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Some Assembly Required

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Some Assembly Required

by

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Creative Writing

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Abstract

“Some Assembly Required” is a short story collection that explores the construction and deconstruction of identity within various fields of interest, generally hobbies or professions, and the type of people who do those professions or hobbies. It also explores dynamics of familial and romantic relationships.

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Chapter 1: Universal Language

Marching band smells like body odor. It can smell like asphalt, or grass, bus exhaust, sun screen, brass polisher, or molded carpet. But it mostly smells like different types of body odor —salt and vinegar and purple onions and dried cum. It's the smell of people who live right under the sun, passing out, throwing up, breathing in for four counts and breathing out for eight. But no matter how different the body odors of those different people, they always mingle and tangle with each other until it's just one smell, one unified smell, and every member of every marching band smells like every other member of any other marching band. They go home, they shower, and when they come back the next morning to do it all over again, they still smell like everyone else. Despite all that, April Earl's body odor always smelled better than anyone else's.

After the week long honeymoon of rookie camp ends in mid-July, a few things happen all at once: section leaders stop coddling rookies, 8th — 12th graders actually choose to sit in silence during water breaks when their bodies start to tremor from newfound depths of exhaustion, boys start to go shirtless during practice, and all the girls, April and myself included, stop masking their odor in perfume. And that's how it should have been -- if I couldn't smell my bandmates, then they weren't working hard enough. But I tolerated others and their smells, knew that it was all worth it for the show. But April's smell made me want to sit beside her during water breaks, discuss her latest

abstract painting, the costs of paints and brushes, my dreams of performing in famous philharmonics. During water breaks we always sat with our backs against one another's

so we could watch the rest of our section and make sure they were resting and not making out in the stands. Her odor wasn't a pleasant smell – it reeked, blossoming from within her movements like dogwood trees in spring. But it triggered a taste, something that reminded me of tonguing the blood in my gums after flossing my teeth.

When Mr. Lawson, the band director, and our drum major dismissed us at the end of practice, the clarinets remained on the practice field where April and I reminded them all that their chair test was in a few weeks. The results never change what chair they are for marching band - it only determines what chair they'll be for the concert season in the fall at the end of marching season. When April finished, I added that if they practiced hard enough, they could even beat me and get second chair, or beat April and get first. Most just sort of laughed, but it had been done before. After that, we dismissed them.

While I changed out of my practice clothes into dry ones in the school bathroom stall, April stood outside and we discuss getting the clarinets together at one point tomorrow to practice jazz running – during the closer, the section wasn't making it from one spot to the next because we had to move 30 yards in 16 counts; normal marching will, at best, get you a yard in 6 counts. When I opened the door, I was happy find her standing so close to the stall.

“You look human,” she said.

I laughed, saying it's all for show, like putting an animal in clothes.

When we walked out of the bathroom I noticed how we were in step, at the same tempo, on the same foot. It wasn't entirely uncommon since that's what we did all day. Still, I tried not to call attention to it so she wouldn't do anything to change it.

"The Lion King came out last week," she began, "and I thought maybe we can go see it this weekend in Santa Monica, maybe Sunday, since Saturday is minicamp. Maybe go to the beach after."

I said yes, immediately aware I did so too eagerly. "I mean, yeah, that will be cool."

"Did your mom get to do any of the artwork for it?"

"No," I said, "She doesn't do that sort of stuff for them anymore."

"They didn't fire her, did they?" she asked, like every other person asked when they found out my mom drew a penis into the castle of Atlantis on The Little Mermaid movie poster. But everyone else that asks always does so with a smirk, or suppressing a giggle, as if to be both amused she could be fired for such a thing, but also entirely accepting of the idea if she was – it was Disney, and she should have known better. But April looked sincerely concerned.

"No, they didn't fire her. She sort of quit. It was kind of mutual. She always liked giant landscape painting more than cel animation and poster painting anyway."

April walked me to the bus stop, saying she'd drive me downtown herself, but she wasn't allowed to after dark, and I told her it was fine since I liked the bus and train anyway. And it wasn't a lie, I did. After the riots, my mom had begged me to find someone in band that could drive me downtown after practice to meet her if she couldn't

leave the studio until late. But I didn't think I was in any real danger that night, since it was only a Tuesday.

When the bus reached the North Hollywood Metro station, most looked relieved to get off. It was packed with commuters getting off of work, trying not to sit next to the smelly girl with the instrument case and duffel bag. Every window was down, but there were so many bodies, sitting next to, standing over, leaning on, and it created a bus sized capsule that trapped all the heat. My clothes started sticking to me as moisture built between my back and the plastic backrest. And then everyone else on the bus began to sweat just as much as me, forcing themselves to look up, as if cooler air and more room were only an arm's reach away, on the other side of the bus roof. It was then I knew, as we inched through gridlock traffic, that they hated me. I was only a teenager, but they were adults, with careers, and seeing me on the same bus as them had to remind them of how bad things were for them, just how unsuccessful they'd been so far in life, to be an adult, living in a city of millions, and still without the means to buy a car, which, in this city, counts for as much as clothing, food, and shelter.

Luckily, most of the bus commuters couldn't afford to live in the neighborhoods that dot along the stops of the Red Line. The metro was still full of people, but not so much that anyone forced me to move my stuff from the seat beside mine. To pass the time, I began to mimic the fingerings of the closer, still trying to memorize the last twenty bars, which is a lot of 16th notes strung together. I wanted to hum it, because I loved the song, and I liked hearing it in my head, but I tried for a few bars and decided the train was too quiet, and I didn't want people to hear me.

It finally reached the last stop, Union station. I was supposed to get off at the Civic Center stop, the second to last, but I enjoyed getting off at Union. Union always reminded me of why people who lived here were supposed to love Los Angeles. It's plenty exotic looking, with mosaic tiled floors, sweeping staircases, large glass windows, and high vaulted ceilings saturated with a warm amber glow. And it's always full of people coming here from out of town, heading into the city with suitcases and luggage, swelling with anticipation. They'd rush down the stairs and buy tickets and pack onto the trains with actual excitement. To get off and on at Union is to be surrounded with the electric current of travelers, of jet setters, of people whose lives take them to new exciting places all the time. And I soaked in it, just standing on the steps, holding onto the railing to make sure I didn't drift away in their current. To get off at the Civic Center though is to be living here, not visiting. And no one that lives here that has to ride the metro to get around moves with any kind of excitement, anticipation, or hunger for what's next.

*

If the smell of marching band is body odor, then the smell of downtown is urine. And it's no different from the smell of urine in anyone's toilet. When I close my eyes and ignore the sounds, it's the same as standing in any bathroom where someone forgot to flush. I was surprised by that the first few times I had to walk to my mom's studio at night, because I always thought every city had a smell, something inherent to it, part of its unique identity and character. But downtown LA has never had a smell of its own to add to or complicate the urine smell, to make me say to someone "yes, there's pee...but I smell something else." With all the different people who work, cook, and live here, none of them seem to make a difference. It smells only like urine. It belongs to everyone, and

every person living here contributes to every puddle and stream of it. So when I jumped over the puddle in front of the art studio door, it smelled as much like anyone's as it did like mine.

I had planned to sneak inside and pretend I had been waiting there for an hour, but my mom had been standing near the entrance with a woman and saw me come in. When she waved me over, the woman she was talking to turned around and smiled, making space so not to get any of the paint on my mom's clothes or my stench on her suit.

"Jami, how was practice?" she asked, packing her suitcase of sketches and preparing to leave.

"It was fine, Ms. Leevish. We started on the closer today. Gonna add body movements and horn flashes and other tricks this Saturday for mini-camp."

"How exciting. You must be very talented to be a section leader and only a junior."

"She's the best," my mom added, which made me smile. I was afraid she would pull out the calendar and show her the exact date she marked when I first started playing in sixth grade and said I would never learn how to play the clarinet, but I think she'd already shown her.

"I'm sure she is. Very talented, just like her mom," Leevish said. "If she sticks with it, keeps her eye on the prize, she'll be playing for philharmonics in no time." She then looked straight at me and, like always, winked. I nodded this time, but in the past I've coughed or shrugged, or spun around when I was young enough to do it right, back when I thought it was a game, but always aware of it being a voiceless promise to monitor my mom and her work.

I walked away to wash my face, but not before I heard Leevish remind my mom about the right color blue and saying Mark would come in tomorrow to start drawing Pocahontas. When I came out of the bathroom, Leevish was gone.

My mom was only one artist out of the ten or so working at that studio, but her space was the largest. High ceilings and lots of windows, that's what she demanded when the studio hired her. And taking up almost the entire width of the room was a giant backdrop – it might as well have been a mural – of untouched wilderness, full of sky and leaves and trees and rivers and mountains. But the colors were more vibrant and saturated than they could be naturally, details more smoothed and less defined. It was nature, undoubtedly, but without blemish, and unthreatening. Beautiful, dreamlike, and not in the least bit dangerous.

“It's beautiful mom, It really is.”

“Thank you, little monkey. But the blue...I have to redo the blue in the mountains before Mark comes tomorrow.”

“You did it in the blue they sent though. They look the exact same color as the mountains in the cels they sent from the movie.”

“You know them. It has to look exactly like it will in the movie, same color, shape, everything. Apparently the paint they sent doesn't want to dry the same shade on this canvas as it did when they tested it. And Mark will find any reason to delay.”

“Mark? But you hate him.”

“Unfortunately, he got Pocahontas, now that they've given Ursula and Gaston to someone else. And he'll be coming in late tomorrow from a studio in Ohio after having to paint her all day on backdrops there, so he should be extra fun to work with. I'll just be

glad when they finish making the movie and start their tour so they can get out of my space and I get to enjoy a few months of work without them in my ear.”

She and I stood for a long while staring at the backdrop, with certain spaces undone where Mark would eventually paint Pocahontas, and then someone else would come in a few weeks later and paint whoever else is supposed to be painted in. The movie wasn't coming out for another year, so I wasn't sure what was going on in the picture or why, but seeing my mom so frustrated over dealing with these people she thought she'd never have to see or work with again made me already dread its release. If it was a success, they'd need more backdrops for more rides and floats and ice skating tours. When she had backdrops for Aladdin two years ago, I hardly saw her. I wasn't allowed to leave Culver City to come downtown during summer break because it was too dangerous, and she pleaded with me to keep the tv off of the news, knowing it would make me worry about her being down there. So, every night, I would practice clarinet for hours, run through scales and memorize music, until she came home when she could, when she thought it was safe enough to drive home. It was in that summer, my first marching band season, where I became a brilliant clarinet player.

“You were late again,” she started without even looking at me, staring at spruces of blue-green-purple trees. “I told you to find a ride downtown or just go home.”

“I'm fine. April said she would have, but her parents don't allow her to drive into the city at night.”

“So, how did it go?” she asked after another long silence, this time turning to face me. “What did she say?”

“I didn't ask her.”

“What! Jami, we talked about this. You are beautiful, and so damn talented, and smart and wonderful. It’s not that hard, and I know you can do it. Last summer, when you were with that boy from the snare line, you owned that poor boy. He followed you around like a puppy, and you weren’t afraid to tell him exactly what you wanted. But now here is someone you actually like, and you’re terrified to even ask her out.”

“She asked me,” I said, smiling just a little, looking at her, waiting for her face to contort into something of surprise and joy. I didn’t have to wait long. She screamed and hugged me and got paint all over my clothes and body and apologized and hugged me again. I told her how April had asked to go the movies and the beach on Sunday and she tore through her stuff and packed and started shutting off the lights in the studio, telling me she wanted every single detail on the drive home. Outside, in the darkness, standing and waiting for her to meet me at the entrance so we could leave together, I stared across the street, watching a man in a suit pee against a storefront. He turned around, smiled at me, then after a short while put his penis back in his pants and continued to walk down the street.

*

My mom, from somewhere in the house, yelling toward the direction of my room, made a comment that night about how she hadn’t heard me playing my clarinet at night in weeks. She never played a music instrument, or knew much about them before I started playing, but as I got better at the clarinet, she would pay attention to it in movies and listen for it in songs, unable to resist pointing it out to people around her when she heard it. She’s even started a swing jazz record collection, since that’s the only style of music where the clarinet is featured. In any other style, it’s mostly just an instrument meant to

blend with the ensemble. The only instrument that's meant to keep its bell pointed down toward the floor and not out into the audience or up toward the ceiling, it's not flamboyant like oboes, or effervescent like flutes, or striking like trumpets. But it's solid, and warm, and purposeful.

I used to practice every night, before that summer, but that was only because I wanted to be section leader when I became a junior. April would be the only clarinet senior and was first chair, so she was guaranteed the spot that year. But there were three other juniors I had to compete with for assistant section leader and second chair, and I knew I was a much better marcher and would be a better section leader than any of them. I whittled down the time of my scales to just short of a minute, mastered my audition solo, and got second chair. There was nothing left to do at that point but coast till next year and become first.

*

I had masturbated before I started dating David. I knew what to do, learning over time through trial by error. But I let David think he taught me how to do it the right way, how to pace it correctly, where to place my fingers, how they should move, because it clearly made him happy to feel he had finally made the tiniest of indelible marks on my life, rerouted the course of it in some subtle way, to some new horizon I couldn't have gotten to without him. But, even then, I knew how to enjoy it, so that it was less of an exercise and entirely about pleasure, about how to enjoy myself. I dumped him, as privately as I could during the Marching Band season, the weekend after finals where we got second. We all had a hunger, knowing next season we'd get what we deserved, what we knew we could have gotten if we worked a little harder, now that we were so close.

But for a while, like that night, when I would finish, right before I reached orgasm, or sometimes the exact moment after, I would think of Mr. Lawson, my band director, and his wife. She was very plain, with lots of hair, almost in the shape of a pyramid, like something out of a Sunday morning comic strip. But they were both pretty old, early 40's. I would sit in the tub, or on the bed, and try to figure out why them. I'd climax, and I'd see Mrs. Lawson's face make my face. And I'd see Mr. Lawson over her, or under her, making some face, I'm sure, but it was never clear what it looked like. I was always more aware of what her face looked like; It was full, more round than usual, flushed, and present, sometimes eyes closed or eyes wide, staring at him or the ceiling. And she was silent when she climaxed, maybe a whimper at times, but almost always entirely silent. They both were.

*

Friday night football games were always pleasant for band members this early in the season, before competitions start. April and I had made it a sort of tradition to get our clarinet section to eat with the other band's clarinet section, and we tried to keep this up for as long as we could, until eventually it became impossible, and neither of us really want to eat with the other. But for that night, April pulled me by the hand as we talked to the other band's clarinet players and learned what their show was and what grade they were in, wishing each other luck for the upcoming season.

After we allowed the clarinets to go back to home side, standing alone near the parking lot, the grass swallowing a lot of the noise from the stadium and crowds, April said she wanted to see the progress on the show's props. I didn't want to agree, because I

knew we had to be back in the stands soon to play the other half of the game, but she had leaned in close, taking my other hand in hers, and insisted.

We walked through the dark parking lot toward the school building, weaving between parked cars. When I could do it without her noticing, I'd look in the reflection of car windows to see what the pair of us look like to others, walking while holding hands, wondering if what they see us to be is at all accurate as to what I felt we were, or could be.

Inside the bandroom, my mom was on a ladder, painting the top part of one of the show's props, a giant treble clef with music notes and bars, streaming through and linking hands of different races together. All of it was to represent our show's theme that year, about how music unifies people, something I'd known was true since joining band. The opener of the show was about a world without music, full of discord, while the ballad and the closer represented a world where everyone reads music, where everyone plays music together, creating a world of harmony and equality.

When I walked in, I knew she would say something gushing about April holding my hand, so I quickly stated how pretty the props were before she could say anything about it. When April launched into her love of painting and wanting to be one herself one day, something I'd told my mom when I came home with one of April's paintings months ago, the first of many, I felt it was finally safe to let go of her hand and let her walk toward my mom and her props.

My mom had agreed to always paint our props while I was a member of the marching band, which I was nervous about at first. Even after years of her doing it, I was still cautious, staring at her sketchings on the other props yet to be painted, trying to find

anything that could remotely be called a penis. But it was mostly just hands and music notes, except for the center prop that was to be on the 50 yard line, linking the props together across the field like a mural, which didn't have anything on it yet. When April asked her why it was blank, she said it was because she hadn't been inspired yet. When I groaned, she turned her back to me and said, as she continued to paint, that it would be ready by the end of minicamp tomorrow, and not to rush her. I couldn't argue with her since it was her props that got so much praise from visual effect judges and had helped us get so close to winning first those past few years. If I wanted first, she needed the time and inspiration to paint first place props.

*

Minicamp always falls on the last Saturday before the competition season begins the following weekend. It's an all-day affair, starting at 8 am and ending at 9 pm, with a public performance of the entire show, with all its newly added effects and props, for the parents. I tried not to budge or break into tears as a couple of hornets wrapped around my head like a hairnet, since the punishment for moving while at attention was the entire band having to do pushups. Knowing that every high school marching band has minicamp, and that there's another girl somewhere at that exact moment with hornets landing on her as she tries to stay perfectly still, it kept me calm, kept me focused, and stopped me from running off the field screaming. If she stayed calm so her band could continue to practice, and we had to stop and be punished because I couldn't, that would be the difference between their band winning, and ours placing second.

When it was time for the woodwinds to start warming up after lunch, we formed an arc around Mrs. Lawson, the woodwind instructor and, as it were, the show designer. I

actually knew Mrs. Lawson, who was my middle school band director, before I knew Mr. Lawson. It had never occurred to me that either of them were married, especially not to each other, until I started high school and watched them drive home together one evening after practice.

She told us, as we stretched in silence, how she came up with the idea and the music for the show, after she saw the LA Philharmonic play the previous December at the Chandler Pavilion. When the earthquake a month later damaged large parts of the Pavilion, she said she started to think of how a philharmonic is made up of members from all over the world, all reading the same sheet music. She then said something about the riots, and how music unites everyone, and dedicating the show to the Pavilion, and some other stuff about music, but I tried not to look at her, finding it uncomfortable, picturing her body twisting on top of Mr. Lawson, her face gripped by hands that caused pain and pleasure. So I mostly watched April stare off into the distance at the props.

*

By the time we were ready to perform the show in its entirety to the parents and staff later that night, my mom had rolled out the finished product of the props onto the practice field, and while the parents and staff had applauded them as being eye catching and beautiful from the stands, the band members sitting on the field with me were snickering or whispering about the center prop which had two girls in marching band uniforms holding hands. I knew that no one who wasn't in our band would look at those two girls, then look at April and I, and think they were one and the same. But it was all my fellow band members could possibly see. As the staff talked about how excited the new season was going to be, how proud they were of us so far for all our hard work, I

could hear the drum line behind April and I giggling. I turned around to find David looking straight at us, leading the rest of the line on as they all made a V with their index and middle finger, licking the air between them repeatedly, moaning and sighing, occasionally letting out a high pitched squeal, as if they had collectively shared an orgasm right there on the football field, huddled in a tight circle of sweaty band members. I kept looking to April to see if she was okay, but she wouldn't look at me. She just smiled as she stared at the band staff with unbreakable focus.

“So,” I said as we were finally dismissed for the night, looking at April as she bent to put away your instrument with her back to me, “when do you want to meet to go to the movie tomorrow? We could catch a matinee so we have time for the beach.”

“Oh, well, I held a vote with the other clarinets a little while ago and we all agreed on around 12.”

She then looked behind her to find me, and smiled. But that smile was different somehow from any of the others she had ever given me - more polite, more vague, and entirely dismissive. It was the smile she would give when a strange homeless man would tell her how beautiful she was, but instead she was giving it to me, and I waited to see if it would change, because I knew it would when she finally recognized who I was, who we were. But she just turned back around and started to walk away.

“The other clarinets are coming?”

“Well,” she said as she walked fast enough to ensure she was always a few feet ahead of me, “I figured it would be more fun this way, a sort of group holiday before school starts.”

I wanted to take her arm and force her to look at me, but everyone was still watching us, waiting to see if we were going to replicate any of the poses done by the two girls on the props, hold hands or hug.

My mom had been waiting by April's car when we both got there, asking if we liked the props. April beamed, saying nothing but polite and wonderful things. She then got in her car and drove home. When I tried to call her later that night, my pleading for her to talk to me just went to her answering machine.

*

The entire clarinet section met outside the movie theater, and I waited for everyone to pick their seat so I could sit next to April. I kept trying to talk about the two girls on the props, and us, to ensure her my mom didn't know any better, that she paints what she feels is true, even if it isn't. I just needed her to look at me, to hug me. I needed to be close to her musk, to taste the blood in my mouth again. But she kept interrupting or excusing herself and leaving the theater. I kept imagining her pacing outside the door, opening it to check to see if the lights were still up. When the lights finally came down and the movie began, she came back inside, where for the first few moments I did nothing but stare at her as she watched an orange sun rise from beneath a pitch black Serengeti.

King Mufassa trusted Scar, and was naïve to think that no one wanted to take the throne from him, and that led to his death. He trusted his brother, and his subjects, with his life, believing they all had his best intentions at heart, oblivious to the fact that every individual believes they deserve to be king, and are always very sure that they are more deserving than whoever is king at the moment. When Scar let Mufassa drop into the

stampede, it was more human an act than any of the animated lions had been so far. Someone in that animation studio wanted me to think this was undeserved, without reason, and somehow separate from the natural order of things. But to dethrone a monarch is just a natural part of the cycle. This was lost on April somehow, who had cried at the death. But at least it was some type of emotion other than what had been, up to that point, blasé enjoyment.

It was her tears, the first bit of expression she'd let escape from her all afternoon, that led me to think she was finally comfortable with me being around her again. She slouched a bit, and parted her legs, opening her skirt. So as Simba started to sing a song about living for the moment and having no worries, maturing into an adult lion in a matter of seconds, I looked straight ahead at the movie and put my hand between April's legs. I waited for her to close them, to look at me with disgust, with hatred, to say I didn't belong there, but she never did. She just gripped her armrest and stared straight ahead as I inserted my finger into her. I didn't want to see her cry, or laugh, or scream, I don't think I even wanted her to say anything. I mostly wanted her to be quiet, to pretend to watch the movie, and let me enjoy her, to let me show her how to enjoy herself.

We emptied out of the theater and walked to the Santa Monica pier. There were moments when I thought April would say something to me, or reach for my hand, but she would only hold the one that hadn't been inside of her, and only after all the other clarinet players had agreed to walk the rest of the way holding hands.

When we reached the pier, without any real decision, we separated from one another. I followed April as she ran toward a group of guys on the beach throwing a football. I walked over to them, introducing myself, hoping April would eventually say

how we knew each other. But she was so preoccupied with them and their bodies, rubbing her fingers on one guy's stomach, that she would only address me to ask how hot I thought they were. Rank them, she ordered, 1-10, 10 being hot as fuck. I wanted to slap her. I wanted to take her to the ground and ram my hand into her, then for her to wink at the guys while kissing me, letting them know she was only toying with them, teasing them into believing they even had a chance of sleeping with her. But then the guy I had ranked an 8 walked away with April on his shoulders as she turned her head to say back to me it was okay if I wanted to leave, that she'd call me later. When 9 grabbed my waist, asking for my number, I gave him the number for the band room and told him to call me, running away from the pier before he could give me his.

*

For the next few days, every evening, before shaving more time off my scales and perfecting my solo, I called April. We had said nothing more than a few words to each other during practice since the beach, but I called her every evening anyway. I'd call her and would never leave a message for her answering machine. But I knew each time I called I would get her answering machine. I would wait to hear the voice of her dad, asking me to say something after the beep, and just before it would, I'd hang up. I'd then wonder what she could have told her parents so they'd help her ignore me. I'd picture her sitting in the living room, staring at the answering machine, at the tape's ribbon being drawn taut, preparing to record my voice begging her to pick up, or begging her sisters or parents to convince her to talk to me again, apologizing for whatever she told them I did to her to make them hate me enough to ignore me. And when she would sit in silence and stare at the machine after each call, she looked as mildly amused as she did staring at the

movie while I fingered her. So, just before the beep, I'd hang up hoping at least the sound of me slamming the phone on the receiver was recorded, so she knew I would never give her the satisfaction.

*

The Saturday morning of our first competition brought much of what it usually brings before every competition. Nerves are frayed as we dress in our uniforms and polish our instruments in various rooms inside a deserted school, preparing to show the state and every other competitive band in it what we've spent the last few months passing out from heat exhaustion perfecting. While applying a color guard member's makeup in a hallway, David walked up to me asking if he could talk to me alone, leading me into an empty classroom.

"It's competition day," I said. "You know we aren't supposed to talk about anything that can start trouble."

"But you really need to hear this Jami," he said, unable to look me in the eye. He had never really been able to, even when we dated, saying it felt too awkward, too intimate. "It's about April. She's been talking about your mom, calling her crazy. Says she paints and draws penises on everything, that she had some sort of nervous breakdown while working for Disney and now she's nuts."

I grabbed David's face in my hands, and guided his eyes from the floor to mine.

"Isn't that what everyone says about her?" I asked, smiling.

"But I've never heard April say that."

"Do you think my mom's crazy?"

“No,” he said immediately, his voice full of apology. “I think she’s weird. But she’s nice. And she loves you. And she’s not crazy.”

He looked worried, as if I was going to break up with him all over again. But I just smiled and hugged him, thanking him for telling me.

“I’m sorry for last Saturday,” he said to me before leaving, in a voice I knew very well. It wasn’t the voice of drumline captain David, the one that had tongued the air between his fingers, but of the David that was terrified of graduating, of the people outside of the school, terrified of his father, terrified of being homeless and beaten to death in the street. That was the David terrified that being drumline captain would be his proudest moment, and that tomorrow would be nothing but an earthquake, or a riot, or a flood, or a fire that would end him so quickly, he would never get the chance to live without feeling terrified of living.

*

How you perform is everything. It’s all you can do. Unlike other sports, there is no defense in marching band. A band of high school students perform the best they can, and then they leave things up to a judging panel of six to decide if they were better or worse than any other band performing. It’s why I never understood how band parents could hate other bands, but not the judges. Parents will sit on their hands during a performance, refusing to clap for any other band but the one their child is on, determined to believe that the band that receives the most applause will win first place. And then, when the judges pick the first place band, angry band parents don’t stone the cars of the judges, but decide to hunt down that band and stone their buses instead. And knowing our

performance was damn near perfect, I was fully confident our band would need police escort out of the stadium that night.

With still a number of bands to go before we all had to go back to the field for full retreat for the announcement of the winner, all the bands that had performed earlier in the day had time to kill. Some bands would barbeque or go to the stadium to watch the rest of the bands. But ours usually just waited near the buses in our designated area of the bus parking lot and talk, or play games, or flirt, or gossip, with band parents walking around playing chaperone. But even before we were required to hush into silence as our bus entered the stadium parking lot, I had not said one word to April, waiting for the break between our performance and the awards ceremony later that night to say what I was going to say. I'd played out how the conversation would go in my head so often during the drive to the stadium, I couldn't imagine it going any different, or ending in any different way. No matter how it went, I knew it would end with me walking away from her and deciding whatever we had was over. So when she decided to approach me before I could approach her, all the words I knew I would tell her escaped from memory.

“So, I've decided I'm quitting band.”

“No,” I said, jumping up to meet her at eye level, forced to my feet from shock, and anger. “You can't quit. You're going to stay just long enough for the chair test, and then, when I beat you like you know I will and take your chair, then you can quit.”

“God,” she said, suppressing a laugh, “You're fucking crazy. It's just fucking band! It's the clarinet! Do you know why there are more clarinet players in a band than any other instrument? Because they're the ones that aren't talented enough to be anything else, and every one of them is just as boring and common as the clarinet player sitting

beside them. Name one famous clarinet player? There aren't any. Because it's a boring instrument that no one cares about. Clarinet isn't a career. Marching band isn't a career. You need to grow up."

