goes by in a blur. I’m finding myself unable to stop staring at Tess when I see her. School is just school, until Friday, when Headmaster Bramble comes over the intercom and makes an announcement.

“Good morning, students. I’m pleased to announce that Ms Ng is back from her maternity leave, and will begin teaching music classes again starting this Monday morning.”

My heart soars into my throat, and I can’t help the wide grin that spreads across my face. I know where I’ll be tonight - Ms Ng and I have an understanding (no, I’m not sleeping with her. Get your head out of the gutter).

But first, I have to brave the beast of two hours in the same room as Tess.

When I get into the dorm, I realise she’s in the bathroom on the phone. I try not to eavesdrop, but it’s hard not too when she sounds that mad.

“What do you mean I can’t talk to her?” Pause. “Mom, how do you know she’s ok if nobody can make calls to her?” Pause. “Visiting her one fucking time is not enough.” Pause. “Don’t you talk to me about my tone.” Long pause. “Fine, mom. Be like that. Watch your daughter slowly dying from the inside out and don’t even bother to visit her while she’s getting better. You really do win mother of the year.” I hear the sound of something hitting the counter, presumably a phone, and then Tess comes storming out. She hits the bed hard, her face buried in the pillow.

I climb up next to her. No fucking clue why, but here we are. “You ok?”

“No.” Her voice is muffled. “My mom is a dumbass.”

“Sounds like it. Is there anything I could do to help?”

Her head shoots up, and she’s glaring at me. “Maybe you could drop the fake sympathy act for five seconds?”

I blink. “What?”

“You have no idea what my life is like. You have it so easy, you know that? You have a fucking family. People that care about you that aren’t thousands of miles away. Your dad is fucking alive. Don’t talk to me about this. I don’t want your help.”

Oh, that’s it.

“You little bitch,” I growl, digging my fingers into the mattress so hard that I’m sure it tears somewhere. “You think my life is easy? That’s what you think?”

“Yeah, that’s what I think.” She’s staring me down. “Care to correct me? Because it’s not like you tell me enough to know much about you.”

I break.

“So let’s go over your situation,” I say, standing and pacing. “Your mom’s a bitch, your sister is depressed and getting help. Your dad is dead. Yeah, that sucks. But you want to know what really sucks? Your mom leaving when you’re fourteen years old because she can’t handle the idea of you being gay or of “catching cancer” from your dad.” My eyes are filled with tears,

but I'm too stubborn to let on. "And you know what else really sucks? Your brother moving out two months later, snorting and drinking his problems away, and only coming back for the occasional beer or the occasional cash exchange. Oh, and, you spending a year and a half *begging* him for money you don't want, because of course he's the breadwinner for the family.

"Oh, and another thing that really sucks? Your dad's treatment dragging him out of work, and forcing you to take on two jobs along with school just to have a fucking roof over your head. Sucking up your childhood like a fucking black hole." I practically spit that last sentence, and come to a halt, facing her directly, my eyes glued to her. "But you know what sucks the most? When a rich girl with mommy issues and no closure shows up and tries to tell you she's got it worse than you. I feel sorry for you, Tess, I really do. But don't you even dare. You have no idea what my life is like, and you never will. So shut your damn mouth."

When I finally stop speaking, Tess's eyes are wide. Her knee is bouncing up and down on the bed, and her face is red. She stands up and walks to me. "Dani..."

"Don't."

But she takes both of my hands in hers, and I'm suddenly made painfully aware of just how green her eyes are, and how this one strand of her hair always falls across her forehead.

I'm tempted - so tempted - to tuck it back into place.

"You're right," Tess murmurs, staring at the rip above the knee of my jeans. "I don't know anything about your situation Dani. I'm sorry I ever assumed... I'm sorry."

I feel one of the more daring tears escape and roll down my face. "I'm sorry too. For saying all that mean shit. It's not true. I shouldn't have snapped like that. You couldn't have known. I just..." I shudder. "I get so pissed sometimes."

"I know."

"I hate this so much."

"I know, Daniella."

There she goes again with my full name. It sets off that deep pit in my stomach, the one that seems to be reserved just for her.

Our eyes are locked, and at some point she got closer to me. Much closer. Close enough to see every freckle dancing across her face.

And close enough for her to cup my face in her hands and tilt my chin up, so I'm staring into her emerald eyes.

All the warning signs go off in my brain, and I jerk out of her grip quickly. She looks a little stunned, and a little sad. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"I have to go," I mutter, grabbing a sweatshirt and leaving the room without a backward glance.

...

I reach the music room right as the clock strikes nine, and look around. Ms Ng is just packing her purse up for the night. Her long black hair is pulled into two pigtails, which would look childish on most older women, but just makes her look like a rockstar. She's wearing a pantsuit and bright blue converse. When she sees me, she smiles widely, and rushes to hug me. "Dani, you are a sight for sore eyes."

"So are you." I grip her tightly, and then look around at the music room. It's just as I remember it from years past - picture perfect organised chaos. Instruments are scattered haphazardly, but I can still immediately spot everything in its correct place - the piano in the corner, the drum kit in the middle of the room, amps lining one wall and instrument cases lining the other.

Goddamn, it's good to be back.

"I'm turning in for the night," Ms Ng says quietly, tossing me the key. "You know the drill. Leave by midnight, key in our usual spot, lock up, use independent study as your excuse if you get caught."

"You don't need to remind me anymore, Ng, we've had this arrangement for four years."

She starts to leave, and then turns around. “Hey... how are things at home?”

My silence is the only answer she needs. She nods solemnly, and walks out.

Two years before my mom moved out, we had a huge fight. We tended to have a lot of those after I came out. I ran and ran, all the way to school, and ended up in the music room. That’s where I met Ms Ng. She’s my surrogate mother. Ever since, she’s given me access to the music room at night if I just need room to breathe and create. Every time I come, I lock up when I’m done, and leave the key under a rug right outside the door. Despite the fact that I’m playing music, sometimes pretty loudly, I’ve never been caught. The room is soundproofed and in the back of a building - anyone passing would assume Ms Ng just stayed late.

That night, I go to the piano and sit down. I taught myself to play when I was thirteen, and haven’t stopped ever since.

Usually I can’t just sit at the piano and play from my mind. I spend hours and hours writing lyrics before I’m able to play.

But today, I press record and start singing lyrics I’ve never written before. It just flows out of me.

*I think we almost kissed and I don't mind it*

*You have a secret and I'd really like to find it*



### Chapter Thirteen - Tess - November 9th

Dani doesn't want to kiss me.

That's ok. I didn't think she was into me anyway. But it doesn't stop the disappointment that lingers for days after. We're steadily avoiding each other, only coming to the room when we think the other won't be there. When we do run into each other, it's awkward. Dani won't even look at me, let alone say hello. I just try to ignore her and focus on whatever task happens to be at hand.

This week, that task is studying for a big Econ exam. Classes in London are so much weirder than back home. You don't have any tests all semester, and suddenly all of them seem to come at once. I obviously don't care much for Econ, but I'm still studying like a machine.

Bradley and I go to the library together to study on Tuesday, and I realize he probably doesn't know about what happened. Unless Dani told him, but I don't know why she would.

We're both individually immersed for a while, but when the silence gets too long, I close my book loudly enough to make him look up. "I have something to tell you."

"Ooh let me guess." He leans forward, resting his chin on his hand. "You had epic sex on the roof of the dorms. No, you snuck out last night and went to the carnival down the street and got drunk. *No* - you did both of those things and *then* also stole a credit card and bought out a liquor store?"

I stare at him. "I think you overestimate the level of excitement present in my life."

"I think you underestimate my imagination."

I roll my eyes. "Well, regardless, no. I... I almost kissed Dani. A couple days ago."

Bradley's eyes bug out of his head. "You didn't."

"I did."

"Tess! Why didn't you go for it?"

The pain of watching Dani walk away resurfaces, but I press it down. I am not the point of this conversation. “She wasn’t into it. Ran out on me.”

He looks confused. “Are you kidding me?”

“Uh. No?”

“Tess, Dani is *crazy* about you. She won’t admit it, but it’s true.”

I shake my head. “Finding that harder and harder to believe.”

“She lights up like a ray of sunshine every time you come into a room.”

“Haha. That’s funny.” I see his serious expression, and actually laugh. “You actually believe that? If anything she crawls further into her shell when I’m around.”

Bradley takes my hand and scoots a little closer to me. “Listen, Tess. You don’t know Dani the way that I know her. She is so obvious about her feelings. She’ll deny it, but she is. She blushes, she shuts herself off, but in doing that she somehow falls even harder. I’ve only ever seen it happen once, and even then it was nothing like this.”

“Huh.” I sit back and stare at the lines of shelves across from us. I don’t want to believe him - if I believe him, I’ll have to accept that the hope I’ve been suppressing is actually real.

“So... what, you’re saying I should ask her out?”

“I’m saying you should at least think about it.”

I turn my face away so he can’t see the heat in my cheeks. “Enough about me. How are things with Raven?”

He smiles. “Good.”

“Ok you have *got* to give me more than that.”

“The date was good. We went out again. We... did some things.” He looks a bit sheepish, and I gawk.

“Ok, B! I see you!”

He swats my arm. “Shut up, this is absolutely not as important as you and Dani.”

“There is nothing between me and Dani.”

“Suuuuuuuuure.”

“Ok, I need to go back to studying.” I look away from him and move to open my book, but he stops me.

“Do you want to know why I’m so invested in you and Dani?”

“Why is that?”

“Because I see how you look at her, too.”

And with that, he pops his headphones back in, and goes back to his exams.

And I am just left there to think.

*Chapter Fourteen - Dani - Undetermined Date*

Upon arriving home, I sift through dad's mail. As usual, there are two letters from extensions of his old company. Probably begging him to come back.

Me too, dude.

I also see a note on the fridge as I walk by.

*Dani,*

*My doctor told me I'm not getting out enough anymore, so I'm taking a little walk around town for a couple hours. I'll be back soon.*

*-Dad*

I snort. Calling London a town is the understatement of the century.

In my room, I open my email and my Docs - exam season is no joke. I'm about to settle in with rain noises on Spotify for a few solid hours of work, when I hear my phone ding. Normally, I don't answer my phone when it goes off, but the only numbers I have set to ringtones are dad and Bradley - if something happens to either of them, I need to know right away.

Luckily, it's just Bradley.

*B: tess\_a\_g(r)ay.*

*D: ?*

*whats that*

*B: Only your secret crush's top secret fanfiction account on ArchiveOfOurOwn*

*D: I hate you so much*

*B: You'll thank me. She's got good shit*

I roll my eyes. Typical Bradley - when either of us gets a crush he goes full stalker mode. Nevertheless, I open the website (which looks like it's from the nineties) and type in the username.

And goddamn, Bradley was right.

Tess has published more than two hundred fanfics, some dating all the way back to 2017. I scan the fandoms at the top - “Gilmore Girls,” “Veronica Mars,” “Winx Club,” “Firefly,” “Supernatural,” “Killing Eve.”

My eyes land on “DCU (Comics).”

I click on it. There are three works. Two are characters that I don’t recognize from the films, and one...

Shit.

“now I’m your daisy” by **tess\_a\_g(r)ay**

*Harley Quinn/Poison Ivy*

*November 1st, 2021*

She wrote this after Halloween.

I look at the tags, and notice a couple that make my eyebrows shoot up. I’ve never been on this website before (contrary to what Tess thinks), but those are looking a little more R-rated. I also notice “True Love,” “Coming Out,” and “Everyone Is Gay.”

I click on it.

I have to read it three times in order to fully process the things that she wrote. I know she would kill me for seeing this, because the subject of her words isn’t exactly subtle. Yeah, it’s a fanfiction, but after seeing a reference to music and lyricality, I know.

Holy crap.

Tess Martin wrote fanfiction for me.

And it is racy as hell.

Like I’m talking kinks and moving car levels of racy as hell.

That makes me feel things that I don’t really know how to feel, at least not until I’m in the shower later. Even after that, after clearing my head, I end up back on AO3 reading other works of hers, from fandoms I’ve never been a part of. I end up falling in love with two

characters named Malcolm Reynolds and Simon Tam, even though I don't really know who they are. Reading about their journey through deep space just moves me for some reason.

Yet I come back to "now I'm your daisy" at least seven times.

And I don't get much sleep that night.

“The Econ test was *so bad*,” I moan, tapping my fingers against my leg quickly. I’m at the foot of Kiki’s bed staring into her full length mirror - she offered to do my hair. It’s so thick that I can barely get a brush through it by myself, let alone make it look anywhere near fancy. But I’m seeing Six tonight as a Christmas present to myself, and I want to go all out.

“I’m sure you did better than you think,” she says, reaching behind her for more pins. “My exams at the end of term always feel impossible, and my spirits always go up when I see a good mark. You just have to be patient.”

“Screw patience.”

She laughs. “I know, I know.”

I glance at my phone. Four on the dot. “You sure you don’t want to come with? I bought two tickets to take Bradley, but he’s got a date tonight.”

“Musicals are *not* my thing,” Kiki insists, twisting one of the smaller braids and pinning it up somewhere. “You should invite Dani. She’s super into music, right?”

My stomach drops. “Yeah, but she’s more punk rock, emo, moody music.”

“I mean, I only listen to K-Pop, so I’m not one to judge.”

“You’re really not.”

She takes a couple of pictures of the back of my head, and then studies them carefully. “This last part is always tricky. Give me a minute.”

“You’re fine. I’ve got a couple hours before I need to leave.”

While Kiki examines the images, I go against my better judgment and send a text to Dani.

*T: Hey. So, B and I were going to see Six tonight, but he had to back out for Xmas plans with Raven. Any chance you’ve got a nice dress and a couple of hours to hang out with me?*

She actually responds surprisingly quickly considering she’s at an afternoon shift at work.

*D: sure. what time?*

*T: 7:30*

*D: mmkay. no promises on the nice dress*

*T: All good.*

*D: can't wait*

*T: See you then!*

I have a love-hate relationship with Dani's style of texting. There's almost never punctuation, emojis or capital letters, which makes it very hard to discern when she's being sarcastic and when she's being serious. But on the other hand, it gives off a really chill feeling, which I can always get behind.

Kiki goes in on my hair again, attacking it with brushes and pins, and within five minutes she's dusting herself off. "All done! I texted you a picture."

She's styled my hair into a smooth bun, with a braid wrapped around it and flowers woven against the strands.

"Woah," I say, admiring it in the mirror. I feel like an actual Disney princess. "Thank you, Kiki."

She grins, patting down a couple of loose strands and adjusting one pin. "Anytime. Just be careful when you take it down - you'll end up sleeping on a pincushion if you miss any."

"Duly noted." I walk over to her closet. "Can I still borrow those shoes?"

"Bitch, you can keep them for all I care. You're, what, three sizes smaller than me? If you ever want some of my old ones just ask."

I grin. "Also duly noted. Alright, I have to go do my makeup."

"Text me how the show is."

"Will do." I swing around to hug her, grab my bag, and head up the stairs to my own dorm. Because of course my closest friend in the school gets a room on the first floor and mine



is on the fourth. As I go, I feel a spring come into my step, and I start thinking about Dani next to me, and about whether she's going to wear her fishnets with those combat boots she loves.

Yeah. This is going to be a fun night.

...

I show up at the theatre excited, and so does everyone else. It's a really lively bunch outside - I even come across a group of girls who are doing a street performance of "Don't Lose Ur Head" with choreography and cosplay.

God, I love London.

The dress I end up picking is a smooth purple maxi with a high neck and no sleeves. Purple has never looked fantastic on me, but I still like wearing it, and it makes me feel like batgirl. Besides, it's a crime against humanity not to wear purple to Six if you're a superfan.

Dani texts me "*by the marquis.*"

That is quite possibly the least helpful text I have ever received.

I do eventually find her parked at the stage door, phone in hand, looking a little lost. She's still wearing her outfit from work - a white button down and jeans - which is annoyingly adorable.

I walk up and tap Dani on the arm. She jumps, her face shocked until she realizes it's me. "Jesus, you scared me."

"You're welcome."

She gives me a quick once over. "You look nice. I didn't even know your hair could do that."

Goddamn this girl and her confusing as hell flirting (if it even is that). "I didn't either, to be completely honest."

"Kiki?"

"Always Kiki."

“Thought so.” She glances around at the crowds of people, and then at her phone.  
“Should we go in and find our seats?”

I do a sweeping bow, and gesture in the direction of the double doors. “After you, milady.”

“You are such a dork,” Dani complains, but the lights of the marquis illuminate a hint of a smile spreading across her face. I like making Dani smile. It feels like an accomplishment, considering how rarely it happens.

Inside, she looks through my playbill and points at someone. “I know her from somewhere.”

“Harmony Lyric? She’s mega famous, you probably know her from something. Most unfortunate name ever by the way.”

“No, I mean, I think I’ve met her before. Hold on.” She types something into her phone, and gasps. “Oh my god. She was fifteen and went to Northbank when I was twelve. I was legitimately obsessed with her. I wanted to *be* her.”

“You mean be *in* her?”

Dani shoves me, and I giggle, getting her in a faux headlock. The people in front of us turn around, frowning in disapproval, and we fix our hair and sit normally. We’re both fighting harder than ever not to laugh.

Throughout the night, a lot goes on. We scream the words to the songs (since when is she a closeted superfan?), we stage door and meet the actors, we talk to random strangers in the throng. We even exchange instagram handles with a couple of girls and talk about making a group chat.

And Dani smiles through all of it. At one point, she reaches over to try and take my phone out of my pocket, and our fingers brush. It’s over in seconds, but even as I’m chasing after her, hoping and praying she won’t prank text Kiki or Rett, I know.

I think I’ve always known.

I'm falling for Dani Nelson.

**Chapter Sixteen - Dani - December 25th**

There's no such thing as a white Christmas in London.

Instead of snowmen and children playing on street corners, there's a heavy downpour and at least two car accidents in any person's vicinity. That's what you sign up for, I guess.

Christmas has always been bittersweet in my family. Before all of our shit went down, it was this huge family affair. Damon and I would race down the stairs in the morning and fight over who got to open presents first. Mom grew up a Jewish orthodox, but she apparently had a bad relationship with her parents because of it, and gave up religion in college. She loved how much the rest of us loved Christmas.

But then dad had a major surgery on Christmas the year I turned thirteen, and suddenly the holiday became something entirely different in my eyes. Because the year after that, mom announced she was leaving on New Year's day. And the year after that, dad and I were completely alone for the holidays for the first time in my life. And before I knew it, Christmas was just another day that came and went like any other.

This year starts out the same way most do. Dad and I sleep until ten, get up to have waffles, and then sit beside our mini Christmas tree to exchange gifts. Dad gives me a music book, a new case for my laptop, and-

"Oh my god." I stare at the box, my stomach sinking as my heart soars. "You got me a record player?"

He smiles softly. "I know you've always wanted one."

"Dad, how did you pay for this?"

He shakes his head. "Don't worry. I found it online lightly used for next to nothing."

My fingers are itching to open the box and set everything up, but I've still got one more gift from him to open.

It's the Manic record.

I throw my arms around him, fighting back tears. "I love you so much, dad."

"I love you too, darling."

I got him a Vision action figure, a big comic book encyclopaedia he asked for, and a set of strings and picks for his electric guitar, which has sat untouched since cancer.

He stares at the items sadly. "Dani..."

"No, dad. The treatment sucked away so much of your joy. I'm going to get some of it back for you. I promise. And that will start with playing music together again."

Now it's his turn to fight back tears. "Yes. Ok."

"Ok." I hug him again, and then hit the light switch for our small tree, casting us with golden light.

As if the universe knows exactly how to ruin a perfect moment, there's a knock at the door.

"Who...?" I walk to the door and open it without looking.

I should have looked.

"Hey, sis!" Damon is standing on the doorstep, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Merry fucking Christmas, right?"

I yank him inside by the arm. "Damon, what the hell do you want?"

"Just a quick exchange of goods." I notice he's carrying two six packs.

"Absolutely not," I say, and then study his face more carefully. His eyes are unfocused - more so than even when he's too drunk to walk.

Oh god.

"Are you seriously high right now?" I demand as he sets the beer on the counter.

"Maybe. So what?"

"You cannot come here high, Damon. Dad's seen enough."

This whole time, dad has been standing in the corner silently. He approaches slowly, looking Damon up and down. "Son, I think you should leave."

“Yeah, so, about that,” Damon says, pulling a cigarette out of his pocket. “My friends kicked me out to get a little action. Plus, they’re sick of me, and one of them is trying to get clean. Loser. Anyway, I assume it’s fine if I crash here for a few days? Just until I can make some calls, find a new place.”

I’m speechless.

Speechless.

There is absolutely no way he thinks...

Dad speaks first. “Damon, it was your choice to leave. You can’t come crawling back here every time something goes wrong.”

“Technically, this place is part mine,” Damon says, “considering I give you guys all that cash.”

That’s the last straw.

“All that cash?” I demand. “A grand a month to pay for the literal bare minimum is not ‘all that cash’ Damon. That’s a pity check for the family you abandoned. And for what? What exactly do you do all day?”

He smiles widely, and clearly seems to think that my outbursts are the funniest thing he’s seen in weeks. “I work. Some.”

“You deal.”

“Want some?”

“Keep your drugs away from her,” dad growls, but I see the conflict etched into his face.

“Let me, dad,” I say, putting a hand on his arm. Then I’m back in my brother’s face. There’s alcohol on his breath - it almost makes me throw up. “Damon, you deal drugs. You quit being a coder to contribute to a drug empire.”

“Pays well. Besides, they required my services. I am very...” He gets close enough to send genuine fear through me, “...persuasive.”

I shove him, and he slams up against the door. I grab a knife from the kitchenette - it's dull, but it does the trick. He doesn't come near me. "Damon, you're going to leave. You're going to take your beer, and your jack, and your... your sickness. And you're not going to come back."

"Daniella!" My dad looks concerned, and his eyes don't stray from the knife. "Threats aren't how we solve this."

"Yes they are," Damon says, smirking as he stumbles towards the counter. "Here's how this is *actually* going to go from now on. Each time I come by seeking glorious asylum and get turned away at the door, I'm withholding a month's check."

Cold, hard fear and white hot anger seep around my heart into my bloodstream, into my brain. "No. Damon, we did this once before."

"And we're doing it again."

I look back at dad, whose face has gone completely white.

Because he knows we can't live here without that check.

He knows it's all we have by way of rent.

He knows we'll starve.

Fuck.

*Shit.*

I look at Damon, but I don't see him. Honestly, I don't think I'll ever see him again.

"Fine. Yeah, you can stay here. But there's two conditions. One, you don't touch me. And two, you don't stop me."

He smiles in a condescending way that makes my blood boil. "From what exactly?"

"Leaving. I'm not coming home anymore if you're here."

"What about my quality time with little sis?"

I approach him again, and stare at him so we're nose to nose. "How about you go spend some quality time with mom, you little shit."

That struck a nerve.

I can tell, because for the first time in years, his face is really uncertain.

He looks back at dad, who's glued to the spot. "I got some stuff to grab. See you in the morning, pops!"

With that, Damon bolts.

"Forgot your beer," I mutter, carrying one of the six packs over to the garbage.

When I lift the lid, I see something.

It's a letter addressed to dad from his old company. The one that came a couple weeks ago. The seal isn't even torn. Why is it in the trash?

Oh.

Oh hell no.

I snatch it, and shove it in dad's face. "What the *fuck* is this?"

His face is ghostly. "Dani, it's not what it looks like."

"See, I think it's exactly what it looks like." I start pacing, waving the letter in the air. "I think that you're scared of working again. So rather than, I don't know, talking about it, or taking risks, or doing anything to help this family, you're here on your ass, sneaking all of your opportunities into the fire and forcing me to *literally* keep us alive."

"That is not fair."

"See, you always say that." I go into my room and grab my nametag, apron and paperwork for the cafe, storming back into the living room and wrestling with the *fucking* keys that always get stuck in the door.

"Darling, what are you doing?" Dad asks as I open the door. "Come sit down and we can talk about this."

I glare at him. "I'm doing something I should have done a long time ago. Forcing you to take a fucking step."

He's left without words as I slam the door behind me and take off into the rain.

...



I quit my job that night.

I do a lot of things that night.

Sobbing in the rain, kicking a brick wall hard enough that my toes bleed, texting Bradley and Tess *everything is falling apart*, and ignoring their responses are among those things.

The one thing I don't do is go home.

I sleep alone at school like a coward.

*Chapter Seventeen - Tess - December 31*

I spend the week after Christmas with Bradley - his parents go somewhere tropical without him every year, and he insists that he hates being at home alone. We both try to call Dani roughly half a million times, but she won't pick up our calls.

It's starting to get me pretty scared.

"Bradley?" I ask quietly one night when we're both trying to reach Dani.

He looks up from his phone. "Yeah?"

"You... you don't think she's... you don't think she would..."

His eyes widen. "No. No, no, god no. She's not. I promise. But without knowing what happened it's kind of hard to know where she is."

"I bet it was that ass of a brother," I mutter.

Bradley looks confused. "You know about Damon?"

"Yeah - she told me a month ago."

"Huh."

"Huh, what?"

"She only told me about Damon's issues recently. Took her years to open up." He reaches out to take my hand. "She really likes you Tess. I can tell."

I smile. "I really like her too."

"Then what are you doing here?" He drags me to the door. "Something happened to her on Christmas. I could go, but I have a..." he smiles. "A thing. Yes. I definitely have a thing. That will leave me incapable of rushing to my best friend's aid."

I yank my arm away, and open the door. "Ok, ok, I'm going. I don't know what romantic magic you think I can pull."

"I have faith in you, my queen. Now go get the girl!"

...

Dani is right where I expected her to be - lying on her bed in the dorm, face pressed into a pillow. She doesn't bother to look up when I come in - nobody else has a key to our room.

"Hey," I say softly, locking the door behind me.

"Go the fuck away, Martin."

"Not gonna happen." I sit on the edge of the bed and, against my better judgment, reach over to stroke the hair that's fallen across her back. "What happened to you last weekend?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she says, her voice still muffled.

"If you didn't want to talk about it, you wouldn't have texted us," I point out.

She sits up at that, and I can see her face is blotchy from days of tears. "Why'd you wait until now?"

"You ignored all of our calls - we didn't really know what to think. You get a little unapproachable when you're upset. I wanted to give you some time to calm down."

"That's weirdly thoughtful."

"Oh, come on, I can be thoughtful."

She laughs a little, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her navy sweater. "Contrary to my words, I'm glad you came."

"Me too."

Dani gives me a sideways smile. "You know, Bradley is trying *really* hard to set us up."

"Oh, believe me, I know."

"Good. Because..." She moves a bit closer to me. "I was actually wondering if you wanted to go to the fireworks tonight. To talk."

I feel my cheeks light up. "Um... yes. Yes. I would love that."

"Good."

"Good."

We sit in silence, and then she gets up and heads to the closet. "How cold is it?"

"Not too bad. But definitely puffy coat weather."

“What classifies as puffy coat weather?”

“Obviously anything below forty.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Yes it is!”

“Sure.” Despite her complaints, Dani does grab a puffy coat after running a brush through her thick, dark hair. “Come on, it’s already eleven. We don’t want to miss the show.”

...

The park nearest to school is a twenty minute walk. I’m shivering, and Dani offers me her scarf, which I politely decline. I don’t think wearing something that smells like her will make this upcoming conversation any easier or any more predictable.

We sit down on a bench, under a blanket we brought. The park is full of families and groups of friends. I see two boys making out against a tree nearby - I know exactly who they are, but just smile to myself and don’t say anything. Evan’s business is his business.

Dani turns to me, sighs heavily, and speaks first. “So. Us.”

“Yeah.”

Her fingers brush mine on top of the quilted fabric. “Whatever Bradley said is probably true. I do like you. A lot. Kiki and I aren’t together, I promise. That was a stupid move... I just wanted to make you jealous.”

“Woah,” I say, smirking. “Daniella Nelson being honest and making the first move? Who are you, and what have you done with my roommate?”

“Shut up, jackass.” She isn’t looking at me, but there’s this smile on her face that I almost never see. Her guard is completely down.

What is happening right now?

“Well,” I say, “I’m sorry to say I have *several* better offers. There’s this motorcycling west end actress - she’s in college. Very experienced.”

“You are such a dork.”

“So I’ve heard.” I lean a little closer to her. “If you’re in... I am. I’ve never done this before. My ex was... complicated.”

“I’ve never done this, period. And Tess...” She intertwines our fingers. “I’m a mess. My brother might be moving back in. I threw away a chance to support my family. The one thing I love - writing songs - gets in the way of all the things I’m *supposed* to be. I’m *supposed* to grow up, get an office job, have a family. Get out of here. But I don’t know how. I’m scared. Of this. Of me, and of you.”

I feel myself blush. “You’re scared of me?”

“Of course I’m scared of you!” She’s fully facing me now. “You’re smart, and talented, and basically everything I wish I could be. You’re so carefree.” Her voice sinks to a whisper that sends chills through me. “And beautiful. God, Tess, you’re just so beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful too, Daniella.” I press my forehead against hers. “And I do want this.”

11:59. The countdown on her phone starts.

She locks eyes with me. “One minute left until a whole new beginning.”

“I hate new years.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not like you wake up on January first and suddenly you’re a whole different person. You’re expected to have all these goals, all these expectations. But I try to think of my life as one big year. Goals that don’t have to be held back by restraints of dates and months. They can just... be. I live on my own terms.”

Dani smiles. “I like that. I want to do that. Maybe someday I’ll be able to.”

“I guarantee it.”

Another alarm goes off on her phone. Ten seconds.

*Ten.*

*Nine.*

*Eight.*

She pushes a lock of hair behind my ear, and I adjust her purple beanie where it sits on her head. When my hand falls to her face, I keep it there.

*Seven.*

*Six.*

Her breath is warm somehow, and I can see the fear and exhilaration in her eyes as she moves even closer to me, our legs intertwined under the blanket.

*Five.*

*Four.*

“Can I kiss you?” I whisper, my hands shaking.

*Three.*

*Two.*

“Yes.”

*One.*

As fireworks explode above us, I press my lips against hers. The first kiss is quick, and I pull away fearfully, gauging her reaction. She’s grinning widely, and she takes my hands in hers, warming us both. Slowly, she moves back in, and this time we let the kiss last. Our lips are out of sync at first, but eventually they find a melody. Dani’s hands wrap around my waist, and their proximity makes me giddy and overheated, despite the literal freeze underneath our feet. She bites gently at my lower lip, and a real giggle escapes me.

“You are so adorable,” she breathes against my mouth, tickling my frozen face.

“No, you are,” I say, running my hands up and down her sides. I don’t know what to do with my hands. What the fuck am I supposed to do with my hands?

“So.” Her cheeks share fire with the light display. “Am I allowed to do the great honour of calling you my girlfriend?”

“Only if I can call you mine.”

“And... we’re telling people?”

I don't hesitate. "Absolutely. Daniella, I'm all in if you are."

She purses her lips, clearly trying not to look pleased. "I'm in if you keep calling me Daniella. It's sexy. Oh, shit, is that too much? We just kissed, I'm sorry, I shouldn't use big words like-

I cut her off with a hard liplock. She cries out in surprise, then relaxes against me. "I love that you think I'm sexy. I think you're sexy too. Don't worry about big words. I like big words. We're writers, big words make up our souls."

"Shut up with your run-on philosophy and kiss me, Martian."

I wrinkle my nose. "Martian?"

"Yeah, not quite as sexy as Daniella."

"Well, I love it. Never stop." I kiss her again, and for the first time, I know I'll look back fondly on watching the years change, and on New Year's Day.

...

I text Bradley a picture of the fireworks, along with a little message.

*And that's how it works, that's how you get the girl.*

***End Of Part One***

## *Part Two*



### Chapter Eighteen - Dani - January 3rd

The sun is shining through the window when I open my eyes on Saturday morning. I look across the room and smile at the sight of my girlfriend splayed across her blankets. Her red hair is tangled and thrown every which way, and her mouth is slightly open.

I pad over to her bed and stroke her cheek, planting a kiss on her forehead. “Good morning, love.”

Tess looks at me groggily, and then smiles. “Hi.”

“Long night.”

“Indeed.”

No, not like that, you fucking perverts - we stayed up late watching Firefly. Ever since I read her Mal and Simon fanfiction, I’ve wanted to watch the show for real. It’s all we’ve been doing the last few days - with the cold wave, we’ve mostly been curled under a blanket with some chocolate and a computer.

“Looks like you’re finally getting into my fandoms,” she says, smiling and pulling herself up to kiss me on the mouth.

“Only because I’m into you, darling.”

It’s been three days, and it’s safe to say that Tess and I are going to be the most disgustingly adorable couple in the history of the fucking planet. We haven’t seen Bradley yet - we’ve mostly been in our room watching TV, avoiding the cold, and eating cookies from a little bakery I took her to on New Year’s day. She’s calling her sister for the first time since she left today - Ash’s facility was very anti-technology for some reason, but she got released the week before Christmas.

“I have got to get you listening to Taylor Swift soon,” Tess says, curling against my side and running her hand up my thigh casually. The gesture sends heat to my face.

“Not until I get you listening to Halsey.”

“Good luck.”

“The same to you.”

She grins, then holds her fist up to her mouth like a microphone. *“But I can’t forget, what I did for love, what I did fooor loooove.”*

“Oh my god, you are so pathetic,” I laugh, tickling her arm and making her burst into giggles.

“Hey, you know I am a proud musical theatre stan.”

“You stan too many things.”

“Babe, that’s what AO3 is *for*.”

I groan. “Fine, that’s a fair point.” I look at the clock. Nine thirty. We slept in. “Hey, I was wondering if you wanted to go ice skating later? There’s this great rink near my flat - free of charge.”

She smiles. “You mean, like a date?”

“Not just any date,” I say, wrapping my fingers around hers. “The first date. My first date ever.”

“I would love that, Daniella. Just a warning though, I’m terrible at ice skating. The last time I went I ended up with four blisters.”

“Well, I guess I’ll just have to sweep you off your feet,” I smirk. “Oh wait. I already did that.”

“Shut up,” she laughs, attacking me with kisses.

...

Tess really meant it when she said she couldn’t skate. She falls a few dozen times before she manages to find a bit of a rhythm, though that mostly consists of gripping my arm very tightly and taking a water break every few laps.

“Damn, this is a workout,” she says after a while, her fingers laced through mine.

“It’s worth it, though.” I breathe in the chilly air, and try to focus on the feeling of the ice underneath the thin blades, and the noises of metal scraping against it. “I tried to write a song about ice skating once, you know?”

She grins. “Oh my god, that sounds adorable.”

“Try terrible.”

“You bet your ass I’m finding that song.”

I kiss her. “I’ll play you whatever you want. You’ll be disappointed, though.”

“I won’t be disappointed in anything you write. I write fanfiction, for fuck’s sake.”

“That’s a surprisingly good point, though your fanfiction is excellent.”

She squeezes my hand more tightly as we make a sharp turn, and then proceeds to crash hard into my side, sending us both down onto the ice. We burst into a fit of giggles, our hands never breaking apart. I pull her up, and we skate to the edge to get water.

“Dan?”

I turn to face her. “Yeah?”

“This is the most fun I’ve had in years. I’m glad we’re here.”

I feel butterflies in my stomach, along with something else that I don’t want to verbalise. I kiss her softly. “Me too, Martian.”

...

Later that day, after a quick pretzel run and some much needed hot chocolate, I finally go to Bradley’s house. He hasn’t moved back to campus from our break yet - that’ll happen tomorrow. He likes staying as long as he can - gives him time to hang out with his parents and sisters.

Bradley isn’t rich by Northbank standards, but his house is unimaginable to me. It’s an adorable three-story tudor, the perfect size for a perfect, five person family. They have a rainbow doormat out front that says *All are welcome!* Yeah, his parents went a little overboard when he came out. I think it’s hilarious.

Bradley's sister, Jerry, opens the door. She's fifteen, and already looks like a college student in her crop top, jean shorts, and thick-ass eyeliner. She shares Bradley's sandy blonde hair and slim build.

She pulls me into a hug as soon as she sees me. "Dani! Omg! It's so great to see you."

Yes, she did say 'omg' out loud.

She's going through that early teenager thing.

"It's lovely to see you, Jerry," I say, glancing inside. "Is your brother home?"

"As far as I know. Come in."

Bradley's house is an absolute mess, but it somehow still reads as organised chaos. Books on every surface, coats and blankets strewn around, shoes and papers and all manner of crap. But it's so them that nobody ever cares.

Bradley's mom, Isa, is sitting on the couch across from his other sister, Kaylee. Kaylee has lately taken to big sweatshirts and hair dye. She always looks a little sad. I get the feeling. She's thirteen, openly bisexual, and clinically depressed. So, basically the usual among queer youth.

Thinking about it, I realise she would probably love Tess's sister.

"Hi, Isa," I say, a little quietly.

The warm smile she gives me in response is enough to bring me close to tears. "Dani! You have scary timing - Bradley was just about to drive to school to see you."

"Is he upstairs?" I ask, smiling at Kaylee, who nods in my direction and shrinks back into her hood.

Isa nods, and I head up to casa de Bradley which is, as expected, even messier than the rest of the house. He is splayed across his Harry Styles duvet (I swear, his duvet is different every time I come. Last time, it was West End themed).

I knock on the wall next to his bed. "Hey, B."

He looks up, surprised at first, and then letting his face spread into a wide grin. “Dani! Welcome to the taken world!”

“We’re just jumping right into that, aren’t we?”

“Tell me what happened!”

I smile a little as I recall the last seventy-two hours. “Well, we went to the fireworks, talked a little, kissed, went home. Not much to tell.”

“Oh my GOD.” He pulls me onto the bed. “Have you gone on a date yet?”

“This morning we went ice skating - we’ve been watching Firefly all weekend.”

“Has she gotten you hooked on Taylor Swift yet?”

I roll my eyes. “Trust me, she’ll need to put in a little more effort than just being adorable for that to happen.”

He’s got a funny smile on his face. “Honestly, I can’t believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“Just - last year we were so different. I was this horny, lovesick mess, and you were basically just a walking, occasionally talking brick wall. Now you have a girlfriend, I have a date, and we’re both maybe happy?”

“Speak for yourself. I’ve still got Damon to worry about.”

“And I’ve got Kaylee.” He sighs. “She’s not doing any better. Barely even speaks to me anymore.”

“I’m sorry, B. I know how much you care for her.”

“I’ll talk to her soon. Once school calms down, for both of us.” He plays with the zipper on his hoodie. “Jerry isn’t talking to me much either. I think she considers herself too old to rely on her big brother for anything. She wants to go by Geraldine, now.”

“They grow up too fast.”

“For now, I’ve got mom, and I’ve got Raven, and I’ve got you.”

“Damn right you do.” I wrap my arms around him. “Always.”

“Aw, Daniella Nelson getting sappy on me.”

“Shut the fuck up, you absolute dumbass.”

“Aaaaaand she’s back.”

...

*D: hey*

*T: Hai*

*D: wyd?*

*T: Writing*

*D: ooooh what?*

*T: Just a lil something for my sister*

*D: gilmore girls?*

*T: Always Gilmore girls*

*D: can i read it when ur done*

*T: You hate Gilmore girls*

*D: well*

*D: yes*

*D: but i like you quite a bit*

*D: so here we are*

*T: LOL*

*T: Then sure - though I’m not sure why you’re asking permission considering I’m posting it to the interwebs*

*D: not gonna read anything you don’t feel comfortable with*

*T: Awwww*

*D: uwu bitch*

*T: LMAO*

*D: gotta sleep. early shift tomorrow*

*T: Dream of me, babe*

*D: always, love*

*T: Goodnightttt*

*D: night darling*

Chapter Nineteen - Tess - January 4

“A D???????”

“Shhh!” I smack Kiki on the arm, and she throws a hand over her mouth. At least a dozen other students have glanced in our direction, which makes me want to melt into the floor and never come back.

“TT, you are a straight B student - how did you get a D on your first exam?”

“If I knew I would tell you.” What I’m thinking is, *maybe that D would be an A if I was taking English classes instead of this econ bullshit my mom is forcing on me so I don’t end up “wasting my integrity.”* But there’s no way I would say that out loud.

“Have you asked about retaking it?”

“No can do. That prof is *harsh.*”

She winces, tugging on one of her long, black braids. “You realise that they do *not* consider an exchange student who is failing their primary course eligible for a second year?”

And there it is. The reason I’ve been avoiding the inevitable mom phone call. As much as I miss Ash and Rett... I don’t know that I’m getting everything I want out of this, and I don’t think I will within one year. School is so hard, and I’ve met so many people... I just don’t see how another five months is enough.

“I’ll figure it out,” I insist.

“You’d better. Application deadline is, what, three months from now?”

“April 1,” I moan, pulling on my face. “There’s no way. Promise you won’t forget about me when I’m stuck in American grad school for the next ten years?”

“No promises - a decade is a long time. *Lots* of best friends could come along.”

“Shut up, K.”

“You know you love me.”

“Yeah, I do.”



She pats down a strand of hair trying to escape from her bun. “Seriously, though. I’m here for whatever you need. Have you talked to Ms. Underwood?”

“She wants to meet with me, probably about the fucking black mark that’s about to go on my transcript.”

“Relax, as long as you get your marks back up, everything will be fine.”

“How do I get my marks back up from a *final fucking exam*?”

Kiki pats my arm. “You were doing fine before that. The final is only 20% of your grade - as long as you keep A’s and B’s and pass your other final, you’ll be golden.”

“Easier said than done - I don’t understand anything in that class. I don’t even care about most of it. I should have just forged my mom’s signature.”

“Yeah, you should have. That would have been funny as fuck.”

...

At lunch, Dani plops down next to me, tray in hand, and wraps an arm around my waist. “Hey, love. How was your morning?”

Holy shit I am feeling things with her hand on my thigh. I try to summon actual English so I don’t come off as a buffoon - at least, no more so than usual. “It was alright, except for the D I got on my final.”

“Babe, I’m sorry, but if you’re getting D I don’t know about, this might not work.”

“Shut *up*,” I laugh, shoving her.

Her face turns a little more serious. “Really, though. I’m sorry about that.”

“I’d say it’s ok, but...” I trail off. I haven’t told Dani about my plans to stay here yet. It would kind of be nice to surprise her with the news at a time when it actually sounds realistic. Besides - after dating for four days, who knows if we’ll be together for another month, let alone long enough for my staying in London to matter.

“Yeah, I know.” She tilts her face slightly. “Would a kiss help?”

“Please.”

Dani's lips are soft on mine - her hands are wrapped up in mine, and her nose is bumping into mine playfully. I let myself smile a little - this girl is exactly what I need on a bad day.

"Please get a room," Bradley moans, sinking down next to us. "I cannot handle this today."

"Damn, what's ruffled your feathers?" Dani asks, sliding into my lap. "You look rough."

"Raven and I were up all last night texting. Some... words were said. Big words. Words that involved -"

"Ok, we can picture," I say, feigning shielding my eyes. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, he's coming here during my break today, and I've been fighting back the urge to straight up fuck his picture on my phone all morning."

"Well, you have fun with that," Dani says. "I've got some work to do during my break today. Toulane's been working way overtime since I'm back in school, so I'm trying to make up some orders to help out."

"Look at my girlfriend, being the best coworker ever."

"You will take any excuse to call me your girlfriend, won't you?"

"Fuck yes I will."

She grins, kissing me again quickly, and then stealing a fry off my plate. I mock offence, trying to grab it back, and ending up splayed over her thighs, giggling hysterically. When I look up, I see Bradley walking across the room towards a guy I assume is Raven.

"Damn." Dani pops another fry in her mouth. "It's like his dick is an arrow pointing in the direction of the person most likely to rail him."

"Hey, that doesn't seem like a bad superpower." I find myself staring at this mysterious boyfriend from across the room. It kind of surprises me that Dani and I haven't met him before now. Raven is well-built - tall and slim, but with some muscle tone. It's obvious he's an athlete. His features are soft, with big green eyes and a thin, wide smile. His tan skin stands out against

the white tile of the walls. He's wearing a leather jacket, a tank top, jeans, and beat-up blue Adidas.

Damn. Bradley scored. Maybe his dick has the right idea.

We both shovel the remainder of our lunches into our mouths, and then I kiss her goodbye and head to the basement of the boys' dorms. There's a small storage closet where we can grab extra supplies in a pinch, and my pencils have been breaking left and right.

I open my AO3 first. Since I finished my November challenge, I've been getting comments pretty much every day, especially on some of my... steamier ones. People are really enjoying what I'm putting out, which is nice until I remember that Ash hasn't posted anything on our account since the week before I left for school.

As I'm retrieving my pencils, still lost in thought, I find myself scrolling up into my texts with Rett. It's been a while since we've talked. I wish I could call her, but it's midnight there. I settle for texting her a little note.

*Hey Ra-ra. Sorry it's been so long. I miss you so much. A lot has been happening and I really want to talk to my best friend about it. Can we try to schedule a call sometime next month? After your chaos with yearbook wraps up, obv. Love you. Miss you. Xoxo.*

After sending that message, I instinctively scroll up to my thread with Ash and prepare to send her a string of heart emojis.

But then I remember she won't get them.

So I leave all those hearts in the "send" box, and slide the door of the closet shut behind me.

*Chapter Twenty - Dani - January 14*

It feels nice to wake up on Wednesday morning at nine and discover Tess already gone. Normally, I would be sad that I didn't get my morning kiss from her, but today I'm skipping my morning classes in favour of brunch with my dad. His treatment ended last night, so we decided to take the morning off to celebrate. The idea of skipping gave me a panic attack initially - especially because I'd been up so late the last few nights working on a new song - but once Tess talked me down, I started to really love the idea.

I throw on a sweater and skinny jeans with my combat boots, and head out the door, moving slowly. I spend so much time running from building to building across this campus, I never get the chance to really appreciate how beautiful it is. It's strange that a person like me is lucky enough to attend a school like this, even on a scholarship. I shiver as a little snow slips from a tree branch and onto my face, reflecting sunlight off of my smile. The crunch of snow under my boots is louder than usual - or maybe I just notice it more.

Bradley is waiting at the curb off the east exit. "You better be thankful for this," he says, reaching over me to toss his coffee cup into a bin by the road. "Just because you're paying me doesn't mean I'm happy to be skipping class on the day my teacher is assigning a hard-ass paper."

"You'll be fine, it's an English class."

"How is that fine?"

"B. Come on. You can pull an essay out of your ass in half an hour and get an A."

He rolls his eyes. "Fair point. It's one of the only educational skills I actually share with your girlfriend."

"Yes, but you can do that because you want to be an English teacher. Tess can do it because she procrastinates by speedwriting a shit ton of fanfiction."

"I... yeah. But at least she loves it."

He pulls away, and I take his phone to open Spotify. It's too happy a morning for If I Can't Have Love, I Want Power, but it's never too happy for Manic, so I put on Beautiful Stranger and lean my head against the window. This is my universal signal for *don't talk to me, I want to be philosophical and moody with Halsey*. Bradley gets it, and lets me remain in silence for most of the ride. Except, of course, he has to uphold the best friend code.

"I know you're happy your dad is out of treatment," he says quietly, eyes fixed on the road, "but how are you really feeling?"

I snort. The only person that actually knows the answer to that question is Tess, but it surprises me that Bradley hasn't caught it by now. "Honestly? Fucking terrified."

As suspected, he looks a bit taken aback. "Why?"

"Because he should have been applying for jobs six months ago. He should be off his ass by now. I shouldn't be going behind his back, calling offices and forging his signature just to get us a stable income."

Bradley is silent. I continue to watch trees flash by out the window. This is the last conversation I want to be having on as happy a day as this. But I should have known. Here we are.

"Dani-"

"Don't." I still can't look at him. If I do, I know I'll start crying. "You always want to help me. Believe me, I appreciate it. More than you'll ever know. But sometimes it's less about getting the help and more about who I'm getting it from. I know you would take a bullet for me, I'm not questioning that. But I need my dad to step up for me or something big is going to have to change. Something big like me moving out."

He's nodding a little. "I get it. You know if you ever need someplace to crash..." He trails off, but the words hang unspoken in the air between us. We both know they're there, and that they're true, and that's all I need right now.

When we finally pull up in front of the restaurant, Bradley unstraps his seatbelt to give me a long, warm hug. I feel a tear escape my eye, landing on the shoulder of his purple puffy coat and starting to roll away. I decide not to catch it. Letting it go where it wants is part of healing, isn't it?

"Call me if you need *anything*," he says as I disembark. "Today, I *will* leave class for you."

I smile despite myself. "Don't worry, I'll let you be to write that hard-ass paper."

"Promise to update me this afternoon?"

"Always. I love you, B."

"Love you, Dan."

...

I decide it's better to wait to mention the file folder until we've done some celebrating first. Dad splurges, getting us all the food under the sun - waffles topped with a mountain of strawberries and drowned in syrup for me, crab cake benedict and a big glass of orange juice for him. We're able to make it through about half an hour of genuinely nice conversation before the thing that's been plaguing me since the car starts to surface in the front of my mind.

"So, darling," Dad says, wiping his chin off with his napkin. "You haven't been home in a few weekends."

"I told you, the commute is a lot in the cold. And I'm not coming home if Damon is there."

"Your brother only stayed for two days, I told you that. Haven't heard from him since. And the commute can't be the only other reason. If you didn't miss me you wouldn't text three times a day."

I wince. Maybe the file folder can wait a little longer. "Well, uh, actually, there is one thing that's sort of new with me."

"Ooooh." He feigns very intense focus, leaning his elbows forward on the table and staring at me intensely. "Do tell."

“I may or may not have a girlfriend.”

His eyes widen. “Dani! How do I not know about this already?”

“It’s still pretty new, I promise. We’ve only been together since New Year’s.”

“Is it that adorable sounding American roommate of yours?”

I nod, and Dad looks downright gleeful. “Darling, this is amazing! I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Dad, I appreciate it.” Here we go. Time for some master segwaying. “So.

Speaking of Damon. There’s something we need to talk about.”

He sighs. “We’re doing this now?”

“Yes.” I pull out the file folder. “I made you a list of six jobs I think you should apply for before the end of the month.

“Dani...”

“No, you’re going to let me finish.” I spread out the papers. “I printed out all of the information, all of the forms, copies of your resume... I did some shady things and took valuable time away from school just so you wouldn’t have the chance to try this and back out. Dad, I cannot carry us anymore. It’s been a long time since you’ve been too sick to work. And I quit my other job because I’d had enough. On Christmas I told you I had to be able to need things from you. This is what I need.”

Dad slides the folder over to himself and starts flipping through. His brow is furrowed, but he’s nodding a lot. That is direct Dad code - he doesn’t like it, but he knows I’m right.

“Dani, half of these are things I’ve never done before.”

“You taught with Bradley’s mom for two decades. There’s three local schools in the market for a good music teacher. Besides that, you have a degree in English. You have experience in marketing - old experience, granted, but still experience. That widens your options a lot, especially into things like bookstores and website work. It doesn’t need to start out full time, it just needs to make enough for you to support yourself. Especially since...” I wave my hands vaguely and trail off. “Since I’m moving out soon.”

He stares down at everything I've done for a really long minute. The longest minute of my whole life. I'm so fucking scared that he's going to walk out on me right then and there.

But he doesn't.

"I don't feel comfortable going back into teaching quite yet," he says, finally bringing his eyes up to meet mine. "But you know I loved my bookstore days. It's why I wanted you to do it. If you help me, I will apply to these three non academic jobs, and at the end of the school year, I will reevaluate my mentality. Is that a fair compromise?"

I jump out of my seat and throw my arms around him. "Yes! Thank you, Dad."

"For you, my darling, I will do anything. Even push myself."

We spend the rest of brunch discussing things we both want to save up for when he starts work. I tell him I want to travel out of the country, a dream of mine since I was a girl. He talks about plans for a new guitar and fridge. Laughing together for another two hours reminds me how sorry I really am for Tess. I don't know what I'd do without my dad. I can't imagine losing him. At the end of the day, no matter what happens with my mom and brother, dad's always there.

But my girlfriend doesn't have that.

And it fucking sucks.

"Dad?" I ask, as we reach the end of our meal. "Can I invite Tess over for dinner sometime?"

"Can you? You *have* to. I would love to meet her. Invite her over this weekend, if you want."

I grin. "I have to talk to her about it. But she really wants to meet you, too. I'll arrange something."

"Perfect." He stands to hug me. "Well, I have jobs to apply for and a really good book on music theory to read. Call me on Friday, yeah?"

"Yes. I love you, Dad."



When Bradley picks me up during his break an hour later, I break down crying in the car. But the whole time, I can't seem to stop smiling.

Chapter Twenty-One - Tess - January 22

Signing up for an online extra credit course is one of the most painful things I've ever done, but regardless, it needed to happen.

I'm lying on my bed with Kiki trying to get my email accepted. "God fucking dammit, why can't it recognize my password?"

"Because you don't know shit about technology. Here." She grabs my laptop and starts clicking and typing too fast for me to keep up with. "Are you gonna have any free time at all after this?"

"Hopefully. Dani helped me map out my schedule, so it *should* work. I just won't get quite as much sleep, which I'm used to anyways."

She laughs. "Hon, seven hours is not too little sleep. As someone who has survived the last three years on only four, you'll be just fine."

I roll my eyes. "There's appropriate moments to bring up your superior life skills, Kiki, and there's inappropriate ones. This would fall under the latter."

"Excuse me, Miss America, but I think I am the veteran here."

"You cannot call me that."

"I can, though, because I just did."

"Oh my *god*." I toss a pillow at her face. "When I become the greatest Economics student of the last decade, you're going to eat my dust."

"Except that you don't want to become the greatest econ student of the last decade. You don't even *like* econ."

"Besides the point, obviously." I grab the computer back from her and start clicking around the website, all of the words blurring in front of me. "Seriously, though. Why is econ so boring? Why do people study this to begin with?"

“Your guess is as good as mine. Some people just really like business, I guess?” She rolls onto her back and curls her knees up to her chest. “I’m bored. Check AO3.”

“What interesting information will come from me checking AO3?”

“I don’t know, read me some funny comments and shit.”

I roll my eyes, but do as she asks, switching tabs and opening up my profile. The first thing I see is a stream of comments in my inbox, and the second is five zeros behind the one for hits on *now I’m your daisy*.

“Holy shit,” I mutter, clicking on it to make sure I’m not hallucinating.

“What?” Kiki scoots closer to peer over my shoulder.

“The fic I wrote for Dani after Halloween just hit 100,000 hits.”

“Bitch what? That’s amazing!” Kiki grins, then hesitates sheepishly. “What are hits?”

“It’s the number of people that have clicked on my fanfiction. Meaning not all of them necessarily read it, but my tags and summary were enough to get them interested.”

“Right. And kudos are the likes, right?”

“Right.”

She eyes the stats. “27K. Not bad.”

“Better than not bad.” I can’t stop staring at the screen. I scroll down to some comments.

*Omg. HQ x PI sexytimes that are actually well written? Hell yes. Great job, queen.*

*My heart skipped approximately a thousand beats while reading this - haven’t had a fic do this to me in a minute. Stunningly written.*

*THE IMAGERY? THE DIALOGUE? THE URGENCY? WE ARE ALL HERE FOR IT TESS.*

<3 <3 <3

*Im literally not even a fan of DC and this is my new favorite fic of all time. Get it.*

“This is quite possibly the coolest thing that has ever happened.” I instinctively open my phone to text Ash.

*Hiii! You’ll never believe what just -*

Fuck.

She doesn't have her phone.

Why do I keep doing this?

I delete the words and slip the phone back into my pocket, feeling something inside me deflate. It... it really hurts that I can't share a moment like this with her.

"It's weird," I say, turning back to Kiki but not actually looking at her. "Fanfiction feels like such a small, stupid thing. It's so many people's guilty pleasures, or something idiots make fun of. And, yes, it can be those things, but it's so much more than that to so many people. It's such a huge damn part of my life. And of my sister's life. It's the one thing I really share with her, no matter what's going on in our lives. It makes me so happy, and it makes a lot of other people happy. I wish people understood it more, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it. That's how I feel about hair." Kiki twirls one of her braids around and around her finger until it forms a giant beehive, before letting it slowly unfurl into its original glory. "People always tell me that hairstyling isn't a real career, and that I'm gonna spend five years being lazy and making no money, get bored of it, and end up with nothing. But I want this to be my everything. I *want* to open my own salon. Nobody understands that this is my life, that it's the biggest thing I care about."

I put an arm around her. "I take it the latest conversation with your mom didn't go well?"

She shakes her head. "If she barely agreed to put Evan on medication, do you really think she's gonna let her only daughter waste away like this?" It's clear from her tone and facial expression that she doesn't plan on elaborating, but from the slivers of information I've gained about her mom over the months, this is all the answer I need.

"You're gonna make it work," I insist. "You're too good for any school in France to decline you."

"My A-Level scores say otherwise."

“You don’t need to get straight A’s in math to be the best hairstylist to ever walk this fucking earth.”

“I’m not the best.”

“You will be someday.”

She smiles a little. “Maybe. I am pretty damn good.”

“You really are.”

She hugs me. “Thank you, Tess.”

“Love you, Kiki.”

...

Later on, I’m walking around a small square on a side of London I haven’t explored yet, when I stumble across a little bakery. I vaguely recognize it from my *Yelp* page, but I don’t think I’ve ever been inside. As soon as I see their selection, I text Nova, Atlas, Kiki, Bradley, and Dani about cupcakes. The resounding *yes* I get over text practically shoves me into the bakery from all the way across the city.

As I order - red velvet for Kiki, two chocolate for Atlas and Nova, strawberry for Bradley and a brownie for my girlfriend - I feel my phone buzz. I frown as I pull it out. My monthly scheduled call with mom happened last weekend - why is she calling me again?

I pick up. “Hello?”

“Sweetie, guess what?”

Great. One of mom’s ‘big news’ calls. “What’s up, mom?” I ask, tucking the phone between my ear and my shoulder as I try to get my credit card back into my purse.

“Well, I stopped by Ash’s treatment center today to pay her a visit - I talked to a *lovely* nurse about all of their policies - they really care about the kids there, you know?”

“Uh huh,” I say, mouthing a quick *thank you* to the cashier and grabbing the box as I head out the door. “Is there a point to this story?”

“You know I don’t like it when you take that tone with me. But yes.” I can practically feel her smug grin through the phone. “Well, the nurse said your sister is doing wonderfully, and they’re going to discharge her in a week!”

I choke on my own spit. “What?”

“Ash is coming home!”

Inside, I’m very confused. Ash’s treatment isn’t supposed to be over for another month. “Mom, did you do something?”

“What? No, honey of course not. She made good progress, so they’re letting her out, that’s all.”

I have more questions, but before I can even get a word in edgewise, mom starts going on about a whole new topic, as she always does.

“I have a surprise for you,” she says in a singsong voice.

“What?” I doubt she can hear how deadpan my voice is over the sound of her own ego.

“Well, you know the school buys you a ticket to visit home over spring break.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, I didn’t know this until a couple of weeks ago, when they emailed me - you know, that institution really needs to get a better handle on their communication. I mean, really. Anyway, I accidentally bought you a ticket myself. It’s non refundable, so I was wondering if you might want to bring a friend home with you to see the states?”

I almost drop the phone, out of real excitement this time. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not!”

“Oh my god, thank you mom!” I start spinning in circles as soon as she hangs up, and so does my brain, my sister’s early discharge completely forgotten.

I’m going to bring Dani home for the holidays.

And I know exactly how I’m going to tell her.

*Chapter Twenty-Two - Dani - January 30*

I'm not really sure when I decided to start going home again. Maybe it was Tess encouraging me, maybe it was knowing that Damon hadn't been back in a month. But whatever it was, I ended up on my dad's doorstep that Friday with my all-familiar suitcase and an odd feeling smile.

I don't think he was expecting to see me, but he doesn't look surprised when he opens the door. "Darling. You're back."

"Yeah." I try to assess his mood - doesn't seem mad, but that could just be my blind optimism. "Am I allowed to be?"

He doesn't speak for a moment, but just when I'm about to turn and run, he pulls me into his chest, the familiar embrace sending a shock of warmth through my body.

"Of course you are, Dani," he whispers. "Always."

He helps me get my stuff inside, and then I really start looking around. The house is... clean. Freakishly clean. No empty soda cans, no dirty clothes strewn everywhere, no dishes piled in the sink. I'm pretty sure he dusted. The only things still strewn around are papers, spread every which way on the dining room table.

I study a few of them, and my eyes widen. "Dad. These are job applications."

"Yes."

"The ones I suggested? You really did them?"

He smiles a little. "I made a promise to my daughter, didn't I? I wasn't about to let her down."

