

Rat Queen
by Skylar J. Beirne

based on the performance art concept by Lilian Boyd

To Lilian, Dan, Austin, and Jay—

Thank you for inspiring me, and for making my time in NYC memorable.

In our modern-day New York City, dilapidated and succumbed to crime against crime, we worship the Almighty Rat Queen, as she is sat atop her throne on the crumbling Empire State Building. The rich above us, suspended in the smoggy clouds that kiss the tips of skyscraper heights, must look down and laugh at our plights. Their Brat City is bright, shining, and it's rumored that the streetlights are made of blood diamonds. But I've never been up there, nor has anyone I've known. Well, there was Bunny, but she was in the first wave of the bourgeoisie that moved sky-high. I can't even say I really knew her, even though I'd like to think I did. But, I didn't. No, not really.

Writing this is a dangerous game. Rat Queen outlawed writing about the happenings here when she first took control of The City. Yes, of course, we still have fiction, and we have stories of old that illuminate thought in the neon nights of the city, but to clue the outside world into what's happening here in New York City is more than frowned upon. The Rationals would certainly take me to a dunk tank if they knew what I was doing, and no one comes back from a dunk tank the same as they went in.

I know this one guy – I'll omit his name for his safety, he certainly doesn't need another stint in the dunk tank – who went to the dunk tank for possessions of fine gems – rubies, to be exact – and came out a ghoul of his former self. Once a vibrant, cheerful bagel shop owner, he returned from the dunk tank washed-up and glassed-over. His once plump stomach was sucked thin and concaved, and he spoke in a manner that could only be described as Spock-like. Not that he spoke of anything that happened in the dunk tank, no one does. I think whatever happens there must be so bad that it scares them to silence.

It's a shock I haven't been dunked, honestly. With the performance art I put on, I should be a shoe-in for the dunk tank, or at least an arrest by The Rationals. I don't know, I think they find me amusing. I'm sure if Rat Queen could see, she'd find me amusing, too. I don't think she cares if I poke fun towards her, I just think she likes people talking about her.

Rat Queen's public appearances are few and far between – twice yearly, to be exact. In June, she appears in Washington Square Park, and once again baptizes herself in the fountain, like she did on her inauguration, to celebrate Liberation Day, the day she and The Rationals took control of The City. I've been to every baptism, as Washington Square Park is where I usually perform my mockery of her. I wouldn't dare do it on Liberation Day, though. See, not everyone hates Rat Queen. They think she has done some good for the city. Violent crime is down, as violent crime is handled with violent crime at the paws of The Rationals, or by extended stays in a dunk tank. The birth rate is up, but overpopulation is down, as well as homelessness. We know what happens to the babies, but we're not quite sure what happens to those who are houseless here. Rumors circulate that Rat Queen sells them into servitude up in Brat City. It wouldn't shock me if she was in some sort of cahoots with Sky Daddy. I don't think she is the single-entity totalitarian ruler she makes herself out to be. There's no way, not with the abolishment of city

taxes. Well, yes it's true, we don't shell out money to live here anymore, but we pay our dues in other ways.

My friend Jeremy, who tends bar in my neighborhood, has a theory about Rat Queen that I absolutely love. Jeremy theorizes, and can get away with saying this since he has control of the liquor rations for the entire West Village, that Rat Queen is a group of cannibalistic business men in a giant rat suit. They control Rat Queen through internal organizational mechanisms, like levers and pulleys and what have you. These cannibalistic business men were sent by The Outside to control New York City, as we were gaining too much power in the war, becoming too omnipresent in the media, and essentially shaping up to either win the war or secede from the country entirely anyways. So, they forced the section, and put three or four or maybe five cannibalistic business men into a giant rat suit and said, *okay, go to town*. I guess the trade-off for them is the cannibalism part; baby boys will have to suffice, though it seems to me girls would be more tender. I don't know for experience, though. Hell, what do I know anyways? I feel like everything I've written so far is just dribble. I feel like I'm trying too hard to sound smart, or at the very least interesting. But that's not what I'm writing this for. I'm writing this for you all to understand what's been happening here. Or, maybe I'm just selfish, and writing for myself, so that someone can remember me and my stories.

Of course, Jeremy can say all of that because he has power, and power is the real currency of New York City now. With a subsidized subway system and an affordable housing act – which I can touch upon at a later time because, like I said, nothing is really free in New York City under the Rat Queen regime – power is the rich man's game. Jeremy is definitely rich in power, though he often forgets it. When he was appointed Head of Liquor Supply for the West Village, we knew we'd lost a good one to the power game. But, that's Rat Queen. She likes games.

Jeremy is still cool, despite being a governmental puppet. He still winks at pretty girls from across the bar, which there are many of, but shies away at their advances. Happily married to a woman twenty-six years his junior, I guess Jeremy is supposedly winning at life, the best he can here, at least.

I get sad for him sometimes. He talks about his family in Connecticut, and how he wishes he could move to a nice house by the sea to raise his unborn child. They're nervous about that, obviously. They're hoping it's a girl.

He laments that growing up by the sea might have been the best time of his life. He remembers a long-ish life before the war, and growing up in suburbia with forsythias in the spring, catamarans in the summer, apple cider donuts from the farmer's market in the fall, and warm winters by the fireplace. His parents are still alive and well, or, at least they were before the war, and if they are alive, I'm sure they miss him. Who wouldn't? Jeremy is a great guy. But, I'm also sure that they don't know whether he's dead or alive, as no one from The Outside really knows if anyone here is. Rat Queen cut off communication to The Outside during the second

year of her reign. There was too much misinformation on her, which feels hypocritical, considering how much she loves being discussed.

Jeremy's wife, Sara, is nice. She was a bit of a party girl in her prime, but seems to be satisfied with her two-bedroom in the East Village, Jeremy, a cat, and a baby on the way. If I'm being honest, I think she's let herself go a bit. Not in terms of looks – no, her fierce amber eyes are enough to send anyone down an attraction spiral – but in terms of her livelihood. See, we went to college together, and she was set to graduate just as the war began. She never did, not like there's an option now. I was amazed by her. She was a prolific playwright, and likely would have made some of the most important theatre of this century had she continued pursuing it. She wrote these spectacular, violent, lucious plays, stringing words together like pearls on a wire, creating masterpieces. She doesn't anymore. She also doesn't party anymore. I once saw Sara make Arnold Kratz swoon at a club in Brooklyn, back when Brooklyn was a thing. She had on this sheer black top that wasn't hiding much, and she sauntered over to his table and asked him for a dance. He obliged, and within minutes, he was putty in her hand. He gave her two-thousand dollars just for existing that night. I was in awe.