"And dream of becoming a famous painter like you?" I asked, knowing what I was about to say was something that, years from that moment, would still replay in my mind as the exact moment we crossed some threshold, when my relationship to her became something else entirely, that looked unfamiliar to anything it was before. It would feel different, it would taste different, and whatever we may have been before, it would be this that would make me remember us in a way that felt like rubbing the scar left by a burn.

"Do you know what my mom said about your painting? She said that you're ordinary, with no talent," I lied, but at that moment I felt it was true. I was absolutely sure it was true. No one could have convinced me otherwise. As far as I knew at that moment, she was entirely ordinary, her smell, her taste, her face, her talent. She was no different than any person I passed on the street, or sitting on a bus, or on the train, and that when she was struggling, and begging me for food or money after failing, I would pretend like I had never seen her in my life, and I'd jet away from here, and leave her to ride the train in circles, underground, going nowhere.

That's when she kissed me. It was the very first time she ever had, and it was angry, full of nothing but rage, her mouth warm and wet with saliva, her lips tasting of the salt of both her tears and mine. I could feel her mouth tremble as she cried, forcing her tongue to push back mine, invading my mouth without allowing me to do the same to her. I hadn't realized I'd closed my eyes till I had to open them, to find hers staring wide

in fear to the side at her parents, who were running toward us, their screams unintelligible -- a tangle of profanity and disapproval. She then bit down hard on my lip, unsatisfied until her teeth had sunk into the flesh. When she finally pulled away, I knew there was as much of my blood in my mouth as there was in hers. She covered her face in her hands and ran away, her parents running after her. When we were called to line up to go back to the field for the award ceremony, we were told by the staff that April Earl had fallen ill and had to be taken home.

As we stood in retreat, the announcer began her speech, but I had no mind to listen at that point, my tongue pressing into the gash on the inside of my lip, still pulsing red hot and full of blood. I didn't need to listen to the speech anyway, having heard it a million times. It's the same speech that's given at every competition, starting by asking the audience to give each child of each band a hearty round of applause, to recognize how every single one of them have sacrificed their summer to be part of a team, part of a family of music players and lovers, working together to achieve a common goal of excellence. We were the blueprint of the future -- a future that promises to be led by individuals who understand that with teamwork, and dedication, we can collectively lift each other up, stand on equal ground, and prove success for one is success for all. It's a rousing speech, and everyone stands and applauds, exposing the sweat stains in the armpits of their shirts or the seat of their shorts. But eventually everyone sits down and falls silent, waiting for the placements to be announced to find out who won.

Chapter 2: The Past is Always Beautiful

John Adams had convinced himself of his job security because he had the face of a man who hadn't lived for 100 years. It was the face of a theologian, a philosopher, a mathematician, a clergymen, an architect, a politician, and he'd portrayed them all, to one degree or another, for either The History Channel, National Geographic, and when his work was outsourced, the BBC.

He had chosen his headshot within an instant of seeing it. He handed it to casting directors with a firm affirmation – a stiff chin, a knowing glance, a determined brow: things he'd learned to do from his first reenacting gig as one member of the Medici family, who's known for prudence, for their keen eye and unwavering demand for perfection.

The night John finally got his headshot in the mail he moved his daughter Susanna's "Middle School Graduation/Beginning of Summer" party/sleepover to his ex-wife's house so he could stare at it by candlelight. It was a night of historic humidity – the air density muted the glow of streetlamps so they blushed instead of shined, like the dewy lights of a Van Gogh painting - but he shut off his A/C anyway, opened his windows, and let the wet vapors and cicada songs cocoon him, watching the lines of his face grow more and less stark in the wavering flame. And ever since that night, he has suggested that casting directors do the same, view the headshot by candlelight, because

the man in the picture would look like any member of the continental Congress, or any relative of the Tudors, or any colleague of Aristotle. By candlelight he was the vision of the learned men of history, with sunken eyes and liver spotted forehead, and a shadowed, sullen face that brushes its cheek against divine wisdom and death.

The resume on the back of John's headshot was dazzling, according to the casting director of a Napoleon Bonaparte documentary he auditioned for last summer. It was a collection of bit parts and big names: "Scared Inmate #5," "Rasputin," "Seneca," "Guy w/ Hot Dog," "Pieter Brueghel The Elder," "Dead Man in Panda Costume." He had started reenacting as a means to get his foot in the door for larger parts on the big screen, but the work came steadily, and he decided that it was easiest this way – acting in movies and commercials and television is a young man's sport, jockeying for roles with all the inexhaustible energy and impatience of a young heart. But in documentaries that celebrated the lives of century-long dead white men, John discovered his bastion – figures of reality, of importance that were too grayed for younger men, that required skin too wrinkled and noses too chewed by age for younger men to qualify for.

*

John drove from San Francisco to the UCLA campus on a Saturday afternoon in early June to watch the last volleyball game of his daughter's undergraduate years, and just as all the redwoods and golden grassed hills turned into palm trees and flatland, he got a call from his agent Zachery, who John had always figured was too old for the name "Zachery." When John answered, he greeted Zachery in the loudest, best version of his own voice, then waited to make sure Zachery hadn't called him by mistake, meaning to call the other John Adams he represented - a gay porn star that, as far as John could tell

from how often Zachery made the mistake, did very well for himself and was in great demand.

“John, great news. So, you know I love you, do anything for you,” Zachery cooed while the sound of balls hitting rackets echoed with a steady rhythmic *clop-clop* in the background.

“Mmhmm”

“So, prepare to hug me, love me, for the rest of your life. Pulled a few strings and finally got you an audition for that John Adams documentary. Casting starts next Saturday, filming the week after. And by the 4th of July, I’ll have every history-loving nut watching you play the most important man of the Revolution. Gotta go. I’ll email the details to you when I get back to the office.”

John waited on the line for a few seconds, knowing Zachery always forgot to hang up his phone, listening to him scream at another man in the background about him being a cheating ass. Then John hung up.

*

John Adams knew he was the best at what he did not simply because he had the face of a man that was an important historical figure, but because he was methodical in his portrayal. It was that devotion that placed him and other “Progressives,” like his friend Gary, just ahead of others who only do Reenacting for another credit on their resume in order to eventually get bigger roles, the “Farbs” and “Mainstreams.”

John and Gary rarely auditioned for the same parts because Gary was fatter, more rotund than John, and spent most of the year auditioning for parts like “Benjamin Franklin” or “William Howard Taft,” sometimes convincing casting directors that some

figures were actually fatter than popularly believed, with most of his winter devoted to being Santa Claus for different theaters and the annual San Francisco Christmas parade. They'd meet for lunch and talk about all the research they'd put into learning the individual they're auditioning for, or playing. Gary mumbled his way into learning Latin and overcame his fear of fire in order to play Emperor Nero, standing near open flames for hours at a time in order to find a delight, a pleasure in setting things ablaze. John Adams learned to paint with his left hand to play Leonardo Di Vinci by binding his right hand until he was able to function with his left entirely.

But being the second president of the United States had started as a joke one evening between John, his roommate Ben, and Ben's girlfriend Rachel during their first year of law school. They had all sat in a circle, the books and class notes they studied webbing the space between them, and talked about the two Johns as if they were the same person. The next morning John had to laugh the idea away as he walked from class to class, reminding himself that only crazy people in padded rooms think they have the same life as some historical figure because they share the same name. But Rachel, in any moment she could without Ben noticing, would mention the similarity to John, sighing with a half-smile how fascinated she was by how rare it had to be that any "John Adams"

should also become a lawyer. She'd then say with a wink how wonderful it felt being so close to a man as famous as him that she could stroke his hair and rub his knee.

It was in those nightly phone calls with Rachel while Ben was in class that John felt less guilty about being John Adams, surprised by the ease of letting the man's headstrong and confident nature pad his ego beyond its usual limits, guide his actions in ways that made him more assertive, and dictate his words from the language of asking to

the language of demanding. And in the rush of the moment, heady with the power of seducing another man's girlfriend for his own, he called Rachel "his Abigail." When she laughed and replied by calling him "Mr. President" with a breathy sigh, John Adams decided that being the second president of the United States was just a natural fit, a buried innate talent he had possessed for years that was revealing itself to him its potential value.

Rachel had agreed to allow their daughter to be named Susanna when she was born just as long as he told no one – to everyone else she would be known as Susan. He had bought Rachel three dogs for her birthday, Juno, Mark, and Satan, and that night she whispered to him with a half-joking smile while her legs were tangled between his that her real wish, what she really wanted, was to be a real first lady, and married to a real president of the United States, because she had the poise and the nerve, and she knew he had the guts and the charisma. But when he left law school after his sixth time of failing the bar exam, Rachel began to recoil with a little more disgust each time he called her Abigail, finally leaving him when he decided to become an actor.

So, as everyone stood to sing the national anthem before the volleyball match began, John Adams enjoyed taking his time in becoming "John Adams" again, finding comfort in its old grooves, its familiarity, relieved that it still gave him the same high as the first time he called Rachel "his Abigail," - He didn't recognize the lyrics of the "Star Spangled Banner," but he did recognize its melody as the drinking song "To Anacreon in Heaven." So he lifted his bottle of water and sang along.

*

John waited for Susanna near the parking lot as the game let out with flowers in celebration. He hadn't seen his daughter since she and her boyfriend Eliad got engaged, and as she strode toward him with a winner's smile, back straight, confident in her height, hair pulled away from her face, comfortable with every inch of her body, he felt incredibly guilty and petty for wishing that shrink until she was five again, standing at his knees, begging to play tickle monster or piggy-back.

"No, he's fine," she breathed into her phone with a smile. "He doesn't care. I promise." She made a face at John and pointed to the phone, implying whoever she was talking to would not let the matter go.

"Okay, I give up, I'll ask. Dad? It's Eli," Susanna motioned, trying to give the phone to John. "He's been trying to call and apologize to you since last Thanksgiving, but I won't let him. But you know Mira and Yvan, they're *so* traditional, so when they found out their only son got engaged without asking for my dad's permission, they flipped out. They practically wanted to kick him out during Thanksgiving dinner until he came back with your approval. I keep telling him you don't care, but he won't let it go. Will you please tell him you're not offended?"

"Oh, no," John muttered at Susanna and her phone, waving his hands as if trying to stop someone from running into him with a bike. "Honestly, I couldn't be happier."

"Did you hear him, Eli? He doesn't care. I told you. I'll talk to you later. I love you too. Bye."

They hugged and talked about her courses, and her summer internship as a law clerk, and the upcoming wedding, which was on Susanna's birthday, the weekend after Labor Day. While leaning into her car, searching for something, she asked about John's

new job bartending at Applebee's and congratulated him on finally getting to play John Adams.

"Well, it's just an audition, but I'm going to get it. I'm sure of it," he beamed, pressing his chest out to declare it as truth and fact.

"Oh, I know you will," she offered, still rifling through the pile of shoes and clothes in her backseat. "Those HBO people don't know what the hell they're doing up there. Paul Giamatti. You've been John Adams for 60 years. That should have been you up there."

"Yeah, but that had lines, it was basically a movie. And they needed big names," John tried, having already decided that the point of the HBO special was to entertain, not inform.

"They gave up a real life John Adams just so they could cast a fake one," Susanna spat, pulling out a sweater from the floorboard of her car to put on over her volleyball uniform. "But who cares. Their loss. The History Channel is where you belong. They always like you, and they give you the best parts. I know I've already told you how my anthropology professor said you were the *perfect* Sigmund Freud. It was like watching the real thing, she said. HBO is fluff. History is the real deal. And I'll be right there watching you on the fourth. I'll make sure Eli watches this one too - he owes me since he never saw the one about that Dutch painter. Which reminds me."

Susanna dived back into her car to search for something else, and for a brief moment John heard her giggle, like when she discovered how a swing works for the first time, and John turned away and stared into the sun, prepared to blame his tears on the sunlight in his eyes.

After retrieving a pen from her backseat, Susanna pulled out John's hand and wrote an address and time on it.

"Be there next Saturday, that time. I need your help with my dress fitting."

"Susan," John started, coughing to keep himself from calling her Susanna, "Don't girls try out wedding dresses with their friends? You don't need your dad with you."

Susanna closed her eyes and shook her head, unconvinced, refusing to accept his reasons for not going.

"Besides," he continued, "my audition is that same Saturday."

"Those auditions are always at night, and I specifically chose a boutique back home so you wouldn't have to drive all the way down here two Saturdays in a row. I want you there. Please, for me. You have to."

As she held his hands with both of hers, John glanced only a moment at Susanna's engagement ring, a subtle silver band with a decent sparkle on a sunny day - the ring of a woman who hadn't quite become a financial success, but knew what she wanted, and was going to get it by any means necessary. So John sighed and agreed, unwilling to resist playing his part in how his daughter wanted to begin the quickly forming path of the rest of her life.

*

That following Wednesday, Gary came down to the Applebees near his job as a coffee shop barista to visit John during their lunch breaks. They settled into their usual booth and talked about the John Adam audition before John, without meaning to, mentioned his daughter's upcoming wedding and the dress fitting on Saturday.

“So, your audition and the dress fitting are on the same day? Can’t you do the audition first, or can’t she move the time of the fitting?” Gary asked while eating almost all of John’s boneless wings, knowing how important it was to audition in the right state of mind, clear of any thoughts that aren’t authentic to that historical figure.

“It’s my daughter’s wedding dress fitting. I’m not asking her to move it,” John finished.

“You know what. I have no sympathy for you,” Gary began with a laugh as a group of servers, all twenty-somethings waiting for their big break in the business, began singing and dancing to Village People’s “YMCA” behind the bar.

“In fact, I envy you. Susan has her shit together. Eliad is a great guy with a great job, and she’ll have a great job too. My daughter...I’m worried about her.”

“What did Holly do now?” John laughed. “That girl gets into a lot of trouble for a twelve year old.”

“So I’m doing her laundry last Saturday while reading about Winfield Scott, because the last time I made her do it she bleached all her damn clothes – which I *still* think she did on purpose so I’d do them for her – and she’s on the phone with one her friends from school, right? They’re talking about boys and clothes and other girl things, and then I hear her say that she wants to have a baby at 16 so that her and her daughter – because apparently she gets to just *choose* what sex it’ll be – will always look like twins.”

“Gary, she’s twelve,” John wagged a boneless wing at the end of his fork at Gary. “It’s a phase, trust me. Susan once threatened to run away because I wouldn’t fly her to Orlando, Florida - she’d already been to Disney Land, and everyone else is going to Disney World now. But she’ll grow out of it, and before you know it she’ll move away,

and you're going to miss the hell out of her, and all of this stuff you're complaining about is what you'll miss the most."

Gary laughed, his stomach bumping the table, spilling water out of the glasses. "Hell no, I won't. I'm counting down the years. When she graduates high school – if I haven't killed her first - I'm free."

"Let me ask you something," John began while getting up to clean the table to start his second shift. "Why are you growing your beard so early? It's June. Santa isn't till December."

"Oh, I'm playing gay bear Santa for the pride parade in a few weeks." Gary pulled out a folded picture in his pocket of him in his costume for the parade, wearing chaps and an open red jacket, holding a whip, driving a sled pulled by eight lightly muscled, hairless boys in harnesses, red glowing noses, and antlers.

"Have you ever heard of this *bear* thing?" Gary asked in a whisper, not wanting to offend anyone with how little he knew about gay culture. "Gay men *love* me. They even want to fly me to Toronto in a few months for a Bear Pride parade up there. All I have to do is walk around shirtless and I get paid way more than I ever got Reenacting. Besides, I haven't gotten cast for a Reenacting gig in months. I'm going try for Winfield Scott in July, but lately every job I go for has been given to some young go-go dancing Farb or Mainstreamer. So if you ever decide to finally eat something and put on a little weight, you can make real money with being a bear."

"And steal the last good roles of famous fat men from you? It's all you have left. I couldn't be so heartless."

As Gary danced the Achy Breaky Heart with the servers, John began to rub his thumb into his palm, like a mortar to a pestle, before realizing he was partially rubbing away the bridal shop address. Within the instant of being reminded of his daughter's fitting and the wedding the dress is for, his laughter stopped, his smile faded, his stomach dropped, and he felt empty of all his vital organs.

*

The part of The Castro where John lived was warm and sunny on the Saturday morning of the fitting, but grew colder and darker with the fog from the Bay as he made his way to the boutique in Haight-Ashbury. Susanna had been inside the dressing room for half an hour debating with the shop owner about some stitching or beading on the dress when John, sitting in an overstuffed white chair, watched different couples pass through the fog, window shopping, staring at the dresses, a few even walking inside. John was surprised that usually it was the man pulling the woman, making a bee-line for the girdles and corsets.

The shop owner, a floating, breathy wood nymph of a human being named Sandra, would occasionally ask John about Susanna and her wedding, which John didn't really have a hand in preparing. He'd told Susanna he'd help where he could, financially, but both he and his ex-wife Rachel were not in the position to really do any of the heavy lifting.

"Most of the details are being ironed out with the groom's family," John finished.

"Ah yes. Eli Patel. Fine fellow," Sandra sang, which made John groan and roll his eyes. He did think Eli was a great guy, but to hear a woman dressed in Grecian robes with

twigs in her hair talk like a cockney street urchin bothered him – the voice and the clothes, the look, should match.

When Sandra asked John if he planned on coming back soon for his own wedding with his own special someone – “It’s never too late” she reasoned – he laughed for a moment before realizing he hadn’t thought about dating anyone in months, which made him pause. He had a healthy sexual appetite, still found women desirable. But even with Rachel he never wanted a long term relationship, and half-knew the day he proposed that the marriage shouldn’t and wouldn’t last, something he admitted and apologized for to her during their divorce. Marriage was just what “John Adams” would do, and did, believed in, and dedicated himself to. But John himself had never really wanted to marry, or have a long-term relationship, and always found it to be an unusual trait of his – Man *should* desire a wife.

If ever asked by the therapist he’d see if he could afford one why he had never desired a long-term relationship, John would say that his mother complained to him as a child each time she got angry with his father that she only agreed to marry him because he had the same last name as her. She’d laugh at his impotency, and cry when she felt scared he’d hit her, but she got what she wanted in the end, and so did his father: a marriage that lasted for the rest of their lives. He’d then say to his therapist - a man that looked like himself playing Sigmund Freud - that for whatever it was worth, he was glad he didn’t pass his aversion to a serious relationship on to his daughter.

In the time that John spent waiting for Susanna to show him her dress, he had convinced himself that the shoes would be six sizes too large. He knew that her corset wouldn’t fit because it was made to wrap around the torso of a full grown woman and not

a child - a little girl parading in her mother's dresses, with a face clowned in make-up, and a bath towel flowing down her back from the top of her head, with imaginary birds carrying the ends of her train. He had decided that this morning would end with Susanna crying, frightened, trying to escape from within a cloud of tulle, and that when he dove in to save her from drowning in the beads and feathers and white puffy silk, he'd dress her in her OshKosh B'gosh overalls and carry her back home, set her on the floor to play with their dogs, or laugh when she begged him to be F.D. Roosevelt because she liked the funny way he walked, and John Adams would do anything to make Susanna Adams happy.

So when she emerged from the dressing room, smiling, spinning in her dress to show John every angle, he felt betrayed and lied to – every stitch, every subtle beading, each shoe and every bow fit her body exactly, as if she only just came into existence as this woman, in that dress, and that the two had always belonged to one another. And when Sandra the storeowner called her Susan Patel – “you're a vision of a dream” she sighed – John Adams realized he had never seen this woman in his entire life. Susan Patel was a complete stranger to him. And while he wanted so desperately to know who she was, what she was like, where she came from, he couldn't shake his panic in being unable to find his daughter, knowing the time had come to finally take her home.

*

John Adams knew he had found his destined profession in being a Reenactor, in giving life to century-long dead men of history, in making them relevant for people who only knew them as a name in a textbook, because of his face: shapeless and pudgy, eyes with as little glint or spark as anyone having seen remarkable and well documented

tragedy, harrowed great woe of note, experienced profound, and now infamous loss, and a thick, unkempt brow furrowed with the genius of a man that created something immortal, that shall be revered, worshiped, and admired for the duration of humanity. These things, he knew, couldn't be faked with make-up.

And that was why, when he entered the tiny casting office – a storefront in Union Square that used to be a bookstore, between a vacated Blimpies and a San Francisco paraphernalia shop - he knew the part of John Adams was his to lose.

There were a few men there, “Farbs,” and John knew they were, as usual, completely unprepared and unqualified, dressed in their normal street clothes with one of them, a co-worker of his at Applebee's, in his serving uniform, going to his dinner shift after the audition, flirting with girls as they walked by the storefront window. Most of them were “Mainstreams” though, taking the initiative to buy a powdered wig, or attach a prosthetic nose. But it was their practicing of monologues from some new play or movie, and their young, fresh, juvenile faces, free of wrinkle, unblemished by experience, that

would be his coup, as it always should be. And to get this role would make his career. It was the kind of role that separated the “Farbs” and “Mainstreams” from the “Progressives,” the real Reenactors, the ones that know their historical figure inside and out - what foot they'd use to kick a rock, which hand they'd use to motion a eureka. And John knew no figure more entirely than the man of his namesake.

John. Adams.

John Adams was charismatic with his motions, dramatic in flare, teetering on flamboyant, and there was no room for understatement: he was a man with the revolution of a nation on his shoulders, and by god, was he going to make that known to everyone

around him. And so would he, John Adams, to the casting directors. He'd practiced dictating the Declaration of Independence to his three dogs, as stand-ins for Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin through heated pointing, enraptured stamping, fist pounding, and air wringing, all traits of John Adams. But all that was merely supplementary; it was his face that would get the job done.

*

John Adams stared at the casting panel – two of the men he recognized from a previous job as Marco Polo. But the woman with them, a representative from The History Channel, looked John up and down with a curious eye, and it made John feel like she was trying to decide if the man in front of her had accidentally walked into the room without knowing where he was, unaware of just how much he didn't belong. They all sat behind a table in the set John would make his home, a modeled replica of Carpenters Hall, with all the windows looking onto the half painted surroundings of Philadelphia.

The woman talked about the project for a while, explaining how The History Channel has been wanting to make a thrilling documentary about the man who cried Revolution when the rest of the colonies said no– He was a rebel, he was a free mind, with a great heart, and a passion for a nation that didn't even exist yet. But the woman said all of this to John with a stinging sigh of apology, as if trying to explain why she had to disappoint him, like how John had explained to Susanna why her parents couldn't live together, or why she had to stay with her mother a little longer because he had to work more night shifts, or why he had to miss this volleyball game or that parent-teacher night because he was stuck on a set or had an audition at the same time, and how it was all in order to eventually become John Adams.

And that's when John realized a number of things all at once: that Susanna Adams had never existed - that she'd always been Susan - and that he had never been John Adams, never been lawyer, never been a politician, never had a wife he loved. And he forced himself to confront the fact that the daughter he thought was his was never his to keep forever in the first place. And instead of starting his pace with his left foot, or standing with ease with his left hand's knuckle placed against his hip, or being spectacular, or impressive, or a politician, or the father of a fledgling nation, or the president of United States, he stood in front of the panel and cried as John Adams, an old man without a daughter.

*

On the Fourth of July, the sun melted into the horizon in a haze of purple-blue-orange while Gary and John shared a beer in John's living room, and Eliad and Susan sat on his stoop outside, watching kids set off fireworks in the street. When Gary asked John if he'd seen the John Adams documentary, John just shook his head no, but his co-worker at Applebee's had been bragging about landing the gig for weeks.

"It was hilarious," Greg said. "They had this professor explain how John Adams was the James Dean of the 1700s. The guy basically just stood there brooding the whole time. He kept pursing his lips and sucking in his cheeks and cutting his eyes. It was more like a commercial for cologne than a documentary."

John walked to the window and stared down at Eliad, watching him hold Susan with a warm intensity, nuzzling her ear.

“So what are you going to do now?” Greg asked without waiting for an answer, rolling out of his chair onto the floor to chase John’s dogs out of the living room into the kitchen.

It was a question John didn’t have an exact answer for. When he’d called his agent Zachery to fire him the previous week, he was terrified. At 60 he gave up a career he’d spent most of his life creating, and released a dream, a man he had been chasing for his entire adult life. But when he saw his daughter and her fiancé walk toward a group of children to help them send a rocket into the sky, John sighed in awe as the rocket burst into a dazzling fire of red and gold, convincing himself that the rattling fear in his chest for his future and its uncertainty was a good thing.

Chapter 3: Go-Kart King

Our first date was a Sunday brunch, and we were best friends before the waiter could take our order. The talk was bite sized at first - pleasant and not in the least bit intrusive or substantial. But at some point in time, without any real definitive moment to specify, he wasn't just the guy I had that one date with- Bob or John or Tommy or something; He was Sean, from Salisbury, who hates broccoli, loves football, has a twin brother, owns a pet toad, loves strawberry flavored everything. The waiter, a wide-eyed, red headed, country-twanged, pink freckled slip of a girl named Robin had called us an adorable couple with a sincere smile and a hushed tone so the people around us couldn't hear that we weren't just "buddies" or "pals" or "bros."

Sean ordered first, asking for warmed blueberry syrup on his eggs, apple juice instead of orange juice, bacon instead of sausage, wheat toast with strawberry jam, and coffee, no cream, with lots of sugar. I had wanted to order the same thing, but doing that on a date is such a clear, desperate attempt to be liked, a begging whine to be accepted and thought of as a soul mate, giving him the impression I'm already, in my mind, picking out a California king bed for "our" place together, looking for a yard big enough for "our" English bulldogs, furnishing a living room large enough to house our mutual friends we invite over. We talk to them holding each other by the hip, none of us wearing cologne, preferring beer to \$13 vodka and cranberry juice, happy we don't have to "hook

up” with random guys we met in some bar that we’ll never see again, those Bobs and Johns and Tommies out there.

One of the tables, a family of three, dad, mom, and daughter, stopped in front of our table before leaving, making Sean pause midsentence. They had been staring at the pair of us through the only thing separating their table from ours, a diamond woven wooden divider covered in framed pictures of old country singers, antique ads with women holding bottles of Clorox or boxes of Tide, movie posters for Rock Hudson’s “Giant,” Randolph Scott’s “Ride the High Country,” and guys in big hats riding bulls.

The dad, all torso, shoulders and gut, dressed for spring in the middle of autumn with his t-shirt tucked into his shorts, cleared his throat and stuck out his hand for Sean, recognizing him as one of the mechanics from the place up the street that fixes his Buick. Sean, without a smirk or smile, shook the stranger’s hand with a firm affirmation of recognition, an acknowledgment of their mutual respect for lug nuts, or gauges, or shock absorbers, for knowing why this type of oil is bad for that type of engine, for being able to describe, in detail, the difference between the octane ratings of 87, 89, and 91 for gasoline.

Sean was proud of his work, and happy to talk about it, as long as he was at work when talking about it, like the first time I’d met him when I’d brought my car to his garage for an oil change. I’d asked just enough questions about car upkeep to bide my time in figuring out if he’d be offended or flattered if I asked him out. At that time, he was eager to talk about cars, never once breaking eye contact or losing his half smile. But every time I asked a question over our brunch about fixing cars, he’d change the subject,

clearly wanting to keep the two, his personal life and his career, separate from one another.

“Did you know Randolph Scott was gay?” Sean asked me while I watched the family as they walked out the restaurant, the daughter at just the right age to make the way her dad was carrying her inappropriate. I looked at him, brow furrowed, confused.

“Randolph Scott.” He pointed to the picture of the man in the movie poster, holding a pistol at his hip. “He was from here in Charlotte, too” he said, stressing “too” so I would understand that Randolph would be a friend of Sean’s because they were so alike, and that if given the chance, Sean would have had sex with him.

We sat in the rocking chairs on the wooden front porch of the restaurant while Sean showed me his pet toad he’d found while fishing, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him it was a frog.