"*Dad!*" This time it's my turn to throw my arms around him. "I'm so proud of you."

"I'm proud of *you*," he replies, ruffling my hair a little. "It took some guts to call me out like you did, let alone take the initiative to actually convince me to change. From now on, I'll take my own initiative. I promise."

I feel tears burning behind my eyes, but I'm too happy to let them fall. "Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

That was the moment my dad redeemed himself - there, in our tiny dining room, curled into his daughter's embrace. Every bad choice he made during treatment - every small way he fucked up, however good his intentions might have been - it was all better in that moment.

...

"Baby, you ready?" Tess emerges from our bathroom, pale blue converse in hand.

I smile. "If you are. I still don't know where we're going, remember?"

"Well, that's the whole fun of a blind date."

"Pretty sure this isn't the definition of a blind date."

"Then I'll rewrite the dictionary."

I roll my eyes, but I take her hand as she pulls me off the bed and kisses me gently. "This better be good. Nobody knows London better than me."

"Bradley might."

"There's no way he..." I stop. He drives cabs. Of course he knows this damn city better than me. "You did not seriously ask Bradley to help you find a spot I've never been to."

"Oh but I did."

"Cheater."

"This isn't cheating, it's called being smart." Tess pulls her hair out of its braid, letting the red waves fall around her shoulders as she tugs a beanie overtop. "I just have to do lipstick and then I'll be ready."

"Can I borrow your eyeliner again?" I ask, a little sheepish. Pretty sure the no-makeup-other-than-eyeliner phase is supposed to hit at thirteen, not seventeen. Fuck it - I guess I'm just an emo teenage girl at heart.

Tess tosses the black pen at me from across the room. "You should really get your own - mine isn't gonna last much longer."



“I know, I know.” I use my phone camera as a makeshift mirror to layer on the wings.  
“Next time I get paid I’m going to, I promise.”

“Good.” She grabs our key off the wall. “Come on. Let’s get this date started.”

...

“So,” Tess begins, as our cab (not driven by Bradley) pulls out of the school lot. “This date will have three parts. The first is a place you’ve absolutely never heard of. The second and third are places you probably have, but I confirmed with B that you’ve never been.”

“Interesting.” I rub my thumb against the side of her hand. “Well, I’m excited no matter what it is.”

“I hope it’s actually fun.” Tess blushes. “I kinda wanted to make my first planned date as special as possible. Especially since this is your turf, not mine.”

“Love,” I whisper, kissing her cheek, “any date you plan will be special. I promise.”

She kisses me back.

The first stop turns out to be a tiny tea shop in a hidden corner of the city. Tess is right - I’ve never heard of it in my life. The inside is decorated like all sorts of old fairy and folk tales - it’s breathtaking, honestly. When we sit down, a waitress dressed like a woodland fairy - like the sexy kind, not the wholesome kind (no I’m not kidding) - comes over to give us water and some sort of citrus based scone. Tess orders chai, and I order green tea, and we both get more scones, and then we just... talk. About things we never have before.

“Wait,” I say, mid bite and giggling way too loudly. “Rett *pushed you in?*”

“In the middle of winter!” she crows, slapping the table. When she laughs, one of her eyes instinctively closes, and she always rocks back and forth a little. She’s so into it. I love that. “Right into the lake. I wouldn’t have gone into a body of water mid December in St Louis, let alone Michigan!”

“She sounds pretty awesome.”

“She is.” Tess’s tone grows just a tad sombre. “I haven’t been able to talk to her much. The time change is rough, and we’ve both been busy. It’s been months since we really talked.”

“I’m sorry.” It’s easy for me to forget sometimes that life here is secondary to Tess - that she could be going back in six months and I might never see her again. I know she wants to stay - but I also know that she misses Ash and Rett with her whole heart. And I can see what it does to her sometimes. It’s sad.

God, I wish there was a way for her to have both.

“It’s not your fault,” Tess says, sipping her chai. “I love it here. More than there. And Kiki... she gives me a lot of things I never knew I needed from a best friend. But Ash and Rett are two things I can’t fully replace, no matter how many pictures I hang up.”

I scoot my chair around the table so I can take her hand, and let her lean her head on my shoulder. “I wish there was a way I could bring us all into the same place. But what I can give you is a place to talk about them, and a place to cry, and a place for whatever the fuck else you need. I’m here for you, my love.”

Tess smiles a little, squeezing my hand and letting the nervous bounce in her knee slow to a stop. “Thank you, Daniella.”

“Always.”

“Now let’s finish this before it gets cold. We don’t want to be late to date part two.”

Date part two turns out to be a trip to somewhere I’ve wanted to visit all my life - the planetarium in the royal observatory. I don’t know *how* Tess got us in, but as soon as our tour starts I lose myself. I can barely speak throughout it all - I’m just lost in the words of the tour guide and the visual masterpiece laid out before me.

“I’ve always had a fascination with the galaxy,” I murmur towards the end, as we’re walking through a pitch black room lit up by naval star charts.

“I knew that. For some reason, I’ve never asked you why?” She sounds genuinely curious.

I take a deep breath - this is always something I've had trouble verbalising. "The fact that we're all so damn small, and there's so much more out there that the universe will never remember us. The universe probably never even knows that we're here. In a blink, a millisecond, we've lived an entire lifetime. No matter how much we change the world, there's no changing the universe, so why do we spend so much of our lives worrying what others will think? They'll die too. Their memory of that time you wore stripes with plaid or the time you tripped on your shoelaces and spilled their lunch is not something that will last for any length of time. We should enjoy the time we fucking have, because it does *not* last forever."

Silence.

"It sounds morbid, I know, but -"

"No, it..." Tess takes my hand in the dark. "That's oddly beautiful. In the most Dani way possible."

I feel the corners of my mouth tug upwards. "You really think so?"

"Yeah, I really do." Her lips touch mine in the dark, and I feel this shock, this sudden longing for more.

And then the door opens, and we're back in the light, and our faces part, and we carry on, almost as if that little shock never happened.

...

It's at the picnic that the real fun begins. She bought hot dogs for both of us from a food stand nearby, so we decide to lay out our jackets on a less snowy part of the lawn and eat together there. Our fingers are touching the whole time, never quite finding a grip, just lying there, interwoven in that perfect zigzag.

"Thank you for this," I say, taking a big bite of my bun. "It's the most fun I've had in a long time."

"It was good?"

"It was *great*."

“I’m so glad!” Tess smirks a little. “You know, there’s one thing I bet would make it better.”

“Oh yeah?”

She kisses me, softly at first, but then harder, the force of her touch pushing my upper body backwards a little. I glance around - nobody in sight - and then return to the matter at hand. Her hands have gone up in my hair, and her lips are parted slightly. I tease them open even more, letting her tongue slide into my mouth, and giggle a little against her skin. Then her lips start to explore the rest of my face, and I let myself get lost. When I feel her attach to my neck, I sigh a little, reaching my hands around her waist. Her own have moved, resting on my knees. With the little willpower I have remaining, I guide them up and over, until they’re gripping the backs of my thighs. I sigh again as she continues kissing my neck. Tentatively, and questioningly, I slip my hands under her shirt, and slowly move them up. “This ok?” I whisper, and she nods in reply. I run my fingers over the lace of her bra, playing with the skin around the straps. I don’t dare reach underneath yet. This is enough for me right now. I’m feeling things - *good* things, things I’ve never felt before. There’s this rush of adrenaline, and holy shit this feels good, and I could go on forever.

Of course, time being what it is, it only goes on for about five minutes, and when it’s over I’m shivering as her body slips away from mine. I take a deep breath, trying to calm the electricity pulsing through my veins. “Goddamn,” I say, tugging my shirt back into place. “You are one hell of a kisser, Martian.”

“You too, Daniella.” I finally look at her. There’s something in her eyes - this whimsy, this faroff look, that makes me realise that she enjoyed that just as much as I did.

“We should do that again sometime,” are the words that come out of my mouth, but in my head, all I can think is *I want to do that every second of every day and I want you to rip off my clothes and I want your hands everywhere and I want every single fucking piece of you and I want to consensually kiss you and touch you until my knees give out.*

Probably better if those words stay in my head, though.

We grasp hands, and start collecting our things and getting ready to leave. Her fingers weaving through mine has never felt so good.

God, this girl is the one for me.

Chapter Twenty-Three - Tess

*tess\_a\_g(r)ay, ashhash - Feb 5th*

A: hi

T: OMG UR BACK

A: ye

T: Do you want to call me?

A: still getting used to interaction again. text 4 now?

T: Ofc! That's fine

T: So how are you doing?

A: can we talk about u first

T: Oh sure

A: tell me everything about northbank

T: It's... amazing. Not the classes, i fucking hate those. But the people and the city and my girlfriend.

A: omg wat

A: gf???

T: Yea. Dani :-)

A: that's awesome. congrats

T: Ty

A: how long have u been together?

T: A little over a month

T: We got together on New Year's

A: love that for u

A: is she hot

T: She's taken and four years older than you

A: is she hot tho

T: *Attachment: img.png.dani*

A: damn

A: nice job sis

T: Why thank you

T: So how are you?

A: have you made any new friends

T: You didn't answer my question

A: have you made any new friends

T:

A:

T: Yeah, I have. New bestie, actually. Her name is Kiki, she wants to be a hairstylist.

You'd love her. I think you'd like her brother too. Also a few others - Bradley, Dani's bsf, and Nova and Atlas, Kiki's roommates.

A: sweet

T: I wish you were here.

A: you'll be here soon

T: Ik, but i wish you could meet them all

A: well, i presume dani is the one ur bringing home

T: Yeah, you'll meet her.

A: good

T: Good

T:

T: Ash, how are you doing

A: ur not gonna let that one go are you

T: Nope

A: i mean... fine?

T: You sure about that?

A: i was better in the facility. when i came home it got worse again

T: Mom?

A: mom

T:

A: she's almost never here anymore

A: new boyfriend. he's twenty-four. he's rich as hell and owns an art gallery - mom says she only keeps him around for money and sex but that it's enough for her

T: She said that to you?

A: on the phone with her friends. im good at overhearing

T: Attagirl

A: she sleeps at his house, so i sleep here alone and then the nightmares start to come back

T: Have you tried the things they taught you in treatment?

A: some of them. some work some don't

A: one thing kinda works

T: What

A: sleeping in your bed

A: sorry ik u dont like me snooping in your room but ive been sleeping in there and i hope thats ok because it still smells like you and it helps

T: Of course I don't mind, love. If it helps with the PTSD you can snoop through my whole fucking room if you want

A: can i use ur makeup

A: only sometimes

T: Yes of course



A: even ur palettes?

T: You know which ones not to use. I trust you : )

A: thank u sm

T: Of course love

T: Also, if you want my room to smell more like me, ask mom to take you to B n B and buy the Cozy Cashmere candle. I lit it every day last year.

A: maybe i will

T: I can't wait to see you

A: me either. i miss u a lot

T: I miss you every day

A: oh i forgot

A: i got diagnosed

T: And?

A: ptsd, ocd and low functioning autism. plus the depression and anxiety but that's nothing new

T: Yeah that checks out

T: How do you feel about that?

A: i kinda already knew. but good

T: Good.

T: Did you make any friends in treatment?

A: yeah, a few. we meet up every week in the park and have lunch together. one of the boys is really cute

T: Ooooooh drama

A: shut up he's mentally disturbed and probably doesn't like me anyway

T: I bet he does

A: fuck off

T: No you fuck off

A: lol

A: fuck. gotta go. mom calling

T: Ok. Hey.

A: what

T: I love you <3

A: love u 2 sis

T: Text me again soon, ok?

A: ok.

<3 <3, *tess\_a\_g(r)ay - Feb 12*

T: Hey - what are we doing for valentines?

D: idk - tea?

T: oooo i do like tea

D: wow

T: I have a surprise for you so we have to do something

D: i gots a couple of surprises too

T: oooooooo

T: meet up at the place from our date?

D: Yessss

D: also question

T: shoot

D: why are we texting if we're literally lying next to each other

T: LOL

T: Can I kiss you?

D: do you rllly need to ask?

*tess\_a\_g(r)ay, ashahash - Feb 13*

T: Happy birthday, love. I'll be home soon.

*Chapter Twenty-Four - Dani - February 14*

Since I'm at home on Valentine's morning, Tess and I decide to meet at the tea shop. I try to put actual thought into my outfit, pairing some cute black boots with a shoulderless purple top, tight black skirt and fishnets. I even throw on a little of the eyeliner I bought and a tiny hint of pink lip gloss. Quick spritz of my Into The Night perfume, which Tess loses her shit over every time I wear it, and we are all set for date day.

On my way out, I catch dad smiling at me. I roll my eyes a little, walking to the counter to pick up my gift for Tess. "What?"

"Nothing. You just look lovely." He studies me. "You really like her, don't you?"

I don't hesitate. "Yes. I do."

"She's good for you."

"I know."

"She makes you happy."

"Yeah."

We hold eye contact, and then the conversation ends, and I leave. But somehow, his brief words are enough.

Of course, those thirty seconds of extended eye contact got me on the slowest train possible and I end up being five minutes late. Tess is inside at a table already, gift bag in hand. We agreed that, since we'd missed each other's birthdays in our dating period (May for her, July for me) we would go a little more all out for our gifts to each other. We tentatively agreed on a fifty dollar budget, knowing I couldn't afford more than that, but something told me Tess had spent more regardless.

My girlfriend is annoyingly hot in her outfit - long sleeved black turtleneck, blue infinity scarf, denim skirt just short enough to make me blush, and navy blue low-top converse. Dammit Tess - it's really hard to think about what to order when you look like that.

“Hey, babe,” she says, standing up to kiss me when I get to the table.

“Good morning. How was your day?”

“Fine. Kiki and I went shopping so I could finish up your present.” She smirks, shaking the gift bag a little ominously.

I’m very nervous about my present to her. I knew I wanted to get her an eyeshadow palette, and she told me she didn’t have many indie ones, so I ordered her a palette and blush from Oden’s eye that was just over our agreed budget. I had wanted to combine makeup and fanfiction, and seeing a Norse themed brand knowing her thoughts on mythology seemed like a good idea... especially when I saw they had a hummingbird palette. If I remember correctly, that was her dad’s nickname for her.

I take a seat, and she’s grinning. “Let’s do gifts now.”

“Right off the bat?”

“Please? There’s something in mine I can’t get through this brunch without giving you.”

I roll my eyes. “You are the most impatient gifter ever. But yes, let’s do them now.”

She opens first. The second she pulls out the blush she shrieks, causing a few other people in the restaurant to give us some pretty heavy side eye. “*Oden’s Eye?*”

I smile. “Pull out the other one.”

She reaches in and gasps. “Oh my god you got me a palette. You...” She trails off when she sees the name, one hand covering her mouth.

Shit. “You don’t like it,” I say softly. Then, much more quickly, “it’s ok if you don’t, I know it’s kind of-”

“Daniella,” she whispers, tears welling up in her eyes, “it’s perfect. Thank you so much.”

I smile. “You really like it?”

“I love you.” She covers her mouth. “It. I love it. Sorry, I don’t know where you’re at with the -”

“Words are just words,” I say quietly. “I love you too.”

We lock eyes for a moment, each judging the meaning behind the other's gaze. But we know each other. We know that truth is the only presence here. I love her, and she loves me, and right now we're here together, and nothing could be better than that.

I snap myself out of the reverie. "Go on and open it. I know you want to."

She grins, and then opens up the palette. Her eyes go a little blurry again when she sees the colours. "You remembered I love blues and purples?"

"And greens. Well, not exactly. I remembered they look good on you."

Her face is lit up brighter than rays from the goddamn sun, and holy shit she is actually the girl of my dreams. "I'm going to use this every day for the rest of my life."

I narrow my eyes at her, and she blushes sheepishly. "Ok, maybe not every day, but a lot of them. It's gorgeous. Thank you so much, Dani."

"Anytime. Now, do I get to know what's in that bag, or what?"

She hands it over. "Before you open this, I want you to know two things. One - yes, I did go a little over budget, but two - I got the bigger item very, very discounted. That would have been your first question, so I wanted to clear it up."

I push the tissue paper away and almost scream. Inside the bag is a pair of red Beats, in such good condition that everything down to the box looks new. On top, there's a tube of liquid eyeliner from a brand she caught me eyeing in Sephora the last time we went.

"Theresa Martin." I stare at her, and I can tell she's quite pleased with herself. "There is no way... what did I do to deserve this?"

"Be the best girlfriend ever." She taps her fingers against the table anxiously. "You mentioned your sensory issues being bad lately, and I thought the headphones might help. Plus, you listen to music on those ratchet earbuds - that's not how it should be enjoyed and you know that damn well. The eyeliner is just a bonus."

I get up and hug her tightly. "You. Are so fucking amazing."

"Yeah, I know."

It's not until I sit back down that she whips out the envelope. "One more tiny thing."

"Oh my god, what else could you possibly have bought me?"

"I didn't *buy* anything else. This sort of... came about by accident."

I hesitantly open the envelope. There's a piece of paper folded into way too many fucking pieces, and on the inside is a handwritten note.

*You are hereby invited to the humble abode of Theresa Q. Martin, at 5088 Washington Pl in St Louis, Missouri, Midwest, USA, North America, Earth, Milky Way Galaxy, Universe. Dates: April 7th to April 15th. Itinerary: a tour of the most mediocre city on earth, a meeting with the most mediocre mom on earth and the best sister in the universe, shenanigans, chaos, kisses. Please RSVP as soon as possible - I have several buyers lined up who would be happy to snatch your spot.*

*Sincerely,*

*Theresa Q. Martin*

I look back and forth between the paper and her enormous smirk. "You're joking."

"The school provides me with a ticket home for Easter break. My mom didn't know this, bought an extra ticket that happens to be non-refundable." She scans my face, looking genuinely nervous. "So? What do you say?"

"What do I say?" I, again, jump out of my chair and tackle her. "I've never been more excited for anything in my life."

"Neither have I, baby." Tess takes a sip of tea this time before pressing her face against mine - it leaves her lips warm and sweet. I want to soak up all of it. I want to soak her into me, to bond our bodies permanently so that we're one being. I want all of her.

We end up walking back from the date, hand in hand down the backroads. I like to take Tess on little detours when we walk together - the thought that she might be leaving in five months makes me want to show her absolutely everything about my city that I can. Today we

take some curving alleys, walking behind apartments and little shops. We stumble into a small square I've always loved, and go into a jewellery store.

"Hey," I say when we get in, pointing at a display of rings. "We should get matching."

"I do love a good ring," Tess replies, peering into the case. "Not anything too expensive, though."

Something inside me tells me she only said that for my sake. And it just makes me love her more.

"What about those?" I point at two matching rings - not promise rings, but definitely a pair. One has a simple design of crescent moons around the band, the other of stars. They're...

"Perfect," Tess breathes, immediately turning around to wave down a salesperson.

We leave that store with matching rings and matching smiles.

Damn. Life is good.



*Chapter Twenty-Five - Tess - February 23rd*

I don't think it occurred to me until I spent a month on an extra credit course and still got a C on an exam that I could, in theory, drop econ.

It wasn't something that had really felt like a possibility. One of my mom's conditions of me coming here was that I had to study something 'useful.' Aka: something that will promise me a reliable career and a long life of sitting behind a desk or wearing pantsuits and heels. Something I can suffer through to become upper class, settle down with my husband and three kids in Nevada or some shit, and retire at the ripe old age of forty-five.

Obviously, none of this is what I want.

So I say so. I go to my advisor, and I tell her I want out. She doesn't seem surprised, and tells me to give her a day to figure out which English classes would fit into my schedule. She comes back to me with a layout that would give me not only more free periods, but also a traditional lit class, a creative writing class, a poetry class and a public speaking class. I almost scream when I see the sheet - it is, legitimately, everything I've ever wanted out of this school.

Later that day, I call Rett for the first time in months. As much as I love Kiki, I miss home, and Rett comes with that territory.

"Babes!" Rett cries out when she picks up my call.

Immediately, something strikes me as odd - the room she is in is definitely not her room. Her room is painted lavender, with gold accents absolutely everywhere. It's blatantly obvious, despite my short and distorted view, that this room is an ugly-ass blue color, with white shades on the windows.

"Ok, so many questions right now," I say, debating where to start.

"The room?"

"Yes, obviously."

“Damn has it really been three weeks since we texted?” Rett runs a hand through her hair. “Well, considering you’re the one that’s literally across an entire ass ocean, you have to tell me something before I answer more questions.” She props the phone on what I assume is a side table and crosses her legs. “Give me new details! How’s the new course going?”

“Oh my god, Rett, you don’t even understand.” I feel myself start to get worked up with excitement. “I walked into my poetry class today, and there was a note on the board that said “no talking, just write.” We picked a desk, and had to write two pages of free verse by the end of the class. I wrote four. This is the happiest I’ve been about myself academically in so. Damn. Long.”

“Congratulations! See, if your mom just took five damn seconds to see how much you love writing, she would have let you do this from the beginning. I’m glad she changed her mind.”

I feel myself flush. “Haha. So. About that.”

She knows *instantly*. “Theresa Martin you didn’t.”

“I may or may not have switched courses without telling her.”

“Tess!”

“I know, I know! But it’s done now, it’s been almost a week already. Not like I can go back.”

“You know you have to see this woman in *six* weeks, right?”

“I also get to see you and Ash in six weeks.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fair point.”

“I don’t care what mom says. I’m happier, it’s not costing her anything, and with a little luck, this’ll be enough to get me offered a full ride for a second year. She shouldn’t be complaining. If me not wanting an office job and millions of dollars makes her turn in her future grave, so be fucking it.”

“Amen, bitch,” Rett cheers.

“Ok but seriously. Where the fuck are you?”

“So. My parents finally got divorced, right?”

“Right. Oh. Oh wow, I’m really dumb.”

She gestures behind her. “Theresa Martin, welcome to casa de dad.”

“That place looks boring as hell.”

“It so is.” She wrinkles her nose. “Thank god I only have every other weekend here, at least for now. I miss my room.”

“I bet.” Rett’s room has always been a little bit of a cave for her. She spent a lot of time making it everything she’d ever wanted it to be - the color, the art, the shelves, the organization... everything. She spends a lot of time there, especially for homework. It must sting to not have that home within a home at your home away from home. (Damn that was a mouthful. Someone should remind me never to do that again.)

“It’ll be ok,” I say. “You know they both love you.”

“I know. And, you know, it’s not like this was much of a surprise. For anyone. Been expecting it for a decade. They just finally pulled out the knife.”

“Yep.” I’d never admit this out loud, but there’s parts of me that have always wondered if my life would have been better had dad divorced mom years ago like he always seemed to want to. I know Ash would have been happier - dad was her everything. Mom was always this disjointed mess at the edge of the family, a rude, passive aggressive control freak who got jealous of our relationship with dad. When he died, she used it as an excuse to try and drag us closer to her. All it did was pull all three of us farther apart, and leave Ash... like this.

“It’s sort of ironic,” I say, my train of thought completely cutting off Rett's, as we often do to each other. “Mom thinks she knows absolutely everything about us, and yet it’s still the dead parent that could tell how fucked up Ash was because of her.”

“Your mom is a sociopathic asshole who has no place in your life once you graduate, you hear me?”

I sigh. “You know as well as I do it’s not that simple. Ash starts high school when I start college, and I’m not cutting off my only way to see my sister. If I cut mom off, she’ll make damn sure I lose Ash too.”

“Fuck her.”

“Fuck her indeed.”

“You’ll both get out. Someday. And then everything will be brighter, I promise.”

“I sure hope so.” I glance across the room at Dani’s messy bed - she’s out with Bradley for bestie brunch. “You know, however bad I have it, Dani has it so much worse.”

“Oh yeah, I wanted to ask - how are things with her dad going?”

“So much better. He’s got job applications in, the apartment is clean, they’re going on three walks a week together, and he even pulled out his guitar last weekend.”

“That’s great! I’m happy for her.” Rett brings her knuckles to her lips. “Be honest with me here, babes. On a scale of one to ten, how are you really doing right now?”

I pause before answering. “Honestly? A solid eight. Everything is so perfect right now. Except for mom.”

“Fair enough. I’d probably have to say the same. The transition with the divorce has been hard on my parents, especially dad. But we’re getting there. One day at a time.” She glances at the wall in front of her, presumably home to a clock, and smiles. “I gotta go, Tess, but listen - you should go over to the Inkitt website.”

I frown. “Ok - any reason?”

“A little bit. Just trust me. Bye, babes.”

I toss my phone onto the bed and open Nico. I almost never use Inkitt, other than the occasional short story contest entry. But it’s been years since I entered...

“Holy shit,” I breathe. Because that is definitely the first chapter of my favorite *Firefly* fanfiction posted on their website’s homepage. I quickly click over to my email to check, and sure enough, there it is.

*Tess Martin,*

*Congratulations! You are the first place winner of our annual fanfiction contest. Please contact us in the next week with venmo information so we can send you the \$150 cash prize. Thank you for entering, and remember to keep creating, no matter what!*

*Sincerely,*

*The Inkitt Team*

“*Oh my fucking god!*” I scream, legitimately running laps around the room. I haven’t ever won a contest before, let alone been recognized like this for *fanfic*. As someone who is very critical of my own work, I can’t help but feel a surge of joy with this news. Being told by a professional team of people that my work is good means... a lot. More than I like to admit.

Hold on though. I didn’t enter...

I sit back down on the bed and grab my phone to call Rett back. She picks up almost immediately, smirking.

I can’t help but smile. “You little shit.”

...

That night I do something I never thought I’d do again. I lie in bed after Dani falls asleep, open Google Docs, and click on a file called *Project*. It’s a manuscript I gave up on a year ago. Just an idea, a badass lead character and a few thousand words.

I write five thousand more that night.

*Chapter Twenty-Six - Dani - February 28th*

Friday classes always kind of suck. The end of the week is looming, and yet we still have to sit through all these damn lectures. I have six periods on Fridays, which is the most I ever have on a given day this semester. I'm in a sour enough mood that when I see dad sitting on a bench outside leaving class, I almost say, "What the fuck are you doing here?" Instead, I say, "You know, part of the joy of sixth form with room and board is getting the house to yourself for five days a week. You're not supposed to go seeking me out."

"Trust me, when you see what I have in my pocket, you'll thank me." He pulls out a piece of printer paper - I swear, email exists, and he still prints the whole damn internet.

I glance at it, then my eyes widen and I snatch the paper out of his hand. "Oh my fucking god!"

"Language, Dani," he says, but he's grinning.

"You got a job!" I throw my arms around him. "You're going back to work!"

"I start next Monday. It's only part-time, but it pays well, and it should be enough for you to spend less hours at the bookstore and more on school and with your friends and Tess."

I feel tears welling up behind my eyes. "Dad, you have no idea how much this means to me. I love you. And I'm so proud of you."

"You were right, darling," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "I was being a coward. Cancer took so much from me, and I've been so scared that the second I go back to being happy, it's all going to fall apart again." He takes a deep breath, and I can see that he, too, is on the verge of tears. "But life is about risks. You teach me that every day. I just forget it sometimes."

I pull him back into an embrace, burying my face in his chest. "You deserve to be happy. And you deserve all the risks you want to take. I hope the new job works out."

"I think it will. And it's not forever. I promise, I'll go back full-time soon."

“I believe you. Take your time. You took this step, and that’s enough right now.” I glance at my watch. “I have class in an hour and a few things to take care of, but tonight, we eat!” I make a sweeping gesture and bow so overdramatically that I almost fall over. “This requires celebration.”

He laughs. “I’m looking forward to it. I’ll see you tonight, darling.”

...

Did I leave my dad an hour early so I could read Tess’s new fanfiction and maybe picture her without a shirt on? That’s for the jury to determine. But I was definitely not expecting to see my brother’s name on my phone screen as it buzzed beside me. I frown, picking it up and debating whether or not to accept it. I don’t really want to ruin my day by talking to him, but declining feels like a shitty thing to do considering I haven’t acknowledged his existence in over a month. He may be one of the worst people I know, but he’s still my brother.

I click the green button and put him on low speaker. These walls are thin. “Hey, Damon.”

“Sis.” He’s slurring his words - definitely drunk, probably high. Why is he drunk at midday, you might ask? Who the fuck knows, this is Damon we’re talking about.

“Why are you calling me at school?”

“I miss you.”

“No you don’t.”

“I do.” He’s laughing through his words, drunk as a literal sailor, but there’s something in his tone that’s keeping my focus locked on his sentences.

“Why. Are you calling me. At school?” I ask again, slowly, more clipped.

“Because I need help.”

“You aren’t getting shit from me, you know that.” I roll my eyes.

“Please.” Suddenly, there is a very obvious tone shift. He isn’t laughing anymore - in fact, he’s gone very quiet, and honestly sounds like he might cry. “Look, Dani. My girlfriend kicked me out. Literally, she kicked my legs out from under me. Broke up with me on the spot and

won't let me live there anymore. I got nowhere to go - this hasn't been a good winter for a lot of my buddies."

"Why'd your girlfriend break up with you? Finally figure out what a douche you are?"

"She broke up with me because she found a better guy, which is fuckin fine, it's just..." He pauses, his breathing shallow. "Just..."

And it's like a switch flipped.

Suddenly, the sombre tone is gone again. He's back to his usual drunk self - laughing and talking too slowly or too loudly.

"I just need a roof and a couple meals a day," he says. "I'll pay extra, I'll stay out of the house during the day, whatever you want. Just please let me crash for a while until I can find my own place."

"So, let you crash for a while until you can find a buddy's vacant floor?"

That shuts him up. I feel a brief sense of triumph from saying something true enough to get him to stop talking, but at the same time, I feel like a complete asshole.

I'm tempted to text dad and ask him about letting Damon move back in, but I don't want to ruin his perfect day. The job is way too important, and way too exciting.

"Listen." I raise my voice just a tad. "Are you listening?"

"Yes, I do have ears, dipshit."

I ignore that comment. "Ok. I'm gonna talk to dad tomorrow. He got big news today, and I'm not gonna mess with his mood by springing this on him. If, and only if, he says yes, I will tolerate your presence for a minimum of two weeks. But I've got some terms."

He laughs. "Ok, princess. Shoot."

The use of my childhood nickname throws me off a little, but I do my best to hold my own. "First. You are not keeping alcohol or drugs in the house. I, frankly, couldn't care less if you sell, or use, or whatever the fuck it is you actually do, it's just not happening under our fucking roof."



“Fine, done.”

“Second. You cannot have friends over. Nobody. Meet them on your own time and your own turf.”

“Lord, you’re strict. Whatever, that’s fine.”

“Third. You are upping the part of the rent you pay for by 25%.”

“Easy. Anything else?”

“One more thing.” I place the phone right in front of my lips and spit, “Never call me princess again.”

I slam my thumb down on the end button, throw the phone across my bed, and scream into a pillow until my throat is raw and my lungs are out of air.

“*Dammit!*” I shriek, slamming my fist against the mattress as many times as I can.

“Dammit.” I collapse into my comforter and feel tears trailing down my face. “Why can’t you let him go, Dani?”

I open my computer and am about to open AO3 to read Tess’s new fanfiction, but something makes me click into another tab. My half-finished sheet music from months ago, the first night I wrote about Tess.

I start something I often do to brainstorm. I make a list of words that come to my mind when I think of Tess, and see if they start to form a song.

Butterfly. Heart. Converse. Knots. Stomach. Tea. Kisses. Fondness. Comfort. Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

My fingers start moving so fast across the keyboard that they start to blur in front of my vision. I can’t stop. I’m writing verse after verse after verse. This hasn’t happened in so long that I practically don’t recognize myself.

Once I get through seven verses, six chorus variations, and two bridges, I make myself stop. I'm legitimately sweating. What is going on? Since when can I write music without agonising over every single word?

I look at what I've created. I see things I want to change, I see things to erase and things to add. But it's the first bridge that stands out to me.

*It's the silence that only comes from comfort*  
*It's the arguments that only end in smiles*  
*It's the rain and the footsteps and the whispers and the heartbeats*  
*Under all the stupid posters on your wall*  
*And I wonder if it's really even real?*  
*I wonder, does she love me in this lifetime?*  
*I wonder and I wonder and the sky just fucking thunders*  
*And my heart forgets to believe it all*

I don't think I'd even realised I felt that way until writing it. I'm not exactly one for self confidence - I never have been. But the thought of my insecurities about Tess's feelings for me had pretty much never crossed my mind until now.

And fuck. Now I'll never stop thinking about it.

It's fine. I'll be fine. I can't control her emotions, and I'll never try to.

But for some reason, all of a sudden the only thing I can think about is going full speed straight ahead toward heartbreak.

Maybe that's why I never went back to think about the fact that I never got an answer from my brother about why he got kicked out.

In the end, it would be a long time before I got that answer.

Not that I cared, of course. No. Not at all.

Chapter Twenty-Seven - Tess - March 1st

“What the hell am I supposed to wear?”

I’m ripping through my closet, looking at sweater after sweater after boring ass sweater. Why the fuck do I have to be such a person of routine?

Kiki is sprawled across my bed with one of her textbooks, snickering quietly. I glare at her, flipping her off before turning back to the mess I’m slowly making. “This is not funny. I’m meeting Dani’s dad, I can’t look like a hobo.”

“You’ll be fine. You look hot in anything. The hobo vibes are not present.”

“I don’t think I believe you.” My eyes land on my galaxy dress. It was an impulse purchase at a thrift store right after I finished reading *Leah on the Offbeat* in ninth grade, and it slowly turned into one of my favorite pieces of clothing. It’s definitely quirky, especially considering what I’d pair it with, but it’s definitely the most me option out of my nicer clothes. Dani told me to dress down, but I take any opportunity to make a cute outfit.

I pull out the dress and hold two cardigans next to it, one navy blue and the other emerald green. I turn back to Kiki and show her my idea. “Which one?”

“Green. Way more interesting.” She smiles knowingly. “Let me guess. You have matching green converse you’ve just been waiting for an excuse to wear.”

“I’ll have you know, these are some of my favorites in the spring. It just isn’t really spring yet.”

“Sure, sure.” Kiki stretches her arms up above her head. “In all seriousness, you are going to have so much fun tonight, I promise you that.”

“I hope so. I’ve never really done the whole meet the parents thing. Guess that really does say something about Josh, doesn’t it?”

“For real.”

“What happens if the conversation falls flat?” I walk into the bathroom and pull my shirt over my head. I wince when I notice the now exposed hickey on my shoulder - maybe covering that before I meet my girlfriend’s dad would be a good plan. “I’m a worse conversationalist than she is, and that is saying something.”

“Just ask a simple question. ‘How’s work?’ That’s a good example.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” I attack my shoulder with concealer - why did I think a sleeveless dress was the way to go tonight?

“Just bring something up. When in doubt, asking for embarrassing stories of Dani as a child is always a stellar way to go.”

“I don’t want to make her uncomfortable.”

“You’ll both be more uncomfortable with awkward silence, I promise.”

I slide on the dress, then walk back out and turn around. “Can you zip me?”

“Got you.” She pulls the zipper up to the small of my back, and fluffs out the bottom of my hair a little. She did it hours ago - a simple braid across the back of my scalp, the rest of my hair curled to perfection and trailing down my shoulders. It looks as gorgeous as it always does.

“You look hot,” she says, taking a step back to look me over. “Whatever makeup you do for this is gonna be fire.”

“Well, I’ve only got two hours to do it, and I have to finish my poetry project.”

Kiki grins. “I still love hearing you talk about your new classes.”

“Yeah, well, my mom’s not going to when she finds out in a month.”

“She’s just pissy because you actually want to enjoy your life.” Kiki grabs my hands and drags me to the full length mirror. “Theresa Martin, look at you! You are in a dorm room in London, thousands of miles away from your mom. You are about to sit down and finish writing *poetry* that will actually get you school credit. You have a group of friends that care about you more than anything, and you are in the cutest outfit ever to meet your girlfriend’s dad! Your kickass girlfriend, Dani Nelson, who loves you to the moon and back.” She puts her head on my

shoulder from behind and puts her hands on my arms, smiling at our shared reflection. “Tess you are, quite literally, living the dream. Don’t let that shady lady distract you from having the time of your life.”

I smile. “You’re right. Of course you’re right, Kiki.”

“I’m always right. Now get your ass back in that bathroom and put on some makeup - I’m not letting you leave until I see some eyeshadow badassery all up in this bitch.”

Laughing, I head back to the bathroom. “Roger that.”

...

Pulling up in front of Dani’s apartment for the first time sort of feels like a weird dream. I’ve seen photos of her inside, and she’s talked about it so many times, that I feel like I know it back to front. I’ve never seen the outside, but somehow I can tell immediately that it matches the images of the interior in my head.

I scratch the back of my heel with the toe of my converse, a nervous habit I developed years ago that rubbed my skin raw at one point. I’m nervous to knock, but luckily, Dani is at the door before my feet have even hit the front steps. She smiles when she sees me, and I feel myself blush a little. She looks absolutely stunning - simple skinny jeans and a ripped t-shirt for a band I’ve never heard of.

“Hello, love,” Dani says, descending the steps to give me a kiss. “How are you?”

I laugh. “Good. A little nervous, if I’m being honest.”

“You’ll be fine - he is going to *love* you, I promise.” She offers me her elbow so formally that it elicits a little giggle out of me. “Shall we?”

I link my hand through the crook of her arm. “We shall.”

Stepping inside, I immediately feel a sense of warmth wash over me. It feels like coming home, even though I’ve never been here before. The living room is small and cozy, with two overstuffed couches shoved in one corner and a small TV in the other. A fluffy rug houses a simple mahogany coffee table, with sheet music and a few novels scattered across the top. Dani’s

dad, Phillip, is sitting on one of the couches typing something onto what looks like an ancient laptop.

He looks up at the click of the lock and smiles warmly, the lines around his eyes deepening as he stands up to greet us. “You must be Tess.”

“That’s me,” I say, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear with one hand as I reach the other one out towards him. He shakes it firmly, his kind eyes calming my nerves a little.

“It’s so lovely to finally meet you.” Phillip gestures towards the two couches. “Please, sit down. I’ll get started on the food.”

“Actually, can I show her my room?” Dani asks lightly, and it takes all of my willpower not to laugh at the very obvious connotations behind her tone of voice.

Phillip rolls his eyes but nods. “Leave the door open please, darling.”

“What’ll you do if I don’t?” Dani calls over her shoulder, but I’m already dragging her away.

Dani’s room is small, but it is the most Dani place I have ever been in. Small bed cast aside in one corner, with records hung on the walls, perfectly aligned bookshelves, a few band posters, and a large dresser I assumed was full of band t-shirts and joggers.

I sit down on her purple comforter, looking around in slightly embarrassing wonder. “This is nice.”

“Eh. It’s ok.” She absentmindedly runs her hand along one of the walls - the paint is peeling, and I can see remnants of old tape and a couple of pencil carvings. “I don’t have that much stuff, so it works.”

“I love it. Very you.” I flop back onto her pillows, beckoning her over. She obliges with a warm smile, curling around my back and wrapping her arms around my stomach.

“Your dad seems nice,” I say, playing with the silver bracelet on her wrist.

“He’s my favorite person,” she says, her breath present on the back of my neck. “Well, other than you.”

I giggle, taking her hand in mine and squeezing it gently. “I think your dad should be at the top of that list.”

“But you’re so much cuter.” Dani rolls me over and presses her lips against mine. Our arms encircle each other, our bodies pressed together. By now, the circus routine our lips carry out is familiar, and before I know what hit me, her lips are on my neck, and I gasp, both of our weights shifting so that she’s on top of me. We don’t dare try to take our clothes off with her dad in the next room, but I can’t help but feel turned on by the feeling of Daniella on top of me, her hands in my hair, her lips all over my face.

She pulls away, leaving me a little disappointed, wanting more. “We should go back out there. My dad really wants to meet you for real.”

“I know, I know. But kissing you is so much more fun.”

“You can kiss me more after dinner, ok, love?” Dani takes my hand and pulls me up. “Come on. This is gonna be a fun night.”

...

“So, Tess, what are you studying?”

Phillip is in the kitchen stirring something in a big pot. I’m not really sure what it is, but it smells *amazing*.

“Creative writing.” The words still feel a little bit foreign leaving my mouth, after only a week of these new classes. It’s a nice change. I like how those words feel. “Poetry and fanfiction have always been my favorites, but I’m working on a few longer projects right now as well.”

“That’s wonderful! Creativity is very important.” He starts pulling ingredients out of cabinets, laying them out on the counter in a perfectly straight line. “Our family is much more the music type. Dani gets it from her old man.”

“He is the most amazing guitarist I have ever known,” my girlfriend gushes, pointing at a little jar in the center of the coffee table. “Those are all the guitar picks he’s used since he was sixteen. He keeps every one.”

“That’s really cool. I’ve always wanted to learn an instrument - I am the least musically talented person you could possibly think of.”

“This one over here is the biggest Swiftie I’ve ever met,” she says, nudging me.

“I love Taylor Swift!” Phillip sounds genuinely excited about my fangirl status. “What’s your favorite song?”

“All Too Well.”

“Oh, come on, you don’t have a more interesting answer than that?”

I pause, considering. “I really like Tis The Damn Season. That’s in my top five.”

“Now *that* is an interesting answer.” He smiles fondly. “I’ve always been fond of This Love.”

“Also an interesting answer.”

He cocks his head towards Dani, who looks hilariously out of place in this conversation.

“Have you convinced the hater to listen to any yet?”

“I’m working on her. Give me another couple months and she’ll be turned to the dark side.”

“You’re not getting me to listen to jack shit until you’ve heard some Halsey music.”

“Language, darling,” Phillip chuckles.

“Sorry dad.” Dani smiles sheepishly.

“Tess, how is your family doing? I’m sure they must be missing you.”

I hesitate, and instantly, I see in Phillip’s eyes that he knows this subject is touchy. We sit in my ever-feared awkward silence for approximately three seconds before I decide to just go with my gut and start talking.

“They’re alright. My sister isn’t doing great mentally, so she was in treatment for a while, but she’s at home now doing a little better. My mom and I don’t have a great relationship, but I think she’s ok.”

“That’s good. You two are going to the states next month, yeah?”



“Yeah.” Dani’s face flushes a little with excitement. “I’ve never been outside the UK.”

“Believe me, I know.” Phillip sets a timer on the stove and then comes to sit next to his daughter. “I couldn’t be happier for you. And as soon as I’m back on top of things, I’ll take you anywhere you want.”

“I’d like that.”

We talk all night. Phillip asks me about my friends, both here and back home. I get to rave about Kiki and Bradley and Rett, and we all laugh about the time Bradley drove his first car into a tree. Dani talks about music, and the two of them end up doing a mini concert for me right there in the living room. Then we play Monopoly and Clue, and we end the night in a sort of pile on the couch. Phillip is reading his book on one side of the couch, I’m writing a fanfic on the other, and Dani is scribbling down lyrics and journaling in between us, her feet up on her dad’s legs, head resting on my shoulder as a makeshift pillow.

It’s weird. This is the most like a family I’ve ever felt.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight - Dani - April 3

Nothing happens for the rest of March.

I wish I was kidding, but it was quite literally one of the most uneventful months of my life. Aside from spending time with Tess and school, school, school, my life quiets down. It's been three weeks since I've heard from Damon - he moved back in for about two weeks, then left two months' rent behind and bolted. I know he won't be gone long, he's done this before. Still, something about this time feels eerily different.

But I'm not going to think about that, because I'm leaving the fucking country in three days. Putting a big red X on the calendar Saturday morning makes me giddy realising how close it is. The flight is early Tuesday morning, and I work tomorrow with school on Monday, so Bradley offered to drive me home after his job to grab some of my shit.

Until then, I'm alone with my girlfriend, at least once she's off the phone with her sister.

I can hear her muffled laughter through the bathroom walls, but I'm purposefully tuning out the bits and pieces of their conversation I can hear. Their relationship is something I've never really wanted to intrude on, though I am quite excited to meet Ash once we're in Missouri. Tess hasn't really talked to me about their family situation in depth since the night we got together, and while I have approximately one shit billion questions, I would never ask her unless she brought it up first. Besides, it's not like I've gone out of my way to talk about my brother with her. I don't like talking about it and... I just don't like talking about it.

When Tess emerges from the bathroom, she's smiling a little. I pull out my earbud and scoot over on the bed to let her lie down. "How's Ash doing?"

"Better, I think. It's hard to tell, but she seemed in good spirits." She's much bouncier than usual, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I also texted Rett, and she's got two days off while I'm home for conferences, so I'll be able to see them at least a few times!"

“Love, that’s wonderful!” I put my arms around her. “I’m happy for you. I know you’ve really been missing her.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes grow a little distant. “It’s hard to maintain a relationship like ours overseas. Part of the fun is seeing each other every day. And exchanging words that aren’t over text and a fourteen hour time difference. It’s just tricky to handle, you know?”

“Yeah, that really sucks.” I hug her tighter. “But think about it! You’re about to be home for a whole week, and you can see her, and see your sister, and do all of your favourite hometown things. Plus, you’ll have me.”

Tess smirks. “That part is a plus.”

Something in her eyes gives me the all clear to kiss her. Our hands and mouths go to their familiar positions, but quickly we grow bored and start exploring other areas. With her tongue in my mouth, I slowly start to inch my hand up under her shirt, running my fingers along the fabric. Her breathing is quickening, and I start to slide my fingers upward, bringing the hem of the shirt with me. “Ok?” I whisper, and she nods, pressing her head back against the headboard. I move my lips to her neck as my hands slide up more, and I pull her shirt over her head. She unzips the back of my black crop, and I shiver at the feeling of the fan’s air on my bare skin.

Tess wraps me up in her arms, and starts to feel daring. Risky. She presses her lips against my neck, intensely enough that I am sure there will be a mark there in the morning. I groan lightly, a feeling of pure longing rushing over me. My hands are also starting to wander - up her stomach, over the cups of her breasts. She follows my lead, her hands rubbing up and down my back, before finally landing at the clasps of my bra. She whispers against my shoulder. “May I?”

“Please.”

Tess unhooks my bra - Jesus, why are they designed this way? They're so damn hard to get off. Once she manages it, she puts a little space between us, allowing herself a moment to admire. I see her breath hitch in her throat. "Holy shit, Daniella."

I feel my face turn red. I'm not used to people complimenting my body. It's not that I hate my body, but I've never really liked it either. I've definitely never had anyone other than my gay best friend say anything about it. Now I'm in bed with this beautiful girl that I love so damn much, and she's lost for words, and I don't really know what to say.

So instead of talking, I kiss her. I kiss her until I'm in a dizzy haze, until my vision blurs and I've lost track of myself. My lips don't wander below her collarbone, but something has definitely changed. We've crossed over a line - a good line. This is serious. We are both serious about this.

I like knowing that.

...

Bradley knocks on the door approximately ten seconds after Tess and I finish redressing ourselves. "You two decent?"

"Get in here, loser," I call, starting the process of making my bed. He steps inside, his nametag from work still on.

"How hyped are you to see the other side of the ocean?" Bradley takes in the hot mess our room has become in the process of packing and making out.

"Honestly? I'm a little scared." I fidget with the sleeve of Tess's Hufflepuff zip up. "I've never flown before. It's always seemed a little intimidating. Like, what if we just fall out of the fucking sky?"

"You are so cute." Tess plants a small peck on my nose, and then gets up to continue packing, leaving B and I alone on the bed.

He takes my hand, twisting today's ring around and around my middle finger. "I'm gonna miss you."

“It’s one week.”

“I know, but it’s been seven years since I’ve gone more than a day or two without seeing or talking to you. You’re my daily, D.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m sure you’ll survive. You’ll be too busy boning your boyfriend to even notice that I’m gone.”

“You don’t have to call me out like that.”

“I’m sorry but you walked yourself into that one.”

“Fair.” He meets my eyes, his freckles particularly pronounced under the dorm’s fluorescent lights. “Have as much fun as you can, ok? Don’t think about your dad, or about school, or Damon. Just let go for a week.”

“I’m not good at that. But I’ll try.”

At that moment, I make a promise to myself. I really will try.

After a couple of hours of online cards against humanity and truth or dare, the sun is going down, and Bradley offers to drive me to the apartment to pick up the last of my things for the trip. He’s sleeping in our dorm tonight - not technically allowed, but the “random” security checks are not random enough for Bradley to ever be out in the open when they open the door. So we head out onto campus, around the back building and into the very limited parking garage. We play a typical walking game for us, where I bump his shoulder, and he bumps mine back harder, and we play bumper cars and giggle all the way to the car.

My goofy mood deteriorates greatly when I reach the apartment. Dad is out at a work dinner - I planned this intentionally so I could have a little quiet before my long week. But I sort of regret that plan when I get in. The lights are off, the AC is blaring loudly, there are dishes in the sink and papers on the table, but no dad. No dad in front of the TV, or tuning his guitar on the couch.

I sigh. “Welp. Let’s go, Halsey.”

I put on my new *Badlands* record and start rummaging around - might as well surprise my dad by cleaning up a tad. I start with the dishes, and speed through them on autopilot. God, I just want it to be tomorrow, so I can be in the states with my girlfriend seeing the world from her point of view, and not thinking about -

The landline jolts me out of my thoughts. "*Call from an unknown number.*"

I frown. That's weird. The landline was never disconnected, but we don't really use it anymore. Dad forwards most important numbers to his cell and gets rid of the spam.

What's weirder is that a voicemail comes through.

"Hey fam. Pops, if you're listening, could you pass the phone to Dani? Like, I'm serious, this is just for her. I'm gonna give you a sec to do that."

Holy shit. It's Damon.

And he is stone cold sober. I can hear it in his voice.

"Ok. Hey Dan. So, I know you're headed to the states. Enjoy your time! Be with your girlfriend. Tess, right? Dad told me about her. She sounds cool. So, go do fun shit. When you get home, though, I wanna meet up. I want you to call this number from your cell, and I want to arrange coffee or some corny shit like that. I'm in a bad spot. I know you probably think it's not that serious, that I'll figure it out myself with my... money, and things like that. But this is about something I should have told you a long time ago. It's hard to explain. Just... can we talk? Maybe get back on better terms. Anyway. Call me. Please. When you get home."

Beep.

I stare at the machine, trying to process what the *hell* just happened. My brother hasn't sounded like that since months before mom left. He hasn't even sounded like my brother.

And yet...

No. I am not fucking thinking about this now. I am thinking about my hot girlfriend and our overseas trip.

I press delete and leave the apartment.

I wouldn't remember until later that that meant deleting the number, too.

*Chapter Twenty-Nine - Tess - April 7*

The airport is much more crowded than it was the first time I was here. It's mostly full of bouncy sixth form students heading to the four corners of the Earth for break. It's funny - their spring break is so short compared to mine back home, and is the exact same length as all their others, and yet this is still the time when everyone chooses to travel.

Dani holds my hand tightly. "I've literally never been here."

I smile a little. It feels pretty special to be the one bringing her to the airport for the first time. "Are you excited?"

"Slightly terrified that it'll fall out of the sky, but yes."

"It won't, I promise."

"How do you know? It happens in movies."

"Oh my god, you are so paranoid." I plant a kiss on top of her head. "We'll be fine. Besides, you have two hands to squeeze if you get scared."

"Very true. That is a nice detail." She takes both of my hands in hers and squeezes them lightly. "However, I assume I'm also allowed to squeeze them just because I want to, yes?"

I roll my eyes. "Come on, we have to get moving."

I guide her through the airport processes as best as I can. International flights have a couple of extra steps, but Dani doesn't seem deterred. She even buys me a teddy bear with a union jack t-shirt in one of the newsstands. Corny, but absolutely adorable. I return the favor by buying her candy for the plane, and helping her download some movies onto her laptop, namely *Love, Simon*, which we're going to watch together.

"So I've got a deal for you." Dani looks at me with a challenging glint in her eye, and I can't decide if that expression melts me or turns me on. Maybe both.

"Ok. What do you propose?" I try to keep my tone as chill as possible.



“If you listen to *Manic* on this flight, I will listen to TWO Taylor Swift albums of your choosing.”

“Deal. Deal, deal, deal.” I feel my face almost split open with the size of the grin. “*Speak Now* and *1989*. That’s where you start.”

“What about *Folklore*?”

“You can’t love that one fully until you’ve fallen for all of her other music.”

“Alright. I’ll humour you.” She rests her head on my chest, drumming her fingers lightly against my thigh in a rhythm I don’t recognize. “I really am excited, you know. To meet your family.”

“I know you are. I’m excited for you to meet them too.”

*Or at least, I’m excited for you to meet my sister. Hopefully my asshole mom will keep herself in line for the whole week, and hopefully you don’t see how fucked up my home life is and immediately dump me.*

But I don’t say that. I smile and draw her in closer to me, trying to ignore the thudding in my chest and the lump in my throat.

On the flight, Dani grips my hand so tightly against the cold blue armrest that my fingers start to turn purple, but I don’t mind. She occasionally knocks her knee against mine, and I think about how lucky I am to have found someone like her. Someone that sees me for who I am, not who I think I should be.

I lean over and kiss her gently. She stirs from her on and off sleep, smiling goofily. “What was that for?”

“Nothing. I just love you.”

“Shut up, you dork.” She nuzzles against me and drifts back into sleep. I just smile and shake my head, leaning my forehead against the window and watching the clouds go by.

...

Landing in Lambert is one of the weirdest moments of déjà vu I have ever experienced. From the second I step onto the gray carpeting of the tunnel, everything smells familiar - that airport smell that's different everywhere, but that you'd recognize anywhere if it's yours. I look around the last gate (where I always end up) and I can see the bad Italian place, and the Auntie Anne's, and the candy store, and I almost cry because it suddenly hits me where I am.

I'm home.

But this time, I brought a little piece of London with me.

Dani adjusts her backpack on her left shoulder, eyes darting around as though she isn't quite sure where to look. If she's surprised by this, showing her the rest of St Louis is going to be quite the fun experience.

"Welcome to my shitty little city," I say, leading her through the throngs of people towards the escalator. "We have toasted ravioli, Ted Drewes, a great Ikea and not much else."

"I'm going to be completely honest, I don't know what any of those things are."

"Oh, but you will." I dodge an older couple and their teenage son, who are in the middle of a heated argument, though judging from the boy's shoes and the wife's Gucci purse, it can't be about anything particularly important. "Trust me - I'm going to show you everything. The good, the bad, the ugly."

"I am here for it all." Dani fumbles with my hand as she steps onto the escalator while also trying to text Bradley that we've landed safely. "So your mom's picking us up?"

"Yes. I think she was planning on meeting us at baggage..." My voice trails off as I see a familiar sweatshirt through the crowd huddled around a conveyor belt. "Oh my god." I sprint down the rest of the escalator and run towards the small figure. "Ash! Ash!"

My sister turns around, her face lighting up like a starlit night when she sees me. She torpedoes into my arms, burying her face in my shoulder and squeezing me so tight that it knocks out a little bit of air.

"Tess," she whispers, her hands shaking against my back.

“I’m back, honey,” I say, running my fingers through her thin, soft hair. “I’m back now.”

Behind her, I notice mom on the phone. She hasn’t even glanced in my direction, despite the commotion I just caused. Figures. I turn around and gesture for a very uncomfortable looking Dani to come over to us. “Ash, this is my girlfriend.”

“Dani. Hi.” Ash presses against my side, the shyness she often gets with new people coming through. “I’ve heard a lot.”

“Hey, kid.” Dani steps towards us. “Do you do handshakes?”

Ash blinks, and I’m fairly certain she’s never had someone ask her consent for such a simple gesture before. “Not really. I like fist bumps.”

“You are my kind of person,” Dani says with a small smile, and the two exchange a fist bump. Even through that small interaction, I can see my sister’s demeanor start to change. Her smile starts to show, her posture gets a little bit straighter. She’s starting to warm up.

At that moment mom *finally* slips her phone into her purse, sees me, and comes over briskly, sporting her cheesiest smile. “Theresa! You’re here!”

She swoops me into a hug, to which I stiffen and exit as quickly as possible. “Hi, mom.”

“How was your trip?”

“Fine, mom.”

“Nothing was delayed?”

“I’m here right now, so no, mom.”

As usual, she picks up on neither my discomfort nor my sarcasm. She instead turns to my girlfriend and gives her a very obvious once-over. “I presume you’re Daniella?”

Dani flinches slightly at the use of her full name (another detail mom cannot seem to pick up on). “Yes. Hi. It’s lovely to meet you, Ms Martin. I’ve been looking forward to this trip for so long.”

“I’m sure you have,” mom says, giving Dani yet another look up and down.

Great. We’re doing this already.

“I’m parked in the lot. Do you girls want to wait for your bags while I go get the car?”

“Sure, mom,” Ash and I say in dull unison.

“Fantastic. Ashley, I’ll text you when I’ve pulled around.”

“It’s Ash, mom,” she mutters as our mom swoops off in her four inch black heels.

Dani turns to me, shellshocked. “Wow. You really were not kidding about her.”

“No, I really wasn’t.”

“You won’t have to see her too much,” Ash states. “She’s got a new boyfriend. Tom something. He’s twenty-five. Works in her office”

I groan, wrapping my hands around my head. “Another one? Isn’t this like the fifth guy she’s dated this year?”

“Yes. Two were at the same time.” Ash makes a face. “I heard them all together in her room.”

“You did not.”

“I did.”

“Mom.” I shudder at the thought of my eighth-grade sister listening to my mom’s threesome through our thin, olive green walls.

Dani’s brow wrinkles with disgust. “Ew. That’s fucking repulsive.”

This time, Ash really smiles. “Yeah.”

Dani spots one of our bags and runs to catch it before it goes around again. I pull Ash against me as I listen to the soft thuds of my girlfriend’s Doc’s echo between the voices of strangers. “We’re gonna talk about you, the first chance we get, ok?”

She stiffens. I expected that. “Um. There isn’t much to talk about.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not. Nothing has changed.” There’s a finality in her voice that tells me we won’t be talking about this more tonight. But her choice of words sends a chill through me.

*Nothing has changed.*

But she's my sister, and I respect her boundaries, so I say nothing.

And when mom comes back and takes her hand, squeezing it hard, and Ash's entire face goes white, I say nothing.

And when we get into the car, and Ash's entire body is shaking so much that I have to help her put on her seat belt, I still say nothing.

### *Chapter Thirty - Dani - April 8th*

I wake up on the most uncomfortable couch I have ever had the displeasure of feeling. The room around me takes a moment to come into focus, and it takes a couple of seconds for me to realise I'm not in London anymore, I'm in St Louis, Missouri, USA.

The house is smaller than I expected, based on what Tess has told me of her mum's love for expensive things. The living and dining rooms, both painted a light olive colour, blend together, both with minimal furniture other than shelves of her mom's knick knacks. Vases, jewellery, expensive bags, books. If I didn't know what I do about her, I would assume she was a pretty cool lady. I can't help but think about dad - all the

I slide in my socks across the uncarpeted floor, shivering as I head to my backpack to get a sweater. It's freezing in their house. I notice that there's an actual door to their kitchen - through the opening I can see rows and rows of shelves that are mostly empty. Clearly she isn't much of a cook.

Tess is in the kitchen with a cup of something hot, a book open on the table in front of her. I tiptoe behind her and put my hands over her eyes. "Guess who?"

"Hmmm, I wonder who that could be." I can feel her cheeks stretching under my fingers as she pushes me off and wraps her arms around my stomach. "How did you sleep?"

"Considering the jet lag, not bad. Your couch is a rock though."

She laughs, pulling a chair out so I can sit down. "Well, maybe on the nights my mom is out, you could sleep with me." Her face immediately goes scarlet. "I mean - not like sleep with me, just sleep in my bed, or not, you don't have to, sorry I just made that really awkward-"

"Martian." I cup my hand around her face, playing with one of her messy red braids. "With all due respect, shut the fuck up." I kiss her gently, and she shifts off of her chair and onto my lap. By now, these motions are routine - simple, familiar, easy to slide into like a familiar pair of shoes. Her tongue in my mouth, my hands on her lower back, our chests pressed together. But

recently, these movements have felt different. More charged. Like we're hurtling towards something bigger than ourselves.

I think she feels it too, because she raises her eyes to meet mine, and threads her fingers through the loops of my waistband. Her gaze is longing, searching for something in mine. I open my mouth to speak, but a creaking sound on the stairs snaps Tess to attention, disentangling herself from me and seated back in her own chair with seconds to spare before Ash comes through the kitchen door.

Despite the bags under her eyes, Tess smiles brightly at her sister. "Good morning, honey!"

Ash nods at her, wrapping her arms around herself as she heads right for the coffee maker. Her hands, which I've noticed always have a slight tremor, go through the motions of making the drink in what seems to be a familiar pattern. But unlike whatever she almost just walked in on Tess and I doing, these movements are bland - she barely looks down, barely moves her feet, just goes about this routine like she knows she has to. She's unexcited - I wonder if she's ever excited about anything.