We were friends, Sara and I. We still are, in a way. Now, instead of her inviting me to dance in a cocaine frenzy deep in the darkness and neon, she invites me over for baked chicken dinners and sips of cranberry juice mocktails.

She and Jeremy are a good fit, despite the age difference. It would never have worked out with us, anyway, especially not with Bunny lingering on my mind, and Elba beginning to weasel her way into my life.

Rat Queen's other yearly appearance happens every New Year's Eve. There's no ball drop anymore. No, Rat Queen is too narcissistic for that. Instead, she ascends from her underground sewer system that connects her to the entire city, and climbs to the top of where that bright ball used to be. She sticks her nose to the sky and lets out a shriek so wonderfully loud, and everyone watching the masquerade does the same. That's how New York City has rung in the New Year ever since The Liberation. Unfortunately for Rat Queen, she will see mere seconds of this new year, as I am going to assassinate her in Times Square for everyone to see.

It's Christmas Eve now, and Elba needs help getting out of the bath. We agreed not to buy presents for each other this year, but I know she bought me one, and I did for her. What I didn't tell her is that I wouldn't need anything come New Year's, since I don't expect to live after what I plan to do. The dunk tank would be too good for me after the assassination of Rat Queen.

No one knows what I plan on doing, and I don't plan on informing them. That being said, I have a lot to get off my chest before my undertaking. So, consider this my final will and testament, my final confession, and everything I need to say before I die.

Elba had been stalking me for months before we met. She lived in my old neighborhood in East Harlem, and would wait for me after class at the 116th Street subway stop. She would walk behind me, at a balanced pace to 118th Street and 2nd avenue, where my three bedroom apartment and two roommates and I perched atop a five-floor walk-up. One time, Elba got so bold as to come inside the building behind me. I stopped at my mailbox, not really expecting any mail, but out of habit nonetheless. The second door of the building entrance was locked, so Elba was trapped in small quarters with me. I could feel her staring, so I prodded, “Can I help you?”

Elba apparently panicked at this moment and said, “Oh! Sorry! I live here, but I lost my keys to the building. My roommate is home to let me into our unit, but I just need to get in the building.”

I believed her. This wasn’t uncommon. In fact, I had done it myself, and had to scale my fire escape more than once to break into my own apartment, having forgotten my keys on the kitchen counter. I let her in, and she followed me up a few flights. She stopped on the third floor, and said, “thank you,” as I continued walking up the stairs, thinking nothing of it.

It’s not that I thought Elba was unattractive, but I had Bunny on my mind and Sara in my sheets, so she wasn’t a priority. So, she didn’t really strike me, upon first impressions, that is.

Apparently, Elba waited until I was a flight or so away, before following me up to my floor, and clocking what unit I lived in – 5E, for the record.

This is when Elba got bold. Over the course of a few months, she had somehow befriended the girls in 3C, and they offered her an extended stay on their couch, and if one of them were to move out, she would have a permanent room. All three of them, yes, Elba included, were budding models, just around nineteen-years-old. What these two girls, whose names escape me now, didn’t know, was that Elba came from a wealthy family in California, and was situated with her own studio apartment on 5th Avenue. Elba knew that I, an air-mattress-sleeping Texan with little-to-no money at any time, would not be able to relate to her, so she needed to relate to me. So, a couch surfer she became, and she tried her hand at modeling, as that is what she had set to The City to do. Tall and slender, she didn’t have much issue finding representation and garnering a team behind her to make her model dreams come true. There was just one issue – her real passion was me, and it reflected in her lack of booked work.

Elba and I really met in the autumn before the war. Halloween was always a spectacular feat of drunken debauchery in New York City, and even with political tensions rising, we New Yorkers were determined to let ourselves party in elaborate disguises, forgetting ourselves and our problems for a night of hopeful fun, hopeful sex, and hopeful playful regrets. My regret seemed to be set in stone already – Sara had sworn herself to celibacy against me, but I was determined to once again charm her into bed, which wasn’t very hard at that time. Elba had other plans.

Elba and her two roommates resolved to throw a banger of a Halloween party, and decked their apartment in cotton cobwebs and low, orange lighting. I had seen Elba coming and going in the building a few times by now (a well-executed strategy on her part), but she actually asked one of my roommates, Carl, if we would like to join in the fun. Carl consulted with us, and we decided that the commute from 3C to 5E was much shorter than that for any other plan that was percolating, so we decided to go. Besides, a new party meant new people to meet, which meant new pussy, for Carl and Joe, at least. I was still resolved that Sara would be in my bed by the end of the night. Or, maybe Bunny, if I was so lucky. Again, Elba had other plans.

Halloween night rained like a monsoon, and costumes arrived dripping with hot raindrops, and it somehow added to the charm of the night. We three dry, strapping young men from 5E arrived in our respective, haphazard costumes, and gave lingering knocks on the 3C door. A pirate answered, and we were admitted into a frenzy of blossoming models and friends from back home who had come in for a visit. Sara was growing impatient, as she thought I would be at a party downtown, but high above the streets of East Harlem, I grabbed a bottle of bodega beer, and sat myself next to a sexy cat and began my descent into drunkenness. I was planning on Sara's annoyance catapulting her uptown, but the night was still young.

Elba clocked me as soon as I walked into her apartment. She waited in the shadows a while before striking, performing an elaborate dance of host duties, batting eyelashes in my unsuspecting direction in hopes that I'd look her way, and stop sharing my vape with the sexy cat next to me.

She saw her chance as my beer was dwindling in volume; she approached with a bottle of vodka.

"You look like you need a refill," she said. I looked up to see a tall, slender vampire in a tight, black, little thing gently oscillating a bottle of vodka in her right hand. Damn right I did.

Elba led me to the butcher's block that served as a kitchen table, and out appeared two plastic shot glasses. Vodka for me, vodka for her, a quick toast and even briefer eye contact, and we had formed a party bond which would remain unbroken for the remainder of the night and, I suppose, for the rest of my known life.

It's Christmas Day. Elba and I exchanged gifts. She got me a personalized pen, a rather nice pen. I like pens, and I'm very particular about the kind I use, so it was actually a very thoughtful gift. I got her a necklace made of tarnish-proof metal, so she can wear it in the bath.

