

## 2018 Literary Contest Awards

### The Patton Family Awards

#### Phil Patton Award for Overall Best Story

Megan Pramojaney, "Refuge"

Enloe High School, Eleventh, Priscilla Chappell

#### Mildred Dwyer Patton Award for Overall Second Place

Peyton Creekmore, "Red-Tinted Porcelain"

Broughton High School, Eleventh, Tiffany Long

#### Dave Patton Award for Best Story by a Varsity Athlete

Grace Raphun, "One Look Changes Everything"

Broughton High School, Eleventh, Babs Nichols

### First Place Awards by Grade

Moira Pecor "Count to Ten"	Twelfth	Holly Springs High School Megan Sanders
Maggie Hall "Star Sailor"	Eleventh	Enloe High School Jenny Ayers
Hayes Thomas "Nowhere Man"	Tenth	Broughton High School William Schmidt

### Second Place Awards by Grade

Gloria Hope "Rebel Against Time"	Twelfth	Enloe High School Joyce Nelson
Sophia Macomber "nitimur in vetitum-we strive for the forbidden"	Eleventh	Raleigh Charter High School Amy Marschall
Dani Reese "After Happily Ever After: Jack and the Beanstalk"	Tenth	Green Hope High School Ashley Nation

**Honorable Mention**

*In alphabetical order*

<b>Caila Bridges</b> "Still"	Twelfth	Wake STEM Early College High School Shelley Bailey
<b>Becca Gargiulo</b> "Free Therapy"	Twelfth	Enloe High School Joyce Nelson
<b>Meg Hardesty</b> "Maggie's Mystery"	Eleventh	Broughton High School Babs Nichols
<b>Kristi Johnson</b> "Across The White Line"	Twelfth	Wake STEM Early College High School Shelley Bailey
<b>Katherine LeCarpentier</b> "Shattered"	Twelfth	Broughton High School Mary Gullede
<b>Suma Mahavadi</b> "Radha Ashtami"	Twelfth	Enloe High School Lisa Covington
<b>Amanda Nance</b> "Duende"	Eleventh	Broughton High School Tiffany Long
<b>Kelly Nguyen</b> "Under a Different Sky"	Eleventh	Broughton High School Tiffany Long
<b>Claire Porfilio</b> "La Cosa Nostra"	Eleventh	Broughton High School Tammy Merchant
<b>Nicole Shearon</b> "Midnight Sky"	Eleventh	Raleigh Charter High School Amy Marschall
<b>Hannah Thompson</b> "A Stroke of Luck?"	Eleventh	Enloe High School Joyce Nelson
<b>Neha Vangipurapu</b> "The Art of Vengeance"	Eleventh	Raleigh Charter High School Tom Humble
<b>Stacy Yates</b> "Sunday"	Twelfth	Broughton High School Mary Gullede

## School Awards

### Enloe High School

Phil Patton Award for Overall Best Story  
First Place Eleventh Grade

### Broughton High School

Mildred Dwyer Patton Award  
for Overall Second Place  
Dave Patton Award for Best  
Story by a Varsity Athlete  
First Place Tenth Grade

### Holly Springs High School

First Place Tenth Grade

## Finalists

**Elise Anthony**, 10th, Longleaf School of the Arts

**Trey Castle**, 12th, Cardinal Gibbons

**Regan Curtis**, 12th, Broughton

**Juhi Dighe**, 10th, Panther Creek

**Abbie Eckler**, 11th, Holly Springs

**Emma Farquhar**, 11th, Broughton

**Abby Finan**, 11th, Broughton

**Aislynn Grantz**, 10th, Broughton

**Krishan Guzzo**, 11th, Cary Academy

**Danny Harris**, 12th, Enloe

**Mikala Huemmer**, 11th, Raleigh Charter

**Joey Johnson**, 12th, Enloe

**Diana Lee**, 12th, Broughton

**Jemima Liteli**, 12th, Broughton

**Emma Lyon**, 10th, Broughton

**Roger Ngo**, 12th, Enloe

**Kyle Opal**, 12th, Wake Forest

**Eden Ralph**, 11th, Broughton

**Bree Schnitzlein**, 12th, Enloe

**Adelaide Spitz**, 12th, Raleigh Charter

**Mason Stevens**, 12th, Enloe

**John Paul Villamor**, 12th, Enloe

**Lewis Williams**, 12th, Enloe

## Participating Schools

Athens Drive HS

Broughton HS

Cardinal Gibbons HS

Cary Academy

Cary HS

Enloe HS

Fuquay-Varina HS

Grace Christian School

Green Hope HS

Heritage HS

Holly Springs HS

Leesville Road HS

Longleaf School of the Arts

Middle Creek HS

Panther Creek HS

Raleigh Charter HS

St. David's School

Sanderson HS

Wake Forest HS

Wake STEM Early College

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## Refuge

Ever since I could remember, Baba would leave the house every Saturday morning at the break of dawn to drive two hours to the nearest raptor refuge. He would return at night with a moonbeam of a smile, filled with stories for me about the birds.

From what I could gather, the hawks and eagles were saucy, the falcons proud and the owls aloof and annoyed. There was one particular great horned owl that was prone to comical attempts of tearing leather handling gloves to pieces, whose antics never failed to make me roll on the floor with laughter.

But the bird Baba loved most of all was the vulture. Why he held most highly the putrid carrion-eater of my nightmares, I had no idea. Even the very sight of one on television would send me scurrying as far away as I could get, quivering in fear. The fact that the birds on the screen weren't actually in my house provided me no consolation.

When Baba would find me hiding in a little ball under the covers of my bed after an episode, he'd pry me out from beneath the blankets and take my hands in his. Then he'd look me straight in the eye and solemnly say, "All birds are messengers to us humans. Even vultures. We must learn from them what they bring to us."

"But Baba, birds can't talk," I would protest. "How do we know what they are saying if they wanted to tell us something?"

Baba's eyes twinkled. "They talk to us without words. To understand them is a gift unto itself. I will teach you, Samaa, when you are old enough. Then you will not need me as an interpreter of their stories. You will have your own."

So, despite my mother's worries, Baba took me with him on the Saturday following my seventh birthday. When we arrived, Baba led me in through the refuge's back door, to the birds.

The enclosures were spacious, but the passageways were narrow and dimly lit in a way that made my insides churn with claustrophobia. The birds themselves were just beginning to rouse, save for a couple of owls with large, haunting yellow eyes. Yet, not even their drowsiness had kept me from scurrying from window to window, half in wonder and half in verification that these were really the subjects of Baba's stories.

But when my eyes fell upon the very last bird on the hall, my heart stopped cold and I gave a small squeak. Baba was by my side in an instant, his hand resting comfortingly on my shoulder. I buried my face in his arms, my eyes brimming with tears of terror.

"Now, habibti, don't cry," he soothed, stroking my hair. "Felix didn't mean to scare you, did you, Felix?"

I peeked out cautiously at the vulture, which peered back from its perch near the glass with a look that resembled concern, though it seemed to have a demonic tint in the flickering light of the hallway. I responded by glaring at it. No way was I buying its apology.

"Come, Samaa, let's meet Felix. Maybe you'll change your mind. He's as sweet as a pet."

"No!" I shook my head vigorously. "It's scary. It eats dead things."

"Give Felix a chance, habibti," Baba urged. "Here, let me get him out." He took out a key from his pocket and opened the door. As if on cue, the vulture pokes its head out and hops onto his outstretched hand.

I cowered behind my father, my eyes squeezed tight. "Put it back, put it back!"

The vulture, for its part, shrunk back in an almost embarrassed silence, its large black eyes staring back at me, wide with an emotion I couldn't quite decipher. Baba sighed. "Samaa, please –"

Suddenly the lights flared up from a dim yellow to a blinding white, causing shrieks of protest to rise from some of the enclosures. A large, rather rotund, figure stood in the doorway with his arms crossed, bloodshot amber eyes burning with displeasure underneath a mop of blonde hair. “*What* are you doing?”

Baba calmly lowered the vulture back into its enclosure and the bird scuttled in. I peeked out from behind my father as he turned to face the man at the door. “Hello, Cain. I was just showing my daughter the birds. She has heard my stories and wanted to meet them.”

The man in the doorway scowled. “Meeting them, eh? Do you think these birds are like dogs, that you can play with? They need to be treated with dignity and respect. Understood?”

“Yes,” Baba replied. The corner of his mouth twitches slightly.

“You need to be reminded too much,” the man said with a shake of his head. “Anyways, Felix’s cage needs cleaning. You might as well get started.” As he walked off, I could hear him mutter, “And he wants to fill the educator’s vacancy.”

Baba watched him as he left. “Don’t mind Mr. Schmidt, habibti. He has troubles of his own. Besides, we have a job to do.”

I made a face. “Yuck. Bird poop is gross.”

Baba laughed. “It is. But I’ll tell you a secret,” he said, leaning in close. “The cage cleaners are best friends with the birds. That’s why Mr. Schmidt is angry – he is just jealous.”

“Okay,” I said, grinning. “I’ll help then.”

\*\*\*

That night, as we drove home, Baba let me sit in the front passenger seat for the first time. Though it was well past my bedtime, I was bubbling with the day’s activities. “And did you

see Horatio scream when you tried to get him out of the cage?” I asked, bouncing. “He had the funniest look on his face.”

A tired smile tugged at the corners of Baba’s mouth. “Horatio is a personality. Barn owls usually are.”

“And the burrowing owls? They are so cute!”

“You’ll learn they get feisty when you spend too much time with them.”

“And – ”

“Samaa?”

I stopped short. “Yes?”

“Do you want to go come back again next week?” Baba asked, leaning in to the steering wheel.

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course. It was fun.”

“Then we’ll come back, habibti,” he replied, placing his free hand on my shoulder. “Just don’t tell your mother. I don’t want her getting worried about you having a vulture episode.”

“Felix isn’t that scary.”

Baba raised his eyebrow. “Really? Funny thing that he seems to like you, too.”

“But *I* don’t like him,” I protested. “He smells funny.”

Baba just smiled and shook his head. “Ah, Samaa.”

\*\*\*

*Beep. Beep. Beep.* I forced open my drooping eyelids and glanced at the clock.

Immediately, I’m wide awake. Leaping out of my bed, I run as swiftly and as silently as I can to my father’s bedroom. Sure enough, he was still asleep.

“*Baba!*” I whispered urgently. “Wake up. We’ve got to go!”

Baba grunted and rolled over. “Five more minutes.”

I tugged at the covers and he pulled them closer. “You’re going to make us late.”

He turned his sleepy eyes to me. “Habibti, it’s four in the morning. You could give me a little more time.”

“But it’s Saturday!”

“Just five more minutes...”

“Baba! Please?”

He doesn’t reply. “Fine,” I muttered. “I’ll meet you downstairs.” Sighing, I went back to my room to get dressed. So it had been every Saturday morning since that first day five years ago, the two of us rising together for our weekly trips to the refuge.

I had almost settled into a snooze on the couch when I heard his soft footfalls approaching. “What took you so long?” I whined, adjusting my hijab. “Mama says that guys are the ones that take longer to get dressed.”

Baba sighed heavily and looked away. “Don’t worry about it, Habibti. Let’s go.”

The car ride was silent as usual - neither of us were morning people. Still, I could still see a dark storm cloud over the ever-present sparkle in his eyes, remaining even as we entered the overgrown parking lot.

He guided me through the back door and the back passageway to the enclosures. I start to head in, then stopped. “Baba, aren’t you coming too?”

“Go ahead, Samaa,” he replied. “I have some business to take care of.”

“How long are you going to be gone?”

Baba hesitated. “I don’t know. It might be a while, Habibti.”

“But Baba!”

“I will be back as soon as I can,” he reassured me. “I promise.” With that, he closed the door gently behind me, leaving me alone with the birds.

I stared after him. He had never left me alone like this before – and I had never seen him this worried either. *Well, no time to worry now, I had a job to do.*

I grabbed some disinfectant, a wet rag, a bucket of water, and a small carrier cage from the closet. Then, I dashed over to the end of the hallway, to the last enclosure. There’s a flurry of feathers and its occupant waltzed up to the glass to greet me. “Morning, Felix,” I said. “You know why I’m here.”

Felix cocked his head at me, beady black eyes alert and inquisitive.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I demanded. “We’ve been over this before. I don’t have any food to give you. I just help Baba clean the cages.”

He doesn’t budge, deciding instead to issue a petulant croak. “Fine, have it your way,” I muttered, shoving the carrier door open. “Make it quick. Can’t put up with you staring at me all the time.”

As soon as Felix sullenly climbed in, I shut the carrier door behind him and commenced cleaning. There was a reason I’d chosen to clean his cage first. It wasn’t that the stupid bird had begun to grow on me – well, he had, but not much. To put it lightly, his enclosure reeked of excrement, more so than the others, and I preferred to get the most tedious job out of the way first. The most positive thing I could say was that Felix was a clean eater.

A pitiful croak resounded from the small cage. I sighed. “I’m working on it, be patient.” Felix croaked again and I heard him ruffle his wings, agitated. I turn around to face him. “What do you want? Do you want to see Baba?”

The bird fell silent. I rolled my eyes. “Oh that’s what you want. Baba’s busy. He says he’ll coming soon.”

A minute later, Felix’s head perked up again. “What is it this time?” I grumbled.

Then I hear it, faintly at first, then with clarity. “I have been working here for almost a decade, Mr. Schmidt,” a voice was saying. “And we have had an opening for an educator position for that entire time.”

It was Baba. But why was he suddenly talking to Mr. Schmidt? Didn’t they usually leave each other alone? I put down my supplies and lean against the wall, hoping to hear them more clearly.

“I am fully aware of that,” a gruff voice replied. “But, we don’t feel we have a need for a third one at the moment - the two we have are sufficient.”

“They are clearly overworked,” my father’s voice insisted. “I’ve taught at Hartsfield High School as long as I’ve lived here and did much more than the two years of cage maintenance required for the position. I do not understand why I was not recommended.”

“You are already lead caretaker,” Mr. Schmidt retorted. “Is that not enough?”

There’s a brief silence. I shut my eyes, imagining Baba’s lips pursed tight, as he does when he’s frustrated. Then, I heard the squeaking grate of a chair being slid across the floor echo through the wall and my father’s familiar footfalls hit the floor, heavier than usual. The door crashed shut behind him and the room fell silent.

“Samaa?”

I jump, startled. Baba stood in the hallway, his lean form a shadow in the dimly lit hallway, expression worn. “Oh, hi, Baba. I’m just, um, getting started on cleaning Felix’s cage. You know, since he makes a mess and all?” I stammered, gesturing vaguely behind me.

He sighed, not quite looking at me. “You don’t have to pretend, habibti. I know you heard me arguing with Cain next door.”

My face blushed scarlet and I fingered a corner of my hijab. “Um, Baba can I ask you something?” I asked.

“Sure, Samaa, you can ask me anything you’d like,” he said, smiling.

I bit my lip, then I leaned in close. “He won’t let you get the job?” I whispered in his ear. “Even though you’ve been here, like, forever? What he’s doing is wrong, isn’t it?”

“Do not worry about me now,” Baba replied heavily. “It is something the two of us have to work out. We do not understand everything.”

“But Baba,” I said. “Why do you keep coming back if Mr. Schmidt doesn’t like you? Can’t you just, go somewhere else? There’s another refuge in the area. Why not go there?”

Baba grew quiet. When he spoke again, his voice was taut, no more than a whisper. “I come back because of Felix. When I see him, he tells me to be strong, to be patient. That one day, the day will be brighter and I will understand. That we will all understand.”

I stomped my foot in impatience. “Baba, just be straight with me! You keep saying stuff like that but birds are just birds. Even Felix!”

At this, a croak of protest came from the cage. I whirled on the bird. “You too! Stop begging me for food and making a mess.”

Felix backed silently into a corner of the carrier, cowering at my outburst. My father just shook his head. “Ah, habibti. I wish you could understand, but – ”

“I’m not too young!” I protest. “You’re the one who doesn’t get it.”

Baba’s eyes met mine, his gaze hardened, yet weary. “Samaa, there is much of this world that you do not know.”

At this, I bit my tongue, but a flurry of questions reverberated in my mind. For the rest of the day, we worked in silence.

\*\*\*

It was the morning of my sixteenth birthday when Baba broke the news to me. “Habibti, did Cain mention there is a new volunteer coming to help us with the cage cleaning?”

My heart began to beat faster. “Huh? No, he didn’t say anything about it. What’d he tell you?”

Baba didn’t take his eyes off the road, but his fingered ever so slightly at the wheel. “Cain didn’t mention much to me. Just said he was about your age and needed some volunteer hours.”

I shrugged. “Eh. Guess we’ll have some company to deal with,” I said indifferently. But inside, I start to shake.

As soon as my father pulls into the parking lot, my gaze is immediately drawn to a worn-out Toyota Camry parked by the front door. My heart sinks lower. They’re already here.

Cautiously, I made for my usual entrance and peeked inside. Empty. I breathed a sigh of relief and headed for the cleaning closet. Time to get to the enclosures. Felix was waiting for me.

Humming to myself, I grabbed my cleaning materials. I turned swiftly on my heel, only to crash head long into a slight, bespectacled boy standing at the closet entrance. Both of us tumbled to the ground in a heap.

I scrambled to my feet, red with embarrassment. “Sorry, I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you there, really.”

The boy looked up at me from behind a mess of brown-black hair, disoriented. For a moment, we both stare at each other, trying to process what just happened. His gaze was drawn to my head, as others often were, yet it was devoid of the judgment I had grown to expect.

As I pondered this, his face broke into a worn, but friendly smile. He picked himself up and dusted off his Denali National Park t-shirt. “No worries. It’s not your fault – I shouldn’t have come behind you like that.” Sensing my hesitation, he extended his hand. “That was a bad start,” he admits, blushing. “I’m Gabriel.”

Hesitantly, I took it. “Samaa. Samaa Reza.” Then, before I can stop myself, I blurt, “You didn’t mention it.”

He cocked his head, genuinely confused. “What exactly do you mean?”

I just shook my head. How can I explain the verbal abuse I’ve received for wearing a headscarf? “Never mind. Anyways, since you’re new here, you might as well grab a bucket and a rag and find a cage to clean. The water hose is outside. If you need me, I’ll be at the end of the hallway,” I said, heading for the door.

“Um...quick question.”

I turned around. “Yeah?”

Gabriel paused for a bit, his head dipping downwards toward his feet. “Could you show me around a bit? Since I’m new to this.”

My initial response was to turn the other way and leave him to figure it out himself, but inside, the tension I usually felt around strangers isn’t there. *Well, it couldn’t hurt helping him just once.* “Sure thing. Follow me,” I said, waving him over.

Walking over to the thirteenth enclosure on the row, I slipped the occupant’s leash around my wrist. “Let’s meet this guy first.”

Gabriel regarded my bare hand with caution. “Aren’t you supposed to be wearing gloves when handling raptors?”

I shook my head. “Usually. Not for this one. He’s the only one here that won’t claw my hand off.” I hold my breath and open the door. “Come on out,” I whispered.

Felix stepped daintily onto my hand, looking first at me, then peering curiously at Gabriel. “This,” I said, “is Felix. He’s a black vulture. Came here when someone took a couple shots at him. The refuge couldn’t release him when he got better, since he couldn’t fly and all, so he’s been stuck here for a while.”

Gabriel’s mouth parted ever so slightly. “Wow,” he breathed. “That’s something. And he’s almost...tame.”

“Friendly, yes. Tame, not really,” I said with a dry laugh. “None of the animals here are tame.”

Felix cocked his head and ruffled his feathers in protest. Gabriel backed up a step. “What’s that?” he asks, pointing to his beak.

I paused. There was no mistaking the bits of dried blood all over Felix’s face and beak. “Remnants from his last meal,” I said carefully.

Gabriel edged closer to the wall, face slightly pale. “I think I’ll leave him alone in that case. He is a vulture after all.”

I swallowed hard. *Didn’t do a good job glossing that over...* “It’s nothing much. It just takes some getting use to. Some time.”

“I don’t know about this,” he muttered.

“Just give him a chance...”

Our eyes met, mine pleading, his confused and tinged with repulsion. He's the first to break away, cheeks flushed. "Maybe." Pause. "Later." Another Pause. "Thanks for letting me meet him, though."

"Sure," I said. I helped Felix back into his cage. As the vulture stared pitifully back at me from the gloom of his enclosure, I can't help but realize how much Gabriel's thoughts mirrored my own almost a decade ago.

I shut my eyes and shook my head. Now wasn't the time for this. "Let's move on."

\*\*\*

One snowy December morning, when we walked up to the back door, Mr. Schmidt was there, waiting. Gabriel was there, too, trying in vain to hide a smile behind his hand. I glared at him, but that only made him laugh. *Mr. Schmidt must have told him something. But what?*

The volunteer coordinator took my father aside, spoke quietly to him for a few minutes. I watched, silent.

Then Baba gasped and a wide grin broke across his face. They shook hands and Baba put his arm around my shoulder and whispered in my ear, "I can go. He let me fill the vacancy."

I hugged him tight. I know what he meant.

Then I walked up to Gabriel and slapped him playfully on the shoulder. "Why didn't you say anything?" I demanded. "Just snickering in the back, huh?"

"Sorry," Gabriel replied, blushing. "Mr. Schmidt wanted to keep it a surprise."

I laughed. "Give me a better warning next time. Come on, we've got stuff to do."

That very afternoon, we all got in the refuge's broken-down van with Mr. Schmidt, my father in the passenger's seat and me and Gabriel in the back, and drove an hour down the road to the Hartsfield Library.

Gabriel was aglow with anticipation. Under Baba's gentle guidance, he had grown to love all the birds of the refuge, even Felix, and was looking forward to more of Baba's stories. Mr. Schmidt had also noticed this - perhaps it was why Baba finally received the promotion.

He and I helped Baba load the bird cages from the van's trunk out into the parking lot and up the back ramp. A soft layer of snow blanketed the ground, which the road salt hadn't managed to entirely melt away. The wind curled softly at my ears and, despite the biting cold, my heart sang.

Baba, too, was radiant. As his audience gathered around, the children seated in a semicircle on the carpeted floor of the atrium and the adults watching from the edge, Baba brought out each bird, one by one. He taught his spellbound audience about the birds, their habitats, what they ate, how they flew. But most importantly, he told each of their stories.

Felix is last. As Baba let the vulture climb onto his hand, a strange, trembling calm fell upon him. He blinked, clearing his throat as his audience leaned in closer. "This one came to the refuge the very first day I was there," he said, his voice tight. "I can still remember him when he was brought in. His body was mangled from bullets. They said he had only a five percent chance of survival. They were going to leave him to die."

Baba paused again, the corner of his mouth twitching. Felix flapped his wings and croaked expectantly. My father smiled and resumed. "But then he opened his eyes and looked at me. And I knew, I knew he would not give up. So I took care of him and he got stronger. The broken bones in his wings healed, but were too heavy to for him to fly, so we could not bring him back. But we proved them wrong, both of us. That is more than enough to me."

At this, Baba smiled, triumphant. The crowd broke into cheers, and Mr. Schmidt gave a nod of approval. From our spot in the shadows, Gabriel squeezed my hand. As Baba's gaze fell upon me, I finally understand why we were here.

\*\*\*

The sun had already begun to set as we packed up the van and headed back to the refuge. The warmth of the day's events purred inside my chest, keeping me awake and my thoughts wandering as I watched the snow fall softly outside. Gabriel lay snoring in his seat, his head resting gently on my shoulder. I didn't bother to move it off.

Baba and Mr. Schmidt talked among themselves in the front. Though there is still a clear tension in the air, the animosity is gone. That's certainly a change.

I yawned and lean back. Maybe I should sleep, too. I close my eyes and begin to drift off.

Minutes later, I jerked back awake to a scream. "Watch out!"

I looked up in time to see a sedan run straight into the tail end of the van at full speed. There is a screech of metal grinding against metal as the two vehicles slide past one another. I flew forward, my head just missing the seat in front. Mr. Schmidt pulled over to the side of the road as the birds began to protest.

The driver of the sedan was already out of his car, his tall, muscular build bristling as he limped forward. Despite the sunglasses covering his eyes, his cheeks were scarlet with rage. Mr. Schmidt went to meet him, my father close behind. Gabriel was wide awake. "What's going on?"

I shook my head. "Not sure. That car ran the red light." I pressed my face against the glass, trying to get a better look. The snow was falling thick and fast, and as I breathed, the window fogged over. "Dang it," I muttered.

I wiped the vapor away. A couple of yards away from the van, I could make out my father, Mr. Schmidt, and the stranger, faces cold wind-bitten with cold yet warm with frustration. “It’s just a scratch, sir,” my father was saying. “An accident.”

“A scratch!” the sedan driver took off his shades, fixing his beady brown eyes onto my father. His meaty hand fingered at the side of his pants pockets, then drifted forward again. “Do you have any idea how much this Porsche Panamera cost me? Two years’ salary. I worked overtime for five years.”

Mr. Schmidt scowled, arms crossed. “We’ll pay for the damages,” he said quietly.

I frowned. But we weren’t the ones at fault.

The stranger seemed to have not heard, his gaze honed in on my father. Again, his fingers twitched. “You don’t understand, do you?” he growled. “You didn’t grow up here, don’t understand how hard we work, how hard we suffer.” His voice continued to tremble as he limped forward towards Baba.

My father stroked his chin. He’s thinking of his own story. “Sir, we understand. We know this means a lot to you and we’ll help with anything you need. Just let us – ”

“You liar!” The stranger’s hands jumped back to his pants pocket, clenching. A shadow crossed over his face. “Doesn’t matter what damn tricks a devil like you may try, you leave me be.”

The streetlight glinted off of something by the stranger’s right hand as he stepped forward. As he reached for it, my heart tightened.

I flung open the van door. “Baba, Baba, watch out he’s – ”

My father turned back, surprised. “Samaa, please not – ”

*Crack, crack, crack.* Baba crumpled to the ground, clutching his stomach. The snow bloomed crimson beneath him. The stranger stood amid the smoke, shaking, his gun raised.

A scream erupted from my throat and I flew forward. “No!”

*Crack, crack, crack.* Something whizzed by my cheek, missing it by inches. Mr. Schmidt launched himself at the stranger and they fell to the ground wrestling for control over the gun. Despite my blurring vision, I kept running. All I can think about is Baba.

Suddenly, a figure tackled me to the ground and dragged me behind the van. I try to get up, but it holds me back. “Let me go!” I choked, my chest heaving. “I need. To. Get. To. Baba.”

“What are you doing, Samaa?” Gabriel hissed. “You’re going to get yourself killed!”

I strained my head forward again, swinging it back just in time for a stray volley of bullets to lodge themselves into the side of the van. “Baba...” I whispered.

“Samaa, not now...”

“But...”

The gunfire had stopped, replaced by the shouts of first responders and the whirr of police sirens. But none of it mattered, none of it except for my father’s motionless body lying in the snow. A sob rose within me and I buried my face in my hands.

*Allah, please don’t let him die.*

\*\*\*

Thunder roared outside the car window as we pull into the hospital’s parking lot. Gabriel exhaled softly and eased his foot on the brake pedal. The car purred to a stop. “We’re here.”

My gaze hung onto the rain droplets streaking past the window pane. As I inhaled, I felt my breath rattle. “I...” I shut my eyes. Even with the sedan driver charged for attempted murder two weeks ago, I hadn’t realized how worked up I’d gotten.

“Are you okay, Samaa?” Gabriel asked.

I shook my head. “No. Really, I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

Gabriel smiled. “If you’re good. Oh, tell your dad that Felix ate all of the brownies in the pantry.”

My eyes widened. “You wouldn’t dare give – ”

“Hey, I’m just joking.”

A small smile crept across my face. “You better be. I’ll make sure...later.” With a goodbye wave, I flew out the car, through the rain and into the hospital, arriving breathless at the reception desk. “I’m here to see Priyash Reza,” I said, gasping.

“Room 111A,” the receptionist drawled. “Take the first stairs to your left. Have a nice day.”

I don’t need to be told twice. “Thank you!” I hollered over my shoulder as I dashed up to Baba’s room. My mind is so removed from the present that I almost collided into my mother on my way up. “Sorry, Mama!”

“Be more careful next time, habibti,” my mother scolded. Then, her eyes soften. “Baba’s doing well. He wants to talk to you.”

I bit my lip to keep it from trembling. “Okay.”

“Mr. Schmidt left some cookies, if you would like any,” she added.

I nodded wordlessly. All I can think about is Baba.

As I dragged myself down the hallway and into his quarters, I noticed Baba's still form lying on his bed. His eyes fluttered open when I knelt by his bedside. "Samaa," he whispered, smiling.

My heart tightened and tears welled up in my eyes. "Baba, I..."

"Shh, habibti, don't cry," he soothed, raising his hand to stroke my cheek.

I could only choke in response. *He's still so weak...*

"How is Felix doing?" Baba asked.

"Misses you," I said. "I missed you, too."

"So did I, Samaa, so did I."

Tears flood from my eyes as I collapsed into my father's arms. "Thank you, Baba. Thank you for everything."

## Red-Tinted Porcelain

I stared eagerly at the clock in third period Civics, and awaited the melodic ring of the bell. My eyes shifted from one side of the room to the other, as I attempted to distract myself from whatever it was Mr. Matthews was talking about. I decided it would be a better use of my time to plan out my day, instead of tracking the seconds leading to lunch.

- *Get home*
- *Fill up on gas*
- *Apply for jobs*
- *Visit Dad*
- *Homework*

Seems per usual.

Finally, after what seemed like pretty much an eternity, the bell for lunch rang, and I slung my backpack on and approached the doorway. As I pushed through the crowded hallway, I followed the line of the bottom of the lockers to prevent myself from accidentally making eye contact with anyone. The lockers seem unneeded to most of the students, which I always thought was strange. When you're watching TV in elementary school, and the shows star characters that are in high school, the characters being "next to the lockers" is a pretty iconic scene. You know what I'm talking about, the popular jock is putting his biology textbook in his locker, the cute, preppy cheerleader girl with blonde hair comes up to talk to him, her locker just happening to be next to his. That's what I expected when I came to high school, but I guess I'm not too surprised that those shows didn't get every detail right. I mean, they had students dancing and singing on

tables during lunch too. I guess I never noticed. I carefully cascaded my way through the cliques of my peers, and eventually made it to Erin.