"Where's mom?" Tess asks, getting up to help her sister pour.

"Work."

"That's weird. She never works weekends. She complains too much."

Ash looks at her, eyes narrowed. "Tom."

"*Right.*" Tess shudders. "Twenty-five. What is he, her secretary?"

"Assistant, actually."

"So this is a woman who likes a power dynamic, I'm gathering." I stand too, figuring coffee isn't a terrible idea after the day we just had.

Tess nods. "Mom slips in and out of personas like you'd slip out of a coat. She dates two types of men - younger men, usually in their early twenties, who can give her a feeling of power,

or older men, usually in their sixties, who have a lot of money and who she sleeps with in exchange for something she wants. Either way, she's in control, and she likes it like that."

"That's gross."

"That's mom," says Ash, sitting down and sipping her still-steaming coffee.

Tess sits on the edge of the counter with her mug, which, judging on the containers I can see in the open cabinet, is definitely full of her classic chai. "Dani and I are going out tomorrow night with mom - do you want me to give you a ride for the anniversary at some point?"

Ash shakes her head. "The anniversary is the eleventh, and I'll walk."

"Sweetie, that will take two hours."

Ash shoots her a piercing stare. "I do it every month. I'll walk."

Tess looks stunned, but nods, backing off the subject and leaving Ash to stare into her mug of black caffeine. "Dani, do you want to come see my room?"

"Sure," I say, extending my fist to Ash as I pass her. She looks up, not smiling, but acknowledging, and bumps me.

"I'm so sorry about her," Tess says as we climb the stairs. "I know she's a little..."

"Don't you dare apologise," I say firmly. "I love her, I promise. Trust me, I'm used to dealing with quiet and ill siblings. B's family isn't doing the greatest either."

She looks a little surprised. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah, his sister's been admitted a couple of times. His parents are too busy worrying about their older daughter sleeping around and getting chased by cops at parties at fifteen to notice when the younger one is struggling. They're a really close family... Jerry's just been making it difficult."

"God, that sounds awful." Tess leads me to a white door at the end of the olive hall (why are all of their walls olive colored?) that has a little metal sign with her AO3 username alongside someone else's - I assume Ash. "Here we are. Sorry, it's a little messy."



I step inside, and I can't help but immediately smile at how fucking Tess this room feels. It's painted a bright robin's egg blue, and I see fairy lights strung around the ceiling, their silver wires reflecting in the early morning sun. The room isn't enormous, but the space that there is is packed full. Her bed is in one corner, covered in squishmallows and throw pillows that I'm sure she kicks onto the floor every night. Sitting against the bedframe are two sets of white drawers, stained with pigment, and covered in a mirror, more sponges than I can count, and a cup of brushes.

Of course. The makeup corner.

On the opposite wall, there are floor to ceiling white bookshelves packed with more books than I can count, all organised into a rainbow. The shelves are covered in her own knick knacks, mostly funkopops and other little figurines. Between the bed and the bookshelves on one side are her bathroom and a big window, and on the other are a closet and another shelf of sorts, this one much prettier and also strung with lights. It's covered in photos of all kinds - framed, albums, polaroids, strips, and even some legitimate film. I recognize Rett, her best friend, in a lot of them. I wonder if I'll meet her while I'm here.

Tess sits on the bed with her legs crossed. "I know it's kind of nerdy."

I pad across her soft, thick carpet. "I love this more than I have ever loved anything."

"Even me?"

"Yes. Sorry, but these squishmallows are way cuter than you." I pick up one that looks like a strawberry and hug it to my chest. "Fuck the bed, I'll sleep on this rug. Where did you find this?"

"Bob's discount furniture."

I stare at her, and she bursts into laughter. "Don't worry about it. It's just a little furniture store near here. What can I say? They have fluffy rugs."

"Well you can thank Bob from me personally."

“I’ll get right on that.” Tess stands, walking over to the window and looking out at her street. “God, I missed this.”

“I know you did.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I love London, but this place just feels so wrong and so right in a way that that place can’t.” She gazes out at the tree-lined block across from us - I can make out some kids playing in a sprinkler. “I’ve never known anywhere else. We don’t really travel, and St Louis isn’t close to any big cities. This year is the first time I’ve really been on my own in a new place. It scared me a lot.”

“Did it really? You seemed pretty fearless when I met you that first day.”

She laughs. “That’s funny, because I was terrified. Especially after I met you.”

I do a double take. “You were scared of *me*?”

“Dani, come on! You’re so intimidating. You put on this front of being so calm and collected and confident - I didn’t think I’d ever be able to get behind your walls.” She blushes a little bit. “It’s funny. I’d had this dream of coming to London, and becoming best friends with my roommate, and going on all these adventures together that I never got to have here. Then I met you, and I thought I probably wouldn’t get to recognize that.”

I walk over to her. “Well, you were right about one thing. We are way more than just best friends.”

Her face shifts into something between a smile and a grimace. “So true. Maybe that’s why my life in London is so chaotic.”

“Oh, be quiet.” I kiss her before resting my head on her shoulder. “Hey, what’s that errand you wanted to drive Ash to earlier?”

“Oh. Yeah. That.” She fidgets a little bit with the ring on her right hand. “I’d rather not say right now - just something to do with dad that Ash and I both do. I wanted to get it done tomorrow. Shouldn’t take me too long.” She adjusts a little, trying to brighten her expression. “But that’s for later! Today, I have a whole city to show you!”

I grin, bringing her fingertips to my lips. “I cannot wait to see the world through your eyes.”

“I have a whole day planned. I’ve called it *The Grand Tour of Mediocrity*, in which I will give you a tour of the most mediocre city in all the world.”

“It can’t be as mediocre as London.”

“Babe, London is *perfect*.”

“I guess we just all think our hometowns are mediocre.”

“Maybe.” Tess crosses to her closet and pulls out a couple of things. “Now get out so I can change. I am about to change your life.”

“Then by all means, lead the way.”

“Shut up.”

“Love you.”

“Love you more.”

### Chapter Thirty-One - Tess - April 8th

It shocks me when mom agrees to give me the car for the day, but I'm certainly not about to complain. Dani and I set off at ten for our first stop, a walk around the Loop.

"This is where I come to write. It's easy to find somewhere outside to sit - Ash and I used to write here for hours and hours when we were a bit younger."

Dani squints against the harsh sun. "Looks like it goes on forever."

"Think of it as our mainstreet."

"Alright. So give me the highlights."

"Well, this is the busiest area of St Louis that I frequent. Like... oh there!" I point at a basement store a couple of blocks down with a blue sign in the window. "That's Wizard's Wagon. They sell comics and games and things."

"So it's nerd central. Got it."

I roll my eyes. "Shut up. Over there is our local record store - dad used to drag me here all the time so he could pick up packs of CDs or some new album he'd been dying over."

She laces her fingers through mine. "I see where the music lover in you comes from."

"Yep. That's genetics, baby." I glance around, and then point up the road. "That road leads back to my old dance studio."

"Wait - you used to dance?"

"Terribly, but yes."

"Holy. Shit."

"We never speak of this."

"Oh I think we are definitely speaking of this, Martian."

I take her to a little Mexican restaurant on one of the street corners for an early lunch, and then we just spend a couple of hours talking and window shopping. We go into the record store, and she buys her dad a couple of CDs that aren't available in the UK. Watching her check

out and chat with the guy at the register sends a bit of a pang through me. It just reminds me too much of my middle school days, when I would come here with dad every other weekend. He used to point out old bands I'd never heard of, and I would just roll my eyes and ask him if I could wait in the car. Now, I kind of wish I had stayed all of those times. Listened to his rants about these bands. Watched the way his smile lit up his whole face.

Well shit.

I try to push those feelings down. Today shouldn't be about dad. This is about showing the girl I love the city I've called home my whole life. So when Dani comes over with a little shopping bag, I force a smile, link my arm through hers, and lead her back to my car.

...

When you think of places to take a date, I think almost nobody would even consider Ikea. But Dani insisted that this was a stop we had to make, mostly so she can make fun of the way all of the "rich American twats" decide to decorate their houses, but also because I know a part of her is obsessed with interior design. Plus, there are Swedish meatballs waiting for us at the end of this journey. What more could you really want out of a day wandering through a furniture warehouse?

Dani insists on trying every single couch, and she almost convinces me to buy a new beanbag for my bedroom until we notice that it's two hundred dollars. But she also has her fair share of snark as we make our way through the twisting hallways.

"This genuinely looks like what would happen if a pottery barn mom and a tennis mom had an illicit lesbian affair and then left the child to fend for itself," she remarks of a hideous white kitchen that should definitely be way more perfect than it is.

"Truer words were never spoken." I point at the curtains hanging in the back windows. "My mom used to have curtains like that in her bedroom."

"*That's* her idea of seducing men?" Dani wrinkles her nose, which is adorable for reasons I cannot explain.

“Nah. The men never come to our house. I think she has enough human decency that she doesn’t want us to be exposed to that shit. She also doesn’t go after married guys, though I think the ethics kind of cancel out when you factor in her being almost fifty and having a history with grad students.”

“That’s so... ugh.” Dani squeezes my hand. “Come on. You don’t have to think about her today.”

“I know, I know.” Apparently there’s a lot of things I’m thinking about that I shouldn’t be.

After we’ve had our fill of the display floor (and of meatballs), we make our way into the warehouse, and Dani immediately hops into a cart. “Push me!” she yells, and I do. I push her up and down the aisles, and about halfway through, we switch and she sends me flying by the shelves. We keep going, laughing our asses off until an employee starts side eyeing us. As fun as this is, I’d rather not get permanently banned from Swedish meatballs. I buy Ash a pretty hatbox type of container - I know she’s been dying for something to keep her letters to dad in. We pay and then go back to the parking lot. But instead of going anywhere, Dani climbs into the backseat and curls up into a ball.

“I’m so fucking jetlagged,” she complains, and I roll my eyes, climbing back and adjusting her stance so her head is in my lap. I run my fingers through her hair and lean down to kiss her.

“Come on. We still have so much left to do on the tour of mediocrity!”

“Oh, I know.” She smiles and brings her head up to return my kiss. “Believe me. Aside from the jetlag, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

We stay like that in the car for about twenty minutes. Part of me wishes we could just be here like this forever. I know that I’ll have plenty of time to just curl up with her when we get back to London, but something about her being here, being home with me, makes it feel so different. Like the two halves of my heart are finally meeting for the first time.

I look at my phone. Four pm. Right on schedule.

I rub Dani's shoulder gently. "Come on, babe. We can't miss the best parts of the day."

...

We make a stop downtown, but Dani insists that she has no interest in going up in the Arch, despite my assurance that nobody has ever fallen out (except for Percy Jackson, but come on, he jumped voluntarily). We kill some time doing some drivebys of my favorite local landmarks and buildings, before heading to my favorite Italian restaurant for dinner. I offer to take her, but she isn't one for letting others pay for her food. She reluctantly allows me to tip, but only after a decent amount of friendly bickering.

And then comes the part of the night I've been planning since she found out about the trip.

I park on the edge of forest park and take her hand, leading her through the trees. The spot I want to get to is about a ten minute walk from the car, but that's part of the point. Dani's boots scratch a bit against the spring grass, breaking the otherwise perfect silence every couple of seconds.

Eventually, we get down to an area with a little creek and some rocks. We stand on a bridge overlooking the water, hand in hand, and I say, "when I was planning this trip, I wanted to do something that reminded me of the walk we took the night of Bradley's birthday."

Dani smiles, resting her head on my shoulder. "I remember that night. I think that's the night I fell in love with you."

"Me too." I lead her down to a grassy area beside the creek. We sit together, hand in hand, and then lay back into the grass and stare up at the black sky.

"Sorry there's not really any stars to look at," I say to her. "Air pollution's a bitch."

"You know I don't care about the stars right now." She tilts her head so she's facing me, the silver moonlight reflecting in her grey eyes and painting pictures across my irises. "All I want is you, my love."

I sigh, curling my body into hers. “I still can’t believe you’re really here.”

“Neither can I. I keep being afraid I’ll wake up back in our dorm and this will have all been a trick of my imagination.”

“Me too. But it’s not.” I kiss her gently, and she wraps one hand around my head, pulling my face closer to hers so she can kiss me more intensely. I feel almost euphoric, like I could kiss her absolutely forever. I should make a career out of this. Professional kisser of Daniella Nelson.

“Thank you for making today happen,” Dani whispers, her eyes back up to the sky.

“Of course. I had to give you the proper hometown welcome.”

“Yeah, I know, but also... just.” She takes both of my hands in hers and squeezes them.

“Thank you for being you.”

“Oh shut up, you dork,” I laugh, tackling her with kisses, and we go rolling down the hill so far that we almost splash into the creek.



*Chapter Thirty-Two - Dani - April 9th*

As wonderful as my day with Tess was, the next night is the dinner I've been dreading.

Tess's mom insisted on taking me to one of their favourite restaurants, so they could "feed me STL style!" I don't think either of us has ever wanted to do anything less, but it's not like we have much choice in the matter. To make things even more fun, Ash isn't coming, which means she'll be alone in the house, a thought that is clearly not sitting right with Tess, and is made obvious by her flitting around Ash all day and making them both incredibly snippy.

I adjust the hairclips I put in to try and look more professional, and apply a thin layer of nude Mac lipstick to what has got to be the most boring makeup I've ever done. I sigh as I look at myself in the mirror. I don't look like me, and I don't think I care. This is one night. All I have to do is get Ms Martin to like me, and then it'll all be ok. I just need to get through one torturous two hours. Just another test to pass. I grab my purse, pull my shoulders back like a ten year old practising their shitty posture, and exit the bathroom.

I'm sitting in the living room scrolling on Instagram when Tess enters the room, which I almost don't notice, because rather than being preceded by the smooth thunk of her converse, she's clipping across the hardwood in four inch heels I've never seen before.

"Hey, Daniella." She curtsies a little, and I look up, doing an instant double take.

"Holy hell, you look hot."

"It's not much."

"It's everything on you, though."

The dress is cute - a halter that shows off the boobs I know she's always hated, solid midnight blue with a bit of black detailing on the skirt.

"To be honest, I know the only reason I can get away with this dress is that mom isn't going to make a fuss about my modesty while you're here. She's got way too many other things to worry about making perfect," Tess rolls her eyes, grabbing her leather jacket from the bannister.

“Alright. Mom is meeting us at the restaurant, which gives me approximately ten minutes in the car to prepare you.”

“How much preparation could I possibly need?”

Apparently, a lot.

...

“She is going to ask you a lot of questions. You do not have to answer any truthfully unless you want to. With my mom, this is about survival, not honesty. You want to stay on her good side, even if it means a little fibbing.”

“Noted.” I look at myself in the mirror, adjusting the front of my hair, which Tess did up in as close to Kiki fashion as she was capable of. “Do you think she hates me?”

I see Tess considering the nicest possible way to answer this. “I think she wants me to fall for money over looks, and she’s starting to realise you don’t have as much as she would like you to. I also think she trusts shady men with deep pockets much more than she trusts genuinely kind girls that don’t quite meet her class aspirations.”

“Is that why she sleeps with...” I wrinkle her nose. “The kinds of men that she does?”

“Mhm. Partly. She also wants to act like dad never existed. He didn’t die an honorable enough death for her liking, and because he’s the one that brought in the most money, she resents him for ‘leaving us high and dry.’ Says he only cared about himself. So, she’s acting like she never cared about him, either.”

“That’s terrible.”

“That’s mom.” She stares straight ahead, avoiding my eyes as much as humanly possible. “I wish she would leave you be. It’s not your fault she acts like this, she just wants to protect me in her own twisted way.”

“I get it. My mom was always like that too. She told me I had to marry a man interesting enough to keep me going, but boring enough that I’d always know I’d be safe.”

“Did she know you weren’t going to marry a man?”

I snort. “Hardly. I honestly always got the vibe that she was homophobic. She got really weird when gay marriage was legalized here.”

“Fuck her.”

“Yeah. Fuck her.”

Tess turns into the parking lot, and helps me and the black heels I forced myself to put on stumble out of the car. Something tells me her mom wouldn’t be a big fan of the platform combat boots.

She puts a hand on my shoulder before we head in. “Just follow my lead. Everything is going to be just fine.”

...

Everything started out just fine.

We made small talk while ordering drinks, talking about school and schedules and Bradley a little bit. Her mom, with her shiny red bob and black dinner dress, is definitely intimidating, but she seems to genuinely listen to everything I’m saying. Tess keeps glancing over at me, but I think I’m handling the evil mom pretty well, all things considered.

That is, until we opened our menus.

As soon as I see the twos and threes jumping out from in front of the zeroes, I feel my face go as white as a ghost.

Ms Martin looks completely unfazed. “Problem, Daniella?”

“No, not at all, it’s just...” I scan the small text frantically, searching for something I could order that wouldn’t cost me half of a bookstore shift. “More expensive than what I’m used to, that’s all.”

Still, her demeanour remains unshaken. “Oh, I’m sure. Tess tells me you’re a waitress? I’m sure you get great discounts from that.”

*Here we go.*

Tess flashes her a warning look, but I plaster on a smile and say, “I quit waitressing, actually. I just work at an independent bookstore now.”

“Oh.” Ms Martin looks a bit taken aback. “Well, that’s an... interesting choice.”

“Mom,” Tess mutters through gritted teeth.

“Have we made up our minds about entrees?” the waiter chirps, appearing as if out of nowhere with a notebook and pen in hand.

“Um.” I shake my head slightly, as though expelling an unwanted fly. “Can I get the soup special, please?”

“Is that all?” Tess’s mom asks, a small smile on her lips.

“Yes, Ms Martin, that’s all.”

“You know, if money is the issue, I can take you.”

I flush red. This is, in my opinion, the worst offer that exists. Having an adult treat you like a charity case who can’t handle themselves. It’s demoralising. “It’s more than alright.”

“Now, now. You’re dating my daughter - I might as well help you out a little until you find a more... sustainable way of living.” Her piercing stare bores through my eyes. “That is, of course, your plan, is it not?”

The waiter, looking more out of place than a snowbank in the summer, rushes off with a quiet, “I’ll give you a couple more minutes.”

I sit up taller, facing down Ms Martin. I am not going to let her ruin this trip for me. “My current employer is paying me generously for doing good work. I have no reason to change jobs. My present one is doing a more than adequate job of sustaining me. I hope that’s not a problem, Ms Martin.”

Her eye is twitching. “No, of course not. I just assumed that, with everything that happened with your brother, you might be in a more... tight bind, financially speaking.”

Holy fucking shit.

There’s absolutely no way she knows about that. There’s no goddamn way.

My hands are shaking under the table, but my expression remains stone cold. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I think you do,” Ms Martin is full on grinning now, her stretched cheeks glueing me to my chair, completely frozen. “Let me make something clear to you, Daniella. You are not good enough for Theresa. I don’t know what she was thinking bringing you here, but quite frankly, I wish you hadn’t come. My daughter is going to marry someone with money, a stable home life, and good values, none of which you seem to possess. She’s too smart to settle for someone like you. So you can have your fun here, but something tells me you’ll never be coming back.” She sits back, satisfied, and waves the waiter over. “I’ll have the steak, please. My daughter will have the house salad.”

I’m completely stunned into silence. A million thoughts are racing through my head at once. How does she know about Damon? I suppose it’s possible to find one of the local news articles about his deals and connect it to me, if you really look hard enough. But why would she do that in the first place? How long has she been fucking testing me? Am I really that far from her standards that she doesn’t want me to date her daughter?

Tess tries to take my hand under the table, but I know the second her skin touches mine I’ll burst into tears. So instead, I push out my chair, and escape into the misty night.

I know Tess can’t follow me. If she leaves, she’ll start a whole nother issue with her mom. But that doesn’t make it sting any less when I realise, ten minutes later, that I’m still out here alone without a ride home.

I text Tess. *i’m gonna wait out here. tell her i needed air or some shit*

*T: Will do. I’m so sorry. I’ll make this quick.*

So I sit in silence on the bench, and when they finally emerge forty five minutes later, each looking adequately pissed off at the other, I don’t speak the entire ride home.

### Chapter Thirty-Three - Tess - April 10th

I truly did not think the week could get any worse.

Famous last words.

I didn't even look at mom when we got home from dinner, and by the time I made my way downstairs the next morning, she and her car were already gone. Ash was sitting in the living room with her headphones on, and Dani had already texted me saying that she was going to grab breakfast and call her dad. That was fine by me, though, because this morning I was *finally* going to see Rett.

Truth be told, I'm not entirely sure why she didn't call me until yesterday - aside from a *Welcome home bitch!* when I texted that I had landed, I hadn't heard from her at all. The last couple of months she's been weirdly distant, which, yes, makes me sad, but also more curious than anything. Rett tells me everything - if something major in her life changed, she would have told me.

Right?

Her mom's house is only about a fifteen minute walk from mine, so I kiss Ash on the top of her head and head out the door, hopping on one foot to finish tying my converse as I leave in a rush. I'm smiling the whole way there - regardless of how she's been these past months, I am about to *finally* see my best friend for the first time in well over half a year.

Two things immediately strike me as odd when Rett's house comes into view. The first is that her car, a little green toyota that she protects with her life, is not in the driveway. The second is that, despite the absent car, the lights throughout her house are clearly on, including the one in her room. She's definitely home. Where the hell is her car?

I run up the steps two at a time and ring the doorbell, which plays a cheerfully out of tune melody that always sounds a little bit different. I hear muffled voices behind the door, and within five seconds, Rett is barrelling into my arms.

“*Tessie!*” She envelops me in an all-too-familiar embrace.

“Oh my god, Rett, oh my god!” I feel tears welling up behind my eyes as I squeeze her more tightly against me, breathing in her warm scent of -

“Girl,” I say, taking a step back and studying her with a smile, “Why do you smell like booze?”

For a brief moment, I see uncertainty flicker across her face, but it quickly morphs into her usual smirk. “Dude, there was this *huge* back to school party last night. We all got *wasted*.”

“Is that why your car isn’t here?”

“Yep. I was too out of it to drive, so I got a friend to give me a ride home.” Again, I see that look of uncertainty, and this time it lingers for a little longer before fading into nothing.

“Do you want to come in?”

“Duh.”

After exchanging hugs with Rett’s mom, we head upstairs to her hideously bright purple bedroom. She painted this fifteen years ago and still insists that she loves the color. Her four poster bed is situated directly in the middle of her room, pushed against the wall furthest from her door, and every other available surface is covered in trophies, stuffed animals and photos.

I settle into her overstuffed futon armchair. “Alright. Catch me up on what’s been going on at home!”

“Absolutely not until you tell me about London.” Rett leaps onto her bed and waves her hands at me. “Go on! I want to know everything.”

“It’s amazing. The atmosphere, and all the nature and buildings are just so beautiful. I love my friends, and I love Dani, obviously...”

“Oh yes, the sexy Brit you somehow managed to pull.”

“Shut up. You’ll meet her in a few days.” I lock eyes with her. “Assuming you’re still up for our lunch date on Monday?”

“Of course I’m still up for it.” She hesitates. “Hey, I’m sorry I’ve been so quiet lately. You’ve been so far away, and I missed you so much, and every single day I wanted to call you, but there’s just been a lot going on. I promise, I’m going to be better when you go back. One call per week guaranteed.”

I nod, feeling a little bit better. “I’d like that. Do you need to talk about anything?”

“No, life has just been crazy.” She stands up and stretches. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom, but when I get back, I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Okay.”

When she exits the room, I take these few moments of silence to let the familiar backdrop of my childhood sink in again. I go over to Rett’s dresser and examine the photos. She loves photos. She always has her phone in everyone’s face when we do literally anything, but everybody always thanks her for capturing those memories later. I smile as I look at photos of us as janky freshmen, her braces on full display alongside my unfortunate side part. The farther along I look, the more we grow up, and when I hit senior year, I feel a pang of jealousy for all these photos that I’m not in. It’s easy to get swept up in the romanticity of London and forget how many people I’ve been missing out on here. Half of the people in these photos are people I’ve never even seen before. Rett’s found an entirely new friend group while I was off gallivanting with my girlfriend and our hairstylist and cab driving besties.

When I reach the end of the row, I see a wooden frame tucked away from view behind all the others. As I pull it out to examine, my existentialism fades into pure shock.

There’s no goddamn way.

In the photo on the left side, Rett is standing on a beach in her red bikini, the only item of clothing she continues to brag about year after year, claiming that it never goes out of style. Her hair is tousled from the sea breeze - it’s short, which means this photo must have been taken recently. Beside her is the kind of boy most girls would swoon for based on objective attractiveness alone. He’s got a mess of blonde hair that shines in the sun, a set of brown eyes



worthy of lust, a sprinkling of freckles down his face and onto his chest that everyone dreams of kissing. His six pack is out for the world to see over his red swim trunks, which match Rett's suit to a T. His arm is wrapped around her midriff, his hand coming to rest just below the band of her swimsuit top.

My blood is ice. Because on the right side is a picture of them with Rett's legs hooked around the guy's hips, his hands gripping her ass, hers draped around his neck. Their lips are locked.

This is very clearly Rett's boyfriend.

But it's also very clearly Josh.

As in my ex boyfriend who cheated on me not long after calling my little sister a mental patient.

There is no goddamn way.

Behind me, I hear something thud to the floor. I whirl around, the frame gripped under my shaking fingers. Rett is in the doorway, her phone at her feet, clearly mid text.

"Tess," she says slowly, starting to bend towards the phone, "this isn't what it looks like."

I move at the speed of fucking light, snatching the phone within centimeters of her grasp and reading the words she had been typing, despite her shrill protests from behind me.

*R: Hey babes - gonna try to explain this to Tess. I think she'll understand.*

*J: can't wait to see you tonight.*

The string of emojis that follows is so appallingly familiar that it makes me want to vomit all over my best friend.

"Rett," I say, very quietly. "What. The *fuck*. Is going on?"

"Tess please." She looks more terrified than I've ever seen her, and based on the pure, white hot rage I can feel building in my chest, she has good reason. "God, I didn't want you to find out like that. I was hoping I'd have a chance to explain-"

"Explain *what*?" My voice is rising, and I don't care.

“Josh and I reconnected while you were gone - he’s *changed*, Tessie, I promise. He’s in therapy, he’s working on himself. He’s good to me.”

“Quite frankly, Rett, I don’t care.” The anger boils over, and I give up on holding anything back. “You’re boning my goddamn ex boyfriend. The same ex who cheated on me! Who called my sister a retard! Who has shown us both, time and time again, that he is a terrible person! And now, what, you’re trying to pull a motherfucking beauty and the beast and convince me that he’s changed? *Bullshit*, Rett. How the *fuck* could you do this to me?”

She’s crying, and I’m crying too.

She tries again. “Tess, if you’d just let me-”

“No.” I shove past her, smashing the frame on the floor as I go. “I think you and I are more than done here.”

I can hear her sobs echoing through the halls as I run - *sprint* - down the stairs, past her alarmed mother, out the front door, and down the block. I keep running until I can’t feel my legs, until I dry heave and curl up in the grass of a park I don’t even recognize.

I don’t recognize my own fucking home anymore.

And I sure as hell don’t recognize the people in it.

...

The hilarious thing is, that’s not even as bad as the day gets.

Of course it isn’t.

I almost can’t bring myself to go home. I considered going to the park, falling onto a bench and texting Kiki for hours while Dani works. This won’t work, of course, because in London it is the dead of night and Kiki is long asleep. I can’t call Dani, either, because I don’t want to tell her that not only are Rett and I not spending the day together, but we may never be ok again.

I don’t know what else to do, so I spend most of the afternoon at the library. Because of our local indie bookstore, I genuinely haven’t spent more than fifteen minutes in this library

since third grade. I don't really read - I explore titles, I flip through about a dozen sets of beginning chapters, I wander and wander and let the hours pass by and the sky turns dark in a gray haze of sadness. I know eventually I'll have to go home. But I put it off so far that by the time I pull my jean shorts down to fit properly on my thighs after sitting and grab my backpack from the dusty corner I tucked it into, it's almost 9 PM. I can tell the librarian is not happy that I stayed until near closing, but honestly, I'm too dazed to care. I push through the door like I'm walking through glass, and feel myself disappear into the night.

...

"Theresa, where have you been?"

Of course the first person I have to see is mom. She's sitting in her arm chair, eyes slightly squinted, eyeliner and red lip beginning to fade from a long day of god knows what.

"Just with Rett."

"You said you'd be home by seven."

"And I'm home at nine."

She frowns. "Don't you talk back to me, young lady."

"Don't 'young lady' me, mom, we are so past that." I put my shoes in the basket (yes, we do have a shoe basket) and turn to face her. "Where were you all day? Ash texted me that she was home alone."

"Don't listen to your sister, I was here all day. Probably just a side effect of her medications. Speaking of which." She shoves a small receipt in my face. "This needs to be filled. Would you mind?"

"Yes, I would actually." I stare at her. "Mom, you do know Ash isn't better yet, right?"

"What are you talking about? She went to that... facility - which was grossly overpriced, by the way - for months on end! Even after the initial treatments, she was back in every day, which meant I had to drive her and pay for extra expenses. She owes it to me to be recovered by now. She knows that."

“Mom. Do you even hear yourself?” I know she doesn’t. I know she’s always like this. She doesn’t know how to accept other people’s emotions or actions if they don’t line up with hers.

“Ash isn’t getting better. We need to try something else.”

“Well, I’m not paying another cent for that girl to recover from a car crash that happened two years ago.”

“Mom.” I’m getting impatient, and I’m really, *really* getting pissed off. “Your daughter is sick. She’s sick enough that it could kill her.”

“Theresa, you know I won’t let that happen. I have been keeping a very close eye on her, and I will continue to do so.”

“Really? Well your vision must be pretty bad to not notice the new scars on her arms.”

“Those were there long before. That’s why we sent her to the facility in the first place, remember?”

“Mom, you know damn well Ash only self-harmed once before the facility. She came to us for help. You got her out of there before she was ready, and now she’s back, and she’s cutting again, and that’s on you. She needs help.”

“She needs to stop being selfish.”

“*You* need to stop being selfish!” I’m shouting now, and I can hear some rustling from upstairs, though from Dani or from my sister I can’t tell. “You are terrible, you know that. My sister could fucking *die* because you refuse to acknowledge that the millions of dollars you swindle off of your thousands of hookups could spare a couple zeros for your daughter’s fucking safety.”

“You know how I feel about that language, Theresa.”

“I don’t give two fucks what you think of my language right now, mom. Ash needs help. She needs different help. And she needs to get away from you until you can figure out your own bullshit and learn how to be a good mom.”

And that's when the idea that's been stirring inside me for the last month finally explodes out into the open.

I stand taller. "Let her come back to London with me next year. I'll get a job, I'll support her. You'll pay every last cent it takes to get her back on her feet from across the ocean."

"What exactly makes you think you're going back there next year, let alone your sister?"

"My scholarship, and your desperate longing to get rid of the daughter actually willing to question you."

"Well, you're not. I need your help here."

"Doing what? Babysitting? Mom, I'll be taking care of Ash all by myself either way. Let me do that somewhere that will actually be good for both of us."

"Theresa, did you hear me? You're not going back there next year. You'll graduate here with Rett and the rest of your friends."

"Mom, no. You can't just..." I don't know if it's the sting of Rett's name or the gut punch of realization that hits me first, but one of them causes a fire of angry tears to begin burning behind my eyes. "Is this because you don't like Dani? Is this because she doesn't fit your fucking standards of what a partner should look like?"

Mom, as she always seems to be, is completely still, her expression somewhere between a smirk and a condescending frown. "I just think that if you're thinking seriously about dating, which you seem to be, you should think about it like an adult. This childish fantasy is a waste, and I need to teach you that myself."

"*I fucking love her, mom!*" It's the first time I've ever screamed at her. It feels good. "This school is the only time I have ever felt passionate about anything academic. I found a family there. A home. I'm not letting you pull me away from that. And I'm not letting you keep Ash in this *shithole* for another fucking year without me."

It's at that moment that I realize I can never tell my mom about switching my classes. I'll figure out a way around the school telling her. I have to. Because if she finds out I'm actually doing what I love instead of what she wants, she'll never let me or my sister exit the house again.

"This conversation is over, Theresa."

"No it isn't."

"I believe it is. Your sister and you will both stay with me. You are not going back to that school or that girl. And Ash will be fine. That's a promise."

"Most narcissistic promise I've ever heard," I mutter.

"What was that?" She raises an eyebrow, daring me to repeat the insult.

I bat my eyes at her, smile, and flip her off. "I don't care what you say. We're going back."

"Nice try. Go to your room, Theresa. We're done here."

As I storm out of the room with tears threatening to spill over and anger boiling inside of me ready to burst, the same thought keeps resurfacing around the mental images of my sister's scars.

My mom is made of stronger stone than a fucking gargoyle.

*Chapter Thirty-Four - Dani - April 10th*

We've been sitting across from each other on Tess's bed for fifteen minutes, and neither of us had said a single word.

Somehow, she's not crying. I don't know if it's because she feels like she shouldn't or because she genuinely doesn't need to, but her face is dry. Her eyes, which were bright and wild when she slammed the bedroom door and threw herself onto the bed, are now blank, dull and almost colourless in nature. She looks like something inside her has been drained.

Eventually, the silence and I stop mixing so well, so I force myself to murmur, "So."

"Yeah."

"That seemed pretty intense."

"Mhm."

"Do you want to..." I trail off, because she's finally stood, and she's over by the window, watching the rain come down outside. I'm not sure when it started raining.

"There's some things you should know." Her eyes are nowhere near mine, but it feels as though she's speaking directly to my soul. "Some things I should have told you a while back, but... I don't know, I guess I'm just chickenshit."

I let a small smile escape, but hold in the witty retort I would usually shoot back.

"I'm not really sure how to make this less blunt, but..." Tess sits on her desk chair. "Ash went into treatment because she was in the car with dad when he died."

Oh.

Oh shit.

"Dad was driving her to a sleepover at her then-best friend's house. Some truck driver was drunk as shit, swerved right into him. Ash was ok - dad tried to shield her from most of the debris. Her leg was stuck under the dashboard for a little while, but she was ok. Except she wasn't, because she was in that car with dad's corpse for fifteen minutes while pedestrians tried

to get an ambulance to come. I don't know if he was already dead by the time the car stopped, or if she spoke to him at all... she won't tell me anything. All I know is that it fucked her up real good, and mom refuses to acknowledge that. She pulled Ash out of treatment too early, she refuses to spend the money to send her to real therapy, and when I told her Ash has been cutting herself, she said she was being selfish, and that she would keep an eye on her. And on top of that..." I can see Tess's wet eyes shining in the moonlight. "I know how selfish this sounds in comparison, but she's not going to let me come back to Northbank next year. I wanted to bring Ash with me, to have a fresh start. I wanted to be with you." At that, she does lock eyes with me. "But it can't happen, all because of my fucking mom. And now Ash could die, and I could lose you forever."

I'm trying to process everything she just told me. If I'm being honest, I don't know how to respond to any of it. She just bared her fucking soul - it's not like I can make any of what she told me better by trying to be comforting.

I don't particularly want to do what I know I have to, but I stand up and approach her quietly. I don't take her hand, or hug her, or even really make eye contact, I just stand at the window beside her. I know she's heard some of what I'm about to say, but I feel like now I owe it to her to tell the whole story.

"My brother was always the golden child. Everyone said so. "That Damon," they all told me. In most people's eyes, especially my mom's, he could do no wrong - I was the one always causing them trouble. He graduated high school a year early, went off to uni, immediately landed this huge tech job. "That Damon," everyone said, and every time he came home to visit, I became invisible again.

"Except then mom left. One day, after a couple months of fighting with dad, she just got up and left. Changed all of her phone numbers, passwords, licence plates - she does not want to be found, and we didn't try. Damon left a week later, and we found out a few months in that he and his hundreds and thousands of dollars from work and trust funds were on the street selling



drugs. Dad fell into this depressive state - before the cancer, he didn't work for months and months on end. Treatment came and went, more months passed, and then the cancer came back. My life became a steady routine. I worked, I went to the school we couldn't afford, I took care of dad and the house, I worked some more. I became so numb to it all that I had forgotten what life used to feel like without this monotony. Then you came along and I was like... wow. This is what life is supposed to feel like. So I started pushing back against the monotony. And I may have fucked myself over in the long run, but I don't even care anymore."

The silence that follows is shorter than our first, but somehow feels even less bearable.

Tess crosses one leg over the other on her teal spinny chair. "Wow."

"Wow yourself."

"So we're both pretty fucked up, huh?"

"Yep."

"Ok." She reaches out, finding the hand resting on my hip and taking it in hers. She lets out a small, abrupt chuckle. "So. What the fuck do we follow that up with?"

"Honestly, no clue." I sit on her lap, and immediately her hands come to rest on the curve of my stomach. "I kind of just want to make out with you and pretend this whole thing never happened."

I want to do a little more than make out with her, but I'm not about to say that out loud to her.

Except apparently, I don't have to, because she's feeling bold enough for the both of us. She kisses the back of my head and says, "I was hoping for a little more than that."

I feel myself tense up, and she immediately backs down. "I mean, only if you want to - shit, I'm sorry, I just totally pushed that on you and I don't even know if you like that kind of thing or want to with me or-"

I put a hand over her mouth to shut her up. I shift my body so we're face to face, both my legs draped over one of hers on the chair. "Martian. There is nothing I want more than to be

with you. And I want..." I feel my eyes drifting down, scanning her body with a jolt of something new. "I want this too."

She nods, and I cup her face in my hand and bring our lips together. The taste of her is so familiar that I feel myself smile, melting into it. One kiss with Tess feels like coming home to a warm house on a cold winter night. I could live the rest of my life off of those simple kisses alone.

But we both just agreed that we want so, so much more than that.

Tess deepens the kiss, her hands gripping in my hair with a force that would probably hurt if I wasn't so enthralled by the touch of her fingertips. Her tongue explores my mouth, the shared taste of salt turning sweet and hot, burning through our jaws and ricocheting through my brain, making me dizzy as her lips leave mine and she moves to kiss my neck. Before she can touch me again, she tugs on the leg of my jean shorts, which have ridden up my thighs far enough to expose all of my cellulite and stretch marks which, for the first time, I have no desire to cover up and hide away.

I follow her gesture, swinging one of my legs to the other side of her hips and straddling her on the chair. Her hands immediately move to the back of my shorts and slide into my pockets as she sighs gently, her lips finally moving to my neck and kissing me so hard there that I forget how to breathe. I press my hips against hers so tightly that I can practically feel her skin through the layers of fabric separating us. She brings her hips up slightly, and we ride against each other, surfing on adrenaline. I feel something hot coiling inside me, coming to rest in the pit of my stomach. I don't know what I'm feeling anymore, but as she nips at my neck gently, her teeth grazing against my collarbone, I know I never, ever want her to stop.

I feel myself pulling her tank top over her head like my brain and my body are disconnected. The familiar curves of her breasts are pressing against a black laced bra that I make quick work of, her newly exposed skin like a voice calling to me. My eyes trail down her body, breathing in every inch of her, and I feel the heat inside me intensify. I let my hands travel

down her chest, swirling in simple patterns and eliciting a gasp from Tess's swollen mouth. She tugs at my shirt desperately, practically ripping it away and removing my bra so fast that I barely have time to think before her mouth is sinking into my soft skin. I groan as her tongue teases my flesh, the heat in my stomach compressing and intensifying. She takes her time, touching me everywhere, drawing out each gesture. I pull her closer still, my hips grinding downwards, needing, needing, needing. I've never needed anything so much. I press myself deeply against her thigh, desperate to feel more, to *have* more of her.

Tess smiles a little bit. "Someone's eager."

"Shut the fuck up," I manage to retort around shaky breaths.

She jolts her thigh upwards teasingly in response, sending a shockwave through my entire body. I feel like my heart has stopped. She does it again, and this time something between a cry and a gasp escapes me as that heat in my stomach recoils, fighting back against Tess's movements. Before she can take me any farther, Tess pulls her leg out from under mine.

"You know, I don't think a desk chair is a great place to have sex." She tilts her head back in the direction of the bed with a question in her eyes. In response, I rise off of her and grab her around the waist, pulling her towards me and allowing her to walk me backwards and push me down onto the blue comforter. Her face is above mine, a hunger in her eyes I've never seen before. Then, she laughs again.

"Didn't think you were a bottom," she smirks.

"Yeah well. I guess I'm an enigma." I grab her hips and pull her down on top of me. "Shut your fucking mouth and take my clothes off."

"Your wish is my command." Tess fumbles with my zipper in the dim light, exposing my underwear, and gently tugs my shorts down my thighs and off of my legs. She tosses my underwear aside, makes quick work of her own clothes, and here we are, skin against skin, nothing left to separate us but lust.

The more she touches me, the more she draws me out of myself and into these pure, feral feelings and thoughts, the more the world falls away, and it's just her and me in this bed. Our motions escalate quickly, and when her head dips below my hips, I grip the sheets, whole body clenched, and allow sounds to escape I didn't know I was capable of making. Her mouth moves in perfect duality with my body, fuelling the heat until it blazes into a full roar. I muffle my cries in a pillow as she draws me slowly over the edge, my back arching up off of the mattress, my whole body drenched in sweat.

When my breathing finally begins to slow, she slides back on top of me, her lips returning to my face. "Was that... ok?"

"Tess." I slowly help us both rise to a seated position and kiss her hard on the mouth. "That was perfect. How did you..."

"Josh." She smirks again. "Never thought I'd get to use that on a girl, though."

"Well, it was amazing." I let my fingers travel down, grazing over her stomach roughly before coming to rest on the inside of her thigh. "Mind if I take you for a spin?"

"Please."

"I don't think it will work very well, but-"

"Daniella." Tess grabs my wrist, and looks into my eyes with a longing I've never seen there. "It's you. Anything would work."

I nod, and gently coax her body through the same tenses and releases that she just brought me through. When it's over, her whole body is shaking, and we fall onto the pillows and make out for what feels like years. When we finally come up for air, we're both euphoric, and we can't seem to get our hands off of each other. I don't ever want to stop touching her.

This, I think, as we lay beside each other later, drifting into sleep with my head on her chest, is what it truly feels like to be happy.

*Chapter Thirty-Five - Tess - April 11th*

In the morning, I wake up with Dani's head on my chest, and for the first time in a while, the very first emotion that enters me is pure, uninterrupted elation. She's already awake, scrolling through instagram on her phone, and when she feels me stir, she adjusts herself, resting her chin against my shoulder.

"Hi," she whispers.

"Hey." I wrap my arms around her. "Last night was fun."

"Yeah. Really fun." Dani runs a hand through her hair and grimaces. "God, I need to shower. And I have work I need to do today - I'm sorry, I know we're only here a little bit longer."

"No it's ok. I actually..." I hesitate a little bit, and she turns back to me, a question in her gaze. "I have something I need to take care of today. It's a little bit of a hike, so I was just gonna go alone. You could work while I'm gone?"

She nods. "For sure. Where are you headed?"

"Uh." I avert my eyes slightly. "If it's ok, I'd rather not say?"

"Oh." She looks a bit hurt, and instantly I feel bad.

"It's not you, I just really don't want anybody to feel tempted to follow me. It's that thing related to my dad - I'm sorry I'm being so secretive, he's just a sort of touchy subject and-"

"Tess, it's completely fine." Her eyes have softened. "Do what you need to do, and I'll be here waiting when you get back. Though for the record, if you need to talk about anything, I'm here."

"Thank you, Daniella." I plant a kiss on the top of her head, and rise to my feet to get ready for a very, very long morning.

...

When I get downstairs, Ash is sitting silently in our old recliner, headphones on, knee bouncing against the red fabric of the cushions. Her stare is dull, her mouth is twisted into its usual grimace. I sigh, heading into the room, making sure to walk in from a place that allows her to see that it's me and not mom.

She takes off her headphones. "I heard the fight."

"I know."

"I can stay here."

"No, baby, you can't." I squeeze in next to her and play with her stick-straight hair. "You're going to destroy yourself if you stay here." I tug on her sleeve a little, which makes her flinch. "I saw the scars. I know you're hurting. And I can help. I can bring you with me. We can both have a year away from mom, a year for you to get better."

"She'll never let me go." Ash's voice is bitter, and almost... sad? "I'll live out the remainder of my days trapped under this roof where she can pretend someone still cares about her enough to stay."

"You do not have any obligation to be that person for her." Please, god, let her understand. "You deserve to be happy. You deserve a chance to try."

"I want to want that."

"I know, baby."

She nestles against me. "Did you and Dani have sex last night?"

I choke on my own spit. "Ash!"

"Sorry, you were just making some weird ass noises last night. Don't worry, mom wasn't here to hear them."

"Tom?"

"Tom."

"Well, yes, we did have sex." I feel myself flush pink.

Ash doesn't miss a beat. "Was it good? Did you... you know..."

I choke again, now bright red. “You cannot ask me that!”

In a rare turn of events, she smiles and chuckles lightly. “I actually can, and I just did.”

“I am not discussing this with my baby sister.”

“Hey, you don’t know what I did while you were gone.”

“Leaving now!”

“Love you sis!”

...

I’m not entirely sure why I didn’t tell Dani about the anniversary.

I mean, it’s a pretty common thing. People die, you visit them monthly or yearly to mourn and heal. But for some reason, it’s still weird to talk about, so I just don’t. Dad is the one topic I haven’t really touched on with Dani in the eight months I’ve known her. Even last night, I didn’t really touch on dad before he died. I honestly don’t like to think about it. I’ll get around to it at some point, it’s just been... hard.

I turn into the graveyard and notice that, thankfully, the parking lot is empty. I hate going off on existential monologues to a stone in the ground when there are people there to gawk at me, even when many of them are there for the exact same reason. It just feels like the sort of moment that should be kept private. Like, why can’t gravestones have little soundproof barriers around them? That would make everyone’s lives so much easier.

I know the path to dad’s grave by heart. Up the path, make a right, eight rows down and five places in. It’s a small grave, and the flowers I now know were left by Ash a month ago are long dead. The grass has long grown over the dirt, erasing any proof of the digging of this grave. It makes me angry, for some reason. Like the universe wants me to feel like dad was never here.

I sit down in the grass, still wet from morning dew. I lay down the flowers I brought, and then pull out the single rose - his favorite flower - scattering the petals one by one. I trace the letters of his name in the stone three times, and only then do I pull out the envelope.

I didn't write his name on it - I couldn't bear to put those two words down in ink. Never once in the letter did I use the word "dad." For some reason, it felt like this would be easier if I was treating the ghostly recipient of my words like just another person I was speaking to on the street. Nothing about this is easy, so I choose to remain as numb as possible.

But no numbness can hide the sting in my gut upon opening the envelope and pulling out the sheet of paper that, even though it was written only a few nights ago, feels like it was penned by an entirely different person. I try to scan the words, but it all blurs together. I can't see through the tears I'm working so hard to fight back, and it frustrates me so much that I scream, crumpling the letter in my hands and ripping it into small pieces that scatter across the wind.

I press my head against the stone, still shaking to hold back the tears. I cannot cry. I have to stay strong for my sister.

It's that thought that finally gives me the courage to open my mouth.

"Hey. Two years. That's a long time. You probably wouldn't have thought it was so long. You loved to tell me that every day was a new adventure. Every time I was sad, you told me that tomorrow was a new day, and that inherently gave it possibility. You told me to sleep off the heartache. I don't know how to sleep off this one, though, because you're not here to tell me it will all be ok." I take a shaky breath. I will *not* cry today.

"Two years. A lot happened during this one. I spent a lot of it in London, actually. I'm at school there. Don't ask me what I'm studying, because I don't even know right now, if I'm being completely honest. But I've made a lot of friends, so I guess that's something. I love the city, I love exploring. Got that from you, probably. I've found a lot of little cafes and bookstores that I go to during my time off. You would have loved it there.

"Big thing though - I got a girlfriend. I'm bisexual - surprise. I think you always knew, even though it was too late to come out to you by the time I wanted to. You always bought me queer books, and little things with rainbows on them. I wish you had known for real. I wish you



could meet Dani. You heard all about Josh that last year - my unrequited crush to end all unrequited crushes. Honestly, I can't believe how much I cared back then. He was a blip on my road to finding this amazing girl. You would have loved her. She would have loved you too, I know it."

Another shaky breath. This part is going to be the hardest to get out, but I know I've got to.

"Ash isn't doing great. She went to a hospital at the beginning of the year - she won't tell me anything about it, but I'm sensing it didn't help a lot. The crash really did a number on her. Honestly, I don't blame her. She... she really misses you. I really miss you too. But I can't tell her that. I have this whole big plan. She comes back to London with me, I help her get better. But mom would never allow that. Ever since you died mom's been worse than ever. If I'm being completely honest, I've grown to hate her. She just makes me want to *scream*. But I can't say that to Ash, either." I feel the tears coming back to my eyes, and I squeeze them shut, my jaw clenching in building anger.

"Because I'm the strong one. I've had to be the strong one ever since you left. If I'm not strong for her, nobody will be. But I'm tired of it. I'm tired of acting like I'm ok when I've never been further from it. I'm tired of holding back tears that I just want to let out. I'm tired of feeling powerless and pushing it away because no matter how hard I hurt, I'll always know she hurts more. But it does hurt. Every day I wake up in that hurt. And the one person who I could always count on to tell me that tomorrow will be better is right here - a few words carved into a stone on this lawn. That's all I have left.

"And I am scared. I'm fucking terrified. I'm scared that I'll forget your face or your voice. I'm scared that little memories we made will start to fade - moments that shouldn't matter, but that I want to keep forever. Moments I won't have time to write down before they're pulled away, just like you were. I can't handle the idea of you not existing, at least inside me. What

would I do then? But no matter how scared I get, I stay strong, because if I don't stay strong, I lose her, and then I'd have nothing. And I wish... I just fucking wish I could cry sometimes."

And with those words escaping me, I do cry. I cry for everything I've lost. I cry for the days and days and days I've gone without hugging him, or seeing the smile behind his big blue eyes, or laughing until I can't feel my ribs. I cry for all the nights I've lain awake praying to the god I don't believe in that it was me in that crash, so that Ash would still have a father to love and care for her in a way I know I never can. I still wish for that.

I really do still wish for that.

"I wish it was me, I wish it was me, I *fucking wish it was me!*" I scream into the void, and I scream and scream and scream, until my voice is raw, and my breathing shakes too much to allow any sound to slip between my vocal chords. I break down into hysterical sobs, curling against myself in the grass and coughing up my lungs. I've never felt so much hurt stabbing through me. When I finally bring myself to stop, the sobs subsiding into hiccups, the tears drying into sticky residue on my face, I realize I've been curled against dad's headstone the whole time. I rise to my knees and, with shaking hands, trace each letter of his name again.

*Robert Martin.*

*R, O, B, E, R, T, M, A, R, T, I, N.*

I place a kiss against the headstone, and push to my feet. I know I must look like a mess, grass in my hair, splotchy face, wrinkled sweater. But I've never felt so rawly alive.

"Happy two years, dad. I love you more than the sun and the moon. I miss you more than I can put into words. I'll never stop thinking of you. I'll never forget you."

And with that, I take the empty envelope that once housed the feelings I thought I was supposed to have, tuck it into the grass beside dad, and walk back down the path, the laces of my converse dragging through the untrodden dust.

***End of Part Two***

# *Part Three*

### Chapter Thirty-Six - Dani - April 14th

I've never been happier to fall into one of Northbank's uncomfortable ass beds.

The first night home feels like falling into a bathtub full of marshmallows. Tess and I have pretty much given up on sleeping in separate beds at this point, so we curl up under her big comforter and watch YouTube together until she drifts off. The jet lag is definitely hitting me hard again, probably because it's still my first time; I can't sleep a wink the whole night.

Eventually, I get up and go out for my walk. I haven't taken one since Tess and I started dating - she's very adamant that I have a healthy sleep schedule, and shockingly, it's begun to rub off on me. But I missed what our campus looked like under pale moonlight. I missed seeing the red bricks turn black, and watching the stars dance off the water of our central fountain. It makes me feel like I'm actually living life moment by moment. To see the small beauties of life is to feel like you're truly a part of something. I don't feel that very often.

And so, our days and nights carry on like this. A week without classes proves to be a week of some... experimentation. It almost feels like we're back in the honeymoon phase but with a *lot* more skin showing. A few tips we learned. One: if you're going to have sex in a car, don't do it in the same row as the steering wheel. Two: if you're going to have sex in a car, remember the car is not soundproof. Three: if you're going to have sex in a car, make sure there are no people anywhere near you. Four: don't have sex in a car. Stick to the shower.

It's weird. Before Tess, I always kind of assumed sex would end up being super overrated. It always sounded so slimy and awkward, and some of the things I read about were disgusting. But now it feels like I can't stop touching her. It's an addiction - an endless cycle of pleasure neither of us is able to shake for the first three days we're back. I actually start to lose count of how many times we do it. The day that finally snaps us back to focus is the day we forget to lock our door and Kiki walks in on... something that should never be walked in on. Needless to say, we reign it in after that.

On Friday, I kiss my girlfriend goodbye and finally, *finally* get to go home to my dad. I've only been able to call him once since I got back because we've both been busy with work (and other things, in my case. Whoops). So when I get to the door and the first thing I see is the fully set up sofa bed in our living room, littered with blankets and soda cans, I do a little bit of a double take. Dad hasn't slept in the living room since he was in treatment. Did something happen while I was gone?

"Dad?" I call out, setting my suitcase down by the door.

"Hi, Dani."

What the-

Damon steps out of the hall, leaning against the door jamb. His hair has been cut shorter, falling in neat curls around his ears. His eyes are sunken and bloodshot, but his skin is warmer than it is pale, and he's wearing his shoes on the correct feet.

I hate every question that rises to my head, so I don't ask any of them. Instead, I narrow my eyes at him and say, "What the actual hell?"

"Hey sis." He shifts his weight almost awkwardly. "Surprise. I moved home."

"When?"

"While you were gone. Figured if you had been here you would have thrown me out immediately."

"You're damn right I would have. And I still will now. Get out."

"Dani, please, wait." His eyes focus on mine. "I'm clean. I've been clean for five days."

"Ha. Sure. You're funny."

"Sis, I'm deadass." He doesn't come towards me, but he steps off the wall, as in debating whether moving is safe at this moment. "I want to be better. I've been trying for so damn long. While you were gone and dad was working, I was able to have a space to myself here for the first time in years. I started setting timers, counting things... stupid coping shit. I can't make you promises but I'm trying. Does that mean anything?"

“I don’t know, Dame, does it?” I glare at him. “This isn’t the kind of shit I forgive just because I went across the ocean for a week and came back to a not completely evil you.”

“Dans-”

“No. Shut your goddamn mouth, for once.” I advance on him, and he shrinks back slightly. “You left us. Mom left, and then you. You left us with almost nothing. We’ve been living off of my work and your rent for two years. This is no way to fucking live. And you expect to just waltz back in here and be a part of the family again? Like hell you can do that. You are not sleeping under the same roof as me ever again.”

“Dani, please.” He almost looks desperate. That’s ironic. “I don’t have anywhere else to go. I’ll do whatever you want me to do, I’ll lock myself in a room all day so you never have to look at my face. I’ll get a good job, I’ll do anything. Please just let me stay.”

I look him up and down. He’s honestly shaking. He looks like he’s about to cry.

Deep down inside me, behind a brick wall I built up the day mom left, I feel a small pang of sympathy for Damon. I want to believe so badly that he’s trying for our family, no matter how much he doesn’t fucking deserve it.

“Ok.” I stare at him. “I assume I don’t have to repeat the ground rules, as you already pulled this bullshit once?”

“No beer, no drugs, no friends, more cash. That it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s it.”

“Great.”

“Great.”

Neither of us really knows how to end this conversation. So, I don’t. I move past him and go to my room, locking the door and immediately collapsing onto my bed.

“Fuck you, Damon,” I mutter, watching the ceiling fan spin round and round. “Fuck you all to hell.”

...

“He’s back?”

Bradley’s face is stunned, though it would be easier to see that if his too-long hair wasn’t whipping every which way in the morning wind. He picked me up this morning to take me back to school, and we both decided that we needed a walk and talk. However, I do not think that discovering my psychotic, drugged-up brother moved home is exactly what Bradley signed up for.

“Yeah. I let it happen. I doubt it’ll last.”

“I don’t know, D.” He kicks a loose pebble as a cyclist whizzes past us on the path.

“Maybe you should give him a chance.”

“B, I’ve given him a thousand fucking-”

“I know, I know. But did he ever seem like he was really trying those times? Was he ever really sober?”

I pause to consider that. “I mean... no. No he wasn’t.”

“That in and of itself is progress, right?”

“I guess so? I don’t know, Bradley. I don’t know if I’ll ever really be able to trust him the way I did before. He hurt me too much for that.”

“Dani, sometimes you need to give someone one hundred chances in order for the last time to stick.”

I sigh. “Can we talk about something more fun?”

“You know exactly what I’m going to ask.”

Already, I feel myself blush. “Do I?”

“Oh yes.” He raises his eyebrows at me suggestively.

“If you’re wondering if we... you know.”

“Banged? Did the deed? Got hot and heavy? Popped your cherry? Tapped some fine-”

“Jesus Christ, will you ever stop talking?”

“Probably not.”

I groan. “Fine. Yeah, we hooked up.”

“Hooked up as in you took off your shirts and made out for an hour, or hooked up as in...”

“Hooked up as in we had sex.” I pause, smiling sheepishly. “Several times.”

“Several times in one night???” His mouth is hanging open. “Goddamn, D, I didn’t take you to be so thirsty.”

“No! I mean, it was a few times in one night, and then a lot of times since we got back.”

“Ah, the honeymoon phase. I remember that, from back in my early days.”

“You have been in exactly one relationship in your life, shut the fuck up.”

“Alright, alright, my point still stands.”

“She’s so...” I feel a smile despite myself. “She’s the perfect girl. I love her so much I can’t even put it into words anymore.”

“Awwww. You’re so sappy.”

“I hate you so much.”

“No you don’t.” He grins. “So how was it?”

“B!”

“You heard me!”

“God, you need to stay in your own business.”

“You are my sister from another mister, Dani.”

“Ew.”

“Come on!”

I wrinkle my nose. “If I tell you, will you promise to never say that again?”

“Absolutely.”

“Fantastic.” I avert my gaze from his. This is awkward enough as it is. “It was great. I loved every second of it. She’s... she’s really good at making me...”

“Oh damn, you really *went* there.” Bradley is cracking himself up, and I shove him with my shoulder.



“Shut up. She has more experience than me. And I thought that would be an issue, but it didn’t feel like anything. We both had fun. It was great. Awesome. Is that enough for you?”

“Oh no. Not yet.” He’s still cackling. “Were you on top?”

“I am not answering that.”

“You *weren’t* on top?” He throws his head back. “Oh, this is a great day.”

“I actually want you to die.”

“And yet, you will continue to answer my questions.” He leans in close, like he’s getting in on some secret. “Where’d you do it?”

“Nope!”

“Yep!”

“You will never leave me alone, will you?”

“Nope!”

“Yep.” I sigh. “It was just her bed. That’s all it’s been, except once in a car..”

I actually don’t think Bradley is breathing through his laughter. “You have fully exceeded my expectations, Dan.”

“Well, I’m glad to have been of use to your entertainment.”

“See? What would I do without you?”

*Chapter Thirty-Seven - Tess - April 17th*

“Are you sure about this?”

Kiki is holding my hand on the bench beside the staircase to the academic advisor’s office. My knee is bouncing anxiously against the wooden slats, my converse squeaking slightly on the waxy floor. I’ve got a folder in my unoccupied hand, and Kiki has my backup copy, which I kept in case anything got lost in the shuffle.

Her eyes are filled with concern. “You know that she’s probably going to say no, right?”

“Yeah. I know.” I fix my gaze straight ahead at one of the unintelligible modern art pieces that seem to be scattered all around this school. It’s literally just a mirror under plexiglass. I do not understand art. “I have to try. I need to give this my all. It’s not even for me anymore. My sister deserves a better life. She deserves a life here.”

“I know, babes.” She rests her head on my shoulder. “God, I want you to stay.”

“Me too.”

“You’re my best friend in the whole fucking galaxy.”

“And you’re mine.” I feel my stomach lurch with that realization.

I think she notices it too, because she asks, “Have you talked to Rett at all about what happened over the holiday?”

“No, and I don’t plan to.”

“Tess, you have to at least talk to her.”

“Do I really?”