Sara and Jeremy invited us over for Christmas dinner, just the four of us, which was nice. It's nice to know that the concept of family still exists here, even if we're connected by bile rather than blood. We resolved to go, but Elba decided to stay in the bath. Her illness confines her to the tub most of the time, and we're not sure what she's going to turn into yet. My bet is some sort of fish, but hopefully not a shark, as that would be difficult to take care of, and rather dangerous if you ask me. People's minds change along with their bodies, and seeing Elba turn into something so blood-thirsty would surely break my heart. Elba thinks she'll be a frog, which I think would be nice. I could make her a comfortable terrarium, and there's no shortage of

insects floating around the city. She might even be the solution to our cockroach problem, if she were to become a frog, that is.

Elba insisted that I go to Jeremy and Sara's for dinner, and to bring her back something yummy. I feel bad leaving her alone, but I think she likes it. I think she prefers it. I think she's embarrassed about her transformation, and I can't blame her for that. It's hard to undergo change, especially to your own body. I have to respect her request for solitude. Or, maybe she's embarrassed about the livestreaming. Actually, I think that's more likely. I think she'd rather have me not see her perform her social media duties, which is her literal job, so I don't think there's anything to be embarrassed about. I'm not sure. There's still a lot of Elba that's a mystery to me.

I made my way across town to Sara and Jeremy's place. It was a quiet walk, not many people were out on the streets. It was cold, gray, and windy. It reminded me of before the war. The week between Christmas and New Years was always my favorite in The City – everyone had boarded their various modes of transportation to visit family on The Outside, and The City would fall into a quiet, wintery lull. There was always a promise of newness in that week, as New Year's approached and reinvention was on the mind. I stopped making New Year's resolutions long before the war, but I never stopped enjoying the potential for the new. However, these days nothing ever changes. Except Elba. Yes, she is changing.

Sara and Jeremy live on the first floor of their apartment building, and have a reasonably-sized backyard, by City standards. It'll be a good place for their child to grow up, as long as it's a girl. I buzzed their apartment number, and walked into the building. Sara greeted me at the front door, with a gentle smile on her face, and a pregnant belly finally beginning to show.

"Look at you!" I exclaimed. I hadn't seen Sara in a while, and hadn't yet seen her stomach in person. It brought tears to my eyes, and she scolded me for crying, as it would make her cry, too. We embraced. Sara is warm, soft, and smells like sweet lotion. She's always been that way.

"I don't like perfume," she once told me, "It's too fleeting." Part of Sara's charm came from her self-upkeep, and a big part of that was her smell. She always smelt good – floral, cherry, patchouli, it didn't matter, it was all good. She was good at sourcing lotions, too. Back in college, in an attempt to seduce one of her professors, Sara uncovered that his favorite scents were jasmine and musty books, and somehow found a lotion that smelt exactly of those two elements. The seduction failed, but she still smelled good.

I entered their apartment, a very Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young scene, one that I used to sometimes think Sara and I would have had together, and Jeremy welcomed me with a back-patting hug and a kiss on the cheek, like he always did. I was then greeted by the smells of ham and fresh-baked pie, and then finally by their fuzzy gray cat, Top-Shelf Bourbon. Yes, their cat's full name is Top-Shelf Bourbon, Topsy for short. Topsy sniffed at my pants and let me give her a quick scratch on the head, before jumping up on the couch, and curling in a tight circle.

“Would you like something to drink?” Jeremy asked me as he walked into the kitchen. I followed, and asked about his options. One thing about Jeremy is that he’s well-connected in his industry. Before the war, he traveled all over the world, and established an advanced palette for cuisine and beverage. His beverage options in the house were extensive and impressive, and I, a simpleton in comparison, let Jeremy decide for me.

“You have to try this tequila, it’s like liquid gold.” He poured me a small glass from an unmarked bottle. Apparently, he had gotten it from a friend with connections in Mexico. It was a birthday gift, and a delicious one at that.

I suddenly became astutely aware that I had not brought any sort of host-gift. Sara shushed me immediately as I said this. “When have you ever brought a host-gift? You’re family.”

That was Sara, reassuring in the most violent way, and I loved her for it.

“What’s your name?” asked Elba on that night of the Halloween party, though she already knew. I told her, and she smiled. “I’m Elba.” Out of Southern custom, I shook her hand. She took it with clammy palms. It was the first time we touched, and I felt little to nothing, while Elba felt the typical display of fireworks and butterflies that people tend to feel in moments like these. Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe it was the later promise of Sara, but I really wasn’t interested. However, Elba had no plans of letting me go now that she had wrapped her cold fingers around mine.

“I like your costume,” she said, “I love Queen.”

“Did you see my arm?”

“No,” said Elba, as she placed her hand on my unmarked forearm. She looked intently at it, examining me for imperfections that she would eventually find. Just not that night.

I shifted my other arm in her direction. Up the arm, starting by my wrist, was written the word *retrograde* in black Sharpie. The Sharpie was a dumb idea, it didn’t come off for a week. “I’m Freddie Mercury in Retrograde,” I explained. Elba laughed, and maybe I did start to feel some potential there. She did, and still does, have an infectious laugh.

I couldn’t take credit for the costume that elicited the laugh. Sara had come up with it. In fact, I think part of the reason that she wouldn’t meet with me was because we were in the same costume. She had gone with “I Want To Break Free,” and I went with Live Aid, but in essence, we were in the same costume, a costume that she had come up with. Maybe it was due to the costumes, or maybe it was because Mercury was actually in retrograde, and Sara paid attention to that kind of stuff.

“That’s funny,” said Elba. “I don’t believe in all that stuff, but I like the idea.”

Instead of explaining away my stolen costume to the new pair of green eyes I was just beginning to notice spots of gold in, I said, “Thank you.” Maybe it wasn’t so bad that Sara wasn’t here.

One of Elba’s roommates came up behind us and drunkenly swung her arms around the two of us. She attempted to whisper something in Elba’s ear, but I could hear it: “Is this the guy you’re obsessed with?”

Elba turned bright red, and made frightened eye contact with me. I gave a sheepish chuckle, and Elba ran away. The roommate turned to me and shrugged, not quite realizing the damage she had just caused.

Dinner was excellent at Sara and Jeremy's house. Sara can hold her own with cooking, but Jeremy is the real wizard. The ham was moist, the potatoes whipped to perfection, and the fresh-baked rolls soft and warm. I was full, but looking forward to the pie that was scheduled for the next course.

Sara pulled me to the side between dinner and desert, under the guise of needing help with the dishes. She washed, I dried, she pried.