Erin and I had been friends ever since fourth grade when we worked on a Romania project together. She had been with me through everything, my traumatic hair decisions, my broken arm, even the funeral...

I saw Erin as I looked over the crowd. She spotted me too, and waved her arm in my direction. Erin is easy to spot, her thick brown hair, always worn in an oversized top bun. Her bun alone could tower over the sea of people. I finally made it to her side.

“Okay, it’s lunchtime,” I said casually, “are we taking your car or mine?”

Erin shrugged her shoulders and shook her head as she spoke.

“I don’t really care. I have a project due in third, but Ms. Christianson is giving us class time to work on it.”

“Well if we take my car, we’ll have to stop for gas, and that’s kind of stressful, I’m just worried we won’t make it back in time if we take my car,”

*Oh God, here comes the word vomit.*

“...we’ll definitely have to stop for gas, and if the drive-thru takes too long, I’ll have to rush at the gas station, but even if it doesn’t, the gas pump might decline my card and not give me gas, so we’ll just be stranded at the gas station with no way of getting to school, and then I’ll have to call my grandma to come get us and take us back to school, and –”

“Jesus, Hila, let’s just take my car.” Erin cut me off. My shoulders immediately relaxed.

I nodded my head as I went to turn around towards the front doors of the school, as I felt an unfamiliar palm on my shoulder.

“Or we could take my car.”

I looked at the hand on my shoulder, and I noticed the unchipped nail polish and expensive bracelets on it’s wrist. I let my eyes lead the rest of my body to turn towards the owner of the hand. Eventually, I stood there, face to face with Kelly Richardson. Like Erin, Kelly and I went to all the same schools together, ever since we were little kids. Her hair was brown too, almost the exact shade of Erin’s, but she always wore it more styled, in thick curls half-up, half-down.

*Act natural. You’ve dealt with human beings before.*

“Oh, um, hey what’s up dog?” I said un-charismatically.

*Why the hell am I so awkward?*

I nudged and pulled at my clothes in attempt to look more presentable. She chuckled at my stiffness and repeated herself.

“I just heard you guys arguing about whose car to take to lunch, and I figured we could just take mine. I assure you my tank is full and we have nothing to worry about.” The way she said everything was so suave and confident, without a stutter.

“Oh, I mean, yeah, um, I guess that could work,” I constantly shifted my eyes from Erin to Kelly, and back to Erin, seeing if my decision had any objections. “Is that cool with everyone?”

Hesitantly, Erin looked at Kelly and said, “Yeah, that works for me. Let’s get going though, we’re losing daylight.”

As we all sat in the car, I popped my knuckles as I examined my surroundings.

*Scratched leather seats, stitching undone, ill-fitting floor mats. I guess she’s not totally perfect, turns out she’s human too.*

“Hila?”

*Oh shoot, I wasn’t paying attention at all.*

I popped out of my trance and shifted my eyes to find who said my name.

Kelly said it again, a little louder this time, “Hila?” Based on her tone, I decided she was asking for my attention, not asking me for my input on what they were talking about. I hoped not at least; I didn’t have the strength to awkwardly laugh and nod as if I was paying attention.

“Yeah, Kelly?”

She sighed empathetically and made eye contact with me in her rearview mirror. With hesitation, she spoke. “I know that it’s your first Mother’s Day since yo—”

“Yeah?” I cut her off. I saw Erin’s eyes looking at me concerned in the passenger side sun visor mirror. I looked at her too, and shook my head shallowly, hoping that Kelly wouldn’t notice my discomfort.

“Anyways, I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. If you wanted to, I’m free to hang out tonight, my mom is out of town on business, we could grab some food or something.” She surprisingly sounded sincere, which was a strange feeling. Usually when I talk to the more

preppy, popular students, I always get an underlying feeling that they're just pitying my poor, unfortunate, average, soul. But for some reason, this didn't feel like the case. In short, this really caught me off guard.

"Oh, um, yeah," I stuttered, "I would love to, but I don't know if I can, I was supposed to visit my dad today. But maybe I can talk to him, and we can reschedule."

Kelly almost flipped the car, she stepped on the breaks so fast. "Wait, you're actually going to keep seeing him?" I don't know why, but her sheer amount of shock confused me. I guess I see her point of view, but I mean, I still love my dad...

"Well, yeah," I said, as nonchalantly as possible, "but if you really wanted to hang out tonight, I can reschedule no problem." I started to think about how my dad might react to me skipping out on one of our visitations, I can't imagine it would gauge a positive reaction. As everyone within a 100-mile radius from my house knew, my dad has slight anger issues. But hey, he kind of owes me.

"Are you sure, Hila? I don't want to put you in any kind of situation with your dad."

"Don't worry about it, count me in." I said confidently.

I saw Erin's eyebrows raise in the mirror, shocked. "Hey, alright! Hila being a rebellious little thang!"

*I just hope I don't regret it, I thought to myself.*

.....

I sat in fourth period, yet again eagerly awaiting the ringing of the bell. I felt my phone vibrate in my sweatshirt pocket, and as I reached down to get it, I let my eyes droop down from the board to look at my screen. It was from Erin.

“Are you sure about ditching your dad?”

“I’m not ditching him, I’m just rescheduling. After I miss the visitation time, he’ll give me a call, and then I can explain everything to him. I’ll be fine. Even if he gets mad, it’s not like he’s breaking out or anything.”

“Okay, just be careful.”

“Will do.”

As the fourth period bell rang, I sprinted to Kelly’s car. I decided that maybe having a friend who cared about me, even a little, is more important than spending my Mother’s Day with the one person who is responsible for what happened.

Kelly looked up at me as I stood by her car, and started to jog slightly towards me. She gave me a hug, which caught me off guard, and when she pulled out of the hug, she looked at me with a genuine smile. Another uncanny experience.

“Hey, girl!”

“Oh, hey, um, girl.”

She laughed. “Let’s get out of here, just follow me in your car, I’ll stop at the nearest gas station for ya.”

When we got to her house, I realized that it wasn't what I expected. I expected a mansion, perfectly fit for weekend high school parties, but it actually wasn't different from the house I used to have. One story, flat, with a nice front yard, and a small porch with little decorations, all having the same generic theme: *Home is where the family is*. I think she might even have the same plaque I used to have. Now I lived in a condo with my grandma, but I felt very at-home in her house; it was surprisingly a familiar feeling.

As we strolled into the living room, I saw a decorative blanket, the same one Erin has at her house. As we sat on her La-Z-Boy couch, I immediately put the blanket on my thighs and started tracing the floral lines, like I always did at Erin's.

"Oh, do you like that blanket?" She laughed.

"Yeah, oh sorry, yeah, Erin has the same one."

"Oh nice, nice. Hey let's pop a movie in, my dad is bringing pizza when he comes home from work."

.....

As I sat there, in this familiar house, I couldn't help but think, *Why is Kelly being so nice to me? I don't doubt that she's a nice person, but she's never talked to me before today... everyone seems to be a little weird with me since it all happened.*

I put my third pizza crust on my plate, and wiped my mouth as I laughed at one of the awkward characters in the movie.

*Relatable.*

“Hey Hila,” Kelly asked to get my attention, “you’re actually a pretty cool chick. We should hang out more, I don’t know why we haven’t before.”

*I do.*

This thought manifested in my brain, and it couldn’t get out. I knew why she was being nice to me, and I couldn’t tell if her efforts were unprompted. Her thick shiny hair and curves, they didn’t compare to my boring features. Lanky, with straight blonde hair, always in a ponytail. She felt bad for me, I could tell. Why else would she be acting like this? She never had before.

*Ugh, I hate being pitied. I hate looking weak. Please stop, don’t word vomit, just don’t ruin this, hold in the anger. Hold in the freak.*

I couldn’t anymore though; I couldn’t suppress it. I felt it bubble in my throat, and with my fists clenched, the v-shaped vein in my forehead popping out, I puked.

“Why are you being so nice to me? I mean, I think you’re a nice person, but you’ve never talked to me before. Are you pitying me? I don’t need your coddling. I just want people to treat me like they always have. Everyone’s been treating me different, ever since my dad,”

I took a breath.

“...ever since he killed my mom. Everyone treats me different, even Erin, but especially you.”

My word vomit spewed all over her, and I could see the impact of my words. But I couldn’t help but realize that I didn’t regret finally saying it (or at least not as much as I thought I would). How could I? It was true, and the saddest thing about all of it was I could tell she knew I

was right. I didn't fit in to her life, I couldn't. My shy face betrayed me and turned bright red, and I tried to suppress the cracking and hoarseness of my dry mouth.

Look at it this way: there are different versions of anger, and both mean different things. There's the kind of anger where your words are harsh and sharp, and they could cut diamond if they had the chance. Then there's another kind of anger where you want to be harsh, but you just can't, instead of looking strong and powerful, you look weak. Your throat dries out, you can feel your eyes swell up with tears, you can't feel yourself breathe. The sheer betrayal makes your hands shake. What I was feeling right now, is the second kind of anger, and I hated it, I hated looking weak. I lost the only family I had, and I finally felt the betrayal everyone had been wanting me to see, and there was only one person to place the blame. I hated him for what he had done. But there are no second chances. No nightmare to wake up from. No fairytale ending, where my magical tears bring my mother's life back.

I thought of all the nights when Erin and I decided to skip whatever preppy school event was going on, and stay in. We would sit on her couch, snuggled in her mom's fancy blanket. I would trace my fingers along the intricate design of the flowers on the decorative side while we discussed movies, classes, and how crazy our families could be.

*Well look at me now,* I thought as my shaking hands reached for my bookbag.

As my left foot hit the ground, my legs regained their strength and I started to do middle school wind sprints to my car. I cranked the engine, and I felt the crappy heated seats turn on, and I could feel her eyes watch me as I sped out of the driveway.

As I drove, I realized I was alone, and I let the thick tears roll down my face. I turned the radio off, it didn't help with the way I was feeling.

I pulled into the familiar neighborhood I grew up observing. I drove by the intersection where my mom always noted that there needed to be a stop sign, I drove by the yard that my dad never failed to point out the blue tint of the fake grass. I felt the brakes of my car screech as I pulled onto the dirt driveway. The police didn't even bother to lock the door, and I ceaselessly walked into the old, empty, childhood-holding house that I knew so well. I was overwhelmed with a sense of nostalgia.

I walked through the hallways, hearing the comforting creaks of the wood that I knew by heart. I went into the backyard, and saw the old, rotting wood on the unfinished treehouse I was promised. I walked into the former bedroom of my parents, and saw the frayed carpet edges and scratch marks that the razors left, after police, after they peeled the bloody carpet off of the floor. I walked into the bathroom, and looked in the bathtub that I used to play in as a child. I could hear my mom's laughter as I gave myself bubble bath beards, and played with my toy boats. I now was disgusted by the red tint of the white porcelain.

I walked silently into my old room, my old bedframe and mattress still there. I saw the window that I looked out of on snowy mornings, the window that my mom would look out of as I sledded in the crisp air.

I laid on my naked bed, in my naked room, and let my memories lull me to sleep, memories of childhood, and my mother. Memories of the smell of store-bought cinnamon rolls waking me up on Saturday mornings. Memories of my dad teaching me to drive, as my mother gasped in the back seat. My eyes slowly drooped shut, and sleep came over me as tears rolled down the sides of my face.

## One Look Changes Everything

The sound of German soldiers' boots clicking against the cobblestone road echoed in the distance. That constant click, click, click never left one's mind. If you turned one corner, you could escape for a second, but it would start again as soon as you continued along your way. It was like a clock ticking in the back of your mind, reminding you of what they were taking away from you. It never went away.

Smoke rose from the nearby market. It was the kind of fume that settles in one's sinuses and lingers for a while. Food was becoming scarce. No matter how much money you had, you could never seem to get enough to eat. It didn't help that the gold star sewed on your coat made the storekeepers hate you before they even knew you. Even if you tried to cover the star up with a scarf, it always found a way to make an appearance and people treated you with disgust.

I headed down the ally that cut through my neighborhood. The relentless click, click, click sound came from the end of the ally. My head spun around as I stepped slightly behind some trash bins. The clicking sound became one with my heart, never ceasing its harmony with the beat of my heart. It is strange how such a repetitive sound starts to suffocate you to the point that just know that it will kill you if nothing stops it.

I always looked down, having learned early to never look the German soldiers in the eye. This time I saw two pair of black jackboots about ten feet away from me. They shuffled around for a bit before the occupant of one pair pulled a box of cigarettes and lit one. The other pair of feet said, "Man, I wish that raid wasn't tonight."

The cigarette feet replied, "How come?"

"Karin and I were going to go to that new western."

"Oh Karin. Hans when are you going to let the other guys and I meet her . . ." It seemed odd that such men could have girlfriends.

The voices trailed off out of the ally and back onto the main street. My heart started to beat even faster. "What raid were they talking about?" I said to myself. As I stood up, I noticed that soot and dirt had seeped onto my skirt. "Just great," I thought to myself.

Just then I heard the sound of marching boots. It was not the pristine, heartbeat clicking of earlier, but rather the urgent, impatient crunch of a small army that was more like the sound of many hearts breaking. It was so terrifying that I could not decide whether I should run or hide. "Where would I even go?" I said to myself. This town was full of soldiers. It seemed as though they were worker ants and each of the yellow stars was a queen, but instead of protecting the queen, the soldiers knew the end of the ant colony was near and they just wanted the queen to die a miserable and slow death. I could not understand how fellow countrymen could treat us this way.

Slowly, I made my way through the cobblestone alleys and back to my once beautiful house. When I was younger, I could look out my window and see the snow covered hills. In the spring, the left outside wall of my house used to be covered in green vines and small pink flowers. Now, when I look out my window, all I can see is darkness, destructions, railroad tracks and soldiers with loaded guns. The vines have been replaced with a metal steel fence that surrounds my once peaceful neighborhood into an anxiety-filled life and our neighborhood had become a ghetto.

One glance can change everything. Sometimes you get good looks. Like when a cute boy gives you a half smile from across the hall that no one else notices, or when you get a good grade, and your parents eyes sparkle with pride. But, the look that my mother gave me when I

walked through the doors of my house is one I will never forget. It was a look of hopelessness. I knew immediately that things were not going to be ok. I wanted to walk right out the door I came through and pretend I was five years old again. "When." I said.

"Tonight." she replied.

It looked like she had been baking all day. She had the flour and sugar all over the counter. "Why are you baking so much?" I asked.

"We are going to have one last dinner as a family. I don't know what is coming, and I can't control any of it. But, I can control tonight's dinner." she replied.

I headed up the stairs to my room. Sheet music was spread out all over the floor. "What am I going to do?" I said to myself. No more would I be able to come home from school thinking about how to improve my violin playing, thinking about Peter Rinehart from chemistry class, and what I was going to do the next weekend. "How am I supposed to react?" I asked myself. I decided to do the one thing I knew always brought me peace.

I opened my violin case and pulled the instrument out. Notes flowed as I played, and the violin seemed to breathe with me. Most people find it intriguing and calming how much music can change a person. The scratch marks on my violin showed the age of this beautiful instrument; I wouldn't know until much later how much the violin would truly help me.

Glancing out my window, I saw a pair of young German soldiers about my age, doing their hourly checks. One soldier had blond hair and bright blue eyes and the other one had brown hair, freckles, and blue eyes. They seemed familiar and I thought I had seen them before today. Had they been civilians, I would probably have found them pretty cute, but it's kind of hard to ignore the fact that their army is imprisoning my family inside our own homes; so they would not be cute to me. I hated them.

I heard the front door open and shut, followed by the shuffling of my father's shoes walking up the stairs and into my room. I've been able to recognize that sound since I was little. I started towards the stairs, but stopped when I got to the edge. I began to have this sad feeling. It was like when you get a realization that something bad is about to happen. That is the exact sensation that came over me as I stood at the top of the stairs that night. I was not sure what was going to happen, but I knew it would not be good.

Finally I started down the stairs. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I received the second bad look of the day from my father. He took had the look of hopelessness and the look of knowing uncertainty. The first thing that my dad said to me was, "Your brother was right, Anna."

"Well there's nothing we can do about it now," I replied.

"You're right," he said.

My brother had gotten the feeling that everything was going to go downhill about a year ago. It was right after they had started putting restrictions on us. He felt like he was being forced to live inside a bubble with no way out, and he didn't believe that was how one was supposed to live. Back then my dad had thought himself crazy for not trusting that it was just political turmoil and that it would sort itself out in time. No one had heard from my brother since he got on the boat for America. I thought that the day that he left was the worst day of my life, but now I was not so sure.

Plates clattered into the sink as my mom tried to bring them down from the cabinet. I rushed over to help her. "I've to go out for a while," my dad suddenly announced.

"Where is he going?" I asked my mom as soon as he had left.

"He's sending a letter to your brother telling him what is happening here," she replied.

"Oh," I said.

A few minutes later she said, "He's also telling your brother where he is putting things."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Where he is putting important documents and some valuables and money he inherited from your grandmother," she said. "So that your brother can come back after all of this is over and pick up the pieces," She replied.

"Why would he need to come back after this is over and get Grandma's money and valuables? We are coming back, right?" I asked.

"Of course," she replied, but it was a hesitant one. The reply was one that must have been carefully constructed beforehand.

After we had finished setting the table, I went back up the stairs and to my bedroom. Before I could make it all the way up the stairs, I heard a loud banging on the door. I had a sinking feeling that started in my stomach. The kind you get when you are about to do something that scares you for the first time, or when you know that your world will never be the same again. I didn't want to turn around. I wanted to pretend that the banging on the door didn't exist. In my head, I wanted my life to continue on as it had been with no changes.

My mother slowly walked towards the door, dried her hands on her apron, and opened the door. A stocky German soldier with eyes as cold as ice stood at the door and there were four others behind him. As soon as my mother opened the door he said, "Where is your husband?"

"He's out right now," my mother coldly replied.

"Alright. We are transporting everyone out of the ghetto at midnight." He replied. My mother slowly closed the door as he walked down out of our small yard and the other soldiers follow him. I looked out the window as they walked away.

"That's funny," I said to myself. "Two of those guys look familiar." That is when it hit me. They were the two soldiers that I had seen in the alley this morning talking about girls. And now, they were the two who were looking up at me as I stood by the window.

I felt like everything was closing in on me. My mother sat down at the table and put her hands over her eyes staying, like that for what felt like eternity. I walked up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Grabbing my violin I headed out the back staircase and out the back door. "This is probably a really bad idea." I thought to myself. "Oh well." I ran, and I never looked back.

I made my way through the back alley between the two houses. Trash lined the ground and broken bottles were everywhere I stepped. "It has to be coming soon," I said to myself. When I was younger I would always make my way through the alleys, in the hours between school and dinner, to a place that I could escape from everything. It was like a secret garden inside a wall of cement buildings. I ended up in a tiny courtyard in an abandoned building. The beautiful green grass was gone and the shrubs had been pulled up. The courtyard was surrounded by brick wall, but the brick wall was falling down and what had been one of the most beautiful parts of the city was no longer beautiful.

I slowly picked up my violin from its old, worn, black case on the ground. Looking around, I could not believe how my world was changing. I knew I was never going to be able to accept it, but did not know how to stop it. I began to play my violin and for the first time in days I felt an inner peace. Everything that I was feeling came out in my playing. It sounded like nothing I had ever played or heard before in my life. The darkness and depth of fear spilled out, though it was combined with a sense of anxiety for the future. After what felt like an eternity, but in reality must have been only a few seconds, I stopped playing and, breathing hard, I closed my

eyes. When I opened them again, I had a gut instinct that someone was watching me. When I turned my head to the left, I saw rustling in the shadow what appear to be leaves blowing in the wind. I played for a few more moments, before pausing because I heard a clapping. Looking to the left again, I saw the same two young Germans soldiers watching me play my violin.

The sinking feeling in my stomach that came next was the second worse feeling I had felt that day. "Well, well, well," The blonde haired German soldier remarked. "It seems to me we have quite the performer on our hands." He started stumbling around, though he seemed to be stable enough to continue to take long drags on his cigarette. The brown haired soldier seemed to be working hard to keep him upright.

"Come on Fredrick!" He said.

"Oh shut-up won't you Hans. I'm trying to talk to our friend here." the blonde hair soldier replied. "I'm about done with all these raids. They are pointless and I'm just not ok with what they are for and stand for. What I came here to do is not what's happening.

You are really bugging me by the way," Hans preached to Fredrick. "I'm so sorry," he said. "As you can probably tell, Fredrick and I have had a little to drink tonight. Fredrick had had more than me though. You remind me of my sister."

"That's ok. I should be getting home." I said.

I started putting my violin back into its case. "Wait!" Fredrick said to me. "Don't you think I will tell the commander, Hans?" he directed towards his friend.

"Uh, no Fredrick. We are not supposed to have been drinking tonight anyways, there's that thing later tonight." Hans said.

"No Hans! That's not what I was talking about. I was talking about telling him how she plays the violin," Fredrick drunkenly said.

"Oh." Hans replied. "Well I guess it wouldn't hurt." Fredrick gave me a smile that one would only give to a close friend.

"Well I guess we'll be seeing you." Fredrick said. "I guess." I replied.

As they hobbled away, Hans attempting to hold up Fredrick, I said to myself, "What is that supposed to mean?" I mean, it was kind of creepy in a way. It was like they were going to be coming directly for me. They did say they had that thing tonight and I thought that this is really not good, but at the same time I felt like they may help me.

As I was making my way through the alleys back to my house I knew that in a matter of a few hours everything would be much different. Once home again, I did not see my mother and father, but I climbed into my bed. Trying to fall asleep, there was a banging on the door. My father answered and called to me in a calm voice, "Anna, its time." I headed down the stairs with my violin. All sense of hope had left me.

By the time my parents and I got out onto our front stoop, most of the other people in the houses beside us were loading into large trucks. We climbed into the crowded truck. The stench that came from body odor filled the air; one you could never escape no matter how hard you tried. After a few hours, the truck finally stopped. Climbing out of the truck, I clutched my violin close. It was the only item I had left from my life when things were good.

Soldiers directed us to lines. When we got to the front of the line one soldier said, "State your name."

"Anna Dossier." I replied.

"Oh, yes." he said, "Wait here." and pushed me to the side.

"Where were my mom and dad? They were just behind me a few seconds ago." I said to myself. Before I could think of what to do next, the two German soldiers that had heard me play the violin appeared.

"Thanks. We'll take it from here." Fredrick told the soldiers taking names. We walked away from the train station and through the field that surrounded it. After a few minutes the two soldiers stopped. Hans took off his backpack and pulled out what looked like a passport and some women's clothing.

"Here" he said.

"What?" I replied.

"It's a German passport and a ticket to Switzerland. Hopefully you'll be able to get to the United States. Your parents said for you to find your brother and they want you to be happy."

"Why?" I asked, he never responded.

He said, "Make sure you stick to the back roads. Up about two miles there's a civilian depot, that's where you should go."

"Good luck." Fredrick said, though Hans had started walking away. I looked back only once, to see a slight smile coming from Hans's face as he walked away, knowing what he was doing was changing so much. I took a deep breath and headed the opposite way, not knowing what I was in for, but knowing it was a chance for a better life.

## Count to Ten

Breathe in. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven, eight, nine, ten. Ten toes. Breathe out. Slope up olive-colored legs. Smooth thigh touching thigh. Pointy hip bone. Belly button. Breathe in. Freckle. Soft belly gliding up towards a perky breast. An arm stretches forward, slender fingers glancing the glass mirror. Breathe out. Look up. Oak brown eyes meet brown eyes. Who am I? Who do I love?

--

*June 27th, 2010*

*Dear Diary,*

*It hurts. Hurts deep down in my soul. In the center of my chest. I am lonely. And, and I think I like girls. Their eyes. Their smiles. The way they laugh. The way they touch my hand. Their struggle and pain. Their strength. The way they love themselves. But I can't like them. Won't like them. What is wrong with me? Is it just a side-effect of stress? Am I overreacting? They say it's just a phase. Just a phase. I am not gay. I am not gay. I am not gay.*

--

Then there was her, laughing blue eyes framing a smile. A smile that reached the crescents on both her cheeks. Golden brown hair laced red and ruffled in the wind. Her pudgy fingers wrapped around the steering wheel, looking at me. Golden fields flew by us and unicorns danced in pink rusted skies. My hands grasped the cotton candy clouds. A strange sound gurgling up from my chest and swelling up, up to my mouth. Head flung back, laughing.

We were besties.

--

November 17th, 2014

*Dear Diary,*

*Today was super amazing. I made plans with a new group of friends for my birthday. I can't believe I'm going to be 15! Two of the guys in the group are gay and HILARRRRIOUS! They couldn't believe I haven't had my first kiss yet. Of course, they don't know the truth. Anyways, we are going to go out to the mall. Also, my sister and I are going to go to Maine for Christmas. We are gonna stay at my grandparent's farmhouse. Whoop whoop!*

--

I stuff the locks of dark brown hair into my shirt collar. Will it look better this way? Screw it, maybe it will. The face in the mirror reflects back a smirk. The frame of this mirror is wooden, and paint the color of sunshine envelops it. I swipe back my hair to reveal the ruby studs in my ears, and I smirk right back at the mirror. I feel beautiful. Later that night, I snuggle in bed with my little sister. She talks about her crushes and I patiently unpatiently listen.

"I think I'm bisexual," she opens up.

"No shit," I tease, and then I say, "I think I'm gay."

"No shit," she sasses back.

And our sides are shaking. From tears or laughter, who knows.

--

December 29, 2015

*Dear Diary,*

*I'm happy, but sad. Happy because as every day passes I gain self-acceptance. Sad because it's hard to keep a secret, to live a lie. But I'm scared, so bloody scared. I'm scared others won't believe me. I've already spent years subconsciously hiding my identity. I'm scared I*

*am wrong. Not because I think I'm straight, but because of the media, movies, my parents, government officials, history . . . really society as a whole has told me I can't be gay since day one. I mean, I've been raised with the presumption that I am straight, so of course it was hard for me to realize and accept my homosexuality when I was so young. Then all this fear of how others will respond and my own homophobia manifest themselves into anxiety, so I count to ten and breathe in until my belly fills up with strength and hope. And then I breathe out the stress and agony.*

*I'll try coming out to my mom or bestie soon. Start with those I trust and love.*

--

Glowing, strawberry tinted cheeks. Blonde hair straightened down her back. Sloppy giggles burst forth as she rips open her shirt to show off her new bra to a pair of guys. I turn to the girl on my left. Our eyes meet, "Lord, have mercy." For catharsis, I chronicle the sobering experiences of my drunken peers. My texts take off one by one. They're paper airplane messages flying across frozen lakes and frosted grass, sent my bestie's way.

It's 3:00 am and the night is still going. Girls pair off with guys. Flirting evolves as the night comes to an end, and I keep texting her. She wanted stories to wake up to, and she's definitely got them.

I go to the bathroom. Hands grasp the sides of the porcelain white sink. Oak brown eyes lift up to the mirror. *Screw it.* And the mirror smirks back at me again. *Okay, one letter at a time, 'I am GAY.'* Then the truth unfolds and it's 4:00 am and I am texting my best friend and *'I know it's not the best way to come out over text. We can talk about it later. I just want you to know because you're my bestie. And being gay scares the absolute shit out of me. And I need someone to stand beside me.'* Thumb hovers over the button. Send.

Who knows if this paper airplane will land safely?

--

*January 1st, 2016*

*Dear Diary,*

*Finally told my bestie! She said she doesn't know what to say, but she wants to talk about it this week. We are going to meet up at the library. Wish me luck!*

--

Hand over hand, black leather turns. Wheels grind against pavement. Headlights shine into crisp ebony air. We park. Oak brown eyes hover, meet the girl's blue eyes.

"I love you," she tells me, "I love you no matter what, but ...". And my eyes no longer see her. There is only her lips and the words they form, "... but, I know why being gay scares you. It's because you don't truly know if you are gay or not. You can't know yet."

And the silence of unacceptance begins. Only a dull ringing in my ears is left.

Then the voices come, the shouting, echoing voices in my head:

"Being gay is a sin. God created man to be with women."

"It is only a choice. A lifestyle choice. They can change."

"You know that cute guy all the girls had crushes on in high school? He turned out to be gay. What a waste of space! A waste of love."

"You're too pretty, too girly to be gay."

"It's just a phase. Everyone eventually grows out of it, you'll see."

"You know, girls kissing girls, that's sexy. I'm cool with that. But a man with a man, that's just disgusting."

"A boy is a boy and a girl is a girl. There can't be any in between."

“What are you gonna do married to a woman? There’s no one to fix the car when it breaks down or be the man of the house.”

“We don’t need to see them in popular media. I don’t want my kids to see that. Being gay, it’s contagious.”

“When did she turn gay? Must just be for attention.”

“It’s inhuman, just disgusting.”

“No one wants to be a fag.”

“You can’t define yourself.”

“It’s all in your head.”

Words tumbling around in my mind. Words I’ve seen and heard. Words people have told me straight to my face. Words from family, friends, strangers. I can feel my heart race out of control, tears leaking out of my oak brown eyes. I can’t count to ten.

--

*January 10th, 2016*

*Dear Diary,*

*I don’t know. I just don’t know.*

--

*April 3rd, 2016*

*Dear Diary,*

*She hasn’t talked to me since that day about being gay, hasn’t brought it up once. Guess she thinks it’s something she can just brush under the rug. That’s what her mom does to her brother. He’s gay.*

*I should've known. Should've realized she'd follow her mom's example. Should've known that coming out is like the castle draining the moat. The sorceress giving up her wand. The truth leaves us vulnerable, open to attack.*

*You can't even trust your bestest friend.*

--

*June 10th, 2016*

*Dear Diary,*

*My grandparents are coming down to visit for a week. I'm so nervous because mom told them about me being gay. I don't know what they will say or do. Think my heart is just gonna beat its way out of my chest.*

--

Then, there were three little words. Not one single 'but' or half-ass acceptance letter followed them. Just three words.

"I love you."

Blue-purple veins crisscross her body, pumping life that shines through her eyes. Her wispy silver hair covers her head, and crinkled skin drapes across her cheekbones. Her red painted lips repeat, "I love you."