“Yes. Sometimes your best friend sleeps with your ex. It happens. And it sucks when it does. But you have to understand that there are always more voices than just yours telling them what decision they should make. You gotta take a step back and think about her side. A guy who you know hurt your best friend is the same guy that might finally see you for who you are.

You've been gone, Tess. She needs someone to trust and love. And I know it sucks, and I probably sound like an asshole, but..."

"No, you sound completely right." I let a deep sigh escape my lungs. "I'll call her this weekend. But... do you think you could call her with me? For moral support."

Kiki grins at me. "I thought you'd never ask."

We laugh, and then I stand and grab the backup envelope from her. "Ok. Guess it's time to face the music."

"Guess so." She hugs me tightly. "Go get 'em. I love you."

"Love you too."

The door to Ms. Barnes' office is open a crack, and I can hear muffled voices coming from inside. I check my watch. 1:59. She really must not waste a single minute.

To my surprise, the person coming out of the office is someone I recognize - Ms. Ng, Dani's music teacher. I haven't even thought about her in several months - Dani doesn't really talk about her music, and from what I can assume, I think she's pretty much stopped writing it, though I don't entirely know why.

"Come in, Ms Martin." Ms. Barnes is in her big desk chair rifling through some paperwork. I immediately notice that there is a file on her desk with my name on it, and that makes my stomach drop a little.

"Thank you for seeing me, Ms. Barnes." I sit across from her and tuck the extra folder under my chair. "I assume you know I'm here to ask about renewing my tuition?"

"I was made aware of that, yes." She peers at me over the top of her glasses. "I won't lie to you, Ms Martin - renewing a foreign student who is on full financial aid isn't exactly common, and with your grades I can't make any promises."

"Ms Barnes." I open the folder and start taking out the papers I need to make this first point. "I know I declared an academic focus in econ, but we both know I'm terrible at it. I don't want to do that at university. I want to be a creative writing major. And in the English and

writing classes I am taking, I have the grades to prove that were I to shift my focus, I could probably get into a good enough uni to make that extra financial aid money worth your while in the long run.”

She narrows her eyes, but takes the transcript from me and begins looking over my semester reports from my two writing teachers. Her face betrays absolutely nothing as her eyes scan the words, but when she eventually sets down the paper, she still looks extremely skeptical. “In your email you mentioned you were trying to come up with a way for your sister to come over here with you. I assume you have plans for her housing and schooling?”

“Yes.” Not really, but I’m working on it.

“And how is that going to blend into your class schedule? Do you think a straight-A student will continue to maintain those A’s while also looking after another human being?”

I sit up straight and tall. “I think I can make it happen. Nothing matters more to me than my sister’s safety.”

“Including your grades?”

Ouch.

“I will make sure to prioritize both factors. With all due respect, ma’am, I am an intelligent person. I know I can pull this off if I am given the chance to put my mind to it.”

She sighs, flipping through a few more pages of my paperwork. “Do you really think that you would be able to make that money worth our while if your curriculum was appropriately adjusted?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And you are aware of the work you’d need to put in to make that happen?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She studies me carefully. “I will see what I can do, Ms Martin.”

My heart jumps into my throat. I want to let out a scream of excitement, but I am not about to let an impulsive burst of unprofessionalism ruin this moment. “Thank you, ma’am. I won’t let you down.”

She smiles, just a little. “You’d better not.”

...

Kiki insists on buying me a milkshake in celebration. I try to remind her that this doesn’t guarantee anything, and that even if it does, my mom is still an issue, but she refuses to be anything but positive about the day. I kind of love her for that.

“So, what is the plan for mommy dearest?” Kiki shovels cafeteria fries into her mouth, looking at me eagerly from across the table. She is a little high on sugar and very high on life though, to be fair, that isn’t really anything new.

“Honestly, I don’t know.” My knee bounces under the table, making the floor feel like it’s caving under me. “She was really damn adamant. I don’t think there’s anything that will shake her.”

“Blackmail?”

She says it with a laugh, but I have actually considered it more times than I’d care to admit. I’ve scrounged my memory for traces of anything I could theoretically use against her, and every time it all comes up empty. Because this woman is a snake. She sucks everything out of you and all she gives you in return is a few meager drops of poison. When I really think about it, I know nothing about her at all. I fucking hate that.

“Tess, you’ll figure something out.” Kiki drops the joking attitude and puts her hand over mine. “You’re going to make this work. You care too much not to succeed.”

I shake my head a little. “Can we talk about something else? You still haven’t told me about your job applications.”

She groans, putting her head in her hands. “Not that. Anything but that.”

“So I take it it’s going well, then.”

“Not one email back.”

I wince. “Yeah that’s not great.”

“The worst part is I fit all the requirements. I don’t know if people don’t want to hire me because I’m young, or because I’m Asian, or because I don’t have much experience, but I swear, you would think one goddamn salon is looking for someone.”

“Fuck them all. You’re probably more talented than all of these ladies put together.”

She laughs. “That is extremely unlikely, but I do appreciate the sentiment.”

“Sentiment is what I tend to do best.”

Kiki dips another fry into her obscenely large puddle of ketchup. “I’m trying to take a step back and think about how many applications they must get. But at the same time, I just wish I could get recognized somehow, you know?”

“Yeah. Believe me, I get it. But it’s gonna happen for you. You just gotta give it some time. I know that must suck to hear.”

“Yeah, it really does.”

“Well, it’s true. Things take time. But you’ve got this.”

She smiles weakly. “Thanks, babes.”

I take her hand and pull her out of her chair. She looks at me extremely skeptically, raising one perfectly lined eyebrow. “Where are we going?”

“Back to the dorm, and you’re gonna do whatever the hell you want to my hair without cutting or dying it.”

Her small smile pulls itself up into a full faced grin. “You know me too well, Tess Martin.”

“Hey, what can I say? I’m just amazing like that.”

### *Chapter Thirty-Eight - Dani - April 24*

The days begin to go by, and eventually they bleed into a full week of Damon being home. My routine begins to feel oddly usual. I see Damon when I come home that weekend - I live under a roof with him, and somehow we both make it out alive. He drinks sprite, and watches TV, and he even cooks something for me, though he does make sure that he's out of the house by the time I find it on the stove. It's starting to feel oddly like old times - that, truly, is what scares me the most.

But my brother is far from being the only thing on my mind. The end of my junior year is fast approaching, and I have a lot to do to prepare for exams and for next year. Tonight is my last shift at the bookstore before I take four weeks off to focus on school before the break. I'll go back to working once a week through exams, and then full time again for the summer. As great as dad's been doing, I'm not about to put all the financial strain on him so fast.

As well as all that, I've been trying to see Tess as much as possible. I know she's trying to stay here, and I know she wants to, but I also know that there's a very high chance she'll leave me in three months. That could be it for us. I want to believe in things like long distance and shared unis, but when it comes down to it, I'm a pessimist by nature.

So I cherish every moment. Every kiss, every touch, every word or laugh or breath of air shared. I hold her closer when we sleep, I smile wider when she holds my hand, I throw my head back when she says something funny. I do everything I never thought I'd do. I do all the things you do when you're in love.

On Monday afternoon, Tess and I are together in the dorm when she gets a preliminary email from her advisor with the subject "Financial Renewal."

"Fuck." Tess covers her face with a pillow. "I can't look."

"It's going to be ok. You have to read it sometime - might as well be now, while I'm here and can hug you."

“Fair enough.” She opens the email, and doesn’t even scan it before reading aloud.

Dear Ms Martin,

I’ve spoken to the foreign exchange team about renewing your registration and scholarship, as well as with the proper legal advisors you requested upon our last correspondence. Were this to be under normal circumstances, I would be able to give you definite confirmation today that you’ll be allowed to return. They approved your academic plan, and are willing to allow you, along with thirty percent of other exchange students, to stay on for the remainder of sixth form.

However, yours is not a typical situation. Your sister is a unique factor that took some persuasion to accept even this far. We will need a detailed financial plan from you for her housing and schooling, as well as a letter of approval from a legal guardian, by the 1 of June, 2022. Once we have this, we will be able to officially approve you for a second year here. If you are not able to comply with these things, you are still welcome to stay on for your second year, but your sister will not be able to accompany you.

Please reply to this email within forty-eight (48) hours to let me know that you have received the information.

Sincerely,

Rachel Barnes, PhD

Tess blinks a few times, and then turns to me. “Well. I’m screwed, then. No way my mom would ever sign anything like that.”

“Is there really nothing you could say to convince her?”

“I don’t think so.” She stares at the raindrops sliding slowly down our window. “That woman is a narcissistic prick. She can’t see more than a few feet past her own ego.”



“Ok, well, that’s still a few available feet.” I rub up and down her arm gently. “Maybe all she needs is for someone to put something close enough to her field of vision that it snaps her to attention.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Tess turns and smiles sadly. “You know, I really never thought it would come to this. Me and mom in a stalemate over something as obviously important as this.”

“I know. But now it’s here, and you have to figure out a way to deal.” I pull her against me and lean into the pillows. “You’re so strong, Martian. You’re gonna get through this, I promise.”

...

My shift feels oddly bittersweet. I know I’m gonna be back in four weeks, but the structure of this job is one of the only things that ever really makes me feel grounded. I thrive living on a series of schedules. Dropping this one is gonna be really weird.

Nothing of particular interest even happens during the shift - we’re always slow early in the week, and new releases don’t even get in until tomorrow. I spend most of my time reshelving, replacing, and updating our inventory. The few times customers do come in, I get first dibs - I’m the only part-timer in today, so Rei needs the extra help anyway. I sell a couple of horrors and one romance, and then suddenly I’m hugging my boss goodbye, taking my paycheck, and walking out the door to head home.

When I get there, as always, Damon is slumped on the couch. He is completely passed out, empty soda can dangling from one hand. His knees are curled into his chest, and he’s got a giant sweater on. It almost - *almost* - brings a smile to my face. He looks so young like this - it brings a strange warmth into my chest. Almost like this really is a new beginning.

Of course, shortly after thinking that, my heart breaks.

In the kitchen, I open the fridge to retrieve some sort of substance vaguely resembling nutrition. There’s a box of raspberries that I grab greedily, but behind it, there’s a small cardboard box I don’t recognize. I pull it out and open it to find -

No.

Nope.

I storm into the living room and shove Damon off the couch. He hits the ground with a *thunk*, jolting away and looking at me in a combination of confusion and annoyance.

“What the hell, Dans?”

“Don’t even bother. Get out.”

Now he looks mad. “Excuse me, what?”

I throw the box at his head. The small baggies of powder spill into his lap, the box itself sliding under the couch.

“This,” I say, my hands shaking, “is exactly why I didn’t want you to come home.”

“Dani, I swear I can explain.” He rises to his feet. My brother was always tall, but since he left he’s shot up to well over six feet, causing him to quite literally tower over me.

“By all means, do explain this, Dame.” I refuse to break eye contact. “Because part of the deal when you moved home was that you can’t have any of this shit. We agreed.” My voice breaks a little. “You promised me.”

“Dani, sobriety is not a straight line.” Damon’s face is hard set and vengeful, but his eyes are begging me. “If I was going through horrific enough withdrawal side effects, I could be a danger to myself anyway. If I’m here alone, I’d just leave, go back to my old boss, and get some more. It’s better I break here than somewhere else.”

“Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you barged back into this family thinking it was yours.”

Now he’s *really* mad. “Ok, Dani. With all due respect, you know absolutely nothing about my struggles or how I cope with them. I am trying so goddamn hard for you right now - the least you could do is acknowledge that. I’ve never tried harder to do anything than I’m trying to be clean for you. If it were up to me, I’d probably be on the streets right now looking for another drugged up roommate. But I’m here, and I’m fucking trying, and it’s only for you. Is that seriously not enough?”

His words throw me off a little, but I try not to let them phase me. “I know you’re trying. But you lied to me, and you didn’t follow the very simple rules I laid out. So I want you gone by the morning.”

He grips his scalp so tightly that I think he’ll eventually pull out hair. “Dani, you can’t do this to me. I have nowhere to go. I don’t have friends. I just have you and dad and-”

“Live with your... I don't know, your supplier, for all I care. Just don’t stay here.”

I don’t stay to hear his argument - I march my way down the hall and slam my bedroom door as loudly as I possibly can.

Of course, the one time I actually need to get a hold of my mom is the one time she won't pick up her phone. You would think with the amount of times she calls me to make sure I'm not stepping out of line that she could answer her own calls one goddamn time. But no - all ten calls I've sent her over the last two days have gone directly to voicemail.

God, I really hate my mom sometimes.

But come Wednesday, staying in London ends up being the last thing on my mind.

It started out like a typical day. Dani and I woke up beside each other, got breakfast with Kiki and Bradley, and went our separate ways for class. My days are eerily quiet now - because I dropped all of my econ related classes, I'm only technically registered in two electives for the remainder of the semester. But, on the bright side, my other grades have gone up! I've got a B+ average pretty much across the board. That felt so impossible a few months back.

Getting those averages put me in a weird state of euphoria - I'm so high that I don't immediately notice my phone absolutely exploding. When I eventually do, I'm still smiling as I click into the texts and calls.

My face falls.

Completely drops.

Dani has called me six times. I have seventeen texts from her, ten from Bradley, half a dozen from Kiki, and several from mom.

I click on Dani's texts first.

*tess.*

*tess pls pick up ur phone*

*martian*

*tess come on*

*please*

*please god i need you*

*tess?*

*tess I can't do this by myself*

*i'm so scared*

*tess please*

*please pick up your phone*

*tess I'm getting an uber pls come*

*tess pls*

*i'm leaving*

*pls come*

*don't let Bradley, I can't face more than just you right now*

*i love you pls come help me*

Holy shit. What the fuck did I miss?

Bradley and Kiki's texts are equally frantic and equally vague. I scramble with my backpack, slinging it over my shoulder like a sack of flour and calling Bradley.

He picks up before it even rings. "Tess, thank god. Where are you?"

"I just got out of class - what the hell is going on?"

"Dani's dad fainted and fell down the stairs. He's in emergency surgery."

"Holy fuck." I exit the building and break into a run. "Where are you?"

"Main lot. I'll call you an uber."

"No, I can't wait that long in this traffic."

"Ok, well what do you suggest? You don't have a car."

I pause. "I do have an idea, but you're not going to like it."

...

"No. Absolutely not." Bradley crosses his arms over his chest, leaning protectively against the hood of his car. "Tess, this is my job. My lifeline. My one true love."

“You literally have a boyfriend. The car is not your one true love. Besides, it’s not even the one you drive for work.” I eye his tiny blue bug skeptically - he can barely fit three people in it, so the thought of it cruising up to an airport to pick up a tourist is almost laughable.

“This was my seventeenth birthday gift from my parents. It is my child.”

“And I promise to take good care of your child,” I say, trying to bring some level of pleading back into my voice. “B, I’m serious. I have to get to Dani as soon as possible, and I don’t have my wallet or my own car to drive. Besides, you should know better than anybody how slow uber is.”

“Then let me drive you,” he says, trying to take out the keys and unlock the driver’s side door.

“You know I can’t,” I say. “She told me she wants to be alone. She needs me right now - just me. I know that sucks. But she’s your best friend - letting me drive this car twenty minutes and back is the best thing you can do to help her right now. Which is why I am asking - *begging* - for you to give me the car. I know how much it means to you, and I promise I won’t hurt it.”

He studies me carefully, clearly thinking. “Are you sure I can’t come?”

I nod.

“And this is the only way I can be there for her right now?”

I nod again.

He approaches me slowly, and reluctantly drops the keys into my palm. “No dents. No scratches, no dings. No going above 75, no messing with anything in the glove compartment, dashboard, backseat or trunk. If you move the seat forward, move it back when you get out. Don’t steal my change or my travel mug, and don’t-”

I grip him in a tight hug, which stuns him into silence. “I won’t touch anything.”

He steps away from me. “Ok. Good.”

I unlock the door, fiddle with the seatbelt, and roll down the window to say goodbye to him.

“Tell Dani I love her, and to text me when she can.” He looks genuinely scared for his best friend, and in that moment, I almost tell him to get in the car and come with me. I don’t want to go into this alone.

But I can’t do that. Because my girlfriend’s dad is in the hospital, and she calls the shots here.

So I promise him I’ll talk to her, kiss him on the cheek, and speed away into the blinding midafternoon sun.

Only at 70 miles per hour, though. I’m not about to break my promises.

You know a surefire way to make a bad week worse? Sitting alone in a hospital waiting room with your phone at ten percent waiting for your dad to get out of surgery for his medication induced fainting spell and broken ribs.

I got the call in class - I honestly didn't process it until the car was halfway to the ER. I broke down screaming in the uber - I swear, that poor driver almost (rightfully) threw me out right there on the highway. Now here we are, in a sea of ugly blues and greys, waiting for some clipboard to come over here and tell us that she's sorry, and that it's too late for my dad.

Where the hell is Tess?

I try to conjure her in my head. She would rest her hand on my violently jolting knee, trying to calm my nerves. *Hey. This is going to be ok.*

"What if it's not?" I say aloud, staring at the double doors across from us, the same ones dad was pushed through on a stretcher not even an hour before. I got here right after the paramedics - I only glimpsed him briefly, but his arm looked fucked up, and his entire body was motionless. He looked dead. After that, I went to the bathroom and threw up until I was sobbing burning tears.

Now, I feel numb. I don't know where the feeling went, but it's like the air has stilled, and the earth has stopped turning. I guess I didn't know how to feel, so I just decided not to feel anything.

The man sitting next to me is older - maybe late sixties. He's been chewing on his lip since we both sat down, and has finally decided to stand and stretch his arms.

Weirdly, he turns to me. "Hey, uh, kid, I'm gonna go get some coffee. Do you want anything? On me."

I'm not sure if this random man I've never met trying to be a parental figure or his use of the phrase "on me" is what gets me, but I find myself on the verge of tears as I muster up my response.

"No. I'm ok."



“You sure?” He studies me carefully. “You really look like you should eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

He shrugs and turns to leave, still watching me over his shoulder. I curl my knees into my chest and lean into the uncomfortable chair, closing my eyes and wondering if this will go away once I’ve slept.

“Dani?”

My eyes snap right the hell open.

Tess is standing in the doorway, her eyes wide and panicked as they scan the rows of chairs. When her gaze lands on me, she actually sprints the seven or eight yards to me. I stand up and fall against her. I’m not crying, just shaking. Shaking harder than I thought was possible.

“Martian,” I whisper into her neck.

“Daniella.” She presses my head into her shoulder. “Jesus. I’m so sorry I didn’t get here sooner, I was in class, and then I had to convince Bradley to let me take his car because uber was too slow, and then traffic was a mess and-”

“Wait. Bradley gave you his *car*? Willingly?”

“In the end, yes.”

That manages to bring a little smile to my face. “Damn, girl. He would block that car with his body in a collision. Nice work.” Then, I feel the panic come back. “Wait, he’s not with you, right?”

“No no, I promise, I saw your texts. He’s back at school with Kiki waiting for us to call.”

“Ok.” I try to breathe evenly, which turns out to be more of a challenge than you’d think.

“Ok.”

“How is he?”

“Still in surgery. The nurses won’t tell us jack shit.” I glance behind me at the front desk, wondering if me storming the ICU in a knocked out nurse’s uniform could get me some more

answers. “They’re not sure if he’s going to make it. He’s so weak - treatment did a number on him and he was still on meds, and...”

“Fuck.” She sinks into a chair and gestures for me to sit on her lap, my face curled against her neck. “You just have to have faith.”

“The last time we talked I was so angry. Dame was home and I was being just awful to them both and I barely spoke to dad the last few days, even on the phone. I was so caught up in my own shit that I couldn’t even bother to call my fucking dad who lives by himself and misses me. What if I’d been home, Tess? What if I’d been able to get him whatever he needed, and help him get back into bed, and then the fall and the injuries and all of this shit could just go away, just like that. What if-”

“Daniella.” Tess tilts my chin towards her face. “You can’t torture yourself right now. This is not your fault, and even if it was, there’s nothing we could do about it now. Let’s just wait and see what the doctors say. Nothing can happen until he’s out of surgery anyway.”

“I know, I know.” I sigh, leaning further into her, trying to hide in the folds of her sweater and disappear from the world through the mirrors in her eyes. “I wish I could run away with you.”

“Me too, my love.” She strokes my hair, her knee absentmindedly shaking under me. Normally the movement would throw me off, but the reminder that we both have that habit makes me smile, so I simply rest a hand on her thigh as it bounces.

“Tess, when this is all over, remind me how much I owe you.”

She sits up a little. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve done so much for me. Were there for me when I thought I was completely alone in the universe. And I feel like I haven’t given you enough in return - like I won’t ever be able to fully repay you for the light you’ve brought into my life.”

“Dani.” Tess again brings my face up to meet hers, this time kissing me on the lips and then the forehead. “You don’t owe me a thing. Words can’t express what you’ve done for me.”

Your love and your support are all I ever need to keep going. Please never think that you're a burden on me. If anything, I kind of always felt like I was a burden on you. My problems seem so minimal when I compare them to yours."

"Oh my god, Tess, no." I look up at her and push a stray red curl behind her ear. "Your problems are just as prevalent and urgent as mine, if not more so."

"Can we just agree to stop thinking of ourselves as burdens to each other?"

I laugh. "Yeah. Yeah I think I like that idea."

"Good." She kisses me again, and we fall asleep there. For once in my life, on this, the worst day of the year, I manage to feel completely at peace, there in the arms of my darling.

...

"Daniella? Dani, darling, wake up."

I drag my eyes open to see a nurse standing over me. She's tall and blonde, and looks like something straight out of a 1950s horror movie with her curls and her red lips. She's holding a clipboard, and she's smiling a little.

I immediately shoot up, accidentally elbowing Tess in the chin which causes her to jolt, gasping with pain. "Sorry," I say to her quickly, then whip my head around. "Dad. My dad, what happened?"

The nurse looks at me, and scans the paperwork in front of her. "Daniella Nelson, right? Charles' daughter?"

I nod so fiercely my scrunchie starts to slip out of my greasy hair. "Yes. Yes, that's me."

"Good. Your dad is going to be just fine."

I throw myself into Tess's arms, feeling the tears on my face and not even bothering to wipe them away. All the feeling comes rushing back into me at once and I have completely forgotten how to breathe, and all I can register is Tess's arms around my waist, her warmth spreading across my skin like a blanket and overcoming the waiting room chill.

"When can we see him?" I ask, keeping my arms around my girlfriend's neck.

“Soon. He’s heavily sedated and we still need to make sure everything is regulated. Then he needs some time to wake up. But I promise you can see him as soon as that happens, ok, dear?”

I nod vaguely, still looking at Tess.

The nurse is looking back and forth between us, looking slightly uncomfortable. “I’ll leave you girls.”

As soon as she’s gone, I grab Tess’s hand and I pull her out of the waiting room, frantically searching the hall for a door that isn’t a bathroom. My eyes land on a supply closet.

“You got a bobby pin?” I ask, and my fucking superhero of a girlfriend pulls one immediately out of her hair.

“You really think you can pick a lock right now? A skill you’ve literally never had to learn before.” Tess is watching me with a mix of scepticism and adoration.

“Desperate times, Martian, desperate times.” I jam the bobby pin around for about two minutes, and by some miracle, I hear a faint click, and the door opens.

“I love you,” Tess says, and I drag her in by her arm.

We don’t have sex in the closet. That’s not why I was so excited to get away. All I wanted was a moment of peace. In a few hours, my dad will wake up, and there will be paperwork and sweat and tears, but for now he’s alive, and I’m alive, and I’m here with this girl I fucking adore, and all I want to do is kiss her and kiss her and kiss her.

And that is exactly what I do.

### **Chapter Forty-One - Tess - April 27**

The nurse sends us home at nine, telling us that Mr. Nelson won’t be waking up tonight and that we should rest. I thought Dani would try to punch her, but she looks about ready to pass out right there, so all she has in her are a few begrudging curses as I lead her out the door.

We sleep at the dorm, where we recently pushed the beds together to make a giant, pillowy fortress of blankets and cuddles. Dani sleeps with her face pressed against my sternum - not entirely sure how she managed that all night without suffocating, but I'm not complaining.

At seven, Dani gets a call from the hospital telling her that her dad is awake and she can see him. She insists that I stay back so she can have some time to quiet her brain in the car, which leaves me alone in the dorm staring at the ceiling, flipping from song to song on spotify aimlessly. I hate how much of me wants to call Rett. I hate missing her so much.

I do call Kiki, but she's working at the salon today - of course she is, it's Saturday. If I call Bradley, he'll want to talk about what happened with Dani's dad, and I can't do that yet, so instead, I text him.

*In dorm if you want to say hi later. Dani's still at the hospital - her dad woke up, so she'll be gone a while. Love u B.*

As I hit send, a call comes through from mom. A FaceTime - that's weird, considering she never uses video chat.

I really don't want to talk to her, but I also don't want to deal with her passive aggression if I don't pick up, so I just click join and groan as it connects me to an image of her face. She has the phone set up on her desk at home, she's in a pantsuit, and she is not smiling.

"Good morning, Theresa."

"Mom, this really isn't a good time. Dani's dad is in the hospital, and..." I trail off. I notice that there's makeup streaking down her face. "Mom, is everything ok?"

"This can't wait, Theresa." She takes in a shaky breath, and says, "Ironically enough, I'm calling to tell you that Ash is also in the hospital. She was checked in last night."

My stomach drops out of my body. My heart stops beating. It feels like the blood drains from me, leaving me as nothing more than a husk of skin and bone.

I know what she's going to tell me already, but I still ask the question. "What the fuck happened?"

Mom looks like she can barely get the words out, like her vocal cords are constricting around this particular set of words. “Your sister tried to take her own life yesterday.”

My knee is jerking so hard that my leg starts to hurt, but I can’t get it to stop. I have to prop the phone up on the bedside table so I don’t make my mom seasick from my shaky hands. “Is she... how’s she doing?”

“Stable. Not happy, but better. She didn’t get very far before I found her.”

“You were actually there when it counted?” I snort. “That’s a first.”

“Theresa, please, for once in your life, listen to me. I think you’ll like what I have to say if you could just let me get through it.”

I bite my tongue. “Ok. Let’s hear it.”

“I’m going to send her to London.”

I actually think I’ve misheard her. “Pardon?”

“You heard me.” She sighs deeply, and I notice that she’s still crying, a little bit. “Look. I know we’ve never had a proper relationship. Any of us, really. Your dad was the glue that held this family together, and when he died...” She bites her lip. “It’s been hard for me. It really has. But I know that no matter how we may feel about each other, your sister’s life has to come first. And I think you’re right. I think she’ll be happier over there with you. And I can make that happen. Get her a visa by the end of the summer, if I pull some strings. I’ll pay for what you need, within reason. Get her into a good school. Maybe an online school so she can take off some stress.”

I stare at her, fully aware of my mouth hanging open. “Mom, are you messing with me?”

“I would not joke about something like this, Theresa.” She dabs at her eyes and does her best to compose herself. “I will help you until you are fully settled into uni and have some sort of job, if you can even get one of substance with your writing. Yes, I do know that you’ve switched programs, and that’s not a battle I have the energy to fight anymore.”

“Ok,” I say, trying not to jump for joy with the knowledge that she knows I went against her direct wishes and is still sending my sister to me. “And after that?”

“I want Ash to come back for her junior and senior years. I want her here with me. Two years with you, two with me.” She laughs darkly. “Split custody, almost. Hilarious.”

I nod. “Ok. And during those two years, you’re going to get your shit together?”

“Theresa-”

“No, mom. My turn to speak.” I breathe in slowly, not even bothering to quell the rage I can feel building. “You neglected me for seventeen years. When dad died, we fucking fell apart. You are such a goddamn hypocrite. You ignore all of our problems, everything going on in our lives, but then turn around and try to control every aspect of our lives. You try to tell me what to do, who to be, who to love, how to live my life. And I’m done with the bullshit, mom. I’m done, and so is Ash.” I stare directly into the camera, and say, “Why do you think she wanted out of that house so damn bad?”

Silence.

I’m expecting fire, anger, screaming. I’m expecting her to tell me that she’s changed her mind - Ash is staying with her for high school because there’s no way I could be a proper guardian to her.

But instead, she does something I don’t think she has ever done in her entire life.

She gives me a curt nod.

“While I don’t agree with the strength of your words, you’re probably right. Ash screamed some similar things at me while I was driving her to the hospital. I don’t think I’ve done right by her. Or by your father.” Now she’s definitely crying - I see the tears sparkling in the lamplight. “He was so much better at this than me. He was meant to be a parent. Not me.”

“Well, it’s too late to fix that now.” I feel a pang of something like sympathy - it’s deep in my chest, but it’s there. “This isn’t gonna make up for his death, but it sure is a good place to start.”

She nods. “Yes. Well. I’ll be starting the process immediately. Ash should be with you by early August.”

“Good.”

“Is Dani ok?”

I blink. “What?”

“Your girlfriend. You said her dad got hurt. Is she ok?”

“I...” I shake my head a little, trying to get over the initial shock of mom trying to care about my life. “Yeah. Yeah, she’s doing a little better. He’s awake now.”

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

The awkward silence is long, but it feels more genuine than almost anything with her ever has. My knee has slowed, my hands have stilled, and my heartbeat seems back to normal.

“Well, I’m going to call her and ask if she needs anything,” I say, and mom seems relieved that I’ve got an excuse to put us both out of our misery.

“Yes. Good.”

“Give Ash my love please, and let me know as soon as I can call her.”

“I’ll be in touch.” Mom gives me one tiny, *tiny* smile, but I still notice it. “Nice accent, by the way.”

A hand goes to my throat. I hadn’t even noticed it yet. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Bye mom.”

“Goodbye, Tess.”

It takes a moment for the nickname to register, and by the time it does, the call has ended, and I’m once again alone, staring at a blank screen.

As if in a trance, I go to my messages, and I’m not sure what about the conversation with mom convinced me to do this, but I open my thread with Rett.



*Hey. I'm ready to talk. You free?*

**Chapter Forty-Two - Dani - April 27**

If asked the question, the number one person I would not have expected to see at the hospital on Saturday morning was Damon Nelson, much less in a suit with a bouquet of lilies.

I'm tired enough that when he approaches me, I don't have it in me to argue as he gingerly takes a seat. "Hey, Daniella."

No *sis*. No *Dani*. Just Daniella. Just my name.

I don't like the name much, but the respect doesn't go over my head.

"Damon." I keep my eyes fixed on the exit sign across from the waiting area, letting the red lines swim around my slightly watery, sleep deprived vision.

"Any news?"

"He dozed off again before I could get back. They say if I wait a couple hours, he should be ready for visitors."

"So... so he's ok, then?"

"Yes. Which you would know, if you'd, I don't know, picked up your goddamn phone last night when the hospital called and came here to be with him?"

He shrinks into himself, looking smaller than he ever has. "I did."

"Stop fucking with me, Dame."

"Daniella, I'm deadass." He stares at the ground. "I was here all night. I didn't sleep. The only reason you saw me coming back was because I left to buy flowers."

I stare at the bouquet. "Dad's favourite. You remembered."

"Of course I did." He pulls a twix out of his coat pocket. "I also remembered you like these. Here. Figured you could use something in your stomach."

I take the candy bar from him, sceptical but impressed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Silence. There's been so much of that lately, hasn't there?

"I think I owe you some explanations," Damon says, not trying to make eye contact with me.

"Damn right you do. Three years' worth."

"I know. I know."

“I honestly doubt that there’s anything you could say to make me forgive you for all this shit.”

“Could you at least do me the one last virtue of hearing me out?”

I sigh. “Yeah. You got five minutes.”

“That’s enough.” He’s drumming on his knee. “I’m fucked up, Daniella. There’s a lot of shit going on up here you never knew about.” He taps his skull lightly with his knuckles. “I was born with anxiety and panic disorders, dyslexia and ADD. I was failing school in the second grade. My teachers told mom and dad that there were better schools I could be going to, schools better equipped to handle me. But mom was determined to make me a successful, *normal* child.” He spits out the word *normal*, as though trying to wash the taste of it away.

“Ok. Well, you were successful, until you threw it away.”

“I threw it away because I never wanted any of it.” He looks close to tears. “Mom started hitting me when I was eight. The reward system started when I was ten. Things I could turn in to stop her from...” His voice breaks. “It was emotional manipulation. She told me I was a disappointment. So I started believing it. When I got into MIT, she told me how surprised she was, how she never believed I was capable. She said I was going to fail there because I refused to listen to her, even though all I ever did was what she asked of me. My brain started to feel like a trap. Everything started to hurt. So I started doing drugs.”

I’ll admit, so far, he’s got me.

“Mom found out the same day dad got diagnosed. So she left. Nothing left for her - or her money - with us. She said it was my job to take care of the family, if I was so cocky. But I started sleeping through class, showing up high - MIT threw me out by semester two. I’m not sure why they didn’t notify my employer, but somehow I made the job and the trust fund, which mom forgot to disable, last long enough for you guys. I didn’t spend a penny of mom’s money on myself. I tried so hard, Daniella.” He’s fully crying now. “I know you hate me, and you have every

right to. But I was so tired and confused and sick, and I didn't know what the fuck else to do. I didn't have anybody else I could turn to."

"What about dad, Dame? What about everything he did for you?"

I can tell he's not looking forward to explaining this part of the story. "I'm not sure how much he knew. About what mom did to me. But he knew enough. And whether or not he tried to stop her without my knowledge, I'll never know, but at the end of the day, he didn't stop her. He didn't do anything. Nothing ever changed. For a fucking decade. And he stayed with her. And I'm sure he was fucking terrified, but the fact that he did absolutely nothing when it counted... I didn't think he'd even *want* to help me." He finally looks in my direction. "Daniella, our father is the kindest man I think I've ever known. But that started to turn him into a coward. And he may have had his own reasons - that's fine - but don't blame me for not asking him for help. He had his reasons to stay, and I had mine to go."

He wipes the tears from his eyes, and stares at the sky. "I'm so sorry for hurting you Daniella. I'll never be able to apologise enough times for all the financial and emotional shit I've put you guys through. But I need you to understand how bad of a spot I was in. I was almost never in control of my own mind." He laughs darkly. "Man. Mom fucked me up real good, that's for sure. Not sure I'm ever gonna be back to normal Damon, but I sure as hell can try."

I'm stunned. He's left me in complete and utter stunned disbelief. I know I should say something, but how are you *supposed* to respond to something like this?

"Wow." *Nice. Real slick word choice there, Dani.*

"Yeah."

"I don't forgive you."

"I know."

"You really fucking hurt me."

"I know."

"You're my big brother, and you let me down."

“I know.”

“But.” I meet his gaze. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for these years of ambushing you and blaming you. And I’m sorry for calling you sick. You’re not. You’re just a screwed up kid. And I wish I’d known all this earlier on.”

“Yeah. I wish you’d known, too.”

Now we’re both staring at the exit sign. Nothing about this is resolved, but all of the words have been said, so there’s not much else to fix, at least not yet.

“How long have you been clean?” I ask.

“Eighteen days.”

I do some quick maths, once again stunned into pseudo silence. “You didn’t break after our fight?”

“It was close. But no. I checked myself into rehab that night, actually. Been going for three days.”

“That’s... that’s actually huge. I’m proud of you, Dame.”

“Thanks, Daniella.”

I snort. “You know I hate it when family uses my full name. Call me whatever you want.”

“Ok, Dan.”

I smile, just barely. There’s a little of the Dame I remember.

“Mr and Ms Nelson?” A nurse approaches us from the front desk. “Your father is awake. You may go in and see him now.”

I stand, and notice that Damon seems to have no intention of following.

I reach out my arm. “What are you waiting for?”

He looks at my hand like he doesn’t entirely trust it, but he still takes it and follows me down the hall of white doors.

...

Dad, to put it plainly, looks like shit.

I step into his cold room, sweater wrapped tightly around the goosebumps on my arms, and almost don't recognize how pale his skin is. But his kind and soft blue eyes are open, and his smile lights up the whole room as soon as he sees me in the doorway.

"My darling Dani." He lifts a hand weakly and gestures for me to come over. I hurry to his side, wrapping him in a gentle hug before I situate myself next to him on the bed.

"Dad." I hold both of his hands in mine, trying to meld myself fully into him, to make the two of us become one, so I'll never again have to cope with the fear of losing him.

"I'm alright, my dear girl," he whispers, ruffling my hair. "Everything is going to be ok."

"I'm so sorry I wasn't there." I feel tears welling up under my thick, days-old mascara. "If I had been able to help, maybe-"

"No, Dani." He says it firmly, in his this-will-not-be-a-discussion voice. "Nothing about this is your fault. The doctors had me on too high a dose of my medication, it made me dizzy, I had an accident. But nothing was punctured, I'm on the mend, and the medication was fixed. Plus-" He tweaks my nose, and smiles even bigger. "It wasn't my cancer coming back. I'm free, darling. I'm finally free."

I sling my arms over his shoulders and embrace him, never ever wanting to let go. "I thought I'd lost you."

"But you didn't. And you won't. Not for a long, long while." He presses a kiss to my forehead. "You're stuck with your old man."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

The door creaks, and we both turn our heads as Damon enters the room. He's shuffling his feet nervously, and he rests the flowers at the foot of dad's bed so gingerly you'd think they were made of glass.

"Hi, Dad." His tone is soft, as though he's walking - or rather talking - on eggshells.

"Damon." Dad's brow furrows. "What are you doing here?"

"Dad, it's ok, he's with me." I smile sadly. "We have so much to talk about."

And we do talk. We talk for two hours, until we're all bawling, our hands shaking, our breath unsteady and staggered. We talk until there aren't any words left, and until the nurses tell us we have to go, that dad needs his rest, but he insists we be allowed to stay. We talk ourselves all the way to silence, and when we've reached the other side of all the talking, we curl up on the bed, revelling in the silence we've reached. A drug addicted son, a kind but cowardly father, a hateful, lonely daughter. The most dysfunctional of families.

But if I'm being completely honest, I've never felt more normal.

### *Chapter Forty-Three - Tess - May 7*

"Are you sure this looks good?"

Bradley turns, eyeing his side profile in the mirror. The baby blue tux fits him to an absolute T - the color is absolutely insane, but it's so Bradley that you'd never notice.

“Bitch, you are *slaying*.” Kiki is draped over my girlfriend on the unreasonably fancy settee in the department store dressing room. She’s playing with Dani’s hair, absentmindedly braiding and unbraiding in a thousand styles at the speed of light. Only Kiki.

“You’re sure it doesn’t look weird?”

“B, we have told you a thousand times.” I help him adjust his collar. “This is the perfect graduation outfit.”

“Alright, alright.” Bradley sits down, still fussing with the jacket. “Guys... I cannot believe I’m graduating. Like - it doesn’t really feel real, if I’m being completely honest.”

“I know.” Dani wriggles out from under Kiki to join her best friend on the couch, taking his hand. I sit down beside Kiki, and there we are, four duos - two sets of once-roommates, cut apart and pasted together into two sets of best friends.

“We’ll still see you all the time, B.” Kiki looks like she’s a bit sappier about this whole thing than she’s letting on. “You’re going to college, like, literally up the street.”

“It’s a ten minute drive from Northbank,” he corrects. “But yeah. I know. It’s just - you won’t be in my hallways anymore. I gotta find new people.”

“You’ll still have Raven,” Dani points out, resting her head on his shoulder and curling her knees up to her chest.

“I know. He’s gonna be a lifesaver, I swear.”

“Don’t get sad yet, B,” I say, trying to lighten the room. “You still got three months with us after graduation to cause all kinds of chaos.”

“I still can’t believe you’re staying,” Kiki squeals, throwing her arms around me. “That means at least one more year of memories and me getting unreasonably drunk while you look on and judge me for my bad choices!”

“I love you,” I laugh, running my fingers through her silky black ponytail.

“Love you more, babes!”

“Oh, speaking of best friends.” Dani looks at me keenly. “Have you talked to Rett yet?”



I wince. She's unknowingly touched on a bit of a sore subject. "No. I texted her a week ago, but so far nothing from her. I think she may hate me."

"I wouldn't bet on it." Dani is smiling a little bit, like she knows something I don't. I eye her curiously, but don't press her further - my girlfriend can be very secretive when she wants to be.

"Tess!" Bradley stares me down, attempting to be menacing. "You still have yet to tell us where we're buying you dinner tomorrow!"

"I know, I know!" I cringe. I honestly haven't even thought about it. I'm not used to celebrating my birthday. Obviously Rett always went all out, Josh took me to dinner, and Ash never forgot to buy me a present. When I was a kid, dad threw me these extravagant and fantastical birthday parties - it was my favorite day of the whole year. But since he died, the passing years have felt like more of a chore than something to celebrate.

But I promised my friends I'd let them treat me in style tomorrow night, and I know how excited they all are.

"Let's just go to the cafe from Valentine's Day," I say to Dani. "It was cute, quiet, and the food was great."

"Perfect." Kiki immediately pulls out her phone and starts typing something. "What time? Seven?"

"Does seven-thirty work? I have a call with my sister at six."

"All good." Kiki sends off whatever message she was so busy typing, and rises from her chair. "Now Bradley, get off your ass and buy that suit so I can figure out what the hell I'm going to do with your hair."

...

As soon as Ash's face lights up the screen, I break down.

She clearly thinks I'm being overdramatic, rolling her eyes and smiling in her jesus-you-are-ridiculous way, but I can't help myself.

“Hi,” I say, laughing as I try to wipe everything off my face.

“Hi yourself. I miss you.”

“You have no idea.” I smile as widely as I can. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. Strange, but better. I’m in a program with the hospital - I go there four hours every day for therapy and group exercises and shit. It’s really different from my inpatient program, strangely. I like it. It’s helping.”

“Well, the fact that you willingly told me all that without me nagging your ass for two weeks is definitely an improvement from last time.”

She rolls her eyes again. Such a teenager already, my god.

“Are you excited to come live with me?”

“More than anything.” Ash traces the lines of the white bandage around her left wrist. “I just need to get away from mom. Away from St Louis. Not like I really have friends here anyway.”

“Well, don’t worry, because I’m about to provide the best two years of your entire life. I already talked to the staff here, and you’ve got permission to stay in our dorm next year. They’re going to set up a room with three beds, just for you. Plus, that means you’ll have a quiet space to yourself to do your online classes every day.”

Mom and I eventually agreed that a lower stakes online program would be better for Ash in the short term. She has absolutely no interest in applying to Northbank, and when we brought up the idea of four hours of hard classes every day as opposed to eight hours of boring ones, she jumped at the idea. She’ll have class from nine to one, and the rest of the day is hers. Mom doesn’t want her roaming the streets alone, but she’s gonna be fifteen. I think she is more than capable of taking care of herself.

Mom is also in the process of getting me listed as a legal guardian for Ash. That should be happening by the end of the year, leaving us in a good spot, especially if I’m able to do what I

know Ash wants, and convince mom to let her stay here for the rest of high school - maybe even go to Northbank as an upperclassman.

But none of that is important right now. What's important is that my sister is safe, and I have an hour to hear all her stories, and tell her about everything that's been happening with Dani and graduation.

"So, you guys are still together?" Ash looks genuinely curious. "To be honest, when you first talked about Dani, I thought that she would be more of a fling."

"Yeah, we're still going strong. Just celebrated four months. I know that doesn't sound like very long, but..." I feel myself blush, and rub the back of my neck with my hand. "Is it weird that I already feel like I could spend the rest of my life with her?"

"A little, but also not really."

"What in the hell does that mean?"

"It means that I believe in love at first sight, and soulmates and all that sappy shit." She bites her lip. "When you were so happy with Josh, I always felt like something was off. I never thought he was good enough for you. But Dani... she's perfect, if I'm being honest. I know I only met her for a little while, and I was kind of an ass for the entire trip, but you just light up when she's around. I don't fucking know, I just like her a lot. Bottom line: wouldn't be at all surprised if you ended up marrying her someday."

"That was weirdly philosophical, Ash."

"I try. Oh happy birthday, by the way. I mailed you a present - it actually should have gotten there today."

"Really now?"

"Maybe you could give me a little FaceTime tour on your way down?"

"I think that can be arranged."

I pop in my headphones, and walk my sister around campus, showing her the place she's going to be living, and watching her marvel at how beautiful it is. Marvelling is rare for Ash, so this is quite the compliment to Northbank's architects.

When I get to the mailroom, I immediately spot Ash's package. I know it's hers because it was duct-taped with purple all the way around instead of clear - Ash hates the sound of tape dispensers, so she always buys single rolls in fun colors instead.

I show my ID to the man behind the desk, thank him, and take Ash the rest of the way around campus before heading back up to the dorm.

"I have absolutely no idea what is in this," I say, repositioning the phone and grabbing the box cutter from the drawer of Dani's nightstand.

"Good. That's what makes it fun."

In true Ash fashion, the box is stuffed not with packing peanuts but with all of my favorite candies in tiny, Halloween-style sizes. She's sprinkled in several fandom stickers - I recognize Taylor and Gilmore Girls immediately, and remind myself to come back to these after I unwrap the two big things at the bottom of the box.

The first is what Ash gets me every single year, a new journal, this time in a starry, night sky pattern. I hug it to my chest, overcome with warmth at how much it reminds me of Dani. Ash got me notebooks so many years in a row for my journaling that eventually I stopped buying them myself all together - it's a little tradition we've had pretty much her whole life.

The second thing in the box is a cardboard tube with an envelope taped to the front.

"Open the envelope second," Ash instructs. "This part is from mom and me together."

I carefully pop off the top and start gently sliding the paper out of the tube. It's thick, and nicer than poster paper. Seems like an art print.

As I unfurl it, my heart stops.

It's a beautiful portrait of Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy, but their faces are Dani and I. Us on Halloween, that awkward as hell night that we've both looked back on so fondly. But aside from my Instagram, I'm not quite sure why Ash knows how much this meant...

I feel myself choke up. "You've been keeping up with my fanfic."

"Every one. Skipped the smuttier scenes though - you write waaaay too many of those, by the way. Except for this one. This one felt totally different. Like some romantic climax out of a classic novel." She shrugged. "It was my idea - mom paid for most of it."

I open the envelope and grin - my sister, the logical thinker, got me a gift certificate to a framing place a couple blocks south of us. "This is the most beautiful gift I've ever been given. Thank you, Ash. And thank mom for me too, please."

"I will." She lowers her voice a bit. "She's been a little bit better, for the record. Quieter. Letting me do what I want with my time. Generally staying out of my way. She's even complimented my outfits a couple of times."

"Wow."

"I know."

Not exactly a redemption arc, but I'll give her some credit.

"Look, love, I gotta go to dinner, but please text me any and all tiny and irrelevant stories, and let me know if you need anything, ok?"

"Ok. I love you."

"I love you more. I'll see you real soon."

I hang up the phone, and head over to the closet. Seventeen's a pretty big number. I gotta dress to impress.

#### **Chapter Forty-Four - Dani - May 8**

I really hope my birthday surprise works.

I've been planning this for months - it only got more important after the trip to St Louis went so extremely south. Bradley and Kiki are chatting up a storm around me, but all I can feel is a bundle of nerves in my stomach.

Of course it all dissipates when my beautiful girlfriend reaches my line of sight.

She's dressed in the most Tess outfit I think I've ever seen her in. She's got on a black, form fitting evening dress, that would be extremely elegant if it weren't for the bright blue flannel on top, knotted at her waist, and the converse and eyeshadow to match. She looks like she's headed to a hoedown at the queen's palace, and she also looks like she could take absolutely anyone on in a fight.

I am the luckiest girl in the world.

I throw my arms around her as she reaches the table, and she lifts me slightly, twirling us around as Kiki and Bradley feign sounds of disgust behind us. I flip them off over Tess's shoulder, pressing my lips gently to hers and trying very hard not to smudge her deep maroon lipstick.

"Happy birthday, darling," I say, pulling her into the chair next to mine. "You are my favorite person."

"Save it for the toast, lovebird," Kiki crows as she tries to make drinking water look cool.

"Yeah, yeah."

"D, when's the surprise happening?" Bradley asks, wiggling his eyebrows slightly.

"Ooh, a surprise. I'm intrigued." Tess kisses my cheek. "I'm sure I'll love it."

*I sure hope you do.*

"Soon. Really soon." I glance at the door for approximately the millionth time. She'd better not be late. We both have a lot riding on this.

Once we've all ordered our food, we do gifts. Kiki got Tess some makeup that, judging by Tess's shrieks, are very specific products they've talked about that I definitely do not understand.

Bradley got her a set of nice pens and a romance novel with two girls on the cover - it looks exactly like what she always reads, so I'm sure he picked right.

Then it's time for my gift.

Well, my first gift.

The 'present' I got her is a ticket to see 'The Prom' when it comes here - I coordinated with her sister, so they'll have seats together. She, as I expected, freaks the hell out, hugging and kissing me all over, but I feel distant, disconnected, my eyes fixed on the door.

When I see the shadow and the light of a phone screen, I pick up my own immediately.

Thank god.

She's not late.

"Tess, I'll be right back. There's one more part of your present."

I stand, and exit the restaurant.

Sure enough, there's Rett, spitting image of her instagram pictures, standing in the shadow of a streetlight with flowers, a gift bag, a wrapped box and an envelope. She's tapping her foot anxiously, and her face lights up just a little bit when she sees me. "Are you Dani?"

"Yep. Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for making this happen."

"If neither of you fucks this up, this might be her best birthday ever." I manage a weak smile. "I'm sorry we didn't meet the first time."

"It's completely my fault." She looks a little embarrassed. "I fucked it up. I should have told her before I did. Ironically, she was right. He was an asshole, and I dumped him right after she left. All I want to do is make this better with her."

"Well, this may be your only shot, so go in there and win your best friend back."

"Roger that."

I open the door for her, and lead her to our table.

Tess notices us immediately, but I don't think it actually registers, because all she does is sit there with her mouth hanging open. I see tears shining in Rett's eyes at the sight of her.

"Hey, Tessie," she says quietly.

Tess is out of her chair and in Rett's arms before any of us can process much of anything. They're both weeping, and I quickly take the packages and flowers out of Rett's arms and set them on the table. Jesus, the rest of the restaurant must think we look insane right now.

"I'm so sorry," I hear Rett gasp out in between sobs. "I'm so sorry, you were right, it was all so stupid, I can't believe we let this--"

Tess starts whispering in her ear, and the girls giggle, and they're still talking and still hugging, and eventually they both calm down enough to come sit at the table. I'm sure that, as with Dame and I, there's no shortage of words left to be spoken between them. But for now, they're both here, and I think that might be enough for now.

"I can't believe you came all the way here for me." Tess is still crying, and her hand is firmly in Rett's. Bradley and Kiki haven't said anything, but I don't think I've ever seen either of them smile so widely.

"Thank your girlfriend," Rett replies, grinning at me. "She organized the whole thing."

Tess turns to me. "This is the greatest surprise of all time." She kisses me hard on the mouth, her arms sliding down my back, which is exposed by the dress I'm wearing.

Then, I pull away, because the food and the drinks have arrived, and it's time for the toast I've been planning for weeks.

I clink my spoon against my glass and the whole table goes quiet.

"So. Today is the seventeenth birthday of someone incredibly special to everyone sitting here, Ms Theresa Q Martin, as Bradley so generously dubbed her on her first day here."

B snorts and pumps his fist in the air. "Hell yeah. Most common letter!"

"Hush up, you ass," Kiki says, shoving him, and we all can't help but giggle.



“As I was *saying*,” I continue, eyeing my best friend pointedly, “today is Tess’s birthday. Today is when we celebrate her and all the good she brings into all of our lives. And wow is there a lot to celebrate.” I smile at her - Jesus, I really can never stop smiling around this girl.

“Tess came here at a time where we both needed someone to lean on. Someone to sit next to and share our hearts with. And at first, I think if you’d told either of us that we would have been that ultimate endgame, we would have laughed in your faces. But these four months have been the best I’ve ever had, at least in terms of the love I feel for this beautiful, beautiful person.”

“My darling. You are a shining star. You light up my life, and I don’t care how cheesy that sounds. You are so kind and so creative and so loyal and so all of the good adjectives in the whole goddamn dictionary. You’re all of it and so much more, and the fact that I wake up every day and walk out into a world where I get to call you mine is still something I don’t entirely believe. I am so proud to be by your side through this absolute shitshow that somebody called ‘life.’

“Despite me being a lyricist, you’re way better with words than me, so I’ll try to wrap this up and not subject you to too many more of mine. But Tess, know that I love you more than anything on this earth, and I will love you that way until the end of time. You are a gift to me, this ever moving ball of happiness that keeps my heart on the path to good. This year is going to be absolutely amazing. You are going to accomplish so many great things. Look how much you’ve already done! My love, you are just getting started. So let me ask your best friends and mine to raise their fucking glasses to you. To Tess motherfucking Martian - the best thing that ever happened to me. Here’s to seventeen. I love you, darling.”

“To Tess!” they all cheer, and waters clink around the table. Tess kisses me again, whispering words in my ear just for the two of us to know.

In my life there’s been so much uncertainty. I’ve never been able to pin down what the next day would bring, no matter how hard I fucking tried. My mom left, then my brother, then

everything started to go downhill with my dad. Certainty has been my addiction, the substance I've craved, and built my life around chasing.

But, after the longest year of my life, here are some things I am now certain of.

One: I have the most fucked up family on earth, and I'm ok with that. Damon is living at home again, and paying more than half of the rent. It's weird as hell, but it finally feels right. We watch TV together on Fridays - at least, as of last weekend we do. We're trying to build a new normal.

Two: My best friend is the best friend anyone has ever had, and I will fight everyone on this. We've already planned how we're going to meet up every week and on what days. Being apart from him for even a weekend hurts - I will break down the doors of the college if it means I can see him for a few extra hours.

Three: I want to make music, and I want it to inspire people. Simple as that.

And four, the most important thing of all: I am head over heels in love with Tess Martin. At first, I didn't think we'd make it here. I thought this would be next in the long list of false hopes I had become accustomed to.

But it happened. We are here and queer and so, so in love.

Yeah. Here and now, her hand in mine in this dimly lit restaurant with our friends, her green eyes sparkling at something Bradley said, I have never been more certain of anything.

### *Epilogue - Tess - Eight Years Later*

The stadium is hot as shit.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, considering it's early June in London, but I'm starting to regret wearing my knee high pride socks to this concert.

It's the last night of Dani's first breakthrough gig. She's opening for ShadyBaez, which is something she didn't believe was happening until about a month into the tour, and quite frankly, probably still doesn't.

She's successful. She's not as successful as she wants to be (or at least, she wasn't before now) but she's got a pretty big fanbase, a great manager, and a very supportive group of friends.

Speaking of which.

"Hey!" I wave Bradley, Kiki and Damon down from across the entryway. We weave our way through the throngs of people and meet up by the snack stand. I hug Bradley tightly - he hasn't been home for a while. He decided to use his flight to Jamaica (yes, you read that right, he's a flight attendant now) to take his three vacation weeks for the summer and take a break in the shade - or, rather the sun. But now he's here - we all agreed to make it for Dani's first and last shows to support her. I, of course, have been at half of the shows, but my obsession with my girlfriend's music is besides the point.

"Babes, you made it!" Kiki joins the hug.

My eyes go wide when she pulls away. "Damn, your braids look great!"

"Thanks! Kiki pats down her insanely complicated hairstyle. She's the assistant manager of the salon now. That's a huge fucking deal for her. We all screamed and cried and freaked out when she got that news, and rightfully so. Kiki's working at the most prestigious salon in London right now - took a hot minute for her to get there, but now that she's climbed the ranks, I don't think she has any intention of ever coming back down.

As for Damon, he's back into coding, and making a small fortune off of it. But in his free time, he's letting his sister and his dad teach him how to play the guitar. He's determined to have some skill in his life - something he's genuinely good at - that doesn't remind him solely of his mom. Last I heard, he was actually pretty good, and that's with only a few months of lessons before Dani started working fourteen hour days for this UK tour.

"It's good to see you, Tess," Dame says, wrapping me in a brief side embrace. The two of us don't really do hugs. Now that his relationship with Dani is almost entirely mended, I have no issue with him, but we don't spend enough time together for our relationship to be anything but subtly awkward. Still, the smile I return to him is genuine - it's always so lovely to see him.

"Mr Nelson is already at our seats," Bradley says, taking my left hand and Kiki's right. "Come on, let's go! I want to get there in enough time for our aesthetic concert photos."

I grab Damon's hand, and we weave our way through the crowd, hands clasped tightly so as not to lose each other. We turn into the first staircase we come across and spot Dani's dad almost immediately, waving us down from the family 'box' that's been reserved for Dani's six allotted guests per night. Once Ash gets here from her boyfriend's house, we will have officially maxed that out.

My sister never did go back to St Louis. It was pretty much a fight to the death with my mom, but she stayed here with me through high school, and now through college as well. My baby sister just graduated with a degree in psychology and a minor in communications - she's heading off to grad school in the fall with the goal of becoming a licensed therapist by the time she turns twenty-five.

Honestly, I don't think I could be prouder of her.

And then there's me.

Well, my first book came out last year!

It took quite a long road of rejection to get to the point of actually publishing my story, but as of November twentieth, my little love story about two girls falling for each other in the

heart of this gorgeous city is on shelves everywhere. It's on *Waterstones* shelves. That's mind blowing to me. I never really thought I'd get published, let alone with a major publishing company and such a good social media presence.

And when I'm not writing, I work at an independent bookstore to pay the bills! I'm basically living the dream of five year old me except it's actually real and I'm making enough money to live on.

Enough money to support my half of the house I now share with Dani.

Ash comes sprinting down the steps, grinning widely and very out of breath. "Am I too late? Did she already start?"

"Do you hear music, miss girl?" Kiki raises an eyebrow at her, and Ash flips her off.

"How's Zach?" I ask, nudging her slightly with my shoulder.

"He's good. His boss is still being a piece of shit, but he's got an interview at a different place next weekend."

"That's great!"

"Guys!" Kiki yells, waving her phone in front of our faces. "Selfie!"

Mr Nelson does his duty as a man who just turned sixty and steps aside while Kiki snaps picture after picture of the five of us making ridiculous faces. I laugh at how absolutely overkill this is, but what else should I expect from my best friend?

I make a mental note to call Rett tonight. I missed our scheduled call last week for a meeting with my editor, and I've been promising her I'd make it up since.

I also have to call mom soon, whether I like it or not.

But I'm not going to worry about that today.

As the lights go down, we all start screaming, and as Dani's silhouette emerges from the shadows, I feel pride rush through me like a jolt of liquid lightning.

Despite this being my tenth time hearing the set, I don't think I'll ever get tired of it. She has a mix of covers and her own originals - nine songs in total, which is pretty huge for a solo

artist opening act. She always opens with her signature, *Be My Always*, which she wrote right after we met, and ended up being the song to launch her onto the charts. She covers *Colors* by Halsey, sings a couple more originals, hits *I Know, I Know, I Know* by Tegan and Sara, and follows that with a few more originals.

I find myself getting lost in the set, in her band's carefully composed melodies, in the way her voice ricochets off the walls of the room like raindrops. Her eyes sparkle like a galaxy under the harsh stage lights - her smile is effervescent, like she could go on doing this forever and never stop feeling that rush of joy.

Anybody could know, just by looking at her, that this is what she was always meant to do. What she was meant to become.

Usually the last song she sings is another one of her hits, *Rollerskates In December*, but tonight, she turns to whisper something to her band, and they all nod, as if they're in on a conspiracy. Clearly, for the last night of the tour, there's been a change of plans.

"Thank you guys so much for coming to support ShadyBaez and myself," Dani says into the mic, and the crowd roars in response. "Now, if you didn't know, tonight is the last night of this tour, and because of that, I've got some pretty special people in the audience. And I figured - why not mix it up a little? Is that ok with you?"

More cheering.

"Fantastic. Because you see, there's a pretty awesome girl in this audience tonight - someone I love with my whole entire heart. And there's something I've been meaning to ask her, but I'm too chickenshit, so I thought I'd sing about it in front of five thousand people instead." Dani locks eyes with me and winks. "This one is for the dumbass that forced me to fall in love with Taylor Swift.

The crowd erupts three times as loud as the drums start.

I recognize the song as soon as it starts, and slowly, my heart starts to lose its shit.

*“The moon is high, like your friends were the night that we first met,  
Went home and tried to stalk you on the internet,  
Now I’ve read all of the books beside your bed  
The wine is cold, like the shoulder that I gave you in the street  
Cat and mouse for a month or two or three  
Now I wake up in the night and watch you breathe”*

I can’t breathe. What is oxygen? Never heard of her. I can’t think about anything except Dani dancing around the stage. As she sings, my friends are grinning at me, and I whip my head around. Were they in on it?