"What's wrong?" asked Sara. I have to admit, her new-found motherly instincts got on my nerves. She was always perceptive, but now it comes with a consistent concern and mild patronizing. The fact is, nothing was wrong, but I had been thinking about how I would carry out the assassination over dinner, and Sara could tell.

"Nothing is wrong," I said.

"I know that's not true. Is it Elba? I'm sorry she couldn't be with us tonight. I should've offered to come to you, but we already had all this food." Sara kept on with her neurotic apologizing, but I began drowning it out, considering whether or not I should tell her. Sara might be one of my oldest friends at this point, which I guess speaks volumes about my friend retention rate, but still. Sara had never given up on me. Between trysts and tirades, Sara was always there.

"I am worried about Elba, but..." I trailed off. I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to implicate Sara in my actions. There would surely be questioning after the assassination. One of the last things I needed post-mortem would be for Sara to endure a dunk tank, especially while pregnant. Hell, The Rationals might even make an exception if it's a girl. Though, there would be no Rat Queen to feed upon the precious flesh.

Sara pressed on with her eyes, looking intently and questioningly at me, with a small hint of anger behind the amber.

"I have a performance art piece coming up. I don't know if I'm ready for it."

Sara seemed to breathe a slight sigh of relief. I can't say I blame her, I've gotten myself into a good deal of mischief in the time I've known Sara. I'm sure a few of the grays in her cropped hair came from worrying about me. Sometimes I can't tell if Sara is my sister, my mother, or the love of my life.

"Oh, okay. I'm sure you're ready. When is it? I'd like to come." A few years ago, Sara might've pressed on. I don't think she believed me entirely. But, I think she knows she has bigger things to worry about now. That thought makes me somewhat sad. I miss the days when I was Sara's biggest worry.

"Friday."

"The fountain?"

"Yes."

Sara nodded and dropped it. Jeremy called from the other room, "Are we ready for pie?"

A while later, I resolved to have a cigarette, a bad pre-war habit, but something I enjoyed back then nonetheless. I asked where I could find the nearest fire escape, and the back room was the answer. I opened the door and found a crying Elba perched on the bed, hiding from the Halloween party, and likely me. At that moment, I knew that the next decision would determine the rest of my night. I could turn away, shut the door, and leave Elba to cry in the dim lamp-lit room. I could take myself and my cigarette upstairs, and sit on my own fire escape, and have an early-ish night without too much of a hangover. I made the other decision.

“Hey,” I said shyly.

“Hey,” said Elba through tears.

I motioned toward the bed, and Elba scooted over. I sat and picked at my nail beds for a second. “So, I think it would be pretty hard to be obsessed with me after only seeing me a few times. That feels like an exaggeration,” I said.

Elba chuckled slightly, and wiped at her face. I noticed her vampire teeth were placed on the bed. I pulled out of my pack of cigarettes. “Do you smoke?”

Elba shook her head.

“May I?”

Elba motioned to the window. I opened it, and began climbing out. Elba grabbed my arm.

“I think you’re really cute. That’s all.”

“Do you want to come out here with me?” I asked.

Elba smiled and nodded. I shimmied myself the rest of the way through the open window, and Elba followed. That night, we climbed up to the roof and stayed there until sunrise. We talked, and as the sun breached over The City skyline, Elba kissed me on the cheek. By this point, that wasn’t enough for me. I kissed her on her moist mouth, and she kissed back with a shy tongue tickling mine. We climbed down the fire escape to my window, and we laid ourselves on my bed. We embraced with a kiss again, until our clothes gently fell to the floor, and I thirstily fell into Elba.

“Will you do me a favor?” I asked Sara. “Will you spend New Year’s Eve with Elba? I don’t want her to be alone.”

“Why would she be alone?”

I realized my mistake and swallowed hard. It felt like blood curdled in my throat, and I choked on my own spit a bit. Maybe it was from the glass of milk I had had with the pie, but my throat filled with phlegm and I began to cough. I spat in Sara’s sink, and she grimaced at me, but did not drop the subject. “Where are you going on New Year’s?”

“I’m just going to be out,” I said. Unfortunately, Sara knows me too well.

“Are you going to do something bad?”

“Define bad.”

Sara turned red at this, and I swear I could see another hair on her head turn gray. Then, Sara grew sad. “You’re not coming back after New Year’s, are you?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

Sara nodded solemnly at this. “I can’t say I’m surprised. I knew our time was finite, I just wish you could stick around longer. You do what you have to do, I won’t stop you.”

“Do you know what I’m going to do?”

“You’re going to kill yourself, or get yourself killed. One way or the other, you’ll be dead.”

She was right. One way or another I would be, so why delay the inevitable? In less than a week, Rat Queen would be dead, and so would I. Sara rested her head on my shoulder, and I put my arm around her. She began to cry as Jeremy approached with a camera. He said, “Stay right there, I want to take a picture.” This made Sara heave a little harder, and Jeremy put the camera down. “Baby, are you okay?”

“It’s just the hormones. Please, take the picture.”

Jeremy snapped the photo, and Sara smiled through tears. I told the two of them I should be heading out. Jeremy brought me a plate of food for Elba, and Sara gave me a long, tearful hug. I could feel the wet form her face leaking through my sweater.

Jeremy asked, “Should we ask him?”

Sara looked up at me, crestfallen. Sara looked at Jeremy and nodded.

“So, Sara and I have been doing a lot of thinking,” said Jeremy, “and we wish Elba was here so we could ask the both of you, and it’s not like we’re religious or anything, so it would be ceremonial more than anything, but...would you be the godfather of our baby? And Elba could be the godmother, of course!”

I looked down at Sara, who couldn’t bring herself to make eye contact with me. I longed to look into her amber eyes at that moment, but I knew she wouldn’t be able to look up at me. However, she did say, “Will you please?”

“It would be an honor.” I shook Jeremy’s hand and gave Sara a kiss on the head, as we were still in our embrace. I took Elba’s plate of food, and said my goodbyes. “I’ll see you Friday,” I said to Sara. She was looking at me now, and gave me a slight smile and nod. With that, I was out the door, and headed home.

“Riho is a cool name,” said Sara one day as we were catching coffee. It was after our first big separation, a blow-out that led to months of no-contact. “I wish I had a cool name,” Sara lamented.

“Sara’s cute,” I said, but it was true, it’s not an interesting name.

My name came from my mother’s lack of imagination, and my father’s speech impediment. At the time of my birth, my father was working at a gas station called Rhino’s. My father can’t say his M’s or N’s, so it came out sounding like “Rhio’s.” My mother loved this, for some reason, and named me Riho. That was before my father’s imprisonment for vehicular manslaughter. It was an accident, apparently, but it happened nonetheless.