The subject of go-karts came up while discussing how competitive we both are.

Growing up, a neighbor who had lived down the street had built a go-kart and drove it all the time. We had nothing else in common except for that little candy-red, white racing-stripped speed demon, but it was enough for me to fake a love for hockey so he’d let me drive his go-kart. When I told Sean this as a way to warn him about my expert handling of go-karts, his laugh was full of indignation and mean spirit. So I challenged him, betting I’d win.

“I’m a betting man,” he said, chest out. “What do I get when I win?”

“Sex. I’ll bottom.”

“No, not that.” he said, looking away, suddenly uncomfortable, even ashamed. “If you win,” he stated in a rush, “You get Fred, my toad” lifting him up.

“If you win, you get my watch,” I said, trying not to be offended, wondering if he thinks less of me for bringing up sex already. We hugged, just long enough to be intimate, but too short to be romantic, and I left him that afternoon stooping over his frog as it hopped in a spit of grass next to the parking lot.

The following week, we met outside the arcade on a cool, bright Saturday afternoon. I walked over to his truck and asked to hold his frog, sitting in a plastic box in the passenger seat.

“I’ve already made him a space. He’s going to like living with me,” I joked.

Sean just asked for him back, told me to wait for him inside, not amused.

We smiled and nodded children away from our knees as they begged for money to play more games, their eyes wide, wired with the whirl of colors and sounds.

Our strides were purposeful and long because the race had already begun. Sean turned his ballcap on backwards to avoid headwind. I’d zipped my windbreaker to do the same.

Some teenage girl in a black and white referee jersey read the rules in gibberish over the microphone.

I took note of the drivers, mostly teens, a few kids, a couple of parents with their son or daughter in a side car with a fake steering wheel to turn for fun. When I looked over to Sean, I tried not to be disappointed at the clenched jaw, the hard grip he knuckled his steering wheel with, the determined stare he gave the track.

“Chill,” I tried, but he just shook his head.

“If this is about the frog, I don’t actually want him,” I tried again.

“He’s a toad,” was all Sean said as the whistle blew and he barreled out of the tunnel.

By lap three Sean’s go-kart started to sputter, slowing him down, not enough to ever be passed by any of the other teens, the guys bumping into the girls, making them scream and laugh, but always a distant second to me. He’d take the lead, sputter, I’d pass, and he’d spit some curse at me like I was his enemy.

On the last lap, I started tapping on my break, feigning frustration, remembering the way my dad would fake losing at checkers to me, or the way my first boyfriend would fake his moans of ecstasy and passion when I had sex with him, because the truth mattered to me, and I wanted to be the best, and those are things a man should be able to do well. Unfortunately the truth was that I wasn’t the best at that time, I didn’t do those things well, and they knew I wasn’t ready to hear that from them, not yet.

I rolled into the tunnel, firmly in second place, got out of the go-kart and started to give Sean my watch. But he just shook his head with a smile that made me feel slightly disgusted with him.

“Don’t feel bad. My job is cars,” he said, full of placative sympathy and woe, and a pit of hatred for him dropped to the bottom of my stomach

We had agreed to meet at his place the next week, and with every passing day that hatred sprouted and coiled around my feelings for him. I realized I was being ridiculous in my anger: *I* let him win. But I had *let* him win, and he bragged about my loss every day: “Maybe you’re a better cook than you are a racer,” “I’m as great at dancing as I am at beating your butt in a race,” “I could put Fred behind a wheel and you’d even eat his dust.”

By Saturday evening, while we drank and watched his TV, I recoiled at his every touch. In certain light, his face was more cherub like, in a permanent pout, on the verge of a tantrum— a child without a toy or a baby without their bottle. When he moved to kiss me while we sat on his couch, I turned away, so desperately wanting to be able to admit to him how I let him win. If I could admit that to him, it would make me want him again, would make me think of him as more than a child, and would prove that I'm more than a child myself.

Instead, I just made out with him. When Sean left to cook dinner, I took Fred the toad/frog from his cage and threw him off the balcony. When Sean realized Fred was missing, I wanted so badly to feel guilty for finding such joy in listening to him whine in sorrow.

Chapter 4: The Observation of Children

Ashley Nancy Keller used her right hand to stroke her black hair, brushed to the left side of her shoulder to show her good side, preparing for an interview that she knew wouldn't be video recorded. It was rare for her to wear her hair down, since she often found every opportunity to flaunt her long neck. But she had quietly confessed to how tired she was today, and that to put it up in a stylish bun with pins would have been too much of a hassle.

She craned her neck back and forth in slight impatience, waiting for someone to ask a question, like there were other matters she had to attend to that were worthier of her time. Whether that was true or not is irrelevant; it is almost universally agreed upon amongst her fellow faculty that Keller must always be front and center, and that her tiny surroundings in a wheat colored portable at Forester Middle School was as criminal as of stuffing a peacock in a brown, label-less shoebox. It was the largest portable the middle school had to offer - but a portable still.

Mrs. Keller had moved from fidgeting with her hair to straightening the collar of her blue blouse when the first question was asked. She shifted her attention with a delicate slowness away from her collage of victorious moments and smiling faces, sports newspaper clippings, posters, and photographs of the University of South Carolina, all stapled, glued, and taped to one of the four faux-wood walls, to eventually look straight ahead.

Her pupils grew smaller as the heft of the question asked finally registered somewhere within her, followed by a short, intense burst of repeated blinking.

“When did I begin teaching?”

As she contemplated her answer, slight apprehension furrowed and edged itself in the skin of her face. Her back straightened, lengthened, and she crossed her legs gingerly, folding her slender arms at the same time. After a brief pause, looking maybe mildly offended by starting with a question that could reveal her age, she answered.

“I started teaching in 1990. You wouldn’t think it, it hasn’t been that long since I started, but things were very different then,” she said with a sigh weighted with aloofness or dismissal, her eyes still partially on the USC shrine collage.

“The first school I taught at was Manchester Middle School in Pinewood, South Carolina, teaching math. It was a small little school in an even smaller town. All of it was very different from Chicago. It was difficult making that transition.”

Chicago, Illinois is where she grew up, had her first kiss, hit a dog during her driving test, stalked Simon LeBon as he was shopping one afternoon in Lakeview for five entire blocks, won “Ms. Chicago ’81,” and overcame her fear of clowns. All student teachers who work under her come to know Chicago as if it were their home, as if they had hit a dog with their car. They could be kidnapped, blindfolded, and dropped in the middle of the city, and would instantly know exactly where to find “Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum,” “Lincoln Park High School,” and would know without hesitation to always take the blue line to O’Hare airport instead of driving, if running late.

While becoming experts in the layout of Chicago, each student teacher also acquires under the tutelage of Mrs. Keller insight into the many phases of her life. There

was her “teacher” phase when she was six, her “Ms. America” phase when she was ten, her “Broadway” phase when she was thirteen, her “recording artist” phase when she was 16, and then a return to her “teacher” phase when she was twenty-four, this time knowing that real students aren’t as quiet and well behaved as the stuffed animals she had placed neatly in a row as a child. The phases are titled and categorized by her, separated and organized for her student teachers like boxes in a garage stacked atop one another. Each one is labeled and holds artifacts identified with those phases in her life and student teachers are to study them meticulously till they’ve learned whatever lesson they needed to learn from them.

When she moved to Rock Hill, SC, attracted to the aged, snowless campus of Winthrop University, she met her soon-to-be husband and they settled in Blythewood. His poster sized pictures are cleverly placed in at least every part of the room so no matter where you turn, one of them is visible at all times. He’s a handsome man, well groomed, too self-aware to ever be pictured wearing a sweater vest, but unable to successfully wear a dress shirt untucked without looking homeless. He has a large brown beard, with tufts of silver bursting from beneath his bottom lip, which is where he gets his resemblance to a younger Michael McDonald. But in each of those strategically placed photos, he is with his obviously more attractive wife, whose sleek figure, high cheek bones, and stark black hair would be more fitting on the cover of a harlequin novel.

There was a time line, a sequence, to the panorama as well, aging from young to old as the pictures went old to new: budding love starting at the door in the back of the room, wedding by her desk on the left wall, children by her dry eraser board on the right wall. And in every one of them, she was defiant and unwavering in her contentedness.

Big toothy smiles were a rarity for her, but so were frowns. Instead, she always had a grin, and never a wrinkle in sight. She often expressed her satisfaction with living in South Carolina to others who would ask about the transition from bustling Chicago to rustic Blythewood. She did, after all, have a shrine to USC. There was her palmetto tree figurines scattered throughout the room. Her choice of blouse was more often state flag indigo than anything else. A rotating mobile of tinkling little metal pieces carved into the shape of the state of South Carolina hung from the ceiling in the corner of the room. The state flag was her doormat. But even as she shifts in her plastic blue rolling chair, peering away, as if capable of seeing through the portable, through the grass hills, the farm sheds, and the walls of pine trees in Blythewood, her awareness, her sights, always appear to span far beyond the shoe box she resided in. But at the exact moment when silence goes from pleasant to awkward, she bit her bottom lip, shifted her eyes, smiled, laughed through her nose, and continued on about Manchester Middle School.

“It was very rural. They couldn’t even afford the bare essentials to teaching. Growing up in Chicago, you always had what was necessary to teach and learn. Here, you had nothing. They gave you a chalkboard, a pointing stick, and a pat on the back as if to say ‘*good luck, you’ll need it.*’” Her hands floated in the air as she simulated the pat, like it actually happened. Her hands often move when she’s talking in class about the importance of English literature to her seventh grade students, but when she talks about her life, she moves them with such zeal it’s a wonder they stay attached to her wrists. They wave, float, flip, flutter, whip, grip, waft, and pinch, and that's only the right hand. But both hands slowly dropped to her lap, folded neatly, as she fell silent, staring at her dry eraser board. No written homework today. Read pages 30-50.

“Then there’s this business of teaching students who just don’t want to learn,” she said as her hands took to the skies again. “They just didn’t want to be here. And then you have their parents to deal with, and they blame you when their child fails. I had a meeting with one this morning actually, told the parent it was my recommendation that the child be removed from this school, but *only* so that he could be placed in one that could cater to his individual needs more, where he won’t be such an obstruction in the educating of other students. He needs greater care and guidance than what only a public teacher can provide. But did I get an ounce of understanding or support from them or where I was coming from? No. Not even the slightest-”

There was a sudden pause. Her head turned away, looking at some translucent specter hanging motionless on the other side of the room by her desk. Then it made a noise, a soft muffled click, like those heard from an attentive baby monitor. Then another. Then another. Keller shot from her seat and almost leapt to the phone on her desk, looking over it, reading the ID.

“Hello?” she shouted at it without picking up the receiver, so tense her voice almost cracked. “Hello?”

The only response it made was the sound of hurried shuffling as the person on the other end hung up. She then picked up the receiver and said she had to call the principle, and to wait outside until she finished.

She emerged shortly after, immediately stating it was time for lunch. So we walked down the swollen, water damaged wooden steps, and strode side by side, heading for the main part of the school. The autumn weather was being deceitful, sitting warm while blowing cold.

As we walked to the school, Keller began talking about all the past student teachers who've interviewed her for their practicum, always failing to have enough questions prepared, which was the exact situation we found ourselves in at that moment.

During a practicum, a student teacher is required to supervise a classroom, watch the students, learn how to teach from the teacher - be a silent spectator. Halfway through the semester, a required interview must be given to the teacher by the observing student to pass the practicum so they can become teachers themselves. This is supposed to give the practicum student an honest account of what it's like to be a teacher, how it feels to be around children all day, how they cope, what they do; The unspoken but clear motive for all of this is to help the student decide whether they actually want to be a teacher or not. Keller often comments on her previous practicum students and their incertitude on this matter by this point of their observation, which is always a small comfort for the next student teacher, to know that many before them have fallen into the same trap: undecided, unprepared, and out of questions.

By the time we reached the main hallway which headed to the cafeteria, plastered with orange brown yellow paper hands in the shapes of little turkeys, the only sound in the corridors of Forester Middle School was the echoes of a teacher lecturing from an open door classroom down the hall. As Keller lead into the cafeteria, there was a wall of "food smell," with no one scent being any more distinct than the others. Instead, as we walked past tables of silenced 6th graders with heads down, currently serving out a punishment for something they had done, and stood next to the food, the pizza smelled like what the jello, the chicken, the fruit cocktail, the walls, and the counters smelled like - food, just food; the smell of something edible and not rotten.

We paid our \$2.50 and made our way to the teacher's lounge. Doing this for a year every Tuesday and Thursday, student teachers get used to this concept of going to the teacher's lounge. When we first start, we aren't sure whether to enter or not. We aren't teachers...yet. True, we weren't in middle school anymore, and for anyone to force grown adults to tie their legs into Boy Scout knots so to make them fit under the low rising lunch tables of pre-puberty is absurd. But we had been "the students" all our lives, and they'd always been "the teachers." And where they ate, where they lived, was kept separate from us, and therefore must be a perfected Eden, drinking from Pepsi fountains, lounging in their forbidden garden, laughing, loving, living their perfect, independent lives - things that are inevitably inherited and instantly possessed with adulthood. It was amphitheatrical in size, housing a secret pool, booming with a live music band, and would shrink into and disguise itself as a tiny room with a kitchen sink that only poured cold water, humming with an empty coke machine the moment a student snuck a peek. The refrigerators inside were filled with limitless Yoo-Hoos and ice cream, with the half drunken Slimfast cans and wrinkled brown bag lunches placed in there as decoys for snooping children.

Keller reveals the reality of such a room to us practicum students every Tuesday and Thursday at 11:30 by holding the door for us to enter behind her, but has yet to give any of us the password so to view the *real* teacher's lounge, because we're one-fourth teachers. And today would be no different.

A white circular table sat directly in the center, where there was already a collection of teachers sitting around it. It would turn out that Keller had walked in at the right time.

“Ashley! Did you hear about Reggie? That loud fat kid in your third period who always wears plaid!” Mrs. Keller turned to look at one of the two P.E. coaches sitting beside each other. The one speaking was Gary Sanders, who was all shaggy blond hair and limbs, blood shot eyes, and baby powder.

“Did you hear about it yet?”

“Gary! Let her sit down first,” said the other P.E. teacher, Mikael Fuller, a prototype of a high school football player: shaved head, but without a brow low enough, a voice deep enough, shoulders broad enough, or speech unintelligible enough to be college or pro. Ashley Keller floated in, the rest of the teachers present watching her, while Mr. Sanders wriggled in his seat. When she finally sat, he burst.

“Okay, so, he was found in the bathroom about an hour ago completely naked! Rodger said he walked in on him this morning, and he was completely naked!”

“Are you sure he wasn’t just taking down his pants to pee?” Mrs. Keller said to Rodger Zetterman, the Latin Teacher, who sat at the opposite end of the table from her, not even acknowledging the two giggling P.E. coaches, clearly disapproving of their behavior. “Sometimes kids do that Rodger.”

“No, he was naked. Naked, naked, naked,” Mr. Zetterman lobed in response rather singsongy from the others side of a book he was reading, trying to stay out of the conversation.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. He stood at the mirror looking at me, and I looked at him until he realized he needed to get dressed and go back to class, which he did shortly after.”

“That’s just sad,” Mrs. Keller said as she leaned back into her seat, crossing her legs gingerly once again, her hands too busy flipping and floating on air to be contained by crossing her arms. “I hope you were lenient on his punishment Roger. Kids like that - usually there's something wrong, at home, out of our control.”

“As lenient as you can be,” Zetterman began, “I didn't do anything.”

There was a slight tensing in Keller's eyebrows as they pushed toward each other in confusion. “You're not going to write him up? I thought expulsion, or at least suspension was the proper protocol for something like this.”

“I was the only person who saw him in there Ashley,” Zetterman replied, still blocking himself from view. “I don't think it's all that serious.”

“But what if it happens again?” Keller asked slowly, dourly, leaning forward with arms reaching toward Zetterman, palms pressed against the table “Next time a student may see him. Can you imagine the firestorm those parents will raise?”

“I really don't think it will come to that Ashley.” He then closed the book, peered over his glasses, and gave a half smirk. “And I'm sure it won't happen again.”

Keller's face pulled inward toward the mouth like she was sucking something sour, while her outstretched fingers curled inward, now fists.

“So you're not going to do anything?”

“I don't see any reason why I should.”

Keller sighed, leaned back into her seat, and turned her attention toward the rest of the teachers at the table. “What are these parents doing with their children today? It makes no sense for that child to want to be completely naked in the bathroom at a public school. No child in their right mind, with the right parents, would do that. Just...it makes

no sense. And it's so sad," Mrs. Keller finished while the other teachers at the round white table somewhat lingered onto her words as if scented with a smell that reminded them of home, their heads nodding in agreement, or maybe moving up and down to allow their noses to follow the waving scent through its crests and troughs. Here, in this room, there is always definitive proof that a circle has a point of beginning.

"Oh, *Mama* came to see me today," Rebecca Banks, the 7th grade math teacher, spoke up on a tangent to no one in particular. The woman she referred to as "Mama" was a nickname given to the principle of Forester Middle School.

"That's so funny for you to mention her Rebecca," Mrs. Keller started, with just enough pause between this and the rest of her statement, to make how suddenly Rebecca had stopped talking feel rehearsed, and that she never really had anything more to say after that. "Gregory has been interviewing me, and I was just on that subject. She stretches herself thin to supervise every single meeting I have with a student's parents, monitors us when she thinks we aren't aware, but I still can't get her to send someone to fix my sign from "Ms." to "Mrs." Something needs to be done."

Again, the teachers surrounding the table nodded in agreement, half dazed, half conscious, some curious as to why I was interviewing Mrs. Keller. They looked to me for the first time, like I had just materialized into the room from thin air, saw my notebook and pencil, and for some reason became apprehensive, shrinking into their seat and eluding eye contact with me – efforts to avoid being called to answer a question they'd be able to if they had only done last night's homework.

"I had one this morning with a student's parent, and for all the good she did, she shouldn't have even come at all," Keller started, the rest of the teachers sitting up at

attention once more, eyes darting left and right, up and down, following her hands as they zipped around, the rattling bangles on her wrists hypnotizing them. “Here I was, being attacked by a parent for caring too much about their son’s well-being and mental health, and she just sat there nodding her head, letting her. School is not day-care and our job is not to just watch over their children while they’re at work. We're supposed to educate them, whether they want it or not. That's what we're paid to do. God forbid I actually want the child to learn something. And then I'm supposed to be punished for caring too much? It's not fair.”

Keller's point was then immediately punctuated with a thump, a dull but definitive thump, the unmistakable sound of a foot stomping against the floor. Who it came from was unclear, the table hiding their legs and feet from view. But judging from their unresponsive faces, all seeming to share the same sullen, unhappy grimace, each person's mood feeding into and off of one another, no one seemed to notice it.

“Well, it's 12:00, I better get back to my portable,” Mrs. Keller finally said. She hadn't even touched her lunch.

“Yeah, we better leave too. Oh Ashley! I do love your hair like that! We never get to see it down. It’s so full. I wish my hair could grow that long-” said Marcy Pack, the chorus teacher who would often “pack” on five lbs of makeup over her face to compensate for gapped teeth, crooked eyes, and profuse sweating. As she finished, the other teachers nodded with a resonating chorus of “mmhms,” and Mrs. Keller smiled graciously.

“Thank you Marcy. I was going to wear it up, but I thought my hair was having quite a nice day this morning and decided that I’d let it down for once. Well, you all have

a wonderful afternoon,” she finished, with her usual “Ms. America” wave as she floated out of the room.

I started for the door as everyone was emptying out, when Ms. Pack, still sitting at the table, called my name.

“I just wanted to know,” she began with a trimmer of apprehension in her voice, “why are you interviewing Mrs. Keller?”

I told her it was a required assignment for the practicum and she looked at me as if she wanted to smile, but fought the impulse, choosing instead to just grin, lips closed.

“Oh yeah. I remember doing that. God it was so awful.”

I asked her whether she meant interviewing a teacher for her practicum or being interviewed by a student teacher for *their* practicum. The question seemed to have caught her off guard, causing her to make a sound caught between a cough and a laugh.

“Both, I suppose, now that I think about it,” she said, noticeably surprised with herself, fully smiling unashamedly, or maybe without being aware of it. “It's so awkward, talking about yourself.”

“Not for Mrs. Keller,” I said quicker than maybe I should have, immediately wishing I hadn't said anything at all.

There was another cough-laugh from her as she began to stand.

“Well, it was for me. I don't know how Keller handles having someone in her class, watching her all day long. It makes me anxious.” She looked away from me and began to stare into the corner of the room. Unsure of what to say, not even sure if she realized I was still in the room, I decided it was best I just left to go back to the portable.

I was halfway down the corridor when I heard two voices whispering in one of the alcoves that split from the main hallway. Thinking it was two students skipping class, I began to walk there to catch them with no real plan of action of what to do once I had them in my possession. But as I rounded the corner to enter the alcove, I found Mrs. Keller and Mr. Zetterman standing face to face.

Mrs. Keller had her hands placed gently on the back of her hips, making her chest stick out slightly, her body bent like the letter “C,” while Mr. Zetterman stood a head taller than her, his hands coming down to hold his book in front of his waist, defensively.

At first I was overcome with the impulse to just leave for the portable and wait for Mrs. Keller to finish what was clearly a private conversation. But then I heard her say the name “Reggie.” I pleaded, begged for my head to turn, my feet to start walking away, but neither was responding.

I stayed hidden by the corner behind a trashcan filled with paper jack-o-lanterns to avoid being seen, so I couldn't hear much. But I could see perfectly well. Keller moved her hair to her left shoulder, tilted the right side of her face slightly upward toward Zetterman, and began leaning back and forth as she appeared to question him adamantly, in her own subtle, graceful way. All the while, Zetterman stood still, statuesque, replying with quick one word answers, avoiding eye contact.

But as Mrs. Keller stepped slightly closer, just barely, taking in only a few inches of the space between them, but with a purposeful confidence, Mr. Zetterman aggressively stepped back. After uttering the name “Reggie” in what appeared to be a string of abrasive words, his the knuckles gripping into his book, the flexing his back, shoulders,

and arms, he turned on a heel and walked swiftly down the hall, away from Mrs. Keller, myself, and in the opposite direction of where his classroom was located.

As much as I wanted to see what Mrs. Keller's reaction was, I raced to a nearby bathroom to avoid being seen. I waited till I heard her heels pounding against the floor on the other side of the door, flushed the nearest urinal, and exited just in time to see her pass by me. She snapped her head back to look at me, but not even time's smallest increments could have measured the speed at which her entire mood softened into a balmy pleasantness the exact moment it appeared she recognized who I was. She then waited for me to catch up to her side.

As we made our way back to her portable, I asked her about Reggie, who often caused problems in her class by being a very loud, difficult, and aggressive student, being a "large" distraction, literally and figuratively. I knew not to ask about the meeting with his mom this morning. So instead, I asked her was it hard *not* to dislike him.

"That's impossible," she stated matter-of-factly as we reached the doors that lead to the outside campus - a boundless acre field, skirted by rustling towers of evergreen and pine, hiding within itself audible animal life sleeping, hunting, living. "I'm human, I have feelings and emotions and preferences in people I do and do not like, though I rarely meet someone I don't like; there's good in everyone. But there are a few people who I could just do without."

There was a certain pause in her step that made me think she forgot something inside, but as quickly as it happened, it disappeared. But following that pause, there was a definitive change in her posture; she stood straighter, taller, like children who stretch

their back against a wall before recording how much they've grown. She also began to walk faster so her steps were always a few feet in front of mine.

“Still,” she continued without looking backwards to me, a higher, more authoritative ring in her voice, “I am an educator, and I will give Reggie the same respect I give every student, showing no preference. But it’s impossible to not “dislike” a person if everything they do grates your every nerve. You’ll learn this very quickly when you get your own classroom Gregory: half the battle in teaching is to be impartial. It’s frustrating sometimes, but the time we get to vent in the lounge makes it easier, helps us get by.”

I was still thinking of something else to ask for our interview while trying discreetly with my tongue to dislodge the piece of baked chicken wedged in between my molars when we reached the portable steps. Without paying attention, I kept moving up the stairs till I turned around to find Mrs. Keller still on the ground, staring up at me with misgiving eyes. She finally began to start up the stairs while I waited for her to reach the door first, since she had the key to get in. But before she reached the top landing, she stood on the upper-most step so my head only reached the top of her shoulder blades, sighed with a slight shrug, turned around, and faced me again. But what had been hesitation before now hardened into solemnity.

“Gregory, I’m not exactly sure what the point of your interview is, but don’t twist my words.” The confrontation caught me off guard. I immediately felt the urge to apologize, but I wasn't sure for what or how at the moment. I felt like I wasn’t allowed to make eye contact with her, so I stared away, toward her “Ms. Keller” sign, never having noticed the error before today.

“I like being a teacher,” she continued with an even firmer voice, the voice of someone taking the underside of your chin in their hands and turning your head toward theirs. “And so do the majority of the teachers who teach here. It’s a wonderful, *glorious* feeling, to know that you made a difference in a child’s life. Venting is exactly that, venting. Sometimes, words are said in anger that isn’t the true measure of how you really feel. It’s just that with so many *unappreciative* students, intrusive and close minded parents who want you to be nothing more than glorified babysitters, and unsupportive, overreaching, and impossibly demanding administration, it becomes very difficult. So many times have I opened the door to students and parents, only to have that generosity shut back in my face. Do you understand that Gregory?”

When Keller felt regretful about something she had done, whether that be grade a test incorrectly or be a little too critical of a student in front of the rest of her classroom, she would turn to me and loft her voice, stretch her neck, straighten her back, and flex those peacock feathers. No longer were we fellow teachers, now separated by the pedestal she had placed herself on, checking the ground below her for where she had left me to see if I understood where she was coming from. Rightfully, she was my mentor, entitled to such a pedestal, but it seemed extra offensive when such comments came from a woman who sometimes looked as if teaching English literature to seventh graders was somewhat below her, the profession being the entire reason why I was going into almost criminal debt for tuition.

She turned her back to me and opened the door to enter and let it shut behind her, leaving me to stand outside. There were two more classes left to observe, then I could get in my car, drive away, write something about how I learned teaching is “tough” but

“rewarding,” pass this practicum, turn that in again for my next practicum interview paper, and the next one after that, and for all the other practicum interview papers I’d be required to write before I can finally graduate.

I stepped inside to find her busy preparing the S.A.T. question of the day for the next class, any signs of prior malcontent purged completely from her face and mood. I sat in a chair by the corner, her mobile spinning over my head as the air conditioner blew it into motion. Blood drained out of my right hand as I tried to reach for the mobile from my seat, the shell pink flesh under my fingernails blanching of color as I flexed them to reach higher. I kept trying to grab it, to simply touch it, but the sight of those fingers that were too pale to be part of my body, that hand that was too numb to be my own, and that arm that, from this angle, was more an inserted attachment than it was an extension, made me feel nauseous. So when the mobile proved too far out of reach, I let my hand drop to my side. As the familiar prickling sensation began to spread down the length of my arm and return to its natural pigment, I stared at the South Carolina knick knacks and photographed smiles, and with each passing figurine and tooth, I felt more resolved. I moved toward a desk and took a seat.

The bell rang, the room filled with the thundering footsteps of seventh graders stampeding into the portable, and Ashley Nancy Keller stood in the center of her classroom, the desks situated into their usual circular formation so we could see each other and her. She looked at us, grinning, making sure we were all in attendance, then to the empty desk that belonged to Reggie. She walked over to it, sat on the desk while crossing her legs at the ankles, and began.

Chapter 5: S02E11: Harry S. Catches \$50,000 Pig

Season 2, Episode 11 of the game show Truth or Dare was, quite frankly, a very average episode: Contestants line up in a row. Camera 1 focuses on Zack McMillan, the host. Dim the house lights. Flare the spot lights. Hush the audience. Three loud chimes to signal the start of recording. Action.