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven, eight, nine, ten. Ten frail fingers clasp mine. Fingers as slender as mine. Together, grandmother and granddaughter, we have twenty.

Then there is thirty. His thick callused hands cover ours. Grandpa, the first man I've come out to.

Slowly, forty. Fifty. Sixty. Seventy. Sisters, mom, dad, stepmom, friends.

"We love you . . ."

Eighty. Ninety. One hundred. One hundred fingers attached to arms. Arms that wrap around me. Arms that uplift me. Arms that will let me go, but minds and mouths that say, “. . . no matter who you love.”

Breathe in. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Breathe out. Feel the steady thump, thump of my heart. Voices telling me I am wrong fade into another room, and my oak brown eyes smile. I am calm.

## Star Sailor

Devon sat on the edge of the wooden dock, his tattered sneakers dangling over the silky dark water below. In his left hand, he gripped the neck of a new cherry wood guitar; in his right, he slowly strummed the silver strings. His fingers were covered in blisters from playing night after night, digging his fingertips into the strings until it hurt. He wasn't very good, but he had only started a week ago. He would get better.

The muscles in his hand began to cramp up. He sighed and set the guitar to the side. He stared at his hand, bloody and red. His face contorted into a scowl, and he looked away.

He took a deep breath of the cool night air, closing his eyes as the soft ocean breeze blew across his cheek. He could taste the salt in the air. His heart clenched. His thoughts flashed back to a week ago, his first day at this abysmal beach house.

*"Devon, I know that you don't want to do this, but it's for the best," his mother said softly. She tried to place a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off, ignoring her hurt look. He looked up at the bright blue house, paint peeling, doors squeaking, flagpole broken.*

*How long was he going to live here?*

*"I don't need this," he said angrily, shouldering his backpack, oddly empty of its usual school materials and instead filled with clothes and other living essentials.*

*"You need to be away from society for a little while," she said quietly, her voice breaking. Devon could tell she was on the verge of tears, but he didn't care.*

*"I need to be away from you," he said coldly.*

*As he walked into the house, he could hear her collapse to the ground, the first sob escaping her lips. His stomach churned a little, but he hardened his heart and pushed on.*

He opened his eyes and let out a breath. And now he was here. Sitting on a dock at three in the morning, night after night, staring into the black void and aimlessly strumming a guitar.

He looked up into the sky, the dark velvet canvas embedded with diamonds. There was something special about the stars, he thought. He wasn't sure quite what to name it. But it was something. He had heard somewhere that the hour between 3am and 4am was the darkest time of night. He believed it. The stars were so much clearer here than they were back home. He tried to remember exactly where he was. He had slept—or pretended to sleep—for most of the car ride. He knew it was somewhere off the coast of North Carolina. It wasn't really a beach; it was a sound, with long grass growing out of the water here and there to create an illusion of land. The house he was in was in a little inlet. If he looked straight ahead, he could see houses and docks of other people, all peacefully dreaming. His gaze fell to the house directly across subconsciously.

Then he froze.

There was a figure draped in shadow sitting on the dock opposite him. Devon squinted his eyes, not quite sure what to do. The figure stood up abruptly, though it moved clumsily and shakily.

Then it turned and walked back down the dock, not running, but not walking.

And then it was gone.

Devon sat for a few minutes longer, stunned.

Then he noticed how fast his heart was beating. He hated people. He couldn't stand them. He was scared this person would try and make contact with him.

But he let out a slow breath. Obviously, this person didn't want to talk to him either. He was okay with that.

He slowly stood up, picked up the cherry wood guitar, and made his way back inside.

~~~~

The next night, he sat out on the dock again, mindlessly picking away at the strings of his guitar. He could only consistently play three chords, but that was okay with him. He would never be as good as Jeremy anyways.

He let his gaze wander to the horizon. The stars were partially obscured by streaks of gray clouds, strewn across the sky like fabric at his grandmother's sewing table. Sometimes, he liked to imagine the sky as a giant piece of cloth stretched out over the top of a snow globe, and the stars were pinpricks through that showed the light beyond. That light seemed so far away. The world seemed too dark.

That's when he noticed the figure again.

He or she seemed more like a shadow than a person. They sat on the edge of the dock carefully. Every movement seemed to be accompanied by some degree of hesitation.

Devon didn't move but for the continual strum of his raw fingertips brushing the strings of the guitar.

The figure didn't move either.

Both people sat opposite each other, staring. Devon could feel something forming in his chest. A connection. It was odd. He didn't know anything about this person.

Yet somehow, there, in the middle of the night with only the stars as witnesses, they shared something no one else could.

Two people, isolated from the rest of the world, were alone together.

~~~

The next night, Devon saw the figure again.

He felt something warring within himself internally. He hadn't approached someone in the past three years. He wouldn't know what to say. What if they called the police?

But yet, something deep and instinctive begged him to do it.

Cursing himself silently, he stood up, locked his guitar back in its case, and made his way down to the bank. He pulled a faded red canoe from the underbrush and pushed it out onto the water, hoping it was safe. He had noticed it a few days ago, but hadn't actually tried it. He clumsily stepped into the craft and sat down, grimacing at the dampness of the seat.

And he began to paddle over.

While it likely took no more than three minutes to get across the small inlet, time seemed to stretch and freeze until it felt like hours. Thoughts and insecurities buzzed through his brain like a swarm of dragonflies, but he never stopped moving.

This was unlike him. He usually listened to those insecurities and fears the first time they surfaced. Was it a decision that could only be made in the deepest hours of the night, when the mind is foggy and the heart is raw? Was it something beyond his control, a higher power that compelled him to act on an impulse?

Or was it, perhaps, that some part buried deep inside him decided it no longer wanted to be alone?

He couldn't say.

But when he finally arrived on the other side of that inlet, his wildly beating heart had somehow stabilized. He rowed up to the side of the dock next to the ladder hanging down off the side.

Was this wrong?

But just then, a thin rope was tossed down. A head appeared over the side of the dock. “If you paddled all the way over here, you might as well at least tell me why.”

So. It was a girl’s voice.

Devon frowned slightly. He hadn’t seen her hair. She must have had it pulled back.

He tied up the boat, then climbed up the ladder, his hands gripping the wet, cold metal a little harder than he probably should have. His stomach suddenly felt full, even though he hadn’t eaten in almost eight hours.

He climbed over the top of the ladder and placed his sneakers firmly on the dock. There was the girl, sitting cross-legged and glaring up at him.

He took a moment to study her. She was thin; almost painfully so. Her flannel pajamas hung limply off her delicate frame. Her skin was dark, not the darkest he had seen, but a sort of milk chocolate color. Her eyes, almond shaped, regarded him shrewdly, like a cat who thought the world was their domain. He shrunk a bit beneath her scrutiny. It felt like she could see right through his eyes and was judging his every thought.

But what surprised him most was her hair...or rather, lack of it. Her smooth brown head shone slightly under the star covered sky. It threw him off slightly. He considered asking her about it, but decided that it would be a rude first question.

There were a few moments of silence as they stared at each other. Her eyes narrowed.

“So what do you want?” she finally demanded.

Devon sat down slowly, facing her. He wasn't sure what to say. He had an odd feeling that his first words in this conversation would be important. He wasn't sure why. He had never worried about talking to people before. He simply didn't care.

But there was a kind of weight in the air that made him choose his words carefully.

"What?" she repeated, a little angrier this time.

"Why are you alone?"

The moments the words left his mouth, he regretted them. Her face tensed up and her eyes narrowed even more. "I'm sorry?"

She definitely sounded offended. Devon looked down. "I was just wondering why you sit alone out here in the middle of the night so much."

"I could ask you the same question."

"You could."

There was another moment of silence. Devon finally looked up and met her gaze.

She stared back. There was fire in her eyes, but Devon didn't back down. If this was a challenge, he was going to win.

Finally, she huffed. "I'm alone because I want to be. Your turn."

Devon shrugged. "I'm alone because they made me."

A slight breeze blew across the water and ruffled Devon's hair. He could hear the sound of the waves slapping against the wooden posts.

"I'm Devon," Devon said suddenly.

The girl nodded. "Cool."

He looked at her expectantly.

She raised her eyebrows. "I'm under no obligation to tell you anything."

“But it would be nice if you did,” Devon replied, growing frustrated.

“Yeah, it would be.” She stood up slowly. Devon could see her legs shaking under the strain. “Well, I’m going inside. Thanks for ruining my night, Devon.”

He watched her slowly make her way up the dock back to where it met solid land, then across the lawn to her house, arms crossed, head down. It was a sad sight. She seemed weighed down by a great burden as if it were draped across her shoulders.

And it was this, and only this, that convinced him to come back the next night.

~~~

Devon didn’t waste any time the next night. He didn’t even bring out his guitar. He just paddled over to the girl’s dock, tied up the boat, and climbed up the ladder.

She gave him an annoyed look. “You’re back.”

Devon sat down. “I am.”

She stared at him. “Why?”

He shrugged. “You said you wanted to be alone.”

“Yeah. I did. So why did you come back.”

He held her gaze. “I didn’t believe you.”

Her stern countenance dropped. Without the creased lines on her face, she was beautiful in the way a small child is beautiful. Pure, untouched by the world.

But if you looked into her eyes, you could see that she had been fighting something for a very long time.

She scowled again and looked down. “Well you should’ve. I’m fine being alone.”

Devon raised an eyebrow slightly. “That may be so, but I imagine you don’t like being lonely.”

She looked up again, glaring. “Yeah? Maybe you’re the lonely one and you come and bother me so you feel better about yourself.”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

She hadn’t expected that answer. She opened her mouth. Then closed it again.

Then she sighed. “My name is Jaamini.”

Devon frowned. “What?”

She rolled her eyes. “Zha-min-ee. It’s a Hindi name.”

“Are you—”

“No. My mom is just weirdly obsessed with Indian names.”

Devon stared. “Seriously?”

Jaamini narrowed her eyes. “Look, I didn’t tell you my name so you could judge my mother’s stupid life choices, okay?”

Devon held his hands up in a position of mock surrender. “Sheesh. Calm down.”

Jaamini pulled her legs up against her chest and rested her chin between her knees.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she mumbled. She suddenly looked very tired.

Devon tilted his head slightly. “Are you...okay?”

She looked up again, the old fire back in her eyes. “Oh, absolutely,” she said, her voice thick with sarcasm. “That’s why I’m sitting on a dock in the middle of the night and contemplating the death of stars. Because I’m peachy keen.”

Devon wasn’t really sure how to respond. It had been somewhat of a dumb question.

Then he frowned. “Did you say contemplating the death of stars?”

She puffed out her cheeks and released a slow breath. “I didn’t mean to.” She looked up to the night sky. Devon followed her gaze.

They sat there like that for a few minutes, gazing at the stars, neither one wanting to move, neither one daring to speak. The night had grown a bit colder since the first time Devon had come out. He glanced over to Jaamini.

Her face was once again smooth, though there was pain in her eyes. He could see the starlight reflecting off her pupils. She opened her mouth slightly, hesitating. She seemed different somehow. More raw. More vulnerable.

She let out a sigh and closed her eyes, as if the last piece of her armour had fallen off.

“Did you know,” she said softly, “that it takes four years for the light from the nearest star, Alpha Centuari, to reach Earth?”

Devon didn’t know how to respond. Her voice suddenly sounded so broken, so feeble: a far cry from its earlier tenacity.

“No,” he whispered.

She nodded slowly. “It’s true. So it takes even longer for some of those other stars. They could have died a hundred years ago, and nobody would know.”

Devon suddenly felt very, very small.

“So sometimes, I like to come out here and look at the stars. They all seem so set, so organized, so constant.”

Devon looked up towards the sky. It was so massive, he felt like he was about to fall into it.

“But I wonder which of them are already dead.”

~~~

Devon went back to the dock. Jaamini was still there, this time wrapped up in a blanket. She looked even more tired than the last night.

“So,” she said once he had climbed over the ladder, “you never told me why you were here.”

“What do you mean?” he replied, sitting down.

She gestured broadly. “Why you’re at the beach in the middle of the school year sitting on a dock and playing guitar.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Okay, but you haven’t told me anything either.”

“Yeah, but I asked first.”

He sighed. His stomach clenched uncomfortably. This was not something he really wanted to share.

But yet, he felt an inner tug that insisted...Jaamini was someone who would understand. Someone he could trust.

He took a deep breath.

“I’m gay.”

Jaamini glanced over with a raised eyebrow. “So?”

He ran a hand through his hair, sighing. “My parents are, shall we say, very religious.”

Jaamini’s mouth formed a small “o”.

Devon nodded grimly. “So when I realized what I was, I hated myself. I thought I was a sinner. I thought I deserved to burn in Hell and all that. So...I did some things. Harmful things. I thought I didn’t deserve to be happy.”

“Intense,” Jaamini said quietly.

Devon took a deep breath. “Yeah. It got bad. Really bad. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t find joy in anything. And so one day...I decided I couldn’t do it anymore. My parents clearly didn’t want me on this Earth, God clearly hated me...so I decided to jump off a bridge.”

Jaamini didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to.

Devon looked down. His voice had remained steady, but he could feel his throat seizing up. He swallowed painfully. He wanted to finish the story, but he couldn’t find the words.

He took a deep breath. “But I was saved. I was there, on that bridge, ready to jump...but there was this boy. Tall, redhead, freckled. He started talking to me. I didn’t want to listen. But he ended up talking me out of it. Telling me that God still loved me. That my parents would still love me. That this world wasn’t so messed up after all.”

Tears formed in his eyes. He blinked rapidly.

“He convinced me that my life was worth saving.”

Devon suddenly felt a small hand on his knee. Jaamini looked up at him, understanding passing between them.

Devon smiled as the first tear began to slide down his cheek. He laughed slightly. “He’s my boyfriend now. His name is Jeremy. He’s teaching me how to play guitar.”

“Oh,” she whispered.

Devon nodded slowly, smiling wryly. “So that’s why I’m here. To get away from the world for a little while and heal. That’s what my mom says, anyways. But she doesn’t know the real reason I was on that bridge.”

For what seemed like hours, they sat there, her hand on his knee, the water moving softly underneath them, the wind rustling and the stars shining brighter than before. There wasn't a cloud in the crystalline night sky.

Devon wiped his tears away with his sleeve. Oddly, he wasn't embarrassed about crying in front of Jaamini. "Okay, your turn."

Jaamini sighed and brought her hand back to under the blanket. "I'm not sure you want to know."

"Of course I do," Devon said, frowning. "Besides, it's only fair."

She shrugged. "Your funeral. Okay, well, here goes." She took a deep breath and looked up. The stars seemed to give her strength.

"I always wanted to be an astronaut," she started.

Devon frowned, confused, but didn't say anything.

"I was obsessed with space ever since I was a little kid," she continued. "I had all the space books, knew all the random facts, had a poster of Mae Jamison on my wall. I got a telescope when I was seven years old, and I think I spent just about every night looking through that thing." She smiled slightly.

Then the smile disappeared.

She pulled the blanket a little tighter around her shoulders. "Anyway...a few months ago, I was diagnosed with stage four acute lymphocytic leukemia."

Devon didn't know what that meant, but he knew the word leukemia. His heart caught in his chest, and suddenly he felt like he couldn't breathe.

She smiled sadly. "I was only given four months to live."

The wood beneath them seemed to grow a little colder, the wind a little harsher. Devon opened his mouth slightly, but couldn't respond. Couldn't breathe.

Jaamini sighed. "So, I was in the hospital for a while, undergoing their desperate attempts to save me. But...I did my research." She paused, her brow creasing. "And every day, I sat there in that hospital bed just thinking about how this stupid disease was going to kill me. I felt like prey, just waiting to be slaughtered. Eventually, I made a decision: I wanted my life to end on my own terms."

And suddenly, Devon knew why there was so much understanding in her eyes.

Her voice was calm, almost matter-of-fact. "In the middle of the night, I ran out of the room, made my way up to the roof. I almost made it, too. I was up there on that roof, running towards the edge, barefoot with a hospital gown on, weak, in pain, crying. But then...I glanced up. And even though the world was blurry through my tears, I saw them. The stars." She glanced up. "Shining like they did every night, a whole universe out there, waiting to be explored. And I realized that... if my life ended right then, that would be the last time I ever got to see them. I collapsed to the ground. And then the nurses arrived, pulling me back to my room. I didn't even fight them."

That's when Devon saw her eyes glistening with tears. She was still staring up. She let out a slow breath.

"And I knew that I wanted to spend every last breath I had appreciating the world I was about to leave behind."

There was silence.

Jaamini wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. She turned to Devon, a touch of her old ferocity back in her voice. “So don’t you dare end your life before it’s time. You have the choice to live or die. Some of us don’t get that choice.”

Devon nodded, his throat seizing up for the second time that night. A single tear slipped from the corner of his eye.

Jaamini looked back up into the sky. “I only have one regret. I’ll never get to be an astronaut. I’ll never get to go to space and thank the stars for what they did. I can only sit here and hope that they hear me.”

Devon reached out and grabbed her frail hand. It was cold, but she interlaced her fingers with his. He saw her wet cheeks glistening in the starlight.

And they sat there, staring into the sky until the sun peeked over the horizon.

~~~

Devon stood in the doorway to his mother’s room. She was reading a book, so she hadn’t noticed his presence. He hesitated. This was harder than he had expected.

Then he knocked on the doorframe.

His mother looked up. She put the book down quickly. “Hey, baby,” she said, concern laced into her voice. “Are you okay?” She rose from her chair.

Devon took a breath. “I...I want to go to therapy.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but Devon didn’t let her. “I want to go to a psychologist, and maybe get medicine, I don’t know. There’s clearly something wrong with me, maybe it’s depression, I’m not sure, but whatever it is, I want to get help. I want to be happy again.”

He felt a weight lifted off his shoulders. He hadn't known how much he had wanted to say that until he had.

His mother's eyes filled with tears. "Devon...."

Then she ran forward and embraced him, sobbing with happiness, smoothing his hair. He closed his eyes. They would talk later about sexuality, identity, and God. But right now, he wanted to tackle this one step at a time. He was going to heal. And he knew that his parents would love him, no matter what he was. Who knows? Maybe he could even change their minds about what was a sin, and what was love.

~~~

The next night, Devon went out to the dock again. He was ready to talk to Jaamini, wanted to tell her what he had done, wanted to look at the stars with her again.

But Jaamini wasn't there.

He stayed on the dock until dawn. Sitting. Waiting. Afraid.