My father was a goofy man, who could never keep a steady job. The gig at Rhino’s only lasted about a year and a half before he was laid off and unemployed once again. My mother was a teacher for special education students, and her job was steady, but it didn’t pay nearly well enough for me and my three brothers to be fed well on a regular basis, especially when my father couldn’t hold a job.

I don’t think my parents are important, in the grand scheme of things. I don’t even know if they’re alive at this point. I haven’t seen them since before the war. But then again, no one has seen their parents since before the war. Unless they live in the city, that is.

It’s the day after Christmas, and I can’t help but think of Bunny. When I got home last night, Elba’s illness had taken a turn. She had been scrolling in the bathtub for hours before realizing that her legs had atrophied together. It looks like she won’t be turning into a frog after all, unless she has to be a tadpole first, but I don’t think that happens with the illness. I think that once you turn, you turn for good. At least, that’s what the studies say. But I think Rat Queen might fudge that, like she does everything.

Bunny was kind of that way, too. I could never tell what was real or fake with her.

I digress, but maybe my parents were more important than I gave them credit. They did raise me, after all, and I am about to do some real good for The City. It’s not easy for me to dwell on them, but I do suppose they were important, after all. I don’t know.

My mother was a beast. She ruled home and hearth with an iron tongue, kind of like a cat without its claws. Sure, she had her softness, but there was always the fear of being scratched, even if it was irrational. One time my mother threw a boiling pot of water at my head because I refused to take the garbage out. She had had a particularly bad day at work, and her temper ran short with me. I ducked, but the water splashed behind me, leaving permanent little marks on my bare back. I rarely wore more than underwear at home as a kid. None of us could be bothered to be fully clothed.

Maybe that was because of my father. His bare beer-belly was almost always exposed and shirtless, as he sat in his recliner watching old cartoons and serials. They were his favorite. He

couldn't deal with any of that modern, violent, sexual bullshit. He missed when television was pure, and so he had tapes and DVDs of all the old shows that he would watch on a loop. He'd go from one to the next to the next and the next, and when he'd watched them all, he'd start over. *Star Trek* was always my favorite, and I'd sit below my father as he drank his Pabst Blue Ribbon and imagine that he would one day take us all to space. He always said if there was a one-way trip to Mars mission, and he had to leave us all behind to go, he would volunteer and never be seen again. I used to think that was so cool as a kid, but now I just think it's sad. The escapism fantasy of a bar-back-gas-station-clerk-pawn-shop-cashier. He wanted something grander from his life, I think. Or maybe he just wanted to be seen as the hero he so clearly wasn't. Either way, he wanted to run away. I guess he got his wish, in a way.

He's written me letters from prison. Not anymore, not since Rat Queen cut out all Outside correspondence. But he would write to me from time to time. He told me about the production of *Twelve Angry Men* he was a part of in the prison's drama club. I don't know why everyone I love does theatre. I'm not sure if I really loved my father, though.

That's not true. Of course I loved my father. But my mother was my real close confidant. I trusted her with my life, maybe because I thought she was so brave. I know her many roles took a toll on her – mother, teacher, breadwinner, cook – but I think wife was the hardest.

See, even though I loved my parents, and I had a decent childhood all things considered, I don't think my parents really loved each other. I think they loved aspects of one another, but I don't think they loved each other. Not really. I think my father loved the stability of my mother. I think he loved that she was a mother through and through and that she in turn would mother him. I think he never wanted to grow up, and I think she enabled that. But I think my mother loved that he was a rebel, and that he was Peter Pan Syndrome on a motorcycle. It pissed off her extremely strict, Christian parents, and she loved that. She wanted to feel free, but ended up being more trapped than ever, with a manchild who couldn't hold his own or a job, and four boys with big mouths to feed.

I'm extremely grateful for my mother and everything she did for me, but I don't miss her. In fact, as an adult, I found myself missing my father more. His letters from prison detailed his days, the kind of soap he would buy from the commissary, and how many books he wished he could read if he was more literate. He wrote about being beat up for having a speech impediment, and being protected for the very same thing just weeks later. His life in prison sounded kind of simple. There were rules – rules enforced by guards, and rules enforced by inmates – and I envied him at times. The real world has no rules, and I found that extremely complicated as I matured.

Of course, there are rules now. There are rules under Rat Queen. But then again, are there? Give up the sons you birth, don't speak to The Outside, do your job the best you can to keep The City running as a well-oiled machine, and don't you dare stop worshiping at the paws of Rat Queen. However, murder is legal, crime is not punished (unless, of course, it directly interferes with Rat Queen), it's everyone for themselves, and all hail Rat Queen.

Elba is recording from the bathtub, so I have to be quiet. I can get a bit riled up when I think about Rat Queen. But, Elba has to livestream her progress, her fans want to know. Elba has over three million followers all who all live in The City, of course, and they are all on the edge of their virtual seats about the progression of her illness. Oh, she isn't the first person to go through it, the pollution long ensured that, and she won't be the last, but I think people like her for the same reasons I do. She's down to Earth, polite, and simple. She doesn't sugar coat things, but she doesn't get overly emotional. She keeps things to the point with a hit of comedic flair, and I'm sure people who are also sick enjoy knowing they're not alone. Sara follows Elba, and says her content is "joyless but charismatic." I would say that's a relatively good description of Elba.

Elba amassed a small following before she got sick for her urban exploring content. It's something she got into during the war, and kept up with until her illness confined her mostly to the bathtub. She would break into abandoned places and film what she found.

"I found this amazing apartment," she once told me, "it's a duplex with a claw-foot tub, we should move there!"

I was pissed off when she told me this. I had done obscene things to get the place we had, and still have, and I couldn't believe she would consider moving. Though, I suppose the clawfoot tub might've come in handy with her illness, but it's too late now. I'm sure someone else has already claimed the property, and it's not like I can really move Elba to the Upper West Side.

My Aunt Susan owned this place. Technically, she wasn't really my aunt. She was some distant relative that found me through one of the ancestry sites. When she found out I lived in New York City, she reached out, wanting to meet. So, we did. We got lunch at EJ's Luncheonette on the Upper East Side, which isn't there anymore, due to the oil rig, and she bought me coffee and a tuna salad sandwich with fries, which I ate with fervor. I think she took pity on the starving-artist college kid, and our meetings at EJ's became bi-weekly, sometimes in the afternoon, on her lunch break, and sometimes in the evening, after my classes. In the evenings we would have dessert which, for Susan, consisted of challah bread and orange marmalade. I eventually tried her esteemed dessert, and was pleasantly surprised. It became a go-to comfort food for me, and a cheap meal in a pinch.