"A waitress from Savannah, Georgia!" McMillan announced dramatically to the camera as it panned past the woman who would be contestant #1. "A farm hand from Boise, Idaho! An English teacher from Tulsa, Arizona! A secretary from San Francisco, California! An accountant from New York City! And a bus driver from Topeka, Kansas!"

Zach finished, as always, at the end of the line, having walked past them all, hand outstretched, showcasing them to his audience. He turned on a heel and stared straight into the camera.

"These six individuals are about to have a once in a lifetime opportunity to have all their dreams come true right in front of you live! As you know, the contestants will each have their own unique challenge that puts their will, fortitude, and commitment to the test. Will they succeed? That's up to them and just how much they want to change their lives forever! Welcome....to Truth or Dare!"

There was a whirlwind of flashing lights, thunderous applause, cheers, whistling, thumping studio music, and rough, grabbing, pushing, shoving stage hands that corral

Harry Smith and the rest of the contestants backstage into a sitting room to wait their turn.

“So, you’re from New York City? That must be exciting!” asked contestant #2, the farm hand, rubbing his arms to warm away the chill of the small, frigid waiting room. It was empty, except for a bookshelf lined with cardboard books flushed against a royal blue wall and a bowl of perfectly ripened fruit that sat on a white table in the center of the room, its legs bolted to the floor. There were no windows, no chairs, no carpet, and no TV’s.

Harry replied “yes,” which was a lie, but only to avoid a conversation with a stranger that would have ended awkwardly. He had been an accountant and he had lived in New York City, and, for a short while, both were true at the same time. And then, all at once, neither was. He reached for the apple on the table to eat, something to make him appear too preoccupied to talk to anyone, turned it over in his fingers, and bit into the plastic with commitment.

The door opened. Squalls of hands, makeup, noise, lights, and everyone was dropped backstage, with the tunnel ahead leading to the main amphitheater of the studio. Harry watched the kitchen from Growing Pains, or Boy Meets World, or possibly Family Matters get wheeled by stage hands from one wing of the studio to the other. Three chimes, an uproar of audience hubbub, and contestant #1 headed down the tunnel and into the arena, the rest of the contestants watching her approach the host tentatively from one of the giant monitors vaulted against the wall backstage.

APPLAUSE

“Welcome back to Truth or Dare! Our first contestant tonight is a waitress from Savannah, Georgia! I bet you must get a number of odd looks from customers when they see your hair!” McMillan spoke to the camera while holding his microphone to the woman beside him, pushing it so close to her face it caused her to rear back a step, leaving him to stand a solid few inches in front of her.

It was the first thing Harry had noticed about the woman. A natural blend of blonde and brown, with a muted sheen that comes from occasional conditioning, which he figured must be incredibly time consuming, since it was 4 ½ feet long, reaching down to the back of her thighs. While Harry usually frowned on exaggerated or superfluous anything, for reasons he couldn’t explain to himself, he found her hair a fair and understandable fit.

“Oh, no, I...put it up in a bun,” she commented to the floor.

“Well I bet you do double takes often when customers comment on your “*big buns!*””

LAUGH

The sign that hung from the ceiling of the studio flashed with threatening reiteration. So McMillan laughed. The audience laughed.

But Harry couldn’t help but notice how the waitress blushed, looked to the floor, and made a motion as if she were going to speak, but only too softly, too late. The microphone had long been pulled away from her.

“And your hair is very sentimental to you, correct?” McMillan asked when a switch was hit and his molar exposing grin withered instantly into a purse of concern.

“Yes. My mother died of cancer when I was a baby. Then I went through chemo as a child when I was diagnosed with leukemia.”

A picture of her at an age Harry figured was no older than six in the hospital faded into existence on the giant screen in the amphitheater, then displayed on every monitor in the studio.

AWW

The audience obliged.

“You must have felt horrible being bald as a child,” McMillan said in a way that was less of a question and more of a statement of uncontestable truth.

“I survived though,” the woman replied with a sudden assurance in her voice that Harry had not expected, but was pleased to hear. “When my hair finally grew back, I didn’t cut it again. I guess...I thought...as silly as it sounds...if I had my hair, my cancer wouldn’t come back.” Her eyes went to the floor once more as her voice stopped, choked into silence by a producer standing off camera, ensuring the show ran on schedule.

The picture on the monitor changed from camera 2’s focus on the woman’s face, which Harry found familiar and comforting, to camera 1’s focus on the host’s, which he thought was not so much a face as it was a cobbled collection of cheekbones, teeth, and hair.

“But recently, you’ve also fallen on financial dire straits, correct?” McMillan finally asked to the camera in a way that suggested he was coming to a point. Then the picture of a house with a foreclosure sign appeared on the monitors, surprising Harry. While he was sure the image of this woman’s house was equally as woeful, for some reason someone had decided to use a picture of his house instead. He couldn’t decide

whether he was angry, or honored they found his house to be the perfect image of downturned America. He wondered how the rotund middle aged man in the suit felt when asked about posing with a glass of whisky in one hand, a comically fat cigar in the other, to be used as the universal image of a greedy fat-cat executive. Harry was convinced his response would have been “I was just happy to finally find work.”

“Well, maybe we can help you out with that! Are you ready to see your challenge?” McMillan asked excitedly without pause for an answer. “Ladies! Bring it out!”

Two pairs of legs and breasts hugged in a tight red sequined dress, with skin that was bronze on screen but blood orange in person, pushed a pedestal draped in red velvet onto the stage.

An atomic flash of light and three deafening bass reverberations from the studio speakers left in their sensory-searing wake the unveiled pedestal: shimmering amidst spirals of lights and cameras were a pair of electric clippers.

GASP

“Your challenge tonight, to win \$50,000, is to cut all your hair! You have to be completely bald! America! What will she do? Will she shave all her hair to save herself from bankruptcy! We will find out...when we come back!”

Eruptions of elations and groans echoed down from the stadium seating as the theme music played the show into commercial. It was in that moment, when the camera had zoomed in on her face to capture her reaction, that Harry realized what about her face was so familiar. Her downturned lips and disappointed eyes reminded him of his mother,

not in appearance, but in disposition. It was a soft, unassuming sadness, of beauty resigned, of quiet defeat, of helplessness.

Harry would run into the house, unconcerned with the door he'd left open behind him, gripping freshly uprooted dandelions, with bulbous, fat yellow heads that hung away from each other. His bare feet would slow to an anxious tiptoe as they touched the cold, glassy, bubbled brown linoleum tiles of the kitchen, bathed in a gold-pink-purple hue of a quickly fleeting afternoon. He'd stand at her feet after handing her the flowers, struggling to fit his arms around her waist, pressing his face against her blood soaked apron, breathing in deeply through the nose, searching for hints of what dinner would be. He'd reach in his bookbag, hand her his report card. In that moment, as far as he could tell from his view of her from a few feet below, her smile would falter, the lines on the side of her mouth as she grinned melting back into her face, unwrinkled, smooth and perfect in its graveness.

She never gave either of his two brothers this look. His older brother, naturally studious and well-read, would receive a proud pat of affirmation and grin of approval for his report cards, tests, papers. His younger brother, strapping, athletic, would have to share with his oldest brother the same proud pat on the head or back after coming in from helping his father with the bailing of the hay, the handling of the livestock, most of which Harry would have to spend his life avoiding because of an animal hair allergy. But this look was his and his alone. He didn't have to share it with either of his brothers. She reserved it just for him, and he held on to it as tight as he could so it could not slip away.

She'd then notice he was looking at her from below, kneel so her eyes were even with his, gingerly wipe the blood splatter from his face, and give him the same warm grin

and pat both his brothers had received before him, but lighter, softer, with more hesitancy.

“You try your hardest, and that’s all that matters” he imagined her saying.

And he did. He did every day. Everything he did he did to the best of his ability, and knew it was enough. He knew it would be enough because when his mother would stand back up, her head rising to its usual height above his, her face would return to that look of solemnity, full of seriousness, concern, and unwrinkled beauty. She’d turn to her butcher block and continue breaking down the carcass for dinner. Her confidence in him solidified his confidence in himself.

APPLAUSE

It was over. Strands of hair lilted and danced with confetti, burning and shimmering, drifting and rotating, flames that lit and reignited as they twisted in air. Harry could see the joy in the faces of the audience, the host, but contestant #1 was nowhere to be found.

“When we come back...things are about to get...*pretty...ugly!* See you in a few!”

Commercial Break.

“I just can’t believe she did it, that’s all”

“But that’s the point. That’s why we’re here, right? We’ll all have to make a decision whether to do it or not. Personally, I’d think she was a fool if she’d chosen her hair over 50,000 dollars. It’s just hair.”

“Did you go through cancer? Did you lose your hair? No.”

Everyone paced inside the frigid, tiny blue waiting room, growing more anxious as their turn approached. Harry kept fidgeting with the pocket protector on his gray shirt, a prop provided by the producers to make him look more “accountant-esque,” which made the English teacher, contestant # 3, when Harry told her roll her eyes. Harry found her concern cute, like the child that quibbles to their teacher when their name is called incorrectly. At one point, Harry decided, maybe he would have cared about this tiny modification to his appearance, but now he’d gladly overlook small intrusions like that in order to win.

“That’s not even a real word. Why do you need to “look” like an accountant? You *are* an accountant. They gave me these fake glasses. I have perfect vision though.”

“These overalls aren’t mine,” said the farm hand, looking upon the bookshelf as if one of the books would eventually become real. “But, I mean, it’s not that big of a deal. It’s just some overalls.”

“Did you see what they made the girl last week do?”

Everyone either shook their heads yes or no. Harry did neither. The English teacher continued.

“She suffered from Entomophobia. She had a deathly fear of bugs. Her challenge was to eat bugs, for 50,000 dollars.”

There was a rumbling outside of the room as the show prepared to come back from commercial break.

“I just hope I don’t have to do anything too embarrassing. I mean...I’ll eat bugs” said the farm hand, who was up next as contestant #2. “I’ve done it by accident plenty of times.”

Harry was about to say something, wanted to say something, was halfway to completing his thought, but was interrupted by the English teacher, who had to express her disgust first.

“It’s just sick, the lengths some people will go to for a little money. There are just some depths I would not go, like cutting off my hair. Do you know what my friends said to me when I told them I had passed through the audition process and was going to be on the show? They said “Hope you have fun on “How Low Would You Go?””

It was a question Harry had pondered, but not for long. He couldn’t. If he did, he would convince himself that there were other options, other ways, other means. But there weren’t. He didn’t know what to expect in his challenge when he was told he’d be on the show, but as he watched the farm hand get pushed onto the stage to face the unknown, his throat closed up, and his skin began to itch. The timer on the jumbo-tron, coupled with the shouting chorus of audience members, counted away the last few seconds contestant #2 had left to decide to take his challenge or not. And as the oppressive heat generated from the undulating bodies in the shadowy distance and blazing spot light spurred a drop of sweat to inch down his back, Harry told himself that when it was his turn, if he tried his hardest, everything would be all right.

3!

2!

1!

GO!

There was a flurry of spokes and clouds of up-kicked dirt as the race began. The long stretch of unpaved road would provide Harry the time he needed to catch up. While the first storm earlier that day had rolled through without a single drop of rain, staining the sky a sepia mixture of browns-oranges-yellows, the second storm was quickly approaching, threatening to unleash its payload as it boomed and cracked above their heads, rearing its whips of lightning and snapping at their back tires, spurring them to go faster. But Harry could only go so fast, the rusted pedals and chain brittle from when his older brother would leave it out in the rain. Harry had been warned to be careful when riding it so it wouldn't snap into pieces, and to never ride during a storm. But he didn't have the leg strength to push the bike to its limits, and *all* the kids raced the rain, no matter what. Another whip crack made the boys that always got first go faster, the ones that always got last go slower, which left Harry to fall somewhere in the middle. He'd best someone, they'd come back and pass him, then he'd fall behind someone, grip tightly onto the scotch taped handlebars, and gain a few wheels in front of them. He never had to look behind him to see who was trying to take the lead from him, but could hold his head high at the end of the race.

Harry felt both embarrassed by the girly flowers his parents bought for his friend, adding to a growing bouquet next to the kid's hospital IV, and envious of the super-speed his friend would have when he finally woke up after being struck by lightning. Harry knew he'd only need a few jolts to win a race or two.

LAUGH

It had been one request too far, and he just would not go any further. The farm hand was fine with the heels, and surprisingly svelte in the dress, but he would not wear the lipstick.

Commercial Break

APPLAUSE

“The answer is either yes, or no,” she stated firmly.

“I don’t know, Ruth. It’s been dead for how long again?” Harry asked

“A few minutes. And no one has noticed but you” Ruth replied.

“And there is no other way? I can’t survive by any other means?”

“Exactly. And if you tell the others, you know you won’t get a thing.”

Harry pretended to ponder an answer to the question as his playful touching turned into a groping of the tiny tiki candle in the center of the table that separated him from her, flickering in and out of existence, its wick nearly spent. In honesty, he was still slightly unnerved at how the conversation had turned so morbid. Never had a 1st date been so macabre. But he could tell from Ruth’s forward leaning posture, her stern gaze that flirted in an area existing somewhere between seduction and abduction, that she expected, and would obtain, a definitive answer.

“Despite my allergies, I’ve lived with animals all my life,” he tried.

“I know that. Answer the question.”

After a year of being undeclared, he had finally chosen a major in accounting, a major he knew, through hard work and full commitment, would allow him to have a stable career and make respectable pay, enough to support himself, his wife, and his children comfortably. It was this decision which would give him the confidence in

himself, his future, and what he had to offer, to finally ask Ruth to go on a date with him. It had taken a considerable amount of convincing, and only after promising to take her to her favorite place, an expensive Hawaiian restaurant miles from campus filled with exotic foods of five or six syllables and authentic decorations and lighting, all reds, oranges, and blacks, did she agree.

He had wanted to date her for months, after two consecutive semesters of having at least one course together, based solely on the way her entire body shook when she laughed, overwhelmed by the sheer strength of its own jubilation. It was the kind of laughter that he yearned to bring about at least one more time, if only to tell others one day that he had witnessed something so purely unbridled, so blithe, so free. He had been vaguely warned to stay away from her, and he could see why: She was Ambrosia.

Unfiltered. 190 Proof.

But over the course of dinner, the conversation ranged in topics, each proving to be disappointingly insubstantial and thin - the gossamer webs that they tore through with desperate haste to reach the door at the end of the dark hallway that lead to self-preservation, away from their lethal pursuer.

Somewhere in between dessert and the check however, the lights dimmed, diners gathered to watch their dinner rotate on a spit, and Ruth asked a question that was so strikingly different from all other first date questions it had to have been the product of supernatural intervention: What would you do if you were shipwrecked on an island with ten other people for five days with no food, and then one day, while crawling alone through the sand in starvation, you found a dead dog, but only big enough to feed one

person entirely? You know the others are greedy and would leave you none, and then you'd starve to death. So, would you eat it?

"But why wouldn't I get any of it if I told the other people about it?"

"Because they're starving too, and someone would kill others to keep it for themselves."

"I don't believe that" Harry said, cutting his eyes.

"It's sociology. It's pure science. It's proven. Have you *never* read "Lord of the Flies?"

"My older brother told me about it. It's just...animals are different. Does it have to be a dog? We owned three dogs."

"I know, you told me. And yes. It does. So, what's the answer? Yes, or no?"

AWW

"Yes, a teacher's salary is paltry, especially when you're a single mother with two kids. As you can see, it's hard to make ends meet," said contestant #3, the English teacher, into the microphone, her voice full of misery and woe, pointing up to a picture of her poor mobile home on the jumbo-tron with one hand while pushing up the large, black framed glasses that sat on her nose awkwardly with the other. They were two sizes too large for her face.

"Yes, and Arizona mortgage isn't cheap!" beamed McMillan. "Well, as an English teacher, I'm sure you have plenty of favorite writers. But who is your favorite writer to teach?"

"Faulkner," she said into the microphone.

“And I’m sure you must own a lot of his books?” he asked, again sounding as if he was coming to a point

“I’m a collector of books, an insatiable connoisseur of literature, so yes, I do, as well as many other writers. My bookshelf at home is filled with them. Twain. Toomer. Flaubert.”

“Trust me. *I know*. Ladies!”

GASP

He gripped the small red tin can in frustration with a strength that surprised him, feeling its aluminum give and mold under his fingers slightly.

“It’s a waste of money” Harry tried.

“We can afford it now” Ruth cooed, massaging her fingers into his scalp.

“It’s \$30 salt.”

“It’s truffle salt.”

“Salt costs \$2!”

“It’s *truffle* salt.”

“You keep saying that like there’s a difference.”

“There is.”

“Does it cook the food for you?”

“It’s a finishing garnish. It turns average food into spectacular food.”

“It turns unsalted food into salted food. And guess what else does that? \$2 salt.”

APPLAUSE

It all burned. Every tome. Every cover. Every page. Every word. She had said something about desperate times and desperate measures, how she could start a new

collection in her new home for her and her children, and how she was both on cloud nine and in seventh heaven, but Harry had heard enough. The flames subsided on the monitor, having entirely devoured its supply of nourishment that had kept it so well fed and allowed it to roar so violently, and as the host pulled the woman's arm, dancing a gavotte around the remaining embers, Harry found her more and more ridiculous. Everything about her was now absurd. Everything she had said before to him, to the rest of the contestants, to anyone, now just seemed absolutely absurd.

CHEER

“One and a half minutes till we're back everyone!” the stage hand yelled into the room before shutting the door behind him.

The waiting room felt bigger, more cavernous to Harry, now that all that were left was him, the secretary, and the bus driver. The lack of bodies only seemed to make the temperature plunge ten more degrees as hypothermia set in.

“I'm so nervous,” the secretary said to no one in particular, looking at the fruit on the table.

“Don't be.” Harry hadn't expected or intended to say anything, but he did, all the same.

“What if they make me fall off a ladder? I'm scared to death of heights. Or they make me lie in a bed of worms? It's terrifying.”

“Well, you don't have to do it,” the bus driver began. “You can always say no, like the farmer.”

“I can't” is all she said. The bus driver looked confused, but Harry understood. The door opened.

Handsmakeupnoise, and they were backstage again.

She looked more terrified than ever.

“Don’t worry,” Harry finally said to her right before she turned away to head down the tunnel. “Just try your hardest. Do your best. Everything will be all right.”

She looked to him, but Harry felt no emotion in return. She was no longer scared, but she wasn’t excited, or angry, or happy. She just looked resolved.

Harry watched as she walked with an even pace down the tunnel, toward the stage, her silhouette disintegrating in the rays of the studio lights, till nothing was left of her.

AWW

Harry sat with the light off, the contours of his face made more stark in the flickering light from the tv that washed the now vacated walls of the room in its glow, black-white-black-white. His clutch on the newspaper tightened, with only hours left before it became obsolete, to have no other use than to be fodder that lined their knick knacks and fragile things in the move to come. Bronzed booties. Wedding glasses. Pee-Wee football participation trophies. Flipping back and forth between yelling pundits, one red, one blue, Harry noticed how the bottom scrolling ticker tape was bleeding with red numbers. Large numbers. Numbers that people worry about. But he was told his job was to deal with only numbers - their products, differences, sums, and quotients, but never their meaning, their purpose, their implications. So he didn’t. And he knew he had done it well, or at least, to the best of his ability. It was just bad timing, bad luck. “It’s just an unfortunate time to be middle management,” they had said from across the desk to him,

as well as to many others. His fist tightened. The paper's furrows deepened. There were so many downward pointing arrows.

GASP

She had to throw red paint over all her paintings. Her entire collection. Every copy. Even the ones she had made to apply for art school. It was splattered all over the black stage floor. Or so, that's what Harry imagined it looked like. He and the Bus Driver hadn't been allowed to leave the waiting room for quite a while. McMillan said something about things getting "messy" when they come back.

"If you do it," the bus driver began, "what are you going to do with the money?"

The door opened.

HANDSMAKEUPNOISELIGHTSHANDSMAKEUPLIGHTSHANDSNOISELIGHTS

HANDS

CHEER

NAME: _____

_____ Last First (M)

Address: _____

_____ Street (APT) City/State

Zip

"Michael! Rebecca! Get down here! I'm not heating up these pop-tarts again!"

Harry shook the nearly dead pen free of its last few drops of ink.

"Ruth, have you seen the white-out? I thought it was in this drawer."

"No. Not that drawer. That was the last house. It's in the one by the boxes."

"Oh. Ok."

“And Harry, again, *do not* forget you’ve got to pick me up *exactly* at five so we can get Michael from Key Club on time. Then I’ll drop you two off back here, pick up Rebecca from district orchestra, then when I get back, you can take Michael to his S.A.T. thing, and that way I can do some packing.”

“When is he going to have time to study for that physics thing he has on Friday?”

“I guess sometime between Key Club and his S.A.T. workshop.”

“That’s hardly any time at all. Do they really have to do all this?”

“College.”

“I know.”

“That’s what it takes now. But they won’t *live* to see college if I’m late again, because I will kill them. I promise, I’ll do it.”

“Yeah. It’s a lot though. Too much.”

“Michael Alexander! Rebecca Hillary! Why don’t I hear footsteps! What did you say honey?”

PREVIOUS

EMPLOYER: _____

“Nothing.”

“So, are you sure you want to tell them about the water being cut off again? I mean, I can do it, I really don’t mind. How many jugs do we have saved up, anyway?”

“I’ll tell them. And we have enough this time. I’m positive.”

“Good. Electricity isn’t due till next week, so we can at least heat it.”

“It won’t be like this forever Ruth.”

“I know.”

“Moving back home...living with my parents, it’s only temporary.”

He watched her from behind as she dumped the contents of all the drawers on the floor.

“We just need a few months where we don’t have bills. The kids will be in college, I’ll get this job back home. Then when we’re back on our feet, we can move-”

“I know. Here! Found the white-out,” she said, rubbing her hands over Harry’s as she gave it to him. “Guys! Downstairs! Now!”

CHEER

“Animal hair?”

“Certain animal hair. Some fowl. Most livestock,” he said, worried.

“Is it lethal?” she asked, with equal measures concern and intrigue.

“No, not really. But it makes it very hard for me to breath and move.”

Harry was sure from the way she kept asking questions without looking up to him that she was about to ask him to leave. He gave his hat another wring, unaware that the patch on the front had finally fallen off.

“And how long have you and your wife lived with your parents? And how long have you been unemployed?”

“We’ve lived with them for a year and a half now. And I’ve been unemployed for two.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that. It’s so tough now a-days, especially in this economy. And I can imagine it must be extra hard for accountants.”

“Yes. But that’s why it’s so important I get to be on the show. You help people like me.”

“Aww, thank you. We here at Truth or Dare love to see families made whole again through our show. Some have even said we’re a humanitarian effort. Do you agree?”

GASP

The lights dimmed. The audience's applause and cheers fell silent. The host turned and walked into the shadows, and a light that had been caressing the audience from the rafters as it swung around the studio shot to the center of the stage, narrowing to a single pillar. Everyone anxiously waited to watch Harry Smith catch a \$50,000 pig.

The time constraints wouldn't be an issue. Even the strongest, most virile pig could be held for at least fifteen seconds under two minutes. No, the challenge was in the mud and his allergies. But this was his challenge, to catch and hold this pig in a pool of mud for fifteen seconds. It wasn't a matter of will he or won't he. There was no choice for him. Harry simply had to.

CHEER

It had bothered him more than he knew it should: his gray shirt looked black backstage, white on camera. There was a certain relief in throwing himself into the mud, a recognizable dark brown, that he covered himself in, head to toe. It was a color, as far as he could tell, that translated clearly in person and on camera. But despite its thickness, it ran off the pig's red skin which glistened with an unnatural sheen. He hadn't touched it yet, but breathing had become a noticeable labor. It was one more additional challenge. But he would try his hardest. He would catch the pig. He would win. And everything would be alright.

LAUGH

Just as quickly as Harry touched its leg, or grabbed a hold of its torso, he'd gasp involuntarily and the pig would break free. Harry's skin swelled from within, stretching to accommodate the growing hives, but he continued to move slowly, purposefully. The space in his throat to breath narrowed, and everything bled into everything else, a pooled mass of color and sound. In those moments of blindness, the mud felt more like milk as it loosened and bubbled. Laughs were louder, lights were brighter, hotter, and he teetered in and out of consciousness. But he would not pass out. He was **LAUGH** close to **AWW** just out of **GASP** A leg.

He had a leg.

He had its neck.

It squealed and bucked, but both his swelling hands held fast.

20 seconds left.

SILENCE

Flash.

Squeal.

Back against the floor, eyes closed, with little breath to give, and even less able to take. The mud/milk spilled onto the circular black stage floor – fingers stretching into tentacles, flexing, reaching, lengthening, desperately trying to place the stage in its palm so it could close its grip and squeeze tight. Flash. Noise. Then the countdown ended.

Harry let go, and the pig rolled free.

He breathed in deep and took his hands to his eyes to wipe them clean.

He surveyed the audience around him and saw nothing but hands - hands of euphoria, of cheers, of joy, of excitement. They were so happy. They were so proud.

They jumped and cried, screamed and applauded, intoxicated by their own feverish high as it infected and spread, rolled and crashed.

Amidst the celebration, no one noticed that the pig had stopped moving entirely. Harry sobered to the motionless animal in front of him, and all at once the world crumbled beneath him.

Everyone was overjoyed.

America was enraptured.

And in the center, Harry wept, his body more grief than flesh.

He had tried his hardest. He had succeeded. Everyone knew he would be okay.

Quickly, the stage was emptied and cleaned for the bus driver, the final contestant of the episode. A large round table, shrouded in red velvet had appeared before him just as suddenly as the contestant had appeared on stage. The velvet was pulled.

GASP

The bus driver wrung his eating bib in his hands. The wings of the gathering flies that swarmed around the severed pig's head caught and refract the studio lights, making them dazzle, casting the pig's head in a shimmer. Beautiful.

Commercial Break.

Chapter 6: A Chef's Story

The first thing I want to forget is the day I flew home. Leaving London wasn't easy, but the flight out of the Heathrow was at least smooth. But as we reached a few kilometers away from the shore of North or South Carolina, the turbulence was rocking the cabin, and I remember thinking of a small boy shaking a toy plane between his hands, with his fingers wringing the body like a neck, taking a few moments to peer inside and wonder how all the people were still smiling.

I had folded and unfolded the article about me so much by this time that it had formed perforated edges, erasing the words that had been where the creases etched into the paper, splitting it into perfect squares. The upper four quadrants were mostly concerned with my background in food, head chef of some places in America, a few notable ones in Britain. The lower four quadrants are the most quoted though, the most cited. When my copy of the article finally split along the lines some months later, I was pleased to find out it was the bottom four quadrants that I still owned.

It had started by saying that if cooking is an art, baking is a science, and molecular gastronomy is both, then Trevor Warren is a modern Da Vinci, thankfully reborn as a chef, much to this food critics sensual pleasures, and then it went on to officiate my recently awarded Michelin Star. I still have the bottom four quadrants somewhere.

There must have been a child kicking my seat, because adults should know better. But I'd lean into the aisle, and no matter by what angle, I couldn't see any tiny hands or feet. For all I could tell, no one was sitting behind me. I bring that up because it was while peering around that someone from behind recognized my face and said I was that famous American chef. I nodded, and they told me how they'd wanted to eat at my place for months – its right down the street from their flat – but it's impossible to get a table. I nodded and went back to my article again.