*“I like shiny things, but I’d marry you with paper rings  
Uh-huh, that’s right, darling, you’re the one I want  
And I hate accidents, except when we went from friends to this  
Uh-huh, that’s right, darling, you’re the one I want  
In paper rings, in picture frames, in dirty dreams, oh, you’re the one I want”*

As the second verse starts, I’m in such a state of shock that I almost don’t notice Bradley and Kiki tugging on my arms. They lead me to the aisles as the pre chorus starts back up; when my girlfriend winks at me and sighs into the mic, I decide I will never be capable of being a sentient human being again.

The bridge starts, the key changes, and they’re ushering me up the stairs to the stage. The whole audience is watching me, and I couldn’t care less.

*“I want to drive away with you  
I want your complications, too*

*I want your dreary Mondays,  
Wrap your arms around me, baby girl”*

The music cuts to just guitar, and Kiki and Bradley lead me to the centre of the stage, where Dani takes my hand and takes a breath before starting the last pre-chorus.

“I like shiny things, but I’d marry you with paper rings,” she sings to me, and she’s singing *to me*, and we are in a stadium full of five thousand strangers and Daniella fucking Nelson is flash mobbing me.

As the beat picks back up, Kiki and Bradley set off machines in the corners that spray confetti all over the audience, and Dani gets so into it, but her eyes never leave mine as she finishes the song out with an absolute bang.

The applause that follows is louder than anything I’ve ever heard in my life, but Dani doesn’t even seem to notice as Bradley slips a small velvet box into her hand, and she gets down on one knee in front of me.

Holy. Fucking shit.

“Theresa Martin,” she says, her eyes sparkling, her smile so bright it could blind me, “would you make me the happiest woman in the world, and do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

Finally, I break out of my stupor enough to sputter. “Y-yes, of course, of fucking course I will marry you, Daniella.”

And the applause is back, even louder, as I scoop Dani into my arms and spin her around, our lips locked as the band goes into an instrumental encore of ‘Paper Rings.’ The ring slides onto my finger, and Dani meets my gaze, and I look confidently into the eyes of my heart, my love, and my future.

*The End*



**Frances McKee**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Kelly McKee

Category: Poetry

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### **Death in a Pearl Layered White Gown**

I wanted my grandmother to die.  
Much of my life I spent resenting her,  
She was a stunning con artist,  
Delighted by a perfect presentation of poise.  
She taunted me for my baggy clothing,  
My pajama sweater with a hole in the seam,  
My eye makeup,  
My passions.  
She was always more interested in my sister's endeavors,  
She loved the pep they put into principle.  
She could be named a virtuous woman,  
That is if virtue meant external beauty and that alone.  
Even at the eve of her death, she wore a frilled nightgown,  
With pearls sewed in a line across the chest.  
The pearls compressed up and down,  
And her pink painted lips struggled to whimper out the air.  
The absence of her dentures deranged her face,  
I knew she would have cursed us for that.  
Her urine matched the color of the stained wooden floors,  
It dripped into a bag hanging off the side of her bed.  
She was doped up on morphine,  
Starved and thirsting,  
Frail.  
I escaped the room,  
Unaware that when I would return,  
She would be heavily sedated and unable to answer me.  
It wasn't until I sat beside her, her being unconscious, that the thoughts all came to me.  
The questions, the important ones.  
The ones about life, growing, and wanting.  
Surges of guilt encapsulated my sternum,  
Selfishly, I never wanted her shallow breath to stop.  
There were still things I wanted to know,  
Places her and I could travel,  
Perspectives her and I could share.  
I bargained with a God I didn't believe in,  
Praying diligently for just one word out of her,  
One more snobby accusation,  
One more poignant promise to her *Halcyon Days Enamels*,  
One more slap on the wrist for elbows on the dinner table.

**Madison Moore**

Age: 14, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Short Story

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## What Lies In Our Hands

I was 13 years old when I first held a gun.

The sun beamed down on my friends and I as we gathered around the tarnished yellow slide that was once notorious for leaving burn marks across our thighs. When we were 11, we declared ourselves too old to step foot on the park's sandy grounds, but Jalen insisted on meeting here—it was empty on account of the freshly bloodstained concrete and fallen police tape that danced in the wind. Jalen opened his backpack and whipped out an object wrapped in the plastic of a Walgreens bag.

“Look what my brother gave me. He says it's mine now,” his clumsy fingers scrambled to peel the plastic off the black item. “He said he loves me too much to let me walk these streets without one.” A gun sat in his lap, its surface reflecting our boyish faces, captivated by what lay in front of us. Our little circle became a chorus of oohh's and aahh's as we passed the pistol around like a roly polly; flipping it, twirling it, and running our hands down its side.

“It's your turn, Theo. Here,” one of my friends pushed the gun into my hands, giddy with excitement. Truth is, as I slid my fingers over the handle and looked down its barrel, I only wished to feel the yellow slide's familiar heat on my skin.

When the pistol had made its way around the circle and was tucked into Jalen's hands once more, he held it in front of him as his finger grazed the trigger. “My brother said there's two things that always got my back. Him and this pistol...” Jalen's voice faded into the creak of the swings that were carried by a lone breeze. I remembered when we'd take turns sitting on the swing, competing to see who could reach the highest feat. One day, as I outstretched my arm, attempting to reach for one of the clouds that floated above my head, my other hand slipped from the swing's chain, ending in a mouthful of sand. While the other boys snickered at my face buried in the ground, Jalen announced that my swing was the highest yet. The boys' laughter blended into the wind as I spit out the sand with a proud grin.

I glared at the gun and the image that its barrel beheld. “You're never gon' use that thing. Give it back.”

“Nah, Theo. You should get you one with that mouth of yours. My brother says when *I* get mad, I better bite my tongue or someone else gon' do it.” Jalen flashes the top row of his crooked teeth. “He said it's all about pride... don't be a tally on some fool's chest.”

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Two years later, his brother's pride was splattered across the liquor store's linoleum floor.

He was in the back of the shop, where a row of refrigerators reflected a drunken debate over who should take home the last bottle of 5-dollar bourbon—him or the junkie whose knuckles were wrapped around the bottle's neck. When Jalen's brother saw the other guy reach for a glint of black in his pocket, he did the same. He once described to Jalen and I the unmatched euphoria of squeezing a gun's trigger— with or without a target. In the back of the liquor store, he sought that brief feeling of peace, knowing he wouldn't be around to feel the drop. The ensuing shatter of glass bottles and the pop of guns was that night's lullaby.

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Jalen's tears at his brother's death ran their course weeks ago, now replaced by curses and threats. He welcomed himself into my room for only the third time that year— as we entered our teen years, we'd grown apart, but our friendship that once ran deep was never forgotten.

My hardwood floors creak under his pacing feet. As he turns to make his second lap, a bulge in his back pocket catches my eye. "Jalen—" I shoot up from my seat. "Jalen, what is that? Is that your gun?" He grunts, spinning to face me. "Jesus, don't bring that crap out here. Are you for real? Seriously, man, what were you thinking?"

"You know what I was thinking, Theo," his voice quivers as it tugs at me, pleading for my understanding. "I've been sitting around for weeks. I'm *done*."

"So, what?" I throw my hands up, "you gon' go up there and light that guy up? He'll be ready for you, Jalen, he's not stupid— everybody knows how close you and your brother were. Come *on*, Jay. Just sit down."

"Nah. You know I can't do that. Some fool killed my brother over some *bourbon*." Each word shoots out of his mouth like drops of venom that even he isn't immune to; his fists begin to shake. "I can't let that slide. My brother can't be a tally, he deserves his pride." He squeezes his eyes shut and runs his hands through his hair, his fingers ripping through the tangles.

I shake my head. Jalen's youthful confidence that he once carried in his goofy walk and snaggle-toothed smile now lies in his back pocket. His compassion had melted away, replaced by the instant satisfaction of squeezing his finger around a trigger. "He's not just *some* fool. That man has put bullets in half the city, while you've never *even* used that thing before. Forget it." Jalen has never told me if he's ever shot his pistol, but I knew that the panicked figure that paced around my room would never possess the finality required to take another's life— no matter the chip that rests on his shoulder. If he faced his brother's killer, he'd be the one to fall. A frustrated noise escapes me, plagued by a rush of anger. I pounce at him, knocking him to the floor. I lunge for his pocket, but as my fingers wrap around the gun's handle, Jalen pivots his hips and rolls away from me.

"It's loaded! Get off of me before you shoot it— are you crazy?" He shoves me away as he brushes his shirt off, covered in the displaced dust that was once settled between the cracks of my hardwood floor.

"You gon' end up just like your brother," I say, struggling to catch my breath, "—blood between some tiles." I watch as Jalen's face contorts, his eyes flashing with an unfamiliar spark. "Please, man. Don't do anything stupid."

Jalen's eyebrows twitch. He pushes his pistol deeper into his pocket.

"Okay. I won't," he says, turning to leave. As he slips out of my room, the slam of the door matches the pounding in my head.

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Hours later, as I lie awake in bed, six shots slice through the night's silence. The pops are quick— one after another — all from the same gun. They fill my lungs and echo through my ribs until every inhale burns my chest, leaving a fire that eats away at my insides. I know that bullets lie tucked beneath Jalen's bones that were heavy with an ugly type of grief— the kind that disguised itself as pride. Regret wraps itself around me and wrings at my skin. I don't resist its embrace, instead, I allow it to slowly suffocate me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing that Jalen's brother was alive to witness the "protection" that the pistol he laid in Jalen's hand had offered. I wish that he would be the one forced to walk past the teddy bears that would hang from a telephone pole, honoring Jalen's life. I wish he could see that his brother became exactly what he feared— a tally. Every finger that has grazed the gun's cool metal and pulled its trigger has been coerced by its culture; and now, Jalen would lay alongside them, guilty of facing a gun's barrel in the name of pride. I pry my eyes open and swallow — my throat taut with tension. An ambulance whirs past my window, briefly basking my room in a blue and red haze. When it returns minutes later, I know that Jalen lies in its stretcher while the gun he once carried at his side is long gone. The pistol will go from pocket to pocket until it falls in the hands of a brother who loves his sibling too much

to let him walk these streets without one. A little boy will hold out his hand and when the gun is set in his palms, adolescence will be ripped from him, leaving only a man who lives by what lies in his pocket.

**Madison Moore**

Age: 14, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Poetry

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## **Oh, the Places You'll (Truly) Go**

*Epigraph: This poem satirizes Dr. Suess's children's book, Oh, the Places You'll Go to accurately represent the grim reality black children face while growing up under America's school-to-prison pipeline.*

Baby, oh, baby, now that you're older,  
your hopes will grow big, and your dreams will grow bolder.  
But, baby, oh, baby, it's time that you know  
the places where you'll truly go.  
A doctor? A lawyer? Those lives aren't for you—  
They're for richer kids, whiter too.  
Look at you, baby, don't be naive,  
don't follow these dreams that *you* can't achieve.  
All false hopes should be squashed while you're young  
Or soon you'll fall from these dreams to which you've clung.  
When you grow up, you'll be just the same  
as any kid from where you came.  
Baby, oh, baby, it's time that you know,  
the places where you'll truly go.  
Look around, baby, at what we have made.  
Our concern for you is little more than charade.  
Look to your soon-to-be high school's police.  
Officer Dan's there when threat disturbs peace.  
Please don't be fooled by Dan's noble mission,  
your peers are the threats, each his opposition.  
For example, there's Malik, who's far too headstrong,  
eager to debate those unwilling to be wrong.  
Frankly, sweet baby, he reminds me of you.  
He's a glimpse of your future, a sneak preview.  
He bumped heads with teachers, he'd have frequent bouts,  
and that is a risky and treacherous route.  
If he were white, the people would say,  
"Malik will be a great lawyer one day!"  
They'd even help him succeed in his mission,  
but *black* boys don't need ammunition.  
They're loud and they're thieves, mayhem's their goal,  
and they need to be kept under stricter control  
We don't take kindly to boys like Malik,  
and soon he would realize his future was bleak.  
His voice was too loud, his message too strong,  
it was no surprise when Dan came along.  
He bound Malik's hands behind his back,  
steering his life far off its track.  
He lead him away and he was suspended,  
marking the spot where his dreams had been ended

In a more rural school, where the kids had been whiter,  
punishment would surely have been a lot lighter.  
For a whole week, Malik was away,  
so he struggled in class and behind he would stay.  
School was never easy, but this was too much.  
His dreams seemed so high, too far to touch.  
He decided that school just wasn't for him  
and chose a new life where success seemed less slim.  
But where can you go with no high school degree?  
You won't find a job and food isn't free.  
He wanted some milk so made one bad decision  
that landed him thirty days in a prison.  
From this incident, he would never recover;  
he got a whiff of the system and was bound for another.  
Poor, sweet Malik shouldn't be blamed.  
He wasn't to be taught, but a kid to be tamed.  
He knew how to prosper, but only in jail.  
Why prepare kids for more, when they'd certainly fail?  
Trouble's all that comes from kids like you—  
kids from the city, kids of your hue.  
So in a few years, when mommy sends you to school,  
keep your head low and follow the rules.  
If you diverge from this path that we have paved,  
Baby, do not expect to be saved.  
No matter what, you'll be like the others.  
You'll follow the paths of your "sisters" and "brothers."  
You'll learn quite fast— like Malik and more—  
that you're destined to life behind a barred door.  
This is a future that you can't escape.  
All you can do is watch it take shape.  
Baby, oh, baby, it's time that you know  
the places where you'll truly go.

**Kathryn Myers**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

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## **Ongoing**

Here I see the fields again,  
honestly forgotten in their autumn musk  
with a circus of flies caught in aging meadowgrass.  
Let me keep my distance from the haulms,  
that hem and haw in Northern winds  
revealing pittering mice  
and stones reflecting the sun,  
like the silver of fish traveling upriver.

In this algid air, my fingers turn rosy  
their numbness barring fur and dirt.  
Yet when I rest my eyes on the featherweight bones,  
left alone in their underbelly,  
I am urged to warm my fingers  
and return small lives to their prairies.

When the seasons turn and the flush of the fields is dimmed,  
the Earth mourns the death of each butterfly.

**Pooja Nagareddygari**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Francis Howell High School, Saint Charles, MO

Educator: Sean Wheeler

Category: Critical Essay

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## **We Are Unwanted: A Broken Immigration System**

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.

*I pledge allegiance to the flag of a country that does not want me.*

Home is America.

For you, for me, and for the 250,000 American students who share this same internal monologue every morning.

From black-and-white videos of Ellis Island to vivid images of Cuban refugee boats braving the Straits of Florida, smartboards across the country preserve an incredibly vital yet narrow representation of American immigration. These retellings boil an unimaginably complex reality to a 3-word description: *Give me your poor, tired, and hungry*. For most Americans, the immigration narrative they learn as a child is the only one they hold with them through their life: America is a safe haven for misfortunate immigrants who are fleeing war and persecution. And while this facet of immigration plays a significant role in the makeup of our country, the narrative is ever-evolving.

The H-1B visa—a type of temporary non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to hire foreign highly-skilled workers—was established in 1990 to address labor shortages in certain fields. Fears that the world's computer systems would go haywire at the turn of the century—the Y2K problem—skyrocketed demand for H1-B computer programmers among competing tech companies. After the Y2K scare passed, companies in a variety of fields continued to hire H-1B visa holders for their specialized training and skills. That same year, Congress passed a law allowing H-1B visa holders to renew their visas every three years.

Dependents of H1-B workers, including children and spouses, can receive an H4 visa to accompany them to the US. After all, ensuring the children of these workers can stay and build lives in the US is critical to winning the war for talent. It's perplexing, then, that complexities in the immigration system result in these same children being at risk of having to leave the only country they have ever known.

Typically, as these H4 children grow up, their parents wend their way through the line for a green card. This tumultuous journey often begins after several years of already working in the United States, since a petition for a green card must be sponsored by an employer that is willing to incur the costs. Green cards offer recipients the ability to reside permanently in the US and provide them with a pathway to citizenship. Obtaining an employment-based green card also allows recipients to break free from the limitations of unstable temporary work visas, which tie their immigration status to sponsorship by an employer. According to Bloomberg Law, the number of employment-based green cards allocated each year is capped at 140,000—a quota shared by both the person sponsored by an employer and their dependents. No more than 7% of the visas in a given year, meanwhile, can go to applicants from a single country of origin. Those per-country caps create particularly long wait times for applicants from countries that are the biggest sources of H-1B workers. A recent study by the Cato Institute found that over 1.4 million people are currently in the decades-long green card backlog, and 215,000 petitions will expire as a result of the workers dying of old age.

Not only does this prove to be an extremely taxing system for these critical workers, but it also penalizes their children as well. Children of H1-B workers are considered dependents of their parents only until they turn 21. If



they do not receive a green card by the time they turn 21, they must obtain new F-1 visas permitting them to continue to study. Those unable to do so face an excruciating choice: stay in the US illegally or self-deport to their countries of birth. Countries they no longer remember.

Even those that manage to obtain new visas face a precarious future. For most graduates, a job search is based on securing Optional Practical Training, a temporary work authorization that typically lasts for twelve months. In this short year, they have to find a company that is willing to sponsor their own H1-B visa, and then win the H1-B lottery. Even if they manage to do so, they will be deposited to the back of the green card line. Every three years, they will have to renew their H-1B visa, knowing that, if they get laid off or the extension is denied, they will once again have to leave the country.

As of April 2020, more than 250,000 of these children were at risk of “aging out” of their legal status. Many of these young adults call themselves Documented Dreamers and see a clear connection between their situation and that of Dreamers: the term often used to describe undocumented minors seeking legal residency in the U.S. Compared to their undocumented counterparts, however, Documented Dreamers are regarded as privileged. In the past, immigration activists have emphasized white-collar issues, their immediate frustrations framed in terms of higher education. How, even with a visa, their children are locked out of many of the advantages granted to U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Because of visa strictures, many children are from families where only one parent can work. Once in college, they are usually ineligible for in-state tuition, institutional and federal financial aid, most merit scholarships, and are required to pay the fees of an international student. And while these are valid concerns, the focus has pivoted from the faulty immigration system to an outdated, harmful narrative that depicts this group as an “elite, high-skilled, model minority.” Instead of detailing these students’ inability to get a typical part-time job scooping ice cream or working the register to save up for college, they focused on their children’s inability to accept prestigious internships. Instead of focusing on how families that have paid state and federal taxes for decades are ineligible for in-state tuition, they focused on their children’s viability for Ivy League institutions. But that’s not the real problem here. It’s never going to be about internships or college admissions. And while no one, from their parents to the government, may not truly understand the scope or impact of this issue, the kids do.

As the younger generation begins to advocate for themselves, we’re seeing a much-needed change. Now the movement is answering the question: “Why is America Home?”. Because we’re talking about kids who grew up here. We’re talking about kids who raced their bikes down the streets of suburbia. We’re talking about kids who survived a decade of public school lunches. We’re talking about kids who love their families and friends. Kids who love this country. Kids who are American.

As divisive as the American immigration policy is, members of both parties ought to agree these Documented Dreamers deserve a chance to pursue their dreams in the country they call home. But the road to a successful solution becomes longer and bleaker by the day. The biggest point of frustration for the Documented Dreamers is their seeming invisibility in the national narrative around immigration. It often feels as if the American government recognizes every group of immigrants except for this precarious category. So when there is any form of legislation that acknowledges these Dreamers, their hopes are pinned to it.

There are currently two possible solutions to this faulty system—and both are failing. The National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year 2023 (H.R 7900 & S.Amdt 6165), which contains an age-out protections provision for Documented Dreamers, was passed in the House in early 2022. Senate negotiations were ongoing for months, but the final passed NDAA draft excluded the provision. The America’s Children Act, introduced in both the House and the Senate this year, is a bill that provides a pathway to permanent residency for Documented Dreamers that have lived in the US for at least 10 years and have graduated college. Additionally, it establishes age-out protections that lock a child’s age on the date of green card filing rather than the final action date, while also providing work authorization to anyone over 16. The pathway to passing this bill into law, however, is a long uphill battle that will take years. Time—that these Dreamers do not have.

These children, these young adults, these victims of a broken system, are fighting for a country that is not fighting back for them. These Dreamers continue to stand up for themselves every single day—failure after failure—because they believe there is a solution. And they’re right. The real injustice is that a solution *is* attainable. They’re not calling for a radical upheaval of the entire immigration system. They just want to give kids, who did everything legally, a fair chance to build lives in the country they call home. They simply want to patch a treacherous loophole to help hundreds of thousands of people. But it is due to our country’s combined negligence and apprehension to cooperate

that we simply watch as, in just a single Congressional session, thousands leave the only country they've ever known. This ignorance we foster, both as people and as a country, is naive at best and dangerous at worst.

Until this country can prove it cares about these children,  
Until this country protects its own,  
Every morning, these 250,000 students will stand up and put their hand over their hearts beating in sync to the rhythm of

America is our home.

*And it does not want us.*

**Lexi Newsom**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Maria Worthington

Category: Short Story

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## **Drowning in Purple Ink**

### KINDERGARTEN

No one ever mentioned the white walls. Endless voids, endless fields of unknown. The snow sang as it streamed across the walls, leaving stains of white blood that soaked the plaster until it hardened. It was as cold as it was outside, cold enough to keep the little flakes that dropped from pink overcoats intact on the linoleum floor, for blue boots to grind them into microscopic shards as sharp as glass.

The walls were largely ignored. Mr. Q always told Kaylie and her colleagues to look straight as they walked down the hall, keeping the *left-right-left* of their march silent and pushing the cold to the periphery. They simply focused on the step ahead, closer to the warmth of the room where they did their math and spelling and pulled on lab coats like little scientists.

Sometimes the teacher would wheel in a '70s tv on a little cart, and they would try to watch videos through the glare of the windows and the static that broke the pictures like lightning. Then the teacher would turn the magic box off and pass out books for Kaylie's colleagues to tear out sheets of addition problems. The books, unlike the tv, were new, and Kaylie didn't understand why they had to pull them apart, or why the other kids tore the paper down the center to say they only had *half* the homework. Kaylie was proud of her homework, the sheets she cut cleanly from the margins of the book and brought home to say, "Mama, Dada—look! I have to work." Standing between her two child-sized mirrors, opposite so that there were thousands of her in each direction, she pretended to straighten a little blazer that looked like the black suit Dada and the lawyers in the magic box wore to work.

Kaylie brought in the homework sheet the next day; she'd waited to do it until she was home, sitting straight at the cardboard-box "desk" in the corner of her room, little lines drawn in black marker (not a Sharpie, she wasn't allowed to use those) to look like the oak wood at school. Her other colleagues had written  $4+4+4$  in the corner,  $8+4$ , 12. Kaylie's paper only had answers, and the others didn't compare work with her. She straightened her black t-shirt as the paper stretched up towards her, erasing the notes on caterpillars and butterflies, the ABCs, until it was all white and there! there were her colleagues, sitting at the oak wood table, visible through a small window in the endless snow. Kaylie smiled in her island of walls, feeling special because she didn't need to look straight anymore. But then everything came back, the caterpillars and butterflies and ABCs. The paper was just paper.

"It doesn't need to be perfect," Mr. Q said when he came around to her table. "Trying like you did is what's important." He marked a little *A+* in the corner of the finished multiplication sheet, in purple pen. She was the only one to get such an honor, so even after he had walked away, Kaylie could only focus on the straight edge of the paper, the perfect grade in pretty pen, and the fact that she hadn't tried at all.

It was snowing outside. In front of the windows was a counter and on that counter, the class hamster, Kee, was running on his wheel. Mr. Q had told them at the beginning of the year that Kee was nocturnal, but Kaylie had known before because of a show she'd seen on her family's tv. It wasn't a box like at school, and it missed the static, and the pictures were too clear, too easy to see. So later that day, she took a cardboard box and cut out the front and back and moved the tv to the floor so they would line up. Kaylie shone Dada's desk lamp through the opening for the glare and found that clicking the power button on the remote caused static to run across the screen.

"What're you doing, Kaylie Kat?" Dada asked, shrugging out of his black suit coat. He turned to hug Mama, who had come home from work an hour ago and was still in her scrubs. The circles under her eyes never went away.

“This is how they do it at school. They share magic boxes on wheeled carts, and the sun makes them too bright, and there’s static. Mr. Q told me that it mattered if I tried.” Kaylie gestured to the tv. “I tried.”

Dada chuckled and pulled a blue pen from his pocket. “You did so well, my smart little girl.” Kaylie giggled. Still beaming, he wrote an *A* on the cardboard.

Kaylie’s smile wavered; she wanted an *A+*. What had she done wrong? But she didn’t ask that; she would figure it out. “I want juice.” Kaylie walked to the fridge, pulling out the grape juice, dyed to look like purple ink. Mama said that wasn’t why; she was a doctor, she would know, drinking ink isn’t healthy. Some things just happen to be purple. But Kaylie believed in *plus* things, not *some*things, and both the ink and juice made her feel healthy.

*Tomorrow, I’ll get a cart*

#### SIXTH GRADE

Boot heels (training boot heels) clicked on the linoleum floor. Kaylie hated the word “training,” but her parents wouldn’t let her wear real boots, the ones with wedges or high heels. Kaylie suffered through; she liked the sound, even of training boots, that echoed down the hallway like a shadow stretching far ahead.

It was Monday. It was also the day of a history test.

Kaylie had reviewed her answers three times, and although they *seemed* right, her hands trembled. For a moment there was a ghost of a paper, a blue *A* at the top, until the jittering chased it away. This was why Ms. R let her go to the water fountain: to chase away the blue *A* and its ensuing earthquake. She leaned over, letting the warm water flow into her mouth. *1, 2, 3.* The trembling stopped.

Loose sneaker soles flapped on the linoleum school floor down the hall.

It was Monday. It was also a day for skipping class.

“Kaylie!” Ben shouted, as if there was a massive crowd he needed to be heard over.

“Keep your voice down,” she said, in case Ms. R heard, and then the paper and its earthquake would stay, trapped in the history classroom. That sounded terrifying. Her colleagues didn’t deserve that. But none of the teachers came outside to tell Ben to shut up, to go to class, so maybe they hadn’t heard.

Ben didn’t care, his shadow now overlapping with hers. It felt cold. “Come on, hold up a minute. Class can wait.”

Kaylie was incredulous.

“It’ll only take a minute.” Ben was close now, very close. “Just a minute, okay? Stay still.” His hands hovered by her arms, grazing the edges of her raised hairs. “That’s it, good girl.” His hands touched her arms, stroked them, pet them.

“I’m not your dog,” she said, trying to sound as fierce as the *click-click-click* of her boots, but her mouth was dry, her voice was barely above a whisper. She looked around at the water fountain and the lines of lockers, all ice blue.

“But you’re *mine*,” he said, and Ben’s mouth closed on hers. Kaylie could no longer breathe, eyes open; Ben’s eyes were closed, his mouth flapping like it belonged to a loose soul.

*Stop.* “Stop.” (a whisper) “Stop.” (a little louder) “Stop—”

Ben shushed her, pushed Kaylie against a locker. “People do this in high school,” he said into her mouth. “Enjoy it.” She inhaled his sweat, his CO<sub>2</sub>. The lock dug into her back.

“Stop!” Kaylie finally tore her face away, keeping it turned as his fingers clawed at it, willing it back into obedience. That way was silence. That way was high school. Kaylie really hated the training boots.

Doors started to open, and there were shouts, and there was someone—Ms. R?—pulling him off of her, pulling him away. The world was blurry, and distantly, Kaylie heard someone ask if she was okay. Patches narrowed into focus: the blue lockers, the water fountain, open doors, children, teachers. Ben was the only one with a shadow. Through an open door, the one to Ms. L's room, she saw students laughing or mouthing *sorry*. Some had the decency to look at their desks as if nothing had happened.

When the world stopped spinning, there was simply the principal's office. Ben was sitting in a chair at the desk. He used phrases like "she wanted to."

"Kaylie," Ms. R said, outside the door. "You don't have to go in there if you don't want to; we'll handle Ben. You can go to the nurse until your parents get here."

Ms. R was missing the point. Kaylie still didn't have a shadow.

A month ago, when talking with Dada about the students who didn't listen or care, he said that in the real world, people have to work with people they don't like. *What about people they hate? They fear?*

But Dada wasn't here to tell her the best answer, so wordlessly, Kaylie stepped into the ice-cold room, filled with the shadows of everyone but her.

The door closed.

Through the rectangular window behind her, Kaylie saw her dad, in his pajamas, beckoning her to leave the room that smelled like sweaty running shoes and silenced tears.

She turned back to the principal, in his suit and tie.

#### ELEVENTH GRADE

The planner was full. There were four tests the next day and hours of homework due, all written in blue ink. The sixth-grade earthquakes began to shake her fingers, then her room. They turned her vision black. Made Kaylie throw up. Her parents had found her passed out on the floor the night prior.

"I can't miss school today." *Yes, you can.* "No, I can't." Kaylie didn't care what they said; today was a debate tournament. Today, she wore a blazer.

"You can't go today, Kaylie," her dad said, then left for work. The world pulsed—once, twice—and then there were salty drops on her hands, rivers on her cheeks. Her mom, halfway out the door in her scrubs and black eyebags, paused.

"Leave me alone," Kaylie said. Her mom did nothing. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Never. Kaylie—"

She ran upstairs, soleless slippers slapping on the stairs. "CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY!" Closed the door of her room and glared into the twin child-sized mirrors. Thousands of Kaylies in each direction shouted: "CRAZY!" The tears were coming harder now. Kaylie couldn't breathe. "CRAZY!"

The opening garage door a floor below replaced the earthquake. Another tremor, the door closed again. Kaylie was grounded by this, her mom working while she stayed home. *Lazy—even your mom thinks you're broken.*

Kaylie looked into the twin child-sized mirrors, at the tear-stained faces of her thousands of selves. Shadows, broken by glass. "I'm going to fix you," she said.

Breath returned to her, but she inhaled CO<sub>2</sub>. That night, she didn't eat, she wasn't hungry; her mind supplied the fuel, burning embers, painfully simple. She didn't eat the next night either, or the next, or the night when the world went entirely black.

Kaylie threw up when she ate again, under warm hospital lights that illuminated her shadow, pieced together like a stained-glass window.

## BEYOND

Most days Kaylie spent on Floor 4. At 27, she was the youngest editor, and as editor, she had an office, with glass windows and a glass ceiling under the Executives' Lounge and glass panels looking onto a sea of cubicles, the sea she'd come from. Her colleagues called Kaylie "A-level," and Kaylie always called them "A-level" back like a little game. *A-level, what's the next story?* muffled through the glass, but Kaylie had learned to listen, truly listen, a long time ago. The men in black suits that relaxed above her said the promotion came with better fantasies and writing, yet Kaylie didn't know if she believed that. At its core, every draft was an escape. And maybe she only thought the stories were better because the men above the glass ceiling said so.

Kaylie looked through the glass office to Nina, whose quiet voice had been made even quieter through the glass, and said: *A-level, when you're here, you let me know.* Kaylie lowered her head to the digital manuscript. She always wanted to print stories, feel the paper in her hands, imagine the success of having it in hardcover and paperback and advertised on little paper fliers in bookstore windows, but the men upstairs said no. The only thing printed in her office was the picture of Liam, a mathematician she'd married four years ago.

As she made to resume her work, the oak-wood + on the door caught her eye, and Kaylie stared at it, asking where it was from and when she'd hung it up and why she couldn't look away. These questions had no answers; these things she didn't know.

She didn't know many things, like why a stray hand in the city made her flinch and think *Ben!* like it was a person, like it was a boy, like the hand had even existed. She didn't know why watching tv was something she could get lost in and why she worked on cardboard boxes at home. She didn't know why her husband always kept her close at night, so close, as if afraid she might slip—slip down into Hell—sleep.

Nina started calling again, something about subjects, and Kaylie consciously avoided the +. Nina's question was answered, another hero did the right thing. And there, next to Nina's desk, was Andy's; he would have gotten her promotion if he hadn't moved away. However everyone told Kaylie a different story: the promotion was hers, she deserved it; she worked hard, and Andy's work was always late. But Kaylie missed a deadline five years ago, and Andy hadn't been late to that one.

The glass room broke. Shards flew into the air, held by time. Distantly, she felt something slide across her arm and then a different something slide down. If she looked to the right, Kaylie knew, there would be blood. The shard must have cut her shirt—fuck—and her blazer—FUCK. There was no air and where there was life there was only a white hole, a white hole, a white—

The glass was back. The shards were gone. There was no pinch, no blood. There was no hole in her shirt, in her blazer (thank god). There was air and there was life, and it was just an office, an ordinary office, with its glass ceiling and walls, and floors painted like steam. *Crazy* she thought, then shied away from the word, looking at the second hand tick on the wall clock. The word was gone, and the time was gone; the hands and their faux-gold arrows read 5:00. The men upstairs always made her leave at 5:00.

*Just a little longer.* She lost herself again in the electronic sea of black words and purple marks and white space.

It was 7:00 when Kaylie closed her laptop and opened the door, locked it from the inside, shut it again. The city streets outside were cold and dangerous, but her boots clicked on the pavement anyway. The thought of cars and engines both attracted and repelled her, like the ghost of something far ahead. Anyways, there was a steady *click-click-click* that came with walking, a little rhythm like checking off a list: edits, a meeting, Nina's question, Nina's second question ... Kaylie paused. She felt like she was covered in a velvet blanket. There! A tingle in her mind—maybe—yes!—an itch, a shout—a sticky name tag—oak wood— $3*4=12$ —paper—plus—

There was a little magic box, and the tingle went away.

At home, Liam asked if her day was okay and if she was alright, and she started to tell him about Nina's question and the work she'd finished and how tired she was, but a little voice whispered *arrogant*. It sounded like her, then it

sounded like him. Maybe it was Liam? *Sorry. How are you, Honey?* He frowned. He said that he was good *I'm going to get juice* Kaylie said. Dinner was over.

The two crawled into bed that night, rushing under the blankets because the heater was broken, and Kaylie buried herself in Liam's arms to escape the white walls of their room. He kissed her forehead; he told her to sleep well and that he was there if she needed anything. Kaylie didn't know what "anything" would be, so she told him the same.

Kaylie dreamed of Mr. Quen, her kindergarten teacher, telling her to try. Dreamed of the cardboard magic box with an *A*. Dreamed of the metal clang of blue lockers and lips that were not Liam's. Dreamed of pajamas in a window, and a suit and tie behind a cardboard box. Dreamed of tears and two endless mirrors. Dreamed of + signs, always + signs. CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY—

"CRAZY!"

It was dark. Liam was asleep; the walls were white. It was 5:00. Kaylie stumbled into the bathroom, the tile lit by moonlight. She examined herself in the mirror, noting the dark circles under her eyes and the pajama shorts that revealed her gooseflesh because she had broken the heater in a panic attack.

"I'm so sorry," she said to her husband, who probably, secretly, thought she was another problem to be solved. "I'm going to fix myself. I'm going to fix myself. I'm going to fix myself." Kaylie held up a shaky hand, counting in the reflection: 0, 6, 11. Hesitantly, she added *infinity*. Her hand stopped shaking. "Just a dream. It was just a dream."

Kaylie hurried back into Liam's arms to escape the four white walls, but she didn't know why. She never knew why.

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Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

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## Forgive and Forget or Revenge and Regret?

Forgive and Forget or Revenge and Regret?

I'd been through this before, and I knew what would happen. Sure, I get 30 text messages a day now, but give it a week and my old friends would grow tired of keeping me updated on life events I'd become increasingly disconnected from. It might be a week, or maybe a month, but sooner or later my old life would disappear. I'd look back fondly on old memories, but that's all they would be. Memories.

"Cathy, can you tell me which carbonic sugar bonds to guanine?"

I snapped back to reality, briefly forgetting my problems. I had only been in Mrs. Johnson's class for a week, and I didn't know what a carbonic sugar was, let alone guanine. I opened my mouth, preparing to give a completely fictional answer, when I felt a nudge at my side. I glanced to my right, and saw that the blonde-haired boy sitting next to me was pointing at the word "cytosine" in his notes.

"Cytosine!" I blurted, relieved to have an answer.

"Correct. Emily, what enzyme performs..." Mrs. Johnson continued her hunt for an unprepared student, satisfied by my answer. I smiled at the boy, grateful for his help. I had transferred to the school mid-year, and I constantly felt like I was 5 steps behind everyone else, from remembering my classes to making friends to carbonic sugars. The bell rang, and the boy walked out of the room.

"Hey! You really saved me back there. I have no clue what cytosine is," I said, winded from hurrying to catch up. He looked up from his phone.

"What?" He paused for a minute before answering. "Oh right, yeah. No big deal." He slid his phone into his jacket pocket and looked up at me with deep blue eyes.

"You're new, right? I'm Ian, by the way."

"Cathy. Yeah, I just transferred last week." I shifted on my feet, unsure of what to say next.

"Well, see you around!" He waved and turned away. Waving back, I felt a twinge of optimism about my new school.

*Ding.* I glanced up from my mountain of homework. My phone had gone off, showing a message from an unknown number.

*Hey, it's Ian. What's up?* I shoved my homework aside and tapped out a response.

*Hi! How did you get my number?*

*Don't worry about it. So, what's your deal?*

*My deal?*

*Yeah, like why did you transfer mid-semester?* I sighed, deliberating my answer. In truth, it was complicated why I had left, but it all boiled down to the fact that I just wasn't cut out for private school.

*It's... a long story.* That had become my go-to answer.

*Oh. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. How're you liking it here so far?*

*I don't know...there are some parts I miss, but some that I definitely don't.* Like nine-hour school days complete with mandatory sports practice. Like sadistic math teachers who give pages of homework. Like the skipped lunches spent cramming for some upcoming test.

*I'm sorry to hear that. What do you miss?* Mornings spent in the commons, talking and laughing right up until the bell. Passing notes back and forth until the teacher gets suspicious. Checking my phone and always having a text from someone. Having friends. Having a life.

*Oh, you know, it's just hard to start over.*

*I get it. I've been the new kid before, so I know how hard it is to make new friends. Got to go soon, but I hope you know you seem really easy to be friends with,* he answered, adding another emoticon. Sending my own emoji back, I clicked off my phone. Maybe this new school wasn't so bad after all.



The next few weeks passed quickly. Ian texted me, I texted back. He called my cell phone, I answered. He wrote me notes in class, I scribbled responses on the back of my biology homework. I learned that Ian was the youngest of four brothers. He played the guitar, but not well. His favorite color was green. He pretended to like rock and roll but actually loved Britney Spears and Lady Gaga. Once, he lent me his sweatshirt because he could see that I was shivering in the biology room's frigid AC, and it smelled like *Old Spice* cologne. He introduced me to his friends, and soon I found myself hanging out with them in the mornings, talking until the bell rang. Sure, he was unlike my old friends, but the hole they had left in my heart shrunk more and more every time I talked to Ian.

*So, I was thinking. You. Me. The new Marvel movie this Sunday.* My heart fluttered. Was this a date?

The movie was exciting, but nothing compared to the message I got afterwards.

*Hey, I know this might be out of line, but I need to tell you something.*

*Sure, anything.* He typed on and off again.

*I know we only met a month ago, but I think you're the cutest, funniest, smartest girl that I know. I really, really, like you, Cathy. Will you go out with me?* I refreshed the message 3 times, sure that it would go away if I blinked. I felt like I had finally "started over".

I practically skipped to school the next morning. Just as I was about to sit down in first-period Algebra, I felt a tap on my shoulder. In front of me was a brunette, petite girl named Ella. Ian's friend.

"Can we talk outside?" Those words never accompanied something good. I sighed, following her out into the hallway.

"Listen, I don't know how to tell you this, but Ian isn't who you think he is." With an expression full of pity and sympathy, she held up her phone.

*...I know we only met a month ago...*

*...You're the cutest, funniest...*

*...I really, really, like you, Cathy.*

*I like you, too.* Ella avoided my eyes.

"He started posting screenshots of your messages about a month ago on this online forum. He thought it would be funny to see if he could trick you." I snatched her phone. I scrolled up farther and saw screenshots of just about every text conversation we'd had. Every picture included disgusting comments, both Ian talking about how smart he was for "pulling one on me" and others commending his efforts. I clicked on the website and saw with a gasp that 100 people had been on the forum. 100 people had seen my thoughts that I believed I'd told one person.

"I'm so sorry. I just saw the website yesterday, and we've been trying to warn you before it was too late." The room spun, and I could feel my face growing warm. I had barely stumbled into a bathroom stall before I began crying. Checking my cell phone, I found neither messages from my old friends nor anyone from my current school. My old friends had forgotten me, and my new friends weren't friends at all. I was completely alone. I sobbed until the bell rang, when I took a shuddering breath and dragged myself back to class. As I struggled to listen to a lecture on polynomials, I couldn't stop thinking about Ian and what he had done to me. Trying to pay attention in Algebra class that day, I likely felt similar to Jim Thornton, when he found out that he was a victim of a scam by a contractor. He says of his emotions, "The more I ruminated about how I had been ripped off by a "certified" professional, the worse I felt- filled with bottomless rage and somehow emasculated too" (Thornton 116). Jim Thornton discusses how he couldn't just simply move on. His mind was stuck on how the contractor had wronged him, culminating in his eventual revenge. Given the negative connotations of "ruminated", and how he was "filled with bottomless rage", Thornton believes that it is unhealthy to let a perceived wrongdoing overtake one's emotions. By focusing on the misdeed, he was unable to heal or move on- he simply became angrier. Like Thornton, I agonized over every aspect of the situation. Shame that Ian had so easily fooled me and sadness that Ian was never who I thought he was occupied my mind, but anger at Ian and everyone else on the online forum held a tight grip on my emotions. While I knew that my fixation wasn't healthy, it was all I could do not to break down on the spot. I had about five minutes to decide what I would say when I saw him. The clock inched its way to 10:03, when I had to make my way to our shared class. The bell rang, and I walked, trancelike, to biology.

I cautiously opened the door and saw him sitting in his usual seat. Everything about him had changed. His blue eyes, which had once seemed so insightful and innocent, now looked at me with malice and deception. His smile, which I had once thought so genuine, was now a confident smirk. I couldn't believe that I had let such an obviously vile person into my heart, and I was now paying the price. Practically shaking with indignation, I stalked up to his desk. He glanced up at me and smiled.

"How could you do this to me?" His smile quickly faded.

"Listen-

"No!" I shoved the screenshot Ella sent me in his face. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?" I knew that everyone in the room had turned to look at me, and some were even taking out their phones to record, but I didn't care. I had only one thought on my mind: vengeance.

“You really thought that you could do this without me finding out? You thought I would fall for your tricks?” I scrolled farther up, waving my phone in front of his face.

“You thought that no one would tell me? Well, I’ve got something to tell you, Ian. You know what I think? I think you wanted to ask me out, but you were too scared to do it. So you came up with a contingency plan. If I said no, you could say you were ‘just doing it for the joke’. You ‘didn’t really mean it’. If I said yes, you made me look like a lovestruck idiot in front of all those creeps on the internet. Either way, you came out on top. Well, guess what, Ian? I’m not falling for your tricks a second time. We’re over.” I heard plenty of stifled giggles in the background. Before Ian could come up with an answer, the bell rang and our teacher walked into class. I sat down with my head held high and a cool smile, the tears long dry on my face.

All throughout the hallways, I heard people whispering as I walked by. Somehow, I had managed to turn the tides in my favor with my outburst. The video had spread around the school, and the masses had decided that Ian was a total jerk, and the way I had handled it was funny and cool. At least, that’s what I had deduced from reading the messages off of Ella’s phone the next morning. I felt a sense of vindication. The amount of friends Ian had was quickly dropping. I couldn’t help but smile at the teasing comments. But as I scrolled further, the messages became crueler, often insulting Ian’s appearance. The smile slowly slid off my face. Feeling slightly ill, I read one that said, *Wow, what a loser. I wonder how it feels to be a complete disgrace to humanity*. Shuddering, I saw even more vile comments farther up. Some even threatened violence, saying they knew where he lived or other worrying personal details. Complete disgrace to humanity or not, these messages were far worse than anything anyone had said about me from Ian’s webpage. While I didn’t know what I wanted to achieve with my outburst, these horrific messages were certainly not it.

Albeit much less serious, my current emotions were similar to a moment in Brian Stevenson’s memoir *Just Mercy*. Stevenson recalls meeting an elderly woman who he often sees in the courtroom, and she tells him that she watches court trials because a group of boys murdered her 16-year old grandson. She tells Stevenson, “I grieved and grieved and grieved... Those boys were found guilty for killing my grandson, and the judge sent them away to prison forever. I thought it would make me feel better, but it actually made me feel worse” (Stevenson 307). Her experience yielded feelings of regret. She states that as a result of justice for her late grandson, she felt worse, as getting justice simply caused more pain and suffering. Justice didn’t bring her grandson back. In my experience, I had a moment of glee at Ian’s downfall, but my happiness was short-lived. When I saw the cruel and violent words written about Ian, I was back to square one. Just like the woman from Stevenson’s memoir, continued suffering wouldn’t take away the initial humiliation and betrayal that I felt. What if Ian retaliated, causing only a cycle of more online abuse?

Thane Rosenbaum also discusses this matter in an article, from a different perspective. Rosenbaum believes, “Revenge is never just if it is disproportionately delivered -- if the retaliation exceeds what is justly deserved, measure for measure. Indeed, vengeance is not irrational (the common knock on revenge) -- it’s healthy and entirely human” (Rosenbaum 2). Rosenbaum argues that revenge is just if it is meted out in equal measures. However, attempting to create a revenge plan that causes the exact same amount of hurt would be impractical at best. In my case, I had only intended to settle the score with Ian, and to show everyone who was really in the right. But I had ended up likely indirectly causing Ian more hurt and pain than he had caused me. While his actions made me feel miserable and alone, they certainly did not make me fear for my safety. Even though I intended to deliver equal revenge, I delivered disproportionate and unfair revenge. Another point that Rosenbaum makes is that revenge is healthy. Again, my experience contrasts his argument. My revenge, while satisfying in the short term, eventually had majorly unhealthy consequences. I was horrified at the hatred from the internet, and it no doubt didn’t make Ian feel any better, as a victim of said online cruelty. These online gossipers didn’t care about who was truly in the right, or whether the people they affronted deserved it. They only wanted to see someone get hurt. Shakily, I handed Ella her phone back and stood up. I knew what I had to do.

I walked on trembling knees 10 feet to Ian’s lunch table. Glancing around, it was noticeably barren. Noticing me, Ian shot me a look of confusion. Before he could start talking, I began my apology.

“Listen, Ian. I’m still hurt by what you did to me, but I just wanted to say, even you don’t deserve what people are saying about you online. I think the way some people are talking is getting horrifying. If I had known what would’ve happened, I would have settled our disagreement in private.” Ian laughed genuinely, shocking me to my core.

“You’re way too nice. I thought that you were going to slap me in the face at the end of your speech, and I would have deserved it. I should be the one saying sorry here. I have no idea what possessed me to do that, and I promise, I would take it back if I could. It’s just...” He sighed, looking away from me. I fiddled with a loose thread on my mauve sweater.

“One day, when we were texting, Lucas got a hold of my phone.” Lucas was one of Ian’s closest friends. “He thought the messages were hilarious and convinced me to post them online. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. It was like some kind of addiction. I know, it sounds like a lame excuse. I’m not trying to get you to forgive me, I’m just explaining.” I shifted back and forth, formulating a response.

“Thank you for that. It doesn’t make what you did any better, but it’s nice to have an explanation, I guess.” With that, I turned and walked away.

My experience with forgiveness is reminiscent of an article by Philip Yancey, describing how one disagreement with his wife often spirals out of control. Yancey remarks, “Forgiveness breaks the cycle. It does not settle all questions of blame and justice and fairness, to the contrary, it often evades those questions. But it does allow relationships to start over” (Yancey 37). Yancey argues in favor of forgiveness, describing it as a “reset” for a relationship. In my experience, forgiving Ian, even begrudgingly, was challenging, painful, and even humiliating, but it was worth it to stop further retaliations. I “broke the cycle” that Yancey describes, making sure that no continued revenge would ensue. While we didn’t hash out whether my actions were merited in detail, it did allow us the opportunity for a fresh start, even though neither of us truly took it. While my trust was far too betrayed to ever become close with Ian again, I may talk to him in passing, or when required to by school. Even though our few conversations are awkward and uncomfortable, they are far better than the original anger and vitriol.

**Ira Rodrigues**

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School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jon Frank

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

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## **The Talent Thief**

You adjust your satchel and slink against sweaty bodies with hands shoved deep in your pockets, another commoner in the crowd. On a day like this one, the black market is booming. You listen to the ever-familiar shout of vendors hawking their products and smell stale meat and saltwater in the air. It's not pleasant, but it reminds you of home...

You're shaken out of your reverie by a tug at your side. It's instinct to grab the tiny hand digging in your satchel. With a twist of your wrist, you have the thief squealing as you lift them into the air by the collar.

"Trying to steal my stuff?" you say angrily.

"N-no," gasps the thief, a small boy barely older than ten at your best guess. "Please let me go, miss. Ma'am. Sir?" He swallows at your expression. "I thought you were someone else."

"You look young." *Too young to be here*, you think. "Where are you from?"

"Up north, miss."

You examine the squirming child, but it's hard to tell much about his appearance. He sorely needs a bath, wearing dirt on his face like a second skin, and his unruly hair has probably never seen a comb.

The back of your neck starts to prickle. A talent is near.

You don't have time to waste on this little boy. But as you stand there, staring, you see yourself in his expression. You recognize the repentance that he will drop as soon as he gets out of your grip. You must carry it for the rest of your life.

"Miss," the boy wheezes. His collar is starting to dig into his neck, drawing thin red lines on his skin. You drop him with a grunt, wondering what is wrong with you. On a usual work day, you're in and out of the black market by this time.

Your palms start to sweat, but not with anxiety. You've never been able to ignore this sixth sense of yours, but lately, it's been more of a curse than a gift.

The small boy vanishes into the crowd, and a second later, so do you. This time you have a purpose. That sixth sense tugs you along like a fish on a hook.

Eventually, you see it. See her.

She can't be more than fourteen, strumming a guitar she's made herself, by the looks of it. A dilapidated hat sits next to her, filled with pennies. She shouts something and beckons people over.

Your vision blurs, tracing this girl in gold. She looks almost otherworldly.

The girl calls out for the last time, seeming satisfied with the size of the crowd. She begins to strum her guitar. You wrinkle your nose. Her talent with the guitar is mediocre at best. But your sixth sense has never been wrong before...

You turn around and start to shove your way out of the crowd, but then the girl opens her mouth to sing and you are still as stone. An earthquake could erupt beneath your feet and you wouldn't notice.

She sounds like an angel. Her singing is like a cloud; you watch it expand over the black market. Every person under it stops what they're doing to listen. Her melody has no words, but it sounds like heaven.

The girl finishes her song, takes a heaving breath, and smiles widely. She glances not-too-subtly at the hat in front of her.

Coins sail into the hat. People look practically dazed by the girl's singing. You feel the sudden urge to empty your pockets into her grubby little hands.

"Thank you, thank you!" the girl says, flushing with pride. She scoops up her hat, which is now overflowing with gold, and saunters down an alleyway.

Your sixth sense prickles with something like pain. She's getting away!

Shoving through the crowd of people, you follow her down the street. She is humming to herself.

Inside your bag, a vial clinks. You could do it now; knock her unconscious and take all you want. But your conscience isn't letting you.

The girl is getting away. This has never happened before. *Move*, you scream at your unresponding body.

"Wait!"

The girl hears you and turns around. Her eyes narrow. "Do I know you?"

"I watched your show," you say in explanation, feeling stupider by the minute. How are you supposed to knock her out now?

"Was it good?" the girl asks. When you nod, she beams. "I've been singing since I was three."

You feel a painful twinge. "How do you do it?" you ask with false curiosity, moving ever closer. "I want to sing like that too." Too much?

The girl seems flattered. "It's just practice," she responds modestly. Lies.

A few steps closer. You reach inside your bag and feel the cool glass bottle beneath your thin fingers. Guilt is coiling in your stomach.

The girl notices your change in expression. She looks uncomfortable, perhaps remembering that getting cornered in a dark alley somewhere is not a good idea. "I should go..."

She turns to leave and crumples to the floor. Your knuckles sting, probably scraped. At least she won't be conscious to see what you're about to do.

Your sight shifts and the molten gold that appears for talents shines so brightly it blinds you. Carefully, you guide it into the glass vial and cork it.

The girl exhales softly, and the rosy glow leeches from her cheeks. She suddenly seems dull and gray, years older than she is. You leave her lying there.

This is what you are, a thief. You are a danger to everyone around you.

There is a part of the black market that everyone knows to stay away from. People go in and never come out. But you know the place like the back of your hand— after all, it's where your talents are sold. They'll be auctioned off to someone who has the money to afford them. Someone undeserving.

You slip in, avoiding everyone, safeguarding your bag. Here, the only rule is to survive. You're not about to break it.

The man who sells your talents calls himself Eddie. He's been your boss for years, but you still don't know anything about him. As you hand him the bottles, he smiles. "Four talents today? Most of my thieves only get one, tops."

In return, he hands you a bag bulging with money— the rewards from your last batch of talents. You snatch the bag and hold it protectively.

"How much?"

"One million."

You inhale sharply. So much, but it came with a cost.

Seeing your look, Eddie grins. "You should know by now, people will do anything to feel special," he says. "Everybody wants to be talented."

**Charlie Rubin**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Benjamin Murphy

Category: Humor

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## **God Bless America ('s Food)**

God. Bless. This. American. Pizza.

To be completely candid, I'm not a really nationalist guy. Not religious, either. On paper, I should be proud to be an American. I was born here, as were my parents, as were their parents, blah blah blah blah, and well, you get the picture. It's the American Dream sort of deal, something or other that I never took enough interest in to hold near to my heart. I saw through the façade of American supremacy, realizing that I could have easily just been born in China or Moldova and thought those countries to be the best in the world. However, there is one small facet of my life where I forget about my disdain towards hypernationalism, wherein I throw my notions towards open borders off to the side and relish in my own Americana.

The school lunch line.

There is something so American about the lunch line. You and hundreds of other little Americans are forced into a line to receive sub-par food. The pretzels are... sticky. The pizza is... sticky. Everything is sticky, and I adore it, earnestly. Something so magical is born out of the lunch line I enter; I feel so connected to my fellow American brethren every time I enter the cafeteria. My comrades and I are brothers and sisters in arms in the lunch line. Screw Vietnam, the deadliest battle of American history took place on that Thursday when they didn't order enough mozzarella sticks. Sure, other countries have lunch lines, but it's not the same! I remember one teacher telling me about his time as an intern in Korea and how all the students would wait in line every day to receive complementary kimchi. *Sure*, I scoff, *but do they have low-fat Doritos?* Do others take pleasure in eating the restrictive "healthy" food spooned into our mouths by the passion project of Michelle Obama? Do others take the milk out of the fridge, the expiration date so old that it seems like even in 1571 BC Moses would have looked at the label and exclaimed: "Ew! No thanks."

No. I have decided that none will ever know America the way that I have learned its secrets that were whispered to me through the suspicious granola parfait.

Don't let me fool you, it's not about the food. It's about the connection. I'm a cynical kind of fellow. I hold contempt for the average American, I see my experiences as detached from theirs, I am a selfish little twat; I struggle to relate to others. I am the secret Habsburg, greater than Alexander, the fourth Musketeer, the fifth Golden Girl, the Eleventh Commandment, the second messiah, the two hundred sixty-seventh Pope, and the eleventh avatar of Vishnu all wrapped into a perfect package that's called *ME!* Yet when I open my phone and scroll Twitter (a surefire way to not get more contemptuous towards others), I'll occasionally see twenty-somethings reminiscing about their days in the iconic American lunch line. Under their tweets, I'll see comments from thirty-somethings, stating that they too share a similar common thread of American culture, and these thirty-somethings will show the tweets to the parents, the sixty and seventy-somethings, who will, in turn, share the sentiment that envelops me from 11:17-11:42 every day. Goshdarnit. These plebs are just like me.

Many facets of the shared American consciousness were ones that I didn't get to take part in. I didn't get to go to Woodstock. I didn't live through Watergate. Although I am not old enough to remember where I was on 9/11, I am nonetheless old enough to remember where I was when Jacob Turner dropped his french fry cheese all over the yogurt bowl, and I'm sure my father is old enough to remember when his friend Bill Sneider did the same. In entering the lunch line, I have earned my place as one thread in the great quilt called American culture. I envelop myself in the Americana, I let it swallow me whole every time I take a bite-sized blue bunny ice cream bar from the school freezer. Every time he takes a diet zero-sugar zero-calorie zero-flavor "Pepsi" Orange (3 oz.) from a government-owned fridge, a little Jewish boy in Missouri earns his designation as an American. Rich or poor, Alaska or Hawaii, everyone is bound to need to buy a school lunch at some point. Even private school kids need to eat, and even kids that find themselves too good to do anything but bring their lunch to school forget their food at home at some point. There is a place where bridges are gapped, strangers become connected, enemies become friends, friends become

lovers, lovers get into fights over who gets the last pretzel and become enemies again, and I am blessed enough to call this great place my very own school lunch line. The great American melting pot wasn't at Ellis Island, it exists in the cafeteria of a high school.

**Amber Schelp**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Our Lady School, Festus, MO

Educator: Mary Ann Crump

Category: Novel Writing

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## **To Protect Her Kingdom**

### **Brief summary:**

Iryen Ravaran is the princess of an elvish kingdom called Fyn, forged of warriors bathing in newfound peace. Iryen uncovers a ranger whom she captures and learns of an attack directed to her kingdom from another empire by the name of Samar, which they have rivaled for thousands of years. Her father, the king, settles for tranquility over the danger and does nothing about the claim. Iryen, however, gathers her two friends, Findir and Aegnor, on a quest to save that which she loves. When they are brutally captured by goblins along the way, who better to save them than the ranger who triggered the journey: Kieran. With their new addition Iryen takes the group through hills, forests, and the cold wrath of unforgiving orcs. Crossing lands far and wide until they reach Samar, where she plans to assassinate the king, they tie and untie the knots of conflict among themselves, desperate to survive until their duty is fulfilled. When they at last walk willingly into the piercing clutch of the kingdom she learns of an already forming wish to rebel against the king in the citizens. Iryen is forced to give her last breath in killing the king when she is summoned to give up information about Fyn they claimed to have in order to gain entry. Her death shatters the ground which her friends stood on, sending them tumbling into the abyss of grief they could only escape by the climb of understanding and acceptance.

### **Excerpt:**

Later that night Iryen lay in the comfortable bed of her room, dwelling on earlier conversations. She had been called to speak with the king and queen about which path she was to take and more information on the journey to kill Azov. The other three had been summoned to answer questions as such for the entire story.

Iryen had been told that word was sent out from Fyn for her to be returned immediately if found, though they did not oblige for they trusted in her word, and shared in the idea that King Raegel was becoming lazy. She knew she should have felt joy in the idea that no one from Fyn would come looking for her, to rip her away from the gripping quest, however, she took no happiness in the occurrence. Her father did not seem to care much for her return, nor her mother. They were too entranced by the newfound freedom of the kingdom and hatred for anything other than so to allow soldiers to search for her. They would rather have calm in Fyn than their own daughter.

She knew not if Kieran had a family though assumed if he did, the same fear of losing them nonetheless would be snaked around his heart. Aegnor had a large family, and Findir had some. Iryen wondered sometimes if they missed being home, and the familiar embrace of loved ones. She figured that she did not miss her family, but rather her home. The royal family was not as perfect on the inside as it was out.

In the morning they were armed with more advanced weapons and their food was replenished. They had dried fruits, bread, salted meats and other things which would stay preserved for a good amount of time. The king and queen had asked more than once if they were sure they did not want any soldiers to be sent along with them for more protection. Iryen turned them down each time, saying stealth was more important than strength. They were due to cross Flatwood forest soon, and she did not want a large mass of men to follow them through.

The way to Flatwood was a longer trek than from Grimemoor to Rougehelm. It did not consist of dry plains, instead hills and prosperous valleys. Queen Omabella saw to it that they had plenty of water, for there was none safe to drink in the forest. Their horses had been carefully tended to and prepared for the adventure ahead.

"You think we will all survive?" Findir asked as they stood in the stables, readying the last necessities.

"I would hope so." Aegnor laughed lightly to brush off the heavy subject.

"There is no telling if we will make it home, however, I believe we have a fair shot," Iryen smiled.

"I'll sacrifice myself first." Kieran offered, "I'm not as important as you are."



"Of course you are! We all deserve to live." Findir did not make any mention of the fact that he no longer felt the need to be rude to Kieran.