Susan owned this apartment. She lived here with her parrot, Pinko, and an array of expensive soaps that she collected from her travels, but never used. Elba is still enjoying those soaps to this day. Susan was cool. She worked for a magazine whose office was on the Upper East Side, hence her affinity for EJ's, and she traveled the world to find the newest and hottest trends in something. Food, maybe? She was a journalist, and was a very successful one at that, but I don't think she wrote about anything important. It was definitely something arbitrary, like food or clothes, and I'm sure she told me one time, but I can't remember what it is now.

One summer, she asked me to watch her place as she would be traveling through Africa, and I happily obliged. This was before the place in East Harlem, so I was bound to a summer in Texas unless I accepted. Summer in Texas could be nice, but I was always put to work. See, my mother had a small farm that she operated, on top of being a teacher and a housewife and a personal chef to four growing boys. But she inherited the farm from her father when he passed,

and she couldn't bear to let it go. We grew all sorts of vegetables — cabbages, cucumbers, spinach — and we kept a coop of chickens.

The chickens were the worst job, and they always somehow came down to me. I remember my cousin (my actual cousin), Billy, was the first to show me and my brothers how to kill a chicken. He'd been doing it for my mom for a while, but by the time my oldest brother was ten, and I was five, we needed to know how to kill the chickens ourselves, as Billy was off to join the armed forces, and my mother couldn't bear to break the heads off the chickens herself.

Billy said, "One. You git one swift stick to the neck. Pull it back and let the chicken run itself dead."

For some reason, I was the one elected to kill the first chicken. My three brothers pushed me forward when Billy asked who wanted to try first. Billy shoved the hatchet in my hand, and grabbed a hen from the coop, he flattered her neck against a wooden block and said, "I'll hold 'er down while you swing, aye squirt?"

I picked the hatchet up, and breathed deeply. I held it above my head and closed my eyes. Billy stopped me. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Gotta keep yer eyes open. Else you're bound to cut my damn hand off."

So I did. I swung the hatchet above my head and brought it crashing down into the feathered neck of a hen named Midge. It's fucked up that my mother named the chickens, knowing full well they'd be dead and dinner at some point. I hit Midge right in the veiny part of her neck, and blood spat onto my pants like a whore after head. When I saw the blood, I threw up. Billy and my brothers laughed belly-laughs, as Midge proceeded to run around without a head. When I caught a glimpse of that, I threw up again. I vomited until nothing would come up, and I sobbed because there was chicken blood on my pants. After a minute, Midge fell dead, and I stopped crying. I looked down and saw the lifeless eyes of a chicken head at my feet, wondering why the second youngest of four sons had been put up to this, and why my baby brother wasn't reacting the same.

Billy picked up the carcass, and whistled his way into my mother's kitchen. "I'll tell 'er what a good job you did, but I won't tell 'er about the puke."

I killed my aunt Susan. Now, before you hate me too much, know that I hate myself more than you ever could, especially for killing aunt Susan. Elba and I needed a new place, and when Rat Queen legalized murder, apartment theft became a real issue. People would break into houses they deemed nice enough to live, kill the current owners, and take over the space. They still do, it happens often, which is part of the reason why I fear Sara being on the first floor of her apartment building so much. Elba and I are on the top floor of a walk-up, and I know no one would want to make the trek all the way up here to murder us and take our space. But, then again, I did that to Susan.

I was devastated when Susan got sick. Blood cancer, nothing I could do, even if I did try. I would take her to doctor's appointments and, as things got worse, I began playing hospice nurse. My time during the early days of the war prepared me for that. Healthcare might be free

now, but that doesn't mean it's good. Most doctors charge exorbitant amounts for ridiculous procedures, and Susan's chemo treatment could only go on so long financially. Eventually, she had to stop trying, and prepared herself for death.

One night, when Elba was asleep in our second story, fire-escape-accessible apartment, two people broke in looking for a respectable home. They climbed in through the unlocked window we used to smoke weed on the fire escape. They held a knife to Elba's temple and told her to climb down through the window. I was out working at the oil rig and had yet to return home. When I did, I found Elba outside shoeless in her nightgown, telling me that the inevitable had happened. I went upstairs with a PVC pipe and chased the two clowns out of the apartment, knocking some kneecaps while at it. We knew we had to move now, but the question was where. Rat Queen essentially ended homelessness in The City, and housing was now monetarily free, but I feel like the cost is much higher. Or, does a human life really not cost a thing?

I guess you don't particularly have to kill in order to survive here, but it certainly feels like it. There are plenty of empty apartments in the city, but most of them don't have electricity, water, or what mind you. Still, Elba was scared to sleep alone in that apartment, and I couldn't blame her. We weren't in the best neighborhood, so maybe it was time to move up and, therefore, downtown.

Susan's apartment was a pre-war one-bedroom with a roomy kitchen and, perched above a six-floor walk-up, it seemed ideal for Elba and I. There was just one problem, Susan was tenacious. It didn't seem like she'd be dying any time soon, despite being sick as a dog. She was strong, and I admired that about her, but I didn't appreciate it.

Looking back, maybe I shouldn't have done what I did. She was the only family I had post-war, and it would've been nice to have her around for as long as she could manage. But between caring for her, working, and providing a safe and kind environment for Elba, I was nearing the end of my string.

It was Elba who first planted the idea in my head. It wasn't malicious, and she was right – Susan was bound to die soon anyway.

So, I went to Susan's house, planning to kill her. I brought her the groceries she requested, and the medicine she needed, so as not to draw any suspicion. Sue greeted me as she always did, with her wheeling fluids in hand, and a kiss on the cheek. I put her groceries away, and we chatted. She wanted to take a bath, and she needed help with that. It's funny how the bathtub in Susan's apartment would become such a crucial part of my life. I decided the bathroom would be the best place to do it, and probably the easiest to clean up.

Susan waddled her way into the bathroom, and I tried to nab a kitchen knife, but couldn't figure out a way to sneak it into the bathroom without her seeing. She called me, the bath hot, and I entered the bathroom to find her undressing from her pajamas. I helped her shug off her clothes, and lifted under her arms to help her step into the bathtub. Susan slid into the water like a dead fish and breathed a sigh of relief. I would always begin by washing her hair, and that's what I did on this day. I lathered the thick shampoo in my hands and massaged it into her scalp, making sure to cleanse her head gently with the warm water from the tub. She mentioned that

there was more conditioner in her medicine cabinet, so I stood from kneeling and went over to it. Inside was the bottle of conditioner, and a pair of hair-cutting shears.