I'd decided to open my restaurant after having lived in London for ten years, working first in sous chef positions, finally getting hired as head chef in a few places, always cooking one generation ahead of whomever I was working for that owned the restaurant. I'd tried to modify and bring their menu into a modern century, but always met resistance. They'd say something about their restaurant being so many years old, so well established, with a clientele that knew what to expect: perfection of the highest form. And that's the beauty of molecular gastronomy: so many of the greats and critically revered are so old, with clientele just as old, that none of their food, no matter how beautifully made or perfectly executed, would ever be anything more than what everyone already expected it to be. The best damn foie gras you'll ever have in your life is still just foie gras. But with Molecular, it can be anything you want it to be, appearing any way you want it to appear. It can be both the best damn foie gras in your life, and the most amazing drink you'll have the great pleasure to sip. As long as all the measurements are right, as long as it's perfectly executed, the boundaries of Molecular disappear, limited only by imagination. And how accurately recorded all your measurements and formulas are.

The meal for the flight that evening was chicken. For all its blandness, it had all the right makings of a good dish, but the balance was off in flavors. Too much salt, not enough pepper. Thyme would have helped. Salt and pepper are the most important fundamentals in cooking. Some foods especially live and die within grams of the perfect amount. That's also something they mentioned in the article, my natural skill in understanding spice percentages in comparison to one another, how much was needed for it to taste ideal. When I have the capacity, I'll definitely write the airline and let them know how many more or less grams of each are needed. As a British airline, they'd know who had created *Americana* in London.

I had decided to call it *Americana* because I liked the way it sounded said in a British accent, and because I knew all the items would be so identifiable, especially to a British clientele: Apple Pie. Fried Chicken. Meatloaf. Pulled Pork Barbeque. Reuben Sandwich. Corn Dog with ketchup and mustard. This is what the world sees when they hear "American Cuisine," and I knew I could deconstruct what everyone knew to be so provincial and common and make it extraordinary, sophisticated, and unique. So I opened my restaurant in downtown London, and just as quickly as critics slammed it, tossing it into restaurant oblivion as a half-baked idea too ambitious to ever succeed in London, it was a success. And I knew it would be a success because it was both what it had and what it had not claimed to be: Retro American Cuisine. It had all the flavor anyone could half remember or imagine what it did or should taste like, but in no recognizable form. I knew that this would not only be preferred, it'd be desired.

A flight attendant came and checked on me, and her head was the shape of a turnip, bulbous and conical, with her hair wet with shine and oil, pulled tight into a high

pony tail, stretching the skin of her forehead back, making her face twice as terrifying. She noted my writings and called them scribbles, and I shrugged and told her they were formulas. She asked for what, and I said to make a gelatin that tasted like candied yams. She asked to show her more so I flipped through my book and explained a few, her turnip shaped head going up and down as she listened, like a farmer repeatedly trying to uproot it out of the ground, her body a shapeless container of soil and earth. I told her this observation, and how I grew up on a farm in Alabama and saw my father do it all the time, and she pretended not to be offended, and I lied and said Asperger's, and she just half smiled with a discomfort that I see in those that taste too much salt in their eggs, and then walked off and finally left me alone.

Asperger's was a lie, but my father was a farmer – not by profession, but by hobby. He grew what we ate, and my mother cooked what he raised. He tilled and she baked, he slaughtered and she broiled. Once when I was home visiting, I asked her how to make the potato yeast rolls she used to make for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and asked how much of this and that, but she'd only say a handful or a scratch or a pinch, and I'd ask how much is that and she'd say a smidgen, and I'd get frustrated and place measuring spoons in front of her, and she'd just turn away and tell me that she doesn't know exactly in *that way*, just that its either a pinch or a smidgen, then she'd stop looking me in the eyes. She'd look at my nose, or my shirt, or the gray at the sides of my hair and call me Duane and tell me to stop bothering her while her stories were on or she wasn't going to give me any "suga" tonight, but not into my eyes. And I'd try to guess the grams from memory and it'd come out all wrong. Baking is a science of exactness that my mother had cheated at perfecting, and then paid the price in her senility after my father

had passed away. She knew she'd always remember the exact amounts for everything without ever writing down the exact amounts, until the day she didn't.

Nurse was at the airport to pick me up when I landed. She tried to help with my bags, but I'm no invalid and I insisted on carrying my own, having to also supervise the airport workers on how to load my tools, my sous vide circulator, my infusion syringes, my sub-zero storage chest, my laser knife, microtweezers and scalpels, into Nurse's trunk with the care they'd show handling a newborn child: they're tools, I told them, that are just as delicate, and helpless, but with so much more potential to do great things, in the right hands.

Nurse and her daughter live in Alabama, and she told me she would only live in Alabama. I offered her double pay to move to London instead so I could stay with my restaurant, and my things, and with Jack, my husband, but she refused, saying I needed to move back home. I had plenty of money, I could have stayed in London. I should have stayed for Jack. But she insisted and reminded me of what I already knew – Jack wasn't there anymore. So I came back home.

Nurse asked on the drive if I was hungry and I told her yes, since I hadn't eaten the in-flight dinner, describing for her the chicken that smelled and tasted of turnip, and she laughed and said that sounded like something I'd make, something that looks like chicken but tastes like turnips, or maybe a turnip that's made of chicken. I told her I'd never make something so disgusting, people would flee from *Americana* - the only people that'd eat something that gross live here, where folks palates don't know any better. She just stared ahead, offended I guess, but aware of how right I was.

I was glad I'd waited till autumn to move back because the humidity had receded further south to the equator, and Autumn in the south, what with all the rain in the changing of the season, felt like England on a typical day, and all of nature had a shade that should smell of spice and pumpkin, like how a scratch and sniff sticker of grapes smells like grapes - none that you've eaten in real life, but what you know it should taste like. My favorite cartoon growing up was Popeye, and on it J. Wellington Wimpy would eat these hamburgers in every single frame he was drawn in that I instantly knew tasted a certain way. But no hamburger I ever ate then tasted like what I thought a Wimpy hamburger tasted like. But upon sight, I always knew exactly what that burger tasted like. I explained this to Nurse, and she said she had the same feeling about pizza on the Ninja Turtles. I didn't understand, and I think she saw this in my face, because she just went on to say she would make something at home. But I refused and said I'd be happy to cook. I wanted to. It'd been a long time since I'd been able to cook. I wanted to show her what a Wimpy burger tasted like.

I've known Nurse long before she was Nurse, long before she was a nurse at all. I left my mother's house to her and her daughter Izzy, named after my mother Isabella, when she died. So, we're close. I call her Nurse because I can't remember her name, and when I tried in the past, I'd get it wrong, and she'd turn away and stiffen her back, stretch it high, and walk to another room so to cry alone, loud enough that I could hear, but private enough so she wouldn't have to see the absence of a reaction - a soufflé that doesn't rise as it should. It's not that I don't care. I don't intentionally want anyone to cry. So now I call her Nurse, because that's her job, and what she's trained to do, and that seems enough.

Izzy greeted me at the door as Uncle Trevor. Her mother gave her this look, and Izzy apologized. I leaned down and asked if she wanted me to be her uncle, that I'd be happy to be her uncle. She just turned to find her mother, looking to her for how to respond, and I looked at Nurse, and she stared at me, caught somewhere between bewilderment and tears, of joy or sadness I'm not sure - they both look the same at the start. Izzy just looked past me, saying no, that it was okay, I didn't have to be. Nurse came and guided Izzy off to her room, which had been my room. I liked how Nurse would fix Izzy's hair often - tightly wound black curls, pulled upward, wrapped at the base with a ribbon that tied into a bow at the front, puffing at the top like a black truffle. When I showed Izzy what a black truffle was and tasted like, she grimaced. Later, I found a new flower shaped sticky note – which meant it was Izzy's notes for me, as Nurse's is a Smiley Face, and mine to myself is a plain yellow sticky - asking if I wouldn't call her "Black Truffle" in front of her friends.

If things had changed in appearance since the last time I was here with Jack for my mom's funeral and the day Nurse picked me up from the airport, I couldn't tell. Nurse said that they'd removed a few of the dead trees in the back, the ones my father planted to grow pears, "The Paulas." There had been lots of trees, and my father had named them all in groups, according to their fruit. He'd told me he'd built this entire house all by himself, piece by piece, plank by plank. He'd constructed my mom's stove, told me GE was the initials for a nickname his friends had for him at the factory, "Godly Engineer." Told me he'd teach me how to build houses and stoves and beds, plant things and grow things, and be a man, self-sustaining, self-providing. But he'd die, and I grew up having sex with men, and my mother would say it's because I didn't have my father here to make me a

man and act as a man should or go to church to save my soul instead of sneaking around with white boys at night. Jack came with me to my mom's funeral anyhow, said he wanted me to fuck him in my old bedroom. When I pointed out where Jack and I had sex to Izzy and her friend who was spending the night that evening while Nurse unpacked my things in my new room, they just stared at the spot, as if trying to will it into sight and action.

I walked into the kitchen later to find Nurse staring at the article I'd folded and placed in my notebook. She said I'd been busy since the last time she saw it, that'd I'd added more of everything, equations, measurements, items. I asked if she needed me to explain how to read it, and she said not tonight, since it'd take her years before she knew exactly how to read it all. I agreed. I knew she was only partially right though; there were some conventional recipes in there, ones that didn't require so many grams of hydrogen or carbon, and she could execute them well enough, as long as she read directions carefully, since everything was recorded down to the gram. But she placed it aside and started making greens, and I told her not to bother, that it would spoil the taste of the burger, overpower it with its astringent smell, and ruin all the spice and pumpkin in the air. She just looked at me, and I reminded her how it was autumn, how spice and pumpkin is in the air, then I told her to step aside so I could begin, with all my tools, my machines, humming, waiting to be used.

Cooking is an art, in the sense that art is something you can construct as you go, fix as you go, and redo as you go. If there is too much fat in the food, add acidity to cut that fat, for example. Baking is a science in that you have to know exactly how much of something is needed for it to be executed properly, and the degree at which it bakes is

vital. Molecular requires both because it is both. Nurse placed my article to the side, satisfied with my answer I guess, staring at the machine as it buzzed with activity and pumped gray smoke into the pan, then reached for cayenne and tried to pour it in. And then I slapped her hand. She looked at me in the same way my mother would when she thought I was out of line, but I told her I was perfectly within my right. I said I was head chef, and she was my sous chef, which meant she was a soldier and I was the general. She didn't breath unless I ordered her to, and even then only as I direct her how to. She knew I'd taste the cayenne when she added it while she thought I wasn't looking at one point while cooking, and did it anyway. But all it would do is turn a Wimpy burger into something other than that. She hadn't earned the right to that burger, and wouldn't till she learned to take orders as directed.

She commented how good everything smelled, and how lucky Jack must have been to have me as his husband. I laughed and said that he hated my food. She said she always thought he loved my cooking. At home he did, but he hated *Americana*. Told me he found it all pretentious when he first tried it; an exercise in vanity and superficiality - all novelty, flash, and no substance. Said it was filled with snobs that didn't know how to say no to something they didn't understand. No one wants to appear to others like they don't get it. Nurse stood next to me, staring as the gauges of the machine as it pumped more gray smoke into the pan, stating she couldn't believe Jack said that to me. It was our first or second date. He was drunk. And I was horny. And he was cute, even cuter when drunk, because he hiccupped in this adorable way. So I just let it go. A good shag and then I wouldn't have to talk to him again if he hated my restaurant so much. He never

did come to eat at *Americana* the whole time we were together, so I guess he was telling the truth.

I asked about Hat Guy, and Nurse just laughed and reminded me of what his name had been. She didn't say much, other than it was complicated. Hat Guy would eventually have his own stickies in the shape of a dog for my memory board during those times when he and Nurse were together, and he'd stay with her. If my father were alive, he'd have liked him. Hell, if Jack were alive, I'd be afraid he'd leave me for him, even though Hat Guy was straight. But Jack would just say, tangling our legs together, pressing himself into me, exhaling all the air in his body, trying to fold himself into me, that I was the only one he wanted, every night. Without fail.

I was the first to admit one night to Jack, after we'd met Hat Guy for the first time a few years ago when we were here for my mother's funeral, that he was a beautiful man. I knew his name then, made an effort, but since then his relationship with Nurse has been on and off, so I don't really try anymore. I told Nurse, her face lost in clouds of nitrogen and mesquite, that if there was one amazing thing that came from her and Hat Guy being together, it was Izzy, who'd grow up into a gorgeous woman; Half black and half white is a genetic lottery win. Nurse just smiled, and I knew she wanted to agree with me but was refusing to.

That evening she brought me home from the airport was one of those times when she and Hat Guy weren't together, and they wouldn't be for quite some time after that. I asked her if she ever got lonely. She said no, not with Izzy to keep her company, and Isabella and Duane to watch over her, and that she was fine. I told her that my mother, if she were a ghost, would lunge at her with a knife for sleeping in her bedroom, and that

she'd better hope my mother wasn't watching her. But then my mother probably didn't even know which bedroom was hers anymore, so she could mistakenly kill any of us. Not one for subtlety, she wouldn't choose poison, or something slow and silent. No, she'd take someone out like she took herself out, a shot to the head, point blank. Done.

Nurse told me to hush, that Izzy and her friend might hear me, that she didn't know that my mother had killed herself in this house, only that she had died. But I told Nurse that Izzy shouldn't care. The woman who killed herself was not Isabella. The woman who killed herself was not my mother, or my father's wife. She was something else - the carcass of a saccade that would go on to sing and scream all night and day as usual somewhere else, leaving behind nothing but the silent skin that had no real purpose other than to take up space. It didn't remember who she was, or where she was, or who I was, or what year it was, or what time of day. But worst of all, she'd scream to me, she couldn't remember how to cook, and was so afraid her husband would beat her when he got home for not knowing how. My father didn't have a violent or abusive fiber in his body, but there was no reasoning with her then. She was scared - everyone was out to beat her, to kill her, because she couldn't cook. She couldn't even look at a spice and tell what it was or what it did. To her, they were bottles full of different colored sands, and might as well been decorations - those cheap tourist knickknacks you buy at the beach in gift shops on a boardwalk that smells of chlorine and feet. She shot herself with my father's old gun he kept to kill rabbits that tried to eat his vegetables.

Nurse then asked me about Jack. She said she got her confidence to date Hat Guy in the beginning because of my relationship with Jack. But I told her she was far braver than I was. I'd left the country, and wouldn't meet Jack till well in my early forties. Over

there, people were accepting, or better than accepting, they just didn't care. It wasn't an issue that required us to be shunned or lauded; we were just a couple, like any other couple, and that was fine. We'd have made beautiful children if we could, our own genetic lottery wins. He wanted a little boy, someone he could show how to whittle things, like that was a thing a child would ever want to learn. I promised to teach him all the things he needed to know, like how texture is vital to the success of a dish.

Nurse then said she was happy I had decided to allow her to take care of me here, and that I was here, and that she didn't like the thought of me living alone in London, not after I had to give *Americana* over to a new chef after Jack died, and my condition worsened. She was afraid I was lonely. Jack would say that being lonely, being alone, is how someone finds out who they are. But that's a lie. I always knew it'd turn out to be a lie. I never had the heart to visit him after he died and tell him though. I knew perfectly well who I was before I met him; only after his death did I start to forget. I laughed out loud at that. Jack would have too.

I turned to find Nurse again, to read the gauge and check the number in my notebook, but she had left the kitchen. I called her, but the rattle of the machine, running too hard, too loud, was drowning me out, and my voice began and ended within the gray fog that had filled the kitchen. I felt the counters for the notebook and couldn't find it, but saw a black truffle in the smoke moving toward me. I told Izzy to get her mom, and the truffle retreated out of the smoke. I knew that it was producing too much fog, and I wanted to turn the knob to make it stop – The cayenne filled burgers had shrivel into charred balls, shrinking into themselves, pruning as the moisture dissipated within from all the nitrogen, burning and freezing at the same time.

Nurse came in, and I told her she had been right there, right behind me, and she said, in that tone where she was my nurse and not Nurse, all pacifying and neutralizing, but still plenty condescending, that she hadn't been in the room for half an hour. I could see as she came toward me that her eyes were swollen and baggy, and that she'd been crying. I wanted to ask what was wrong but there were too many smells, too much smoke. And then she handed me my notebook and asked what to do, and I looked at it, and I asked if Izzy had been scribbling in it, because it hadn't been here, and then Izzy appeared in the kitchen, and now it was full of nonsense. I called for Izzy immediately. Izzy came into the kitchen with her friend in tow, coughing as their tiny lungs digested fist sized puffs of nitrogen. And Nurse, leaning down to Izzy, saying both her names, the one I called her and the one everyone else does, showing how serious the situation was, asked if she had written in my notebook. She said no, immediately, with such assurance it had to be a lie. I told Izzy that she better not lie, and her friend tried to assure me she wasn't, that they hadn't touched my notebook. I opened it, and stared at it, and flipped through it, and page after page was nothing but scribbles, lines of nonsense, letters that didn't form words, and numbers, lists of numbers, units, and the jottings of a child.

Nurse went to unplug the machine, and as the nitrogen finally stopped pumping, the flames of the gas stovetop erupted around the pan near me, licking the air as it devoured it, digested it, to make it stronger, roar louder, reach higher. And then Nurse yelled at me, saying my hand was in the fire. But it wasn't. It wasn't. Yes, there was a hand, and it was on fire, but it wasn't my hand. The skin on it charred and bubbled, peeled and revealed the supple red meat and tendon underneath, and then the flames began to devour that too. Yes, the hand was at the end of my wrist, connected to my arm,

that went to my elbow and lead into my body, but it wasn't my hand. It looked nothing like my other one, and I felt nothing, not a prick, not a pinch. I tried to move my hand for Nurse so she'd stop screaming and realize that the hand in the fire wasn't mine, and I did. I wiggled all my fingers and gave her a thumbs up. But she remained as horrified as ever, and then she grabbed the extinguisher and covered me, the stove, and my notebook in the white foam, and Jack grabbed my hand and whispered he'd wait for me, that I was the only one he ever wanted, always.

Chapter 7: Tumors of the Catskills

My ex Malcolm and I have a relationship of false starts. When “he” and “I” wish to start trying again to become a “we” - hoping that somehow our years of dates eventually amount into something resembling what couples are supposed to be: healthy and loving and supportive - it’s like revving a dead car battery and thinking the flickering headlights and the coughing carburetor are sure signs of life, that it will start on the next try if we just touch it the right way, utter the right incantation, close our eyes and want it bad enough.

For example, last autumn, we had our fifth 3rd date: I followed him through the Catskill Mountains, “hiking,” as he called it, because walking isn’t “walking” when done between trees with a stick. In the 5 years of our false starts, it was the first time we’d ever hiked together, so he offered to label things for me he knew I wouldn’t recognize; a flourish of *rhododendron* sprouting out of a rock reminding him of a summer-long girlfriend from Blowing Rock, NC. A *squall* (not just a gust of wind) ruffling the canopy that told him rain was coming soon - pulling the drawstring of his hood so tight, his body from behind looked like a *hiking* purple condom. I told him I had spotted a possum darting through the underbrush but I was wrong. He’d seen it too. And it was an *opossum*.

There was a colossus of a tree - more a house with rounded edges - and he wanted me to rest near it because I looked ill and was not used to the altitude as he was. So I did as he prescribed, sitting on a tumor that had swelled from the trunk of the tree, out and downward. It was coated in red orange and brown leaves, as if plastered in strips of colored construction paper, like a papier-mâché project.

I told him about the tree tumor, then began to repeat myself because I'd sworn he hadn't heard: his back was to me, feet apart, standing over The Catskills, surveying it like an inherited possession, saying something about me investing in a time share here, because this would be for him - moving to Manhattan would only be for me. But he said he had heard me the first time.

And it wasn't a tumor, it was a *burl*.

That night, on the drive home, while he snored in the passenger seat, I whispered into his ear that this was the end: we were never having another 3rd date, or even a 1st, and that this was the last time I'd have to pretend to laugh at his joke about bumping into and spilling his vodka-coke on a guy who had passed out at the bar with penises drawn around his mouth, scaring him back into AA when confronted with a bigger mess than him. He'd say it with a half chuckle each time, as if alcoholism was inherently funny, the laughs just a given.

"10:30. Right on time" he mumbled, never even opening his eyes.

It is true that each time we decided to try again, it was in the day, usually the morning after sex, and each time we decided it wasn't going to work, it was at night. It was night that brought the death of our relationship each time. Last year was the first 4th of July party my family had allowed me to attend in years, so when he puked in the

drawer of my mom's vanity and laughed out an apology, I ended it. The previous winter he caught me taking the antenna topper off a car that had parked over two parking lot spaces and "remembered" at that moment why he'd broken up with me before, calling me crazy - a klepto.

There was something about the late odd hour, the time of day when people do, act and say things they'd never do, act, or say in the harsher, more critical light of day. (He'd joke he was only an afterhours alcoholic, who would never think of touching the stuff in the day, and I figured it sounded true enough.) It was the pitch emptiness of the sky, or the brain that had been thinking all day of reasons, of ways, of means, and by that late hour was too exhausted to say no, that would make us reject one another, fall into old habits, and once and for all say "enough is enough."

Halfway between the Catskills and Hoboken, I checked to make sure Malcolm was asleep, because I knew the next song on the CD that had been playing the entire way to and from the Catskills was Dvorak's *Cello Concerto in B*, and I didn't want him to know that listening to it still made me cry. For five years, ever since I heard Malcolm perform it with the Garden State Philharmonic, it had been my favorite song. He was explaining the song to me while in line on our *first* 4th date, at a yogurt shop, when some woman cut in front of us. I was about to jump out of the line and complain when he touched my shoulder, not wanting to be interrupted, and continued to tell me how the song was the epitome of unrequited love. And as soon as he said that, I knew it was true: I could see Dvorak chasing after this woman he'd loved all his adult life, and, only at the end of her life, did she turn around to kiss him faintly on the forehead, and smile, before

turning away and ascending into heaven. It was plenty beautiful in sentiment, but Dvorak had been alone hoping she would eventually love him back, and would die alone.

I had started to cry and excused myself when I saw the woman who had cut in front of me walk away from her table without her scarf to go to the bathroom. The woman was a rich looking New Yorker-type, all black everything, who had the audacity to believe she owned every grain of sand on earth and could leave her stuff anywhere and know for a fact that it would still be there when she got back. Convinced no one would notice, I pulled it from the table and fought the desire to wrap it around my neck, as if it had been mine the whole time, deciding to pocket it until she left instead, excited to watch her stomp out of the yogurt shop trying to warm her skinny little neck with her hands.

Only when I turned to walk back to our table did I realize Malcolm had seen the entire thing, because in that instant I'd forgotten he even existed, forgotten my promise to myself to not to do this in front of him. He looked at me in horror, like he was watching a woman give birth to a pinecone, and said he didn't want to hear from me again. I had worn that scarf on the hike, but I don't think he remembered where I'd gotten it from.

A little out of Hoboken, I stopped at a gas station that was a tiny fluorescent blip swallowed in the blank void of I-87, because Malcolm wanted a beer and needed to use the restroom. When he walked inside, I stepped out of the car to find somewhere in the sky a giant moon, or a search light, or even the blinking nodes of airplanes on their way to somewhere else, and was disappointed in just how much nothingness there was.

A few gas pumps away there was a couple screaming inside of a dark green Saturn who I had tried to ignore, but when I looked over there was a tuft of fabric

sticking from the bottom of the car door from a part of the woman's dress that hadn't made it inside when the door shut - an unnatural pink leopard print. Comfortable knowing Malcolm would be a while talking to the gas attendant, moving his arms around, slushing his beer onto the floor, I stared at the yelling couple in the car, trying to place what had happened, how she could have gone so long without noticing her dress was caught.

At first I figured they had just left wherever they'd eaten dinner when she slammed the door, furious with her boyfriend because, at dinner, he finally admitted to not being sexually attracted to her anymore because of her weight, pointing out the only reason she wears sundresses in autumn is because she is embarrassed about being fat, dressing in things that will hide her body. But when I noticed that she was doing most of the screaming, raising her hand repeatedly like she was going to slap him, and that he mostly just sat there, eyes down, I realized he must have tried to surprise her with a trip somewhere, but forgot to tell her to dress comfortably. He had tried to do something nice, and all he was going to get for his efforts was venom; she didn't love him, and was stringing him along for sex, or money, or both. So I grabbed a pair of scissors from the trunk and started inching my way to the car on my knees, tracking rain-wet specks of asphalt on my palms, constantly checking to see if either could spot me on the ground next to them. When I reached out and grabbed the fabric, I was surprised by how wet it was, how the leopard print melted in my hands. I cut the tuft of fabric and freed it from the car door.

I tied the wet fabric around my rearview mirror and kept waiting for Malcolm to point it out, to ask where it came from, but he had decided years ago to never to ask why

because he knew how much the “why” meant to me, how happy it’d make me to explain it to him.

I told him how I hoped he’d heard me the first time when I said we were done, that we were over, because I really meant it. He never took the time to ask why I do what I do, or care enough to help me stop. He just assumed he knew why because he liked to think nothing was unknown or unexplainable to him.

For the rest of the drive, we were silent. I made the final few turns into his neighborhood and stopped in front of his house. When I told him to get out, he placed his hand on mine and admitted to hearing me cry when Dvorak’s *Cello Concerto* played a while back, that he knew me, and how the story of Dvorak’s life scares me - that I’d love someone and they’d never return it.

He then assured me that he loved me, and that he knew I loved him, and that neither of us wanted to waste the rest of our lives alone, trying to love someone who we could never have because they were normal, and in their right mind, and could never love us – it’s why we will keep trying to make whatever we are work.

The entire drive home I fought my impulse to agree with him, if only out of spite, but the truth was I did find it so incredibly comforting. I’m sure I was supposed to feel helpless, but I didn’t, and I guess I should be ashamed of how little shame I felt, but I don’t: By the end of that night, we would be over, and I would sleep by myself, in my own space, surrounded by only my things, just as he would his. But eventually we’ll grow tired of only surrounding ourselves with our own singular company, and some morning a few days, a few months, or a few years later, we’ll decide to try again, convinced we’ve already found our other half, hoping to cure each other, make each other

the healthiest, best people we can possibly be for one another. Love is supposed to be everlasting and steadfast— like a repeated routine - so we are, by that definition, in love.

Chapter 8: The Laurel Tree

When Penelope was 6, her teenage sister Daphne begged their father to turn her into a tree. All Daphne wanted was to be left alone for the rest of her life, to enjoy her rivers and her forests by herself. But their father had always said Daphne was too beautiful a woman to remain single forever, and he was right: Men pursued her without rest, chased her through streets, broke into their home, drowned, threw themselves into fires, just to see her; She was a prize made all the more desirable with every man that died trying to win her. So during the darkest hour of the winter solstice, Penelope watched her father turn Daphne into a laurel tree.

The next morning, Penelope convinced herself that Daphne would finally be happy, among her rivers and her forests. She pressed that belief tight against her body, positive that if she were to let go, it'd spool away, unravel, and she'd no longer believe it was true. And sure enough, the following week, while sitting at the root of her sister's trunk, holding Daphne's hairbrush, Penelope could no longer say she was happy for her sister.

Penelope didn't know how the loss of her sister made her feel, couldn't describe it to herself, until she was stung by a wasp a month later and decided that it felt just like that: a sting, a pain – bright, sharp, and sudden, leaving a round, swollen welt that she hoped one day would get smaller, become less noticeable.

Convinced of her and her sister's unhappiness, she confronted her father, her tiny body speaking into his knees.

"Was there nothing else you could do?" she tried

"She wanted me to open the earth and let it swallow her. That's what she really wanted, Penelope. Do you think she'd be happy then?" he asked.

"No. But couldn't you turn the men into fish, or pigs, or roaches?"

Her father smiled. It was warm and sympathetic, but not what Penelope wanted. She wanted an answer. She wanted her sister back.

"She'd still want to be alone," he began. "No matter where she went, men would come for her. She is happier this way. You can talk to her this way. I'll show you."