"True, but yer lives are at risk for yer kingdom. Mine is at risk 'cause I feel I have ter help." He stroked his horse's mane tenderly. Iryen did not think he was right. His life meant just as much as theirs did, if not more. He did not have an eternity to live as they did. He had the curse of a mortal life, though would always call it a blessing. His time was limited. It struck wonder in Iryen as to why he tossed his fragile being around so carelessly. Kieran was not one who could be understood easily. He spoke of a life eventually to end as if it was the best part of existence at all. She once again wondered if he were right.

"We are grateful for your help, and shall do everything in our power to bring you home safely." Aegnor patted his shoulder in assurance.

They set out at last, shouting last minute thanks and farewells to the people of Rougehelm and their leaders. The stay seemed to have been cut short, and Iryen longed to be able to roam amongst its towering walls once more. Maybe in a better time, when the crashing wave of urgency passed, and peace was upon them again.

The kingdom slowly passed from their vision, and faded into the horizon of the past. Land anew lay before them, waiting to be walked and seen. The first two days were seldom troublesome and consisted mainly of green hills. The next four showed flecks of trees and rocks. It was a much more pleasant ride than those before, and the sun had taken a break from scratching heat onto their backs. They stopped at a stream, gathering more water, and refreshing. There a lucky find of berry bushes emerged, giving them breakfast for the next few days. The stream flowed quietly, trickling along the submerged stones. Trees overshadowed the miniature clearing, creating a comfortable shade to rest under. Soft greens sprouted up from the ground, and light glittered through the trees. It was the most beautiful place Iryen had ever seen, seemingly untouched by the hands of outside life. They stayed in the clearing overnight, telling each other tales and singing songs passed on from old elven lords. Each held a precious message waiting to be uncovered by the curious digging of young souls. The magic of the serenity swayed the heartfelt feelings out of their inner cell in which they were usually locked.

The next morning they moved on through more trees, which eventually opened up into another set of hills such as the ones before. Each of them carried a cheerful mood due to the advantageous climate. Iryen knew the joy would not be permanent. It may last through the forest, however once they were on the other side it was orc territory until Samar. Houndrun, the House of the Council of Wizards was not all that far away from Flatwood, but was much further south. They would have to cross the Saltbury river and Swiftyard to reach it, which was too far away from the direction they were headed. For all they knew Fyn could already have been ambushed and their cause defeated. "Flatwood is near. We will reach it by tomorrow," Aegnor told them one evening around a feeble fire.

"Ya know some used ter say there was no more peaceful place than Flatwood. Men rarely ever went in there, and elves had a bond with nature, bringing it ter life." Kieran saw a time which they could not, and watched a world of trees and grass beyond their eyes. He never seemed to be quite all there when recalling any tale or legend. He was unlike any other man Iryen had ever met, and could pass as an elf if it weren't for his lack of pointy ears and scruffy appearance. When one got to talking with him he was not the messy ranger he looked.

"I've heard those stories before," Findir joined, "It was all I ever wished for to walk among those great trees. To breathe in the fresh air filtering through the leaves and bark." He too drifted away into a mystical land. Iryen imagined he was thinking of his childhood, and the adventurousness that never really left him. Findir was just the opposite of Kieran: the grace of an elf but the stubbornness of man. His blonde hair flowed softly with the wind as he gazed up at the sky above. Findir always was the one to encourage others to peel away from the comfort of a strict lifestyle. He was reckless, though it was the quality she found she liked best in him. Aegnor and Iryen would not be who they were without him.

"One day we shall all go there. When times are not so dark and urgent. I have been there before, but it did not hold the wonder it should have." Aegnor looked over at Findir and smiled.

He was a brave, yet gentle being. Rolling his eyes at Iryen and Findir's childish acts even when they knew it was not sincere. Aegnor was the one who reminded them they had a reason to keep going.

"We shall visit all of Ethenly when the threat of Samar haunts us no longer. Except Grimemoor, of course." Iryen smiled at the thought. The night was radiating with the laughter of friends, and hope for a better future.

Flatwood forest looked as beautiful as it had been described. They arrived the next day in the afternoon, and the sun just barely showed itself through the leaves. The company looked around in wonder when they first stepped in. The trees were tall and bursting with green leaves on every branch. The soft chirping of birds fluttered in the distance. The ground was sprinkled with moss covered rocks and damp smelling earth. Iryen felt one with the true form of Ethenly, infatuated with its near alive feel.

She felt as if the longer she walked among the beauty the fainter every other problem became. The other three were just as intrigued with the wonder of the forest. The first day of riding through was much slower than it should have been, each of them desperate to drink in every drop of its delicacy. When it came to their attention at last that the

entire kingdom of Fyn was at stake, and relied on their ability to control their fascination they sped up.

The ride through Flatwood was not to last as long as Iryen hoped it would. The further south one went the thinner the forest got. It would take roughly a total of three days to pass through, assuming minimal interruptions.

Before she knew it the first day ended and the second began. It began to get rockier, and more than once they had to take new paths for the horses, which Iryen had begun to care about very much. She had given hers the name Bathrion, and took pride in his beauty.

Aegnor led them, knowing for the most part where to go, guiding them past fallen trees and over small creeks. It began to rain, increasing the danger and difficulty of climbing over the rocks. They came upon a small valley with a muddy river raging at the bottom, and only a coincidentally placed fallen tree serving as a bridge. Multiple of the trees in the forest were large around the trunk, and this one was large enough to cross. Seeing as there was no visible option to go around they made up the decision to take their chances at crossing.

"I believe if we send over two of us, then the horses, and then the last two it will work best." Findir analyzed the trunk through the pouring rain.

"It'll be real dangerous. We might die. I think we can do it." Kieran dismounted, smiling tensley.

The four clutched the reins of their horses, drenched from head to toe trying to decide who would go first. Of course Kieran and Aegnor offered immediately, Findir jokingly saying he would rather die than be first. Iryen suggested that she and Aegnor go second, for they were better with the horses. Once they were all in agreement Kieran hesitantly stepped onto the log.

"Feels strong 'nough!" he shouted over the sound of the storm and the rushing of the dirty river. His boot slipped on the water before he regained his balance. The gap between both sides was not all that big, but was lined with sharp boulders on the walls down. Once he was halfway across the rest of the way was easy and he went quickly. Findir looked anxiously at the other side which Kieran was waving him towards. He inched cautiously onto the wet wood. Iryen knew he had nothing to fear, he was one of the most swift amongst them and would pass with ease. He did just so, at last grasping Kieran's outstretched hand on the other side.

They sent Bathrion over first. He strided over simply, Findir's horse following, then Aegnor's, and Kieran's. They had made it across safely, with the exception of confusion and fear. Next up was Iryen. Aegnor trailed closely behind, not flinching in the slightest at the booming crack of lightning overhead.

The rain soaking her clothes made her cold, shivering at not only the temperature but the scene before her as well. She was almost towards the other side when her foot got caught on the end of a broken off branch. Iryen tripped, grabbing desperately for something to hold on to. *Anything*. She felt her body being flung off the side, almost plummeting to the taunting water below. The panicked screams of her friends appeared in the blend of ear ripping noises, calling for her, though knowing it would do no good. She clung to the wet side of the tree, her hands slipping and cutting open on the rough bark. Iryen knew she could not hold on for much longer, soon the river underneath would claim her. Aegnor appeared, leaning over the edge carefully.

"Take my hand!" He shouted. Iryen's insides turned on themselves as she dared to release her failing grasp on the trunk and rely on the strength of the elf. He pulled, lifting her up some. She moved her foot up to try to help, placing her knee on the makeshift bridge. Aegnor heaved, falling backwards as she pushed up with her leg and collapsed onto the tree. Iryen breathed heavily, terror sticking unpleasantly to the corners of her heart. The two crawled to the solid ground that awaited them with the helping hands of Findir and Kieran. When she stood she found herself wrapped in the embrace of Findir, and then Aegnor when he let her go.

"We thought you were lost to the water!" Findir exclaimed, fear and relief dwelling in his eyes.

"So had I," Iryen exhaled, moving further away from the valley. "One more reason I owe my life to you, Aegnor."

"I shall add it to the list." Aegnor smiled tiredly.

"How 'bout we get outta this forest?" Kieran suggested, grinning. With the whole group in agreement they moved onward from the fallen tree, each keeping a closer eye on each other.

The length of the forest provided one more night for them before they at last reached the sunshine again. It gave Iryen a surprising feeling of being able to breathe once more. She was not so fond of the last half of the journey through Flatwood. Obvious signs of earlier rain still remained, the ground being softer than before. Mud sloshed under hooves and the scent of damp soil filled the air.

They were in a land known as Eastmeadow. It was further north than Houndrun and the main southern kingdom, Kildenn. The land was very close to Samar, a sign that they were almost at their destination, still holding hopes that the attack had not yet taken place. They were at the most dangerous point of the entire journey. Eastmeadow was crawling with orcs. Orc packs scavenging, hunting, and searching for intruders would be everywhere. Samar loomed unseen a few days away, and could have troops scouting. Had they been in the possession of more time they would have visited Othorion, said to be the wisest wizard of the age, in Houndrun for advice. Yet there was no such time, and Kildenn was in an alliance with Samar. It was rumored that King Azov fooled Princess Aveley into an alliance, promising wealth and prosperity for her people in exchange for her obedience. One of his first orders would be to

execute the four travelers.

It was also rumored that the orcs living in Eastmeadow had moved further east of late, away from the Silverpeak mountains, which served as natural protection for Samar. With a smooth stroke of luck they would encounter few along the way. For the first day they saw no sign of orc nor elf. They had progressed northeast and moved along the meadows simply. The second day did not prove to be so uneventful. No living being had been spotted, however, orc tracks lay in the dried dirt before them. The end of them nor where they led to could not be found, for they faded away. It was certain there had been many more than one present at the time. Kieran estimated they were around a day old, and Findir guessed it was a pack of nearly thirty. The tracks went on for a few hours before stopping completely, running into too much grass to be seen or even have been made. They resumed the original path heading further north, and saw no more orc tracks. That night was the first sign of the horrendous creatures that made Iryen feel the threat was alive. She was on watch, looking out beyond the blanketing dark for any movement. Her hand was placed on the hilt of her sword, waiting patiently for the need to bring it out of its sheath. An eerie quiet floated in the ominous meadow up until that moment. A high pitched shriek sounded out, almost certainly an orc call. Iryen stood up, waking the other three quickly. They sat waiting for another call but none were made. Aegnor decided they had to move even faster, for now not only were they in need of reaching Samar quickly to kill the king, but they were being hunted.

The kingdom of Fyn had been free from threat for a thousand years. Its vast population was seldom troubled and had many allies of great importance. The gift of immortality had allowed its community to be built around the same elves who had long since reigned and ruled its land.

The elves of Fyn were of swift and strong stature, genetics ensuring it stayed so. There was no elf of two hundred years or older who lacked a specific gift in combat or weaponry. Some held the talent of a crisp and fair shot with bow and arrow, while others had their share of strength by means of sword or dagger. Others, however, strayed from battle and found themselves in music, literature, or art. The latter had grown more common, due to the newfound peace of the land, and younger elves brought in a new string of interests, leaving the old tales of great wars to loom in history, where they deemed it belonged.

King Raegel of Fyn had no interest in the decline of warriors, for peace was hard to come by. He ruled over his kingdom with such a bold passion, not even the elves who remained from aged, darker times seemed to doubt his word. He had all the people convinced that if even a raging herd of goblins poured into the city, or enemies from long ago resurfaced, they need not be troubled.

All of the people excluding Iryen Ravaran.

Iryen was the princess of Fyn, daughter of King Raegel and Queen Erlan. She trusted her father and believed he would be capable of saving her beloved home from all the terrors of the outside world until the end of time. She knew even if he remained stubborn and oblivious to the very much alive dangers which lurked beyond the palace walls, in the end, Fyn would not die. Though this was true, it did not restrain her from the inevitable feeling that he cared far too little about the defense of the sacred kingdom.

The elves of Fyn had been warriors, perhaps the finest breed to ever have walked the west side of Flatwood forest. They had been feared among whispering rangers and spoken of through the mysterious words of the Council of Wizards. There was not a being in all of the lands who passed unknowingly of the rumors.

Though the wind which words are carried on grows wearisome, and one can not be on the tip of tongues forever, for they are bound to fall off the edge sometime. Ethenly was a world structured on war and forged in a path created by victory. The people of the land had been straying from that path of late and found themselves on a road of undisturbed tranquility.

Iryen would not have minded, in fact, she may have even enjoyed it, if it weren't for the attack from their rivaling kingdom, Samar.

After such calm had been embedded in the elves of Fyn's hearts, Samar's king had found it to be the perfect opportunity to strike. It would take a fool not to. Iryen had been on patrol when she heard the carelessly thrown words. She'd taken her horse and a group of other patrol men, who she was responsible for, and set out to scout the perimeter, keeping relatively close to the edge of the nearby Northmond River. They had been preparing to turn back when they saw a huddle of troublesome-looking rangers. Iryen took it upon herself to ask the basic information of them: where they were going, why they were going there, where had they come from, and who they were.

She had approached the group from a nearby cluster of brush, from which they were unable to see her, and first listened in on what they were saying.

"-leave none of them alive, that's their plan, I tell you. Kill all of 'em off while they're weak." One of the men to her right declared. "They'll never see it comin', that's the beauty of it."

Iryen waited as still as her horse would allow, taking low, shallow breaths. The man had a heavy accent and spoke of a gruesome plan. These rangers were not of the worst ancestry, but certainly not of the best. They sat in a circle, paraphernalia scattered across their resting area. Iryen counted six of them, plus three scrawny horses.

"Ol' King Azov really outdone himself on this one 'asn't he?" Another raspy voice said before laughing deeply. "All of Ethenly will hear 'bout the killin' of those snobby Fyn folk."

At his last statement the others laughed in sync. Iryen's heart took a confusing pattern of beats, and she found herself puzzled. Samar and Fyn's rivalry was known by nearly every creature who roamed about, and even after it had died down, tales of it were still traded amongst others. If Samar was planning one final attack, especially a surprise attack, the life she knew was doomed. Iryen returned to her men and gave them the order to leave only one alive.

The single ranger they had left living struggled against his bindings and attempted to protest through the cloth he had tightly wrapped around his grimy face. The patrol took him back to the kingdom, and Iryen insisted he be brought before the king and queen.

Sitting on the silver throne, lined with the most precious jewels there could be found, Iryen stared down at her prisoner with an icy gaze. He trembled before King Raegel and made one last try to pull free of the tight grasp the soldiers had on him.

"My daughter claims you and your fellow rangers have spoken of an attack directed at us, originating from Samar. Is that true?" King Raegel's booming voice echoed through the large and gaping room.

"I'll die 'fore I tell *you* a thing." The ranger said rudely, now free from the speech-preventing cloth. "You're a murderer."

King Raegel turned towards his daughter, not bothering to remove the look of disgust covering his stern face. "Are you sure that this man spoke of an attack on us? There has been no attempt in years."

"Yes," Iryen replied, in hopes her voice would project confidence and certainty. Her father had not been one to take her word seriously, and she often found him doubting her claims. "They talked of killing off our entire population."

"I do not find that to be an easy task. Impossible, even." The king said deeply, alerting Iryen of the obviousness that nothing would be done in prevention. "Fyn is well protected, and if Samar and its people dare to strike they shall feel my wrath. In the meantime put this ranger in a cell, for trespassing on our land."

The soldiers tugged on the wrists of the ranger, who smiled nastily. His cold grin told Iryen everything she needed to know. There was going to be an attack and no one was going to try to stop it. Her father did not believe her, nor her mother, but the ranger knew. He knew everything.

That evening Iryen found herself on her way to find the prisoner, if the king and queen would do nothing about the threat then she would have to do something herself. There is no stopping war, not until it is won. She threw open the door and revealed a stone chamber with an eerie darkness coating the cell doors, to her right was a messy mound of barrels, which were emitting a strange, stale smell. She had only been there one other time, then too Fyn had faced a terrible danger.

She scanned her eyes across the various halls, unable to decipher which would lead to the ranger. She made a guess, and walked slowly down the left passage, looking in each barred door as she went by. When she didn't see him there, she tried the row next to it. There were multiple columns of cells, over half of them being empty at the time.

To her luck she found the ranger, at last, sitting against the wall opposite Iryen. He looked up slowly when she tapped her hand against the door. The sound echoed throughout the quiet room. For a moment neither of them said a word while the faint sound of water dripping filled the background.

"What're you doin' down 'ere, eh?" He asked, accent heavy on his tongue. She looked down at him with a sort of pity she seldom had for prisoners. He hadn't done much of anything wrong, but his disobedience earned him a life sentence from the ruthless king. Those who were required to spend their days waiting alone in the dungeon of Fyn in due course would give up hope of escape, for the doors were forged from the precious metal of the dead ages, and could not be broken out of.

"When will the attack take place?" Iryen said, though somehow knowing he would not give her a useful response.

"Raegel really thinks by sendin' down you I'll tell ya what Azov's brewing up in that mind o' his? What a load of rubbish!"

"So it is true then? The king of Samar is going to try to kill off all of us?"

The ranger took on a look of regret at his previous words. "No use tryna tell ya otherwise. Execute me if that's what pleases yer king. I ain't in on it, and I don't know who is."

Iryen pondered his words, they could mean anything. He could simply be lying, as the common ranger would, though she felt that was not so. It was surely possible that there was no decided date for Samar's plan, or word had only gotten out of its existence. Either way, Fyn stood no chance against its forces, once the king made up his mind he would not be easily swayed, and he had already made the choice that peace would remain, though it was unfortunately so that the choice was not his to make.

"What is your name, ranger?" She asked calmly. "You are of Freytide's folk if I am correct?"

He nodded slowly, looking at her with less hatred than had recently claimed reign over his eyes. "The name's Kieran."

"Well then, Kieran. I will make the request for your release," she replied solemnly, before turning on her heels and returning from whence she came.

Later that night Iryen strode through the halls, deep in thought. She had earlier spoken to some guards about permission to let Kieran go, for he had committed few crimes and nothing that had caused trouble to anyone. She supposed her father would likely agree, or at the very least shorten his sentence. King Raegel was brutal, but not one to hold those of innocence captive. In the meantime she found herself struggling with a solution, there was almost no way of knowing whether Samar's army was already at the gates, preparing to claim their victory, or if they were going to wait another thousand years.

Iryen paced, unsure of what was going to become of her home. With no defense and none on the way, it would take a few loyal elves to set out on their own in hopes to gather information, or even put a stop to the devious happenings in Samar. Even then a few seemed too much to ask, for not many had the courage to rebel against the royal will. Then again, even if they were, it would take even more bravery to possibly give up one's life on the word of the princess.

She knew of two elves who might be so courageous and stubborn as to follow her onto the battlefield and sacrifice everything they love, for the sake of everything they love. It would take a fair deal of persuasion, however, they were her only hope. Iryen made her way back to her room, a beautiful and plentifully dazzled abode, larger than the average civilian's kitchen and dining space combined. It was a gorgeous white and silver color scheme, with some of the most priceless trinkets of the kingdom residing in every corner, and hanging off of every wall. Soon she would be leaving it all behind, putting life as she knew it to rest and pursuing a journey most would deem insane, or foolish to even acknowledge in the ever-growing garden of sprouting ideas.

She sat on her bed, waiting for the elf who came around each night to check on the members of the royal family, and those of the upper class. Iryen had always found it

strange that one would be in need of care late at night, but she was grateful for it at the moment. When the elf finally arrived she requested that her friends be summoned to her chambers. They were the two she figured would either believe her and make the journey with her, or talk her out of it, and assure her the problems would be dealt with in due time. Hoping the latter would not come true, she waited patiently for them to arrive.

It took a rather long time for the night elf to return, due to the ridiculously winding corridors and elongated halls. When she did, however, Iryen was glad to see her friends trailing behind, looking tired and disturbed.

“Glad to be of service, Miss Ravaran,” the night elf said humbly at her thanks before walking out.

Iryen looked back up to face the elves that stood before her: Aegnor and Findir. Both of whom seemed displeased at being summoned across the palace at such late times.

Aegnor was one of the remaining soldiers, knights who served directly the king and queen. He was often on duty, though managed to find time to do otherwise. He was not emotionless, as the other soldiers appeared when working, and got out of punishment for his friendship with the princess, which, much to her dislike, he used as an advantage. He was the tallest of the three, and though given the appearance of sure strength and strict stature, he was rather enjoyable to be around.

Findir, on the other hand, was one of Fyn’s archers, and perhaps the most arrogant one at that. He joked and seldom took danger seriously, for he had not experienced much in his lifetime. The archers of Fyn had more free time than most, and he spent it pestering his friends for fun. Though he had an admirable shot, and held himself well, well enough to be seen as a brilliant elf in the king’s eyes. If anyone was going to be willing to walk across Ethenly on the words of a ranger, it was him.

“You called?” Aegnor said with a sarcastic tone, clearly not amused with her action.

“I did,” she said, mocking his tone.

“That’s when you’re supposed to tell us why you called.” Findir rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. He was never a pleasant being when he lacked sleep.

“I’m assuming you heard about the ranger we caught?” Iryen asked, waiting for them to nod before continuing. “Well, he told me something. Samar is going to attack Fyn when we least expect it and my father wishes naught to be done.”

At her words they seemed to perk up, the topic had sparked their interest. “He does not believe you?” Aegnor questioned, looking at Iryen with concern. “You are certain-”

“All of the proof I need is here.”

“By proof you mean the words of a ranger? You see, that’s how they get you, they *want* you to think that so you go on a dangerous quest, trying to be the hero. Then you die,” Findir stated plainly. “You are far more intelligent than that.”



“You weren’t there, I could tell it was the truth,” Iryen insisted. “There was no lie in his eyes.”

“If what you say is true then something must be done. With or without the word of King Raegel,” Aegnor replied.

“I agree, which is exactly why I called you here.” She explained in reference to Findir’s previous words. “I wish for you two to accompany me in assassinating King Azov.”

Aegnor and Findir looked upon her with disbelief. It was an insane request, and they had minimal preparation, no permission, and the words of a stranger. It would perhaps be the most difficult task any elf of Fyn was ever sane enough to try, and Iryen knew it. Even if they both refused she would go herself. She was willing to die for Fyn and its people, for she loved them with all of her being. Iryen had no idea how she planned on killing the King of Samar, or if it was even remotely possible. For her family, though, she was willing to try.

“You realize we will have to cross the entirety of Ethenly to get there? That’s...” Aegnor’s voice trailed off.

“Impossible? No, not necessarily. I will do it alone if I have to, I cannot sit and watch while everything I care for collapses, knowing I could have changed it,” she stated sternly.

“You’re not going to change your mind are you?” Findir asked uneasily. “This is a hill you’re willing to die on?”

“Yes, but also no.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m going to regret this...” He muttered under his breath. “You can count me in.”

Iryen smiled and threw her arms around him in an embrace. She was not alone, and the feeling that knowing she had a friend who would go to quite literally the ends of the earth with her meant more than any amount of gold or silver. When she let go of him she looked up at Aegnor, who smiled proudly.

“You really think I would let you two roam Ethenly in an attempt to kill a king without my supervision?”

It was settled. The three of them would leave in two days to slaughter King Azov. They were to pack everything they could carry with decent ease and steal three horses from the palace stables. It had all been a blur to Iryen, one day she was innocently on patrol, and next she planned to set off and do what had never been done before. If her father knew what she and her friends were going to do she might have as well been locked up in a cell right next to Kieran.

The next two days were filled with secret packing and more discreet discussion with Aegnor and Findir. They would leave in the middle of the night and work their way as close to the neighboring town, Littlewatch, as possible. Littlewatch was under the rule

of Fyn, though as long as she ditched her royal gown and took on a demeanor of average behavior she figured it would be easy to blend in with the common folk.

Her maid, Maribel, very nearly caught her packing away food stolen from the kitchens, and more than once she had to persuade the merchants she was only interested in buying such heavy-duty items for a friend. It was tedious work and made the days go by at a faster pace. She stowed away her items in an old pack and attempted unsuccessfully to mentally prepare herself.

On the designated night of action, Iryen hid in her place by the outer gate. She was carrying all of their luggage while waiting for Findir to return with the horses, and Aegnor to provide the weapons. The cold wind chilled her bones, causing every subtle move to be paired with a sharp jolt of pain. She feared that the others may have been caught, and were facing the consequences at that very moment. Melting away into the shadows, and becoming one with the stone wall, she slowed her breathing.

The clacking of horse hooves sounded in the distance, though it was likely Findir, she knew there was no forgiveness for the dangerous drag of assumption. She waited stealthily as the noise drew nearer. It was too dark to see who it was yet.

“Easy does it Ravaran, only us,” Findir called out from ahead of her with a smirk. “No need to kill me just yet.”

Iryen rolled her eyes and pulled away from the wall. “Not just yet.”

“How exactly do you propose we get out without being seen by the guards?” Aegnor asked, dismounting his horse.

“I was going to leave that up to you. You're the one who knows these guards better than us,” Iryen said, handing him his pack. “Therefore, what do *you* propose we do?”

Aegnor exhaled deeply, crossing his arms in thought. He stepped back and examined the wall, estimating its height and durability. “We can't go over it, not with horses.”

“What a way to state the obvious.” Findir laughed and rolled his eyes. “We should just tell the guards it's a small mission from the king, when they see Iryen they'll let us pass. There's no need to complicate it.”

Aegnor glared at him. “If your plan doesn't work they will fetch the king and all three of us are as good as dead.”

“Yes, well you see, it will work. Trust me,” Findir smiled. “Mount your horses, my friends! You shall thank me later!”

Iryen's horse was a stunning white beast with gray speckles sprinkled across its coat. She pleaded silently that Findir did not get them all killed before they even left the kingdom. They approached the large metal gate, clad with rust and an old portcullis attached. The eyes of the guards pierced their skin, digging under their flesh, searching for the roots of untold secrets. The trot leading up to the gate was oddly watched,

leaving a feel of perplexing unease at the tip of their fingers, which were clutching the reins in an anxious manner.

“Your majesty,” The turnkey looked up, startled at their presence. He had been in deep conversation with one of the directly stationed guards. “May I ask what you are doing here?”

“Orders from King Raegel. He wishes us not to disclose any further information.” Aegnor stated rigorously, tilting his chin up in a manner which Iryen could not identify, though guessed was meant to be dominance or respect.

“I’m afraid we are unable to let you pass without that ‘further information’. I was speaking to her majesty,” the turnkey said in indirect address.

“I do apologize, however my father desires our immediate action on the subject. You see, he fears there may have been a pack of orcs scavenging nearby. It was brought to his attention mere hours ago, and he fears if word spreads the people will discard their faith in him,” Iryen replied, hoping she radiated enough dignity for them to believe everything she had made up.

The turnkey looked at her in a sense of doubt, but reluctantly nodded, and signaled for the gate to be opened. The three rode past the wall, careful to hold themselves well until they were out of sight, for they could feel the watchful gaze of the guards on their backs. It was rather difficult to see much ahead of them, so Iryen lit a candle and held it in front of her face. Upon lighting it she saw the proud look plastered on Findir’s face.

“I told you.”

They continued on so as to advance as far from Fyn as possible with the time they had. It was unlikely they would be able to reach Littlewatch that night, so they went as far as they could while leaving time to sleep. Once they found a place tucked away behind a mass of trees Aegnor started a small fire for the time being. They would set off early the next morning. After that they would proceed south and likely pass Grimemoor, a mountain range infested with goblins.

They ate a small portion of the food they brought along, knowing they could not let their supply run out. They took money with them to buy more of everything in Littlewatch when they had left. Iryen lay on the ground, watching the stars which painted the night sky above her.

Before the sun rose Aegnor woke them, distributing small bits of dried fruit to Iryen and Findir while taking some of his own.

“We will continue our ride south, by luck we will reach Littlewatch before nightfall,” he declared, peering somewhere beyond the trees as if he could see their destination already. They finished their food and set out again. In the early hours of the day’s travel they seldom spoke and kept their flowing thoughts for their mind to ponder.

The forest thinned out into green fields, and the sun now shone directly down on them, melting away all hydration they stored up before. It was far from pleasant, and

they had to stop half a dozen times for water, but as the sun slipped from the grasp of day they saw the town standing on the far horizon. When they arrived at the entrance they found a handful of guards stationed at the site. The guards of Littlewatch stood still as stone, their armor was crafted in a style identical to that of Fyn. The edges were lined with the same shade of blue as their flag, and each carried an unsheathed sword glistening in front of them.

“What is your business here?” One across from them called out firmly.

“We seek shelter, and intend no harm,” Aegnor replied in equal means of authority. “We come from Fyn, and our business is our own.”

His words were persuasive enough to gain them passage. Through the gates they were welcomed by stone streets lined with buildings. There were shops, houses, and inns carefully placed on the edges of the paths. The town was welcoming enough, elves went about at a less posh tone, and did not wear fine gowns passed down from their mother and their mother’s mother, or wildly decorated cloaks. It provided Iryen a much-needed break from perfection, and an embracing of freedom. She looked around the plain town with an unusual fondness. She remembered visiting it at times when she was younger, a fresh soul of the world. She visited at troubling times with her mother and father, when Fyn needed resources and reinforcements. They were at devastating war, receiving attacks daily, which they were barely managing to claim victory. Littlewatch was well fortified and handed over soldiers, goods, and battle tactics plentifully. It served as a temporary home for the Ravaran family, where they were safer from the ongoing war. Thankfully, it was eventually won and they could return to Fyn, though Iryen did not let the kindness of the people slip her mind. It was expected of Littlewatch and its people to be of immediate assistance to Fyn, due to its indirect rule, however, the memory stood out to her.

“-would be best.” Findir’s words tugged her back to the present, and she found her two companions discussing the best inn to choose.

“I agree, we will need to save what we have as of now,” Aegnor stated, scanning his eyes across the scene before them in search of a suitable inn.

“I know where to go,” Iryen chimed in. There were multiple places they could stay that were within their budget, however, she wished to stay at the very same one she did all those years ago with her parents. They’d had to stay there secretly, so they weren’t in the best place that was offered. Seeing as their current situation was likewise she led them to the Crookedtree Inn. It was of average size and held a fair amount of guests, it would be desirably simple to get a room for their needs. The three brought their horses back to the public stable and took their luggage with them. Littlewatch was a town of decent folk, though one cannot be too careless as to leave their belongings out to be stolen.

Inside there was a room full of tables and people eating or drinking. Five hallways went off further into the building on the right side, where the rooms for guests

to stay in were. The bar was to their left, with two elves preparing drinks, and one waiting to take in new visitors.

“Room for three, please,” Iryen said pleasantly to the elf standing behind the wooden counter. He didn’t recognize her, or at least did not show any signs of such.

“Room for three over here!” He shouted to an unknown listener.

A beautiful elf with flowing ginger hair rushed out from one hall to greet them. She stood patiently, waiting for orders.

“Chalia, please escort these three to their room, we have one ready, I presume?”

“Yes, sir.” The ginger elf, Chalia, grabbed their bags from them, struggling to remain upright from the weight. “Follow me, please.” Chalia led them down the second hall to the right, taking them past many rooms before stopping at one towards the end of the hall. She opened the door through all of the bags, revealing a small, cozy room.

“How long will you be staying?” she asked after placing the bags on the floor.

“One night,” Findir replied, looking at Aegnor for confirmation. He received an approving nod in return. “We will be off your hands by tomorrow evening.”

“Very well.” She strode to the door, looking over the room one last time. “If you require anything please come to me, or the other innkeepers. You will find meals provided for you in the main room, and you are welcome to join us.” With that she glided back down the hall, leaving them to get settled.

The next morning the three awoke early to shop for the final necessities they would need for the long trek to Samar. Iryen went shopping for food and herbs, while Aegnor and Findir searched for small daggers they could easily hide within their clothes.

The shops were plentiful and respectfully priced. Iryen managed to find clothes that fit her, dried fruit, salt, fresh bread, and herbs which could be used in either cooking or for medicinal purposes. Unfortunately not everything needed would be able to be taken further than Littlewatch, and they sorted out the wants from the needs. By the evening they were truly prepared for the journey.

Iryen had brought with her a sword that was passed down in her family for hundreds and thousands of years. It remained sharp as the eyes of a dragon, and as gorgeous as the fairest maidens. Its hilt was encrusted with a large red jewel, and wore a fine coat of gold. In its time it had slayed many orcs, goblins, and enemies, earning its mark in history more than once. Iryen recalled all of this while staring at the gleam of the moon on its blade as she rode with her friends away from Littlewatch. They were headed directly toward Grimemoor, a nasty range of mountains ominously close to the small town. Grimemoor had been crawling with goblins in days of old, though Aegnor and Findir admitted they were unsure if the population was still residing there as well.

Fear trickled into her heart at the thought of being slaughtered in the tunnels of the Grimemoor goblins, where their bodies would not be found, and their short tale would not be told. The fate of Fyn weighed heavy on her shoulders, for who was she without her kingdom? Who was she if not the princess of Fyn, daughter of the infamous

King Raegel? Would she ever manage to give a new meaning to her name, or was that the tempting mirage which danced out of reach in her wildest dreams?

It was all she could do to try. If she were to die along the way for that which she loved she would do it knowing that she did all she could. Regret replaced the fear, instilling guilt for dragging Aegnor and Findir along. Aegnor had served well and made himself familiar among the people. He was noble and honest, taking it upon himself to watch over others, lest they required it or not. He guarded the fragile wonder of life owned by the elves of Fyn, meaning he put his own at risk. Findir was a shining light in any pool of darkness. His undying humor and swift being made him appear all the more devastating to lose. He gave all of himself into everything he did, including his skills in combat and warming personality.

Iryen would never forgive herself if they died. If they died on a ranger's word. If they died on *her* word.

She watched them riding in front of her, laughing, allowing the night breeze to blow away the feeling of doubt. They trusted her, and she was not going to let that slip away.

They stopped moving forward and left time to rest. None spoke of it, but it was known that the next day could be perilous. If they failed to pass the mountains without getting captured by goblins, they could very well forget all hopes of surviving.

The night passed slowly, the darkness melting into the burning hours of day. Waking up felt like rising out of mud to Iryen, she had to force her eyes open.

"I say we take the western passage. If I recall correctly it is flatter land there. We may be less likely to run into a herd of goblins," Findir studied the range that loomed ahead of them. "I don't know about you two, but I fancy not being killed today."

"I agree, our luck is better going where the tunneling would be worse. Even so, three elves are not easy to spot," Iryen observed, shielding her eyes from the blazing sun.

"If we die I blame you. Both of you." Aegnor exhaled with a hint of a grin. "Going all across Ethenly to kill a king. What a tale this will make."

With their hearts lighter in their chests, and ghosts of smiles leaving a flutter of contentment, they went on.

The terrain progressively sharpened, rocks sprouted from the ground like weeds, and the soft grass slowly passed on behind them. Soon Iryen found herself moving upward. Paths had been made through the mountains for easy passage in older times, and few still remained. The majority of them cut straight through the mountain range, providing quicker routes and simpler riding. When the goblins raided they destroyed the paths that were closest to the center of Grimemoor. Findir had been able to locate a pathway closer to the edge of the towering hills of stone, and the three found it was clear enough to use.

They rode on late into the day, stopping few times to allow their horses rest. The rocks which covered the path created uncomfortable travel for them, and once Aegnor's horse attempted to turn back. As night threatened to engulf them by the last daylight fizzling away with the sun, Iryen decided to stop for the night.

They tied the horses up to prevent their untimely escape, and let sleep swallow them. Iryen dreamt of the welcoming halls of Fyn. The feasts they had every day, and the warm beds they had to go back to when the day's work was done. Even the basic housing the civilians owned would be a blessing compared to the piercing cold of the mountains. The further up they went the colder it got, and the chances of finding water declined. Findir had suggested they eat snow in place, as it wasn't much different. Iryen hoped they would not have to use his plan as a last resort, though the horses may have to. The comforting halls of Fyn faded away, and Iryen was ripped back into the freezing terror of reality.

*A falling stone.*

Iryen heard it, she knew she heard it.

*Another.*

Something was there.

Were those footsteps?

Iryen sat up quickly, blinking rapidly to force her eyes to adjust to the surrounding darkness. Aegnor and Findir slept on her left, seemingly undisturbed. The silence felt as if it was growing louder with every passing second. She heard the wind whistling as it peacefully dodged the mountainsides. She could hear no other living thing apart from herself and her companions.

*Scratch.*

Iryen stood up, reaching for her sword to unsheath it. She was too late. Goblins filled the space before her on the edge of the mountain. Around twenty of them piled up, one wrong move and they would topple off the edge. Iryen knew there would be no wrong move made. These were the goblins of Grimemoor, they knew each pebble and every cliff in Grimemoor as well as they knew themselves. Their cries filled the air, waking Aegnor and Findir. The herd scrambled toward the elves, rage frothing in their beady eyes. Their skin was rough and they wore torn rags for clothes, crooked teeth jutted out of their mouths, filthy faces invading the once calm area. Aegnor made a grab for his sword, while Findir prepared his bow.

The goblins were on top of them in a second ripping at their hair and pulling at their weapons. Before Iryen could make a stab at more than two of them she found even more joining the herd. Findir killed off a good deal of them, though he could not slaughter as quickly as they were arriving. Aegnor and Iryen slashed at the beasts, managing to kill the ones closest to them, however, it was not enough. Iryen found herself being thrown onto the ground, grubby hands with sharp nails wrapping her up in rope.

The world around her went black, echoing with her friend's screams.

Iryen awoke to the tumultuous cheering of hundreds and hundreds of goblins. Their raspy voices filled the air and clawed their way into her ears. Her eyes struggled to take in where she was. A dizzying pain tore into the side of her head.

As she began to see everything around her, her gut twisted with horror. Aegnor and Findir were wrapped up next to her, looking around in fear. They were underground—or, rather, inside the mountain. Goblins half their size filled the space around them, shrieking in utter delight at their newfound catch. They stood on what felt like a wooden floor in the midst of other rotting wood bridges and houses. It was an underground civilization, filled with tunneling systems dug by the goblins themselves. It stank of mold and another unidentifiable stench. Iryen searched everywhere frantically.

There had to be a way out.

“What do we have here?” A voice deeper than all of the others called out. “Pesky little elvish folk, coming to kill my people?”

Iryen looked up, dreading what she knew she would see. In front of the crowd of goblins sat one bigger than the others. He was only slightly taller than Aegnor himself and wore a stained crown atop his wrinkly head. Iryen had long thought this goblin king was dead. He was a leader of death and an ally of none. He was at rule long ago, murdering all who attempted to pass through, even if they meant no harm.

Before Iryen, Findir, and Aegnor stood King Ivasaar of Grimemoor. He looked down on them with a nasty grin. Iryen knew his face, and though it had clearly suffered the wrath of time as all mortals do, she remembered how many of her people he killed.

“Not just any elves I see. These are elves of Fyn!” King Ivasaar enunciated the name of the kingdom, signaling rude laughter from his crowd. “What might you be doing far from your happy little homes? Surely you did not believe you would pass through alive?”

Silence lingered in the air. Findir looked at the other two, as if wordlessly asking whether or not he should say something. When neither Iryen nor Aegnor spoke he turned back towards King Ivasaar.

“If you shall not speak of your own free will, then I will force you to. I ask you once more, what might you be doing so far as this from your kingdom? Have you set out to kill me? Quite a pathetic attempt on your part if I say so myse-”

“We have simply come to pass through the mountains. We intend no harm upon you and your people. Let us go freely and you will never see us again,” Iryen interrupted him loudly. King Ivasaar investigated her, raking his eyes over her face before moving along to the other two.

“I see,” he said simply, leaning back into his throne, “I will let you go if and *only if* you do as I say.” Iryen contemplated his words, once again finding herself in search of a



solution. He could want anything from them, it could be a trick. Then again, everything Kieran told her could be a trick.

“We will do as you say, lest it be of any harm to us.”

King Ivasaar grinned in sheer content. “Give me your horses and I will let you run along to accomplish whatever task you set out to do. Though if I see any of your faces once more you will never breathe again.”

Iryen had forgotten completely about the horses. She’d suspected they would have already been eaten, bones tossed aside to rot. No sign of otherwise could be found, as they were likely tied up in a horrid corner the barbaric goblins considered a homely stable.

“They are yours.”

The crowd cheered mercilessly, screaming at their success. Iryen felt horrible about giving up the beautiful mare to the cold hands of death, however, it had to be done. To her left, her friends looked utterly defeated. She had given up their horses to die for their freedom as well and hadn’t thought twice about asking. More guilt.

Their hands and feet were sliced free. Some goblins were selected to escort them out while others went to fetch the horses. They had only progressed halfway up the tunnel when shouts of terror rang out behind them. Iryen had already seen to it that their weapons were returned to them, and naturally, she drew her sword. The goblins beside them turned back to see where the cries were coming from. More yelps shot out and what sounded like fierce orders from King Ivasaar joined the mix.

Someone was coming up the tunnel. Not a goblin, nor a horse. It was a man.

Findir began killing the escorts, and not long after Aegnor did the same. Iryen strained to see who was down the tunnel, but goblins were rushing in after him.

“Those are horses!” Aegnor shouted above the chaos, “How did they escape?”

Sure enough, not three, but four horses ran toward them, trampling goblins by the dozen. Iryen stabbed at the attacking beasts, wanting to get closer to her horse.

“What are you waitin’ for? Get on!”

A hand emerged, grabbing her own, and pulling her up to where she was able to mount the mare. Aegnor and Findir climbed atop their own quickly, still slaughtering the short monsters while they were at it.

“Come along, this way!” The voice which belonged to the same person as the hand instructed. “We can get out but you must move faster!”

The horses took off down the tunnel, following the unknown rider up further and further. The dirt underneath their hooves flew up in dust behind them. The sound of angry goblins died away, stuck in the dense past. The fresh air greeted them at last, refreshing their spirits. Though the horses kept going, they did not wish for the infuriated herd to kill them right after they escaped. Iryen looked up at the mystery rider and gasped at who she saw. Hair blowing in the wind, and a determined look residing on his face, sat Kieran upon a great black stallion. She was shocked that he was let out so

early even after she had gone missing, and thought her father would have surely sentenced him to death. The four of them still were to say a word after the event and did not even stop to rest until they were out of Grimemoor completely.

“Thank goodness I came along, otherwise you three would’a died.” He raised his eyebrows at them before dismounting.

“My apologies, but I don’t believe we have met before?” Aegnor said slowly.

“Course I ‘avent met you ‘fore! I only met your friend ‘ere!” Kieran gestured towards Iryen, “I knew you would’n last a day.”

“Excuse me, I have already lasted a week!” Iryen exclaimed in defense. “We would have been perfectly fine without your help!”

“No, ya would’n.” He waved away her words as if swatting flies, “Not without yer horses.”

“He’s right, you know.” Findir added, “You were really ready to let them get eaten! How do you expect we would have killed Azov then?”

“There would be no killing of King Azov if we were dead,” Iryen said pointedly.

“We must move forth,” Aegnor ignored the previous conversation, and peered ahead once more, “How long until we reach Rougehelm?”

“It’s not far from here. Fairly close to Grimemoor, though further than Littlewatch,” Aegnor stated. Rougehelm was a kingdom of warriors. It held men with eyes as sharp as the swords they carried. They had long been at intense war with Grimemoor, both sides losing numerous soldiers in battle. Rougehelm was built of stone and carved in the victories of old. It was widely known for the warriors it produced, names burned into the memories of many and remembered through ink. Aegnor was called to assist them in battle before, triggering worry for Iryen and Findir which lasted many days until his return. The folk who lived there were known for war, often being the ones who sought it on their own.

“Are you coming with us? If you are, I think a proper introduction is due,” Findir said to Kieran.

“I don’t mind taggin’ along. That is, if m’lady agrees?” He turned to Iryen, waiting for a response.

“Of course you may. This is Aegnor,” she motioned towards Aegnor, “and this is Findir.” She granted Findir a gesture as well. “You two, this is Kieran.”

Kieran bowed deeply to the two elves, earning an amused smile from the both of them. “Nice to meet ya, lads.”

“Nice to meet you as well,” Aegnor replied. “You must be the ranger who is the reason for this quest.”

“I won’t be so arrogant ‘s to say it myself, but I ‘pose so,” he nodded slowly. “Ya really took what I said seriously, eh?”

“If you tell me now that it was fake after all I will throw you back in the tunnels,” Iryen warned, looking up at him with genuine concern.

"I 'an't say it's no doubt true, but I'll tell ya what I heard is what I told ya. King Azov wants ter kill off all of yer population." He shrugged. "If that ain't good enough for yer than what 'an I say?"

"From whom did you hear this from?" Aegnor asked.

"Folk from the south. Mighta even been from Samar. Point is, they knew what they were talkin' 'bout." Kieran replied, shaking his head.

"What are we standing around for, then? Let's not wait for the sun to melt us into nothingness." Findir piped in, clapping his hands together. "By all means, lead the way." He mocked a bow to Kieran before mounting his horse.

The day dragged on at a slow pace, giving Iryen the feeling of walking through molasses. Sweat drenched each of their clothes, and ran down the backs of the horses. It was not a friendly trade for the cool of the mountaintops, and caused all of them to dive into unpleasant moods. Except for Kieran, who let his mouth run on and on. He guided his words through forests and fields, and into aged tales and myths. He spoke of his life in Freytide, and constantly asked questions about the others which remained unanswered. Iryen found herself listening to what he had to say about the rest of Ethenly and its people. She longed to have been present for the wonders of the world at its prime. She'd been to many places, and walked many halls, though it never felt to be enough. He described his home and the rangers he'd journeyed with. Iryen suddenly felt bad for killing them so instantaneously. They really had not done anything wrong. Yet here Kieran was, smiling faintly as he revisited his life through the transportation of tongue. From what Iryen gathered he was not a bad person, far from it actually. He left his kingdom in curiosity for what the young eye had not seen, and pursued his dreams from such an angle. It was a beautiful process, the cycle of getting older, and Iryen sometimes wished to be able to experience it herself.

The land sank into fields once more, flattening out into yellow grass as far as they could see. Occasionally a few rocks would show themselves, or hills would add their own touch to the mold of the land, but for the most part there was nothing of much significance.

The night did not gift them a single cool breeze, and remained humid. It was an unfavorable stretch of darkness that lasted longer than any of them thought it should. Sleep seldom came by any of them in those hours. They assigned times for each of them to be on watch so they did not run into any more predicaments. On Iryen's first shift they were sleeping by a large rock. The other three had been bickering often throughout the day, leaving her in a dense frustration. The land had not changed at all and Rougehelm was nowhere to be found. The heat beat down on them at every second, making the trip all the more unbearable. Iryen looked at her surroundings, taking in nothing but fried grass everywhere. More rocks and hills had shown up recently, which gave a tantalizing sliver of hope.

Kieran told them that Rougehelm was in the midst of fields as such, nested in hills. Aegnor could confirm, adding that it was meant to be a battle tactic. Findir looked upon everything with a negative tone. He expressed how much he disliked Kieran, lacking any trace of sympathy or shame. Though no matter how many times he rolled his eyes, the ranger did not take interest in his opinions and sought the others' instead. Iryen did her best to keep them all together, knowing that the more they fought the more likely it was that they would not help each other when they were in danger.

The wind picked up slightly for once, creating a subtle chill in place of the previous warmth. Findir and Aegnor's horses grazed on all the greens they could find silently. It was a welcoming sense of calm, the rush of the world seemed to come to a slowing stop. The next day was worse than the past few.

"No one wanted you to come along anyway." Findir was telling Kieran. "Iryen only wished to be polite. It's in her blood."

"No, yer the one who didn' want me ter come. Yer the only one angry 'bout it." He was snapping back this time, something he did not usually do.

"I am *not* the only one, right Aegnor?" Findir turned to his friend for help, needing confirmation.

Iryen looked up to see Aegnor struggling with whose side to choose. He had found Kieran to be likable, and the two had become fast friends, though him and Findir had been close for longer than Iryen could remember.

"You both have different thoughts, I suggest you get past that and get along. It would do us all some good." Findir did not appear to enjoy his take on the subject, as it caused Kieran to smirk and laugh.

"Told yer. I'm too good not ter love."

None of their horses were moving anymore. Findir had stopped, forcing all of them to stop.

"We must keep moving, or else we may not make it in time!" Iryen cried out, but he took no notice.

"What is wrong with all of you? You act like this thieving ranger is the best man to ever live!" He looked around at all of them.

"Its 'cause I am."

Before Iryen knew it they were both on the ground, pushing each other and arguing loudly. Aegnor gave Iryen an exasperated look. Findir was perhaps the most stubborn elf to ever have lived. He was usually in a light mood, though not with Kieran around.

They were all four on the ground now, horses standing around, inching away from the noise of the fight.

"You two must stop. If you keep up this childish behavior we will all die of dehydration before Rougehelm touches our vision!" Iryen stepped between them, ceasing their shouts.

“Findir,” Aegnor placed his hand on the shorter elf’s shoulder, “ride by me until we reach our destination. You can forget your anger and tell me about whatever you’d like. Iryen will handle Kieran.”

They were back on the road again, Aegnor listening to Findir chat away in front, with the other two in the back.

“Quite a handful ‘e is, that little one,” Kieran scoffed.

“If he’s little, what does that make me?” Iryen asked, smiling at his hesitation.

“Never mind.”

Not many hours went past before the silence outside of their calm circle was broken. Aegnor heard it first. The sound of horse hooves and armor clanking slowly grew closer, pouring into their ears.

“Do you hear that?” Aegnor held up his hand, signaling them to halt. Iryen scanned the area around them, searching for the source of Aegnor’s concern.

“There’s someone else ‘ere.” Kieran appeared to have heard it as well, judging by the sudden look of alarm flashing upon his face.

“From Rougehelm?” Findir looked around frantically.

“I am not sure. It is possible.” Aegnor located the origin of their worries, to their east. A large crowd of men atop horses emerged. They carried the flag of Rougehelm, red with two white swords elegantly placed. The troop spotted the four of them quickly, and steadily progressed nearer. Iryen could not tell if they saw them as friend or foe, for each wore a helmet on their head, covering their faces.

She unsheathed her sword, and saw Kieran do the same. There must have been almost three hundred men coming for them. The men arrived and circled around the four of them, staring with barely visible stern eyes. No one spoke a word for an uncomfortably long stretch of silence. At last the man they assumed must have been the leader of the troop stepped forth.

“You do realize you are intruding on the territory of Rougehelm, unannounced, I presume?” He had shoulder length brown hair pouring out from underneath his helmet, and was riding a sleek gray horse.

“Our most sincere apologies, we wish to temporarily stay in your kingdom. There was no time for us to announce our arrival,” Aegnor said, taking on his demeanor of a respectable elf as he always did when speaking with other kingdom’s folk.

“Your leave was urgent, then?” the man asked, implying he did not believe so.

“Indeed. I am Aegnor Beilar of Fyn. This is Findir Oriro, and Iryen Ravaran, from Fyn as well.” Aegnor motioned towards each of the elves as he said their names.

“And what of the fourth?” The horseman eyed the ranger suspiciously.

“I am Kieran Delmuth of Freytide. My people have been at peace with yours for hundreds of years and I intend to remain so.”

He contemplated their words for a moment before appearing satisfied with their identities. “What was this urgent reason for leaving your kingdom?”

“Allow me,” Iryen said, “King Azov plans to kill the elves of Fyn off until none remain. It was meant to be a mass murder, a surprise attack if you will, though Kieran gained knowledge of this and told us. We have set out to assassinate him.”

The previous quiet returned, and the snorting of horses filled the air. A few of the men murmured amongst themselves, likely wondering exactly who the four thought they were to kill the king of Samar on their own.

“We will take you back to our kingdom for a drink. Tell us your plan then.”

They broke their circle and made for the direction they had come from, Iryen and her friends near the front of the mob. Rougehelm had not been very far away in the end, and resided in the conditions just as Aegnor and Kieran had said it did. It was a grand kingdom, many flags bearing their symbol with pride. The gates swung open wide at the return of its beloved soldiers, welcoming them home to the robust stone walls. They each dispersed to their own ways, leaving but a few guards for the guests, including the man who led them. He first took them to a stable, where they all left their horses to be fed and watered. Next they were to be taken to see King and Queen Omabella, rulers of Rougehelm. The leading soldier led them through the large, fancily decorated doors into a large throne room. Sitting at the far end were the king and queen, watching intently as they were walked down toward them.

“Welcome, my friends, to our humble kingdom. What brings us together on this beautiful day?” The queen smiled at them kindly.

“Your honour, we have come from Fyn and Freytide. King Azov of Samar intends to slaughter my kingdom, and we wish to prevent it.” Iryen replied.

“In which ways will you prevent it?” the king asked. Iryen could already sense he was more stern than the queen, not taking any detours before getting directly to the point of their visit.

“We have set out to assassinate him ourselves. We know it may not seem a wise choice, though there is no other option at the time. We cannot wait for our lives to be destroyed.”

“Not a wise choice? It is an incredibly foolish decision! Did King Raegel not send you with more men?” The king scoffed, inspecting them as if he could find the answer himself by doing so.

“He did not approve of anything being done in prevention. Me and my two companions took it upon ourselves to do so when we came across Kieran,” She looked towards him when saying his name, “He was the one who gave us word of the attack and joined in on our task.”

“I see. Please stay the night, we would love to have you here. In the meantime you can tell me all about this task and I hope we will be capable of sending you on your way soon with more preparation.” Queen Omabella gave them a thoughtful smile and motioned for the guards to take them away.

Later that night Iryen lay in the comfortable bed of her room, dwelling on earlier conversations. She had been called to speak with the king and queen about which path she was to take and more information on the journey to kill Azov. The other three had been summoned to answer questions as such for the entire story.

Iryen had been told that word was sent out from Fyn for her to be returned immediately if found, though they did not oblige for they trusted in her word, and shared in the idea that King Raegel was becoming lazy. She knew she should have felt joy in the idea that no one from Fyn would come looking for her, to rip her away from the gripping quest, however, she took no happiness in the occurrence. Her father did not seem to care much for her return, nor her mother. They were too entranced by the newfound freedom of the kingdom and hatred for anything other than so to allow soldiers to search for her. They would rather have calm in Fyn than their own daughter.

She knew not if Kieran had a family though assumed if he did, the same fear of losing them nonetheless would be snaked around his heart. Aegnor had a large family, and Findir had some. Iryen wondered sometimes if they missed being home, and the familiar embrace of loved ones. She figured that she did not miss her family, but rather her home. The royal family was not as perfect on the inside as it was out.

In the morning they were armed with more advanced weapons and their food was replenished. They had dried fruits, bread, salted meats and other things which would stay preserved for a good amount of time. The king and queen had asked more than once if they were sure they did not want any soldiers to be sent along with them for more protection. Iryen turned them down each time, saying stealth was more important than strength. They were due to cross Flatwood forest soon, and she did not want a large mass of men to follow them through.

The way to Flatwood was a longer trek than from Grimemoor to Rougehelm. It did not consist of dry plains, instead hills and prosperous valleys. Queen Omabella saw to it that they had plenty of water, for there was none safe to drink in the forest. Their horses had been carefully tended to and prepared for the adventure ahead.

“You think we will all survive?” Findir asked as they stood in the stables, readying the last necessities.

“I would hope so.” Aegnor laughed lightly to brush off the heavy subject.

“There is no telling if we will make it home, however, I believe we have a fair shot,” Iryen smiled.

“I’ll sacrifice myself first.” Kieran offered, “I’m not as important as you are.”

“Of course you are! We all deserve to live.” Findir did not make any mention of the fact that he no longer felt the need to be rude to Kieran.

“True, but your lives are at risk for your kingdom. Mine is at risk ‘cause I feel I have to help.” He stroked his horse’s mane tenderly. Iryen did not think he was right. His life meant just as much as theirs did, if not more. He did not have an eternity to live as they did. He had the curse of a mortal life, though would always call it a blessing. His time

was limited. It struck wonder in Iryen as to why he tossed his fragile being around so carelessly. Kieran was not one who could be understood easily. He spoke of a life eventually to end as if it was the best part of existence at all. She once again wondered if he were right.

“We are grateful for your help, and shall do everything in our power to bring you home safely.” Aegnor patted his shoulder in assurance.

They set out at last, shouting last minute thanks and farewells to the people of Rougehelm and their leaders. The stay seemed to have been cut short, and Iryen longed to be able to roam amongst its towering walls once more. Maybe in a better time, when the crashing wave of urgency passed, and peace was upon them again.

The kingdom slowly passed from their vision, and faded into the horizon of the past. Land anew lay before them, waiting to be walked and seen. The first two days were seldom troublesome and consisted mainly of green hills. The next four showed flecks of trees and rocks. It was a much more pleasant ride than those before, and the sun had taken a break from scratching heat onto their backs. They stopped at a stream, gathering more water, and refreshing. There a lucky find of berry bushes emerged, giving them breakfast for the next few days. The stream flowed quietly, trickling along the submerged stones. Trees overshadowed the miniature clearing, creating a comfortable shade to rest under. Soft greens sprouted up from the ground, and light glittered through the trees. It was the most beautiful place Iryen had ever seen, seemingly untouched by the hands of outside life. They stayed in the clearing overnight, telling each other tales and singing songs passed on from old elven lords. Each held a precious message waiting to be uncovered by the curious digging of young souls. The magic of the serenity swayed the heartfelt feelings out of their inner cell in which they were usually locked.

The next morning they moved on through more trees, which eventually opened up into another set of hills such as the ones before. Each of them carried a cheerful mood due to the advantageous climate. Iryen knew the joy would not be permanent. It may last through the forest, however once they were on the other side it was orc territory until Samar. Houndrun, the House of the Council of Wizards was not all that far away from Flatwood, but was much further south. They would have to cross the Saltbury river and Swiftyard to reach it, which was too far away from the direction they were headed. For all they knew Fyn could already have been ambushed and their cause defeated.

“Flatwood is near. We will reach it by tomorrow,” Aegnor told them one evening around a feeble fire.

“Ya know some used ter say there was no more peaceful place than Flatwood. Men rarely ever went in there, and elves had a bond with nature, bringing it ter life.” Kieran saw a time which they could not, and watched a world of trees and grass beyond their eyes. He never seemed to be quite all there when recalling any tale or legend. He



was unlike any other man Iryen had ever met, and could pass as an elf if it weren't for his lack of pointy ears and scruffy appearance. When one got to talking with him he was not the messy ranger he looked.

"I've heard those stories before," Findir joined, "It was all I ever wished for to walk among those great trees. To breathe in the fresh air filtering through the leaves and bark." He too drifted away into a mystical land. Iryen imagined he was thinking of his childhood, and the adventurousness that never really left him. Findir was just the opposite of Kieran: the grace of an elf but the stubbornness of man. His blonde hair flowed softly with the wind as he gazed up at the sky above. Findir always was the one to encourage others to peel away from the comfort of a strict lifestyle. He was reckless, though it was the quality she found she liked best in him. Aegnor and Iryen would not be who they were without him.

"One day we shall all go there. When times are not so dark and urgent. I have been there before, but it did not hold the wonder it should have." Aegnor looked over at Findir and smiled.

He was a brave, yet gentle being. Rolling his eyes at Iryen and Findir's childish acts even when they knew it was not sincere. Aegnor was the one who reminded them they had a reason to keep going.

"We shall visit all of Ethenly when the threat of Samar haunts us no longer. Except Grimemoor, of course." Iryen smiled at the thought. The night was radiating with the laughter of friends, and hope for a better future.

Flatwood forest looked as beautiful as it had been described. They arrived the next day in the afternoon, and the sun just barely showed itself through the leaves. The company looked around in wonder when they first stepped in. The trees were tall and bursting with green leaves on every branch. The soft chirping of birds fluttered in the distance. The ground was sprinkled with moss covered rocks and damp smelling earth. Iryen felt one with the true form of Ethenly, infatuated with its near alive feel.

She felt as if the longer she walked among the beauty the fainter every other problem became. The other three were just as intrigued with the wonder of the forest. The first day of riding through was much slower than it should have been, each of them desperate to drink in every drop of its delicacy. When it came to their attention at last that the entire kingdom of Fyn was at stake, and relied on their ability to control their fascination they sped up.

The ride through Flatwood was not to last as long as Iryen hoped it would. The further south one went the thinner the forest got. It would take roughly a total of three days to pass through, assuming minimal interruptions.

Before she knew it the first day ended and the second began. It began to get rockier, and more than once they had to take new paths for the horses, which Iryen had begun to care about very much. She had given hers the name Bathrion, and took pride in his beauty.