But she never came.

~~~

Devon heard a knock on the door. He looked up to see his mother. She was holding a letter. "This is for you," she explained. "Hand delivered by a little boy."

Devon slowly reached out and took the letter. "Thanks."

She left the room.

He turned it over. It was addressed to, “Devon, the blond boy in the blue house across the water.”

With a trembling hand, he ripped it open.

*Devon,*

*I'm pretty sure these are my last moments, and oddly enough, I realized the only person I really want to talk to— I mean, that isn't around me right now— is you. I want to remind you of all the reasons why life is the greatest gift we've ever been given, even if it's a nightmare. But look. You have people who love you, and an awesome boyfriend, and a guitar to learn how to play. You'll do alright.*

*Devon. I don't want to die. I'm afraid.*

*Maybe we'll meet again someday. I certainly hope so. But I also hope it isn't for a long, long time. You have to go on living. For me.*

*And who knows? Maybe when I'm in heaven, I'll finally get to thank the stars.*

*With all the love,*

*Jaamini*

Devon read the letter again. And again. He read it until he had memorized the words.

Then he crumpled it up in his hands and collapsed to the ground, his body shaking. He closed his eyes tightly, not wanting to believe the truth he held clenched in his hands.

Then he burst into tears.

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*Three months later*

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“I’m really proud of you.”

Devon turned to Jeremy, who smiled wryly. He looked uncomfortable in the black suit, but he had told Devon, “*If you have to wear one, I’ll suffer with you.*”

“Thanks,” Devon whispered.

Jeremy hugged him, giving him a quick peck on the cheek, subtle enough so people nearby couldn’t see. “You’re gonna kill it.” Then he stepped back.

Devon took a breath and stared at the person who meant everything to him. The only person who knew just exactly how much this moment mattered.

And then the announcer began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to introduce the young man we are honoring this evening. He is simply astounding, his musical talents even more so. I present to you, the winner of this year’s Young Composers Competition, Devon Calvaruso!”

The applause started, and Devon took a deep breath. Then he walked on stage, smiling.

He tried not to look at the audience, but instead at the announcer. She smiled brightly.

“Devon! Do you want to tell everyone a little bit about your piece before playing?”

He nodded, and she handed the microphone to him. The audience quieted down.

Devon cleared his throat.

“This piece was not easy to write. Not in the sense that the music itself is difficult, but because the person who this song is about has passed away.”

The audience was silent.

“A few months ago, I met a girl who wanted to be an astronaut. She loved space, the planets, the sun, but most of all, she loved the stars. I met her when she only had days left to live, and I didn’t realize how much I would miss her presence when she was gone. But she told me her biggest regret in leaving this world was that she would never see the stars again.

“But...I like to believe that, wherever she is now, she’s with the stars, sailing among them. As some of you may know, the word for ‘star’ in Latin is ‘astro’, and the word for ‘sailor’ is ‘nautus’. So, this song is dedicated to the girl who always wanted to be an astronaut. I present to you, ‘Star Sailor’.”

He handed the microphone back to the woman. The audience was silent. He walked to the piano and sat down.

He lifted his hands and placed them on the keys.

He picture Jaamini in his mind.

Then he took a deep breath, and began to play.

## Nowhere Man

John Lennon sang through my headphones, “He's a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody.” Raindrops pounded the slate roof tiles above mixing with the lyrics in my head, producing a wave of depression. Then the words of my father came back to me joining the painful chorus, “Son, he who runs in the heat of battle, alas was born a traitor.” He had searched my eyes as he quoted the old Albanian battle hymn, measuring how much I understood. Yet his own handsome features were troubled, betraying the very confidence he was trying to instill in me. Without another word he walked out of the door and into the darkness.

A few days passed without any news. Then a message appeared, slipped under the door, four words scrawled on a piece of paper: “captured, interrogated, tortured, killed.” I was stunned. The proxy funeral was a blur, followed by the village women wailing for seven days. The men set up a crude wooden marker in the graveyard and pronounced again and again that he was a hero, a martyr for the rebel cause. I just wanted my father.

In the months that followed life lost all purpose. The only emotion I was sure of was hatred. I hated the curfews! I hated the massacres! I hated the Serbians, every one of them!

Bam! Bam! A knock at the door pulled me back to the present. It was Edanis.

“Mirëdita Nazz!”

“Good day to you too,” I muttered.

His animated features fell a bit. “Your birthday is tomorrow man! Aren’t you gonna be 16?” he said trying to cheer me up.

“Yeah, I know.”

Without warning he punched me in the gut and laughed, “You can’t keep on acting like this! It’s been months since you’ve been out of the house. Don’t you remember the times we would sneak out of class to go buy 50 cent toasted sandwiches? Or the rock’n’roll concerts we packed with people to see our band? How about the time we got hundreds of people to sign our fake petition?”

I cracked a smile. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, I think it’s time we go on another adventure!”

“Alright,” I said hesitantly, “What do you have in mind?”

“You see this bucket of nails? Check it out.”

I took the bucket and rummaged through the nails. As I got deeper, I felt the long round cylinders and pulled one out. “Whaaat? Edanis! Where did you get these 6mm Remington cartridges? If the Serbian police catch you with these you’re as good as dead!”

“Shhh!” he looked around and whispered, “The KLA rebels are running low on ammo and I’m going to deliver this to their base in Rance.”

“You’re out of your mind! Rance is way up in the mountains. You’ll be shot before you get halfway!”

“Not if you come with me.” There was a moment of dead silence.

“Forget it Edanis. I’m not that stupid.”

“You afraid?”

“What?! Of course not. I just think it’s not... well... not a smart idea.”

He looked at me in disappointment, “Your dad was the bravest man I ever knew, and I thought that you were a lot like him. It’s your decision man.”

“My father was a senseless casualty of a lost cause! Just another nowhere man!” Guilt churned in my stomach as I let the words fly. Edanis just shook his head and walked out the door. I wanted to say something, but the words stuck in my throat.

As I closed the door, I noticed my grandma acting as if she had been sweeping the floor.

“Grandma, how’s the cleaning coming along?” I asked sarcastically.

She glared at me, “Come here and sit down, boy!”

I was startled because my grandmother rarely spoke harshly to me.

Softening, she said, “Nazz, dear grandson, do you know why your father died?”

“To die in glory and honor,” I grunted.

“No, you’re wrong. He died for you. He died so that one day you could live free from the oppression and humiliation we all endure every day.” I was silent. “You can be sure of one thing: your father never cared about glory. So, don’t you ever say that again! What’s more; he believed in you, Nazz. He believed you were destined to go somewhere.” These words came to me with the full force of a revelation, even though part of me had always known they were true. All I had ever heard was how great my father was, how brave my father was, never about what he had hoped for me.

I rose and gave Grandma a hug, “Thank you” I whispered and hurried out the door. The rain had given way to bright sunshine.

Edanis looked surprised when he saw me running after him. But then his face broadened into a teasing smile.

“I had no choice,” I said panting. “I couldn’t let a klutz like you carry a bucket of explosives around. You’d have blown yourself up before you ever got out of town.”

“Funny, at least you’re stupid enough now to come on the adventure.”

“Hand over the bucket!”

“Take it. It was getting heavy anyway.”

We both smiled as we began the winding journey up to Rance. Although I knew we could be walking to our deaths, it was the first time in months I felt fully alive. I was going somewhere. Eventually the day faded, and the road ahead turned dark. Every little sound in the woods became amplified. Suddenly we heard voices. We couldn't make them out, so we advanced stealthily. Finally, we were only a stone's throw away.

“Zašto smo ovde.” We froze in our tracks. In the shadows we made out the form of three Serbian soldiers.

“Čuješ li to!” shouted another voice and two bright searchlights turned on us, exposing us as if it was midday. They pointed their rifles as we raised our hands crying, “Don't shoot!” The soldiers sprinted forward and grabbed us. One of them, who was very tall and the soberest of the bunch, grilled us, “What are you doing sneaking up on us?” Petrified, I could not utter a word. Luckily, Edanis was quicker on his feet.

“We were not sneaking up on you, sir. We were just afraid you might be part of those rebel scum roaming these parts. Thankfully you are some of our brave soldiers.”

The soldier was not satisfied. “What's in that bucket?”

My shaky voice cracked, “Oh, it's just a bucket of nails.”

Edanis quickly added “To take to my old grandfather, for his new barn. You see, there was a terrible fire and the old barn burned down.”

The tall soldier's tight features remained unconvinced. “Gimme the bucket!” He took the pail, raked his hand through a few nails and then dropped it with such force that I braced for an

explosion. Some of the nails fell out on the ground. “Look boys, if I ever see you again, I’m gonna gut you with this knife!” We nodded our heads like little children.

“Thank you for your great kindness sir!” I bent to pick up the bucket when a shiny object on the ground caught my eye. A bullet! It would be way too risky to retrieve it, so I just grabbed the bucket and walked away with Edanis.

We had gone only a few miles when we decided to ditch the bucket of heavy nails and stuff our backpacks with the ammo. After that we picked up the pace and, after a couple hours with no sign of soldiers, we began to relax. Finally, Edanis broke the silence,

“I think we’re safe. We’re getting close to the KLA camp in Rance. If they had found the bullet, they would have caught up to us by now.”

“Yeah, I know, but that was just a little too close.”

“Come on dude, it’s the risk we take. Anyway, you should’ve seen yourself!” he laughed, “You turned as pale as a ghost!”

“Shut up!” I said smiling.

“BANG! BANG! BANG!” Three bullets whizzed by our heads.

“Run! Edanis! Run!” Everything became a dark blur of panic. Branches whacked me in the face and cut my arms and legs as we tumbled through the forest. All I could feel was numbness. All I could smell was blood. All I could see was black.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity in motion, Edanis stopped, breathing heavily, “Nazz, do you see that town up there?”

I squinted, but could see nothing. “Is it Rance?”

“No, it’s Shterpce, a Serbian town. I’ve been there before. There’s a graveyard on the outskirts where we can hide.

By the time we arrived at the graveyard, the night had passed, and the first rays of sunlight were streaking across the sky. The graveyard itself was surrounded by thousand-year-old trees and crumbling gravestones in the shape of orthodox crosses. We laid down on our stomachs peering through the tall grass among the stones. Then I saw something moving in the distance. Someone was coming up the path. Then she came into focus; it was just a girl carrying a pail of milk. I nudged Edanis. We held our breath as we waited for her to pass. Then she saw us.

“O Bože!” screamed the startled girl.

I jumped out and grabbed her, putting my hand over her mouth. Struggling fiercely, her elbow caught me in the stomach. I grunted as she broke free. We waited for the scream, but instead a slow smile broke out across her face.

“Aren’t you Nazz, from my second-grade class?” I couldn’t believe it. Albanians and Serbs had gone to school together until a few years before the war, until the problems started. She noticed that I was bloody and beat up.

“Who are you hiding from?” she whispered.

Before I could answer, a shout erupted from the edge of the graveyard, “Hey you, girl! We heard a scream. Are you OK? Have you seen any Albanian boys?” They were the same soldiers who had chased us. My heart sank. I knew they would kill us. All I could do was pray. And then the voice of an angel answered,

“No sir, there are no boys here. I’m just walking home and stumbled in a pothole.

The soldiers scolded her for being out alone and hurried on towards the town. The fear that had been smothering me began to lift. I slowly stood up and gazed into her face. She was beautiful.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“Why not? Do you think I was about to let you get killed?”

“But, I’m - I’m Albanian.” I stuttered.

“Yeah, I know.” she giggled, “But don’t you remember me? Katerina. We were friends at school. Come, let me show you where my house is. You’ll be safer there.”

As we followed her up the path, I tried to process what had just happened. I never thought a Serbian girl would save my life. I didn’t know whether to hate her or love her. Everything I believed had just been flipped upside down. A very crazy idea started to creep into the back of my mind. I looked at Edanis and saw he was also in shock.

When we arrived at her house, she introduced us to her brother Aleksander. Then she gave us some spinach burek pastries and Russian tea, and we warmed our hands by the fire. Eventually we began to exchange our stories. Aleksander told us how their parents had died leaving him to take care of his younger sister. We hesitantly confessed that we were smuggling ammo for the KLA. Surprisingly they didn’t seem to be angry. Soon Edanis was acting like his old self telling corny jokes and laughing with Aleksander. It made me miss the times when everyone used to get along before the war. But it was still too much to take in. Serbians were helping Albanians hide from Serbians!

Noticing that the wood was running low, Edanis jumped up and offered to bring in a load from the woodpile. I pulled on my boots and followed him out the back door. That’s when we saw them: two Serbian soldiers coming up the path.

“Edanis! Hurry! We’ve got to warn Katerina and Aleksander!” When I got to the door I looked back. Edanis was gone.

BAM! BAM! CRASH! The front door broke open. Just moments before, Katerina had stuffed me into a small space beneath the floorboard. There was a small crack through which I could see the commotion above.

“Who are you?” demanded the tall soldier.

“Aleksander Dragović” he replied, firmly staring back.

“We suspect you of treason! We have a report that you are hiding two Albanians here!”

“What? Do you have any proof?”

“Hah! Do we need proof? Get him!”

The other soldier attacked Aleksander with the butt of his rifle, eventually leaving him bloody and unconscious on the floor. Katerina was screaming and ran to caress his swollen face. The tall soldier pulled her away and grabbed her by the wrists.

“So, you're the mischievous girl who lied to us? You thought you got away. Well this town not only has eyes, it has tongues as well.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Katerina's voice wavered.

“Don't lie to us! Tell me where they are!”

“I t-t-told you, I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Smack!” the tall soldier slapped her face. “Are you sure now?”

I burned inside as I watched the events unfold. I wanted to jump out of hiding and beat the soldiers' faces in. If only Edanis hadn't abandoned me! Together we could have made it a fight. Instead I was helpless. Revealing myself would only endanger my friends more. The soldiers proceeded to search the house, angrily throwing chairs and tearing things up. Finally, they stood for what seemed like an eternity, right on top of me, their boots on the boards above my head. “There's nothing here. Let's go.” He spat on Aleksander's inert form and left.

Katerina rushed to nurse her brother's wounds. I waited a full ten minutes to be sure the soldiers were gone and then emerged from my hiding place. Katerina begged me to leave quickly out the back. I knew she was right, but before I could get out the door, the house was stormed again by soldiers. As the first one came through the door, terror turned to joy. The long beard and eagle emblem on the shoulder identified him at once as the rebel commander. Just behind him was someone else I knew, Edanis.

"Commander!" I saluted awkwardly.

He smiled, "How are you faring young man?"

"Not too bad sir.

Who is this pretty girl?"

"Katerina. She saved our lives." I told him.

He looked at her for a moment.

"You look familiar. Who is your father?"

"I am the daughter of Marko Dragović."

"Ahh yes, I knew him well. We were friends as kids. I'm sorry things have changed. He was a good man. You should be very proud of him."

Then he focused his gaze on me, "And who might you be?"

"I am Nazz Latifi, son of Sefa."

His eyes widened a bit, "It is an honor to meet you. We were like brothers, your father and I. You probably don't know this, but your father was captured while rescuing a 14-year-old boy who had been imprisoned by the Serbs. I'm sure he was thinking of you." He paused, listening for sounds outside, "We better get outta here!"

As we rushed out the door, I looked back one last time to see her face. She smiled faintly. Suddenly I felt horrible. She had saved my life and there wasn't even time to thank her. As we hustled down a path into the woods, I pulled even with Edanis and our eyes locked in the dim light.

“Why did you stay at their house?” he said. “That was stupid.”

“Oh yeah? Why did you come back to get me? That was even dumber!”

We both laughed and then for a long time were silent, pondering the events of the day. We felt safe with the KLA soldiers marching at our sides. Eventually one of the soldiers struck up a song. It was a familiar tune.

“Around our common flag,  
we unite with a just one goal  
and make an unbreakable vow  
to give our lives to save her.

For he who runs in the heat of battle

Alas was born a traitor.”

Author's note:

This story is fiction, but based on the events of the Kosovo war for independence in 1999. I moved to the town of Shtime just after the war and have grown up with friends who lost relatives in the fighting. Shtime is famous for the massacre of 45 Albanians by a Serbian paramilitary unit in January of 1999. There are many stories of local Serbians protecting their Albanian neighbors and vice versa. The old battle hymn is today a part of the Albanian national anthem.

## Rebel Against Time

My sense of wonder was born almost as soon as I was.

Ever since I was a little girl, I looked up at the stars every night and knew that I belonged there. I never had a telescope- they were too expensive and I had a bad habit of breaking things- but every night right after the sun went down I'd lie in the grass in my backyard and stare at the stars, trying to pick out constellations. It never really worked for me. I always ended up with the back of my t-shirt soaked through by sweat on summer nights, sulking inside, disappointed. A few times I contracted ticks. My mom hated the habit, and pleaded with me to lay on the porch- *at least*- but the light from the house was too bright there.

Many things have changed: I'm older now, poised on the precipice of adulthood; but that particular habit hasn't. Well, it has a little, in that I have the presence of mind not to lay on the grass. But every night, without fail, I go outside and I stare at the stars for as long as I can, still trying to trace the constellations in my mind. I ask myself questions that nobody can answer, like *how big is the universe? And are we alone out there? And will we ever make it out of here?* They fuel me and my sense of wonder in this world.

I learned to walk by catapulting myself off a baby swing into my dad's arms. Trouble was my accomplice throughout life. My house was unrecognizable for baby proofing, every door knob covered in white plastic to keep me from turning it, every outlet with plastic caps plugged into them, everything remotely breakable moved five feet up from ground level.

My favorite story growing up was one of the Magic Tree House books, the first one where the characters Jack and Annie go to the moon. Every time I was a passenger in a car coming home from something late, even now, I lie down and follow the moon with my eyes, imagining that it's

getting closer and that my car is taking off towards the stars. I'm always sadly stuck on Earth in the end, right where I used to be.

Tonight, the stars aren't offering me much. I'm bad at seeing constellations, but I can usually at least see Ursa Major with its telltale Big Dipper. Something's wrong tonight, but I don't care enough to think about it too hard. I go back inside early.

My mom confronts me at the back door with my progress report. I roll my eyes at the long column of Cs, but I know what she's trying to say.

"I know, Mom. Most of my teachers don't even put in the grades until the end of the quarter. It's no biggie."

My mother, a woman of few words, pushes the paper into my chest and storms upstairs with a bottle of wine in her hand. I decide to sit down and do some work- deep down, I have to admit my mother's right. I can't get into Caltech with Cs.

Statistics homework, English homework, French homework, history homework, all these things pass by in a terrific blur. I type and I write and I think, blazing through essays and research projects and worksheets. I'm looking forward to the moment when I'm finished, when I can open my bookmarks folder and finally, finally go through that article I found on black holes the other day.

I live my life for the late nights, when I am free to read, to research, and to watch. The day is too full for that kind of leisure, and school does little to ameliorate the constant need in my brain for knowledge. I've been starving for it ever since I could read. I devour the article hungrily, taking in every piece of information that I can read about black holes. Bent space-time. Infinite density. Space-time. Laws of physics breaking down. Time and space switch. Nobody knows what happens at the singularity. Nobody knows, nobody knows. Nobody knows. I need to know.

But it's physically impossible right now. No matter how much my heart yearns for that knowledge, to *know* what happens when we die, to *know* how big space is, to *know* what happens at the singularity. My mind buzzes, full of racecars speeding along a track, going in circles faster and faster and faster. I can't focus, I can't do much of anything, and I can't sleep because my mind is racing so fast. I stare at the ceiling for three hours, my thoughts all jumbled up in knots that are unintelligible.

I fall asleep when the race cars slow down to 100 miles per hour, just slow enough not to crash into the walls or anything else.

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The morning brings an empty mind, quickly filled with the obligations of the day. A Stat test, an oral presentation in English, and a set of questions for French that's still unfinished. I need more hours in the day...

I need more brain capacity...

I need more... more.... more...

My body feels heavy as I drag it out of bed and stumble across the myriad pillows scattered across my floor. I slam my hand against the light switch and light fills the room, temporarily blinding me. I grab a set of clothes out of my closet at random. The door creaks as it opens and I cross the hallway to my bathroom and flip that light on too. Concealer goes on under tired eyes that still aren't clear, then I take my glasses off and shove contacts haphazardly into my eyes, letting them water up but ignoring the pain, ignoring the pain. I pull some clothes on and sigh, running my hands through my hair in a pathetic attempt to brush it.

It's 6:45. I need to leave. My keys, where are my keys? I look around my room- no. My bathroom- bad luck. The kitchen? Still no. At 6:55 I finally find them in the refrigerator on top of

my lunchbox. They were put there so I wouldn't forget my lunch. I'm late now. As I'm walking out to my car, I take a second of time that I don't have to search out a star again. Polaris, the North Star, and he's right there in front of me. Sailors used to use Polaris to know which way they were going, and I guess in a way I'm doing the same thing. I think people have a lot of Polaris (Polarii?) in their lives, little spots of light that appear in the cloudy sky at 3 in the morning and reassure you.

To me it's saying yes. Yes, I see you there, you little tiny human, only five feet tall, living in a thirty square mile radius of the place you were born. I see you, and I am a million miles across, and you still matter. You see me every day and I see you there on that tiny little rock orbiting that small star. You're doing everything just fine.

That's what I tell myself when I make mistakes. That's what I tell myself when I'm late or when I forget something or when I break a promise. That's what I tell myself on those days when the cars on my racetrack are crashing into each other in a never-ending cycle of fire and screaming and explosions. I tell myself that my little brain that barely weighs three pounds doesn't even begin to pull focus in the scope of the entire universe. The stuff that's wrong with my little three pound thinking muscle is so tiny and so insignificant that it's become easy, after all this time, to separate myself from it.

7:00. I'm really late now. The idea of just skipping and going back to bed crosses my mind, but the alarm bells going off in my head intensify. No. That is a Bad Idea, my brain says. I agree and surrender, but it's mostly because I don't feel like putting up much of a fight. My brain can get nasty when I don't do what it wants.

It should only take me twenty minutes to get to school, but I account exactly five minutes for missing a turn on the road and five more for skipping the exit on the highway. The radio needs

to be off while I'm driving, it turns those five-minute periods into ten minutes, twenty, and thirty. I'm terrified to death of what happens if I forget where I'm going entirely.

I get to school, but I'm pulling into my parking space right as the late bell rings. I'm really not starting this day out on the right foot. I keep my head down to ignore the judgmental stares of the teachers on patrol, knowing they can't do anything. I contemplate not going to class, again, but ultimately decide against it, again. The school would call my parents, probably still will call my parents, and I'd get in trouble. This is far from my first tardy in this class, though, and my teacher has to be getting sick of me constantly coming in late.

I walk in the classroom, attracting the stares of everybody in the class and halting my teacher's lecture in its tracks. I duck my head and take my usual seat in the back. My teacher stares at me for a few moments, her eyes boring into my soul. She's asking me the same question she asks every day, "Why?" I don't know why. I wish I did, and if I did I guarantee I'd never be late again. I try to make that promise, but I've broken it too many times for her to believe me. She looks away and continues to teach. I take my notebook out of my backpack slowly. The class turns back to the front.

This class is Statistics but I take out the astronomy book that I keep in my backpack, its corners folded over and its pages marked up time and again. The book falls open on a graphic on the life cycle of stars. I run my frozen fingers over the printed graph. It's got pencil marks littered all around it. Rereading this, the beautiful dance from nebula to star to red giant to red dwarf to white dwarf, it calms me. It puts my universe in order when nothing else can. I sit back in my seat and close my eyes, projecting myself up into the stars so that I can leave the mundanity of this classroom and this life.

I'm jolted awake by the girl next to me elbowing me right in the side.

“What?” I demand, a little too defensively.

She shrinks back. “Um... pass these...” She hands me a thick stack of paper. Some kind of assignment. I look at the paper, and it’s a quiz. I slap the stack down, hard, on Jeremy’s desk to wake him up. He startles awake and gifts me a blinding smile before taking in the quiz on his desk. He groans and I laugh. We laugh together until the teacher and the girl next to me both glare. I cover my mouth with my hand. Jeremy’s mouth is forcibly flat, but his eyes are dancing.

I probably fail the quiz. I don’t know a single thing that’s on it. That’s the consequence of never paying attention in class. But how can I pay attention when the boy with the stars for eyes sits next to me? When he talks to me, takes my mind off everything, lightly touches my hand every so often with a serious face? And how can I care about Statistics, a mundane science, when there are spectacles in the universe to be wondered at? When there are unsolvable mysteries out there in the real world, no hypothetical coin flip or die roll required?

I’m thoroughly exhausted when I get home. I fix a snack and I settle down at the kitchen table to read some more. I breach a new chapter in my beloved astronomy book, one on neutron stars. I’m enraptured for the rest of the afternoon, annotating diagrams so I understand and underlining formulas to memorize later, so when my race cars are going again I can stare at the numbers and letters and put everything into its place. My brain works that way, like a circuit. I work piecewise on it, when I lose control, stating facts from simple to complicated, stating my name and age, and then my test scores and GPA, and then my formulas that I don’t yet understand. I read too quickly for my mind to comprehend everything as I go, because I’m so desperate for the knowledge. It will save me.

I look up from the book and it’s eight o’clock and something inside me is breaking, begging me to leave. I need to get out of here, I need to run away, I need to escape. This house feels like

it's choking me and I can almost feel the chains snaking their way around my ankles to chain me here forever.

I call Jeremy, because he told me to call him when I felt like this. I dial his number, still unfamiliar to my fingers, and lift the phone to my ear. My mother will be at work for four more hours. Monday nights she draws the short straw and works the late shift. She won't check up on me when she gets home, more likely she'll just pass out. That's what I would do, and an old friend once told me that my mother and I were two peas in a pod.

"Hello?"

I'd already forgotten I was calling Jeremy.

"Hey, Jeremy. I-" I falter, dropping the rest of the sentence.

"Say no more, Grace. I'll be at your house in five." He hangs up.

I'm so lucky to have a person like that, who can read my silences as easily as a book. Most people don't even try. They see my silences as walls and my forgetfulness as a sign that I don't care, but Jeremy knows me. He's already pulled up to my house in his weird green pickup truck by the time I've gotten to the front porch, and is getting out to come greet me.

He hugs me, placing a gentle kiss on my forehead. I bury my face into his chest and he rubs my back. I didn't realize how broken I was until he got here, wonderfully whole. I still haven't unlocked that particular secret. I begin to sob right into his hoodie and he wraps his arms around me even tighter.

"There, there, Gracie. It's all gonna be okay. C'mere."

We stand like that for a few minutes in silence underneath the stars. Then, he picks me up and swings me over his shoulder, and I stifle a gasp. I'm laughing loudly by the time he gets me

to his truck and plops me down on the passenger seat. He jumps up into the trunk, then out, crossing over to the driver's side. Then he starts the car up and rolls both of our windows down.

And then, we *fly*.

Time stops as we soar through my neighborhood and out onto the highway, encountering no traffic along the way. The place I live is dead but I've become alive, we're alive together. I stick my hand out of my window and feel the wind until it's too much and the force of it is whipping my wrist back and slapping my hair into my face until I can't see. I whoop into the darkness, with Jeremy laughing and pushing at my shoulder and shushing me like he doesn't really mean it.

The stars are brighter than I've ever seen them before and I'm finally, finally free.

\*\*\*

We go to the lake, because of course we do, where else would we go? The stars are the brightest and the clearest here. Once we're parked, Jeremy fluffs out blankets and pillows and makes his truck's bed into a makeshift nest that I crawl gratefully into. I see the fireflies around us, twinkling as bright as stars themselves, and I smell summer's last breaths in the late September air. Jeremy leans his head against mine and I can stop for a second.

I count every breath, I feel his head against mine and I can feel him breathe too, if I concentrate hard enough. I lace my fingers into his and use him to anchor myself, steadying our pulses together by the wrist. The last time I felt calm like this was years ago, maybe even a decade. I breathe in, and then I breathe out. It's nine pm and I'm holding hands with a boy in a truck bed and I'm breathing and I'm finally me again, whoever that is.

I look at the stars and I'm filled with a familiar wonder, but none of the sickening desperation. None of the obsession, none of the compulsive studying or counting or tapping. None of my thoughts threaten to tear me apart, they simply float through my mind, not disturbing me,

but simply existing. One taste of how it feels to be normal, and I'm hooked on it. Projecting my energy outwards instead of constantly in, in, in... it feels so nice.

I smile, my cheeks pushing out against Jeremy's. He grins back and turns to kiss me, just once, short and sweet. I'm smiling even harder now, and I feel this utter sensation of letting go. Of relinquishing control of the muscles in my face that want to smile bigger and live longer. Of not regarding consequences or attached strings or hidden messages just for one moment. Of living in the present, for one minute, of enjoying the world around me to the fullest extent. It's like a bubble of calm and happiness, two things so rare for me, and I want to live in it forever.

We stay there in silence for a while, but then Jeremy breaks it.

"Amaaaaaazing graaaaaaace, how sweeeeeeeet the souuuuuuund" he screeches, off key and off pitch and off rhythm. I shriek with laughter and bury my head in his shoulder. It doesn't deter him. He continues.

"That saaaaaaved a wretch like meeeeeeeee"

We're both nearly in hysterics.

"I oooooooooonce was loooost but-"

He cuts himself off, because he's too busy laughing. I don't know how long we're there, trembling with laughter, practically howling with mirth, happy tears rolling down our cheeks.

Once he calms down, marginally, he chokes out between laughs, "Amazing Grace. Get it? Because you're Grace and you're amazing."

More laughter, but I'm too busy thinking again. I laugh a few times, because the joke *is* funny, but then, before I can help it, the moment dies. Jeremy notices I'm not laughing and turns to me.

"Hey, Grace, I didn't mean-"

I cut him off. “No, it’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong, I’m just being dumb again.”

And the best, most valuable thing about Jeremy is that he doesn’t try to argue what I said. I know calling myself dumb isn’t right. It’s not healthy. Jeremy has too much experience with this exact same thing to make things worse for me by arguing it. But he’s whole now, and I’m still broken.

He wraps an arm around me and leans in, but I stiffen up and he lets go, giving me space. I want him but I also need the space, and most of all I just want to get out of my own head. But that’s the one thing I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do.

And just like that, the bubble pops, and I’m back to reality.

We start the long drive home, and with every mile closer to my house I can feel the race cars picking up speed. The thoughts don’t float by anymore, they stick to the walls of my brain like they’re made of glue and they don’t go away, they just pile on top of each other. Jeremy kisses me again when he drops me back off, but I barely notice.

I wipe a tear from my eye and lock myself in my room, burying myself in a map of the northern circumpolar constellations. Everything’s gonna be ok, I tell myself, not believing a word of it. Some number of hours later, I finally doze off, still under the map.

\*\*\*

I wake up too early and too empty. I operate on autopilot, raising myself out of bed, shuffling across my bedroom to flip the light on. My hair is annoying me the way it’s brushing my face and my neck, so I pull it up into a bun. I don’t get all my hair in it so I try again. It’s lopsided so I try again. It’s too high so I try again. It’s messy so I try again. Now it’s passable, neat and lined up straight with my part. I do it one more time to make sure I’ll be able to do it again.

I chew on a spoonful of raisin bran. I can almost enjoy how it loses flavor the longer I chew on it, how it becomes less and less recognizable. Raisin bran isn't really a particularly noticeable food, though, I think to myself. A good point. I chew on the spoonful a couple more times and then I swallow it. I scoop up another spoonful and chew on that one for a while. The refrigerator starts to emit a low hum, similar to the one it emits when we're getting filtered water from it, but not quite as loud.

Thinking about the past is painful, because I miss it so bad that it almost hurts. Thinking about the future won't do, either, because it holds too many questions that need to be answered and I'm too tired. I don't think about either, I put up walls to shield myself from them. When I get to school, ten minutes late, my face is like a mask. Or maybe a suit of armor, I don't know. I don't know if I'm protecting myself from the world or protecting the world from myself. I think it's probably a little bit of both.

My mom comes out of her room, the circles deep and purple under her eyes. She grunts at me as she pours her own bowl of raisin bran, then sits down heavily in the chair across from mine.

"Late night?" I ask, teasing. Her face clears.

"Ha. No, just a lot of work to be done by midnight. You know how authors get, when their books aren't edited quickly..."

I nod. I've heard so many stories about the snobbish authors that my mother reviles and reveres in equal measure.

"Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em." I laugh.

She laughs as well, then her face turns serious.

"I don't see much of you anymore, Gracie." she says. "How's everything been?"

"It's been... bad," I decide to say, being honest with her for once. "I can't seem to get out of my own head. Ever."

My mom makes a sympathetic face, but I know as she digs back into her raisin bran and spouts some crap about positive thinking that she doesn't understand. I'm glad she doesn't have to, but all the same, it does little to help me feel less abandoned.