Her father bundled Penelope in his arms to protect her from the bright north wind of winter, and walked to the laurel tree that had been Daphne. He sat her in front of the tree and told her to whisper anything she wanted to it and the tree would respond. So Penelope cupped her hands around her mouth and spoke into the bark, telling Daphne how she missed her so much it felt like hundreds of wasps stinging her body every day. When her father pulled her away from the tree and pointed up, Penelope watched and listened to the leaves - brilliant and glossy green - as they rustled in response.

"See?" her father began. "She heard you."

Penelope couldn't disagree with her father. She had seen it with her own eyes: her sister's leaves were bright and healthy, while the other trees were bare, their leaves ripped away by winter. But it did not stop the sting or the pain.

*

On the warmest afternoon of the winter season, Penelope watched a man approach Daphne's tree from afar. She recognized him because she'd seen him stalking around their home, peering through Daphne's window - he had begun to even appear in her dreams when she closed her eyes. Penelope knew he was Apollo, the man who had chased Daphne longest, with more abandon than any other man. Watching him circle the tree, Penelope pressed her fingernails into her palm, fighting the need to hurl herself at him, to make him feel all the pain he'd caused. She wanted to make him suffer. She wanted to make him mourn. But he was one of the greatest hunters who had ever lived, and in size was a god compared to her. So she silently watched him embrace the tree, and forced her fingernails deeper into the flesh of her palm until her entire body felt nothing but *that* sting, *that* pain. As he began to pluck the leaves from Daphne's branches to make a wreath to frame his head, Penelope was convinced she could hear her sister cry in misery.

The next day Apollo brought more men, and they plucked more leaves from Daphne's branches, creating more wreaths to wear around their heads. The following day, more still. When Penelope warned her father of this, of the stinging pain her sister must feel, he smiled.

"They will grow back," he assured her. "And she can't feel it."

Penelope was sure that her sister's leaves would grow back, but knew it would bring more men that would want to tear them off again. She also knew the pain was real, because she could feel it: She'd watch a man grasp a fist of leaves, tear them from the branch, and each time it delivered a bright new sting, a fresh stab of pain. Penelope swore

that if she could feel it, then so could Daphne, and if her sister could always feel pain before, and happiness, and fear, why is it any different now?

But men continued to parade to and from the laurel tree, each time with a new bundle of leaves in their arms, and Penelope could do nothing but watch from afar. Her sister had only wanted to remain unmarried, to be left alone, and now she had no recourse but to stand and sway while men plucked her beautiful leaves, convinced that wearing them in wreaths bestowed them with might, royalty, and godliness.

So, during the darkest hour of the last day of winter, after the men had taken the last of Daphne's leaves and gone home, Penelope approached her sister. She cupped her hands around her mouth and promised into her sister's bark: When she was tall enough, and strong enough, and big enough, she would cut her sister down, and hide her from everyone. Perhaps by then, she hoped, the stinging pain would have hurt for so long, would have etched itself so deep into the both of them, that when the day came to cut her down, neither would feel a thing.

Chapter 9: How to Make A Monster

Professor Tomorrow and His Wife

When his wife was run over by a speeding semi-truck unable to see the tiny old stop sign, he built the first stop light the town had ever seen. Until that evening, no one had ever been hit by anything faster than a go cart. It had never been a large town, but the Chernobyl disaster had crippled its population permanently, with more bodies buried underground than living on top of it. Running cars were rare, those homes that had one had their doors rusted shut and their tires buried in leaves and wild vines in the summer and hard packed, ungiving snow in the winter. When the glow of red yellow green spooked the local wildlife away from the neighboring woods, ruining the autumn hunt, the town complained, demanding the man dismantle the stop light. So he took the pieces and buried them with the woman and cried over her grave alone, where the tiny glints of red yellow green in the soil became the only marker distinguishing her grave from the thousands of others surrounding it.

*

Pyotr gave a low whistle as he finished reading an article from a newspaper he'd spread over his half eaten bagel.

“What?” said the woman on her stomach, searching under his bed for her top.

“My brother, Kris.”

“You have a brother?” he barely heard her ask from below, her entire torso having disappeared under the bed.

“Yes. He’s been missing. Now he’s been found.” Pyotr dropped the article onto the floor and got out of bed, careful to avoid stepping on the pair of legs under him amongst various items of produce scattered around a ripped paper grocery bag: two apples. A banana. A canister of cream cheese. A bottle of olive oil.

The woman, having finally found her shirt, had it halfway over her chest when she stopped to read the article on the floor. Pyotr heard her mutter *how sad* while he gurgled and spit mouthwash in his bathroom.

He came back into his bedroom area and sat on the edge of the bed, wondering why she chose to dress herself on the floor like a five year old, and whether this is something she does at home: gather all her clothes, drop them on the floor, then sit on the ground and dress herself, one article at a time.

“To be hit by a truck, can you imagine?” she asked as she gathered her groceries and her newspaper from the floor, re-tying the bag of bagels and dropping it in with the rest.

“There are worst ways to go. Besides, she didn’t feel anything.”

“Did you dislike your sister-in-law?” she asked, looking horrified, in the way Pyotr thought she would have looked as a child when she found out that wise, helpful Baba Yaga also kidnapped and ate children.

“No. But she wasn’t my sister-in-law. It’s not legal to marry a robot,” Pyotr said, then kissed her on the forehead and sent her on her way, back to whatever her day was supposed to be.

*

Their moving truck had arrived into the town some years prior and parked in front of the largest house the town had. Everyone that frosted winter evening had gathered, huddling into a tight ball of whispers, watching movers haul hulking masses of steel and wires, blinking nodes and whirling gadgets. Little did these unsuspecting townsfolk know that the man moving in was none other than Professor Tomorrow.

For years, no one knew who had moved in or was able to catch a glimpse of the Professor and his wife. And then, years later, at 2 AM during the middle of a rare snowless autumn, a naked woman was hit by a truck on the only road in town that did not begin and end within the town itself. Finally, the Professor came forward, breaking through the gathering crowd, claimed the body as his wife, and carried her back to the large house everyone had watched so intently for years before.

*

The letter from Science & Now arrived two days after Pyotr had expected it to once he'd found the article about his brother, but the extra time had not provided them with anything to say that was different from what he had already expected: The Editor & Chief will arrive tomorrow at your home to discuss a freelance opportunity. Pyotr crunched the letter into a little ball and shot it at Sweater, causing its two yellow eyes to appear within its woven oval mass of gray black white fur, then disappear. Months ago, while needing to live in a hostel temporarily, Pyotr had been delighted to find someone in the public laundry had placed their sweater in his laundry basket by mistake, and he sprinted to his room to try it on. But when he dumped the basket on the ground, Sweater tipped the basket over and shuffled its way into a corner of the room that it had decided

from that moment would belong to it. When Pyotr could finally afford to rent a real apartment, Sweater appeared inside on move-in day, already pilled against a corner, and Pyotr decided that it had already lived here once before.

The front door opened as if it had no lock or padlock barring entrance into his home, and Mr. Dvorzhetsky took his seat in front of Pyotr in the modest studio, occupying half the space of his kitchen and living room.

“Pyotr, you are going to write an expose on Kris and his life in that tiny town, and the loss of his wife, and then we will publish it. The people will be delighted to know what happened to their *Professor Tomorrow*.”

“But there is already someone who knew enough to write about the death of his wife. I don’t want to step on his toes when he discovers the Kris of his article is *Professor Tomorrow*.”

“Mr. Pyotr, the people don’t know that man. But they know *you*. They know you, because they know your brother, who they came to love through *your* words. No one else can write this piece, and *no one* else will.”

“Mr. Dvorzhetsky-“ Pyotr began with his eyes to the ground, wanting to hide his joy at hearing such a thing, his desire to regain that level of exposure to his words again.

“Mr. Vladislav, Pyotr. You worked too long for me for such formalities as last names.”

“But I don’t work for you, Mr. Vladislav. I haven’t written for you since they dissolved all the operations Kris was working on in ‘91. When Kris doesn’t have a job, I don’t have a job. That’s what you told me.”

Dvorzhetsky laughed with a boom that made Pyotr flinch in recoil, his body preparing itself for a punch to the face.

“Yes, you did great work for us. The people needed to know that a human man was working with Gorbachev in making this the greatest, most forward thinking and advanced nation in the world. It wasn’t a machine that put satellites in space or kept us safe, giving us peace of mind; No, it was a human man, your brother, and the people loved him.”

“And now the people want to know who the woman he was married to was?” Pyotr asked, to which Dvorzhetsky nodded in reply.

“I can tell you right now. She was a robot, a lady made of parts. She was made, designed by him. The whole time you had me writing about him, it was all he ever talked about doing; Real women can’t feel or love in this age, he’d say. Real Russian women don’t have the capacity anymore. So he built one instead. And he moved to that town. And she got hit by a truck.”

Dvorzhetsky was a man of sharp angles, with a body and face of great contrasts, made of basic geometric shapes, which gave him the striking and deeply unnerving appearance of a protagonist in a propaganda poster. So when he rose from his chair and stared down to Pyotr, shoulders extending into crisp ledges that touched the walls, then plunging forever downward like there wasn’t a floor to stop it from extending into a layer of the earth’s mantle, Pyotr sighed with a smile at the delightful inevitability of it all, and just walked with him to the door.

“So,” Dvorzhetsky started, “You will write a piece about your brother, and he, like he always was and shall be, is Russia: strong and resilient and inventive and full of

humanity. You will write of his wife, and she is Russia: loving and nurturing and supportive. You will go to this town, and then in five weeks you will send me your expose, and we will publish it. Until then, Mr. Pyotr.”

*

One of the townsfolk was haunted by the death, wanting to help her new neighbor. He was not new, of course, and she knew that; He'd lived there for years. But only now did she know who he was, and in that moment recognized what he had lost. All too familiar with death (she once had four brothers, a father, and a stepmother, all gone within a few months of each other, when she was much younger), she wanted to help him. So she braved a winter afternoon that had brought with it snow that reached her knees, and trekked into the Professor's yard, eventually reaching his door. But her knock went unanswered, so she went back home.

When she tried the next afternoon, placing her feet in the same foot holes she had made the previous day to the house, she was joined by two others, an old husband and wife, who had lost their baby triplets years ago, but still carried their pacifiers around their neck. Together, they trekked to the house, knocked, and eventually made the journey back home. The next day, they were joined by a woman who had lost her mother and the first of five dogs, all buried and gone now, a man who had lost his sister and father, a brother and sister who had lost their other, younger brother and sister, as well as their grandparents who had raised them all, and an old woman who had lost her daughter. Each day, a new group of people joined in the effort to eventually talk to the man in the house with the dead wife. His loved one was now buried just as deep underground as the rest of theirs.

*

The town had a semi-sweet but plainly toxic smell that reminded Pyotr of the bug repellent he sprayed on himself during summer. Abusive and relentless, leaving no part of the town untouched, he finally decided after spending two days searching for a room in his hotel not afflicted by the odor that it was being produced by the thinned dead forests that surrounded the town, or the nearby river, or the power plants that encircled the town like mountains that pumped and fumed with the fury and roar of industry and labor that made him feel lazy by comparison.

Since the only way to reach the town was by car, Pyotr spent the drive looking over the original article, voicing his surprise and disappointment with the writer's oversight in not mentioning his brother's home address to Sweater as it crunched and toppled atop the newspaper Pyotr had layered his car seats and floor mats with, determined to keep it clean of fur. He dismissed the writer as young, neglectful, and limited, choosing to write it like an obituary instead of a news article, with a few reviews of restaurants sprinkled in-between. Half of it was about Kris and his dead wife, the other half about the town's bakery, or the town's seafood. Try it, he stressed, if ever in the area.

But the more Pyotr explored it, a town that struck him more as a suburb with its own elected mayor, made to feed into a giant city that was never built, the more he realized that no person would ever *really* be in this area of the country. Not for lack of trying though, Pyotr would say to the hotel bartender every night once he realized his hotel had a bar. He could see tourists visiting, if they ever built more than one hotel and replanted all the trees, got rid of that awful smell, and cleaned the river so every step taken didn't sound with the crunch of tiny fish bones. It's very pleasant and sort of

quaint, traffic isn't too bad except for the times of day where people are driving to work at the power plants or coming home, and everyone seems to keep to themselves. Rent was cheap, but that probably had to do with all the dead people buried everywhere. Pyotr then burped and apologized to the bartender, knowing that he used to have a sister and four cats.

It was something he came to realize about the families who lived in this town as he asked them questions, inviting himself into their houses, asking for filtered water or slices of cake if he spotted it out in the kitchen, roaming about their homes knowing they'd never ask him to leave out of decorum, spotting certain rooms untouched or unchanged, with tv's and stereos and cassettes from decades ago. The people who lived here lived like they were missing an arm or a leg from their body, each family entirely formed, and then reduced instantly because of Chernobyl by a quarter or half, without the time to prepare for the loss. A family of five became only one mother and two sons, or just three sisters.

Imagine it this way, Pyotr would later say to a woman with brown pigtailed when he got back home, wooing her with his explorations over shots of vodka: A baby is born with all their parts, and somewhere in development, say age eight or nine, that child's right arm ceases to grow, but the rest of him develops normally. That's what families in this town were like, a normal body with a dwarf arm, an entire quarter that just didn't exist anymore, and at first it's horrifying, but they learn to cope because the rest of their body just keeps growing, and the family that's left just keeps aging, and they can't replace their useless arm. They go on with their life, they have to, but that stunted quarter is

always there, just hanging from them, frozen in that moment where it stopped aging, stopped growing, but always there. It was unnatural.

*

In the days that followed, snow was dumped in massive clumps from gray clouds that looked more mechanic than organic; skies of puffy claystone, steel, and slate made slabs of snow that dropped with a thud atop frozen ground that had tightened from soil into iron, squeezing with such pressure it cracked the earth open in places, forcing tree roots out of the ground. The people of the town had believed themselves to be cursed with these winters, to go on living when so many had died. Those who were left alive were not allowed to die in the winter because the ground was too hard and there was no way for their remaining family to bury the body, which forced them to either wait until the first snowless day of spring to die or disappear into the forest to only later be found when the body started to smell from rotting in the sun.

But Professor Tomorrow had not been closing himself to these tortured souls out of misery or self-pity for his loss. He had been working all his days inventing a way to help the kind people of the town. In those days when the townsfolk braved the snow to try to talk to him, he wanted to let them in, to let them know he was okay, but realized that there was much work to do, much he wanted to accomplish before he met with them again. He had been reading articles by his brother, a writer who still lives in their childhood town of Moscow. The Professor had admired his brother for years, always thinking highly of him as a fellow great mind and a respected friend. The Professor had read all of his brother's works for guidance during the quiet intermittent years he spent with his wife. And now The Professor was going to use his brother's publications as the

foundation for helping these townsfolk, to save them from the oppressive sadness that consumed their days.

Professor Tomorrow had learned a great deal about humanity from his brother's writings in just the past decade alone. He had learned how to cope with the death of his wife from "The Human Spirit and its Temperament" (*Journal of the Moscow Mind*; Spring 1996). He had learned about the importance of forging and creating a community from "Why Humanity Needs Each Other" (*Science & Now*; Fall 1990). He had learned which foods, if prepared correctly, could heal broken souls from "How Certain Foods Can Save Your Life" (*Russian Cooking*; Fall 2000).

Professor Tomorrow braved the harshest winter storm of the season, going from home to home, handing out copies of his brother's articles. The Professor knew, once they'd read his brother's wise words, they'd be ready to make a change, to build a community. The professor would tell each family that it took re-reading his brother's articles to realize that the stop light he had built for the town had been a nuisance for these townsfolk because it served them no purpose. So he would give them something that would be useful. He would save them from their oppressive winters.

*

It had taken two weeks of walking into and out of homes and talking to mothers and sisters and brothers and fathers before anyone would even admit to have ever knowing Kris, and that was by accident. Pyotr had handed the woman, who had lost her brothers and father and stepmother, a sheet of paper proving he wasn't a police officer, wasn't a detective, but just an author and a journalist, sent here to write about Kris and his wife, and only Kris and his wife.

“Why do you want to write about him anyway,” the woman with the lazy eye and the blackened fingertips asked with a knee jerk reaction of such disgust and reproach she covered her mouth in order to avoid spitting in Pyotr’s face.

“He was a famous scientist. I wrote about him. Surely you’ve heard of Professor Tomorrow?”

“No. I’ve never heard of him.”

“But his adventures were published all over the country. The circulation was huge. School children in cities much bigger than this one were required to read about his inventions and adventures. Your parents had to have read them to you until you were forced to read them to yourself.”

“I can’t read,” she said, opening the door to let him out, letting in a whirl of snow. It was a door that swung open from both sides, something Pyotr had only then realized were how all the doors opened in the town.

“I beg your pardon, you’re a grown woman and you can’t read?” he said as he stepped out, offended by being forced to leave.

“No. No one can. The people who survived lost the ability to read words properly. Our eyes can’t make sense of them anymore. Doctors have said brain tumors or something. Everything looks like gibberish.” She then threw a shoe at Pyotr, causing him to fall over backwards into the snow, telling him to never come back.

He had also questioned the hotel bartender about Kris. Pyotr spat, his voice bouncing inside of the empty lobby, frustrated with being lied to, knowing Kris would have come almost every afternoon and evening to the only bar in town. But the bartender only grinned and shook his head, to which Pyotr would then push another drink onto the

floor in spite. The bartender would always offer to make him another free one, but Pyotr had begun to refuse all of them once he'd spotted the bartender spitting into his third free cocktail.

It was this sort of animosity that had become tired and irritating to Pyotr. Cars had begun to speed through red lights in order to hit him as he walked across the street. People closed the door behind them when he was only steps away from entering with them. Sweater continuously disappeared out of his room, reappearing the next day, each time with less fur and less teeth.

By the third week, he was finally able to meet with the mayor to voice his complaints.

"Is that all?" she asked, standing from her seat, walking to him with a limp, one foot noticeably smaller than the other, her right wearing a women's sneaker, her left a child's.

"No. You had to have known Kris. Someone came and wrote an article about him. You at least knew about the woman who was hit by a truck."

"I am aware. Very sad."

"Very sad, but I'm starting to think very untrue. No one seems to know about a truck, and no one seems to know about this woman. And no one knows where she lived, who she lived with. How the hell did this reporter write anything if no one knew who they were?"

"Well, it sounds very simple to me, Mr. Pyotr" she began, leaning into his face, her breath a concentrated cloud of the same bug repellent that lingered over the entire town. "There was never a truck, or a woman, or a man. He made up the whole thing."

“Why would he do that?”

“Because I paid him to.”

“And why would you do that?”

“Tourism.”

“Did the bartender tell you I said that?”

“His name is Andrei. And no, it’s the truth.”

“This entire town can run me in circles, but this story is my job. I will write it, and then I’ll write this little dump into oblivion.”

“Well, I wish you the best of luck, Mr. Pyotr.”

She stood him up out of the chair and shook his hand as she forced him out of her office. Pyotr involuntarily shivered as his fingers gave her hand a squeeze, finding it as smooth and boneless as holding a stick of butter that melts in his grip, oozing between his fingers.

*

The town had been passing articles between one another, sharing their thoughts, excited to put them into practice, to cook and live as a community. But the townsfolk had no place for them to meet and share. So for weeks in late December, Professor Tomorrow and his brother wrote each other, trying to figure out what wonderful invention The Professor could create to help these people build the community they so desperately deserve. At last, the Professor’s brother suggested that the invention should allow the townsfolk, young and old, to share a single space that they all could enjoy, where they could be each other’s family. But how, Professor Tomorrow asked. Professor Tomorrow’s brother was surprised at the Professor, asking if he had already forgotten

their favorite place to go to while growing up. Professor Tomorrow wrote his brother on Christmas Day to thank him, asking him to visit in exactly two weeks, then instantly got to work.

*

That night, Pyotr walked along the frozen river in search for Sweater, knowing that some of the teenagers came here sometimes to drink and throw animals onto the river to see if they'd break the ice and drown. The weather had been gradually warming since Pyotr's arrival, to the point that almost every evening, while breaking into abandoned houses trying to find one that could have belonged to Kris, he'd spot a few neighbors trying to dig holes in their backyard. The first time the ground was supple enough to be dug into, he had broken into a house by the river, rifling through the drawers and closets of what he had decided was a young girl who loved purple panties and socks, and the pop group Mirage, which Pyotr figured was a shame since they would have most of their biggest hits after the girl had died. She had been fairly good at math but terrible at showing her work, so she always failed her tests, at least the ones he could find. He decided she mostly did the work in her head, since she always got the right answers in the end, and decided to fold the sheets and pocket them. On his way out the back, he saw that the next door neighbor had finally gotten through the frozen soil and dug a hole. After that night, most of the town began digging holes in their yards; not all at once and never more than once, but they always dug them quickly, like they had been waiting for years to do it.

It wasn't until Pyotr was heading back to the hotel that he saw Sweater darting into the thinned forests behind the boarded up library and grocery store, avoiding all the

wide circles of light spotting along the pavement from the streetlamps, only moving within the leftover shadows. Pyotr followed in chase, stumbling over fresh mounds in the dirt while Sweater, steps ahead, jumped over holes left unfilled with the rhythm of an expert in the terrain, loping through a forest that it's owned for years. Pyotr stopped to watch Sweater saunter into a thin pale house with empty windowpanes and no door that looked to have sprouted from the ground with the rest of the forest, and just as poisoned and leached of nutrition and color, becoming dried, bleached, brittle rinds of their former selves.

Walking under the black and yellow checkered warning tape that wrapped around the house like a waistband, Pyotr stepped over a couple of dead cats, a few birds, and some fish, their bodies half sticking out of a thin bed of gray snow that covered the floors. It had two floors, but the wooden staircase lay shattered below the upstairs landing, with more dead cats lying within the rubble. Most of the house had been stripped of any furnishings or appliances, leaving only a few items scattered on the ground, a "best husband" mug, a notebook, a tennis shoe, a curtain rod, some earrings.

There was, however, a painting, half on the wall, half leaning on the mantle of the fireplace, that Pyotr recognized instantly. Kris had owned a print copy of Bruegel's "Hunters in the Snow" for years, had always put it up in whatever lab they stationed him to work in, even his dorm room, despite everyone telling him not to, Pyotr would then later say to the brown pigtailed girl as she giggled and snorted, leaning back on her barstool, Pyotr's hand holding her from falling. A woman with sky blue earmuffs who their father had been flirting with while ice skating for what he had told the woman was Kris and Pyotr's eighth birthday in Gorky Park had bought it at the nearby gift shop.

Their father often told women that they were twins. He'd stand them together and tell women to look: both skinny legged with brown hair and eyes half-suspicious of everything. But in truth Pyotr had always been two years older. Their father ditched the woman a few days later, and the next weekend he had them celebrate their eighth birthday again, this time with a woman in a blood-red parka. With that winter, and spring, and summer, until Pyotr hit puberty, they had amassed a treasure trove of things that blinked, spun, glowed, and peed, but Kris only ever kept the painting.

A low sad choir of growls made Pyotr turn toward the corner as Sweater battered a half-dead cat in the face, knocking it to the floor. The rest of the cats, some with only three legs, some with one eye, some with no fur, each one equally as starved and horrifically mutated, simply bowed and cowered around Sweater, a nimbus cloud of angered, knotted black white gray fur. Every time one of the withered cats would reach for what Pyotr had decided with excitement was a human ear, Sweater, poised over it in full possession, would rear back, swat the cat full in the face, then pummel, claw, and chew it until it stopped moving.

Pyotr ran over and stomped on the floor, scattering the cats left alive to separate parts of the house, with Sweater standing guard over the ear. Confident in his assumption, he jerked back to look at the painting, with its white worn etchings curling over the landscape. Finally remembering the notebook, Pyotr picked it up, expecting to find extensive records, data entries. However, each page was entirely blank.

Folding the pages with his fingers, Pyotr continued to stare at the painting of the two men trek down the snow covered hill, dragging a dead fox back to a small village of ice skaters and black pot cookers, tucked snugly within a tiny ring of mountains. And it

was at that exact moment, he'd say later while leaning nose to nose with the brown pigtailed girl, that he had decided exactly what had happened to his brother Kris, and his monster wife.

*

Exactly two weeks to the day, Professor Tomorrow's brother arrived in town on a brisk sunny winter morning in the fresh new year. The Professor lead his brother to where the townsfolk had gathered, explaining what he had done along the way. The problem, the Professor began, was that the people were so burdened by their loss, it consumed them, and they were never able to move on, and form new families with one another. So he designed a device that leveled some of the hilly, dead land at the edge of town, clearing it to make a lake.

As they reached a clearing at the foot of a mountain on the edge of town, the Professor's brother began to cry at the sight of a giant frozen lake dissected into three skating rinks by a strip of snow and a stone bridge, with the entire town skating and cooking with one another. Shots went off behind them from within the forest, startling the Professor's brother. No need to be scared, the Professor began with a laugh; it's only the hunters, bringing in dinner. They both laughed as they made their way down to the frozen lake and joined the rest of the town.

By the end of the evening, all the townsfolk had spoken to Professor's Tomorrow's brother to express just how much his publications had changed their lives. While walking with Professor Tomorrow's brother back to the town entrance to say goodbye, the town asked him to please send any more of his writings to them. Professor Tomorrow's brother promised he would, as long as he could continue to write about

Professor Tomorrow and the rest of the town. Professor Tomorrow looked his brother straight in the face and told him that as long as he never mentions the town's name, to protect these people and the wonderful town they've created, he'd be delighted to share any of his future inventions and adventures with the rest of the nation.

On his way out of the town, the brother stopped by the graveyard, found the one with glints of red yellow green, kneeled, then softly whispered thank you into the soil, knowing none of this could have happened without her.

*

When the brown pigtailed girl asked what happened when he got back home and gave the story to the Science & Now, Pyotr leaned in, as if telling a secret.

Pyotr had been left alone in Mr. Dvorzhetsky office for almost ten minutes, time he spent staring at the monument of Yuri Gagarin in the middle of the city square, chest out, arms bowed out at his sides, his torso melting into a steel pillar of fire, shooting him into space, a human rocket. Pyotr knew that if Gagarin were alive he'd only come up to his chest, and he'd learned enough about him from Kris to know he was plenty nice but plenty simple, walking everywhere with his torso hunching into itself like something in his stomach pulled his entire body inward, trying to shrink him out of existence, and always choosing to smile instead of talking to avoid embarrassing himself with how little he knew and how tiny his voice was. But here in the middle of Moscow he wasn't a human cosmonaut, he was a superman.

Dvorzhetsky entered and Pyotr rose, which Dvorzhetsky laughed at in response.

"Nonsense. Don't get up. The expose is remarkable."

"Thank you."

“So, you’ll be able to keep writing about Professor Tomorrow?”

“I don’t see why not,” Pyotr offered, watching Dvorzhetsky thumb through the notebook.

“I still can’t believe what that town did to your brother and his wife. How awful.”

Pyotr just nodded, uttering something noncommittal from his throat.

“But, I guess I just don’t understand how you could continue to write Professor Tomorrow pieces with your brother dead,” Dvorzhetsky said. “I mean, personally. It must be very difficult.”

Pyotr, staring at the notebook without breaking focus even once, just observed that in all the years he had written for Mr. Dvorzhetsky, wrote about Kris for him, he never once asked about their relationship, how Pyotr did what he did. So why start now?

And that, Pyotr said to the brown pigtailed girl, was when Dvorzhetsky got up from his chair, shook his hand, and welcomed him back to the magazine. The girl just stared gap mouthed at Pyotr in surprise, but clearly happy for him, and for the stars in the sky and the air in her lungs, she shouted repeatedly. Pyotr raised his next shot to her lips, let her down it, and then let her down her own.