Aegnor led them, knowing for the most part where to go, guiding them past fallen trees and over small creeks. It began to rain, increasing the danger and difficulty of climbing over the rocks. They came upon a small valley with a muddy river raging at the bottom, and only a coincidentally placed fallen tree serving as a bridge. Multiple of the trees in the forest were large around the trunk, and this one was large enough to cross. Seeing as there was no visible option to go around they made up the decision to take their chances at crossing.

"I believe if we send over two of us, then the horses, and then the last two it will work best." Findir analyzed the trunk through the pouring rain.

"It'll be real dangerous. We might die. I think we can do it." Kieran dismounted, smiling tensley.

The four clutched the reins of their horses, drenched from head to toe trying to decide who would go first. Of course Kieran and Aegnor offered immediately, Findir jokingly saying he would rather die than be first. Iryen suggested that she and Aegnor go second, for they were better with the horses. Once they were all in agreement Kieran hesitantly stepped onto the log.

"Feels strong 'nough!" he shouted over the sound of the storm and the rushing of the dirty river. His boot slipped on the water before he regained his balance. The gap between both sides was not all that big, but was lined with sharp boulders on the walls down. Once he was halfway across the rest of the way was easy and he went quickly. Findir looked anxiously at the other side which Kieran was waving him towards. He inched cautiously onto the wet wood. Iryen knew he had nothing to fear, he was one of the most swift amongst them and would pass with ease. He did just so, at last grasping Kieran's outstretched hand on the other side.

They sent Bathrion over first. He strided over simply, Findir's horse following, then Aegnor's, and Kieran's. They had made it across safely, with the exception of confusion and fear. Next up was Iryen. Aegnor trailed closely behind, not flinching in the slightest at the booming crack of lightning overhead.

The rain soaking her clothes made her cold, shivering at not only the temperature but the scene before her as well. She was almost towards the other side when her foot got caught on the end of a broken off branch. Iryen tripped, grabbing desperately for something to hold on to. *Anything*. She felt her body being flung off the side, almost plummeting to the taunting water below. The panicked screams of her friends appeared in the blend of ear ripping noises, calling for her, though knowing it would do no good. She clung to the wet side of the tree, her hands slipping and cutting open on the rough bark. Iryen knew she could not hold on for much longer, soon the river underneath would claim her. Aegnor appeared, leaning over the edge carefully.

"Take my hand!" He shouted. Iryen's insides turned on themselves as she dared to release her failing grasp on the trunk and rely on the strength of the elf. He pulled, lifting her up some. She moved her foot up to try to help, placing her knee on the

makeshift bridge. Aegnor heaved, falling backwards as she pushed up with her leg and collapsed onto the tree. Iryen breathed heavily, terror sticking unpleasantly to the corners of her heart. The two crawled to the solid ground that awaited them with the helping hands of Findir and Kieran. When she stood she found herself wrapped in the embrace of Findir, and then Aegnor when he let her go.

“We thought you were lost to the water!” Findir exclaimed, fear and relief dwelling in his eyes.

“So had I,” Iryen exhaled, moving further away from the valley. “One more reason I owe my life to you, Aegnor.”

“I shall add it to the list.” Aegnor smiled tiredly.

“How ‘bout we get outta this forest?” Kieran suggested, grinning. With the whole group in agreement they moved onward from the fallen tree, each keeping a closer eye on each other.

The length of the forest provided one more night for them before they at last reached the sunshine again. It gave Iryen a surprising feeling of being able to breathe once more. She was not so fond of the last half of the journey through Flatwood. Obvious signs of earlier rain still remained, the ground being softer than before. Mud sloshed under hooves and the scent of damp soil filled the air.

They were in a land known as Eastmeadow. It was further north than Houndrun and the main southern kingdom, Kildenn. The land was very close to Samar, a sign that they were almost at their destination, still holding hopes that the attack had not yet taken place. They were at the most dangerous point of the entire journey. Eastmeadow was crawling with orcs. Orc packs scavenging, hunting, and searching for intruders would be everywhere. Samar loomed unseen a few days away, and could have troops scouting. Had they been in the possession of more time they would have visited Othorion, said to be the wisest wizard of the age, in Houndrun for advice. Yet there was no such time, and Kildenn was in an alliance with Samar. It was rumored that King Azov fooled Princess Aveley into an alliance, promising wealth and prosperity for her people in exchange for her obedience. One of his first orders would be to execute the four travelers.

It was also rumored that the orcs living in Eastmeadow had moved further east of late, away from the Silverpeak mountains, which served as natural protection for Samar. With a smooth stroke of luck they would encounter few along the way. For the first day they saw no sign of orc nor elf. They had progressed northeast and moved along the meadows simply. The second day did not prove to be so uneventful. No living being had been spotted, however, orc tracks lay in the dried dirt before them. The end of them nor where they led to could not be found, for they faded away. It was certain there had been many more than one present at the time. Kieran estimated they were around a day old, and Findir guessed it was a pack of nearly thirty. The tracks went on for a few hours before stopping completely, running into too much grass to be seen or even have been

made. They resumed the original path heading further north, and saw no more orc tracks. That night was the first sign of the horrendous creatures that made Iryen feel the threat was alive. She was on watch, looking out beyond the blanketing dark for any movement. Her hand was placed on the hilt of her sword, waiting patiently for the need to bring it out of its sheath. An eerie quiet floated in the ominous meadow up until that moment. A high pitched shriek sounded out, almost certainly an orc call. Iryen stood up, waking the other three quickly. They sat waiting for another call but none were made. Aegnor decided they had to move even faster, for now not only were they in need of reaching Samar quickly to kill the king, but they were being hunted.

The next morning they ate quickly and one more urgency presented itself: their food was running low. Meals would have to be more limited and in lesser amounts, they could not take the risk of running out of food before the final arrival. If their assassination was successful they would still have to make the journey home. Iryen hoped that Kieran's thoughtful tale of only a small portion truly agreeing with King Azov's choices contained no lie. It was likely, for that had happened in many kingdoms of old. Once the ruler was dead or the civilians were able to overrun them they would either hope their heir would prove to be a good choice or decide on a new one. It had happened in Samar three times before, and there was a chance of that being the current case.

"-reckon yer gonna be 'fter all this?"

"Back home, I suppose. I have not much of a family, though I have Iryen and Aegnor, and I would certainly hope you'd join us as well," Findir was speaking peacefully with Kieran next to her. She was astonished that she had only just realized it.

"It would be a delight to have you. Findir and I find that each other's company is one of the most important aspects of life. Iryen included, of course, though she always seems to be in her own world." Aegnor leaned forward on his horse to look at her, smirking.

"I am not! I'll have you know I do more thinking than you both combined!" She faked offense, laughing along.

"You do more thinking than Findir, not me. I am always thinking," Aegnor beamed.

"That is why you are so dull. Always in an attempt to see the tactical side of things!" Findir stated jokingly, "Of course that is the reason I am alive today."

"What I taken from all this is ya both'd be dead 'f it weren't fer yer friend 'ere." Kieran said, looking at each of them.

"That is true," Iryen remembered all of the times when Aegnor proved to be a sort of older brother to her. He was on a full time responsibility of watching over others.

"This entire world would be dead if it weren't for *me*! I am just that brilliant," Findir stated to Kieran, mocking a proud look upon his face.

"You know what would make you even more brilliant?" Aegnor asked.

“What?”

“If you were not so arrogant.”

The four flooded into laughter rather at the exploding warmth of friendship than the very much humor lacking remark. It was perfect. The fragile friendship which made its home inside them held magic beyond the most magnificent works of any wizard.

Orcs.

Deadly creatures from one's worst nightmares.

They were everywhere.

A pack of almost fifty had ambushed them from behind. The hunted had finally been caught. All four of them had been harshly knocked off of their horses, causing them to run away, galloping to a hopeful freedom and forgotten by the murderous beasts. Iryen unsheathed her sword the moment she came crashing onto the ground, and began to stab and slash at every one of them that rushed at her. They had swords too, as well as daggers. Nasty jagged blades from every which way making an effort at killing her. Iryen could not see any of her other friends, she was trapped. Enslaved in the invading circle of calloused-skinned brutes all wanting her dead. She did her best to at the very least fight them off, and had killed five of them. Her ears were once more drowning in a piercing ramble of deafening cries, none of which seemed to belong to her companions.

*Then there was one.*

“Iryen!”

It was Kieran, he had slain multiple orcs and their bodies were laying limp on the ground. Black blood was oozing out of their open wounds, drizzling onto the grass and staining it. A gap in the crowd opened up, and Iryen was able to catch a glimpse of Aegnor and Findir fighting side by side. Kieran ran toward her, dodging the daggers slashed at him.

“There ain't many more!” he cried out, diving his sword into the stomach of the closest enemy, “We ‘an kill off em all!”

Iryen made a swing, slicing a beast's head clean off. He was right, few orcs remained and Aegnor and Findir were fully visible. Iryen's muscles were burning, the sharp stinging pain of dirt in her cuts crawled inside her skin. She was no longer alone, though felt the hurt more than she had before. Before she knew it they were all dead, gone and cold before her eyes. Safety did not return to her, or if it did she did not feel it. Findir had driven an arrow straight through the last one's head, and was now rushing toward her, Aegnor not far behind.

“Are you both uninjured?” he asked hurriedly.

“I have not gone unscathed, no. They are only small scratches, though.” Iryen wiped the blood on her hands off and slid her sword back into its sheath.

“We best move ‘long. Samar ain’t far now, only ‘bout two days I ‘spect,” Kieran sighed. “Two days on foot.”

On foot they went. With horses they would have arrived in Samar that day, they would have arrived sooner still if it were not for the orc pack. Though there was naught to be done with the exception of running. They ran, stopping as little as possible only for what little water they had after the loss of the other items tied up with the horses. One day blew past, and then the next. At last the final threat of how exactly to kill the king resided before them.

“I’ve given this some thought,” Kieran pondered. “Ya see if we act ‘s normal visitors wantin’ to see the king, we migh’ get ‘proved. Azov likes visitors. Then we kill the guards and after that ‘s only him.”

“And if we do not gain permission to see the king?” Aegnor asked.

“Oh we will, trus’ me.”

Once again relying on Kieran’s unsteady word they continued forth. They walked for few hours more until at long last the place they dreaded most –though must go to– lay embedded near a mountain of the Silverpeak range. Iryen once more felt fear pooling inside her. It was as if she were walking to her death, an odd feeling. The closer they came to the death that was Samar the less sureness they would survive remained in her soul. King Azov had not wasted any time in making his kingdom appear approachable. The stone walls were cracked, though sturdy, and the gate was wearing a coat of rust, sharp metal ends poking out in every direction. She felt as though that was what it was like to walk into the cold hands of death, to curl up in acceptance of your fate.

Not one word passed between the four of them when the gate swung open. Only glances of assurance were exchanged. Ten elvish soldiers emerged, five on each side. They held perfect posture and not a trace of casualty allowed itself to be shown.

“State your business.” The first soldier on the right ordered plainly. He had just as much empathy as a troll: none.

“We have come to speak with his majesty, the king.” Aegnor took it upon himself to do the speaking, as he typically did.

“What use do three elves and a man have with a word from our king?” he asked, eyeing them suspiciously.

“We have information for him on the attack on Fyn,” Iryen said, hoping the others would go along with it, and the soldier would deem it important. He whispered something into the ear of the closest elf, giving a nod afterwards.

“Where have you come from?”

“Kieran here is from Freytide. Us three are from Faymoor, Lysanthir has sent us,” Iryen replied.

The guards looked her up and down. She feared for a moment that they would recognize her and slay her where she stood.

“Follow me.”

Samar was not in the slightest how Iryen imagined it would be. She always pictured a kingdom full of unhappy elves, smothering their anger at the world in each other’s faces for no reason at all. She was shocked to see that it contained folk as usual as those of Fyn. They walked about at their own pace, carrying goods or talking with neighbors, enjoying the simplicity of life.

“Please do excuse our lack of originality. Some of the citizens have made attempts to rival the king, and even overthrow him. Those have had to be put back in order or even thrown into a cell. You see, they are not pleased with his plan to attack Fyn. They believe he wants more than the freedom we already have and should not, for if it proves to be unsuccessful their homeland will fall.” The guard was leading them around the passing folk, weaving through the crowded streets. Iryen remained tense, one wrong move could cause the entire plan to collapse, they had already made it so far.

“And what of you?” Iryen decided making light conversation could provide an assumption of innocence, “Do you trust in your king?”

“It is not my place to have such an opinion. I must serve whoever holds reign over this kingdom.” He did not accept her attempts at eye contact.

Iryen would have been lying if she claimed to not be confused. Samar appeared orderly and unproblematic on the subject of the people’s loyalty to their king up until what the guard had spoken of. Would there be enough elves on King Azov’s side to kill them? What would happen if they were discovered before reaching the king? She would never let go of the antagonizing feeling of guilt if any of her companions did not survive. The nauseating hallucination that it was her fault would corrupt her until the very end of her days, refusing to so much as loosen its grip over time. She had always strived to do her best for those whom she loved. She loved her people, and was willing to walk across Ethenly for them. She loved her friends, and was willing to sacrifice herself for them. She loved Fyn. Though her father had not been compassionate of late he had not always been possessed by such ignorance. Once one is out of the eye of danger they never want to leave, and cannot easily accept the change. Fyn was her life, it held memories of more value than any currency or victory. She had grown up in its shelter, it was the home of all she cared for. To lose that would be to lose herself. To lose that would be to die.

“His majesty is ready for you.” Another elvish soldier stood outside grand red doors. Had they not been the symbol of risking everything they might have been beautiful. The doors were pushed open by both of the guards, opening up to a large throne room similar to that of Rougehelm, which seemed very far away. More elves stood guard nearby the throne which loomed intimidatingly on the opposite side of the room. Upon it sat King Azov. Findir shook chills away next to her, and Aegnor seemed to be shaken slightly. Kieran only made himself appear taller, and exhaled sharply. King

Azov had black hair pouring over his shoulders, looking young, though he had seen thousands of years. He sat expectantly, waiting for them to advance. Upon his face was a stern stare, cheekbones highlighting his piercing blue eyes. Iryen began the walk forth. *This was the one who wanted to kill her people. This was the one who wanted them all dead.*

She had not been prepared for the surge of anger which filled each of her bones and lit a fire of hatred in her heart. She wished badly to reach for her dagger and slash away his smug sense of superiority. He watched them intensely, yet to greet them. If he treated his allies in such ways she did not want to imagine how he would treat his enemies. Let alone any folk of Fyn.

“What news do you bring from the west? You claim to know of something in which I do not.” His voice hinted at his severe arrogance, being deep and filled with a careless want for them to be of service.

“We know of news on your wish to attack Fyn.” Iryen allowed herself to answer in place of the others. She realized only too late that she did not speak to him correctly.

“*Your highness or your majesty* attached to the end if you will.” His tone was bubbling with a slowly rising annoyance.

“My apologies, your highness,” Iryen would not allow herself to tremble at his frustration. She only kept up the act for the safety of her friends. “We have news on your wish to attack Fyn, sir.”

“That is better.”

Iryen clenched her fists tightly, holding in the urge to pull out her sword. She began to wonder why their weapons were not removed from them at the door as they should have been, and were in the other kingdoms.

“What news do you come with? I do not have all day to listen to your foolish words and nagging voice.” King Azov waved his hand in the air as if swatting their conversation away like it was of no concern to him. Iryen saw Kieran and Aegnor’s hands drifting toward their swords out of the corner of her eye, Findir doing the same for his bow. She took it as a sign to speed up the process of small talk.

“It is a slight disturbance in the plan, your majesty,” she now fought a smirk. The guard had not taken away their weapons because he knew who she was. He knew what she was going to try to do, and that it would be easy with so few guards.

“What is it? Spit it out!” King Azov glared at her impatiently. His anger had reached a boiling point.

“Well, *your highness*, the princess of Fyn has come to kill you.”

It did not take long for King Azov to shout orders at the guards to kill them once Findir had already shot two of them. On Iryen’s last words the fighting had begun. The guards of Samar’s flashing blades shining their cold murder upon the four had begun to do what they were made for. Aegnor and Kieran were fighting multiple at a time, while Findir either shot or stabbed with the arrows themselves. The clashing of swords rang



unpleasantly and the sharp sound of blades scraping against each other filled their ears. Some of the guards began to fight each other, Iryen assumed they were the ones who were against their king. It was a mass of bodies, there was no way of telling who meant to protect the king and who meant to do just the opposite. A civil war had broken out among the throne room, and Iryen was at the center of it, face-to-face with King Azov. They both lunged at each other at the same time. He fought as if he knew he was of higher skill than her, and would likely have laughed right in her face if he had not just received a cut across his arm.

“You will not win!” he shouted at her, dodging another one of her efforts, “You know I am more powerful! The death of Fyn begins with *you!*”

He sliced at her stomach in sync with his most previous word. The two’s utter hatred for each other flowed freely in their stabs. Iryen moved past his sword and behind him, going for his neck. He was too quick for her once more, and kicked her feet out from underneath her, causing her to fall.

“I shall have the peace I deserve! I shall rule all of Ethenly if I wish, and Fyn is the first to go!” He held his sword upside down with both hands, and forced it down. Iryen rolled onto her side, barely escaping. The guards fought beside her loudly, every few moments one would fall to the ground. She could not tell which of them were dead.

Azov jerked his sword back up, turning around to face her standing once more. “How will you feel then? How will you feel when you know you’ve failed?” He was taunting her, coaxing her fury out until she was tired of fighting both him and herself. He wanted to get inside of her head, and mix up her mind until she could not tell that she had a chance. He wanted her to feel so intensely that it suffocated her: rage, sadness, guilt, and fear. He wanted her to be distracted from his fear.

King Azov was afraid of losing. He had seen his people turning against him. He knew that what he had was slipping away from him and the only way he could think of fixing that was to destroy someone else’s perfection. He did not seem to know that there was no solution to the problem he had given himself other than to turn away from the tempting sin of destruction. He did not know that Iryen Ravaran was going to be the death of him.

They both made another synchronized attempt, though this time success had shown through. Iryen’s sword had been driven right through King Azov’s heart, and was sticking out on the other side. His face was drained of color as he fell to the ground. Blood trickled out of where the sword had struck, leaving a permanent mark.

The king of Samar was dead.

Iryen sank to her knees and clutched where his sword had been embedded into her gut. She’d always feared death, and did not understand how mortals could live knowing it would eventually come. Now at the doorstep of what might as well have been considered the end of everything she understood. Life with no end was not a life with no fear. It was not perfect, and would never be. She had succeeded, and that was all that

mattered. Aegnor and Findir would be able to go home to peace, and Kieran would no longer be seen as a lowly ranger. She had done what she had set out to do, and wished for nothing more.

Shouts and swords throbbing still rang in the outside world, though her vision dizzied into nothingness. The burning pain seared in her stomach, and extracted every ounce of breath out of her lungs. Iryen knew she was dying, but it was perfectly fine, because she was willing to die.

She was willing to die to protect her kingdom.

The entirety of Fyn had gathered in memorial for the princess. Aegnor stood, watching as flowers were gently placed on her body by her mother. He remembered the ripping sadness that strangled his heart when he saw her laying on the ground, all of her gone, leaving only a body behind. It was a memory he wanted to be rid of, something he wanted removed from his brain and lifted off his shoulders. Though he did not truly want it gone, for taking it away would be taking the proper ending to the story of her life away. So he watched, allowing tears to fall down his face, knowing that they could never express how much he wanted her back. They could never express how much he longed to see her smiling again, laughing, alive. Knowing she was gone hurt the most.

Findir looked upon Iryen beside Aegnor. He allowed himself to cry, cry for what they had had and what they would never have again. He let hopelessness engulf him, it was not fair that a soul so pure had to be torn so brutally from the world, and with such little mercy. In his eyes Iryen did not deserve such an unfinished ending. She was the reason Fyn still stood and Samar was under a more healthy rule. She should have been able to live in the days of the result of her work, to breathe in air and feel content with what she had done. He believed she, who never once thought of herself first, was the only one worthy of receiving credit for saving their lives.

Kieran did not stand with Aegnor and Findir. He figured he should allow them to mourn on their own, for in the end he had not known Iryen for nearly as long as they did, and felt he did not deserve to mourn. He wished to permit a tear to fall, though found he had none. He indeed felt sadness, more so than he ever had before. Iryen was the first elf to have ever seen him as anything other than a filthy ranger. She was the first one to give him a chance, and it pained him to know they only knew each other in a time of war. He had never been able to tell her how he truly appreciated her, and that was what crushed him most of all. He had never been able to part properly with her. She died alone, in the midst of a battle, no one yet knowing she was the hero. Kieran despised the regret which shadowed him. He wondered if he'd tried to help her if she would have

lived. If it would not have all ended so horribly, and gone so wrong. There would always be an 'if', no matter how long anyone waited. There would always be the guilt of asking yourself if you could have prevented the inevitable, and in the end it did not matter.

For in the end, peace will always find its way back.

**Mary Schwanke**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: North Shelby Jr Senior High School, Shelbyville, MO

Educator: Kathy Jackson

Category: Poetry

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## **Dysautonomia**

### **Dysautonomia**

Entertain the idea  
Of dysautonomia.

Imagine you inhale a stick  
About a centimeter thick,  
And it gets strung  
Inside a lung.

Now turn up the heat.  
Your skin, red as a beet  
Boils from forehead to hips,  
Everywhere but your icy fingertips.

Now your whole body shakes  
Until every joint aches.  
But no matter the strength of your will,  
You can not keep still.

Then your brain has dried up.  
You crave a cup  
Of ice cold water.  
You may drink, but you won't feel better.

There is a belt around your chest.  
Your heart is too stressed.  
Not enough air.  
There's none anywhere.

And among it all,  
You think you could fall  
Because you are so dizzy.  
Your vision both dark and fizzy.

Every throb is a heartbeat,  
Irregular and bittersweet.  
It pulses to its own rhythm and tact.  
One comparable to a constant heart attack.

Pain in your back,  
Crawling down your neck,  
Spreading to your shoulder,

Aching all over.

You go to the doctor one night  
Because something isn't right.  
They examine you and find  
That you should be just fine.

So they refer you to a friend  
And the cycle never ends.  
This discomfort and pain,  
That no one can explain.

You have an invisible illness,  
But fear it's your own madness.  
You pray to God  
That you're not a fraud.

Fear says "You've created your suffering!  
You want attention! You're bluffing!"  
Because nobody sees  
Your body's personal swarm of bees.

And now you can't run in a straight line.  
You're exhausted all the time.  
There is never enough rest  
For the thing in your chest.

It doesn't get a break  
For your own sake,  
Because you rely on it to survive.  
Without its strain, you wouldn't be alive.

Entertain the idea  
Of dysautonomia.

Mary Schwanke

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: North Shelby Jr Senior High School, Shelbyville, MO

Educator: Kathy Jackson

Category: Short Story

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## Scissors

My grandmother “Mimi” and I were stitching the pieces of a double wedding ring quilt together one Christmas Eve. My needle reached the end of the seam and was caught helplessly on its leash, begging to be tied off, cut free, and re-strung for a fresh quilt block.

“Did you see where the thread trimmers went?” I asked Mimi as I searched beneath the sea of fabric scraps strung across our workspace. Pins escaped their hiding places between layers of noisy tartan and paisley. They rolled desperately towards the ledge. I stopped them with my forearm before they could jump from the worktable and disappear into Mimi’s shaggy carpet.

Mimi’s eyes didn’t stray from her handiwork, almost like she was hiding a secret. I wondered if she’d heard me. After all, her right ear went out years ago during a firework show. She claimed the drummer in her head got scared and ran away. He was lost somewhere in her noggin.

“Maybe a pair of scissors?” I asked. The crinkles on the edges of her eyes came to life. She giggled one of those quiet, closed-mouth giggles older ladies are so good at. I knew I was in for a story.

“You know, I have a special pair of scissors,” she said. Her left hand loaded a tiny needle with precise dolphin stitches. She drug it through, the thimble on her middle finger helping it along. Needles were always much more obedient in the fingers of Mimi than they were in mine.

“Check on the shelf by my cornhusk doll.”

Residing in a footed green glass on Mimi’s piece of aqua discount furniture was a large pair of scissors. In all my years of shrinking away from the stare of that creepy corn husk doll with its neatly combed swath of dried silk hair, I had never noticed the scissors.

“That’s them. Bring ‘em on over,” Mimi said without glancing up. She backstitched three times, effectively tying off the needle, but leaving it to hang from the fabric. It waited patiently, almost as if it were settling in to hear Mimi’s tale.

I hooked my finger in the scissor’s thumb ring and swiped them from the glass. Mimi thrust a palm out and I placed the shears upon it, wondering what was special about them.

A smile etched the geography of her face as she inspected the scissors a foot from her plastic frames. The scissors hung proudly from her outstretched fingertip, basking in the warm glow of an ancient goose-neck lamp. They were heavy and sharp, meant for cutting hair. They appeared to be like new.

“You know, I asked your Aunt B to cut my hair when it started falling out.”

I shook my head, not wanting to get into this topic and ruin the calming atmosphere of Mimi’s sewing room. But she persisted and leaned forward, propping her elbows on the table swimming with chevron and floral designs. Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

“I bought these at Hobby Lobby when they went on sale. This was while we were still in Columbia, just after my first round of chemo. These were just mocking me in the store. So I decided I better get it over with already. I bought the scissors because it would be rude of me to use one of my nice pairs at home. They would be devastated if I made one of ‘em cut off all my hair, you know. I couldn’t put my old friends through that.”

It made me grin, how she personified everything she owned. She was so kind, she could even make friends with scissors.

“So I brought this new pair back home and immediately regretted it. They just kept making fun of me all the time. They were an awful reminder. I hid ‘em up in the closet where I couldn’t see ‘em. It wasn’t too long before my hair started coming out in big clumps, and I called your Aunt over. I told her where the scissors were hiding, and she went and cut all my hair off. I hid these back in my closet when she was done. I just couldn’t bear to see them around my house.”

My throat tightened. The scissors looked at me guiltily from their perch on Mimi’s finger. I wanted to throw them

away. Take them apart and kill them with fire. Get them away from my dear Mimi. She cleared her throat and continued.

“Well, I figured it was rude to keep them all shut up in my closet. It wasn’t their fault they cut my hair. I was the one who bought ‘em. So I put them in the kitchen, up by the M&M jar. I didn’t eat too many M&M’s after that. I let you grandkids eat all you wanted. Grandpa helped a lot.” She giggled and I smiled back, even though my stomach was turning. “I had a grudge on a pair of *scissors*,” she laughed.

I was harboring a grudge against the scissors, too.

“But I couldn’t get rid of them because then I’d be admitting defeat. So I kept them. One day, Grandpa and I came home from the doctor. My cancer was going away. I looked right at these scissors when I went in the kitchen and reminded them who’s boss. Grandpa probably thought I was, you know, looney from the drugs.”

I snickered, imagining Mimi standing up to a pair of scissors. Dangling from her finger, they looked less powerful. Almost pitiful.

“For the rest of my treatments, I started talking to these guys while I worked in the kitchen.” She wiggled her finger, making the scissors wobble pathetically.

“I started to think this pair of scissors needed a second chance. I let them steal my hair, and then I let them be the villain. When my cancer was all gone and it was time for me to get my port taken out, I brought ‘em along with me. I asked the handsome young man doing my procedure to use this pair of scissors.

“When my port was gone, the doctor gave my scissors back. He said he used them to cut the string when he finished my stitches. I told him, ‘Good. They started this mess, the least they could do was finish it.’” She looked the scissors up and down defiantly.

“Anyways, I brought them home and keep them up here with me when I’m sewing. We still talk sometimes, but most importantly, they finish all my projects. When it’s time to cut that last thread, I always let the chemo scissors do it.”

She turned her hand around so she was staring into the shiny blades. They looked like old friends.

When the moment was over and Mimi handed the scissors back to me, I got the nerve to ask. “So... I’m guessing I can’t cut my thread with these.” My needle which had stopped to listen to the story was now frantically trying to escape bondage once again.

“Uh, *no!* Use your teeth!” She answered, grinning and shaking her head of short, brown curls as she used the pair of thread trimmers I was looking for earlier to free her own needle.

A year later, when we finally finished that quilt, those scissors snipped the last string.

Mary Schwanke

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: North Shelby Jr Senior High School, Shelbyville, MO

Educator: Kathy Jackson

Category: Short Story

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## Bananas

The foreground of the weathered photograph contained Bill and his twenty-year-old wife, wearing trousers and glowing with all the rays of a setting sun. Behind them was a large waterfall deep in the woods of Colorado on hunting ground owned by Bill's uncle. Most couples preferred a hotel on their honeymoon, but Bill and Lois had gone camping. They bought that land from his uncle together and settled down with the intent of grazing cattle nearby. Then the draft letter came.

Bill was amazed to think the picture had been taken just over a year ago, while he was still young. Or, at least, while he felt young. It had been the hand of a young man that removed the picture from its frame the morning he left her. That morning he was deployed to fight a war against Japanese soldiers in the Pacific Ocean. That was the last morning he was young.

Bill was not a boy anymore.

He glanced up from the photograph clutched in his hand aged in the ways only a year at war can age someone. His eyes strained and adjusted to the orange light of a new sunset, one on the other side of the world. It streamed through rich green foliage of a Philippine tropical rainforest instead of reflecting off Lois' glee-filled smile. A much larger waterfall poured into a cove behind him, spraying him with cool mist.

Bill and his platoon had only been on that particular island for three weeks, yet the waterfall, his favorite place, quickly became a longed-for slice of home. Paired with the picture, he was transported to happier times of the past.

It was getting dark. On any other island, he would be afraid of the forest at night. The Japanese sometimes hid in the trees, clinging to branches like weaponized bananas. Bananas became rare in the United States during the world because trade with Japan, an exporter of the fruit, ceased. Bill hadn't seen a banana for years, until, one fateful day, he found a banana tree grove on his first island. They stopped to snack on the rare find, the smell permeating the forest. Only an hour after his platoon came across the bananas, everyone except Bill and his best friend Grump were dead. They had been ambushed from the canopy. The nightmare still tormented both soldiers. Bill thought if he ever smelled bananas again, it would be too soon.

Grump and Bill joined another platoon and were shipped elsewhere. The event stole part of Grump's sanity. Paranoid, he couldn't even trust the mosquitoes that buzzed into their camp, killing them with the flame of a small lighter throughout most nights.

But Bill wasn't afraid on this island. Yes, being alone made him nervous when he wasn't certain just how alone he was, but his commanding officers reassured him they were *very* alone there. All of the Japanese had fled this island to protect the mainland. The war should be over soon. He could go back to Lois. But he knew what the commanding officers said wasn't true. He knew they weren't alone on the island.

Bill stood to return to camp when the click of a rifle echoed off the rock face. Nausea washed over him and his throat clamped so tight that he couldn't breathe. The last time he heard that sound, he was one of only two survivors.

Bill waited for the gunshot for an eternity. He was beginning to think he had already died. What had it felt like? Which fearful sensation was actually his own passing? He couldn't remember.

A voice whispered softly, "Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

His posture melted in relief. Of course, it was only Sami. There was another reason Bill liked the waterfall.

"You better not have been pointing that thing at me," Bill said, trying to keep the mood light, even though he found it hard to speak.

"Right... What's the picture?" Sami asked.

"My girl."

"Your daughter?"

"No, my wife." Bill couldn't tell which tree Sami's voice was coming from with the echoes off the cliff and all. The elongating shadows made it impossible to discern human figures among the branches.



"Do you have a daughter?" asked Sami, hope in his voice.

"Maybe one day, if I ever get off your dang island."

"I hope you'll take me with you. My mother taught me English so we could go to America some day. But then the war started and now I have to kill you."

Bill chuckled. "Well? What's taking you so long?"

Sami sighed. "I can't think of the best place to shoot you. I don't want to listen to your whining all night."

Bill only grinned and shook his head, certain Sami was watching.

"Goodbye, Joe," Sami whispered. "I'll kill you tomorrow."

With that, Bill folded the picture of Lois. But as he started to return it to his pocket, Sami said, "Wait! Could you leave the picture there so I can see her, too?"

Bill hesitated. He didn't want to part with the sentimental photograph. Other than the waterfall, the picture was his only tie to home.

"Now, Sami, I don't know..."

"Come on, please? I've never seen an American lady. And I need to know what she looks like if I'm going to live with you on your ranch."

"Sami..." His heart ached. He always knew Sami wasn't the brightest, at least, not sense-wise. He thought like a child. That was what made him so harmless. Sami had been under the impression that Bill, or Joe as he called him, would take him to live in America. It was impossible, but the two of them liked the idea of it.

"I know, I know," said Sami, dismayed. "If you take the long way back, you'll be fine. I don't think anybody is there tonight."

Bill set the photo on the rock as he left.

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"Don't you go wandering at night, Billy Goat," Grump warned him the next morning. Bill began to sweat. Grump saw him sneak back into camp the night before. "Remember what happens to people when they go out in the dark? The enemy knows these woods. They can be hiding anywhere."

"Come on, Grump," said Lieutenant Mann. "There ain't nobody on this island but us. They all went to their mainland. We get this place free."

"Haven't you had a banana or two of your own, Lieutenant?" Grump growled.

"Oh sure, I've seen death plenty. But being scared all the time gets you nowhere 'cept the 'sylum." Lieutenant Mann puffed his cigar and washed it down with whiskey.

"Think what you want, *Lieutenant*. But I know a massacre when I smell it. And this whole island smells like bananas."

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"Joe, I'm not too sure you should be coming back to talk to me anymore," said Sami the next evening. "We need to figure out a plan to get off here."

Bill's stomach squirmed. There was something off about Sami's voice. Bill was certain that if he could see his face, his eyes would be shiny.

"Sami, what's wrong?" he asked.

"I can't tell you."

"If y'all plan to attack us soon, I have to know so me and my guys can get off."

Sami sniffed. "I don't want you to die, but we have to win the war. I just can't."

"So you're ok with my friends dying?" Bill said it louder than he meant to. Sami's breathing hiccuped. He didn't reply. The air between them thickened.

"Sami... What aren't you telling me?"

A tree rustled as a tiny figure shimmed down the trunk, shoving vines. Bill sat up straight, surprised. He had never seen him up close before and certainly hadn't expected to come face-to-face with a boy. Sami was less than five feet tall and scrawny, like he hadn't eaten in weeks. Tears stained his sunken cheeks. He was just a child.

"You're a kid?" Bill asked.

"I'm not a kid. Just 'cause I'm twelve years old doesn't make me a kid."

"Why are you a soldier?"

"I'm not a soldier, either." He sniffed. "I'm worse."

Sami stuffed the picture of Lois into Bill's hand.

He heard distant clicks, each one pummeling him with dread. The forest filled with the phantom scent of bananas.



Mary Schwanke

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Educator: Kathy Jackson

Category: Humor

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## McDonald's

A young adult woman walks into a McDonald's at three in the morning in late July. She stands at the register, pondering the Dollar Menu, trying to decide if she should order a cheeseburger or chicken nuggets.

"Are you ready to order?" the tired, teenage employee asks, growing impatient. Her long shift was almost over, and she planned to go home and sleep until noon.

"I want a number one with a small drink, please," says the customer at last.

"Alright. Do you want anything else?" asks the employee, trying not to sound too annoyed that anyone would come in at this hour.

The customer sighs. "Do you ever just want so many things that you can't hardly get anything at all?" she asks the employee. It is at this point the employee realizes this is not the average young adult woman visiting a McDonald's at three in the morning. This one is *eccentric*.

"Sure," she says, praying this one is not the *overly* eccentric type.

"I want to try your entire menu, to be honest," says the girl in what seems to be a developing accent of sorts. The McDonald's employee raises a confused brow, hesitant to add the entire menu to her order. She doesn't seem to be the kind to have enough money to order everything just because she wants to. The employee figures she probably doesn't even have a job.

"But," states the girl, "I also want to starve myself and fast like a Buddhist monk."

"Oookayyy?" The employee is a little worried.

The girl continues, straightening as she gains confidence.

"I want to be bilingual. Hmm... Forget bilingual. I want to be a polyglot."

Oh no.

"I want to fly a plane. I want to go everywhere. I want to stay here."

Oh no no no.

"I want to write poetry. I want my poetry to become music. I want people to see the world the way I do."

The employee starts to back up from the cash register. This is not an ordinary overly eccentric person. This is an overly eccentric *writer* who is not afraid to say everything out loud instead of just on paper.

A young, scattered family trods through the door, having driven through the night to go on a vacation somewhere far away.

"Go!" shouts the McDonald's employee, ducking beneath the counter. "Save yourselves!"

The writer takes a deep breath, and everyone steps back.

"I want to work a day job. I want to be my own boss. I want a house. I want to live in a van. I want to be a scientist. I want to be a teacher. I want to be an engineer. I want to join the military. I want to kill someone."

"Somebody call the police!" shouts the employee.

"But I also want to save a life," says the writer with an exasperated flailing of her arms.

"She's gonna explode!"

"I want to speak before crowds. I want to hide my identity. I want to be a secret. I want everyone to know the secret. I want no one to know it's mine."

The family shuffles out the door, rolling their eyes about how strange people are in this town.

"I want to stop crying every night. I want to *want* to stop crying every night. I want to win everything. I want to be the underdog. I want to tell people all of this. I want to keep it to myself. I want to stop wanting things. I want to get started doing things instead."

The employee holds her ears and rocks beneath the counter, so fed up with crazy that it has started to infect her. The other employees in the store peek out from the kitchen, perplexed.

The writer takes on a softer, more melodramatic tone. "I want to do something meaningful." And then, bluntly, "I

want to go back to sleep.”

Silence falls on the McDonald’s. The employee dares to peel her hands back from her ears in the stale air. *Is she gone?* She climbs to her feet, shaking, and peers over the register, only to find the writer peering back at her. Heart racing, the employee asks, “I-is there an-n-nything else you want?”

“Yes, I want a small Oreo McFlurry, please.”

The employee gulps before answering, her voice a hoarse whisper. “I’m sorry, but our ice cream machine is currently out of order.” And then she runs for her life.

Mary Schwanke

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: North Shelby Jr Senior High School, Shelbyville, MO

Educator: Kathy Jackson

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## Glossophobia

I will never forget standing in front of three middle-aged farmers, tears staining the navy corduroy of my FFA jacket as I forgot five notecards worth of prepared public speaking. Those farmers (judges of a district speaking contest) were decent about it, one of them giving me his copy of my speech to blubber through as I fell apart in red-hot humiliation. To make matters worse, I knew all three of those men. They were friends of my father, fathers of my friends. I thought I would never hear the end of it after this. They avoided eye contact with the shaking freshman girl, because what else were they supposed to do?

It was right there, in that anxiety-scented room, that I decided I was going to love public speaking eventually, one way or another. But first, my hiccup-filled message about microorganisms in Missouri soil ran three minutes overtime and I fled the scene.

*How could I ever love public speaking after that?* I thought, sniffing the entire awkward car ride home with my FFA advisor, who was another middle-aged farmer. I never liked to talk. In fact, my mom had to iron two speech impediments out of me in my youth because she is not only a speech-language pathologist, but also a perfectionist. Her children should not have stutters, lisps, or dysarthria. Even when I *could* pronounce words, I was not loud. I was a chronic mumblor with a side of glottal fry and vocal cord dysfunction, as we would discover later on. Talking a lot literally hurt.

People couldn't hear or understand me. Having to repeat myself constantly and deal with the confusion of others wore me into timidity. I became accustomed to being ignored or unheard from a young age. Even when my voice came out fine, I would start to talk and get so excited that I would forget everything I meant to say. That or I couldn't come up with responses fast enough for my careful mind to inspect and submit. Simply opening my mouth to speak brought me bouts of terror, not knowing how my voice would sound or what I would say. I convinced myself that it was perfectly fine to have nothing to say. It was because of all this that I first leaned into writing. What I couldn't make myself say using vocal cords I could get out just fine with a pencil.

It was a surprise when, after the miserable failure, a steady voice in my head said, *You are going to practice speaking, by golly, and you are going to like it.* It sounded crazy, but I believed the voice.

A year of comfort zone ejection ensued, and every opportunity to speak in front of people was seized with equal parts fear and motivation. I delivered devotions and meditations behind the pulpit of my church. I signed up for contests and positions that put me in front of people and required me to open my mouth. I initiated conversations with strangers and kept them rolling until the other person walked away. But still, I could not force myself to enjoy talking. Not when I knew inside that I was no good at it. Not when I couldn't handle how embarrassing it was to me.

*I am going to practice speaking, and I am going to like it.*

Another opportunity arose: one that would put me in front of hundreds of people, including three judges. The Miss Old Settlers Queen Contest, where girls cry and women are forged. Where humiliation is brewed and confidence is shredded. Jokes aside, the queen contest is actually a laid-back annual function that threatens to go out of business every year due to a lack of participation. Teenage girls want to watch it. None of them want to participate. Who wants to be interviewed by judges, answer difficult questions on stage, or give a speech in an evening gown?

*I sure wasn't doing it. Until, of course, God gave me something to say.*

I have always held a love for Shelby County Christian Assembly, the church camp I attended every summer since I was little. It is a place of sweat and spiritual salvation. Some of the kids I met at SCCA had a life-changing experience, but when they went home, the fire lit inside them at camp died out without proper stoking. Hence the idea: use donations from the community to put together Bible study kits children without Bibles of their own can take home and use, even after their week at camp is over.

I signed up for the pageant, wrote my speech, and hoped for the best. Despite the desire to vomit, the interview went wonderfully. The judges told me I didn't make very good eye contact or stop fidgeting with my dress, but I answered their questions well. All I could do leading up to the actual pageant was pray and ride the adrenaline.

I don't know any other way outside of a miracle from God Himself, but the speech went flawlessly, except for the time I tripped over the microphone cord. The judges said I owned the stage. I had notecards, but I hardly used them because I knew what I was talking about. I wasn't just speaking anymore. I was sharing my newfound passion with thousands of people. Even when I answered my impromptu question, the words poured out of me without stutter or hesitation. I can't quite remember exactly what I said. Only that it felt natural.

I managed to win Miss Old Settlers, Miss Congeniality, and the People's Choice Award, which was what I really wanted because it was voted on using money that would be donated to my philanthropy. I did not think much about how the speech affected others at the time, but years later, people I did not realize were there confided in me that my speech inspired them. Maybe I was not so bad at talking.

The second part of the quote my inner voice had repeated over and over in the past had finally come true. I practiced public speaking, and I absolutely loved it.

I spoke up more in class, whether that was answering a question or making one of the stupid little remarks nobody asked for but all the other kids think are funny. I stuck up for my friends when they were being gossiped about and whispered words of encouragement to people who needed it. I said that little joke my head came up with during group conversations. I still got ignored a lot, but I persisted and kept finding the courage to speak.

I tried the speaking contest again and managed to win first place at the area level. There I was once more, clad in official dress at districts, standing before three farmers while anxiety digested me. I remembered freshmen year, breaking down because I could not remember what I planned to say. The panic won over. I froze. I forgot. And I got dead last. But I was not about to give up.

I went back to the Queen Contest to participate in a ten-minute-long talk show while the contestants got ready. My anxiety was heightened seeing as I didn't have any sort of speech prepared. I had no idea what the hostess (my high school's superintendent at the time) would ask me. However, I managed to pull it off without showing my fear. I know because my mom recorded the whole thing on her phone, as moms do. There were moments when I had the crowd rolling in laughter. At other moments, there was silence as the audience hung on my every word. Speaking on stage had never been more fun, and all I did was be myself out loud. All I did was relax and let myself speak. My confidence went through the roof after that.

I delivered a speech at FFA camp in front of hundreds of members with only a few days of preparation. This one was written out and regurgitated verbatim, but dozens of FFA members recognized me later in the week and claimed that the story I told them all was inspiring and well-said. I was elated.

I spoke to state representatives in a legislative hearing at HYPE Academy, this time without using notecards. My approachable yet confident tone appealed to the politicians. They asked genuine questions about my family's struggles with oil pipelines and eminent domain damaging our farmland. After my testimony, I carried on genuine conversations with those representatives who are much better at speaking than I was, yet I felt like I belonged. They gave me their cards and told me to give them a call if I ever needed a letter of recommendation or an internship.

I have gone on stages, stood before classrooms, shared my testimony with my school, and spread the Word of God extemporaneously. I went back to the same speaking contest this fall. This time, I was hardly nervous at all, even though my speech was written mere hours before I delivered it. I won at the area level and the judges told me to get that speech memorized because they were certain I could go to state.

Tragically, my aunt passed away after a short battle with cancer and the funeral landed on the day of the district contest. Would I speak or would I go to her funeral? Of course, what choice was there? But there was peace in my decision because I knew that sometimes what matters more than speaking is simply being present. It was better to share with my family a few words of comfort or even nothing at all than try to win the contest. After all, it had served its purpose already. I had learned how to speak.

With all this being said, I am still not *great* at talking. Writing is still my go-to form of communication, one that I will always use as an escape from the vocal world. I continue to mix my words up, string them together, and conjure a loud and clear tone. Occasionally I hate the sound of my own voice. I'm still cautious about what I say and overthink the words that come out of my mouth days later. My journey is far from over, but it has begun. And with that, I have transformed. One fact has changed in my headspace.

*I have things to say and I speak because I love it.*

**Mary Schwanke**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: North Shelby Jr Senior High School, Shelbyville, MO

Educator: Kathy Jackson

Category: Flash Fiction

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## Yellow

I didn't see Joy on Valentine's Day. It was especially hard to get out of bed that month. All I could do was sit around the house. I'd turn on my computer, intending to play some mind-numbing games, but even that was too much effort. So I'd aimlessly scroll social media instead.

One cold Tuesday morning, the sixteenth of February, I woke and felt compelled to leave the stagnant, lukewarm comfort of my house. Determined to seize my temporary motivation, I planned to get Joy's Valentine's Day surprise together. All it would take was a trip to the grocery store. Then I'd go see her.

I hoped she'd understand the delay. Her compassion is one of her best features; one of the many things I love about her.

Being two days after the occasion, most of the flowers at the store were already picked over. What remained was half price. *Joy will be relieved to know I didn't spend too much* I thought. She always said I didn't have to get her gifts, even though she put hours of thought into every craft she made for me. Paper crafts, watercolor paintings, photo collages, remnants of memories frozen among scrapbook paper. They decorated my walls, a constant reminder of her affection and creativity. It felt like she was always there, hanging around my room. Maybe that's why I spent so much time there that year.

Regardless of Joy's dislike for my spending habits, I bought her gifts all the time. In those days, more than ever before, the urge to do so became a critical desire.

Joy loves white roses most, but I had given her those last the time I saw her. She deserved some variety. I plucked three yellow lilies from haphazard, wilting bouquets and figured she'd like them. Yellow is her favorite color, after all.

Everything about her screams yellow.

My stomach grumbled to remind me of my worsening eating habits. I knew inside that consuming food was something I must do, not only to survive, but to feel better. The urgency to eat only came in scarce jolts. Emotion can starve you.

One detour into the snack aisle later and I was in possession of a party-sized bag of Original Lays. *I'll share them*, I thought. I used to poke fun at Joy for preferring the boring, original potato chips. She likes them most because of the packaging. That pretty yellow design.

I studied the bag in my hand. Too large. I switched it out for a smaller, regular-sized one instead. The flowers' stems sweat in my hand, so I brought my items to the cashier. He discounted the lilies a little more, a small act of kindness paired with a faint smile. The total came out to \$9.88. He cashed my ten-dollar bill and dropped the change into a glass jar that appeared a month ago. A yellow sticky note taped to the front had the letters AFSP written in orange ink. A charity. A good cause. Joy likes noble causes, but she would never approve of orange ink on yellow paper. "Not enough contrast!" she would say.

I took the chips and her flowers out of the store. Her place wasn't far. I could stand to exercise, so I walked, returning strangers' polite how-are-you-doing? nods. My lungs ached from the moist cold. It was a good thing I wore my letterman jacket. My arms suddenly burned inside my sleeves, thinking of her. Joy always tried it on, burying her own arms in its thick fabric. Sometimes she pretended to be cold, just so she could breathe my familiar smell. It was returned to me only a month ago. I tried to avoid wearing it, but it was my only good coat.

Her place was painted in tones of February gray. I solemnly navigated the rows, not bothering to read the names. I knew where she would be. And there she was, waiting for me. I removed wilting white roses from the vase hanging on a pole driven into the ground, tossed them in the glittering, frost-encrusted grass, and replaced them with those yellow lilies. The chip bag squeaked as I pulled it open and propped it up, mouth to the sky. I settled beside her, not minding the dark, frozen, still freshly turned soil soaking my sweatpants.

The tombstone was new. It must have been placed only days ago. I leaned against the cold granite and ran my

fingers along her name. My sweet Joy. I told her how much I loved her. Why did she think nobody did? I told her I missed her. I asked her why she didn't tell me, how she hid it so well under all that happiness. All that yellow.



**Gillian Sellet**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Andrew Martin

Category: Poetry

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## **Lingua Franca**

I have a list written on the back of my heart  
Of every word that I have thought of and loved  
And forgotten immediately after  
Vitriol  
Zenith  
Flummoxed  
Deprecate  
Coddiwomple  
Dern  
And of course, the slightly overused but still wonderful  
Syzygy

I was taught that words were the most powerful tool available to us  
That the only way to fix a problem was to speak about it

Letters are inscribed so deeply into our bones that  
I'm half surprised we don't bleed ink  
Our systems were built on the scratch of a quill

When we didn't evolve with wings we made them out of paper  
When we couldn't cross oceans we assembled boats out of punctuation  
Piles of paragraphs to shelter from the elements  
Curls of the earliest cuneiform bridging gaps between mountains

The language of literacy can seem to many  
Like a lock on the jealously guarded strongbox of knowledge  
That alphabet leading to the gleanings of wisdom  
Jewels nestled in the learned man's crown  
The gleam like a dragon's hoard of treasure  
Illuminating true purpose

Then why, when I write about something truly important to me,  
Do my fingers trip over the words  
When I argue with passion  
Do syllables twist and coagulate before they leave my throat  
How do letters fall short when rhetoric is supposedly infallible

Thousands of sensations inexpressible  
Ineffable  
Is a word that describes an emotion that can't be described in words  
Whoever came up with that thought they were really clever, didn't they?

Letters strung together in a line

Could never hope to detail

A elderly woman whose mind is fading  
Memories withering like fruit that has not yet been  
Plucked from its branches  
The image of her grandchild preserved  
Fresh and golden in her mind  
Even though they have never spoken a word in the same language

The crash of a soloists cadenza in a concert hall  
Painting a picture wordlessly

Complimentary colors clashing  
Brushstrokes of a human hand  
Conveying emotion

A feeling in the back of your mind  
Just out of reach  
Never quite palpable

But they can get pretty close

They can make people smile and laugh and cry  
They can start and stop wars  
They can bring joy  
But they can also bring terror

In the millennia of its evolution  
Language  
The device that our success as a species can be accredited to  
Still  
falters  
Is used to harm people  
Is used to uplift  
Is brand new  
Is archaic  
Is beautiful  
Is ugly

I have a secret to confess  
I used a thesaurus to write this poem  
Because I couldn't think of words that were cool enough  
To include in a poem about how cool words were  
And I don't think my inability to absorb the English vernacular into my brain  
Makes me a worse writer  
I just sort of like the word thesaurus  
Because it sounds like a type of dinosaur

**Gillian Sellet**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Devin Heath

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

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## All That Remains

The tubers I dug up from the wasteland have gone bad. The stench of rot is so strong that sometimes it gets hard to breathe. I blame the incessant mold that's developed due to a hairline crack in the concrete above my head, allowing the slightly acidic rain to drip into the corner where I keep my foraged food. Only the peach candies, in their tiny metal tin, are safe.

There is another corner that would be better served to hide the food from the elements, complete with a dusty shower curtain, but I don't pay much attention to that corner these days.

Not that I've been specifically ignoring it.

There's nothing behind the curtain, anyways.

I dump the roots down the side of the hill a ways off from my shelter, my legs too short to get as far away as I want to before depositing them. When I go back home, the rot smell hasn't dissipated. Curious.

□ □ □

The man wrinkles his nose as he opens the door to my hideaway. Perhaps it's musty. That would make sense.

He leaps back when we make eye contact, before speaking in a honeyed rumble of a voice.

“Woah there, kid! Didn't realize there was anyone left in here. Don't worry, we won't hurt you.”

His head is bald like an egg, but he has a bushy beard. Not like an egg.

Two women shoulder in after him. One is stocky, scarred, and weather-worn. The other is quiet, faded, but in a nice way. Like an old quilt.

The larger woman also wrinkles her nose (*I get it, it doesn't smell good. jeez*) and throws back the curtain from the corner where—

—In a whirl, she has a knife out, rusty blade singing at me. The one with the beard pushes her away and his honey-voice turns bitter, but as he sees the corner—

—Quilt lady exchanges a glance with the man and turns to me. She has deep wrinkles around her eyes, like grout in between cracked floor tiles. She asks me if anyone else lives here, and I say no. It's the first time I've ever said that to a real person. Now that I think about it, that would probably make it the first time I ever talked to a real person. Talking is much easier than finishing the opened tin of peach candies sitting on the bottom shelf of my cabinet.

□ □ □

*James smiles*

□ □ □

The loud, bright woman pulls the curtain back into place and seems...relieved? She exchanges words with the other two.

I overhear snatches:

“Looks like an infection,” from the angry one.

“Of course it was! did you expect her to have k—”

“Poor kid,” murmurs the faded woman as she looks at me. The other woman rolls her eyes, but it seems like she’s calmed down since her discovery in the corner. Do adults always look so relieved by death? It’s been so long since I talked to one that I can’t be sure, but it doesn’t seem like a normal thing.

Though now that I think about it, there isn’t anything dead in the corner, so I suppose her reaction is typical.

The man is approaching me. What does he want?

He stoops down to eye-level and holds out his hand. “Hey kiddo. Sorry again for barging in like this. I’m Trusken.” I stare at his outstretched hand. The adults are looking at me expectantly. I think I might be supposed to do something. After a beat he retracts his hand, still smiling wide. I wish I could tell if he’s pretending to be cheerful for my benefit, or if he’s just insane.

“My grumpy friend over there is Katja. Don’t mind her, she’s not a morning person.” He gives me a wink as the tall woman—Katja—folds her arms and narrows her eyes. “And our other companion-”

The other woman cuts in before he can introduce her: “My name is Noray. It’s a pleasure.” The lines near her eyes crinkle when she smiles. Trusken returns her smile and turns back to me.

“What’s your name, pal?”

My name. My name is a whisper in a cloud-filled room. It returns to me, but it feels like a piece of charred parchment. Like it could crumble if I tug at it too fiercely. The voice that finally speaks is familiar to my ears, even though it should be dusty from disuse after all this time.

“Sonya.”

□ □ □

*James smiles, and holds out his hand to pull me over a ridge in the dirt. The air at the crest is heavy with the scent of foxgloves and violets.*

□ □ □

Katja had briefly rifled through the shelves in my hideout, commandeering any scrap of food hiding there. When she stumbled on the tin of candy, she reached for it with a grin, but I snatched it away with an unprecedented burst of energy. If I couldn’t savor the taste of peaches on my tongue, nobody could.

Their group built a campfire and congregated around it while they ate. Noray prepared some sort of meal from a variety of wrapped parcels. I can tell that their portions were made smaller than usual in an attempt to compensate for my dinner.

They attempt to induct me into their inner circle, sharing stories that they call their “greatest hits” and volleying questions at me. I bob my head enthusiastically when they look at me, but beyond that, I am like the smoke from the fire. Existing to fill the cracks in between the walls of their conversation.

I've eaten more than I have in days, but my stomach hurts. A sharp, metallic emotion is coiled there, evolving and reacting to the new human presence.

A little girl named Ivy features frequently in Trusken's stories, to the point where I look around to make sure that I haven't missed a fourth member of their party. They laugh about her exploits and sigh over what a wonderful daughter he had.

Had.

Ivy is dead, but as Trusken's mouth twists into a faint smile he doesn't seem sad. He looks at me from across the fire and laughs at something Katja says and He. Is. Such. A. Liar. The pain in my stomach intensifies to a bitter burn.

The laughter and stories and smiles aren't what grief looks like. Grief looks like a decaying body in the corner of a room, like a vase full of wilted violets, like a box of peach candies that you can never finish—

If he's this happy right now, then he couldn't possibly miss his daughter.

Liar.

*Liar.*

□ □ □

*James smiles, and holds out his hand to pull me over a ridge in the dirt. The air at the crest is heavy with the scent of foxgloves and violets. He winces and attempts to hide his shoulder from me, obscuring the festering cut that seems to grow by the day.*

□ □ □

I flee the scene. In the ruined building I shelter in, there is a piece of broken concrete that hangs down a bit farther than the rest of the piecemeal roof. I slip through a hole in the wall and use a few rusted pipes as footholds to reach the slab. The silence that can be found up here, underneath the dusky sky and in between the howling wind, is deafening.

Or rather, it would be, if the pipes didn't squeak as Noray pulls herself up next to me. It's hard for adults to get up here. I wonder how she did it. She must be very squirrely—

"You're sad about something." Her voice interrupts my train of thought, and I turn onto my other side, away from her, so I can scowl into the night.

"I'm angry." My tone is sharp and clipped as broken glass. I don't think I've ever been angry at someone before. Well, not someone who was still conscious enough to receive the brunt of my ire. Noray shakes her head solemnly.

"They often show up as a pair." I don't speak or look at her. This conversation is over. Or apparently not, because she continues. "That man who passed away downstairs"—he didn't pass away, he just sat down in the corner and breathed shakily and then stopped moving—"left a letter. He asks whoever finds it to keep you safe. I'm guessing you can't read."

I give her my most withering stare, but she just smiles gently and shakes her head.

"That's okay, honey. I can teach you once we get going again. I helped teach Ivy too."

"I'm not coming with you." Her eyebrows raise.

"Your guardian can't look after you anymore, Sonya. You don't have to trust us, but this is no place for a kid." She reaches for me and I slap her hand away before turning and staring stonily in the opposite direction.

“I’m not going,” I reply stubbornly. Noray simply sighs and begins to ease herself down from the overhang, trying to make sure the rusty pipes don’t break under her weight. My brain works in spite of itself, blurting out a final question that’s been boiling inside me since dinner.

“Why is Trusken so happy that his daughter died?”

I feel, rather than see her turn around, before I glance back to get a good look at her face. Her mouth is pulled into a taut line, and her eyes well with tears. We make eye contact and there’s a moment of silence as she looks at me with both pity and another emotion that I can’t name.

“Sometimes you have to choose to honor someone's memory by laughing about their best moments. Otherwise the only option left is to fall apart.”

I wonder if other people know these things like Noray and Trusken do, and if there’s something wrong with me because I don’t. I also think about James. I think about him for the first time since he—

—died.

□ □ □

*James smiles, and holds out his hand to pull me over a ridge in the dirt. The air at the crest is heavy with the scent of foxgloves and violets. He winces and attempts to hide his shoulder from me, obscuring the festering cut that seems to grow by the day. He ruffles my hair affectionately and then walks ahead into the field as I squint my eyes against the rose-colored sunrise. I look around, and realize that I’ve lost sight of him through the tall grass. I’m alone.*

□ □ □

I float back to the now-dead campfire in a sort of daze. Katja sits to the side of the room, fiddling with a carving knife and some sort of statue. She raises an eyebrow at me but doesn’t say anything. I plop down onto a bench and sit and absolutely don’t cry. Trusken finds me, Noray trailing him like a soft-voiced ghost before she sits down next to Katja. He squeezes my shoulder bravely. It’s difficult to tell who is more surprised that I don’t crumble at the touch.

“We’re going to head out soon kiddo. Noray says that you won’t come with us, but I have to ask you again.” He is gentle and sad, and I’m not sure how I ever thought that he didn’t miss his daughter. “It’s not good to be alone, Sonya.”

“Okay.” My words don’t surprise me like they did when I first spoke, the conversations I had with James clear in my mind, the rust of silence not yet gathered in my throat.

Trusken’s eyes widen, but he grins hesitantly at me.

I continue: “You’re right. I don’t want to be alone anymore.” Trusken’s smile grows. Katja sends an approving nod in my direction and Noray bumps her shoulder, and I’m struck by how happy they seem, despite the ruined cities and radioactive wastelands and mutated creatures that lie outside my lonely safe haven. It reminds me of James, and the look on his face when he dug the silvery tin of candies out of the rubble of what was once a grocery store.

*“Incredible,” he breathed, “I haven’t seen one of these since...before.” And even though he must have had another family at some point, other people to look after that were gone now, he turned to me and smiled.*

And Trusken isn’t James, and I don’t understand Noray, and I’m not sure that Katja likes me that much, but for the sake of the gaunt corpse in the basement, and the person he used to be, and the words he wrote in that letter, I try to smile.