I see Jeremy in the hall after first period, French, and I work up all my energy to smile, because he deserves that much. He smiles back at me blindingly, like I'm somehow good for him, like he wants to see me. His smile is beautiful, and if I were another person, I would've told him that. People probably do tell him that. That smile, that damn smile, it crumbles my walls and everything comes flooding in. He's probably slipping out of my fingers, being pulled by another girl who tries less and cares more, a girl who would have the energy to spend time with him, a girl who would be good for him and would deserve those radiant smiles. To love me, I think, is an awfully dangerous thing. It's understandable why not that many people try it.

I fix my eyes on the ground in front of me and I practically run to class. My second period is Astronomy, and I think, amazing. This is exactly what I need. When my walls fall down, I need something to bury myself in. This is perfect. I start to understand why they use the term "head in the clouds" to describe someone who's distracted. More appropriate for me, though, would be "head in the stars".

We study moon phases today. Each student gets a diagram to fill in with sixteen circles in two concentric circles surrounding the earth, some of them between the earth and the sun. On the inner circle, we're supposed to fill in the phases of what the moon looks like from earth. On the outer circle, we're supposed to show the actual pattern of light on the moon as if we were watching

it from afar. It's easy, and I do it in five minutes while the teacher's still explaining to a kid in the front row why the light pattern never changes on the outer circle. I take out my book again.

In the back, sandwiched between the glossary and the index, is a small Q&A section about black holes. I turn to it now. It was the root of my fascination, something my small, sick brain latched on to when everything else shrunk away. It's there to comfort me now, and I read it again even though I have it memorized. I get lost in the familiar routine of bewilderment.

It says that inside a black hole, the singularity is so extreme that all the laws of physics break down. It took me a while to wrap my head around that one. What's the point of the universe if things don't behave how they're supposed to? If the variable for time switches places with the variable for space, how do we know if it's real? Ordinarily, time marches steadily forward at a constant rate and we are free to go wherever in space. In a black hole, somehow, wonderfully, that switches. Once you fall in a black hole, your travel through space becomes a constant march deeper into the black hole, towards certain death, but time can be delayed or even stopped, based on how much you struggle. I can't even try to understand it, but I know how it feels when time stops. It did for me, once, twice, maybe even a hundred times. But now it's charging full speed ahead, and I can't help but be caught up in it.

Unless you're in a black hole, there's no way to rebel against time.

*nitimur in vetitum*  
—we strive for the forbidden

You're perched on the arm of your chair when I stumble into the flat— arms laden with groceries. Not a glance is spared in my direction. You're too immersed in the flickering in the fireplace. Must not have heard me then—hardly the first time this has happened. I switch on the lights and try to make my presence as loud as I can. It must work because when I turn, you're staring at me with that fond grin of yours.

“Didn't think you'd be home so early.”

“Shift ended about an hour ago. Figured I'd pick up something on the way back.”

You walk up to greet me properly now with your lips pressing firmly against mine. I want to thread my fingers further into your long curls, but I stop myself. There'll be time for that later. It's hardly the first time we've kissed, and, hopefully, far from the last. Still, the effect is the same. We work in unison to prepare dinner—arms occasionally brushing, wordlessly passing utensils. It's the type of mutual understanding crafted from years together. Soon enough, our worn bowls, wedding presents from some cousin of mine, rest on the table, steaming with the split contents of a Campbell's soup can. It's been hours since I've eaten, but you sip at your spoon as gracefully as the Queen would her tea.

“Bela Parker, one of the nurse practitioners, wanted to know if you were going to come to the party on Saturday,” I mention.

“What'd you tell her?”

“That I'm sure you'd love to go if only I could manage to tear you away from that boss of yours.”

“John—”

“I know, I know. Your work is important, and McCormick just wants the case done, and this guy arrested.” I’ve heard it all a thousand times before.

“I think we’ve got a lead.”

“Anything you can tell me about?”

“Maybe once we’re done investigating it.”

I nod, standing up to clean our bowls in the sink. You begin going through a pile of pages that I hadn’t noticed on the coffee table. I don’t try to see what they are, nor do I try to start another conversation. It’s one of those nights. It’s safer sometimes, you say, the less I know. You leave space for me to sit on the couch, having abandoned your armchair. I pick up the book you had gotten me for Christmas, *House of Leaves*, and fit in beside you like a puzzle piece. We read in a comfortable silence.

“Come on, it’s nearly eleven,” I say, shaking you out of your stupor.

You sleep half on top of me that night. I don’t ask why. Your ear presses hard against my chest right above the heart. I fall asleep easily despite you being too warm to the touch, but your restlessness wakes me throughout the night.

“What’s up, dove?” I mumble. The clock blinks 4:37.

“Just work stuff. Go back to sleep,” you say softly, tracing patterns on my chest.

You’re watching me carefully when the alarm goes off. I don’t think you slept. I blink away the sleep from my eyes. Today’s routine is the same as any other day. Your shoulders relax as whatever had been troubling you last night fades away. I brew the coffee—a dash of milk and lots of sugar in your mug. Steam pours out of the bathroom when you open the door, dressed in your uniform. You cling to your coffee as if it’s the elixir of life as I get ready for work. I make eggs while you inspect your search warrants again. You only take a few bites.

We walk together in the cold November mist, hands clutched, till we reach the split in our routes.

“John—”

You stop. Your eyes scan my face for an answer that I’m not sure I can give you. Your lips brush against mine—hardly a kiss. It means something, I know, but whatever it is is lost in translation.

“Be careful for me,” you whisper. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Promise you’ll be careful?”

I nod. “Are you sure there’s nothing wrong?”

“It’s just this case. I’m sure it’s nothing.” You bite your lip uncertainly. I pull you into a hug. People shove past us as we block the flow of traffic on the sidewalk. I don’t care.

“We can talk about it at home.”

“Yeah, okay.”

I let go of you so we can go our separate ways. I don’t look back.

The hospital is teeming with energy when I arrive. There’s no time to stop—no time to breathe. It’s just one operation followed by another. It’s midafternoon by the time I hear from you:

Messages now

**Evelyn Levingston**

Lead is a hit. Be safe. Love you.

“Dr. Levingston! We’re ready for you,” Bela calls, stepping out of the operating room.

I pocket my phone and smile. You know what my answer would be anyway.

“Was that the missus?” she asks.

“Yeah, it’s nothing.” I shrug. “Let’s finish this up.”

The surgery takes two hours. Even the plastic chairs in the hall look like a comfortable place to doze off. I turn on my phone to find six missed calls from James McCormick. My fingers shake as I press call. The dial only rings once.

“John, where have you been?”

“In surgery. What happened?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ! Holy shit!”

A faint groan could be heard in the background.

“What’s that?”

“Oh God, John. Evelyn got him, but—”

My phone clatters onto the ground. I can hear shouts and sirens through the speaker, but they’re too far away to make out. In the hall, people run past, wheeling stretchers and shouting in codes I don’t understand. I am still.

At some point, the cacophonous noise becomes an itch under my skin. No matter how hard I try to scratch it, it won’t go away. I want to snap at the innocent nurses at the end of the hall to tell me where you are. I want to run and run, never stopping until I find you. I want to hold you and protect you from every harm, but I can do nothing. There’s no sign of your presence in the hospital. You must have just gone home. No one calls me in for another case, and no one tries to stop me as I leave.

The sky is an inky black when I step out onto the streets. If I squint, I can almost pretend to see the stars. It’s been night for far longer than I had thought, but I don’t recall the hours passing. I cling to the hope of seeing you safe as I hasten to get home. You are. The jumping

flames illuminate your pale skin. From here, I can't see any signs of injury.

"Evelyn." I'm standing in the doorway. You look up. "I heard—on the phone—"

"Stunned. That's all." You shake your head. "Head wounds always look worse than they are, but look, you can't even see it now." You pull your hair to the side, and I walk closer to inspect the wound. A few stitches hold it together, but it's as you said. "A little concussed. They've put me on leave to 'recover'." You scowl.

"You can't work with a concussion. You know that."

"They need me!"

"You'll go back when you're ready. I can call in some time off in the morning. They'll understand. Just, come here for a sec."

I pull you into a long hug and bury my nose into your dark hair. Everything in the flat smells like you and that perfume you wear. I don't know what I'd do without it. Your hair is damp with tears when I let you go.

"Why didn't you let me know you were okay?"

"You shouldn't have been worried. I told you I'd come home."

I nod, and you lean up to press your lips against mine. Something feels different. You pull away easily and return to watching the fire. Maybe it was just in my head. I want to capture this moment on film—just to remember in case something does happen. You'd find it weird, I know, so I don't ask. I feel lost for a moment, drowning in something I can't imagine.

"I'm going to heat up some pizza. Want some?"

"No." You don't look up. "I'm not really hungry."

I leave it for now. You've probably done enough arguing today. I eat alone in the kitchen, but I keep a watchful eye on you. I can't help but distrust your reassurances. You're usually

much more talkative after a case, explaining everything in painstaking detail. You're quiet now.

You're freezing when I settle in next to you on the couch, but you're not shaking. Maybe the concussion caused your body temperature to change? I wrap a soft blanket around you just in case, and I can see your faint smile. Your head lolls onto my shoulder like you're too exhausted to keep it up any longer. It's been such a long day.

"Come on, let's go to bed." I nudge your head a little bit and coax you to stand up. You are so compliant to my directions. That concussion must be worse than you let on.

I fall asleep with you on top of me. You're so light that it hardly feels like anything and so cold that I have to draw a blanket over the two of us, but you're okay. You're fine. You're alive, and that's all that matters. You cling to me as you drift off to sleep. Something must have changed to make you freer with your affection. I don't mind.

You aren't there when I awake. Fear races through me, but you're sitting, prim and properly dressed, on your armchair, staring out the window. The corners are fogged, but you can still see the passersby on the sidewalk below. I don't know why you're ready for the day this early in the morning when you don't have work, but then again, you've always liked mornings. I start the coffee, make use of the warm water in the shower, and call in for some leave. I put the coffee in our usual mugs.

"I'm meeting up with my sister," you say. You're already halfway out the door. "Do you think you could pick some stuff up at the department? Love you!"

"Love you too," I say, curling my fingers around your mug to hand it to you. "Why so early?" But you're already gone. I slowly sip my drink. Yours goes cold. I dump it into the sink.

It feels so odd not walking to the hospital. My entire routine has been so entirely thrown off that I almost make a wrong turn on my way to the department. A staff member sees me and

opens the door. I take the stairs two at a time to get to the third floor. I've done this so many times that it feels natural, but hardly ever without you. McCormick's door is shut, and the blinds are closed. It feels so empty being here without you.

"James is in there if you're looking for him," Kathleen Bramen says. I recognize her from one of the many holiday parties the department throws. "Look, John, I'm really sorry about Evelyn. If you ever need anything, we're all here."

"I appreciate it." I say awkwardly and knock on McCormick's door.

"Come in," a grated voice says from inside, so I do.

McCormick looks like shit to put it lightly. Everything looks ruffled, particularly his suit. His face is swollen red, especially the tip of his nose, and his eyes glisten with tears in the little light that's allowed in. My nose scrunches in disgust at the revolting smell. His teeth clench as if he were attempting to hold back a sob or vomit. It's hard to tell which. His hands grip his temples.

"God, McCormick, have you been drinking?" I don't really need to ask.

"John!" he gasps. The sob wins out. I wait for him to calm down and hand him a tissue. "I'm so sorry about Evelyn. It was all my fault."

"Hey, hey, you can't blame yourself about this," I say sitting down on one of the two chairs in front of the desk. "You've known Evelyn almost as long as I have. Do you really think that anything you could have done could have stopped this?"

"I don't—" McCormick stops and takes a moment to collect himself. "I'm sorry. I know how hard this must be for you. I didn't expect to see you over here so soon. I was going to send over her stuff in a bit."

"No, it's alright. You know she wouldn't like people touching her stuff."

“Yeah, well, I had Kathleen box it up anyway. It shouldn’t be too much to carry over. We can get you a taxi from here.”

“Thanks, that’d be helpful.”

“Anything else you need?”

“No, just wanted to get her things. I’m taking some time off from work to deal with this whole thing.”

“Yeah, I would expect you too.”

“You can still call me to consult, you know. I’ll have some extra time for the next few weeks. I know that Evelyn can’t help anymore, but I know her better than anyone. Maybe I could help?”

“Maybe. That’d be great. We’ll give you a call if we need you.”

“Thank you. Might give me something to do in my time off.”

McCormick laughs, but there’s no humor to it. I turn to leave, but he holds up his hand to stop me.

“Hey, John, just wanted to say. If you ever need anything, just give me a call, okay? It doesn’t always have to be work related.”

“Same goes for you.”

The day is still young when I drop your things off. I could stay home, but I don’t want to stay here any longer without you. It’s cloudy but not raining yet. I make my way to the small little coffee shop on the corner that you and I frequent. Mrs. Henderson, the old woman who runs it, is often forgetful, but she has such a fondness for you. She doesn’t smile when I enter.

“John.” Her wrinkled hands shake. “Oh my dear child, Evelyn’s sister told me what happened.”

“Yeah,” I take her hand if only to still it. “I’ve decided to take some time off work.”

“I know, dear, I know. It’s hard.” Mrs. Henderson nods. She goes to the back and returns with my normal order along with a small tray of pastries. “Here, these are on the house.”

“Thank you.”

The people on the streets start running for shelter from the rain that begins to fall while I drink my coffee. The sky is still crying when I manage to pull myself out of the coffee shop. The drops chill me to my bones, so I use my jacket for protection. When I get to our apartment, it's not warm like I'd hoped. I shiver.

It hits me all at once, and I am stunned. The apartment is dark. You haven't been back yet, but something's different. A blunt force knocks me to the ground. Everything hurts. I try to gasp, but cold, dead hands wrap themselves around my neck. There's a clog in my throat. I can't shout. I lash out and try to open my eyes. The walls close in. I groan when the grip loosens, but it returns more strongly than ever. The walls start to bulge from the force of whatever's behind them. I can see hands, heads, legs, even, trying to break free from the weak container as if they wanted to take me with them. The walls crush my body. I cry out in pain as the pressure grows. My ribs crack. My eyes sting.

“John?”

Your hand is on my shoulder. I open my eyes once more. The pressure is gone, and the walls are in the same place they always were. I gulp in oxygen. I want to ask if you'd seen the assailant, but you're staring quizzically at me.

“Why are you on the ground?”

I scramble to stand. My muscles groan. I run from the entranceway, from those confining walls. You still look concerned.

“Didn’t you see him? He must have passed you!” I check the latches on the windows, but they’re still stiffly locked.

“What are you talking about? Who is he?”

“I was attacked! Didn’t you see?” I feel lightheaded.

You put your hands on my shoulders and force me to sit down on the couch. You count slowly to help me breathe. I didn’t realize I was hyperventilating. I rest my head in my hands and try to focus.

“I found you on the floor. There was no one here. There was no one outside either.”

“But—”

“Nothing happened.”

You’re quiet that night. I must have scared you. You shake your head when I try to hand you some dinner. I turn on the television just for some noise. I must have crossed a line somehow with that episode. You’re right. Nothing happened. Regardless I double-check the locks before we retire to our room.

“Why’d you have to go?”

“Why? Are you feeling jealous?” You give me a teasing smile.

“No,” I sigh. “Can’t stand the thought of losing you.”

“Michelle wanted to meet. Had to take care of some arrangements. Family stuff, you know?”

“Yeah. Got your stuff from McCormick. He’s kind of a mess without you. They’re going to let me come in and consult. Maybe you should come along.”

Only a few days pass before I get a call from McCormick. It’s the first time I’ve had to leave the flat since. You’re dressed and ready to go by the time the coffee is finished, and you’re

already waiting impatiently by the door by the time I get changed. You've hardly had a week on leave, and you're already antsy.

"Don't waste time."

I nod and dump the coffee I had made for you into the sink. As always, it now seems. I hesitate when we get to the scene. You haven't been officially cleared for duty. There's got to be some heavy legal consequences to this.

"If you make it look like I'm supposed to be here, people will believe you," you say as if you can read my thoughts.

The officers lift the tape without pausing as we approach. The body is lying on the ground, contorted into an unnatural position and beaten beyond recognition. It should be sickening to look at, but I don't feel anything.

"What do you make of it?" McCormick asks.

I pull on gloves and start to examine it more closely.

"Time of death approximately 9:30 am," I say.

"There'd be a lot more blood if it happened here," you say, "and look at the cuts and bruises—they'd be different if they were done while he was alive."

"Yeah, that's a good point," I say quietly. It's disconcerting how open the eyes are. I want to run from them, or at least close them.

"Say something, John?" McCormick asks.

"Wasn't killed here. Look at the bruises," I explain. I sit back on my heels. "Cause of death was something else."

"Look at the neck," you say.

Two pinpricks, nearly invisible—one on each pressure point, and it feels different than

the rest of the body.

“Check the body for toxins,” I say. “My guess would be poison.”

“I’ll call in forensics,” McCormick says. “That should be all we need. Thanks for coming in. Before you go, are you doing alright?”

“As much as I can be.” He nods. I grip your hand tightly as we leave. I can almost picture you looking like that. I shake my head, chasing away the image and squeezing your hand harder. It doesn’t help.

“Do you want to go back?” I ask that night. I thread my fingers through your soft tresses. As much as you loved your job, I don’t think we’ve ever been happier. At least now, I know that you’re safe here.

“I don’t think so,” you say with a sigh. “What’s the point? I can just go with you.”

Something’s changed when I come home from the grocery store. You welcome me with an embrace, but you feel colder than ever. Something about your smile is off. I press my lips against yours. Your smile doesn’t change—as if you were a photograph. I bite my lip uneasily. The walls start to reach out again.

“John.” Your voice is muffled. I’m forced to focus on you again, and the walls return to normal. “You were gone for so long. I missed you.”

“I was at the store, dove,” I say. “How are you feeling?”

“It’s just a cold or something. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

You reject dinner in favor of kisses. I would too, but I haven’t eaten since a piece of toast for breakfast. I can’t focus on anything—not my food, not my book, not even you. I just stare at the fire while you rest against me. There’s no heat. We shiver. I pull the blanket over us. You’re so cold. Your curls feel limp against my fingertips. You smile at me again, but it just

feels so wrong. It's all I can do to have my head rest against yours. I'm so tired, but all I do is stare at the ceiling as we try to sleep. Something is missing. I just feel empty.

It's early afternoon when I get a text from an old friend of mine asking to meet. You're lying on the sofa, but that terrible rasp of yours still hasn't gone away. I've given up by now trying to convince you to take something. You'll be fine on your own for a few hours, right?

"John, where are you going? Why are you leaving?"

"I thought I'd meet up with Will tonight, from school?"

"You're leaving? I thought you wanted to be with me?" Your eyes begin to brim with tears.

"I'll be back, promise." I kiss your forehead. I'm afraid I might not be able to leave if I look back.

You're waiting awake in bed, looking paler than ever, when I get home. I didn't expect you to wait up. You stare at me as I ready for bed, but you don't say anything. The wall starts to close in. I wait for you to say something, anything. You don't. Is this some sort of punishment? I want to shout, to scream, anything to get a reaction out of you. You do nothing.

"Will's doing fine. Hope you had fun here," I say for want of noise.

You open and close your mouth, but there's no noise. It's a hellish tease.

"Damn it, just say something already!" I shout. I regret it as soon as I do. You try to speak again, but tense in frustration when you can't make sound. You've lost your voice while I was gone. Your sapphire eyes have faded into a dull gray. It's startling how a simple sickness can reduce you. I crawl into bed, but you retreat to the other side. Hands reach out to me as I fall asleep, but I'm too exhausted to care.

We grow accustomed to communicating silently. My life is reduced to quiet days with

you, but I feel no urge to leave. Sometimes it feels like you might just vanish. You physically wither away before me, yet you still resist anything I bring you. It's a simple routine by this point. I wake up, make coffee, get dressed, dump out your coffee, read, make dinner, throw away yours, watch the fire, go to bed, and repeat. It's maddening, but I can't lose you.

It's Tuesday when I snap. I put the plate down and wait for you to pick up the fork. You stare down at it then look back at me. There's nothing. What happened to that lively woman I married—the girl who talked for hours and thought faster than anyone could hope to keep up?

“Eat.”

Can you even hear me anymore? Has this sickness taken that away from you too? It starts to rain hard—so hard the ceiling disintegrates like paper. There's water everywhere. It's drenching the furniture, flooding the floors, soaking through our clothes. The walls pulse eagerly. You look at me with that awful nothingness behind your eyes.

“Why can't you just eat for Christ's sake?”

The wind shatters the window panes. It roars in my ears. However limp your hair was, it's nothing compared to how it wilts now. With the rain, mottled bruises bloom in bright hues all over the ever-paling canvass of your skin. I can only watch in horror. You stare, empty, with that horrid smile etched upon your face. I hold you, merely so I don't have to see it. We wait, huddled together, until the rain stops. When I pull away, my hand is covered in crimson. I can't fall asleep that night.

“I'm afraid,” I admit in the silence.

It's startling when morning comes. The routine repeats as if yesterday didn't happen, but water pools in the carpet when I step. Your skin is pruned and cold like you've been submerged. The bruises and cuts are as vibrant as they were yesterday. I can't look at you anymore. I start

wandering the city if only to avoid seeing you so damaged.

It's later than usual when I stumble home that night. It's not like I would have missed anything if I were home. You're standing with your arms crossed by the window. I feel the strongest urge to laugh, but now is hardly the time.

"Hey."

You don't respond. The clock ticks louder and louder. You walk towards me carefully, and then you're in front of me. You stare at me, and I'm forced to look at the destruction wrought upon your body. The room darkens, and the walls throb around us. I want to run, to hide. Then, you smile, and it's that sickening smile that you've had for days now. I break.

My fist comes down on those delicate glass cheekbones of yours before I realize what I'm doing. A piercing screech fills my ears. The sound didn't come from you. It's the sound of millions of souls in eternal damnation breaking free from the walls. They crash into a pile of dust and rubble, exposing the city. I must have broken the bone because all your features have moved and twisted somehow, bending around the source of impact. The same red that coated your hair begins to blossom on your shirt. You smile. I throw up on my shoes.

"God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I fall to my knees before you, ogripping your swollen ankles, but nothing changes. Tears blur my vision.

It's a Thursday when your sister comes to visit. We haven't had visitors in a while. It's odd how similar the two of you look. I clear some of the debris off a chair for her.

"Astrid, what can I do for you?"

"Just wanted to see how you were doing. Haven't seen you much in the last few weeks."

"Yeah, well, you and Evelyn have been working on something."

She frowns. It deepens when she sees the three cups of coffee I'm preparing.

“Who are those for?”

“You, Evelyn, and I, of course.”

“How about we go for a walk, John? I think I need to show you something.”

We follow her out of the flat through the sunny streets of the city. Astrid and I chat about nothing in particular, and the fresh air seems to do you some good. She stops at the cemetery on the east side of the city. I would do anything to not go in, but Astrid enters. I follow. I don't even have to think about where we're going. For some reason, my feet know the way. We walk amidst the maze of graves until we stop at a new one. The headstone was only recently erected, and new topsoil still covers the ground. A bouquet of wilted orchids, your favorite, rests against the headstone.

“Look at it, John.” Evelyn remains silent beside her sister.

“I don't want to.”

“Look.”

I do.

*Evelyn Catherine Levingston*

*hinc itur ad astra*

*April 21, 1986- November 23, 2017*

I turn to look at you, but you aren't there. My knees crash to the ground, but that pain is nothing compared to the pain in my chest. I grab the soil and cry out. The whole city must hear me. I don't care. Astrid waits as I sob, but she eventually touches my shoulder and pulls me back.

“It’s time to go.”

“No!” I clutch the headstone. “She can’t be—”

“John, come on.”

Astrid yanks me up by my arm. She’s so much stronger than she looks. I can hear your laughter in the whistling of the wind. Your smile is on the woman waiting on the park bench. Your sapphire eyes stare back at me from the bus window. You aren’t there, haven’t been there since that one damned case. Astrid doesn’t loosen her grip until we return. The flat looks normal—like the walls never collapsed and the ceiling never flooded. Memories flash through my vision as she makes tea—buying orchids to rest on your grave; your funeral with everyone dressed in black and Astrid crying; your body, cold and limp; you, weak and groaning, in the hospital as I plead not to say goodbye after that phone call. Astrid kisses my forehead as she leaves. The tea goes cold in front of me. I lay down on the couch, staring at the ceiling—empty.

## After Happily Ever After: Jack and the Beanstalk

Jack had successfully cut down the beanstalk, and everything was perfect. He had acquired the riches, he had pleased his mother, and the giant was dead at his feet. The boy couldn't have been happier. The only problem was the huge corpse lying in the garden. Jack's mother wanted to just forget about it. "It will decompose eventually, dear. Let's just try and spend these riches wisely." Wisely, being a relative term, apparently. His mother wanted to buy everything she could never have, but Jack hid the harp and gold, and kept a careful eye on the goose. He knew that if his mother got her hands on them, they would be just as poor as before within hours. In his mind, those riches might as well be blood money. He walked around the giant, assessing the damage. The vegetables were ruined for sure. He pulled the axe out of the stump of the beanstalk and wondered whether it would be too much trouble to just hack him up and throw him into the river. "*No, that'll be too messy.*" He thought. He considered trying to sell him. "*Who would want to buy a humongous corpse?*" It seemed hopeless. Jack asked his mother what they should do. "We'll just use the loot to move far away from here and put that giant out of our minds." Jack liked this idea, but he knew he would feel guilty and probably come back to get rid of the giant anyway. "*Maybe I should reconsider. People will buy anything, right?*"

The marketplace was small compared to others, but it was certainly the largest part of the town. Jack maneuvered through the hustle and bustle of the crowd until he approached a tiny stall with the oldest woman he had ever seen sitting opposite him. After a moment, Jack realized that the woman wasn't sitting at all, but was actually stooped over enough that she could barely see over the counter. Despite this, she gave off the impression that nothing could scare her. Perhaps she had seen so much that this was true. "What can I do for you, young man?" It was

well known in these parts that this unflappable woman was the way to get to the more “underground” customers. If Jack had any shot at getting rid of the corpse, this was probably the easiest way to do it. Jack slid a scrap of paper with his offer over to her and waited as she painstakingly read the words. She crumpled it up and leered at him, her suspicious eyes roving over him, making Jack feel as if she could see right through him. “How much do you think I could get for it?” This was the wrong question to ask. “How much? How much, you say? Boy, if you’d come to anyone else you’d be lucky if you could even find a buyer, much less a good price. Good thing I know a guy that likes the darker stuff.” The crone shuffled into the back of her stall. “You coming or what?”

The smell was heavy and dank, just like everything else in the cramped space. “There’s a man you can talk to. Can’t tell ya anything about him except that he’ll buy almost anything ya throw at him. Come with me.” Jack followed the old woman through a back alley that he barely recognized into an old stone building that he had never given a second thought. “Go in there and ask for Saul. He’ll get you and the buyer acquainted.” She then made a noise like a cat stuck in a wood chipper, which Jack realized was probably supposed to be a cough, and left the building. He suddenly felt a chill and hesitated before walking towards a figure in a hooded robe. “Excuse me? Where could I find Saul?” The figure turned to face him. “You’re lookin’ at him, son.” He lowered his hood to show pock-marked skin and sunken eyes. Unfortunately, this was definitely not the ugliest person Jack had ever encountered. Saul motioned for Jack to follow him, and they made their way into the back of the building where the man pointed towards a table and two chairs on the opposite side of the small, dimly lit room. He then stood by the door and crossed his arms. Jack got the message: You are not leaving until I let you.

Just then, a side door that Jack hadn't noticed swung open and an old man trundled in and sat down behind the table. "Please, take a seat." Jack squinted in the near darkness. "You!" The old man cocked his head to the side and smirked. "Me?" Jack had never been so bewildered in his life, not even when a gigantic plant had erupted from the ground in his backyard overnight. Thoughts were swirling faster and faster inside his head, and he fell into the chair in front of him. "Bet you thought you'd never see me again, didja?" The old man chuckled. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and interlacing his fingers. "I know this might be a bit of a shock for ya, but there was a reason I gave you those beans, Jack. They were meant for you." Jack was shaking and wondering how the man knew his name. "C-could I have something to drink?" That wasn't what he meant to say. "Saul, fetch the boy some water." He left the two of them alone, and Jack wished he had said something else. The man in front of him had an insane sort of gleam in his eye, and Jack didn't like the look of it. The man leaned forward more, and Jack instinctively scooted back. "I also needed a cow, but that's not important. What *is* important, however, is how you handled those beans and the consequences that came along with 'em." The rancid smell of his breath was inundating, and Jack barely kept himself from gagging. "What are you talking about? My mother was the one who threw the beans out of the window, it wasn't just me."

"*Great.*" He thought. "*Now she'll get dragged into this and I'll be stuck with even more problems. Why can't I ever just keep my mouth shut?*" The man shrugged, which Jack had no idea how to interpret. "You're the one who took the beans, lad. Don't ask me." He supposed that was true. He should have just taken Bessie to the market like his mother had wanted him to...but then they wouldn't have gotten rich. The whole situation was befuddling.

A hand set down a glass of water on the table, seemingly out of nowhere, which made Jack flinch. Now that he thought about it, Saul had made no noise other than when he was speaking for the whole time Jack had known him. Granted, that wasn't very long, but it was still freaky. He sipped the water tentatively, trying not to think about what might happen to him in this dark room in this old stone building that no one ever gave a second thought. "*I hope my mother spends that money wisely if I die in here.*" It did not occur to Jack what an odd wish that was to have when you are assuming that you won't make it out of a situation alive. He had another burst of thought, which translated to: what if they want to poison me? Jack put the glass on the table and eyed the old man across from him suspiciously. "Could you at least tell me your name?"

"*Finally,*" a little voice in the back of his head whispered, "*Something smart comes out of that mouth of yours.*" The man leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the table. Jack preferred the smell of his breath. "Well lad, it's probably best if you don't know that. You see, I'm a figurehead of sorts, and so you squealing about me to anyone else wouldn't be too good for business, ya know?" Jack gulped. They really were going to kill him. "I do have a job for you, though." Good, they couldn't get rid of him if they needed him. "I need you to bring me that giant, ya know, the one with its backside in your cabbages? That is what you came here to talk to me about, isn't it?" Jack nodded. He wondered if this was such a good idea after all. Then he thought of the scent of the corpse after it had rotted in the sun and his mind was made up. "How do you want me to deliver it?"

Chopping through giant flesh was a lot harder than Jack had anticipated. Night had fallen and the air was cool, but that didn't stop the perspiration that trickled down his forehead. He was using the axe that had taken him down in the first place to hack apart his body into smaller pieces

so that he could be transported more efficiently. The smell might even have been worse than the feeling of metal cutting through skin and bone. He had to stop for a moment to puke into the bushes, which only added to the horrific stench. He shoved the pieces into sacks that he typically used for grain, grimacing and cursing the giant the whole time. Once the task was finished, he loaded the now heavily stained sacks into a cart that he had “borrowed” from a neighbor and set off towards the old stone building.

The old man was waiting for him by the entrance. “Jack! Nice work, boy. Why don’t you just unload that cargo of yours into the back room? I’ll show you to the door.” Jack snapped the reins and followed him behind the building feeling worse about the situation every second. “Just stack em’ up here. My people will do the rest.” He did as he was told without a word, trying desperately to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. The sacks were dripping and making a mess, but only Jack seemed to mind. He gritted his teeth as he handled the squishy cargo, thinking of his warm, clean bed back at home. Once the last sack had been deposited, Jack breathed a sigh of relief and turned to bid the old man goodbye, but was greeted instead by a club to the forehead.

The world was a blur as Jack blinked the sleep out of his eyes. He felt like the giant had stepped on him a couple of times, and he had to stop himself from vomiting. Everything seemed to be moving around him, though he was lying still on the ground. Or was this the ground? Jack rubbed his eyes and looked around. He was not behind the old stone building anymore; he was in the back of a cart that was bumping and jolting along a dirt path that Jack could not recognize. “Whaaa..?” That wasn’t what he meant to say. There was a grunt from the front of the cart, which must have meant, “Don’t bother me.” He decided that getting more sleep would be the best option. The road ahead might be a long one.

When Jack opened his eyes for the second time, there was no movement around him. There was no light, and so he assumed correctly that he was in a room by himself in a place he did not know. There was a creak as the door slowly opened and a figure in a hooded robe like Saul's strode in. Jack was too disoriented to feel fear; he was just confused and frustrated. "What do you want?" He croaked. The figure made no noise, but lit a candle and held it aloft. Jack clambered to his feet just as the door closed. "Why am I here? Can you even hear me?" The figure continued to ignore him as they moved around the room, lighting candles. Jack crept over toward the door, but it had locked from the outside. "You do realize that you've trapped yourself in here as well, right?" No comment from the figure. "Will you *please* just talk to me?" A grunt not unlike the one from the ride over issued from within the hood. "Good enough." Jack sighed and sat cross legged on the floor. Another creak; another figure entered. Jack made an exaggerated frown at them and asked why he was being held hostage. No response, as expected.