I returned to Susan and stabbed the shears into her neck, just shy of center. She looked up at me with confused, sad eyes, blood spewing from the hole in her throat, and emerging from the sides of her mouth as she tried to ask me why I had done what I had done, and what she had done to me to deserve such inhumane treatment.

The image of chicken heads began to infiltrate my mind, and I remembered what would happen if you didn't remove the head in one swift move – a bloody mess, that's what would happen. I took the shears in my hand, and pulled. Blood spewed over the floor and onto my shirt, but I stabbed again, creating another, sloppier hole next to the first one. I repeated this again, again, and again. I could see Susan was crying, and it broke my heart that she died with her final emotion being sadness. That shouldn't have been how it is. But, that's why you can't name your chickens, you'll grow too attached when they eventually end up on the dinner table.

I stepped back and admired my handiwork and Susan's limp, bloody body, before throwing up in the toilet. I threw up until there was nothing left, just like the first time I killed a chicken. The grief struck quickly, and the regret followed faster, but I pushed them away. I had secured stable housing for Elba and myself. I spent the rest of the day cleaning up my mess. I moved Susan's body into the kitchen, and warped her in her bed sheets. I scrubbed the bathroom three times, until there was no blood in the cracks of the tile floor, and there were no stains in the white bathtub. I scrubbed the crevices with Susan's toothbrush, and that seemed to do the job.

I wanted to bury her, but that seemed impractical. I knew a pizza shop owner who offered cremations on the downlow, so I chopped Susan's body into smaller, more portable pieces, and put her in a large shopping bag. I gagged everytime I snapped a bone, or popped something out of its socket. It was disgusting and sad, but, again, don't attach yourself to your chickens. I then cleared up the mess in the kitchen, so much for keeping it all in the bathroom. But by the time I was done, the kitchen was clean enough to eat off the floor.

I brought the shopping bag of Susan's remains over to Victor's, the pizza shop. Vic was there to greet me, as I had called him on the way. It seemed to be a slow business day, and he was happy to have my cremation fee. He threw Susan's body and the bag rather haphazardly into the oven and lit the fire. In just ten minutes, Susan was nothing but dust.

"Do you have an urn?" Vic asked.

I told him I didn't, so he offered me a takeout box to carry Susan's remains until I came by an urn. Carrying Susan back to her apartment in a pizza box was rather precarious, and I was worried the wind would blow it out of my hands, and spread her ashes down Houston Street.

Now, Susan sits on our windowsill, next to Pinko's cage, in a pretty urn Elba found at a thrift store, watching over us and her home. I figured she'd want to stay home. It's not like there's any good place to spread her ashes anyways.

I had to work today. I felt bad that I had left Elba on Christmas, and then had to work the next day. But, that's The Upper East Side Oil Rig for you. They don't care about holidays like

other, more cushy jobs. Jeremy doesn't have to work today, but, then again, he has the power to choose his own hours, and to choose when or when not to open The Swingset. I would've killed for a drink at The Swingset after work today, but Jeremy wasn't opening. It must be nice to spend time with his pregnant wife.

I should probably ask Elba to marry me, but with her condition worsening, I don't know if she'll even be able to consent by the time the wedding comes around. It's probably for the best. Divorce would be difficult if she turned into a fish, which is what it's kind of looking like.

She did make an odd request today. Sometimes, there are cravings that go along with the illness, and today she was craving soil. Thankfully, there are still some good places to acquire soil, and the oil rig is right next to Central Park. On my brief lunch break, I walked over to the park as I scarfed down my sandwich. I collected the dirt in the empty sandwich bag, and put it in my coat pocket, so as not to lose it. I suppose I could've killed two birds with one stone and visited Sara at work, and apologized for springing hard news on her on Christmas, but I didn't.

I brought it home to Elba, and she asked me to leave the bathroom so she could do a "dirt tasting review" on her social media. Her fans would probably eat that up, as she ate up the soil. I made dinner for myself, put Elba to bed, and then wrote all of this.

As I inch closer to the inevitable, I can't help but feel like I'm abandoning Elba. But, I've set her up with a lot of good stuff, and I know Sara will take care of her, even if it means moving Elba to her and Jeremy's place. I think Elba will be fine.

Dalton Abernathy is probably my best friend. He's got the most stupid, pretentious name I've ever heard, but he's far from either of those things. Dalton was born in Atlanta, Georgia to a single mother and three older sisters. He's always been the baby boy, both in stature and personality, and he's always had an affinity for strong women, which is why he doesn't care for Elba, and now detests Sara. He used to be head over heels for Sara when she was single, sparkling, and slutty. But, now basically married with kids, Sara is as reprehensible to him as Rat Queen is to me – a cheap facade, a sell-out, a sorry excuse for the real thing.

I met Dalton in college, though we did not attend the same university. He was downtown at Pace, while I was uptown at some god-forsaken institution that tainted the Upper East Side in a matter of two buildings. I've always hated the Upper East Side, for one reason or another, but I always find myself stuck there. The wealth, the exclusivity, and the pure bore of boys in Brooks Brothers and women in Ann Taylor. Yawn. It's actually one of the things we bonded over, Dalton and I. He hated yuppies, and was a Che Guevara in his own right, revolutionizing downtown with a bullhorn and fliers about the environmental damages of the building of the Oil Rig. Oh, how things change.

Dalton was disgusted by extreme wealth, and is actually one of the few people who was thrilled with the rapturous happening of Brat City. Of course, I was devastated, but that was because of Bunny. Dalton spat at the helicopters that took the rich into the sky, and flipped the bird at Sky Daddy himself, or so says Dalton, at least. I feel like Bunny would've written if she saw Dalton do that. Oh, if Dalton dislikes Elba, who was always dependent on me, and Sara, who is relatively dependent on Jeremy now, you should've seen how he treated Bunny. Rich, white, and pure, Bunny was everything Dalton detested in women. For someone who's a self-proclaimed feminist, and who grew up raised by women, Dalton has particularities in regards to a certain sector of woman. If she isn't completely self-sufficient, self-reliant, and self-important, then Dalton has no interest. In fact, he actually harbors disdain for any woman without these three qualities.