As Pyotr walked her back to his place, her arm slung over his shoulder, her breath tickling his ear, she cooed: what’s in the notebook? To be frank, Pyotr began, he didn’t understand a lot of it; Kris mostly used it as a journal for his formulas. But near the end it details a night where Kris had gone to the bar and his wife escaped, walking to some woman’s house. When the woman opened the door, Kris’ wife swore she was the woman’s dead husband. Why? Because she had her dead husband’s brain in her head, so, naturally, she swore she was him. But while visiting the poor woman, Kris’ wife would

also think she was another man's sister, another woman's aunt, each time begging the same question: where am I? The woman asked Kris' wife questions that only her dead husband knew, and that's when she noticed the state of this woman claiming to be her husband, how her fingers were different shades from each other, her forearm different from her elbow, her neck different from her shoulder, her cheeks different from her nose. The poor woman started yelling around town, telling everyone about Kris' wife, how she was made of body parts from their dead loved ones. Then, Pyotr finished, the townsfolk slaughtered Kris' wife and took their relative's body parts back to their homes.

Dragging brown pigtailed girl up, her with her legs banging against the stairs, she slurred through hiccups just enough to state how she can't believe a whole town could chop up a person into pieces. Pyotr, pushing Sweater out of the doorway, then dropped her on the bed, saying it was just fortunate he got there before the ground thawed enough so they could bury them all and get away with it forever.

The girl, lying on her side with her knees to her chest whispered how even if the woman was made of other people's body parts, to chop her up is just insane.

Pyotr, unzipping his pants, stated quite sincerely that you can't make this stuff up.

Chapter 10: The Golightlies

On the night of Christmas Eve 1980, back when I lived in New Mexico, for reasons that weren't entirely undeserved, I was smacked in the face with the butt end of an empty vodka bottle. It'd knocked out my right canine and both premolars. The guy who hit me wished that I'd rot in hell, but in the meantime should have a very merry Christmas.

The next morning there was only one dentist answering their phone on Christmas day, and the woman on the phone sounded as surprised someone called her as I was that someone answered. She asked, quite frankly, why the hell do I need a dentist on Christmas? I explained as best I could through the cotton balls stuffed in my mouth.

"Fine," she finished. "Dr. Barnes can you see you today. So come on down, honey."

*

The dentist's office was in a deserted strip mall - a rogue weed in the middle of the nothingness that is New Mexico. The receptionists I'd made the appointment with was in her 50's, had more white hair than brown, wore glasses too young for her face, but had a face too young for her age. She talked loudly, but with excitement, like she'd forgotten how to speak, and only just now remembered, yelling to fill the room with her voice in case she goes the rest of her life without saying another word.

I had been studying myself in the red and green glass bulbs of the plastic Christmas tree beside me in the waiting room, humming with Karen Carpenter as she warbled her way through “The Christmas Waltz” over the PA system, when the receptionists started on why she hated fake trees, but couldn’t bear to ever have a real one again. Once the tree is cut, she started, it’s exalted: it goes in the house, gets decorated, celebrated, admired. It’s not a tree anymore, it’s a totem, it’s a spirit. It was happiness. It was youth - contained. But it leaves a stump, a tiny brown nub in the dirt, that can’t go with the rest of the tree, so it can’t be anything else, can’t become anything else. It’s just the rest of a stump.

She had asked me a bunch of questions about why I was so young and living on my own in a state that wasn’t my home before she finally revealed that she understood, because she was Holly Golightly, and had done the same thing.

“The real one of course darling,” she laughed, “not some damn fiction character.”

She grew up in the Texas, got married in ’38, left her lover, was best friends with Capote, lived in Manhattan, knew a cat, was a bit of dyke, and still gets the mean reds – we’re talking really scared. And before I could even start laughing at such a confession, she said Dr. Barnes was ready, so I had better scoot.

*

When Dr. Willie-Mae Barnes removed her fingers from my mouth to call her receptionists, Connie, into the room, the medicine she’d shot into my jaw set in just right so I wasn’t seeing spots of color from the pain anymore. The pair shared an agreement apparently where Connie could talk all she wanted to the patients as long as she stood there to give Dr. Barnes any tools she needed.

So, Connie started on how I looked just like a man named Josh who had followed her to Manhattan from their hometown in Texas, begging Willie-Mae repeatedly to agree.

“When we were kids Willie-Mae was crazy about Josh.” Connie confessed to me in a loud enough whisper so everyone could hear. “They even got engaged, before he chased me all the way to Manhattan. Have you ever been to Manhattan, honey? You should, best damn years of my life. Go there, get lost, get in trouble, steal something that’s worth it, and every night have dinner with strangers until they’re your best friends, then learn so much about them that you can’t stand the thought of seeing them ever again - get up from the table, wish them well, and go on with your day. What the hell was I talking about-”

Connie made a face at Willie-Mae, as if she had walked into a dark room and was waiting for Willie-Mae to tell her how to turn on the light. But Dr. Barnes was silent, staring at Connie, refusing to answer. At the time I couldn’t figure how, but there was something about how muted and elevated Dr. Barnes was with Connie, like a child refusing to retaliate against their bully because they always felt they had to be responsible and take the high road, that made Connie instantly remember she had wanted to tell me about Josh, and why she thought I was so much like him.

Josh had a good head of hair, too, and a decent smile, so he walked around like gold bricks paved the ground behind his feet and talked to people like he’d invented the English language. He was an alcoholic too, but other than being vain, he was the most generous man she’d ever known. He now lived in Florida, a widower, with 3 grown children. So don’t keep hitting the bottle too hard, she finished with a wink; don’t end up

like Josh, living in Florida. Willie-Mae just shook her head, neither testifying it as truth or fib.

*

“Once,” Connie said in a bright pitch, as if preparing to sing, “Ronald Reagan flirted with me while filming King’s Row. He sidled up to me wearing these fake amputated arm props from the movie, and kept rubbing my legs and back with them to get me to laugh. He was a darling, harmless. Not bright, but very charming, and honey all you really need.” Connie finished with a knowing wink at Willie-Mae, who looked down at me with smile lines around her face from behind her surgical mask.

Willie-Mae mentioned how handsome Gloria Vanderbilt’s teenage son Anderson was, and Connie called her a bore, and Dorian Leigh scattered, but sweet.

“Out of all those beautiful fools who want to pretend they’re Holly,” Connie finished, “I only ever really liked Carol Grace. Crazy as a bat but at least she was a proper bitch to your face and not behind your back.”

It wasn’t until Connie asked Dr. Willie-Mae Barnes about her daughter that I realized that the two were sisters, Dr. Barnes the oldest. I sat beneath the two older women, mouth wide, unable to say a word. Only when Willie-Mae asked Connie for tools would I even remember I was a body in the room. They talked about each other’s nephews, nieces, and grandchildren who would all get into town later that day: Ella won’t let her mother braid her hair anymore. Matthew learned how to tie his shoes.

But for all the growing family they had younger than them, they had none older than them: mothers, fathers, grandparents, uncles, aunts, all gone. The family they had known, had built themselves under, were taken away, leaving just the two of them - the

rest of a stump. All their nephews and nieces, sons and daughters and grandchildren knew them as “aunt” and “grandma” and “mom,” but to each other, they could only be younger sister Connie and older sister Willie-Mae.

When they finished, they sat me up and smiled at me like they were meeting an old friend, laughing in unison at my gibberish speech, or the string of saliva that pooled onto my right shoulder from the corner of my mouth, my lower lip an uncontrollable and foreign bulb of flesh attached to bottom of my face; it was a laugh of caring and sympathy, without malice, and full of pity, like parents who chuckle with a coo at a baby falling on their butt after walking for the first time. It was a kind of parental concern I’d never known before, and for a brief moment alone while tonguing the plastic alien slickness of the temporary canine and premolar teeth, I thought about knocking out a few more teeth, or getting a root canal – require or request an operation where both of them had to be in the same room with me at the same time. I even wanted to call my sister, convince her to move here; telling her about them wouldn’t be enough since she grew up the same way I did, would understand why a few more teeth needed to go once she’d met them.

When Connie was excused to prepare my bill, talking to herself the entire time from the other room, Dr. Willie-Mae pulled her chair toward mine, as if wanting to whisper something to me about her sister, and I just knew it was to confirm or deny all of her stories about the Vanderbilts and Ronald Reagan and Josh as truth or fiction. But instead she took the fat nubby portion of her index finger and stroked my useless bottom lip to wipe the drool away. I tried as quietly as I could to suck my breath inward, dry my tongue and lips to make the drooling stop, because I didn’t want her to feel obligated to

care for me – I was an adult, and I should be able to control my body in at least this small way. But then she'd just massage my lip till I started to drool again. She still had her latex gloves on, and her surgical mask, but they couldn't hide the sad smile lines around her face and eyes, looking at me, then beyond me, determined against reason to find the past we shared, beg me to reminisce with her, to play "remember when," but all the while knowing that I couldn't because I was never there. I wanted to feel horrified and betrayed, but I just felt guilty. So, not wanting to be another man who ran away from her, I decided to close my eyes and convince myself that it was all purely maternal, so we could both get what we wanted.

Chapter 11: A Loss

Vic's New Year began with his mother's aneurism. The first morning of the New Year was clear, cold, and starless. The air was bitter with burnt cardboard and gunpowder, the road littered with firecracker shells. Vic, holding his younger sister's hand, counted the shells silently from the backseat of his aunt's car as she sped after the helicopter that had lifted Vic's mother to the hospital.

When they arrived, the doctor of the ICU explained what an aneurism was, how they don't know how much blood is in her brain, and asked them to wait patiently. Vic wanted so desperately to be able to hold his sister's face in his hands and tell her what to do, and not to worry, that he'd take care of her, quit school, find a job, be an adult now. But the word "aneurism," and the death it stood for in meaning, had addled him, crippled him, withered that part of him that made him immortal and fearless, reducing him to a barely cobbled figure made of nothing but terror, desperation, and loneliness.

A nurse showed them to the ICU waiting room, a small silent space of grayed teals and beiged pinks, ghostly lit by an emergency light that couldn't be turned off, separated from the rest of the hospital with a door. Vic had hoped the room would be empty, looking on the other two sleeping families inside with frustration and disappointment. When they all found their own chairs, Vic, his sister, and their aunt fell asleep without ever saying a word to one another.

The next morning Vic was immediately aware that one of the families had left the room, and tried to remember what any of them had looked like, knowing he'd never see any of them again. The other family, two older women in their seventies, and a younger woman in her forties, was folding their blankets, nibbling on coffee cake out of a plastic wrapper, and sipping tea from a Styrofoam cup. When they offered one of the unopened cakes to Vic, he walked over, sitting with them, leaving his sister and aunt still asleep on the other side of the waiting room.

“So, who are you here for?” Vic asked.

“He’s my husband” said the oldest woman.

“My brother” said the second oldest.

“My dad” said the youngest.

He'd been in an out of ICU for almost a decade, they told Vic, but the doctor was optimistic. When they asked about his mom, he spoke in words that formed complete sentences successfully, but was mostly preoccupied with the space within the ICU waiting room.

“There is something familiar about it.” Vic said to the sick man’s daughter, and she nodded her head faintly, her attention divided between him and something that wasn’t in the room that made Vic want to check over his shoulder to make sure nothing was there.

“Sometimes,” the sick man’s sister started, “I feel anxious, and start to panic, just sitting here. Sometimes I leave to sit in the cafeteria. Not to eat, but just surround myself with sound, to remember what life sounds like.”

*

Vic and his sister sat across from each other in the cafeteria for at least an hour mumbling to one another, their eyes unfocused, only half listening to what the other one was saying. They'd been tearing pieces of bread between their fingers, trying desperately to trick their bodies into remembering how to feel hungry, to force themselves to take back the appetite the word "aneurism" had stolen from them. But when Vic mentioned to his sister the conversation he had with the three women, it was the first time his sister's eyes seemed to steady at any one thing for longer than a breath, looking at him intently, clearly feeling that same muted panic, the same anxiety that just existed in that room without a place of origin to blame it on.

"It's like a dripping drop," she finally said. "Like a steady dripping sound that no one can fix or find. You can look around, check every corner of the room, but it never sounds any closer, or any further away."

"It's quiet enough to talk over, but so loud you don't want to even try." Vic confirmed, nodding, trying to find relief in having it diagnosed. But there wasn't any.

*

On the third day of the New Year, the doctor told Vic his mom was stable, but would need surgery, and that wouldn't be for a few more days. It was enough good news to not only bring back Vic's appetite for the first time in days, but also make him aware that he'd been wearing the same track jacket and pajama pants for just as long.

Within the next few days, Vic and his sister befriended the three women, both with loved ones in stable condition. But Vic couldn't ignore that subtle current of panic and unease, the dripping drop, that reminded him of being in a stranger's living room that he could never find a comfortable sitting in, talking to extended family he'd never met

before, finding a strained camaraderie in their distant relation, but ultimately never wanting to see them again. But he admitted to his sister while they chuckled at the names written on the plaques of some of the newborn's cribs in the maternity ward that if he had to share the ICU waiting room with any other family, he was relieved in it being those three women.

*

On the sixth morning of the New Year, the day before his mother's surgery, Vic walked around the giant Christmas tree in the lobby, watching staff disassemble it, packing it away into various boxes. He was determined to stay away from the ICU waiting room because the three women's husband/brother/dad had died overnight. They had been clutching one another all morning, crying, and Vic couldn't be there anymore.

"Why?" his sister asked, trying to guilt him into staying. "They were nice to us."

"If he died," he started, "then mom might, too."

The two had nothing to do with one another, his sister said, and Vic knew that: The dead man was older, and less healthy, and Vic's mom didn't even share a room with him. But they had to share an ICU, and their families had to share a tiny waiting room because of them, forced to bond, forced to share each other's joys and disappointments. Circumstance had made them trade phone numbers, share memories, and invite each other to future holiday gatherings. Coincidence, and grief, and panic, and misery had bound them all into being family.

But Vic had never wanted this new family, had never wanted to share in their joys and their loss, and did not want to cry over a man he would have never known existed had his mother been flown to a different hospital, or had her aneurism only a few weeks

later, if at all. Vic knew it was absurd to think it, but he was convinced in every stitch that kept his body from collapsing into pieces that to sit and watch those three women cry in their grief was to doom himself to doing the same thing a few days later. To subject himself to that was to admit something inevitable: that his mother will die. If she didn't die tomorrow, then she would die next week, or next month, or in a few years. And for Vic, in that moment, he had no interest in admitting that to anyone.

So Vic made a few more passes around the tree, walked through the gift shop, watched nurses take a smoking break, and only went back to the ICU waiting room when he was sure it would be empty of everything but his sister and his aunt, some other unfortunate family, and the sound of the steady dripping drop that bound each of them to one another.

Chapter 12: IM W/ U 4EVER

They appeared on his wall the first day of spring, two days after his death. Posts upon posts, grievings atop mournings. A pile of verbal bouquets.

Exclamations of shock, grief, and profound sadness were posted to his wall as acquaintances checked their updates, noticed the growing list of sorrowful sentiments under his name, and quickly paid their respects, their hurt digitally collected.

And days after he had passed away, a woman who was a “friend” of a “friend” of a “friend” of the dead man checked her own wall while on the elevator, reading a comment made by a reliable source, expressing in all caps how devastated she was now that David was gone, how they’d known each other since childhood, had Ms. Davis as their 5th grade teacher. When the woman got to her office desk, she wrote a few emails, called in a few favors, and finally got the number for the dead man’s mother.

“Gwen Burreca, I’m Leslie Graham, a reporter for Fame magazine, and on behalf of the entire magazine staff I offer my sincerest condolences about your son David’s death.”

Gwen was silent for a long time as the reporter stated without pause how terribly sorry she was about the death, how the public is heartbroken by the news, and if her ex-husband, Barry, and her would accept a substantial amount of money for publishing an exclusive interview with Fame on their son’s death.

“You and Barry are in the heart and prayers of America, Ms. Burreca. I understand this must be a hard time, so I’ll leave you my number, and you can get back to me.”

And that was how Gwen learned of her son’s death.

*

Gwen had been standing in David's room for quite a while, staring at a cockroach that had scurried from one end of the ceiling to the other, before recalling why she had entered the room in the first place. She motioned to grab his things, when she remembered that whatever belongings of her son she still had were already packed and stacked against the walls.

David had never even seen this room. It’d never been inhabited by anything more than a mattress and box springs that sat without frames on the floor and the boxes of books David didn’t want or need. Clothes and shoes he’d outgrown. Old gaming systems and carnival toys. Movies he had discarded before leaving her a few houses ago. With the work of packing David’s past into boxes already done, she left the door cracked as she exited, just in case the cockroach decided he wanted to join her in the living room.

She’d made the calls, all the ones she could think of, to tell relatives of David’s death. She didn’t have much to tell them other than there would be a funeral. When was still TBA. Where: TBA, begging them not to leak any of the details to tabloids. The only call she hadn’t made was to her ex-husband. He had called her first.

“What about his things? What I have? What you have?” he asked, his words buried under shallow, rattling inhales and deep, shuttering exhales.

“You can keep what you have in his room there. He liked that room more than all his others with me I think, so I should probably bring what I have to you.”

“What about his actual things? The stuff he had. You know. His things.”

“You mean what he had wherever he was living? I don’t know Barry. I don’t know where he lived. I don’t know what he owned. Do you?”

“No. I don’t”

“Well then, until someone he knew or lived with sends us something of his, what you own and what I own is all we have.”

“You should never have let him go. You know that, right? He was too damn young. Finding out about my own son’s death from some tabloid reporter.”

“Bye, Barry. I’ll call you after all the funeral arrangements are made. Bye.”

*

It had been a small funeral, which Gwen was thankful for, because it meant no one had told reporters when and where it would be. Still, Gwen wished it would have been slightly bigger, but with no body to bury, and no known friends to invite, she could only get the word out to immediate family, and a few old friends of hers from the neighborhood where she and Barry had lived before their divorce. She hadn’t seen most of them since her divorce, and the only phone calls she ever got after the divorce before having to change her number were threats to have her killed for being a slut, usually from female fans of Barry. Gwen never told anyone she recognized some of the voices as her old neighbors.

Gwen wondered, only for a short while, if any of them had ever thought back then, after she and David had moved away, about how David's face looked when he'd call

their houses, looking to talk to their children, his old friends, and they'd refuse, hanging up on him. Because she wished she even had an image of it to remember. David would hang up the phone and dial another number, and no matter from which direction Gwen tried to find the expression on his face, he'd have his back to her. She convinced herself that it was best that she not know.

Gwen had made a special point to invite Cheryl, the woman who had been executive producer of Million Dollar Love, the dating gameshow that Barry and Gwen met and married through. It was obvious to Gwen that Cheryl was trying to avoid her during the service, sitting as far back in the pews as possible, making no eye contact when forced to confront her to wish her personal condolences in a procession of people who had to walk in front of her and Barry. But amongst the sparse crowd of people at the wake, Gwen found hunching in a corner over her phone, her thumbs working furiously as they padded against the glass surface.

“Gwen,” Cheryl shrieked, “I didn’t hear you walk up.”

“It’s been a long time,” Gwen stated as she pulled a chair over, letting the legs drag against the floor, before sitting to face Cheryl directly. “How have you been? How’s Diane? How’s Peter?”

“Oh, they’re getting by. Peter wanted to come, but business, you know. He’s always off. And Diane, she wanted to come too. But finals are close by, and she’s all the way in California. Wants to be a TV executive like her mother, despite me begging her not to.”

“Well, often children don’t know what’s best for their own good until it’s too late.”

“You got to know, Gwen, the network is devastated. We all loved David, he was a beautiful child. Just as beautiful as you and Barry were. You know, I sometimes still watch reruns of Million Dollar Love? The wedding episode still makes me cry, even 22 years later.” Gwen laughed in a way she hoped would insult Cheryl, terrify her, make her spine crumple into dust, make her regret even creating the dating show, regret ever forcing Barry to pick and marry Gwen, America’s favorite, over the woman he had actually fallen in love with, resenting Gwen for the rest of their marriage because of it. And from the way Cheryl’s eyes searched the ground in order to avoid having to look back at Gwen, Gwen was confident she’d succeeded.

Looking up to find Barry watching them both from across the room, Gwen realized that despite him being right beside her all day, his movements more shadow than human, it was the first time they’d made eye contact with each other, lasting only a few seconds, before both turned away from each other.

“So,” Gwen began, forcing Cheryl to look up at her, “How did you learn of David’s death?”

Without lifting her head, Cheryl replied “A friend of mine posted on his wall-“

“What does that mean?”

“You know, his wall,” Cheryl repeated in a tone Gwen recognized as slight frustration, like when she’d try to remind Barry repeatedly during the taping of Million Dollar Love how much he was supposed to love Gwen, and to smile at her like he meant it. Gwen leaned back slightly as Cheryl leaned in to present the cellphone to her.

“His wall,” she stated again, resting the cellphone in Gwen’s hands.

Gwen looked at the screen and saw a small image of her son, sitting next to a name she recognized, but not as her son's. David Burreca. Her maiden name. Her father's entire name. But not her son's legal name.

But as she pushed her finger upward on the glass, scrolls upon scrolls of messages from people appeared, moved upward, and vanished as she made her way downward, sinking further into the piles of posts that had collected there over the past few weeks.

“What is this? Who are all these people? How do they know David?”

“I don't know Gwen. I'm not friends with David. But they could be fans of the show. Celebrity kids usually have tons of friends on there. David wouldn't be an exception.”

She stared at them, but didn't read any of them. They all looked identical.

*

Gwen had only tried to contact the website that owned David's wall once after she was made aware of it. The e-mail exchanges were very simple, brief, and definitive.

“Ms. Burreca:

We are sorry to hear of your loss. We offer our sincerest condolences. But only those with a password to an account may deactivate said account.”

“But the only person with the password is dead.”

“Ms. Burreca:

"I understand that you may be disappointed with our final resolution and appreciate the opportunity to clarify this matter. While this may not be the response

you were hoping for, I trust I have addressed your concerns."

"So, he's dead, and it's going to just stay up?"

"Ms. Burreca:

There's nothing we can do."

*

The roach had gone the entire length of the living room floor and made it to halfway up the wall before Gwen realized she had been staring at it for too long. She found it had calmed her excitement, anger, and disbelief, diverting her attention from David's wall:

- June Fowler said "David was one of the kindest most gentle most selfless spirits to ever walk the planet Humanity has lost a true hero"

- Chloe Greensboro said "I feel so sorry for Barry first his wife cheats on him then his

son dies hope that woman feels ashamed of herself for letting

her son

die at such a young age"

- Rose Pillsbury said "david's mother had him so young guys give her a break married

at 21 mother at 21 I had my daughter when I was 30 and it was even

hard for me very sorry to hear about David"

- Alessandro Pedres said "El fue mi amor mi vida mi corazon mi escencia y yo te

amaré para siempre”

- Natasha Krause said “Er ist mit Engeln. Er ist mit seiner Art.”

Gwen shut her laptop and, in one motion, rose from her chair, grabbed her shoe, stepped onto a taped box of pots and pans and placed the shoe's heel directly on top of the roach's back with a forceful grunt, just as it had made its way to the kitchen. She removed the shoe, inspecting the roach's crushed legs and broken shell wings, and stared at its unresponsive body. But as she came back with a paper towel to wipe it down and flush it away, it had disappeared.

*

Just after David moved away, and perhaps a few days before, Gwen would daily flip through old tabloids she was too embarrassed to admit to anyone she kept. They chronicled her and Barry's marriage, their honeymoon, her moving into Barry's mansion, their son's birth, their family vacations, David's first days in kindergarten, her affair with a man named Frank, and their divorce. When she first started to do this, she was happy to find David in so few of the pictures, glad she was able to guard him just enough in this small way. But when Frank called for the first time since they ended their affair, a few weeks after David's funeral, the lack of David in anything she still owned, that hadn't been lost, stolen, or sold, bothered her deeply.

“I was wondering if you were going to call,” Gwen said, relieved to finally hear another voice that wasn't a reporter. “So, you heard?”

“Yes, I heard. I'm so sorry Gwen. You know I loved David just as much as I loved you. I thought of him as my son, too.”

“Frank, of all the people that have said that to me these past few days, you’re the only one I know is telling the truth.”

She asked about his wife, and their children, and his job in Seattle, and he asked her about her job, her mother, who had died a few years ago. They talked about how they’d spend every other Saturday for months at a tiny, run-down amusement park just off the highway with David because it was the only place they could hide from the press, where David could roam around as if he were the owner. Gwen laughed at Frank’s love for bumper cars. Frank laughed at her love for skeeball. They laughed about things people who loved each other laugh about, inside jokes and small memories that, for Gwen, had never lost their glossy rose hue. And then Frank apologized for convincing her to leave Barry and his millions for him, and then she apologized for reducing his life to being “the other man” in every magazine and newspaper. When they eventually said their goodbyes, Gwen threw away her magazines.

*

The road that lead off the highway exit toward what was once both Gwen and Barry’s house was single-laned, with plenty of blind turns, etched within a dense forest before SUVs were common. Occasionally the brush would be more sparse, allowing views of nearby farms a few acres wide, before concealing it again within trunks of high growing trees, the tops creating a canopy that shrouded the road in shadows.

Gwen always thought this was David’s favorite part about the ride home when he was little. Growing up, he always got upset if she or Barry didn’t wake him to see it when they’d gotten off the highway after a long road trip.

So when Gwen turned onto the road that came off the exit leading toward Barry's house, she looked for the familiar single-laned road she'd known so well – a snaking path, just barely paved, without a speed limit or a street light to stop her from blurring past forests and farms, from taking banked curves in a rush that would make her grip the steering wheel in fear and excitement, her nerve ends warning her of the danger in going too fast, only spurring her on to go faster.

But at some point during the years she'd gone without driving through it, the road had been straightened and doubled in lanes, pulled taught and laid back down, tamed into a straight line that rested between fast food restaurants and gas stations, home improvement stores, and multiple pharmacies within a mile of each other. So Gwen inched her way through a line of traffic that stretched from light to light, fighting her desire to ram into the back of a blue minivan with a decal depicting the litter of children and pets the driver had. She glared at the line of taillights in front of her, all of them unwelcomed strangers in what was her home, who had changed her road without her permission, without even asking - She could only blame these invaders for removing the dangers of her road, for making it toothless and flaccid.

Crawling past a freshly paved strip mall, with newly sprouted trees and parking lot lines so bright and clean that they could only have been painted a few days before, Gwen spotted a crop of old road to the side that had been roped off, redirecting traffic to the newer, wider, less winding freeway. It was barely visible, shrouded in trees, dark and wild. But Gwen saw it as her opportunity to retread the path she had known so well. So she got off the paved road and entered the pathway. But the road was only shards of gravel and broken pavement, fallen tree branches, vines, and weeds – a road that nature

had taken back as its own, tearing it into land that did not welcome vehicles, and rejected Gwen, tossing her and the boxes in her backseat around her car, reminding Gwen of the dice in David's *Trouble* board game that he would smash with a fist over and over just to watch it tumble and jump inside the plastic bubble.

Gwen had only slowly crunched her way through half of the gravel path before stopping at the sight of a mother deer and her child grazing to the side. They appeared unaware of her, and their lack of curiosity and fear at her presence in their home infuriated her – didn't they realize she was an invader? That she could kill them both within the span of a breath? So Gwen blew her car horn to scare them away, then gripped into her steering wheel, her body heaving, wishing she could crawl out of her car on all fours and run away with them, become a species of life who was only aware of the immediate world, ignorant of past or future, unable to comprehend such concepts. But when she opened her eyes, she was disappointed to still see her hands, to still be only human. So she crunched her way through the rest of the broken gravel and got back onto the paved road, made the final few turns, and entered her old subdivision.

*

Gwen's surprise at seeing Barry answer the door of their old mansion wasn't from not knowing he'd be there. He'd lived here since their divorce, since he was the only one who could afford to. He'd fought hard to keep all of his money from her, and Gwen knew he was going to die at an old age in this giant house. But when he opened the door, she had expected to see the Barry who lived in this house seventeen years ago. It wasn't that she hadn't seen Barry since then. But she hadn't seen Barry in this house since then: she knew the Barry of “post-divorce,” the Barry of Million Dollar Love, and the Barry of this

house, the Barry of their marriage – only now was she aware that they weren't all different people. But she was also convinced that wasn't entirely true.