Jack spent over thirty minutes in that room. Two more figures joined him, but none gave him answers. Just when he was deciding whether to bolt toward the door the next time it opened, there was a knock. "*That's strange,*" He thought. "*None of these people have been so courteous.*" Not one of the figures made a move toward the door, so Jack called out, "It's locked from the outside; you have to open it." There was a familiar chuckle and a moo. Jack almost laughed out of surprise. "Is that a cow? Do you have a cow with you?" In lieu of an answer, the door swung open to reveal the old man and Bessie, Jack's cow that he had sold only seven days prior. He sat in stunned silence as the old man led Bessie to the opposite end of the room, where he handed her lead to one of the figures. "Hey there, boy. Sorry about the means, but they do justify the ends." Jack preferred to gape instead of say anything. "Now that I've got you here,

though, I might as well explain the situation.” The boy nodded slowly. He wanted to know why he was caught up in this mess.

“You see, it all started way back when the goddess came to me in a dream. She wanted a very specific ritual done a very specific way.” Jack frowned. “*Ritual? What is this, a cult?*” It sure looked like one. “To complete it, I needed a cow, the head of a distant king, and an innocent witness.” He turned to look at Jack with that insane look in his eye, and the boy knew that he was referring to him. “So when I found you, I knew you were the one. I traded you those beans because....well, because they weren’t actually mine and I wanted them off my hands.” He paced across the room, stopping for a moment to scratch Bessie behind the ear. “I stole ‘em from a witch and I didn’t want the curse, so handing ‘em off to you was just a weight off my shoulders, if you know what I mean. When that giant landed in your yard, I knew you’d be trying to find some way to get rid of it. I told my friend in the market to send you to me, which she managed, bless her; even with short term memory loss, that woman still comes through.”

There was a pause, and Jack wanted more than anything to get out of this room and go home to his mother and his warm bed. “So in the end, I got the cow, I handed off the beans, I got the king’s head, and an innocent witness.” He poked Jack on the forehead. “Thanks for your help, boy. I couldn’t have done this without you.” The old man seemed to have finished his speech and was standing in the middle of the room. He snapped his fingers and two figures went to the door and performed a very complex knock. The door opened and they went out, bringing a large pedestal in behind them. The old man moved back so they could set it up in the very center of the room. The other figures assisted them in laying Bessie on it. They went out and back in again with kindling, which they placed under the pedestal and lit aflame. The old man drew symbols on the ground with chalk and led the figures in a chant. Jack held his hands over his

ears, trying desperately to block out the noise. He backed up until his back was against the wall and he closed his eyes. He began a chant of his own; “This is not happening. This is not happening. This is not happening. This is not happening...”

The chanting stopped, yet the flames were only going higher. The immolation was not complete, but Jack had had enough. “Let me out of here! I hate you, I hate you, let me go!” He screamed until his voice was hoarse, but no one paid him any attention. The old man and the figures were standing in a circle around Bessie’s charred body; the old man’s eyes were closed. Suddenly, they snapped open and he called out, “Bring it in!” A fifth figure brought in one of the sacks that Jack had delivered earlier that day. Or was it the same day? Had he slept through the night and into the morning? He could tell when the door opened that it was bright outside, but trees partially obscured the sunlight. The figure emptied the sack on top of Bessie and Jack cried out in horror and pain from the awful stench. The giant’s head was now lying atop the smoldering quadruped. One of them came towards him and he tried to back away. They threw some kind of strange smelling dust onto him and it clouded over him, making him cough. The fire was so hot and he was so tired. He did not know if they were going to burn him as well, but if they did, he wanted to be unconscious while it happened.

When Jack awoke for the third time, he felt strangely refreshed. There was no heat or darkness surrounding him. There were no figures and no smell. He was alone, which was simultaneously relieving and terrifying. On one hand, there was no immediate danger, but on the other, he was completely alone in a forest that he could not navigate. He pushed himself to his feet and spun around, trying to get his bearings. Jack decided to follow his instincts and just started running. He sprinted past trees and streams, stopping only when his humanity bade him rest. He relied solely on adrenaline, of which he had an abundance. Eventually, he came upon a

road. He didn't know if it was the one he had been carted along, but at this point he didn't really care. It was a road, and roads lead to civilization. He followed it for some time, and after about an hour, Jack found the entrance to a small town. He wandered around it until he found a tradesman who was willing to take him home.

“Jack! Jack, my boy!” His mother ran out of their house with joy. He knew that she would have questions, but before he answered them, he needed to sleep. He could still feel the dust particles in his nose and mouth. As Jack's eyes closed, he wondered why the cult had left him alive after he had seen their ritual. He blinked. How many figures were there, again? He yawned. He couldn't remember what they were sacrificing. He blinked again. He had the strangest taste in his mouth. It must have all been a nightmare. He glanced out at the garden. Why were the vegetables flattened? What had made that crater? Nothing made sense to him. Jack heard his mother in the hall, asking if he wanted anything to eat. He closed his eyes and tried to picture her. Wasn't she blonde? Or maybe it was going gray. He wouldn't be surprised; she dealt with so much stress. Jack called back to her that he was fine and turned over, hoping that sleep would find him soon.

Jack sat up in bed and sighed. He had acquired the riches, he had pleased his mother, and the giant was dead in the garden. If only there was an easy way to get rid of such a large corpse.

## Still

No matter how hard I try, my hands won't stop shaking.

As I sit in the small airplane seat, my legs bounce up and down without my consent.

A cute little boy across the aisle has been staring at me awhile, appearing almost fascinated with my jittery movement.

Even though he tries to whisper I can clearly hear him ask his mom next to him, "What's *wrong* with that girl?"

His mom tells him to be quiet and looks over to give me a small, apologetic smile. I don't even take offense since I'm used to the stares and whispers by now.

I gulp and turn my head towards the window, looking out at the snow-capped mountains in the distance that are visible through the clouds. I'm now on my way to my parent's hometown, where my Aunt Mila lives.

I can't silence the different thoughts that zoom around my head like a movie in fast forward. So many things can go wrong on planes and there is nowhere to go. There are so many possibilities, and most have bad outcomes.

I extend my neck to look around the relatively small airplane cabin and then slouch down in defeat. Almost everyone is sleeping to pass the time. I wish I could fall asleep and forget, just for a little bit, but it is in sleep that I remember. I remember everything.

I wouldn't want to have another one of my episodes around all these people.

I hold the armrests in a death grip and close my eyes. I try to take deep, calming breaths like Dr. Craig told me to. *Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.* I don't know if it really does much of anything.

There is no real cure for my condition. Sometimes you can treat the symptoms, but the wounds are still there.

As I try to clear my mind, a flight attendant announces over the speakers that we are beginning our descent to Denver. I let out a heavy sigh of relief. *It's almost over.*

Our landing is fairly smooth and soon the plane comes to a complete stop. I can't get off the plane fast enough as I quickly find my way to the exit and into the busy airport.

Once I collect my luggage, I start searching around for my Aunt Mila, my mom's younger sister, who I haven't seen since I was fourteen. Seeing as though my Dad was an only child and his parents died before I was born, Aunt Mila was the only extended family I really had. When she was in town, she used to treat Aubrey and me to ice cream and we would talk about everything

under the sun, from the boys we liked in our class to what we wanted to do when we were older. Aunt Mila always felt like more of an older sister than an aunt.

However, the visits became few and far between until eventually they just stopped.

I never imagined that the next time I saw her, it would be because I'm utterly alone in this world.

As I continue to look for her, I feel the uncomfortable presence of people's judging eyes on me. It causes a chill to travel up my spine and I subconsciously pull some of my hair to cover my face.

People of all kinds rush past me to get to their destination, sometimes jostling me in the process and I flinch every time. Being around so many people in a place I'm not familiar with terrifies me and I can feel my hands resume their shaking.

I decide to just wait for Aunt Mila in a separate seating area away from everyone. I can clearly see an exit sign, which helps me breathe a little easier.

I sit down in one of the chairs, taking my phone out of my pocket to check the time. I sigh when I see the amount of notifications I have and quickly shut off my phone, shoving it back in my pocket. It's hard to cope anyway, never mind with constant reminders.

I turn my attention to the TV mounted on the wall.

*-- and now to Darren Schaffer with Current News.*

*Thank you, Charlotte. It has been three months since the fatal night in April when 59 people were brutally shot down at a city carnival. The pain is still fresh around the nation as we start to pick up the pieces that are left in the shooting's wake. Arrangements are now being made for a special memorial service to commemorate the lives of those fallen as well as survivors of this terrible event.*

*The service is open to friends and fam--*

“Cian, honey, I’m so sorry for being a little late. I can’t even describe what it feels like to see you here!”

I tear myself away from the TV and my breath hitches in surprise.

I turn my attention to a woman who looks to be in her thirties with a warm yet sad smile. She has the same amber brown eyes that my mother had. Like mom, Aunt Mila’s eyes are full of wisdom and have the ability to draw you in.

Those eyes stare intently into my own, and I can’t help but shift my eyes away nervously.

It feels like ages since I’ve seen her last.

All of a sudden, she is bringing me into her arms and hugging me so tightly I can barely breathe. I immediately stiffen and I'm aware of how steady she is compared to my shaking frame, but my body gradually relaxes.

She pulls back to look at me again and I give her a small smile. I wonder how I must appear to her. There is no doubt that I have dark circles under my eyes and my black hair lacks any kind of shine.

“It's good to see you too, Aunt Mila,” I say quietly.

She gives me a last look over and I get a chance to look at her too. Her hair is different from years ago. She now has curly, black hair that perfectly frames her face and she wears a delicate, silver chain with tiny music notes around her neck.

Seeming satisfied with her examination, she motions me to go with her. “Well, let's get going out of this busy airport. I can't wait to show you around the house, and then we can catch up.”

I gladly follow her lead.

I'm deep in thought as Aunt Mila navigates winding roads and steep inclines to what would be my new home.

I stay silent even as we finally arrive at a modern house made of glass, concrete and reinforced steel.

As Aunt Mila takes me on a tour of the house, all I can think about is how much my dad, a passionate architect, would have loved it.

“-- and this is my favorite room of all, the music room!” Aunt Mila opens a pair of double doors and waves out her arm with flare, allowing me to step into the room.

Like the rest of Aunt Mila's glass house nestled in the Rocky Mountains, the music room is breathtaking. There are all kinds of instruments laid out, some of which I do not know the names.

In the center of the room is a beautiful grand piano. The piano is a glossy black and its lid is propped open, allowing me to see the dozens of metal strings and components.

Aunt Mila sees me staring, and walks over to it.

“This is my baby,” she coos, rubbing her hand over it adoringly.

“As a little girl I always wanted a piano of my own, but since our family could barely scrape by, there was no way we could afford it.” She trails her hand over the keys, and then begins to smile to herself.

“Your mother and I would practice together with the piano at school and at the neighborhood church. When I got more advanced, I started playing at small events to save up my money. After a while, playing in front of only a few people became playing in front of entire concert halls and I could finally get a grand piano for myself.”

“Did you enjoy playing all over the world?” I ask curiously.

Still facing the piano, she lets out a soft sigh. “Fulfilling my dreams while traveling the world was truly amazing, but after awhile I started missing home. I regret not having a bigger part of yours and Aubrey’s lives.”

I nod slowly, looking down at my scuffed sneakers. I try to muster up the courage to ask her something I’ve wondered for a long time.

“Aunt Mila, I-I-I want to ask...”

I stretch out my hands, and, as expected, they are jittery. I cross them in my arms to get them to calm down.

She walks over to where I'm standing and uncrosses my arms, taking my hands into her own. Her hands feel strong and firm, most likely from her many years of playing piano.

“What is it honey? You know you can ask me anything.” She looks at me with genuine concern.

I decide to just blurt it out.

“What happened? You know, that made you stop coming around.”

“I think the simple answer is I got caught up. I was so obsessed with becoming the best that I lost sight of what was really important. We all know the saying ‘you don't know what you've got until it's gone.’ I think the truth we try to ignore is that you knew what you had--you just never thought you'd lose it.”

“But I'm *never* making that mistake again.” Her eyes are full of a guilt so deep it startles me. I recognize that guilt, since it is something I see every time I look into the mirror.

“Mom really missed you. I was going through some of her stuff and there's something addressed to you. I guess she never got around to sending it to you. Wait one second.” I dash quickly up to my room, snatching a large manila envelope from the unpacked luggage on the bed.

As I walk back into the music room, I hand the envelope to Aunt Mila.

She stares at her name on the front that is written in my mom's cursive. After a minute, she opens the clasp and takes out the contents of the envelope. Aunt Mila smiles as she looks intently at the papers in her hand.

“It's a piece of music that we started composing together all those years ago. We never got to finish.”

She dabs at a tear near her eye that neglected to fall, “Would you like to help me finish it? I think Claire would have wanted you to.”

“Oh no...I can't... I mean with my shaking and everything. It's been so long and I don't think I could play a single note, never mind a whole piece.” I put both of my hands up, slowly backing away.

“Cian, you were the best pianist in your division. Not to mention, you have Walker blood flowing in your veins, so I *know* you can do it. “

I wish I had as much confidence in myself as she has in me.

I guess she takes my silence as affirmation because with a tone of finality she announces, “We'll start tomorrow.”

We sit through dinner in silence as thoughts weigh on both of our minds. If I even *could* play again, I wonder if I would have the strength to do so when every note I strike would remind me of *her*; remind me of a time of happiness and warmth, when I knew my family would be there to support me.

It is no surprise that after Aunt Mila and I have dinner and she bids me good night, my body and mind refuse to rest.

Instead, I stay up looking at the stars through the windows in my room. As I gaze up at the sky, I think of various possibilities and outcomes. What if I had done something differently or made a different decision? Would they still be here?

And the foremost thought in my mind: Why am I still here when they aren't?

The guilt gnaws at me a little more every day and I fear that one day I will be reduced to only a portion of what I once was.

My thoughts go in circles until my own body betrays me and eventually I doze off.

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*It all feels real -- the sounds, the smells, the emotions.*

*Kiosks and food trucks can be found on every corner and the tempting aroma of fried food floats in the air.*

*The mechanical whirring of rides operating, pop music playing from unidentified sources and the gleeful screams of children creates an atmosphere of excitement.*

*The bright, neon lights against the dark sky makes everything seem almost magical.*

*“Cian, did you have to drag us all the way here?” Dad complains with an exasperated expression.*

*I groan. “Come on, Dad, this will be fun! It’s been so long since we’ve all done something like this as a family.” I put my arm around my dad’s broad shoulders and Aubrey does the same on his other side.*

*“Don’t act like you aren’t craving deep fried Twinkies and a turkey leg,” Aubrey exclaims accusingly.*

*“Now that you mention it...” Dad wiggles his eyebrows while rubbing his stomach.*

*Mom gives dad a soft glare.*

*“I’m going to make sure your dad doesn’t completely clog his arteries and give himself a heart attack. Why don’t you girls go on a ride and meet us at the pavilion before the light show starts.”*

*Mom smiles brightly, waving us off.*

*“Okay, see you later!” Aubrey and I are off before mom can even respond.*

*“So much for a family outing!” Dad yells out after us. We just giggle, making our way through the crowds of people.*

*“First up, the Ferris wheel,” Aubrey announces and I give her a blank look in return.*

*“What? It’s a classic!” She says defensively.*

*“Yeah, for five-year-olds. If I do this with you, you have to ride the Ring of Fire with me.”*

*Her caramel eyes get wide but she nods anyway. She grasps my hand, pulling me to the line for the Ferris wheel.*

*It’s not long before we are next in line and we are giving the operator our tickets. We step into the cart and sit down on the bench. The cart gives a slight jerk before making its ascent.*

*“Wow, Cian, I can see everything from here!” Aubrey exclaims in amazement.*

*I look out at the miniaturized world in front of me. The people walking around look like little ants and all the lights blur together.*

*“Yeah, it really is cool,” I agree, keeping my eyes on the view.*

*After a moment of comfortable silence, Aubrey turns to me. “You’re a senior this year, Cian. Have you decided what you want to do after you graduate?”*

*I take a deep breath. “I’m not completely sure what I want to do with my life. Mom wants me to pursue some prestigious music career. In her mind, she thinks I’ll be the next Martha Argerich or Yuja Wang. I love playing, but I don’t know if I’m cut out for that kind of life and to be honest, the pressure mom is putting on me is crippling.”*

*Aubrey puts her arms around me, hugging me close.*

*“I think you should tell her how you feel. Mom just wants the best for you, even if she goes a little overboard sometimes. I know she would be happy with anything you choose to do as long as it makes you happy.”*

*I absorb what she said before nodding my head in agreement. “You’re right. I’ll find a way to tell her.”*

*Aubrey smiles. "Good, and if this is about your lack of confidence in your skills, I've told you a thousand times that you're a prodigy and you play beautifully."*

*I gently pull away, chuckling.*

*"Thanks, brat." I ruffle her hair and she swats my hand away.*

*I glance over the edge of the cart to see that we're getting closer and closer to the ground.*

*"Look at us engaging in deep conversation when we should have been enjoying the ride. It's already time to get off."*

*"It's okay, I really can't wait to see the light show now!" Aubrey bounces in her seat excitedly. She has always acted like a five-year-old stuck in a fifteen-year-old body.*

*The cart comes to a complete stop on the ground and the operator opens the door. Aubrey takes my hands, and leads me in the direction of the pavilion. It seems like the crowd has only gotten thicker and we have to try to maneuver our bodies in odd ways just to get through.*

*We find a good spot to see the show and start searching for Mom and Dad.*

*I pull out my phone and dial Dad's number and then Mom's, but they both go straight to voicemail.*

*"Hmm, they must have cut off their phones or something," I mutter.*

*“Or Dad’s stuffing his face and mom’s trying to stop him,” Aubrey suggests and we burst into a fit of laughter.*

*“I’m going to try and find them real quick. They couldn’t have gone far. You stay here to save our spot and see if they turn up,” I tell Aubrey.*

*“Okay, be fast. The show starts in like 10 minutes.” I give her a mocking salute and then turn around, heading toward a cluster of food stands where mom and dad might be.*

*I weave in between the food stands, but I don't see them hanging around. A kiosk advertising the chance to win a free prize catches my eye. My dad loves to play those kind of things to show off to my mom. I start walking over there next.*

*I think I get a glimpse of my mom walking away from a kiosk but a group of tall men blocks my view.*

*I stand up on the tip of my toes and move every which way, but I can't seem to get a good look.*

*I take out my phone in order to try contacting them again.*

*While I'm opening up my messenger to send them a text, I hear a loud, sharp sound. I immediately look toward the pavilion to see if maybe they started the fireworks a little bit early. I don't see anything, so I just shrug it off and finish typing the text.*

*Then the loud sound happens again. And again.*

*Then the screams start.*

*I see people running.*

*The panic is palpable and spreads like wildfire.*

*I don't know what's happening but I feel my heart start to pound.*

*"Everyone get down!" I hear a man shout to my left.*

*I quickly obey the man and crouch down on my knees behind a trash can. I put my hands over my neck like we used to do in elementary school for tornado drills.*

*I hear another round of shots and I finally understand what is happening. I hear little kids crying out of fear and it mingles with the cries of pain.*

*I feel wetness on my cheeks and I realize I am crying too. I don't know whether it's from fear or pain. Probably both.*

*All I can think about is Mom, Dad, and Aubrey. I have no idea where they are. I have no idea if they're okay.*

*I cup my hands over my ears to block out the sounds, the horrible sounds...*

I wake up to someone with their arms around my shaking body. I distantly hear something emitting strangled, haunting screams.

It takes me a second to realize that those screams are coming from me. Tears are streaming like unending rivers down my cheeks and I can't seem to control them, much like my tremors. I clutch my chest as it feels as though my heart has gotten off rhythm and now beats erratically.

I finally hear Aunt Mila whispering soothing words in my ear, and I'm slowly able to relax when I see that I'm not in danger anymore. *It's okay*, I try to convince myself in my head but I know I'm lying to myself.

I'm barely able to form words but I stutter out, "It's all my fault they were there in the first place. It's all my fault they're gone. They should be here instead of me."

"Honey, please don't blame yourself. I should have been there for you. For all of you. I won't ever leave you again. We'll get through this together, I promise," Aunt Mila says aloud, with a firm determination in her voice. She softly strokes my hair.

It feels good to know that I won't be alone.

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“Cian, you are on in five,” A staff member tells me hurriedly. I nod in response.

I’m sitting in the right wing of the stage, my elbows on my knees as I fidget with my shaky fingers. My foot taps a nervous beat all on its own.

I see someone approaching from the corner of my eye and look up to see Aunt Mila with a big smile on her face. She is wearing her usual silver necklace, and the music notes on them shine from the overhead lights.

“How are you feeling?”

I look at her with distress, “Not very good.”

Aunt Mila chuckles, “I remember the jitters I used to get every time I would perform. Don’t worry, Cian. You were made to play this piece. It comes effortlessly for you. Your parents would be so proud.”

She takes my left hand. “With every note you strike, know that you are continuing their legacy and honoring their lives. They will be right there beside you.”

The staff remember returns. "Okay, we're ready for you."

I stand up and smooth my hands over my dress.

Aunt Mila gives me one last hug. "I love you," she whispers in my ear before she lets go. I give her a small smile before allowing them to lead me to the stage.

*We have the pleasure of having a survivor play an original piece, in tribute of her family and all those who lost their lives. Please give a warm welcome to Cian Allegrotti!*

As I walk to the grand piano and sit down on the bench, all I can hear is the blood rushing in my ears. I squint through the bright lights and risk a glance out into the audience.

I realize that all these people are in the same situation as me and understand what I've been through. They look at me with encouraging expressions and it's as if they are saying 'you can do it' just with their eyes.

I hover my hands over the keys.

I think back to the Sunday mornings, when my Mom would play for us after breakfast. Aubrey and I used to sit at the feet of the piano, while we begged her to play yet another song. She would laugh, but give into our whims anyway.

Dad used to lean on the wall, a cup of coffee in his hand as he tried to hide his amusement.

*We were so happy.*

I strike the first note and the piece flows from there.

I put every emotion I've ever felt into the rising and falling tones. Everything around me blurs away and I feel as though I'm the only person in the room.

I gradually gain momentum as the piece progresses and I can feel the power building. My body moves with my fingers as I put my weight into the keys. It's as if my family is right there beside me the whole time.

The piece is a combination of slow, haunting progressions and a driving, passionate melody.

It isn't long before I'm playing the last cadence and the piece comes to an end.

My hands stay suspended over the keys a few moments after I finish the piece, letting the final chord resonate. For a while, nothing can be heard in the auditorium. There is only complete silence.

Then the applause starts.

The deafening roar startles me and brings me out of my daze. I look out to see that most of the crowd is giving me a standing ovation.

I wipe at a tear that I didn't know had fell and rise to my feet. I give a quick bow but the crowd doesn't let up with their applause.

I look down at my hands.

I realize that for once, my head is clear of disquieting thoughts and none of my body parts are shaking.

A smile appears on my face.

For once, I was still.

## Free Therapy

*Mandy*

My mom rolled down the window and I could see her beaming face and the pride in her eyes. The rays of the fading sun caught the strands of her brown hair, turning them golden. For a moment, his tousled, honey-colored locks flashed across my mind, but my mom's voice interrupted my memory before the associated feelings flooded in.

"See ya later, sweetie," she said with her warm, familiar smile, calming the whirlpools of my thoughts. "*Merde!*"

"*Merde?*" my little sister echoed from the back seat. "Mommy, what's *merde?*"

I laughed and turned away, leaving my mom to handle that explanation. The chilly wind of the new season bit through my athletic wear. Eager to escape the cold, I bounded up the concrete steps and pulled open the heavy doors, but not without first catching a glimpse of my appearance in the window. I saw my slicked-back ponytail and the swash of pink on my lips. Again, a memory of him slipped past the dam. He told me he hated when I wore lipstick, insisted that he despised the sticky feeling and the plastic taste. He'd smudge it away with his hand and then violently kissed me until every last bit was gone. I felt myself unable to breathe again, felt him smothered over me, and I gasped for air. The icy air pervaded my throat, bringing me back to reality. I tentatively touched my lips, reminded myself that I was alone, and stepped into the lobby of my high school.

I walked into the dance studio, and settled into my pre-show routine. Every performer has one, each one unique. Mine includes signing in, quickly eating whatever granola bar I have on hand, and then silently stretching with my earbuds in and my music turned up. Other girls ran

around the room, screaming and laughing, high off the adrenaline. A faint smile crept to my lips as I watched their fun, but I still preferred my solitude.

We went through our warm-up as a class, and I felt myself slipping out of my head and into my body. I followed along through our sequences of pliés, leg swings, crunches, and other technique exercises. My heart rate increased and pumped warmth through my veins. I could feel the beads of sweat starting to drip down my spine, an inch at a time. This sensation was what I loved about dance; I loved feeling alive. Finally, it was time for contact improvisation. We always ended our warm-ups with contact in order to feel connected to our team. The ebb and flow of the yoga-like music filled my ears as I closed my eyes and settled into the ground. I could sense another body approaching mine, could hear the way they stirred the air and brushed the floor, and our skin soon met. Her hand initially met my thigh, but the point of contact soon rolled across our surface area as we rolled across the floor. We became entangled in this spontaneous dance, so that neither us nor an observer could tell who led and who followed. I'd done contact improv countless times, but my sense were feeling something new this time. I walked the line between independence and dependence like an acrobat on a tightrope. I felt in complete control of my body as I moved through the space and as I made a thousand decisions every second. Yet there was my partner. I was completely comfortable touching another person. I was trusting. Trusting myself to let go and trusting my friend to support my weight. Her back slid down my arm, preparing to go into a lift.

“OW!” I yelled, and immediately 20 heads snapped in my direction. I tipped my head down to avoid their glares and the guilt rushed through me for breaking the tranquil atmosphere. She had pressed into the five long, purple bruises on my bicep, the last physical reminder. The searing pain distracted me, and I let another flood of thoughts break through. I felt the pain in my

arms from his unbreakable grip. He wouldn't let me go, not from his hands nor from the relationship. He was yelling at me for so many things I couldn't even begin to count.

A warm droplet hit my leg, and I realized I was crying. I suddenly saw my teacher's concerned face as she crouched in front of my crumpled form. Most of the class had returned to their improv, but my partner still looked shocked. Her eyes were wide, and the guilt racked me again. I quickly wiped my eyes, and muttered a half-coherent excuse about being sore from all the extra rehearsals. I resumed dancing as well, but my energy was gone. I felt as cold as the world outside.

*Erin*

I could feel the push and pull of our bodies communicating and felt drawn to go into a lift. My back slid down and around Rachel's arm as I tried to orient myself in a high table position.

"OW!" she suddenly yelled, and I jumped, startled from the sound.

Mandy had fallen to the ground in pain, clutching her left arm. Her blue eyes glazed over and stared at a point on the floor. The rest of the class was looking at us now, but all I could focus on was the single tear that had welled up in her eye. It finally pushed over the edge of her eyelid, running smoothly down the contours of her face and landing in a puddle on her leg. There was a wet streak of smudged makeup on her cheek that I couldn't bear to look at. I turned my gaze away.

If only I wasn't so skinny.

My bony vertebrae had probably pushed into her arm. I recovered from anorexia about three years ago, but I'm still always the thinnest person in the room. I don't want to be, but no

matter what I do, I can't seem to gain any weight. Now I'm so skinny that I'm physically hurting people. I hate my body.

Mandy was walking back over to me. I whispered that I was so *so* sorry, but I'm not even sure if she heard me. She still seemed caught up in her own head, oblivious to her surroundings. I couldn't blame her. She was probably thinking about how I look like an awkward, lanky 12-year-old boy. And if she was thinking that, well, she was right.

We resumed dancing, but everything was different now. The sense of freedom, of complete abandonment was lost. Instead, we were careful and hesitant. I moved with difficulty, trying to avoid letting the jutting angles of my figure to touch her. The tension made the improv drag on for ages. All the while, my mind was flying through a thousand thoughts a second. I was trying to focus on not hurting Mandy again, but that just distracted me with self-deprecating thoughts. The self-hate made me think of why I was in this situation in the first place. The cycle continued, swirling and picking up power like a hurricane at sea.

Our teacher finally called our warm-up to an end. It was time to dress out into our costumes. I dashed for the door; I just wanted to be out of the studio as fast as possible. And what a sad thought that was, to want to escape a dance studio. One more thing my stupid, ugly body had to taint.

### *Rachel*

Our class stood outside the wooden door of the locker room, waiting for Ms. Harris to unlock it. The quiet trance created by the improv was already fading, and the chatter grew louder and louder. Only Mandy and Erin were silent. Mandy was looking fixedly at the tile floor, absentmindedly tracing small patterns on her arm. Erin, on the other hand, had her arms wrapped

around her torso, and her eyes darted back and forth, clearly trying to look anywhere but in Mandy's direction. After what felt like hours of watching this awkward interaction, the key turned in the lock, and the class pushed through the entryway.

I held the door open, so I entered last, with some breathing room. I walked over to my locker, expertly maneuvering between the sea of dancers, and entered my combination. 24-2-16. I peeled off my tight black leggings along with the rest of my warm-up gear and tossed the dirty pieces back into my locker. The light chiffon of my pants brushed across my skin as I slipped into my costume. I pulled on my pink shirt and something about the shade caught my attention. The rosy tone perfectly matched the thin scars on my forearms. The marks were very faint, too faint for anyone else to notice so I felt completely comfortable changing in front of the other girls. I closed my eyes for a moment and remembered the days when that feeling was the exact opposite. I used to change in the stalls every day to hide my actions.

I've come so far.

I opened my eyes and saw Erin doing just that, slinking into one of the bathroom stalls with her costume in hand. She had the same frantic air about her as her eyes continued to flick back and forth, scanning the small, hot room to see if anyone noticed. I quickly averted my gaze because I sympathized with her. I wasn't sure exactly what she was hiding, but nevertheless, I understood.

I stayed behind as the other girls trickled out of the locker room one by one. A few seconds after the door shut for the last time, I heard the click of the stall being unlocked, and Erin cautiously stepped around the corner. Once again, she searched the room. Her gaze found me, and she jumped. Her hand flew to her chest as she let out a huge exhale

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

“What are you doing here?”

Crap. I hadn't really thought this through. “I - I just,” I stammered. “I wanted to let you know that I'm here for you. You can talk to me about anything. Anything at all.”

The anger subsided from her freckled face, and she exhaled once more. This time it was smaller and full of relief. The corners of her mouth lifted into the slightest of smiles.

“Thanks,” she said, in a whisper so low it was barely audible.

“Of course.”

“We should probably get back.”

“Yeah, Harris will kill us if we're late.”

Erin laughed a little, and I was happy that I had lifted her mood, even if it was by just the smallest margin.

I held the door once again, and we headed downstairs in a comfortable silence. Our energy was returning, and the excitement was burning as we prepared to take the stage.

### *Mandi*

“Dancers to places,” the Assistant Stage Manager called.

I walked to the upstage curtain and took a deep breath. The lights brightened as the music increased in volume. Three girls ran across the space which was my starting cue.

I darted from stage right to left for the opening scene of our piece. With each pounding step and the resounding beat of my heart, I eased back into my vessel. Every last thought of him faded into oblivion for the next twelve minutes. This was time for me and time for women as we portrayed our story of feminism. The running opened into Rachel's solo and what we called the “box section”, and then I took my place at the bench at quarter stage. I began manipulating the

limbs of the girl directly in front of me. Pulling her own slicked-back ponytail. Tipping down her head and effectively hiding the swash of pink on her lips. My actions gave me a sense of déjà vu. They had a familiar undertone, but I was used to being on the receiving side. Two counts of eight later, I gave her a final push. Our group climbed nimbly over the wooden bench and entered into a phrase of floor work. The piece kept progressing, and we kept pushing, onward and upward. The time for my lift was nearing so I made my way to standing. Rachel pulled my arm to sit into a pose of counterbalance. More contact work was to follow, but I didn't back down.

I can do this.

A few more dancers surrounded us, and suddenly they were lifting me into the air. My arm didn't hurt. My thoughts didn't drift. I was on top of the world, and it felt good. My friends supported me from beneath, but I did a lot of the work myself, leveraging my weight on two dancers' shoulders. It was the best feeling in the world.