Still, Dalton is probably my best friend. He was a line cook at Catch when I worked there waiting tables. Dalton made a mean sashimi platter, and I bussed the plates stripped naked of his handy work with carelessness. A paycheck was a paycheck, and restaurants were the only places that seemed to want to hire me. Dalton introduced me to the beauty of raw fish, which I probably would never have touched had he not convinced me, and showed me how to bite the seal off a beer bottle without breaking a tooth. He also showed me the ways of protest and performance art, and how the evils of capitalism would destroy the feeble threads of our nation. He wasn't entirely wrong.

The first time Dalton and I went out, he invited me to a secret meeting of minds regarding the fall of the nation, which was well on its way to war at that point. We were in Greenpoint, on a rather unassuming street with gentrified shipping facility apartments. Dalton rang the bell to what seemed to be an abandoned building, and the door opened to a white fluorescent hallway

that led up and up and up. We walked as high as the stairs would take us, and turned the corner to find a few stragglers left in the hallway. Dalton slid a large barn-like door open, and inside was a giant illegal loft apartment. “No one knows this is here,” he said, “except us.”

Lit in dim red and orange, Dalton and I wove through the crowd of people, some barely clothed, to the middle of the room, where I was introduced to Cal, a thirty-something dude with a beard long and thick enough to deflect bullets. Cal kissed both of my cheeks and welcomed me to his home. “Grab a beer, or some wine, and take a seat. The show will begin shortly.” I did as I was told, and grabbed a beer, leaving a few dollars in a donation bucket on the table, and sat on some cushions on the matte, wooden floor.

The show began, and in a frenzy of bosoms, cardboard masks, and creatures crawling out from couch crevices. I was entranced. A large man with a leather loincloth and a sword slayed a dragon made of couch cushions, which was said to be the United States government, and he, the communist savior. Naked sirens tried to drag him into an abyss of paper flame, but he prevailed, giving them each the kiss of death, and casting them into eternal damnation. His name was revealed to be Adam, the first man, and this, the beginning of a new world order. I touched my wet face, and realized I was crying. It was spectacular, and I suddenly understood why I was supposed to make theatre. I had always felt the need to perform in my bones, but never like this. I was invigorated, and I stood in a clapping ovation.

Cal wrote the play, and I went up to him after and kissed him square on the mouth, and knelt before him, thanking him for the performance. He laughed. Apparently he got this reaction a lot. “Come back tomorrow night, bring a friend.” And that’s exactly what I did.

The next night, I brought Sara to see the amazing play and meet the inspiring playwright behind my artistic transfixation. We met Dalton at a bar in Williamsburg before the show, and I think he fell for Sara instantly, as she was wearing a nearly see-through dress with nothing underneath, and Dalton admired women who weren’t shy about their bodies, size and shape without matter. Sara didn’t seem impressed by Dalton, and all of his 5’3” bearded glory, but then again, she didn’t seem impressed by many people, let alone men. She was hardly impressed by me, but despite that, she loved me, and had confessed that to me just days prior as we lay in my bed with a fan blowing our naked bodies cool post-coitus. I didn’t return the sentiment, as that was the summer of Bunny, and I was convinced that I was in love with her, and her with me. But Sara didn’t know that yet, and she didn’t need to. Why would I give up my cake if I could eat it too?

Nonetheless, Dalton flirted his little heart out with Sara, and she looked down at him with mild displeasure.

“What’s your problem?” I asked Sara when Dalton went to squeeze the hose.

“He just seems like a phony,” said Sara. I tried to explain that he was the most authentic person I had ever met, and what we were about to see was more real than any piece of art I had ever consumed in my life. Sara didn’t seem convinced.

Dalton returned from the bathroom and ordered a round of pickleback shots for the three of us. We took them, paid the bartender, and headed off to the show, Dalton and I slightly tipsier than the night before. The night was warm and dark as we danced through the streets of Williamsburg to Greenpoint in a summer haze. Sara looked beautiful, and Dalton looked thirsty for her sweat. We arrived at the unassuming building. Dalton rang the bell and looked back at Sara, waiting for an impressed look to cross her face. It never did.

Once inside the barn door of the giant loft, Sara made a beeline for the bathroom and Dalton finally got his chance to ask, “What’s her deal?” I asked him what he meant, and he responded by saying “I’m a pretty impressive guy, and not a bad looker, or so I’m told, so what’s up her ass?” Before I could come up with a clever answer, Sara returned with three beers in hand, having paid for this round herself. This only made Dalton fall harder. I think he liked her difficulty level, she was like the final boss of a video game, and Dalton was definitely a player.

I spotted Cal in the center of the room, surrounded by a few women, and I wove my way towards him. He beckoned me towards him, and kissed me on both cheeks again.

“I brought a friend,” I said. I motioned for Sara to step forward, but she seemed apprehensive.

Cal put his hand forward, and the women around him shifted like cats protecting their leader. Sara took his hand to shake it, but he held it limp, the amethyst ring on his ring finger shaking ever so slightly. He wanted Sara to kiss his ring, but Sara would never do a thing like that. Instead, Sara laughed, dropped his hand, and said, “It’s a pleasure.”

Dalton and I were gobsmacked. Sara perched herself on a ladder that served as show seating like a proud peacock, and I followed in a fury.

“That was so rude.”

“It was rude of him to assume I’d be a part of his little harem. I kiss the ring of no man.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that, and besides, the show was starting soon. So, I did as I often did when Sara was in an inarguable mood – I shut the fuck up.

As I watched the couch-cushion creatures, the dragon slayer, and the siren songs, I could hear Sara snicker behind me. She wasn’t impressed. I was disheartened, as I thought this kind of dramatic force of nature would be right up Sara’s alley, but I was wrong.

We three left the play, but not before congratulating the playwright once again. Cal made a point to ask Sara what she thought.

“I think it’s clear you have a vision. It’s impressive. Let me know if you ever need someone to proofread future works.” With that, the two exchanged emails, as Cal only had a flip-phone. I think this surprised Dalton and I more than her blatant disrespect. We couldn’t tell if she hated him, wanted to fuck him, or both.

Later, when Sara and I were on the subway back to Manhattan, I asked her what she really thought of the play.

“I thought that was the most pointless, pretentious, self-postulating dribble I’ve ever witnessed. I can’t wait to hate more.”

A week later, *The New York Times* wrote an article about Cal and his play in a secret location somewhere in Brooklyn. His play was apparently titled “Masterpiece,” and *The New York Times* raved about it. Sara began crying when she read the article.

“That should’ve been me.”

To be continued...