“Isn't that what you wore to the funeral?” Barry asked as he helped take one of the boxes out of her hands and place it inside.

“Everything else is packed.”

“You're moving again?”

“Like always, I don't have a choice,” Gwen sighed as she picked up another box

“You can try renting a place you can afford,” Barry offered as he disappeared down the hallway, heading into David's room, leaving her at the entrance.

“Sure. You want to start paying me alimony again?”

She wasn't sure, he had gone pretty far from earshot, but Gwen thought she had heard Barry reply with something to the degree that she wasn't able to keep a place longer than a year without getting an eviction notice when she did get alimony, which Gwen laughed at, if what she heard was correct. She dropped the other box of David's things she had in her arms and followed him toward the back near David's room.

She was going to say how she wasn't going to have to stay in this district anymore for the sake of David's education, how she was moving to a less expensive part of the city, or a different state possibly. But instead she just stared at Barry's back as he opened one of the boxes she brought, this one of David's old posters and child drawings – lines, circles, and squiggles that Gwen recognized as giant strawberries and ferris wheels - and somehow found space on the walls that now showcased everything David had ever owned, drew, wrote, or painted. Encompassing the entirety of his grade school career, Barry had taken anything that was once boxed and placed into the basement that David

had ever touched and pinned, taped, glued, or hammered it to the walls. Every article of clothing David ever owned was now on display in a closet that was built to hold all at once the clothes of a 6 year old, not an entire life's worth of socks, shirts, shoes, pants, and underwear.

“So, who is all this for,” Gwen asked, rifling through David’s old little-man suits.

“It’s for me,” Barry replied.

“You mean I’m not going to open next week’s Fame magazine and see all this in a centerfold?”

“Fuck you, Gwen. You’re the one who needs the money.”

When Barry turned away from her, hunching over, like he’d burned through the last remainders of his energy to deliver that one outburst, Gwen saw the man who had stared back at her with vacant, unfocused eyes during their wedding while cameras squared in on the pair of them for the final kiss– it was the posture of a defeated man too young and rich and healthy to die, but without any desire to live the rest of his life with a woman forced upon him. Gwen recognized that Barry thought of her as an imposter, a fake, a prop that he didn’t want to touch at night or check on during the day. He’d cry in his sleep with his back to her, and then shoulder her away when she tried to console him and his grief in being bound to a woman who was only a shadow of his real choice, of the woman he really wanted to marry and spend all of his life with. So when David was born, Gwen decided she had finally repaid Barry with something he could love to make up for the love he’d lost, and convinced herself to stop wasting her life feeling guilty for being America’s choice, but not her husband’s.

*ding ding

The alert had snapped Gwen's attention away from the walls toward Barry's pocket. Barry reached in, pulled out his cellphone, read what it said, placed it back in his pocket and continued pinning things to the wall, fighting with a poster that kept peeling off the wall.

Gwen walked over, placed her hand on one of the Power Ranger's faces, and stared at Barry as he tried to keep the poster from falling again. She wanted desperately to remind Barry of a day in all their years of sharing and raising a child – a Christmas or a birthday - that had to be good, that was surprisingly effortless to get through, where they somehow forgot about loving other people, or feeling trapped in each other's company, and actually enjoyed being with one another. But she could only think of strands, sparse items and moments that, when strung together, wouldn't even make a full day – Fisher-Price roller skates, a “three-foot-tall” marking on the wall in red Sharpie, Rice Krispy Treats, Speak & Spell, an episode of Winnie the Pooh.

Gwen had almost cobbled together at least a few hours' worth of happiness when Barry turned and asked “Why does he have your dad's name on here?”

Gwen stared at him blankly, playing naïve.

“I get alerts on my phone every time someone posts on David's wall. But he's going by your dad's name. Why?”

“He stole his credit cards and stuff before he left.”

“And you didn't do anything about it?”

“My dad was dying around the time he left Barry, remember? And David, you know how he was then. He refused to finish high school. And since you fired him-“

“Don’t start Gwen. All my employees know I built that business from the ground up – I wasn’t about to just hand my son a job that others would kill for when he didn’t want to do an ounce of work because you spoiled him-”

“I spoiled him? I wasn’t the one jetting him off to a different city every other weekend. I wasn’t the one buying him a new car every time he crashed an old one. No, I was the one having to yell at him for skipping school, bail him out of jail every other week. And I was tired of yelling at him. I was tired of bailing him out. I was just tired of looking at him. And it wasn’t like you were going to help, you’d made that clear. He wasn’t talking to you, you weren’t talking to him. So when David left, and took my dad’s stuff, I just let him.”

“I want it changed. Your dad never liked me. He never trusted me.”

*ding ding

Gwen watched Barry, who had been red in the face only moments earlier, turn white as he read the alert on his phone.

“What? What is it?” she asked.

“It’s David” he said, still staring at the phone like it had transformed into a living animal right there in his hand.

“What about him?”

“He’s at the movies.”

*

Technically, the alert had read that “David Burreca is at Pavilion 8 Movie Theater with Sean Thompson.” Pavilion 8, as Gwen would learn later, was located somewhere in Seattle, WA. So Barry Washington mailed Sean Thompson that afternoon, asking him to

explain how David Burreca could possibly be at the movies with him since he's dead. And deciding to reply publicly on David's wall instead of to Barry Washington in private,

- Sean Thompson said "I was just asked how David Burreca could be with me at the

movies since David is gone. Well not in my heart he isn't.

In my heart he is alive. And in my heart he is with me forever."

*

A boy, around the age of 6 or 7, had only at first been kicking Gwen's back tire over and over, but had now started to spit on her car as well, aiming for the "O" in her Ohio license plate. Gwen kneeled down to the boy, who continued to kick her tires while looking her straight in the eye. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone, which had just sent another alert, the 8th one in the past 10 minutes. She read it silently, then faced the phone toward the boy, making sure he was close enough to the screen to read it.

"What does that say?" she asked him.

"That David Burreca is with...Tristan Reed at The Castro"

*ding ding

"And what does that one say" she asked him again of the new message.

"That David Burreca is with Michael Zamboni at The Pantheon"

"Do you know where the Castro is?" she asked, putting the phone away as it sent another alert.

He shook his head no.

“It’s in California. And the Pantheon is in Greece. Do you know where Greece is?”

He shook his head yes.

“How can he be in two different places at once?” he asked, amused, skeptical.

“Do you know who David Burreca is?” Gwen asked.

He shook his head no.

*ding ding

The boy stared at her pocket.

“David Burrecca is my son. He died about 3 months ago. But now, he’s everywhere.”

“Like a ghost?” the boy asked, his voice jumping in pitch.

“Yes. He follows everyone. He’s always around. You don’t know me – I’m new here. But this is all you’ll ever need to know. My name is Gwen Burreca, and my son is David Burreca. He was a very bad boy growing up, and it killed him. If you decide to misbehave as well, and cause your mommy and daddy lots of trouble, lots of heartache, my son will find you, as he has found these people...as he finds everyone. Now, what he decides to do with you once he’s found you, I don’t know. But I’m very sure you don’t ever want to know either. Do you understand?” Gwen then pulled herself upward, taking the box she had placed behind her in her arms.

He only stared in reply.

“Good. Now go home,” she said. And the boy ran off.

*

*ding ding. Gwen placed the box down next to the others, beside her computer desk. *ding ding. She had fought for this studio apartment in this apartment complex because of its view, and because it was walking distance from Pavilion 8, which, by coincidence, was only a few blocks away from Frank and his family.*ding ding. When her legs gave from under her, and she let go of those small wisps of willpower that had kept her upright since that first phone call from the reporter - kept her walking, breathing, forming sentences, functioning as a human body should - she hit the floor, crawled into a corner of the room, and grieved with all of her body. *ding ding. Gwen refused to cover her ears or turn off the alerts, to ignore her impulse for self-preservation, because she'd decided she deserved it, decided that she needed to let each alert lash against her body with refreshed hatred.*ding ding.

Each time she received an alert to inform her of David's new location, it reminded her of a specific afternoon she and Frank had spent with David at the amusement park. *ding ding. Spring had just started; A man in a wifebeater walked his daughter on a leash. A woman in a dinosaur costume removed her head for a cigarette. Frank had leaned into her ear to whisper "lets run away together" while they thought David was still riding inside a mechanical spinning strawberry. *ding ding. In the past she'd convinced herself that she couldn't recall what she said, or that David had heard her.*ding ding. But with every new alert, her son reminded her of what he had overheard her say, and what she wanted him to haunt the rest of her life for - something about how she wanted to run away with all her heart, and she would, if she didn't have her son.

Chapter 13: Hello, Are You Looking For Me?

Exotic Woman on Treadmill – m4w – 32 (Downtown)

On April 13th Mara turned forty, so she responded to an online ad on a dare she'd given to herself. He was [the]"Sexy handsome fella with the beard, white Tshirt and cream army pants and blue low tops, buffed," looking for [the]"girl on treadmill late 20s early 30s light skin italian or latina nice and shapely."

So she wrote him back, told him she'd seen him checking her out, thought he was sexy too, asked if he wanted her number to chat sometime. She didn't get a response, so she printed a recipe for Paella, polished her flat pan, and left with her husband Thomas for a bodega where, together, they bought enough rice, clams, shrimp, lobster tail, and sausage. She asked her son Gale to help her pick parsley, tomatoes and garlic from the garden, talked to herself about a dress on the Home Shopping Network while cooking. When she finished they all sat in the dining room, and in spoons she studied the flavors of this late 20s early 30s light skin Italian or Latina woman. She was irresistible and entirely unapproachable. Men could only talk to her anonymously, online, through ads bemoaning their missed connection.

Dark Haired M Train Beauty - m4w - 24 (Midtown East)

Hours before Gale's high school graduation ceremony, Mara responded to an ad with a simple, direct message, full of x's and o's, guaranteed to elicit a reply from the

man with “a (well maintained) beard” looking for the “white, fair skinned” woman he’d seen on the downtown M train. She had “dark red lipstick,” wore a “black leather jacket, a black shirt and black skirt.” She was “sex on legs.” He pleaded with the woman, “let me love you.”

When he replied asking “what was I wearing?”, it infuriated Mara. How dare he distrust her. Who else would take the time to write this ugly little man who leers at women on the subway? So she didn’t reply. She got dressed in a black leather jacket, a black shirt, black skirt, and a dark shade of red lipstick from her early 20s. The entire graduation ceremony Thomas could not keep his hands off Mara, biting her earlobe for the first time in eighteen years, asking her “who are you?” over and over. That night they had sex where he called her so many different names it was hard to keep track. But Mara wasn’t offended, she didn’t care. She just wanted the little man from the subway to watch her from a chair across the room, make him see she was a Dark Haired M Train Beauty, but also more than that, offered him more than that.

Brazilian in blue dress - m4w - 48 (6th and 22nd)

When her son was born, Mara emptied herself of everything she’d been before him. Her father and mother had died years ago. She only recognized Thomas as the father of her son, indifferent to his other affairs as long as he provided for Gale. She did have loves - film, gardening, cooking, but forgot how to love them on her own when she had a son to love them with her. But she enjoyed filling her days with his life. So for eighteen years she filled herself with motherhood, resisting any distractions to be anyone else, pursue other interests. By the day her son could walk, motherhood was the flesh and the

bone of her body. So when Gale packed his boxes, tore himself from her embrace, and drove away for college, it stripped Mara of her flesh slowly, tendons at a time, then corroded the bones till they were brittle and hollow.

“Why don’t you cook something?” Thomas yawned, patting her back.

So she found the forty-eight year old man looking for [the]”Brazilian in the blue dress, platform shoes carrying a pink tote bag standing on Sixth Avenue and 22nd Street.” He called himself a “first class professional man” and wanted to meet. She wrote him quickly, saying she’d love to meet now, at the same place.

“Yes please. Can’t wait,” he replied.

When Thomas returned with everything Mara told him to buy to make Brazilian Moqueca stew, she asked for help, but he just laughed.

“I’m all fingers with that stuff.”

“I don’t want to do this alone” she begged. “I can’t.”

But he had turned away and did not respond. So she filleted the fish flesh from the bone, cooked the stew of the Brazilian in the blue dress, and watched her husband fall in love with the taste of her. When Thomas pleaded Mara for seconds, thirds, she decided to make him the first class professional man standing alone on the sidewalk, looking for someone who was never coming.

Donna al mercato – m4w – 38 (Testaccio-Rome)

She responded to an Italian man in Rome looking for a woman in a marketplace. She only knew a few words, but recognized his longing as her own. Quite plainly, she asked if he was as tired of the emptiness as her.

“Sì, yes.”

Every evening for weeks Mara flavored her food with an eroticism unlike the mother she had been for eighteen years, unlike the farmer’s daughter she had been before that. Her husband was falling in love with her again with every meal.

“When you cook like this, you are the woman of my dreams” Thomas moaned, to which she’d smile in reply.

When Mara was absolutely sure Thomas could love nothing more than her from that day forward, crave only for the passion she spoon fed to him, addicted to the lust she had baked into his stomach for her, given up his other lovers for her, forfeited his other interests for her, confident he would be an empty husk of a man the day it all disappeared, she left her husband. She left him for the man in Rome, or the woman in Japan, or the job in Paris, or the love in Brazil. She left him to find new flesh, forge new bone, and become the kind of woman *she* would desperately look for.

Chapter 14: Águas de Março

É pau, é pedra

é o fim do caminho

I had run out of places to look, standing at the bottom of the street, near the *O Mercado de Rio*, staring at the blues, purples, and greens of vegetables, the reds, yellows, and pinks of fruit on bouquets of carts. All were appetizing, none were recognizable. A flute, somewhere, tiny shards of sound, bottled in the throat of lazy guitar chords – a kingfisher fluttering in a cage carried by a humming old man. Not at all the same tempo, but a natural fit. She was not where she was supposed to be. The address had been wrong.

É o pé, é o chão

Everything was more difficult here. Walking, language, food, life. It was March, and I was dressed for the coming of spring. But here, it was the closing of summer, and the storm clouds of the approaching rain season were rolling in like beach foam. North there, south here. Autumn here, spring there. Yet rain is expected of both...at the same time.

É um peixe, é um gesto

é uma prata brilhando

It had ensnared my attention without warning, pulling me in hand over hand. The

hanging metal fish sign for the...Mercado do peixe..."fish market" according to the translation book. It swung in a wind full of salt, drying my tongue in a way it hadn't been since I was a child. I had lived as a fish in my youth, never leaving the ocean except to sleep those summer months in my grandmother's beach house. But fish grow, evolve, and I emerged from the water, learning to breath, to live without it. The fish swung, the rain started, and I entered.

I

É o laço, é o anzol

"*Bom dia? Vo...Voki? No. Voc...when the e is accented, the "c" is an "s"...right? Yes. So...here is a little house roof on top of the e...você...yes. .Você-*"

The burly man at the counter of the *Mercado do peixe* was staring, amused, as I flipped through the little book helplessly. Translation books with beaches on the cover. They were promises of surf, of sun. But there has been no beach. No sun. Only translation books, work, confusion. Clouds of confusion. Clouds and rain. And so much rain.

"*Con...Cone...I-*"

"I speak English" he said forgivingly, his calloused hands clutching the counter, staring at

i don't know what he was staring at. There were no fish in the store. Was this a fish market? I don't know. He spoke English. It didn't matter. He was the first person to speak English here. Probably the only one. If the rain hadn't forced me in, I would have walked right by.

"Oh. Good. Do you know where I can find Uma Meia?"

“*Uma meia...*of what?”

“I beg your pardon?”

His two black eyes looked beyond where I stood, to the rain outside. I didn't need to turn around to know that. It had grown louder. He looked back at me and chuckled.

“Are you *uma meia*?”

“No...I'm *looking* for Uma Meia.”

He smiled again. At first it was disconcerting...but then it wasn't. I had seen many things that scared me before, but didn't afterward, like a new job, or living alone in the city. But there was something wild in his smile that wasn't to be found in a career or my apartment. Something natural. Something earthy.

“If you're looking for *uma meia*...you are *uma meia*. One Half.”

Dos

One Half. Of what? Just more clouds of confusion. More inside. More outside. The rain beat even harder than it did before. This was the one man that spoke English. No beach. Just rain. And a fish market without any fish. Where were all his fish?

“Okay. I'm just going to say it really fast. I'm looking for *um mulher*, a woman, named Uma Meia. She used to live in downtown Rio de Janeiro, but now she lives here...but I don't know where. This address? *Endereço*? It's old. *Obsoleto*. I was told to come here by her old landlord. So here I am. I need to find – *encontrar* – Uma Meia. It's very important.”

I don't know what I expected after I'd finished. Understanding. Anger. Perplexity. But he just smiled. Earthy, empathetic. I didn't need empathy. I needed answers.

“I bet it is. Everyone needs *encontrar* their *uma meia*. Sit and wait. The rain isn't

going to stop for a while. You can't find her in this weather. It's impossible. Just sit and wait.”

So I sat. I waited. He disappeared into the back of the store. Hopefully to find his fish.

É um estrepe, é um prego

é uma ponta, é um ponto

Many items were caught in the stream of rain water that cascaded past the shop window into the gutters a grain a bee. Being at the bottom of the hill, they just keep coming so agreeably a spike. The water caught it all, and they all slide down. There was an unraveling ribbon of pink from a spilt drink up the hill that colored the water and all its rubbish. And the rain kept coming, kept beating on the window at such a steady hypnotic tempo. What time was it?

É um aguilhão, é uma dor

“12:3HEY watch where you're going! He broke my watch. Just great.

3

É um pingo pingando

Quatro

3:05. Two more hours. $82+97$, divided by 12, multiplied by 86 is

“Sure is coming down out there.”

The man from cubical 3 never tells me why he's at my desk till I look him in the

eye and respond.

“Yes. It is.”

82+97, divided by

“Well, I've got good news for you. So, the big boss gave me a retrieval assignment that I'm giving to you, Big Tuna. Some old woman, Mrs...where's that name? Something weird. Maybe it's-”

by 12, multiplied by 86 is...128

“-here it is, way at the bottom on the last page, in pen.”

“That's not the proper way to fill out a form”

“Must have been Stacy. Dumb as a brick, but that rack! College girls man...I'm telling you. Anyway, the old woman hasn't paid off a 45 year old loan. She disappeared...hey, you listening?”

“Yes. Why can't you go?”

“Because, the wife-“

86 is...1282.83. 174

Liper Rd. owes

“-gested they send you. Man, I am so jealous.”

“Why?”

“Because of where you're going! Brazil man! Rio de Janeiro! Beaches, and sun, and *women*! All Seattle's got is rain and more ra-”

per Rd. owes us \$1282.83. That means, with 10% interest...it owes us

“You leave first thing in March. Here's Mrs. Meia's profile. Your plane ticket is in

there. Take these books. Learn the language. And try, in spite of yourself, to enjoy it.”

É a viga, é o vão

More items were coming, swept in the torrent. Bits and shavings from people’s lives that were no longer needed. The hairs that circle a drain. The shopkeeper had been gone for a while. No telling how long. There were no clocks in the store. Mine was still broken. Long enough for the rain to stop though. I walked to the counter to see if he was around and found a paper he had left. An address, Rua do Riacho 36, scribbled in a thin, swirly handwriting. It had to have been written by a woman. It was old, wrinkled and creased, like worn folded handkerchiefs preserved by lonely old widows, given to them by their late husbands. But the address was something nearby. So I left.

I walked on the sidewalk and up the hill. Steep. No shadow in front or behind because of the clouds, no sun to use me as the gnomon of a dial. I passed the reemerging crowds of shoppers and florid carts, against the cascading rainwater a snail a wasp. And then I came to the house, Rua do Riacho 35. No...that wasn't right. There was Rua do Riacho 35 and 37, one house a bloom of gold and yellow, the other blue and white, with nothing but a stretch of grass leading into the forest behind the houses in between. No one would skip a number if the number was there, somewhere. I refused to go back home a failure. The bank deserved its money. Uma Meia had to be here somewhere. So I stepped off the concrete and into the green space in-between.

5

É um passo, é uma ponte

it's a toad, it's a frog

I stared at my footprint. There it was, clearly defined. But the detail of it slowly

faded as the pressed grass began to stand erect in defiance, no longer under the pressure of my foot.

The thing that had appeared amongst the rhododendron, trees, and overgrown grass, so far and away from the street, looked as if it had grown with the rest of the forest. A tree mistaken for a flower, or a flower for a rock, or a rock for a tree. The longer I stared, the more uncertain it became. But whatever it was, it had a door. And on the door was the number 3

6.

The young woman inside looked at me funny as I flipped through my book. She was young, no older than 25. She couldn't possibly be the woman with a 45 year old debt to a bank in the United States. But she was human. She could talk. And I wouldn't let her slip away, not like the fish man with no fish.

No matter what I asked, she only nodded her head politely and smiled, full of charm, delicacy, and vagueness.

Just another dead end. But what a pleasant looking dead end.

It was all one room, rounded edges, quaint, and quirky, with dozens of pictures and schools of figurines that sat atop or near everything. The air was infused with an exotic perfume of shells, spice, and flora. And it was all soaked in muffled light that had no visible place of origin, existing because it simply existed. It all fit her well.

I would gesture, trying to indicate looking for someone, unable to consult my translation book in the midst of the dimly lit room. She would just smile and shrug, unable to decipher what I wanted. I looked through her figurines, wondering if I could tell her through puppetry. But none of them seemed relevant. And the people in the

pictures stared as I bumped into her, tripped over a table, at odds with everything around me, constantly in A minor key. I would have felt self-conscious if it weren't for them having too much fun hot air ballooning, eating ice cream, or blowing out birthday candles for them to care, living moments that picture frames were made for.

And they were. Each vividly captured image was labeled with a tiny bar code and a cost.

One wasn't however.

It sat by her bedside. A simple image. An old woman, set against the skyline of Rio de Janeiro.

I gestured to the picture, pointing. She nodded, knowingly, lovingly, longingly.

I looked away. I don't know why. I found the fish figurine on her bed stand comforting to look at before she grabbed my arm and pulled me outside.

It's a footstep, it's a bridge

I stared at my footprint. There it was, clearly defined. But the detail of it slowly faded as the sand smoothed over from the beach foam of the coming tide, rolling in like storm clouds. I knew I was supposed to wait, but my skin was taut, dry, in desperate need of water. I looked back at the beach house, trying to wait for her to come out like she promised she would, but she never came. My body couldn't take it anymore. When the next wave rolled in, I rolled out with it.

The flesh and the bone

She pulled me through the greenery, between 35 and 37, into the street, and ran

headlong toward *O Mercado de Rio*, clutching my arm, running barefoot. A guitarist tipped a hat to us as we sprinted past. Her dress pressed against her awkwardly, as if just barely on her body out of respect of company. The morning sun had pried through the clouds, but we ran too fast to have shadows.

A sting, a pain

I stepped out of the taxi, staring into the small town. The sun was directly overhead. Dark clouds amassed in the distance. I only had today to find her before had to go back home. But as I checked my watch for the time, a bicyclist flew by and clipped my wrist.

12:30 HEY! Watch where

It's a dripping drop

I pulled out my book, trying to ask her to stop, to slow down. But she smiled, giggled, and knocked it out of my hand. The beach, the sun was thrown

No. throne

Was a...

book A book was thrown into the torrent, and

joined the bits and shavings of people's lives no longer needed.

?

It is night, it is death

My parents wished the EMT's a safe drive as they took her away before they came to get me from the living room. They told me I couldn't come back to the beach house. But I knew that already. It was the most apparent thing to me. I knew I couldn't

swim anymore. Not without my One Half.

It's the end of the road

We passed a smiling flute player as we reached the *O Mercado de Rio*. She pulled me through the crowded plaza. When we reached the dense heart of the market that threatened to bring us to a standstill, a bicyclist flew past us, through the crowds, into the center of the marketplace, and careened into the carts. All the fruits and vegetables, blue tronchudas, purple açais, green chuchus, red pupunhas, yellow maracujás, pink pindaíbas, rose into the air. And there they stayed. Each squeezed their juices into a clear sky that soaked it in. Ribbons of saturating color spread overhead, streaming onward from the plaza, past the market, far into the distance, spiraling into the setting sun. There was a tug on my wrist, and we ran in the same direction.

The promise of spring

“So,” she finished, tugging at my wrist, “You don't swim without me. Do you know why?”

I shook my head no.

“Because, half a person can't swim, that's why. Have I ever gone without you?”

I shook my head no.

“That's because I can't swim without my other one half. Do you know who that is?”

I shook my head no.

“It's you, little guppy. So remember, only swim when your other one half is around. Okay?”

I shook my head yes.

It was the mud, it was the mud

i trekked into the house from the beach outside. I reached the kitchen, worried. The lights were off. The TV was on. Whatever was in the pot on the stove had foamed over onto the floor.

It's the rest of a stump

we passed as we sprinted through the trees. The ground sloped downward. And we came to a river that tried to run as fast as us. She wasn't holding my wrist anymore. She didn't need to. I was hurtling down hill just as quickly as she was by the river side. We saw things, we said their names, and we continued to fall down hill, the river trying its best to catch

up.

pau

stone

fim

road

rest

stump

little

zinho

shard

vidro

life

sol

death

gun

laço

hook

A thrust, a bump

a beat of the measure. She whistled. I hummed. And the melody of the young woman, that was neither young or a woman, like a *tear* isn't a *tear*, matched mine.

a cliff, a fall

into the river. Her body darted, glinting in a muffled light, her dress left strewn on the ground a few feet back. I had to catch up, so my clothes slide off, and I let the torrent carry me down with her.

It's the cut on the foot

my left foot, so I would come to call it, from a discarded fish hook on the ocean floor. The salt entered the wound. I instantly became aware of my human body as I writhed in pain.

It's the morning's light

that reflected off the ocean as I stood at the door that made my body thirsty. I ran into the kitchen, the air full of spice, her shell collection, our flowers we'd picked. I walked over to her by the stove, and tugged on her skirt. She was so much taller than me.

“Can we go swimming granny?”

“Yes. We can. Let me finish here, and I'll be right out with you. Remember-”

I looked back, responding before she could finish “I know. One Half.”

It was nothing at all

to be pushed by the river, cascading downward, right behind her small silver body. And then I felt a dull press against the bottom of my foot, not knowing where my shoes went. I'd cut it on something in the riverbed. No blood. No pain. She darted onward. I wouldn't let her slip away. I lowered my body and tumbled down river, spilling into the orange-gold of afternoon, forcing myself smaller, faster

downward

smaller

faster

small

till

a loss

of gills, but a gain of lungs, full of water. A loss of fins, but a gain of awkward arms and useless legs, floating without function. I couldn't swim. I heard it clearly. Not without my one half, it said. The ocean pushed me back to shore, where I awoke, choked up the water, and went to find my one half. *It was*

a find

that was at first disconcerting...but then it wasn't. On the contrary, it was by far the easiest of all things. I watched her flit, I watched her dart, and I knew it inherently. The spear knows its tip, the compass knows its needle, the turtle knows its shell, and I knew she was Uma Meia, my *uma meia*, and I was hers. I lowered my head and opened my mouth. We weaved in between the pillars of light that shot into the riverbed, pink and

gold. She had waited for me, and I had waited for her. Dawn, Dusk. North, South.
Autumn, Spring. She, I. Yesterday, tomorrow, today. They all bled into one another. We
pushed our silver bodies side by side, needing nothing else, as a school of others joined
along.

And the riverbanks said, as we swam down

The Waters of March,

This is the end of all strain,

this is the joy in your heart.

~Aqui, não importa~