The lift only lasted a few seconds, but I could've stayed there for eternity. My feet safely returned to the comfort of the Marley floor. Still on this high, I was ready for the next section: speaking. In an off center clump, 20 other women and I faced into the pitch black of the audience and glaring white of the lights. An inhale together. A scan through our senses. The music faded, 5, 6, 7, 8...

"Independent," we called out to the house, in steady voices that rang loud and clear. Our confidence pervaded the fourth wall, tearing it down and drawing our viewers into the deeper meanings of our choreography.

We chose these words for the generations of women who fought before us. Both the sexes have always had the capacity to be self-sufficient, to stand on their own two feet. Yet equality has still not been achieved. Our class wanted to share that message with our entire

school and with anyone else who found themselves in our modest auditorium. We can all be independent, and we can all work together towards common goals. After all, that's how my class created this collaborative dance.

And that's when it hit me. *I* was independent. Everything I had put into this dance, all the blood, sweat, and tears, was entirely my own. I shared it with every girl around me, but that was it. Dance was a completely open sanctuary for me to simply focus on myself. He could never take that away from me. No one could. I felt liberated. For a second, I flashed back to the memory of him gripping my arms with his hands like a pair of cold, unforgiving cuffs. But he was gone, and I had found the key. I unlocked myself, free.

*Erin*

A shiver ran down my spine as I awaited my cue in the darkness of the wings. I'm not sure if it was because I was cold or if I was nervous. On one hand, I'm always freezing because I have neither a shred of fat nor muscle on my body. I also had a lot of things to be worried about though. For example, I could really mess up the big lift towards the end. Ms. Harris has this idea that we should all be able to lift and be lifted so, of course, I got stuck as one of the bases. Hopefully the other girls could do most of the work because I really didn't trust my puny arms to make any substantial contribution.

Eventually, I made my entrance and got swept up into the craziness of performing. I was too preoccupied with remembering counts and applying to corrections to think about my body. I had no time to wonder whether or not I was physically capable of the moves or to analyze how I looked in my costume. I just danced.

The minutes flew by, and suddenly Rachel and Mandi were counterbalancing each other. It was time for the lift. I slid into the space next to Mandi and found a deep pli . My hands encircled her hips, and the other lifters wedged into their positions. We pushed down into the ground, rooting ourselves into place with a strong sturdy base. I extended my arms higher and higher. Mandi was airborne, basking in the bright stage lights and extending her limbs like the branches and leaves of a glorious oak tree.

I'm doing this. I am actually helping to lift her.

Mandi came back down, safe as could be. We had a brief moment of eye contact, but it was long enough for her to communicate. She looked surprised, but I wasn't sure if it was directed towards me or herself. I could also tell that she forgave me for our mishap earlier and that she trusted me again. That's how dance works. When you're constantly tossing each other around, this momentous level of trust is established. Our blunder was just a tiny chip in that reserve, and we easily mended it with another successful sharing of weight.

The eye contact was broken as we both turned to face the front. "Independent," we stated. We listened for breath, looked for movement, and tried to sense each other's presence as we rotated 90 degrees. "Powerful", we declared, now with the lights from the trees glaring in our eyes.

With my heart pounding, my voice confident, and my friends by my side, I felt pretty damn powerful. I realized I should feel that way because I *am*. I had just danced for ten minutes and lifted another human being above my head. Plenty of people can't do that. Sure I'm a tiny person, but just being a dancer gives me a ton of power. We're not only artists; we're athletes too.

And if I'd trained my body to do all of these absurd dance tricks, then I can control other aspects of my body too. Three years ago, I learned that I control the food I take in, for better or for worse. I vividly remember the days of skipping breakfast, of making pathetic excuses at the lunch table, of pushing around food on my plate to make it look like I ate dinner. I wanted a thigh gap, a flat stomach, and prominent collar bones. I got all of that but at the cost of my happiness. Now, I'm so desperate to forget that pain that I'm just creating more. I'm still unsatisfied with my body. But that's actually ok. I just need to help myself in a healthy manner. I can become stronger if I want. I can be happier if I want. My mind rules my body, not the other way around. That's power in and of itself.

### *Rachel*

Just like every other dancer in the piece, I ran out of the wings and into the open expanse of the stage, but I didn't make it to the other side. I stopped at center, finding my parallel position. My arms raised laterally, and then my clean wrists twisted above my head as I began my solo.

In January, we had an assignment called our "Body Story" for our midterm. We had to write essays about our physical body and then create solos based on them. Of course, I talked about when I was born and the color of my eyes, but I focused on the scars that marked my forearms and thighs. My solo was deep and dark and vulnerable, and for some reason, the class liked it. So here I was, sharing one of my best kept secrets with a packed audience.

The other dancers walked into the space in lines, boxing me in from three sides. They marched shoulder-to-shoulder with the intensity of an army, building the pressure. Right, left, right, left. I kept dancing as every single person's attention was directed toward me. I felt

trapped, but instead of trying to escape, I let my emotions empower my performance. How could I connect this feeling to the women's rights movement? Surely other women had been scared and faced scrutiny. If they could, I could too.

With this newfound resolve, I pushed out of a fourth position lunge. My balance was slightly off though, and my double pirouette didn't make the full rotations. I sloppily stumbled back to the correct direction. A slight heat rose to my cheeks. The first mistake of the dance. And it was all my fault.

I started to beat myself up internally. The logic was clear; I messed up so I had ruined the dance. My neurons fired this message loud and clear to every ounce of my body. My eyes watered and my stomach twisted in a tight knot. Worst of all though, my brain pummeled my heart. The guilt was too much to bear and I felt my heart disintegrate into a fine dust, leaving a hollow cavity within my chest. Without a heart, I couldn't feel. Nothing was better than pain.

I looked frantically around, desperate for a way off that stage. My gaze connected with two of the soldiers of the wall, Mandi and Erin. Their eyes were full of concern. They met mine, sending urgent encouragement to me. They stood in formation, shoulders back, sternums lifted, exuding confidence into the still auditorium. After the warm-up they'd had, they still managed to be giving 110% of their effort to the success of our dance. Inspired by their resolve, I too lifted my chin toward the overhead lights.

The thoughts I'd had before were remnants of the old Rachel. The girl who entered a downward spiral anytime things got tough. That girl had hit rock bottom though and realized the only way to go was up. I had climbed back to safety, one arduous step at a time and now knew I never wanted to return to that pit. So today, I would take another step upward, learning from my mistake and moving on.

We had continued to dance as my mind went through those hills and valleys. The class now faced upstage, staring at the cyclorama and ready to say the third word. “Unbreakable,” we said, and the word rang loud and true in my head.

Maybe I had broken once, but I would not allow that to happen again. Even then, I couldn’t have been completely shattered. A piece of me had held on to hope and kept fighting. If not, I wouldn’t be standing on my own two feet right now. I wouldn’t be dancing right now, surrounded by friends. I wouldn’t be shouting message of equality into a darkened theater. With love and with purpose, I am whole.

### *Mandi*

After taking our bow, the class headed back to the dance room to change and gather our belongings. Most of the class rose to the pre-show noise levels, except they were drunk on pride and relief not excitement and anticipation. As they ran around, taking silly videos of each other, I quickly pulled on my athletic jacket and grabbed my bag. I checked for my earbuds and then slid out the door.

I could still hear the echoes of their laughter and screaming when I stepped into the lobby. I began searching for my mom and sister. Before I could locate them in the crowd, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and at first saw no one. I lowered my gaze a few inches, and my eyes fell upon a freshman who I recognized from the dance department. We stood there for a few seconds of awkward silence. She seemed too terrified to speak so I smiled and said hey.

“Hi,” she stammered. “Um, I’m Grayson. I just wanted to say your dance was my favorite and that you did really good. I thought it was cool how you guys talked on stage, and did a dance about feminism. It was really inspiring.”

I barely caught the last few words because she increased her speed as she talked. Her message was clear though, and I felt the emotion swelling inside and closing off my throat. I managed to choke out a thank you, and Grayson slipped off into the mass of people. My eyes were getting watery. She was so kind. Through the film of water, I finally saw my mom's head of honey-colored hair and blinked back the tears. I made my way over to her and my sister. They congratulated me and we headed out to our car, with our hands shoved in our pockets and our chins tucked against the cold. My sister was rambling about what we'd eat for dinner, but I tuned her out. I was already thinking of tomorrow's performance, the excitement bubbling within my soul once more.

## Maggie's Mystery

As they walk to the swimming hole of the river, Maggie slips her hand inside her Grandpoo's. Their bare feet kick up dirt behind them. The evening sun hangs low in the sky like a heavy Christmas ornament, lighting up the tops of the old oak trees like a flashlight. Shadows dance on the ground, and her Grandpoo hums a song he learned from his mama. Maggie likes hearing him sing; his smooth voice sails behind them and whispers to nature around them. Though they were far away from his little church, when she heard him singing, she could feel the knotty pine of the pews beneath her, and she could smell Mrs. Johnson's sweet lavender perfume from the pew behind her. She could see all those bright, white pearls draped around her neck, little white globes strung together on a string. Grandpoo's singing, just like his little church, felt like home.

"Grandpoo," Maggie asked, "Where does the river go? It is always moving, pulling me to the swamp. It doesn't change a bit. It looks just like the river from the picture of mama dipping my toes in the water when I wasn't wearing anything but a droopy diaper."

Grandpoo stops his singing but keeps a tight hold of Maggie's hand. They keep right on walking, kicking up dirt behind them.

"Maggie, the river hole here we swim, all of the river that you see, even the ribbon of river that we paddle through in the canoe; it's all just leading to the big ocean."

Maggie thought about last summer when she and her mama sat on the shore at the beach dripping sand into castles and digging holes with her brothers. She squinted her eyes real good that afternoon searching to find where the ocean met the sky, searching for the other side of the ocean. But try as she might, all she could see was the vastness that stretched out in front of her. She knew there was more that couldn't be seen even with real tight squinting.

“Mama, do you think I can find Africa from over here?” Maggie asked. “Maybe we could swim out tomorrow.”

She chuckled, “Try as you might, but I wouldn’t wish on it, my dear. It’s further away than you think.”

Off in the distance, pelicans dipped their beaks into the water and carried their fish away to places she could not see. She remembered how she had lain in the sand; sprawled out like a starfish in the surf, belly laughing as the waves gently crashed over her. That same river water that her mama had dipped her toes into as a baby was now rolling over her back as a girl.

The sunflowers in the big field were slouching now, heads lowered heavy from the harsh summer. Where they once stood tall and proud, all lined up together, happy soldiers saluting their sun king, they now were sleepy and weak, eager for surrender. Where their yellow faces just weeks before shined brightly and boldly, full of seeds and life, they were now sullen and black with empty pocket holes from seeds long gone.

“Grandpoo,” said Maggie, as they kept walking as their bare feet brushed up dirt, “Where do all the sunflowers go in the winter? They are already starting to leave us. I can see that. Will they come back?” Her Grandpoo dropped her hand just for a moment to switch his towel to the other shoulder.

“Sunflowers scatter their seeds across the field. Birds carry the seeds to other fields and pastures where new flowers will grow. Just because we don’t see the sunflowers in winter, does not mean that they are gone. They are simply scattering and growing new life around them.”

They were almost to the swimming hole now; the Carolina heat was overwhelming. The summer sun bowed behind the tall oak trees to greet the rising moon. The crickets were beginning to warm up for another nightly chorus.

Maggie looks at her Grandpoo as he steps into the iced tea river. She notices how the skin on his arms sags a little more than she remembered, and his veins poke out like blue road map lines down his legs in all directions. But when he plunges into the cold water, he pops out like a puppy, panting and smiling with joy. Right then, she imagined her Grandpoo, floating down the river to a point where she needed a good squint to watch him reach the great big ocean.

Maggie felt a shiver rush through her as she imagined a walk to the river one day without her Grandpoo. She remembered how he, too, had once stood tall and proud, bold and bright. She saw how Grandpoo, now slouched like the sunflower, holding seeds to scatter, was approaching his winter. She thought of all her bottled up questions about life without his ears to hear them and without his mind to share his wisdom. And she thought of how she would one day kick dirt with her bare feet alone and how she would not hear his humming that reminded her of home. But then Maggie remembered the seeds of the sunflower, and she wondered if maybe she could carry her Grandpoo's seeds when his winter came. She wondered if maybe she, too, could scatter them out with love and watch new life grow because he once stood tall and then surrendered like all the sunflowers before him.

The sky was cotton candy now, pink and purple bled between the clouds. She and her Grandpoo were turning the final bend on the road to the river where the dirt stops and the fallen leaves begin. She could smell the swamp and touch the sandy river bottom between her toes. She closed her eyes to better hear the whip-or-whil singing in the background of her Grandpoo's humming.

“Grandpoo,” she said, “how can we know what it will be like to be gone from the earth? How can we know what will be in store for us? How can I be sure that you will be good and safe and happy without me to walk with you?”

Her Grandpoo stopped walking and knelt down beside her. “Sweet Maggie, this is the most beautiful mystery of all. We can’t know everything there is to know. But we sure do have clues. Like when I hear old Mr. Tom singing like an angel in the front row at church. Or when the river splashes on my skin and makes me feel revived to life. Or when I am feeling sad, and Sunny trots up to give me a slobbery kiss. Or even the taste of Mimi’s pound cake, melting in my mouth. Look around you, my dear! Even the sky, right now, runs with color and beauty. And being with you, on this walk, feeling our hearts holding on to each other like our hands. They are all just tastes, little glimpses of what is in store for me, what is in store for us.”

Maggie smiled at the thought of knowing what was in store. She dreamed of peering into the gates of heaven with her bare feet firmly gripping the dirt of the earth...and she thought about how even when she squinted to see far away, she could only see a sliver of the river making its way to the vast sea. She admired the sunflowers, whose most selfless and beautiful job came in their wilting, their parting. And she thought about heaven’s clues all around her, pouring grace into her pure heart and onto her golden hair. She grabbed Grandpoo’s hand, and together they walked to the river.

## Across The White Line

My father's voice travels down the hallway as he talks on the phone, most likely with one of his colleagues. He's naturally loud, which is good for me as it has let me listen in on his conversations easily.

Pausing for a second, I tilt my head to the side and listen. "No, no, the meeting is tomorrow." Pause. "Yes, it will all be covered tomorrow. Don't forget we're having dinner out afterwards. Will you be..."

Deeming the conversation unimportant, I continue my path to the study. My family holds a high standing in society due to the work my father does for the government. I've never felt comfortable living in this house; it's too flashy compared to others. I do my best to blend in, but I'm not always successful.

The one thing I like about this house is the blood red carpet. Not many people have the luxury of carpeted floors. My feet glide silently through the labyrinth of a house until I come to a stop just outside of the study. The doors are shut, but I know that my father isn't in there.

Taking a final glance around me, I'm satisfied no one is nearby. I push one of the doors open just enough for me to slip inside. The lock softly clicks shut behind me.

Bookshelves containing useless books filled with lies line the walls. I ignore them. My goal today is money. My gaze focuses on the large, wooden desk in the center of the room. Moving on autopilot, I step around behind the desk and crouch. I feel around underneath the inside of the desk. It doesn't take long for my fingers to catch on a small latch. Pulling it reveals a key. A key that I use to unlock the bottom drawer on the left. Stacks of money lay inside. I take only one from the back.

After placing the money in my pocket, I put everything back the way it was. It's important for it to look as if you were never there.

Getting back to my room is easy. My father's voice is still booming, offering me comfort. I know that I will miss the sound very much.

I stare at the money in my hands thinking about all of the things I will miss once I'm gone. My father's deep voice, his thoughtfulness, my mother's cooking, her smile, and my best friend. Tradition. I sigh, knowing I have to do this.

I'm jerked from my thoughts when I hear my father's voice getting louder.

Crap.

I throw myself at my bed. Hastily, I rip open the hidden compartment I made on the inside of my bedframe and stuff the money inside. His voice comes to a halt as he stops outside my door. The panel slides back in place. I hold my breath.

His voice continues and he walks away. Exhaling, I fall back on my bed. After a couple of minutes, I get up and dig my bag out of the closet. I pull out a pile of papers. Reading them reminds me of why I'm doing all of this. My anger spikes as the words fill my head yet again. Despite my anger, I carefully refold them and place them back in a plastic bag. As I'm putting the papers in my bag, a picture falls out.

Picking it up, I smile. One of the few happy moments I had was captured in this picture. My friend and I are hugging, laughing at Slate, the person taking the picture. It should have been all three of us in that photo, but if anyone found out Slate was our friend...we'd all be dead.

### **Three Years Ago**

Glasses clink, utensils scrape, lights twinkle. Voices chatter. It's the perfect dinner. The perfect night. It's all fake.

I look on with disgust. How can we be in here eating all of this when just next door there are families starving. I'm starting to realize just how much we've been brainwashed into believing we live in a utopia. Utopia. What even is a utopia? Certainly not this.

Not this fake place full of fake people with fake smiles. I hate myself for smiling with them.

“Hey you. You’re looking a little ‘off’ there.” Slate walks up and nudges me.

My smile morphs from fake to genuine at the sound of his voice.

“Well, when you don’t want to be somewhere, you tend to look ‘a little off.’”

Slate laughs.

Quietly. I wouldn’t want to draw attention to us.

I motion for us to head outside where we can talk more openly. Technically, we shouldn’t be talking at all. If anyone saw us, we’d both be screwed.

“How have you been? It’s been what, a year?” Slate asks once we get outside.

“About. And good, I guess.” I tip my head back and stare at the clear sky.

He follows suit.

“You know. I always find it weird to be able to see the stars so clearly while I’m here. If we were in D.C., all you’d see is the artificial lights from the city.”

“That’s crazy. It’s hard to imagine a city full of lights at night. Even though our capital has the most lights in the country, you can still see the stars; they’re what calms me at night. Maybe I wouldn’t like it there. Maybe this will be all I ever know.”

It’s hard for me to think about what other places look like. Slate has told me so many stories over the years and every time I get a little more jealous of him. His freedom is envious.

“Nonsense,” He protests. “There are so many places you’re going to go. I’ll take you around the world and you’ll get to experience all of things I’ve told you about. You-”

I cut him off.

“Slate. Stop. Just stop. It’s illegal to leave. You know this. I will never leave here. I will never see so many lights that the stars disappear. I will never be free.”

“So leave. Leave all of this behind. You could do it.” His face lights up with hope.

Already I regret what I’m going to say.

“No. It’s impossible.” But it’s not. “Don’t say stuff like that either. You know what will happen if someone hears you. Both of us will suffer. Even your father won’t be able to help you.”

That kills the mood. We both sit there in silence, just watching the stars, for a long time.

“I’m sorry.” His voice is so quiet I almost don’t hear it. “Sometimes I forget where we are and I get carried away.”

I keep quiet, not knowing what to say. I want to tell him that I do to. That sometimes I imagine that I do escape. That I make it to freedom. That I never lived here. But I don’t because I live in North Korea. And here. Here those thoughts lead to pain.

My father, Ryo Dae-Won, is the current Minister of the People’s Armed Forces. His position gives me privilege others don’t have. For example, I was able to go to the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, where I became fluent in English. My best friend, Sol So-Yun, has been working in a factory ever since she turned 17. I’ve seen the conditions. They’re bad. There’s a whole other side to this country. Poverty. Hunger. And from Slate I’ve learned there are work camps. That’s where people disappear to.

So no. I will not voice my thoughts. I don’t want Slate to be sucked into my life any more than he already is.

“But just in case. Here’s my number. If you ever need anything, call me. Ok?”

Slate’s voice shakes me out of my head. His hand is outstretched, holding a small piece of paper. I take it, knowing I won’t use it.

“Thanks.” I smile at him, though it feels more like a grimace.

**Present Day: February 12, 2018**

That small piece of paper with 10 numbers on it now sticks to the back of the picture. I taped it on later that night so I wouldn't lose it. I don't remember what made me do that, but I'm glad I did. That number is going to save a lot of people.

There are only four days left until my escape. Nerves are starting to show. I expected this though and am doing my best to shake them off. There's too much resting on my success.

I check the time, 12:03, and put everything back in place. I told So-Yun I'd meet her at 12:30.

On my way out the door, my mother stops me and asks if I can stop by and drop off my father's work bag.

I sigh. He always forgets it. But hey, it gives me another excuse to snoop where the real information is. So I bend over and carefully sling the brown, worn down bag up from the ground. It's so old I fear it's just going to disintegrate one day and all that will be left is the little brass buckle on the front.

I slow my pace down as I cross the 6 blocks to his office building. Another perk of having a father who holds a high position in the government is that you get to live in the heart of everything. It's convenient since there are no cars here. Sure, there are a few buses, but they don't go far. We aren't supposed to leave our district.

I quickly reach his office building and rush up the stairs. My watch reads 12:16. Shoot. I'm about to fling the doors to his office open when the sound of voices halt me. I used to not care what went on behind closed doors, but these past few years have changed me. Slate opened my eyes to what it's really like in here, who our great leader Kim Jung-un truly is. Ever since he told me the story about the work camps, I've made it my mission to discover the truth.

I found more than I bargained for.

BANG!

I jump. My thoughts of the past interrupted, I now focus on what they're saying on the other side of the door. Eyeing a chair, presumably for waiting, I quickly head towards it. From here I can blend in while eavesdropping.

“You can't just move up the dates! These things take time and testing!”

“This is a direct order from our great leader! Do you dare go against his word? Shall I report you?”

Silence.

“That’s what I thought. They will be launched in a week. Prepare the troops and keep quiet. No one is to know.”

A chair scrapes across the ground and footsteps follow. Jerking back from the crack in the door, I whip out my phone and pull up the one app I have on it. The door swings silently open.

“Sun-Mi! What are you doing here?” My father exclaims.

“Mother sent me with your bag.” I hold up the work bag I myself had forgotten until just now.

“Oh yes! Of course! Tell her thank you for me. Why don’t you go on in and wait for me. I need to walk Mr. Pang Si-Woo out.” I nod my head towards them both and turn to walk in.

“Just don’t touch anything.” He reminds me.

“I won’t.” I pretend to make myself comfortable in his chair until the door clicks shut.

I immediately start shuffling through the piles of paper spread haphazardly across the desk’s surface. By now, I know which words to skim for: nuclear, testing, attack, and weapons among other things.

One pile in particular stands out. It looks to be about a weapons testing that was successful. Phrases like “The nuclear missiles had promising results.” and “Request for approval.” are written many times. Knowing I don’t have much time, I take out my phone and start taking as many pictures as possible.

Heart racing, I’m almost done with the stack when I hear footsteps in the hallway.

Crap.

Taking a risk, I continue taking pictures of the last three pages. My hands are shaking like a ninety-year-old. I scramble to put everything back the way it was, but honestly, my trembling hands probably made it worse. All I can do is pray he doesn’t notice his desk is slightly messier than when he left.

His shadow blocks the light coming in under the door. I clasp my hands on top of the desk. They won’t stay still though so I move them to my lap just as the door glides open.

“Alright Sun-Mi. Was that it?” He walks forward into the middle of the room.

“Yes, that is all. I’ll see you at home.” His puzzled looks makes me feel guilty for being abrupt, but if I stay here any longer he’ll notice my jitters.

“I guess I will see you tonight, then.” He’s still standing in the middle of the room, so I get up and make my way past him.

“Yes, I will see you later. Bye.” I give a little wave as the door shuts.

When it does, I let out a big breath I didn’t know I was holding.

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The rest of the day passes in a blur and when I get home I start reading through the pictures I took. Despite not understanding most of the documents since a lot of it entails technical terms, one part jumps out at me.

The launch date.

February 18, 2018. That can’t be. It’s too soon, only six days!

I rush to the closet and pull out my bag. I slow down so as not to harm the papers. I’ve read through these papers so much I know exactly which page to flip to. The launch date on here says August 23, 2018. How can this be? Two different dates? Which one is correct?

I'm sitting on the floor trying to figure out the answers to my own questions when the conversation my father had earlier in his office comes back to me. "They will be launched in a week. Prepare the troops and keep quiet. No one is to know."

It all comes together now. It's the same plan, just sooner. With dread, I realize that my plan to escape will take too long. My plan was to cross the Tumen river into China and then make my way through Laos and Thailand until I eventually end up in South Korea. It was all already set up, transportation and everything. I've heard it can take up to two or three months to arrive in South Korea. The old launch date gave me enough time to reach Seoul and alert the appropriate authorities. However, this new date for next week screws it all up.

I can feel the panic starting to take over. My breathing speeds up. I feel a bit lightheaded. My room starts to fade like an unfocused camera. Somehow I drag my legs up until I can rest my head between them. Nothing feels real right now and I start to think I'm going to pass out. My eyes close.

And then my breathing evens out. I can feel my heart beating slower. When I brave opening my eyes again, I can see clearly. I've avoided fainting. For now.

I take a few deep breaths before picking up my phone, which must have fallen at some point. Immediately my brain starts racing a million miles a minute. I run through several different scenarios of my escape, each one ending with me being too late. Or dead. Frustrated, I rake my fingers through my hair. As Slade's face surfaces in my head, helplessness, a feeling I don't like,

washes over me. I just don't know what to do. If only I could talk to Slade, he would have an idea. He's good at thinking "outside the box" as he says.

Deciding to try thinking like he would, I rack my brain for something, anything, that could help me. The only other way to get out of North Korea is over the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Slade had mentioned something about a soldier defecting over the DMZ a couple of years ago. It's been over a year since I've seen him, so it's hard to remember the details. I'm praying it's possible though, because right now I'm only grasping at straws.

I wish we had maps here because now would be a good time to put them to good use. The only place I know of that has the closest access to the DMZ and in turn South Korea is Panmunjeom where the Joint Security Area is. I've heard my father talk about it and he even showed me a picture of it once. It's the place where guards from both sides stand side by side 24/7. If I could get there, then I could just run across the line.

The next obstacle is how to get there. The government doesn't allow anyone to move between sectors. Ever. There are checkpoints everywhere. Anyone who tries to pass them without a pass is either shot or they disappear. Now I know that when they disappear, they're sent to work camps. That's somewhere I do not want to end up in, which means I need a really good excuse for going out of Pyongyang. Or a really good connection.

My father's booming voice sounds throughout the house as he enters from work. And that's when I get my idea.

**February 15, 2018**

The drive from Pyongyang to Panmunjeom doesn't take but two hours and I'm horrified at what I see on the way. Farms with thin, tired people working in the fields. Run down houses that don't look livable. Everything from the houses to the people and animals look worse than in Pyongyang. I guess it's always been in the back of my mind how terrible the conditions are here, but it's just become a part of my everyday life. It makes me sad for all of the people I see who will probably live short lives. I make a vow that I will do whatever it takes to help these people once I escape.

The vast fields of farmland come to an end as we exit the Pyongyang-Kaesong Highway. I sit up straighter in the seat, muscles tensing.

"Relax. Nothing's going to happen." My father's voice shakes me from my death grip on the seat.

Suddenly aware of how worked up I am, I make an effort to relax every part of me. I attempt a laugh but it sounds more like a gasping frog.

"Right. Sorry. I guess the thought of being surrounded by all of the soldiers make me nervous."

"It will be fine. Just keep to yourself, alright."

I nod my head, afraid to say anything else lest my nerves get the best of me. Turning my head, I stare out the window. Everything looks the same. The trees are the same shade of green as on the way here. The road is still just as worn as in the city. The sky just as blue. Nothing stands out to me. I'm disappointed. I thought the closer to freedom I got, the brighter everything would get. I guess I was wrong.

As we drive up to another checkpoint, I pull my bag closer towards me. So far none of the guards at the other checkpoints have requested to see inside the car, but I can't help but get nervous now. There are double the guards here and they're all carrying an assortment of weapons. Total, there are more weapons here than I have ever seen in my life. Our car rolls to a stop.

"Hello. I'm here for my scheduled visit." My father says through the window, holding up his ID card.

"Who's that?" The soldier nods at me.

"My daughter. She's cleared."

"We still need to check her." Then, talking at me, "Take out your ID card and step outside, please."

Heart racing, I do as he says, but not before kicking my bag under the seat out of sight. Another guard pats me down while the first one inspects my ID card. I keep as still as possible, hoping that if I don't move, they won't see me as a threat. I almost slip, though, and turn around when the guard pulls my phone out. Luckily, I check myself in time.

“No pictures.” The guy waves the phone in my face before giving it back to me.

My card is given to me next and I take that as a signal to get back in the car. I'm barely in the car when the door slams shut behind me. I jump. The soldiers motion for us to continue. It's a short drive to the parking area. Once there we get out and my father says that he's going to the main building. I follow him.

It takes a while for us to make our way outside. My father convinced the guards to let us go inside the split building. We walk down the steps of the main building and from here I can see the other side. I have no idea where the actual line for the border is. That could be a problem. I glance up at my father and then at the guards following us. I debate whether it would be suspicious if I ask.

“Where exactly is the border?” I ask. Apparently too quietly because my father asks me to say it again.

I clear my throat. “Where exactly is the border?”

“You see that road right there?” He points between the row of buildings. “The other side of it is South Korea. Don’t ever go near that road, ok? It’s very dangerous; the South Koreans are trigger happy.”

His warning goes over my head because I can see the road he’s talking about. It’s so close. 20-30 yards from here.

“Sun-Mi?” My father asks.

“Huh. Oh, yes, I understand.” I drag my eyes from the road and focus on him.

He continues the “tour” of the area. We’re walking out of the split room, the one that has soldiers from each country surrounding it, when someone walks up to my father and indicates he wants to talk to him.

“Sun-Mi, why don’t you go over there for a minute. I’ll make this quick and then we’ll leave, ok?”

I nod and start walking away.

“Just don’t go too far,” he calls after me.

Some of the soldiers start to follow me, but my father waves them away, saying I won't do anything. If only he knew.

I walk to the building at the very end away from everyone else. Slipping behind it I shoulder my bag. It starts to feel a lot heavier now, even though there's hardly anything in it. I'm so close to the road I feel like I could touch it.

There's a crack behind me. I whirl around, hair hitting my face. Brushing it out of my eyes I anticipate one of the soldier's cold eyes glaring at me. Instead, I'm met with empty air. No one is there. Paranoid, I crouch down and crawl to the end of the building. Right now I can't see any soldiers, but that doesn't mean they can't see me.

I take a deep breath of cold, sharp air. My lungs burn. Already I can feel the adrenaline kicking in because I no longer feel cold. I feel nothing. I am numb.

It's now or never.

I go from 0 to 100 in a split second. One second I'm crouched down, the next I'm sprinting full speed to the road. I see nothing but that road. That road is all that stands between me and freedom. The only thing that stands between global destruction and peace. Normally I'm a fast runner, the fastest. Now though, it feels like I'm running through molasses. I'm in slow motion.

The air is ripped apart by bullets. The sound is deafening. Bang after bang after bang. There's no pause. I can't decide if I should weave or run straight.

Weave.

Straight.

Weave.

Straight.

Straight.

Guess I'm going straight. I pray I get to the road faster. It's so close. A few more yards and I'm there.

4 yards. I feel my arm jerk.

3 yards. There's liquid fire in my leg.

2 yards-BAM!

I'm slammed to the ground, face first. Someone's on top of me. My fingers touch the road. I'm so close. Not close enough. The guy on top of me starts dragging me back.

No. I'm too close. Too close!

So I kick. I flail. I punch. I fight. His grip loosens. Not letting up, I aim for his face. My foot connects and he screams. Blood flows, and I don't know if it's his or mine. He's holding his face

with one hand, making it easy for me to get out of his other. As I'm pushing him off, his body jerks. Blood flies and I know he's been shot. Quickly, I scramble up. Out of the corner of my eyes I see several more soldiers swarming towards me. They're running now which means they can't shoot as fast. My only advantage now.

I take off. Well. Sort of. I'm pretty sure my leg has been shot and the blood loss is slowing me down. My feet land on solid road, though, giving me hope. I cross the white line. My right foot is inches from touching the grass of the other side when something hits my side. My foot hits grass. I move my hand to the side that was hit and connect with a knife handle. Pain explodes in me and radiates out. This is the first time I've felt pain since I started running. It must be bad.

Bullets are still zipping through the air, so I choose to ignore the knife and keep running with it in. I'm confused, though, because I thought that once I made it to the other side of the road they would have to stop firing. I quickly learn that isn't the case. My new goal is to get behind the big building looming in front of me.