My lips are chapped, and they stick to my teeth, and it’s *really* awkward, but I think that this is the kind of thing that improves quickly with a little practice.

□ □ □

*James smiles, and holds out his hand to pull me over a ridge in the dirt. The air at the crest is heavy with the scent of foxgloves and violets. He winces and attempts to hide his shoulder from me, obscuring the festering cut that seems to grow by the day. He ruffles my hair affectionately and then walks ahead into the field as I squint my eyes against the rose-colored sunrise. I look around, and realize that I've lost sight of him through the tall grass. I'm alone. I race into the brush, toward the spot where I lost him, whirling around to face a rustling noise coming from the distance. James emerges from the foliage, eyes laughing, presenting me with a small bundle of flowers. And he wasn't lost after all.*

**Jack Shadden**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Chaminade College Prep School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Allison Justusson

Category: Short Story

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## **Blossom**

Early spring has always been my favorite; chirping birds, showering rain, and the gentle kiss of sunshine are among the things I value most this time of year. What I find myself being most grateful for, however, is the unique and infrequent opportunity I am granted to witness the world around me, albeit brief. Though I often find myself limited to this windowsill, it is hard to feel isolated in the presence of the sun beaming in through the glass. I try taking in its beauty all at once, compensating for lost time. I wonder—what is it that makes the sun so alluring? Is it the sustenance it provides? Or perhaps it is—

A small child catches my eye as it crawls on the floor nearby, a puzzled look resting on its face. It approaches me, giggling and pointing as if something funny has just happened. I see no cause for laughter, but I understand that children can be cryptic creatures. The child—a boy, I think—is followed by a woman I presume to be his mother, who picks him up and brings him closer to me. At this point, I can tell he finds me fascinating in some capacity, but for what I cannot tell.

At the same time, I hear the commanding voice of a man coming from the next room. I cannot make out his speech exactly, but I can sense exasperation in his gravelly tone. His utterances gradually devolve into impassioned ranting, causing the woman a great deal of distress.

“Babe! Could you please keep it down?” she says, her quavering voice slightly raised. She bounces the child in her arms as she awaits his response.

The man’s conversation comes to an abrupt pause. “Sorry,” he says, his hushed voice seemingly aimed at someone other than the woman. “Could you please give me a moment? I need to go deal with something.” I hear the immediate crescendo of footsteps as a figure marches through the doorway across the kitchen and approaches me. No, not me—the woman. His eyes meet hers with an unbreaking stare, and the woman instinctively lowers the child to a straddle position on her hip furthest from the man. She turns her head away from him to face the infant resting on her right side, and I notice her weight shifting with unease.

“I guess I haven’t been clear enough about the way things work around here,” he spats through bared teeth, “seeing as you had the nerve to interrupt my *very* important business call.” Disgruntled, he redirects his attention to the device in his hands, being cautious to cover the end of it.

The ensuing silence is punctuated by the woman’s shallow breaths. Her face remains in the direction of her right shoulder, contorted by the squinting of her eyes and the slight raising of her eyebrows. “Mark,” she replies softly, “you were scaring the baby and—“

“How is that my problem?” he roars, moving in closer. Then, in a sudden change of pace, he lifts the device to his mouth and says, “Hey, Brian? Let me call you back later.” He presses his finger to the screen and slams his device on the counter, turning his focus entirely on the woman. “You know, sometimes I think you forget your place, so let me remind you.” He grabs her chin, twisting her face to be inches away from his. She stares back at him with wide eyes. “I work hard to provide for this family. My job is to pay the bills and put food on the table. Yours is to take care of the kid.”

“I— I know, Mark. But you were scaring him and I—“



“I don’t care!” he screams, spit flying out onto her face. Armed with a deranged look, he draws his open right palm behind his head and delivers a crisp smack to the woman’s cheek, knocking her off balance. He hesitates for a moment as the stricken, cherry-pink area begins to swell, his eyes glaring venomously into hers. He then turns around promptly, grabs his device, and storms off.

At this moment, I notice that the baby has begun to fuss in his mother’s arms. I cannot help feeling sympathetic for this distressed child—how is it fair that he must suffer the consequences of his parents’ actions?

At first, the mother ignores the cries of her infant son, trembling in place with a single tear rolling down her cheek. She then sets him on the ground next to her, collapses to her knees, and starts to sob uncontrollably. She sets her head in her hands and leans her upper body forward onto her legs, closing a blind eye to the boy.

\* \* \*

If my memory serves me right, there is a novelty to be found in this room in which I dwell, unlike its former condition. Notably, the fresh coat of lavender paint on the walls fosters a much more contemporary atmosphere than the tacky patterned wallpaper that used to stand in its place. The elegant flower arrangement next to me adds a nice touch as well, enlivening the room and providing me with some much-needed company. I must say—time is scarcely known for its forgiving nature, but it has evidently treated this place well.

Time... what a funny thing. The concept itself has always puzzled me. What makes it inherently valuable? Why is it so remarkably fickle? For such a complex, indispensable standard, why is it in perpetually short supply? Though no answers to any of these questions seem to be anywhere in sight, this general lack of understanding can certainly be attributed to my unique experience with time, as the ephemeral gift of life seems to escape me in the blink of an eye. For many, this momentary window of opportunity may be cause for dread, but I tend to see it for what it is—a chance. A chance to experience the wonderful sights and smells around me. To see how the world around me has shifted. To see how the boy and his mother have developed.

The piercing crunch of shattering glass resonates throughout the room.

Startled by the noise, I assume a sudden state of vigilance and scan my surroundings for any signs of danger. My curiosity is piqued by an empty bottle lying on its side before me, accompanied by several others sprawled across the countertop and the floor. After pausing to take a brief mental note, I resume my careful examination.

I catch sight of the woman continuing woozily through the kitchen; it is obvious that time has not been nearly as kind to her. Her arm brushes against the empty bottle lying ahead of me, causing it to roll off the counter and onto the floor. The abrupt crash causes the woman to let out a shriek, followed by a hysterical fit of laughter. I can’t help but ask myself—why is she behaving so erratically? Has something changed?

The rapid pitter-patter of footsteps can be heard ascending a nearby staircase, and from the door across the room emerges a young man wearing an expression of concern. I immediately recognize him as the boy, though many of his features have changed. When I saw him last, he had grown considerably from when he was an infant, but he still had fairly innocent features. It seems that now, his figure is defined by a head of shaggy brown hair, bumpy skin, and a much taller stature.

“Is everything okay?” he asks, eyebrows raised. He closes the door behind him and approaches the woman slowly. “I thought I heard something crash up here.”

“I’m f-fine,” she responds curtly, slurring her words. She attempts to catch her breath from her eruption of laughter. “Why don’t you m-mind your own b-bu-business?”

“Well, my friends downstairs were getting worried, so I—”

“So you what?” she snaps back.

“Nothing. I’m glad that everything’s fine,” says the boy.

An uncomfortable silence engulfs the room, causing the air between them to become fraught with tension though I cannot explain why.

“You w-want something... don’t you?” she says, expressing her unequivocal disapproval with the tilting of her head and pursing of her lips.

“Well, um... I know you’re busy, but, um... could you maybe make some snacks for me and my friends?” His eyes look up from the ground to meet his mother’s for a brief moment before darting away, intimidated by her severely lowered eyebrows. “Never mind,” he says, swallowing. “I’m sorry—I—I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I need you to listen... listen v-very carefully to the words I’m about to t-tell you,” the woman scowls. She lets out a belch before continuing. “Ever since your f-father left, I’ve had to work twice as hard to t-take care of you... pick up double the shif-shifts. D-Did you know that I worked over f-for-forty hours... hours this week at the Gas N’ Go down the road to m-make sure that you have a roof over your head?” She pauses to hiccup, but the intensity of her tone does not falter. “It’s not easy, you know... making all this w-work.”

What could possibly be the reason for the woman’s animosity toward the boy? Is there something I’m missing? Or does this wound cut deeper than the surface?

“I, um... I understand. I’m sorry to bother you,” the boy says. His tone suggests resignation, but the subtle frown worn on his face leaves room for ambiguity.

“Don’t you d-dare give me that look!” growls the woman, her eyes narrowing. “I can t-tell... exactly what you’re thinking.”

“I... I’m sorry, I—“

“*I... I... I’m sorry*” she whines, mimicking him. “If you’re s-sorry,” she hisses, “then maybe you should g-get... out of my face, you brat!”

He bows his head. Slumping his shoulders in surrender, the boy exits through to the basement and gently closes the door behind him.

The woman scoffs, shaking her head dismissively. I watch as she begins to pace back and forth through the kitchen, the vein in her neck on the verge of bursting. At once, she goes to grab a platter from the cabinet, as well as an assortment of food from behind the door of a large black box. I think to myself—what could have possibly changed her mind? With the platter in her hands, she swings open the basement door and yells, “Snacks!”

She waits for the boys to arrive upstairs, maintaining her composure as they gather before her. This seemingly genial disposition is short-lived, for as soon as they all arrive, she shouts, “You wanted snacks? Take ‘em!” The woman grabs a fistful of apple slices and hurls them at the crowd of boys, followed by barrages of grapes and cheeses.

Most instinctively place their hands in front of their bodies to shield from oncoming food, though a particularly frightened few opt to cower behind their friends. One boy shouts, “Dude, your mom is psycho!” Another, “What is wrong with her?” A third, “I—I, um... I have to go.” The group, shrouded in confusion and discomfort, frantically scrambles to leave, though the boy desperately chases after them.

“Guys, come back!” he pleads. “Please! Come on, guys—it’s not my fault, I swear! Guys!” The despair in his voice grows until his pleas cease, at which point I hear the faint echo of sobs coming from the next room. With tears streaming down his blushing face, the boy stumbles back into the kitchen and looks daggers at his mother.

“What can I say?” she says, shrugging her shoulders emphatically. “You m-made me do this. Next t-time, don’t be... be such a selfish brat... and learn to m-m-make your own snacks.”

At this point, the boy has begun to blubber as he attempts to form a sentence. “How... c-could you?” he says, turning his face away.

Over the sounds of his wailing, I can hear the woman's footsteps approaching. She grabs an open bottle from the counter and takes a big gulp, then strolls past the boy who now lies on the ground.

"F-find yourself a ride to hockey tonight."

\* \* \*

Several hours have passed since I blossomed, or at least that's what I gather from the sun's disappearance beneath the horizon. The deep-seated unease that once washed over me has begun to wane steadily as I grow accustomed to my new surroundings. Though my contentment improves in that regard, I find the gloomy, cloud-ridden sky that eclipses the sun and the consequent frailty of my leaves to be utterly unpleasant. Still, I have a view of my former home in the kitchen from the bedside table I now reside on, granting to me a semblance of familiarity in this unfamiliar time.

Strewn across the bed that lies beside me is the woman, whose sickly appearance implies an affliction of some sort. A slew of visitors have come to witness her unconscious body, though I feel compelled to ask amongst this onslaught of unfamiliar faces—where is the boy?

The long withstanding silence that permeates the room—unbroken despite the many who have come through the house—is interrupted by a nearby conversation.

"It doesn't look like she has much time left," says a young woman, who appears to be the woman's caretaker.

"Do you think he'll visit before she..." a concerned older gentleman asks.

"It's hard to say," the caretaker sighs. "I suppose only time will tell."

Someone knocks on the door.

A familiar presence seeps in as the caretaker cracks open the doorway. A man crosses over the threshold and into the house, tentatively approaching the unconscious woman. For some time, he stands at a distance and observes her silently. After a while, he steps closer and kneels down next to her.

"Hi, Mom," he whispers. The boy—now fully grown—begins to form tears in his eyes. "I, uh... I kept waiting for you to give me a reason to come back—something, anything to convince me that... I don't know, that you had somehow changed and were ready to be in my life again." He laughs under his breath. "I kept daydreaming that you would somehow make up for the years of pain you put me through." With this, his voice begins to break. "For all the times you told me that I was the reason you hated your life. For the miserable childhood you gave me. And yet... for whatever reason, I was willing to put all that aside if you had reached out even once. But you never did... and now, you never will."

He begins to shake with sobs. "I know you can't hear me, but, um... I have three kids now. I try my hardest each and every day to be the parent for them that I wish you were for me."

Has this been the answer I've been longing for all along? I used to wonder how everything fits within the confines of time and its cycles, but is it possible that the beauty of life comes from the disruption of them? I understand that it is easy to remain complicit in these monotonous, sometimes vicious cycles of life, but perhaps escape is a much more rewarding prospect.

"Oh, Mom," the boy sniffles, "I... I really missed you. The times we spent watching old movies together, or when we sang at the top of our lungs on road trips... those are some of my happiest memories. Those are the parts of you that I want to pass on to my children." A deep exhale escapes through his nostrils.

"I decided against my better judgment to come here today, but I didn't come to forgive you. I came because I... I

missed those parts of you, and I couldn't live with myself if I didn't see you one last time before, well... before I couldn't anymore."

The woman slightly opens her eyes and, seeing the boy, grows a faint smile.

"I missed you... *so much*, Mom."

Her hand reaches to brush his cheek, but her arm grows weak and her breathing slows down to a stop. A cascade of tears streams down the boy's face as he rests his head on his mother's chest gingerly.

I take this opportunity to look through the window beside me, gazing upon the vast expanses of nature this world has to offer. I pay close attention to the ripples in the lake, each one larger than the last. A flock of geese flying overhead catches my eye, and I watch intently as these birds travel in an impossibly synchronized formation. Although this window separates me from the outside world I so deeply admire, I have never felt so connected with the entirety of existence as I do at this moment.

It is with this clarity that I finally come to the realization—the natural tendency of the universe is to become disordered, and the fickle nature of time contributes to this perpetual state of disarray. In other words, nothing in this chaotic, ever-changing world ever truly makes sense... or does it?

Of the lessons I have learned from the woman and her son, I will forever keep with me that meaning in this ostensibly meaningless world can be derived from anywhere; it is those who defy their circumstances and work to make a positive impact on the world around them that lead the most meaningful existences. After all, is learning from the mistakes of the past to create a brighter future not the whole purpose of existence?

Coming to terms with the universe and my place in it, I start to feel my petals slowly losing strength. The abscission process is no foreign concept to me, but this time feels... different somehow. I sense the escape of water through my veins and the release of nutrients back into the soil from which I was conceived. As I feel myself fading, I reach out to the sun and feel its brush upon my petals.

The cycle has been broken.

**Sophia Thomas**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

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## **Sex Education, or Guidance?**

Sex Education, or guidance?

Teenagers know what sex is. An unfaithful truth. Students who have followed public or private education most likely have experienced the perplexing topic of sex-ed. Personally, my extent of sex education was textbook images of eggs and sperm. Graphically, a video of agonizing, fluid-filled birth. Rooms full of pubescent minors fly through their post-secondary education not knowing the anatomy of their own bodies, and certainly not the anatomy of others. The western world spends the majority of health classes preaching the morals of sex, rather than speaking out that *no means no*, options for birth control, same-sex relationships, or even forms of sex. Society expects youth to make grown-up choices with their bodies when we don't educate them like adults. Based on the statistics and humane aspects of our world's sex education, it is in dire need of evolving through comprehensive anatomical education, topics of harsh realities, and expansion of perspectives and sexual lifestyles. Ultimately, better sex education will improve and adapt how we view and perceive the bodies of ourselves and those around us.

Sparking most commonly around the United States and Western Europe, sex education was introduced to inform youth of sex as well as general information about reproduction. Teaching anatomy, sex, and the risks of intercourse were soon flooding western world school systems, as a required portion of our education. "54 percent of high school students claim they have had sexual intercourse. 40 percent of 9th graders have spoken up about sexual experiences around the age of thirteen or fourteen" (Lickona). Roughly half of high schoolers in America have experienced sexual intercourse by the time they reach the teenage digits. But at this point in their life, some have received little to no education about these reproductive abilities. According to US news, "Sex Education varies state by state- some not having any circular requirements in school". Although the organization *Planned Parenthood* has been promoting education about STIs, healthy relationships, birth control, and sexual orientation, very few schools have picked up these concepts, reflexing on the statistics. Lickona specifies, "Twenty million people are affected each year by STDs, 63% being under the age of 25. 1 of every 10 teenage girls become pregnant". The more the statistics reveal, the more you realize how little our education system teaches about sex. Considering the mass spread of STDs, and large amounts of teenage pregnancies per year. Yet, this is only the tip of the iceberg on the failing education system.

Our youth is not prepared for mature concepts and additionally are not aware of the common misconceptions of our body. Ranging from consent to the anatomy of the opposite sex, our education system leaves plenty of blank spaces in lesson plans. Lucy Cosley, a previous 'victim' of western hemisphere sex education speaks out about how this directly affects students. "I don't remember being told any of the contraceptive options other than condoms". Birth control and other protection methods have evolved in a large way since the dawn of sex-ed in 1950. But the system has not evolved, rather than describing condoms which on average, 18-41% of users have complained of breakage. Rather than speaking about higher success rate materials, we reflect on the past, misconceptions, and stigmas. "The teaching of consent is one of the most important aspects of a young person's sex education, and I don't mean just implying that sex is something that men want and women acquiesce to, but teaching young people of both genders what "yes" and "no" can look like." (Cosslett). In addition to poor anatomical misconceptions, consent is barely or never spoken about. The stigmas that reflect upon young people's minds remain that men want sex, and women apply to these needs, reflecting on the statistics of sexual assault at a young age. "A 2010 survey conducted by the *sexual assault referral agency* the Havens found that *only* 77 percent of young men between the ages of 18 and 25 (against 92 percent of young women) thought that having sex with someone who had said "no" constituted rape." (Cosslett). 23% of young men believe that although the woman says no, she still wants him. These inappropriate perspectives dilute healthy mentalities and enable the normalization of rape. Rather than just hinting, sex-ed should

include the realistic horrors of sexual assault, the complexity of birth control, and life outside of tradition.

On the note of life outside of the average, a common aspect of citizens' life is not spoken about on a regular basis. No information about the lives of those in the LGBTQ+ community is spoken about. Whether or not you support them, the introduction of this community is necessary for the proper education of all, and additionally general representation of the public. "the LGBTQ+ education nonprofit GLSEN found that only 8.2% of students said they received LGBTQ+-inclusive sex education." (Gray). It's hard not to envy those who receive this knowledge. "When I was in school, sex education included a quick lesson that highlighted abstinence and demonized any sexual activity," Delilah Gray, a member of the community speaks out. "The only "resource" I had to learn about same-sex dating and activity was pornography." The most common age for those to start pondering their sexuality is the peak of puberty, a hormonal wave. Sex Education provides the perfect opportunity to welcome information based on activities of all sorts, and methods of sex. In my personal education, I never remember being taught even what 'vanilla' sex was, I had to piece together myself where the parts went. "The sex ed I received in school didn't prepare me for sex. I didn't know how to say no, how to deal with certain feelings, or even how to recognize the harm in pornography. I didn't know where to turn to for advice, and no one told me where to go" (Gray). This natural part of life is hovered around, all because of personal fears of pregnancy and STDs, when sex keeps our world spinning.

Fear puts chains on our sex education, as they only seem to have fears of pregnancy. Perhaps, this fear is validated. "On Friday, June 24, 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, the landmark piece of legislation that made access to an abortion a federal right in the United States. The decision dismantled 50 years of legal protection and paved the way for individual states to curtail or outright ban abortion rights" (Gilman). In 11 states, abortion is completely banned unless validated in court, removing or limiting options for unwanted pregnancies. Whether or not the education wants to believe it, accidents happen even whilst performing safe sex. The overturning of Roe V Wade should nonetheless promote improved sex education to attempt to help unexpected parents choose their path. If you are anti-abortion or not, a basic right is knowledge of where you can get medical procedures, promote the foster care system, or even support the youth's parents. "Getting pregnant, we were told, was The Worst Possible Thing That Could Ever Happen To You, and we believed it" (Gilman). If youth was introduced to what to expect through sex or pregnancy, perhaps Roe V Wade being overturned would be more adaptable with open minds. Sadly, our education remains to put a cap on any evolution. Birth control, teen pregnancy, and how to prevent or adapt to any circumstance have begun to be normalized in society. How come our system has not adapted?

Arguably, the ideals of the dawn of sex education have corrupted our ideals. Ignoring ancient China's usage of sex dolls in male youth-used to educate and adapt the performance of future spouses-sex education primarily began in relatively modern times. "The rise of sex education to a regular place in the school curriculum in the United States and Europe is not, however, simply a story of modern enlightenment breaking through a heritage of repression and ignorance" (Moran). Roughly 76% of any source claims that sex education must be more in-depth, but reaching nearly 70 years of normalization, we need to normalize more. The formal movement for sex education commenced in the early twentieth century. Oddly, early reformers seldom said anything about needing to compensate for the loss of barnyard knowledge when families grew up in the city rather than on a farm. In other societies undergoing rapid urbanization, newspapers regularly reported on young city couples who wanted children for years but never picked up the essential information on animal breeding that would have suggested how to become pregnant" (Moran). Sex education was created to inform people about how to make babies. But sex is so much more, than making babies. "Boys and girls sat in separate classrooms, and their lessons reflected a strong sense of the difference between the sexes. Besides hearing the medical warnings about sexually transmitted diseases, boys learned that they had a moral responsibility to their mothers and future wives to remain chaste. Girls were instructed much more deliberately in raw fear—especially in the high likelihood of contracting syphilis from a male. So vivid were the warnings that some instructors in the first decades of the twentieth century actually worried that their female students might never marry. Because they sought to ennoble sexuality by making it synonymous with reproduction, early sex educators seldom dwelled on the threat of TEEN PREGNANCY." (Moran). Ever since it began, our education system purely relies on fear, rather than true education of the deep topics of what makes sex, sex. Misconceptions stem from the root of this education, and people are in need of standing up to sexual stigmas.

This far into this essay, those reading have initially gone through statistics, lack of representation, and the odd history of sex ed. But at what point-as been argued for over a thousand words-are we going to realize that this wasn't sex education, it was sex guidance? At eleven and twelve many young people are approaching the threshold of puberty while others are already in full pubertal flower. As hormones kick in, children are ready to express themselves sexually. Thus the focus of sex education shifts from sex literacy to building sexual skills. This is when students must

acquire the knowledge and technical skills to manage their emerging sexuality” Studies have been done about human brains, and the background information, statistics, and anatomy of humans have been studied, whether or not we use this information in a classroom setting is up to the future. “In response, sex educators point to the statistics. Face facts, they say. A growing number of teenagers are engaging in sex and suffering its harmful consequences. It is foolish, if not irresponsible, to deny that reality. If more teenagers are sexually active, why deprive them of the information they need to avoid early pregnancy and disease?” (Whitehead). There is no valid reason to not expose youth. It’s not going to turn minors into sex demons, but rather promote open perspectives.

Throughout this, In the greatest efforts from a minor who has experienced such topics, I hope this expands the horizons of how sex education as been evolved. It is in great need, as repeated, that we should stand together and normalize sex, as intercourse is performed daily. Sex should not be a “deed”, but encouraged safely, consensually, and openly. Perhaps, exposure to harsh topics will promote healthier mindsets, as sex education should be designed for. Rather than guiding us on what sex is, sex is a multilayered subject that should be taken more seriously in our society. Ultimately proving the point that this is purely guidance. What are you going to do, to promote this education and end this wrong?

**Vivian Wang**

Age: 14, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Katarina Fernandez

Category: Poetry

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**Portrait of a Girl**

Look at the portrait of a girl  
and you will see her beaming innocence  
her naivety about the world  
the belief that only bad guys get unhappy endings.  
She leaps  
from slicked-up technicolor slides of the park playground  
she combs the hair of porcelain carousel horses  
into pretty braids and twists she cannot give herself. She shouts  
of gunsmoke  
and missing her mother  
as all little kids do  
but she puts on her kitty Band-Aids herself  
and kisses her sticky snow-cone scratches alone.  
She is still jumping off the rusted metal swing  
long after her friends have been called back home for dinner.  
She cries  
and cries to the constellations of streetlights,  
making wishes on dandelions with shaky, bony paws.  
Sitting on the chipped concrete porch of her small house,  
she loses herself in dreams of shining rivers of chocolate  
and tinsel-brick windmills  
as all little kids do.  
She walks through her front door after school  
closes her mouth  
and bites her small lips shut tight until  
she can peel off the chapped skin like the mesh layers of an onion.  
She eyes the white raspberry vodka on her mother's dresser but doesn't touch it;  
she goes to water her mother's dying tomato plant instead.  
At night, bare-skinned  
and all stiff glass tendons under her flowery covers  
her tiny fingers press her eyelids closed  
and her eyelashes become inky, pointed writings on her cheeks.  
There are poems hidden there;  
she is the only person who will never get to read them.  
She doesn't eat her green beans, but nothing ever happens;  
she throws coins into the metal well by the barbershop, but nothing ever happens.  
When the words finally don't claw their way back down her throat  
and her mother screams at her for the first time, she will run the white petal gravel road  
up past the trees that try to pull her into their stiff arms  
to the very top of the mountain  
and she will cry silently  
as all little kids do.  
Rows and rows of fluttering hearts fill the broken houses she sees.



She leans against the earth and lets it sweep her off her feet, murmuring the prayers  
she kept tucked under her tongue.  
She runs all the way back home again the next day, the air stinking of rotting peaches, and  
her mother welcomes her with a meal, a peace offering  
but she eats her dreams for dinner instead.  
Soon she can't remember the last time she prayed in a church.  
She is eleven.  
She is sorry.  
Faith is no longer what fills her breath at night, and she is restless for a place to sleep.  
Her brother no longer has time for her, her mother never did.  
She sits under a peach tree, a lemonade-sand glass of a rare, budding love  
between her fingers  
her tears burn it open like acid.  
It spills out of her hands, and yet again  
she has nothing. She no longer knows how to color the dizzying gray  
and blood around her  
a place of peace.  
Those stubborn flecks of glitter under her fingernails are finally washed away by the September rain  
so she stops kissing her bruises  
and starts digging her nails in instead.  
There is a newfound wickedness in her veins  
there is a sugary ache deep between her teeth  
and she has become one of the fairytale witches she once hated so much.  
She is sorry,  
but never to herself.  
The biting taste of girlhood no longer entices her.  
She lifts her moon-like face  
to the falling rain  
and grins  
singing,  
*I AM BEAUTIFUL  
AND I BLEED SO MUCH  
AND I AM NEVER GOING TO DIE.*

**Anna Wright**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Battle High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Daniel Gammon

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

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## **Subtle Magic**

Corinna Moss had always hoped magic was real. Her wishes for it were like desperate prayers to the unyielding universe.

It was on days like this when she wished for magic the most. Dreary, misty days where the clouds covered the sky and coated the world in a thin slick of water, sending most people inside for cover. Lonely days when she was the only person around, both outside and at home. Days when she made her pilgrimage with nothing but an umbrella, a pencil behind her ear, and a worn journal tucked under her arm.

It didn't have to be much. No grand magic schools, levitation, or wizards disappearing and reappearing in a puff of smoke. No dragons, unicorns, mermaids, or elves. No, she'd be more than happy with something small. Tarot cards holding powers other than suggestion. Wind blowing through trees and playing eerie melodies with their branches. Flowers growing in places where they shouldn't. Anything that could hint that there's more the world has to offer than it seems.

The lust for adventure that defines fairytale heroes never found its way to her heart, but that didn't stop her from seeking out the unordinary and overlooked. Not to be told that she's the "chosen one" and be whisked away on some grand adventure, not to stumble across a hidden world, but to find something, anything, to give her a secret to keep between her and the world. Something to make her feel like this world was meant for her just as much as it was for everyone else. She constantly kept her eyes out for even one moment of unparalleled wonder and amazement.

And that was why, every rainy, lonely day, instead of running under the nearest awning, Corinna would grab her journal and umbrella and go out to the park just past the edge of the woods. It could hardly be called a park really, just a shelter with a single barbecue grill at the end. But the sign at the front of the path said "Hickory Park", and who was she to argue with that?

Corinna sighed, tilting her head back, and watched the shadows of tiny droplets as they hit her umbrella. She had gotten so used to the trip that her feet moved almost on their own, never slipping on the slick ground even as she moved off the road and onto the muddy path. Her gaze drifted back down, eyes seeking signs of movement now that she was surrounded by trees, not houses. After all, just because she hadn't found anything yet didn't mean she wouldn't find something now.

But today was not Corinna's day, and once again there was nothing amiss in the forest. *My forest*, she thought to herself, gazing around the thick oak and hickory trunks the park got its name from. In all her years coming here, she'd only seen other people a handful of times. It was usually people who had just moved here, often kids. They saw the sign at the entrance saying "park" and decided to give it a try. They never came back a second time. She was used to the odd looks they'd give her, to the girl who chose to come back here time and time again. She was used to all the odd looks shot her way, whether here or at school.

Her classmates whispered about her, teasing her about the odd things she said and did. They joked that her head had to be filled with nothing but moss for her to believe in magic, saying it must be where her name came from. That her honey-blond curls justified it all, being just another "dumb blonde". Every day her whole life, she'd been teased and made fun of for being weird or slow or whatever else the other kids came up with to push her out and

make her feel small.

Corinna sighed again, shaking her head to rid herself of the thoughts. Being distracted by the harsh words of teenagers who could hardly pass their classes between their gossip wouldn't help her find magic. What did they know anyway? They called her stupid for believing in magic, but they were the real dumb ones. Magic was real, she was sure of it. She may not have anything to prove it, but she trusted she would find something one day.

So she kept watch, gazing into the trees from underneath the park shelter and peacefully observing the beauty of nature. Eventually, the rain stopped, but she kept watching. Even without seeing any signs of magic, sitting there in the park, surrounded by trees and mushrooms was soothing. Listening to the wind rustle the leaves was like hearing a soft lullaby in her ears.

Now that there wasn't quite the risk of messing up the pages in the rain, she pulled out her journal and jotted down some observations. It was mostly the same stuff as always. A rainy summer day, warm although not very humid since it had just rained, and a calm breeze. The grass was still nice and green, not having been scorched by the sun quite yet. The trees were, well, trees. There's not exactly much you can notice happening to trees day by day unless it's fall and the leaves are changing colors. But she still wrote it all down. Once her ritualistic observations were finished, she flipped through the pages and reread her notes. At this point, her journal was nearly full, having spent days and days like this one out in the park keeping watch. There were so many notes in it about how the park changed and hadn't. So many days spent on this quest of hers to find magic. And there weren't just notes about how the park looked. She had sketches of anything interesting she'd seen, leaf rubbings from some of the trees, newspaper clippings about anything odd happening in her little town. Years of her life were recorded in that now bulging, worn journal.

After reading through a couple of years' worth of summer days that she'd spent here, she noticed something odd. Nowhere had she mentioned there being mushrooms before. After looking further, it seemed like she usually started noticing them somewhere around September, not late July. But when she looked out again, there they were. Little clusters of honey mushrooms around the bottoms of some of the tree trunks. The odd little early mushrooms were just the kind of lead she was looking for, and she was itching to get a closer look. She glanced up at the sky, a little worried about getting home too late. She hadn't been able to get out until the evening, so the sun was already starting to set. *But it'll be fine*, she reasoned, *I'm only going to check the mushrooms out, and I don't have to be home that soon anyway.*

She left her umbrella under the shelter, tucked her journal back under her arm, and walked out to the nearest cluster of mushrooms. They were indeed honey mushrooms, as far as she could tell, and she crouched down and sketched the little cluster on today's page. They were small, which wasn't surprising considering how early it was for mushrooms. And now that she was at the tree line, there were a lot more of them than she'd thought. Hundreds of tiny mushrooms dotted the forest floor, in clusters of around 10 stems, with a couple of clusters around the bottoms of each mushroom-attracting tree. This many mushrooms was definitely strange.

She started walking further into the forest, wanting to see how far the mushrooms spread. *This is the closest thing to magic I've seen yet*, she thought, going farther and farther in. There were so many clusters of mushrooms on this side of the forest, but when she looked across the park to the other side, she couldn't notice any. *I mean, what else could this be? Mushrooms way too early in the year and only in one section of the forest?*

Suddenly, she heard the cracking of a stick from far away. Her head whipped up, and she found herself staring straight into the eyes of a deer. A large buck with some leafy brambles caught in his antlers and lightning bugs wreathing his head. The orange and red streaks from the late dusk sunlight through the branches seemed to form a spotlight on the two of them, the girl and the deer. They stared at each other for a few moments, Corinna breathless with amazement, the deer seeming curious. Then, after a few seconds that had felt like hours to her, the deer slowly blinked, and then bounded off into the forest.

Corinna chased after it, not wanting to lose such a magical seeming beast after so long searching. Her feet pounded against the ground, carrying her swiftly over the hills, slipping on the muddy ground and crushing whatever small plants were in her path while she barely avoided collisions with bushes and trees. What else could that moment have been but magic? She wasn't paying attention to where she was going or how she would get back, she just wanted to catch up to the deer. Trees flew past and her lungs started to burn from the running, but she couldn't give up. Not

yet, not while she could still see the deer.

Suddenly, her foot caught against something -a tree root- and she came crashing down. She tumbled down the side of the hill, scraping her arms and legs against the brambles and thorns all the way down. She hit against a tree, stopping her fall, but she could feel that she'd have a bad bruise there in the morning. Her whole body hurt, her hair was a mess with twigs, leaves and thorns tangled up in it, and she was coated in mud from head to toe.

Twilight was swiftly approaching, and it dawned on her that she was lost. She had no idea where the park was now, and since it was almost dark she didn't have much time to figure it out. *Why did I do that?* She silently cursed herself for running off like that and being so impulsive. *Even if magic is real, it's not gonna help me get back home.* She didn't know what to do anymore. She was lost in the woods, hurt, and it was almost night. *Why did I think I could catch up to a deer? That was so stupid,* she thought, scolding herself again. *If this is all I have to show from chasing magic, maybe I should just give up. Maybe the kids at school were right. I don't care if the deer and mushrooms are magic or not, I wanna go home. I wanna be safe and warm with my parents. Not out here muddy and hurting at the bottom of some random hill in the middle of the forest.* Her vision got blurry as her eyes started tearing up. She tried to wipe away the tears but only smeared mud around her face from her filthy hands. She felt so helpless, just sitting there on the ground crying.

Her quiet sobs filled the air, and she hugged her scraped knees against her chest. *At least it's not that cold out* she thought to herself, trying to find some little hope to cling on to. It didn't really help much, but it was better than wallowing in self-pity. After a couple of minutes sitting there like that, she laid her head on her knees. She was still crying, but less now.

Slowly, lightning bugs started coming out, filling the air around her. They almost seemed to be dancing around, trying to get her attention. They would swoop out in front of her face and flash around her head. She blinked her tears out of her eyes and started watching them. Yet another strange thing in the forest today. Even stranger, once she started watching them they almost seemed to start making a path. No, they were definitely making a path. Lightning bugs lined up in two rows a couple feet apart, slowly flashing in sync. Trying to guide her somewhere.

Even with her faith in magic shaken and wanting to be anywhere but in the forest right then, she knew that this was something to pay attention to. She picked herself up, brushed some clumps of mud and leaves off herself, and followed the lightning bug-lined path through the woods. She didn't know if the trail was heading back to the park or leading her deeper in. But she followed it anyway, because it seemed better than just sitting there at the bottom of that hill. She walked slowly, every step hurting, aggravating her fresh scratches and bruises.

The sun sank deeper over the horizon, getting ever closer to night. After minutes of walking, the firefly trail stopped, and Corinna walked into a beautiful clearing. The moon was high in the sky, lightning bugs flashed everywhere, honey mushrooms clustered around most of the trees, lining the clearing. And amazingly, they seemed to be glowing a pale green. Her mouth fell open looking at the spectacular sight, a much more magical scene than she'd ever hoped to find.

But the most surprising thing of all was that the deer from earlier was standing in the middle, staring at her with the most intelligent looking eyes she'd ever seen. They had a wise, almost ancient look in them that she had missed before, being closer now than she was when she first saw him. She slowly approached him, afraid of scaring him off like she did earlier, but soon realized she didn't need to worry. He was perfectly calm around her now, like running off earlier wasn't because of a fear of humans but because he didn't want to be that close to the park. She was only a few feet away from him now, both of them wary but intrigued by the other.

Hesitantly, Corinna closed the distance and lifted her hand. The majestic buck turned his head away for a second, still staring at her with one of his wise old eyes, but soon relented and let her pat his nose. She stepped back again, giving the creature his space.

"Thank you," Corinna said, "for showing me this."

The buck blinked slowly and nodded his head, giving her a good view of the brambles stuck in his antlers. *Not stuck,* she thought, *but placed.* Arranged atop his head almost like a crown.

She looked around the clearing again, taking in the beautiful sights. It was better than anything she could have imagined, even in her dreams. It felt so perfect, like *this* was the place she belonged. She never wanted to leave.

And yet...

She still hurt. She was still worried about not knowing the way out. She still wanted to be warm, and safe, and *home*. But she would never find this place again.

Even though she knew it would hurt, she looked back at the deer and said, "I need to go home. I don't know how to get back and it's getting dark. Could you help me get back to the park?"

The buck looked at her for a long moment, seemingly appraising her intentions. At the end of the day, she was just a lost girl who loved magic but wanted to go home, and the deer seemed to sense that. He snorted loudly, shaking his head, and then turned his head towards the right side of the clearing. Where his nose pointed, the honey mushrooms along the edge of the clearing grew brighter, lightning bugs flashed, and another luminescent path formed.

She took a few steps towards it, then stopped and turned around, "Thank you again. For all of this."

He nodded at her again, and Corinna made her way over to the glowing pathway. Her arms and legs still hurt from her fall, but she felt better knowing she was no longer lost. As she walked down the path, the mushrooms behind her stopped glowing and the lightning bugs dispersed. With every step she took she got farther and farther from the clearing, and with it farther and farther from all the magic she had seen and experienced that day. With every step, it all felt more and more like a dream. With every step, the path and the clearing cemented in her memories, proving themselves to be real.

Before she had made it to the park it was almost completely dark. The last rays of the sun painted the horizon pale blues and grays through the trees, with most of the light coming from the nearly full moon instead. The end of the pathway was coming nearer and nearer, and she was still loath to leave it and leave her magical experience behind. But she wanted to be home. So she stepped off the path, the last of the mushrooms and lighting bugs fading away behind her, and made her way into the park.

She had never been more glad to see street lamps. Even with her scratched-up and aching limbs, she practically ran through the park and back to the road home. The magic she had seen in the forest today was amazing and she wanted to write all about it in her journal- but after she had washed all the mud and leaf litter off. She took one last glance at the forest from the park entrance. There was no way she would ever find that clearing again, but that was ok. She had found her magic. She had found that part of the world that felt custom-made for her. She finished the walk home with a warm glow in her heart after all she'd seen and learned that evening. No one would ever believe her, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't want to share something this special anyway.

**Rebecca Xue**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Jeffrey Baxter

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## **Impostor**

*Don't look into their eyes.*

The banner, which read *2019 Sunflower State Spelling Bee*, hung behind us, precariously held by strips of thin string from the ceiling. I walked up to the short microphone, one of two standing at differing heights, reminding me of the existence of hundreds of competitors sitting behind me. My name card dangled lifelessly from my neck as I braced for my next word to spell. A panel of judges stared intently at me, listening for the very moment I'd slip. And behind them a peering audience filled with students, teachers, and parents, their eyes seemingly poring over me and my every action. But I couldn't let the pressure get to me for fear that I would mistake an *s* for a *c* or *aj* for a *g*. I hadn't attained any success in the last two years and knew it was my chance to prove that I had real skill, not beginner's luck. It felt to me that the entire world was holding its breath, waiting to see what I had to show for myself. My eyes darted from corner to corner, pleading for something to anchor my faltering focus on. I settled on the cheap clock plastered on the wall opposite of me, its infinite ticking, that spared no one, a reminder that I still had to start spelling my word.

*What are you doing here?*

Drops of sweat formed on my forehead after hours under the merciless spotlight, which was probably there to lend me a sense of pride and confidence. I shuffled in my seat anxiously, uncomfortable that only four other people stayed sitting with me. A peculiar sense of loneliness washed over me as I looked over at the dwindling audience. The eyes were gone, but the attention felt just as overbearing. The burden I had felt earlier was minuscule in comparison to the sickening nausea now, knowing that victory was within arm's reach. I still wasn't quite sure how I ended up there, though. It seemed to be just good old luck. But it couldn't be beginner's luck, because, well, I wasn't a beginner anymore. So what kind of luck *was* it? My moist brows crumpled at the possibility that I wasn't really proving anything. *I was just sitting in the right spot. The boy next to me just got unlucky. It just wasn't a good day for speller 51.* Everything. Anything, except for the knowledge I knew I didn't really have. Abruptly, a harsh tone invaded the solitary sphere of my thoughts. A vacant void filled the space where a hopeful speller once stood in front of me and suddenly, it was my turn again.

*You are a fraud and nothing more.*

The pure delight emanating from my family was palpable. I had graced my way into the top two spellers of the state. But I felt helpless. I was a pilot who had lost control, barely evading sharp mountain peaks and deep river valleys by mere inches, somehow staying on my original flight path. In a few minutes, though, I'd certainly crash my plane and reveal to everyone my true incompetence. As my opponent recited each of his letters with resounding assurance, I wanted to hide deeper into the darkness of my black metal chair. He was the reigning champion, and clearly, I was no formidable opponent. With every next word I attempted to spell, I felt like a failure, each unfamiliar word a testament to my insufficient preparation. I badly wanted it to end. And so I began my next round, feet planted securely on the ground below me and mind clear of any thoughts that could have crossed it. I faced an unknown word once again, but I didn't worry. Though my parents prayed for good news, I silently hoped to hear the sound I so dearly missed. And when the bell rang, I retreated, but not with defeat.

*Is this what you wanted?*

I sat in utter tranquility for the remainder of the competition. The opponent's winning word, my handshake with him, the relieved *congratulations* from the announcer, and the restrained applause from the audience nearly went unnoticed. But it didn't. My lifelong dream to reach the National Spelling Bee was over in an instant. I had been eyeing the fruit, a soft, juicy peach, hanging from a low branch, earnestly pushing my arm in its direction. And with malevolently calculated precision, a light breeze seemed to knock it right out of reach. When my senses returned to me, the spotlight still shone, but the announcer's smile towards me was shining brighter. He turned to the audience of less than 20, and in flowery TV-show-host fashion, announced that with a recent rule change, I'd be going to Washington D.C. too. Had I heard that correctly? I used to imagine what I would feel in this exact moment. Perhaps a sense of dignity, a deep sigh of calmness, an overwhelming ecstasy. And yet, I felt none of those things. I diligently tried to concentrate on my achievement but I could only feel my heart thundering at the thought that other spellers would see me as a fraud. As if I had stolen this honor from all of them, guilt enveloped my throat like a dose of cough medicine. I was unable to rid myself of the bitter taste that remained in my mouth.

*Be grateful.*

Cameras swarmed into the auditorium, eager to capture our celebratory jumps and conceding nods. Reporters began inquiring about this and that. Despite the thousands of words logged in my mental dictionary, I could not find the right ones to describe this moment. I surveyed the audience in hopes that they weren't scrutinizing me too harshly. When my eyes made their way to the other three spellers, I despised myself even more for wallowing so pathetically in my self-pity. If I couldn't take my reward and leave with grace and composure, it would surely be an insult to them as well. I wanted to escape from the attention and pretend no one was watching. From my parents, my opponents, the audience, and the reporters, afraid that one wrong word would ruin this persona I had never meant to create.

The grinning announcer went down the row, presenting our awards. A small medal, hanging from a crimson ribbon, replaced the old name card around my neck. Photographers motioned slightly with their hands, gesturing for us to stand closer. I stepped awkwardly into my position, reluctant to remain on that stage for much longer. A countdown started: 5... 4... 3... My facade seemed to melt away with each captivated stare in the audience, but for a moment I wanted to believe that they didn't exist. Maybe, just maybe, I'd be happy that way. With a smile plastered on my face, I let my attention drift wearily to the clock on the wall across from me.

But the clock, each certain tick full of the self-assurance I lacked, reminded me of what I was wrong about. Because even if I could escape the looming eyes of the students, teachers, and parents, I could never escape myself. Without a notion of faith and self-confidence, my achievements would still mean nothing to me. I had a dream, but not belief. I never *truly* believed I could achieve something like this, and my only choice was to rationalize my success with any reason other than the fact that maybe, I actually deserved it.

On the three-hour-long car ride back home, while my family babbled excitedly about the upcoming trip to Washington DC, I sat quietly in the backseat wondering how I might piece my self-esteem back together again. I wasn't quite sure where to begin this daunting task, but I believed I could do it, and that was a start.

**Annie Zhao**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## **Lessons From the Rain**

The rain hushes the roosters' clucking as they huddle in groups within the grove. The rain roars the Yangtze River back to life. The rain feeds the newly planted baby bean sprouts.

The rain irritates my grandma, Nai Nai, because the ground turns into mud, which makes it hard for her to nurture her vegetables. So, she has to loiter inside her house, wasting her precious time that she could have spent cultivating her vegetables. Her parents passed away when she was young, leaving her no choice but to assume a "mother figure" role for her little brother. Nai Nai gave up her own education for the betterment of her little brother, learning the importance of sacrifice. Later, Nai Nai became a mother of five. For her whole life, she worked in the fields, raising chickens and tending to her farm. Even now, she never ceases to labor diligently. Never. Before the sun peeks out, Nai Nai, who is now in her 80s, pushes her tricycle filled with numerous plucked vegetables up the cement hill, beginning her two-mile bike ride to the market.

The rain irritates my dad as well. When it rains on the only day he's home from work, he isn't able to mow the lawn or play soccer. Like Nai Nai, my dad, Baba, never stops working. Often, he retells the story of his sole dream to leave the cows and vegetables in his hometown. To achieve that, he had to excel in the Chinese education system. So, he devoted all of his energy to studying unceasingly. Finally, he achieved a score he needed on the college entrance exam to get into medical college. In his town, he was one of the few high schoolers able to get into college. But even that wasn't enough to satisfy his thirst. A new dream appeared: the American Dream. So, my dad, along with my mom, worked and worked to immigrate to a new country and settle into a home where they could fulfill their dream: a beautiful life with their future children.

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Unlike my father and grandmother, I find beauty and comfort in the rain. It's the rain that lulls me to sleep. It's the rain that soothes my brain after I smell its earthly essence.

However, it was also on a gloomy, rainy day in elementary school when I found out I was "different."

"What is that?" my classmates asked.

"Dumplings," I responded, smiling and hoping they might want to try some.

"It smells so weird," they giggled, running away.

After they spoke, I didn't touch a single dumpling. My appetite was lost, and I swore to never again bring homemade food to school. From then on, I drank from overly sweet chocolate milk and ate the stale lunch food with pride, but also guilt. Whenever my mom offered to pack my lunch with leftovers, I refused, with a lame excuse that there were no microwaves to heat up food, although a row of them lined the side of the cafeteria.

On another day in elementary school when dull clouds engulfed the sun, casting dark shadows over the ground, my class was doing time table tests. When I finished my sheet first, I heard snickers, and when I went up to the bulletin board to record how much I'd improved from the last test, I heard even more exaggerated sighs. My teacher then announced my name as one of the people who had exceeded their previous scores.



Some of my classmates asked me why I even bothered to study.

I studied because I wanted to. But they told me that I didn't need to because I was "Asian"; getting good grades came "naturally" to us. So, were all the practice worksheets I'd completed at home futile for my progress?

I sat in confining silence. Even when the teacher switched to reading, the other kids' voices echoed in my head.

Stereotypes are etched into our brains, and our eyes perceive others with prejudice and hostility. The model minority myth of "All Asians are smart" is tattooed on my head, as I cast aside my achievements as things I'm expected to do. Does my culture define who I am? Does my culture dictate what I should get on a test? It's true for me that my parents have a dream for what future I chase. It's true that they want me to try my best in high school. I also want to make them happy and proud for they have sacrificed far too much for me to repay.

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Unfortunately, I haven't always been able to live up to their sacrifices. On a bleak Friday several months ago, I flunked a math test. Raindrops fell gently as I sat in my friend's car on the way back home, nodding unconsciously to whatever they said. At home, reloading my grades every few seconds, I finally saw the red alert button for a new notification: 62%. *This grade is not okay for me.* My world ended at that moment, and for the next few weeks, I'd find myself lying on the floor of my bedroom mindlessly scrolling through YouTube.

High school made me a workaholic. The grind will never stop until I get into a college I like. If I don't stand out among my peers, I won't get into college. My parents remind me that grades are important, and I morph into the "no pain, no gain" mindset, the never failing or else. But what I desired differed with my reality as I faltered again and again. The tightrope I'm on is fraying.

When I break, I retreat into a deep cave within myself. Guilt builds up in thunderstorm clouds and is released as downpours once in a week, or sometimes more than once each day. Downpours make me lose my breath. I go lightheaded, reminding myself how to breathe while tears stream down my cheeks. *One, T- One, Two, Three Hold. Breathe out- out- out-* Thunderstorms within me repeat until the semester is over. Before I learn how to catch my breath, a new semester begins.

I hear the stories of other Asians who got perfect ACTs and got into Ivy League schools and the straight-A students who are also on a varsity sports team. Yet, I lie in bed awake at night pondering about my unknown future. *Who am I? I don't do anything. I'm not successful.* The more and more my brain lists out my qualities and compares them to others', the more and more I spiral out of control. My eyebags are evidence of my procrastination. My nail biting gets worse. *I should know how to control myself.* The sacrifices my Nai Nai made for my dad. The sacrifices my dad made for me. But, what sacrifices did I even make? I don't work hard enough, I don't manage my time well, and I don't do what I'm supposed to do.

One night after a breakdown, a quiet memory arose. Many years ago, it had been a scorching hot summer day, and worse, the AC had been broken. Thus, Nai Nai had pried open all the windows and had brought out the electric fans to cool me and my newly born brother. The crickets chirped in unison as the sun baked their hard shells. The heat waves spread like wildfire through the windows and onto my skin. It was supposed to be our nap time, but I cried and threw my arms in protest against the heat.

"Shhh," Nai Nai whispered, rocking me in her arms.

"I don't want to sleep!" I'd objected.

The two fans that faced my brother, who was already fast asleep on the towels, had continued to hum. The rocking had persisted, and my arms grew lax. Murmuring that everything would be okay, Nai Nai slowly pushed back my hair, which was soaked with sweat and tears. Even though she had probably been equally as worn out and miserably hot, Nai Nai had made sure we were fast asleep before worrying about herself. In every situation, Nai Nai never fails to put others first.

When I awakened to the morning birds, the soothing touch of Nai Nai's hand lingered upon me.

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Thunderstorms didn't stop abruptly, but they started to come less frequently. Rays of sunshine emerged through cracks in the murky clouds. A beam of light started to warm my frozen mindset of never stopping to rest. Thus, in high school, the emphasis on my mental health has been the starting point of my awareness. I wasn't doing well and I admitted it to myself – a huge improvement. I began to prioritize what I needed to do to become a stable person.

Crying every day became crying every week, then every month.

As the sunlight slowly appeared, finals season approached with a schedule jam-packed with tests. The end seemed closer than ever, but now, the road was hazy. I fell back into my old routine of grinding for finals, lessening my wellbeing. One day while I was putting off studying for my first exam, I heard a sharp knock on the door.

"You can come in," I said instinctively.

My dad entered the room holding a plate of freshly cut up apples and a fork. He took one look at my chaotic table filled with old worksheets and stationery and couldn't decide where to place the food. I moved papers around to create an opening for my favorite fruit. Delicately, my dad set the plate and fork down as if not to disturb my architectural mess of pencils and papers.

"Keep up the good work. This is all for yourself!" he said, patting me on the back.

Responding with a quick thank you before the door closed, I was struck with a thought. *For myself*, I thought. *I'm doing this all for myself*. The hours of studying and restless nights were for myself. The grades I achieved weren't for colleges to nod in approval or for my parents to smile, it was for myself.

I learned when to stop and when to take breaks. I learned how not to define myself by numbers on a test. My life shouldn't be controlled by words spewed out of others' mouths. My life isn't controlled by preconceived ideas of my culture. To jump off the running hamster wheel was a step for me to gain authority over my life. I will turn my blood, sweat, and tears into growth. I need to turn my pain into progress.

So, I will clear the thunderstorms that once drenched me. Taking these ideas into the exam season, I was finally able to complete it.

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Now, the thunderstorms have retreated and give way to a cloudy blue sky. I collect my clouds of thoughts and emotions in order to decipher them.

Petrichor emanating from our lawn revitalizes my soul as I lean back on our tarnishing green porch bench. The pitter-patter of rain hushes my bombarding thoughts. Although Nai Nai and my dad wouldn't savor this scenery as much as I do, they find similar comfort in their own environments. The backyard fields that Nai Nai sows and the hospital rooms that my dad works in give them their invigorating moments.

So, in thanks for all that Nai Nai and my dad have given me, I hope to one day give an ounce of it back to the world.

**Meifan Zhu**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Thomas Jefferson School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Myra Miller

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## **The grasses became very green yesterday in Saint Louis**

The grass became very green yesterday in Saint Louis. I heard wind swirling as fierce tappings of rain landed restlessly; the next day, I threw open the door, and it all grew until the fields were carpeted in verdure. I ran outside with a bunch of idiots like me. We jumped for hours in the meadow just to listen to the sound of grass drinking ponds of leftover rain. It's a gentle sound, the roots absorbing nutrition. Every time I landed, my knees bent as if I were sinking until I was covered in thick wet soil. Then, all I could feel was the warmth of the roots covering my fingertips when in fact it was nothing more than another idiot's sweating hand.

We can do such things because it is spring break and we live without adults making demands. All we do is talk, eat, and scarcely sleep. We go to museums and run down the road outside our campus. It's a long road, long enough to be straight and never allow us to see the end of it. We usually take off during the evening hours, since we need to get some sleep after the long "constructive" complaint seminars overnight. For us, breakfast is not a thing, and neither is dinner. Bread with butter or some Chinese take-out food suffices. It's because we never really get *hungry*. We feel hungry all the time for *other* things. So, we are always going down the road, walking slowly until one of us starts chasing another. Then, all of a sudden, everyone starts racing like headless chickens.

See?

I told you we are idiots.

I figure we love running down the road so much because we are simply curious about where it ends. Maybe we are simply comfortable. We are students, after all, but we are also vagrants, roaming the States, eagerly searching for things resembling home. That is, we used to search for resemblance until we realized from our "seminars" that our purpose here has nothing to do with what we are familiar with, nothing to do with the dear accents of Chinese or familiar chophouses. We often talk about our destination. "I hope it's not KFC, FedEx trucks, or some land racing exercise in the West." We laugh hard. Because, in the end, we only laugh or cry. We only cry for loved ones, not for uncertainty or the future. If you really want to know why, it's because we get to live through the future, but we may lose loved ones.

One day, we ran too far down the road. Across the river, the fierce wind blew right into our faces. Even when night fell upon us, we did not stop. So, we reached the end of the road. It was an unexpected end. Nothing impressive, just a turn. But we could see the field of plants bending in the wind. We could hear the sound of leaves flying beside our ears. One of us had a match. We always have matches, not to be destructive but to be prepared for darkness.

This time, it was different. I looked into their eyes. In each of them, I saw the same intention. Our veins were beating.

"Why don't we burn it down."

"We should."

"Aye."

We are idiots. We are angry idiots who had learned that our destination was simply a turn. But we ended up leaving. It was a beautiful field, though grotesque in the darkness. Maybe we simply wished to leave it as a useless yet beautiful place.

That night, we stayed in a nearby motel and discussed emotionally how we needed to work so much harder just to show that we were capable of entering schools that native students were easily accepted into. We mocked how the States, so "equal" and "inclusive", still judged us by race. We understood the policies, but we did not bring them up. Two hours past midnight, and all of us were drunk on the moon. We went on with dimmed eyes and sober voices. Later, all the idiots fell asleep. I stayed awake as the sun was extracting itself from the plains and mountains. The dewdrops, the softness, and the slippery pebbles lured me, but I sat still. The time was so distinct, so strange, that I forgot who I was. It turned out that I was only a girl who was tired of the distance from home, a girl haunted by her future who stayed in a cheap, unknown room filled with misplaced furniture and the odor of wet wood, a girl who

listened to the sound of steam and the chirping of birds and the high steps and the sad noises. I looked outside the window and wondered who I really was. For 13 lonesome seconds, I could find no answer. "I am a total stranger," I thought, "detached from the floor I'm sitting on, from the room I'm in, from the world I inhabit," But it was only half a second before I saw the idiots sleeping on the floor, snoring like cows.

I cried that night. Not because of the future, but because of my loved ones. I knew, that to tell the story of these idiots, narratives are almost always absent, it's only dialogue, and it's only *them* who fill the page with ink.

We are all physically trapped in this room, behind the fence, and in the eyes of adults who have "experienced" our age before. We know we are burning way too much. We are burning the room to ashes, burning holes into fences with our thoughts and words. No place comforts us, so there is nowhere to stay. We have to keep packing our suitcases and piling them on the sidewalks, waiting for the next bus to arrive, no matter which direction it's driving.

I looked at them again. Idiots like us never slept in order, not parallel to each other nor vertically. We slept on top of each other, feet sticking in one another's faces, legs on one another's throat, faces buried in one another's back.

Their chests moved up and down with heavy poetry collections on their stomachs.

I knew the idiots I was with were special. We lived together, madly, acted madly, talked madly. Madly waited for opportunities, madly waited to be redeemed. We never yawned or grew tired. Never spoke one vulgar word. All we did was swallow the most fervent verses from Keats or Blake and say them to people worthy of their beauty. We could wait, like a night breeze blowing across halcyon fields, across acres of plantations, oceans, and the starry sky. But when we were tired of waiting, all we did was burn, burn, burn. We burned like maniacs, like flames touching chemicals and exploding as if spiders were flying across the moon.

The grass became very green yesterday in Saint Louis, a place located in east-central Missouri, bordered by the Mississippi River to the east, the Missouri River to the north, and the Meramec River to the south. During spring break, there are always beautiful sunsets and a bunch of idiots running down the road.

By the way, if you wish to know. The things that grew in the field were roses. We learned this when the break was over and I became a day student. When all of us were embedded in lives of bread and butter, it's a great comfort to learn that we once had the chance to see such beautiful roses burn.

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Category: Flash Fiction

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## Caught

Caught

There she sat, in the holding cell, contemplating why she listened to him, why she betrayed her whole family just because a guy got in her head. Just because he said she wasn't appreciated. Just for some freedom from her father because he thought she needed it.

Before that, they were riding in a police car, silent. She couldn't believe they were caught. She couldn't believe their plan didn't work. She couldn't believe he wasn't trying to get them out of this. She couldn't believe it.

Before that, there were sirens outside of the cabin flashing everywhere. Blue and red lights pierced the pitch black, night sky. They couldn't escape. Police broke down their door. Handcuffed them, like criminals. But were they criminals? She just wanted an escape from the man that constantly hit her. Constantly belittled her. Constantly stifled her freedom.

Before that, they fell asleep almost instantly after taking care of everything. Satisfied and relieved, they were sleeping soundly until he heard leaves brushing and sticks breaking in the forest. Someone had followed them, he knew it. He knew they had to leave, but it was too late.

Before that, they pulled up to the discreet, distant cabin in the woods. She rushed to open the cabin and hide; he rushed to haul the body out of the trunk and find the perfect place to bury the body. He found a secluded dirt patch behind some rocks. *Perfect*, he thought.

Before that, they were speeding away from her house, engine revving, driving in the dead of night to a cabin 100 miles away, in the middle of nowhere. Not a single soul on the streets that night, almost as if the city was prepared for what had just happened.

Before that, they were stuffing her father's body in a trash bag and then into the trunk of his car. Bones shattered with every movement, every corner the body hit.

Before that, her father lay dead on the floor. Blood pooled under his corpse, pouring out of his cold, lifeless body like a waterfall.

Before that, 5 gunshots went off. 2 seconds between each boom. No more, no less. The neighbors could hear what was happening, but they chose not to say a word; they knew the consequences.

Before that, he snuck into her house. He knocked 3 times on her bedroom door. *Knock knock knock*. They walked hand in hand to her father's room. A shotgun in his other hand, fully loaded, ready to commit the unspeakable act. Before that, he was at the nearest general store, buying the cheapest gun he could find. He only had \$30; just enough to do what he needed to do. For her.

Before that, they were FaceTiming, planning the night. Planning what they would do to her father. Planning the escape. Planning.

Before that, it was a chilly, autumn night.