I veer to the right, but, with my vision fading, I'm not even sure if that's the right direction. It doesn't matter now because I can feel myself slowing. One more jerk and I fall. The last thing I think before blacking out is how much softer the grass is on this side.

## **2 Days Later**

I saw only darkness for so long that it burns to see light. Pure white light. I force my eyes open despite the pain it brings. Groggy, it takes me a minute to realize where I am. A hospital. The steady beep of a machine next to me quickly becomes annoying, echoing in my head. I try to swing my arm at it to shut it up, but pain sears through me at the slightest movement. That's when I realize all of the bandages on me. All I see are bandages. The rising panic brings back all of the memories. How I got to where I am. The lies. The trip. The escape. The information. The phone.

Wait! My phone!

I use the arm that hurts the least to start patting all around me, frantically searching for my phone. The phone that has all of those secret documents on it. The whole reason for my escape in the first place.

I'm in the middle of my search when the door opens. In walks a man in a suit. He looks dead serious as he walks towards me.

"I see you're awake. How are you feeling?" He asks.

I'm silent.

I don't know him. This could be a trick.

“What’s your name?”

Nothing.

“Why did you leave?”

I won’t say anything.

The man in the suit holds up my bag. “Why did you bring this? Why is your phone encrypted?”

I’m glad I had the sense to get my computer friend to encrypt my phone before I left. I know I need to talk to someone in order for someone to stop the attacks.

“Slade.” I say. It comes out as a whisper though so I say it again louder.

“Who’s Slade?” The man asks.

I keep saying Slade’s name and make a phone motion until I’m given one. Pulling out the small piece of paper Slade gave me from my bracelet, I dial the number.

“Hey, it’s Slade.”

His voice relaxes me. Just a little.

“Slade! It’s Sun-Mi.”

There’s silence and for a minute I think maybe he hung up.

“Sun-Mi? How are you calling me? Are you ok? Wait. Does this mean you’re out?” He sounds hopeful when he asks the last question.

I ignore him though and tell him I need him to come to me as soon as possible. I only trust him and I need to make sure I’m not being tricked. If I’m really out of North Korea, he’ll be allowed to see me. He agrees saying it will only take him a few hours to get here since he’s in Europe right now.

I sleep while I wait. When he walks through the door, he rushes to me. He stops short, not wanting to hurt me more, which I appreciate. I waste no time in telling him everything. I start from the beginning; from the very first time I heard my father talking about the weapons to the first documents I stole to my escape. Everything. The man in the suit joins in the conversation. Once I finish he’s quick to leave, thanking me for the information. I just hope that he gets the information to the right people in enough time.

I have faith in him, though.

Faith is all I have now.

## Shattered

In a dazed state Jake's eyes slowly opened and took in the disaster that surrounded him. It felt like a dream, he didn't recognize his surroundings. Pain radiated in his arm as he pinched it to make sure this was his reality. This place he was in didn't look like anything he had ever seen before, it resembled the aftermath of a bombing. It wasn't until his eyes fixated upon the barely standing white painted wooden fence behind him that he realized where he was. This cracked; half standing fence previously surrounded his family's beloved vacation house. Jake's jaw dropped and his eyes widened as he quickly stood up to examine the ruin of the neighborhood. A wave of fear and panic paralyzed him momentarily and sent a cold feeling up his spine that made his body shiver. Even though it was summertime and about eighty degrees outside he had a cold feeling that he couldn't seem to shake, sending waves of goosebumps up his arms and legs. It was eerily quiet outside but Jake could still hear a faint roaring noise in his ear.

His eyes surveyed the rolling mountains in the distance as he focused on the farthest mountain he could see, he'd seen this sight maybe a thousand times, yet for the first time he really took notice of the steep sloping sides compared to the rolling ridges and peaks. His mountain house had been his 'safe place,' the place where he felt truly at peace. This brief moment of peace was overtook by his harsh reality and in the blink of an eye, his recollection of the events before he became unconscious flooded back to him. His mind became consumed with shrieks of terror, children crying, and the wind howling. His hands shook as it all replayed in his mind; he almost felt like it was happening all over again. As his cheeks became stained with tears he remembered calling out for his mother, but he couldn't even hear his own voice over the roaring wind. The deafening sound of the wind that drowned out all other noise became louder and louder and his heart thumped faster and faster until he thought it was going to beat out of his

chest. Amidst all the chaos his mind jumped to his family, his younger brother and mother. He suddenly recalled his little brother Jimmy screaming out about ten minutes before, "I'm going to play outside, bye mom!" and the loud slam of the screen door. Adrenaline pumped through his body as he frantically searched around the backyard screaming "JIMMY, Jimmy where are you?" over and over with panic flooding his voice. He lived in the countryside and his backyard was a field that stretched for ten acres. Anxiety consumed him as he realized that Jimmy had probably gone for a walk to the shed about half a mile away which housed things such as bikes, sports equipment, and farming tools. With the roar of the wind screeching in his ear he knew there was no time to run out there and save him. He faintly remembered peering into the window and seeing his mother cooking dinner in the kitchen, just as he started to make a dash for the door to warn her about what was to come he caught a glimpse of the tornado in his peripheral vision. After that, all Jake could remember was diving under the porch in an attempt to shield himself.

Jake's mind snapped back to reality and he focused on the screeching sounds of sirens in the distance, none seeming to come toward his direction. His jaw began to tremble as he realized he had no clue where his family was. Jimmy. He wallowed in guilt as he recalled his last encounter with his six year old little brother, Jimmy. "Jimmy I hate you. I wish you had never been born" were the last words he spoke to him before angrily retreating to his bedroom. Jimmy accidentally breaking his favorite XBOX game seemed so insignificant now. All he wished for now was to hug him and apologize for being such an awful big brother. His mind swirled with the possibilities of what could have happened to his mother and brother. It was all too much, the shock and panic consumed Jake and he breathed heavily like he had just run a marathon. He walked slowly to the lot his house used to stand on; his eyes welled with tears as he surveyed the

piles of debris where his house once stood. Pieces of wooden boards with nails sticking out were violently thrashed across his yard. Oddly some items were seemingly untouched by the tornado. Jake became puzzled and almost angered at the sight of a fully intact lightbulb resting atop a stack of wooden boards. His house was literally ripped to pieces yet the tornado didn't even break this stupid lightbulb. Jake crouched down to pick up a picture frame of him, his mom, and Jimmy smiling in front of the castle at Disney World last summer. The glass was not shattered. His heart ached at the sight of the picture but it gave him a ray of hope that he would find his mom and Jimmy again, alive and well.

He paced around his yard nervously and came upon a stained, tattered off-white apron that he recalled his mother wearing in the kitchen before the tornado came. It dawned upon him that she must be near so he jogged toward the back of the lot. His heart jumped and a sigh of relief escaped him when he spotted his mother alive. She was stuck underneath some rubble and her face looked tired but she smiled and with content said, "Jake, sweetie, you're alive." Jake, secretly wishing he worked out more, worked hard to lift up the two wooden planks resting on top of his mom. Feeling extremely grateful to have found his mom alive with few injuries, he embraced her with a hug. His mother was visibly weak, had two broken fingers, and was covered in scrapes and bruises but that didn't stop her from wanting to help Jake find Jimmy. They both had a nervous feeling in the pit of their stomachs regarding the safety of Jimmy.

As Jake and his mother looked out in the field the sun started to set, giving off a beautiful pink and orange sunset. The two set out walking at a fast pace toward the shed to find Jimmy. Their exhaustion got the best of them making the half mile walk feel like two miles of running. Their chests pounded as they wiped off beads of sweat on their forehead but they had finally gotten to the shed. There was no sign of Jimmy in the field but the shed was perfectly intact, the

tornado had just barely missed it. Jake's mother peered open the large, screechy wooden door to the shed. As a small beam of light flooded into the inside of the dark, crowded shed, they heard a faint voice. A small, scared voice whispered "Mom, Jake, is that really you?" There was Jimmy, curled up in a ball in the corner behind a bike. His mother immediately picked him up as tears filled her eyes. Jimmy was shaking from the traumatic events that had previously occurred but he was alive. They all cried tears of joy; they couldn't help but feel grateful that they were all alive despite losing everything they owned. Jake smiled and thought to himself, *the glass was not shattered.*

## Radha Ashtami

Dark brown trunks of coconut trees splayed out lush green leaves behind a meandering river. Flowers bloomed everywhere, their petals reaching up towards the sky in hunger for sunlight. Peacocks splayed their vibrant blue and green feathers as they danced. Two divine figures dominated the image with their beauty in the center, adorned with jewels, golden ornaments and priceless silk clothes.

“Finished,” I said, sighing as I placed my paintbrush in the nook between my right ear and my head. I looked towards my masterpiece with pride. This particular image had taken me two weeks to complete. It was a portrayal of my favorite deities, Lord Krishna and His Beloved Radha Devi, together in a pose of holy bliss. I was examining the painting for missing details when my *Babai*<sup>1</sup> came behind me and patted me on the shoulder.

“Radha, you’ve really done it this time. The painting is so beautiful,” he said, sighing.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Babai,” I said, looking up at him from my place on the floor. Babai had taken the wood of a coconut tree and scraped it until the surface was smooth for me because he knew how much I loved painting despite all the work he had to do in the fields.

I lived in a small village in Andhra Pradesh, India called Yelamanchili. At fourteen years of age, I’d already been married eight years before, but I don’t have to live with my husband until I’m eighteen. I was born into a Brahmin family, so no one could imagine what might happen if someone disobeyed the various ancient rituals and traditions. All of my father’s side of the family lived in the same mud house, including my grandparents, my uncles, and even some second cousins too. To the right of our village, the beautiful blue-green Godavari divided us from another village, Chinchinada.

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<sup>1</sup> *Babai* means uncle in Telugu; in Indian culture, people tend to call each other with these colloquial terms rather than with names.

Just as I was about to get up, my older brother Rudhra, who I called *Annayya*<sup>2</sup>, came from a door on the left side of the room, wearing a *panchakattu*<sup>3</sup> around his waist. Annayya was an eighteen year old young man. He was the tallest in the family, had very long arms and legs, and was quite skinny for his age. At a young age, Annayya had learned all of the scriptures and mantras from our wise priests, and had his *vodugu*<sup>4</sup> when he was six. He was very religious and commanded a lot of respect in our village.

“Radha, why didn’t you join me this morning to do *puja*<sup>5</sup>?” he asked when he stepped inside and saw me.

“I was finishing my painting, Annayya,” I said, gesturing with my hands as I started packing up my supplies. “Look, isn’t it nice?”

Annayya didn’t even glance at my painting.

“That’s no excuse, Radha. Next time, remember to come,” he said grudgingly, his face pinched in irritation. I know that he loves me, but sometimes Annayya is *very* annoying.

“Annayya, you didn’t even see the painting. Why are you so angry today?” I complained. He set his things down, came to me and sat beside me to look at the painting. Then, his expression softened as he put his arm across my shoulders and faced me.

“Sorry, *ra*<sup>6</sup>. Your painting is very beautiful, as always. Something just felt very wrong this morning. I couldn’t even focus on my puja.” He stood, a small look of confusion on his face, and left to continue his work. That was weird. Annayya had perfect focus and concentration, something that I was envious of him for, and something had shaken him so much that even he had lost his

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<sup>2</sup> *Annayya* means older brother in Telugu.

<sup>3</sup> A *panchakattu* is a *dhoti*, which is a cloth that males wear, tied around the waist that is extended to cover the legs.

<sup>4</sup> A *vodugu* is the ceremony to become a priest.

<sup>5</sup> *Puja* is a form of prayer.

<sup>6</sup> *Ra* is a colloquial term in Telugu to express closeness to someone.

focus. But I did not have time to ponder this, because a little voice called “*Akka*<sup>7</sup>!” and ran towards me, hugging me at my torso. It was Raksha, my eight year old sister, who I fondly called as *Chelli*<sup>8</sup>.

“Chelli, what are you doing here?” I asked as I lifted her and placed her on my waist.

Chelli was a small girl with skin that was as soft as *ghee*<sup>9</sup>, and as white as the moon. She was the village favorite; everyone loved her, me especially. She was the sweetest girl: she never caused any trouble, and she would do anything for anyone with joy. My family was looking for matches for Chelli, but they haven't found someone who matched her *jathakam*<sup>10</sup> yet. She hugged my neck with her small hands and planted a kiss on my cheek.

“*Amma*<sup>11</sup> is calling you. She needs your help,” she replied in her sweet voice.

“Alright, let's go,” I said. Chelli climbed onto my back, and I carried her to where my mother was; we laughed and talked on the way there.

When we arrived, Amma said, “Radha, how long do I have to wait for you? There are chores to be done,” Amma said in a stern voice, hands on her hips.

“I'm sorry, Amma. I just caught up in my painting, that's all. Tomorrow I'll be here on time.”

She sighed, shaking her head as she gave me an empty bucket. We talked as we went to the river, washed our soiled clothes, and filled our buckets with water.

I brought my painting with me to show my mother as we walked. She loved it, pointing out her favorite details as we made our way through the village. As we sat by the river, I held the painting in my hands, admiring it. The images slowly started to blur, and then they disappeared

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<sup>7</sup> *Akka* means older sister in Telugu.

<sup>8</sup> *Chelli* means little sister in Telugu.

<sup>9</sup> *Ghee* is butter made from cow milk.

<sup>10</sup> *Jathakam* means horoscope in Telugu.

<sup>11</sup> *Amma* means mother in Telugu.

off of the wooden slab, reappearing in front of me as life size animated people. Radha smiled as Krishna played divine music on his flute. I watched, entranced by the scene, and closed my eyes as I enjoyed the music. Then, as my mother came towards me, Radha and Krishna vanished, reappearing on my wooden surface.

Since I was a child, my paintings have always come to life. When I was younger, I used to play with the images that I created. When I told my mother about the day's adventure, she simply disregarded it as a figment of my imagination. For a time, I thought so too. But one day, when I drew a deer and watched it prance around, someone came from behind me and it ran away suddenly in fright. The deer didn't come back. It did not even reappear on my wooden canvas. That's when I realized that whatever I painted really came to life. However, I didn't tell anyone because I knew no one would believe me. So I enjoyed the pictures by myself, watching as each painting came to life and eventually disappear into mist and surface onto the wooden slab again.

After completing our chores beside the river, Amma and I headed back to our house. The day passed as usual, doing work around the house and spending time with family. I swept the and cleaned the floor with water while chatting with Chelli as she swung on the wooden swing. After completing my duties, I went over to Annayya, who was placing some plates and spoons back in their places.

“Annayya,” I said sweetly to catch his attention.

“Yes, Radha. What do you want?”

“I finished my chores, and Chelli and I want to go to the temple. Will you take us there?”

I asked timidly, unsure of how he would react.

Chuckling, he said “Sure Radha. Go, get Chelli, and ask Amma for some flowers. We will go in five minutes.”

Excited, I rushed to get some flowers and to find Chelli. I met Annayya by the front door, and as he promised, he took us to the temple, which was two minutes by walk from our house. At the temple, Annayya, Chelli and I spent the rest of the afternoon singing *bhajans*<sup>12</sup> and enjoying in peace. At the end of the day, I joined Amma and Annayya as they performed the evening puja. Then we all ate dinner and went to sleep.

The next day started out normal. In the morning, Annayya and I chanted our morning prayers, and Amma and I headed out to get water, take a bath and wash the clothes by the river, and after that I went out into the fields to get a couple of ripe coconuts for today's curry. But when I went back home, Amma was watching the streets from behind the doorway, and Annayya, Babai and my father were standing just outside our house, looking at something. Confused, I stood across from Amma and looked from behind the doorway to see what was going on.

That was when everything turned around. Strange looking people came marching into our small village, wearing strange clothes and holding weird branches. They had skin that was the color of the moon, and they spoke in a foreign language. When I came to look our *sarpanch*<sup>13</sup> was confronting them to see why they had come. From what he could understand, the strange people said that they were now in control of our village, and we had to listen to what they told us to do.

I thought it was preposterous. How could people just come to our village and say that they had the right to claim it as their own? But it seemed that no one else felt the same way that I did. Amma was afraid of them, and forbade me to go outside after they arrived. No one gave me any reasons. My parents told Annayya, though. When I saw Annayya alone, I pulled him aside so that no one could see us.

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<sup>12</sup> *Bhajans* are religious songs.

<sup>13</sup> A *sarpanch* is the head of a village.

“What is going on, Annayya? Why is everyone acting so strange? Who are those strange people?” I questioned.

“We have to be very careful, Radha. Those strange people will kill us if anyone broke their rules. I know who they are. I’ve heard of them from the neighboring villages. They were called Britishers, and they came from a far away place to conquer India.”

After that fateful day, we kept our doors closed at all times, and only my father, Babai, and sometimes Annayya would come and go with buckets of water and other essentials. Other than that, we were cooped up, imprisoned in our own house, and controlled in our own village by strangers. It seemed so stupid, but I was too scared to take any action against them. I felt helpless, and grew restless every day that passed after their occupation. Five days after, though, I couldn’t take it any longer, so I decided to sneak out of the house through a door in one of the rooms in the back of the house. I was running out of certain colors for my paintings, too, so I slipped out of the house and into my family’s fields.

When I got to the place where I found the fruits and berries from which I created my colors, I was surprised. There was a boy around my age sitting there to the side playing with a small stick, his side turned to me. He had skin that was as dark as rain clouds that were about to pour, and shoulder length hair that was jet black, thick and curly. He wore small, shiny golden studs with small *rudrakshas*<sup>14</sup> hanging below them. A mango yellow panchakattu was wrapped around his waist and legs, and a thin white cloth was tied around his head, the knot tied to the left side of his face. Sticking up from underneath the knot on his head was a small peacock feather. He wore rudrakshas around his neck, as anklets, as bracelets, and even around his biceps. He was a bit chubby, too.

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<sup>14</sup> *Rudrakshas* are special prayer beads, named after Lord Shiva because he is adorned in these beads.

The boy turned to face me when I entered. I gasped. The boy smiled sweetly, his face radiating with joy, and got up to face me. I was entranced by his face. He had eyes shaped like the petals of a lotus, with pupils that were a rich brown earthy color, and his small red lips the color of pomegranate seeds. His forehead was adorned with a small red colored *tilakam*<sup>15</sup>. I was instantly overwhelmed with a feeling so rich that I couldn't describe for this boy I didn't even know. The boy continued smiling with joy until I finally regained my senses.

“*Namaskaram*,” I said timidly, placing my hands together in front of my chest and bowing slightly in the traditional greeting.

“*Namaskaram*,” the boy said in return, mimicking my actions. His voice was so sweet, and it sounded as if he was singing.

“What's your name?”

“Gopal. What's yours?”

“Radha,” I said.

Gopal seemed so friendly, so welcoming and understanding, that I didn't feel afraid of him. After days, I finally felt a sense of security and safeness just by being around him.

“Are you new to the village? I haven't seen you here before,” I asked.

“I'm from Chinchana. I came to celebrate *Radha Ashtami*<sup>16</sup> with my relatives who live here.”

I was immediately saddened. Amma told me that our village would not be celebrating the festival like we did the years before, and that instead we would just perform a small puja at home. Radha Ashtami was my favorite festival of the year. Yelamanchili would be richly decorated, the

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<sup>15</sup> A *tilakam* is a type of *bindi* formed with two small diagonal lines that meet each other at the bottom and a longer straight vertical line in the middle.

<sup>16</sup> *Radha Ashtami* is the celebration of Radha Devi's birth.

houses lit with *deepalu*<sup>17</sup> and the streets decorated with multicolored *muggulus*<sup>18</sup>, and everyone would be filled of joy for the celebration. It was a sight to see.

Radha Ashtami was next week, and I had been planning to give one of my paintings as an offering at the temple, but now I wasn't sure that it was going to happen.

Seeing my expression, Gopal asked, "What's wrong? You seem so sad."

"Amma said that we wouldn't get to celebrate Radha Ashtami this year," I explained to him.

"Don't worry, Radha. You will celebrate it just like you want to," Gopal reassured me.

I didn't know why, but I found hope in his words. We chatted for an hour, although it truly felt like five minutes. At the end, Gopal said that he had to leave, but told me to meet him at the same place at the same time. Agreeing, I left for my house.

Luckily, when I entered my house no one noticed I was gone. Almost. As soon as I came into the main hall, Annayya gave me a knowing look, but didn't tell anyone. After everyone had fallen asleep, he woke me up and pulled me to a corner.

"What is it, Annayya," I groaned softly, drowsy with sleep.

"Radha, I know you went somewhere, but I won't ask where you've been. All that I ask is for you to be careful. I know it's tough being at home all of the time, but I don't want you to get hurt, or even worse, fall into the hands of those British people. Please be careful, okay?" Annayya asked, shaking my arm to make sure I was awake and had heard what he'd said.

"Okay, Annayya."

"Good girl," he sighed with relief.

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<sup>17</sup> *Deepalu*, also known as *diyas*, are lamps that are fueled with butter.

<sup>18</sup> *Muggulus*, also known as *rangoli*, are colored patterns formed using substances such as colored rice and dry flour.

Knowing how tired I was, Annayya picked me up and laid me down to sleep next to Amma. I curled up next to her and found the picture of Radha and Krishna that I had finished the day before and admired it as I settled for the night. However, there was something off about the painting. Then I realized why I felt that way: Krishna had disappeared from the painting.

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I contemplated about the missing deity in my painting as I did my chores the next morning, and while I ate. I could not figure out how Krishna had escaped without my notice from the painting. Usually the images didn't become animate until I held and examined them. Still pondering over the mystery, I walked through the fields to meet Gopal. He saw my confused expression and asked what was wrong. I opened my mouth to tell him how Krishna had disappeared from my painting, but then caught myself. *He'll probably think I'm seeing things, just like everyone else*, I thought. So I shrugged it off and told him it was nothing. He didn't pressure me into explaining. Instead, he told me that we were going to cause some mischief today. At first, I was a bit scared to take part.

“Radha, come on. It will be fun,” Gopal said, trying to convince me.

“I don't know, I am scared,” I told him.

“Why are you scared? We aren't doing anything wrong. We are just going to show the British people that they don't belong here.”

I still wasn't ready to take action, but eventually Gopal convinced me and we went off.

Each day, we would do something crazy to the Britishers, such as act like ghosts, steal their clothes and weird branches, and make big sounds to scare them. Some of the men became paranoid and left the village, too scared to stay any longer. However, there were some Britishers who decided to stay despite our efforts.

On the day before Radha Ashtami, Gopal planned something big that would scare all of the men away from the village. But he wouldn't tell me what we were going to do. The day before the plan, all he told me was to wait for the next day, and he would tell me then. Although I was really impatient, I waited for the following day to come.

On the day of the mysterious plan, I woke up early and silently left the house after getting ready. I ran through the lavish fields to go to the special spot under the coconut tree, my *pattilu*<sup>19</sup> and bangles tinkling slightly as I rushed. In my hurry, I took a wrong turn and ended up on the dirt road. I was confused. I stood on the road, looking back and forth, trying to figure out where I was. The sun had not risen yet, and there was mist everywhere, so I couldn't see anything. I strained my eyes, starting to walk to my right in hesitant steps, hoping to find some clue to my location.

All of the sudden, I saw a tall dark figure coming in my direction. Scared, I started walking backwards, keeping my eyes on the figure and making sure that I didn't make a sound. The figure started coming closer at a rapid speed. Consumed by fear, I turned around and started running, my feet slapping the ground and my *pattilu* and bangles jingling as I sped into the opposite direction. I heard a muffled shout and ran faster, tears streaming from my eyes as the early morning cold air slashed at my eyes and my two long braids whipping through the air behind me. I turned back slightly to see if the figure was following me, and to my horror, there were multiple figures coming in my direction at an alarming speed.

I smashed into a strongly built body as I was running and was knocked out of breath. To my surprise and relief, it was Annayya. He had a very determined expression on his face.

“Annayya, let's go!” I said, trying to pull him with me to run away. He didn't budge. He pulled me in front of him and turned me so that we were face to face.

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<sup>19</sup> *Pattilu* are metal anklets lined with different designs and bells

“Why are you running away, Radha? You didn’t do anything wrong. Stop hiding from your problems, stand up for yourself and fight for what you believe is right. You can’t run forever.”

I looked at him with uncertainty.

“I can’t, Annayya. I’m afraid. You told me yourself that I should be careful and stay away from the Britishers.”

“Yes, but now I know you have the courage and the strength to stand up to yourself. For the past couple of days you have taken care of yourself and were brave enough to step outside of the house despite danger. It’s time to face your fears, Radha.”

Annayya was right. I did have the courage to leave the house, and even attempt to get the Britishers to leave. I could do this.

After a moment of hesitation, I took Annayya’s hand into mine and held it as I stood beside him and faced the people following me. The mist cleared, and I saw several of the Britishers with their strange branches aimed at us. I knew that I was supposed to be afraid, but I wasn’t. The Britishers hesitated, puzzled by our lack of fear. Annayya pulled two long wooden staffs from behind him and handed one to me. Although I had never handled a staff before, I had this strange feeling of control, and held it confidently in my hand, lightly banging it on the dirt road and stirring some dust.

Annayya and I took fighting stances. One of the Britishers made a clicking sound, but Annayya didn’t give him a chance to make a move after that. He charged at the men silently and started wacking them with the wooden staff. I followed him, jumping into action. As we were fighting men kept falling down, but they kept getting up and picking up their fight. Annayya and I were losing our energy as the fight stretched on. Several men saw me slow down and started attacking harder, smacking me with their weird branches at my arms and legs, and even across my

face. One branch cut across my skin, drawing blood and throwing me to the ground. Immediately, Annayya came in front and covered me while I tried to regain my balance and stand up.

“Radha, are you okay?” he shouted with concern.

That was when I saw Gopal. He was standing there, leaning against the tree on his shoulder and playing with a wooden flute that had beads strung and tied to one end. He looked up with his lovely eyes lined with *kaatuka*<sup>20</sup>, a small smile dancing on his red lips. At that moment, it seemed as if all of time slowed to a stop. The Britishers froze in combat with Annayya, expressions of aggression splayed on their faces. Gopal confidently strode towards me and helped me get back on my feet.

“What is this Gopal?” I asked in confusion. “Why didn’t you come before? Why aren’t you helping us fight these people?”

Gopal looked at me eye to eye. “I am not the fighter. That’s your job. I’m only here to guide you,” he said calmly. “If you truly believe in your cause, and you are doing it for the greater good, then success is always on your side. No matter how many obstacles and enemies come in your way, if you hold to your principles and values then God will always be there to lead you to victory. Go now, go and win your battle.”

With that, Gopal left to stand by the tree.

Time resumed, and Annayya continued fighting with the Britishers. With new confidence and vigor, I picked up my staff and started battling. The end of my staff started shimmering, and animals and birds started appearing and attacking the foreigners as well. In a matter of minutes, the Britishers started losing members, each getting defeated one by one. Bewildered by the magic, they all started screaming in fear. Those who were fighting threw away their weapons and started

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<sup>20</sup> *Kaatuka* in Telugu, known as *kajal* in Hindi, is the term for eyeliners similar to kohl.

running away; those who were sprawled on the floor noticed their fellow soldiers running and looked in our direction to see what was so frightening. Seeing the images come to life from the end of my staff, they also shrieked in fright, got up and started running away. We had won.

Tired, Annayya and I came to the tree where Gopal was standing. Annayya sat down at its base and relaxed into the tree, sighing and closing his eyes in exhaustion. Gopal motioned for me to follow him away from the tree. I embraced Gopal tightly.

“Thank you, Gopal. Without you I wouldn’t have had the confidence to finish fighting.” I said.

“Always follow your *dharma*, and success will follow you. Believe in what your heart says is correct, and do the right thing. Then, nobody can stop you,” Gopal advised.

I smiled, and he smiled back.

“Radha?” Annayya called from the tree.

“Gopal, come with me. I will introduce you to Annayya.” I said, taking his hand and pulling Gopal towards the tree. But Gopal didn’t move.

“I can’t come, Radha,” he said.

“Why not?” I said, disappointment clouding my face.

“My parents will be waiting for me, and yours will be too. Look, the sun is rising,” Gopal said, pointing at the horizon. He was correct. The sun was slowly rising, painting the sky in beautiful bright purples, pinks, yellows and blues.

“Radha? Where are you?” Annayya called out.

“When will we meet next?” I asked quickly, reluctant to leave Gopal.

“Go home first. Everything will make sense to you,” he said, placing his hand on the side of my head and sliding his finger over the spot where one of the men had cut my face. “Bye Radha,” he said, and then he turned around and left.

“Bye Gopal,” I said, waving my hand at his receding figure.

I went back and found Annayya at the tree.

“There you are,” he said in relief, “where have you been? I’ve been looking for you.”

“I was just at the side of the fields with Gopal, Annayya,” I said.

“Who is Gopal?”

“He is my friend. I met him just a couple days back. He said he came here from Chinchinada to celebrate Radha Ashtami because his relatives lived here.” I told him, recounting the adventures that Gopal and I had together.

After listening patiently, Annayya said “Radha, nobody in this village had relatives in Chinchinada. I know everyone in Yelamanchili, and I have never heard of a Gopal or his family. Who are you talking about?”

This puzzled me. I was certain that Gopal wouldn’t lie to me. He just wasn’t that kind of a person. At the same time Annayya had no reason to lie to me either. So what had actually happened?

Annayya didn’t give me much time to ponder. “Come on Radha, we need to go home before anyone knows we’re missing and clean up the cut that you got. By the way, where is it?”

I slid my fingers over the place where the cut was supposed to be, and where Gopal had rubbed his finger just moments before. The skin was completely smooth, and there wasn’t even a scratch. That was weird. It was like it had never existed.

“I don’t know, Annayya.” I said hesitantly.

“I thought I saw you get cut on your head.” Annayya paused, examining my face for a minute. “At least you aren’t hurt. Now let’s go home.”

With that, we rushed home, cleaned up, and went through our daily routine as if we had never left. Thankfully, no one noticed that we we had left. Before we parted, Annayya made me promise to never tell anyone about what happened that morning.

Later that day, our village found out that the Britishers had left our village for good. It was announced that Radha Ashtami would be celebrated with more splendor than before because Yelamanchili believed that Krishna had protected us from danger. We all celebrated, decorating our houses and chanting the Lord’s name for saving our village. Everyone was so happy, and we had a blast for a whole week after celebrating Radha Ashtami.

I never saw Gopal again. No matter who I asked and where I searched, I could never to seem to find anyone who knew even the slightest clue about him. For a month, every afternoon I would run across the fields to our place under the coconut tree and wait for him, hoping he would show up. But he never did. Eventually I gave up searching for him and continued painting. But something did happen, almost without my notice. The day of Radha Ashtami, when I went to the temple to receive blessings for my painting of Radha and Krishna, I realized that something had changed. Krishna had returned in the painting, playing his flute and looking at Radha lovingly.

## Duende

Duende (*n.*): the power to attract through personal magnetism and charm

*Day after day, month after month, he said nothing of his affection.*

*"I am in love with you," he whispered to the headstone before him.*

### Three Years Earlier

The first time he saw her was at a party. She had smooth dark brown hair that fell down her back in perfect ringlets. She was standing in the corner surrounded by her friends wearing ripped black skinny jeans and an oversized purple sweater. He watched as she laughed with them, her eyes sparkling. He was in the middle of the dance floor when he first caught a glimpse of her, and something about her captivated him. He couldn't quite place it, but something about her drew his attention. He kept glancing at her throughout the party. The only times his eyes left her was when she stepped away from her friends to use the bathroom, leaving her drink with them when she left. He never got the courage to speak to her the entire night.

Next Monday, he saw her sitting alone on the wall outside during lunch. *What happened to the friends she was with at the party?* He sat at the picnic table with his friends, their conversation and laughter turning into white noise as he studied her. Her legs were swinging gently, hitting the wall as she nibbled on her sandwich. As if she could feel him staring at her, she glanced at him, their eyes meeting. Quickly, he averted his eyes and turned his attention back to his friends. Throughout lunch, he kept stealing glances at her, but no one ever joined her.

Later that day, he stopped at the small café down the street from the school. There she was again. Once again, she was sitting in the corner. This time she had a laptop in front of her,

seemingly blocking out the world. Every so often, she picked up her mug and took a small sip of whatever she was drinking. Behind him, someone cleared their throat and he was pulled back to reality. Once he got his drink, he took a table near her. Something about her was different today. She was less lively than when he first saw her at the party. Her hair was messy as if she had run her hands through it multiple times. Every so often, she would scan the room as if she was anxious about something.

That night, he lay awake in bed unable to sleep. His thoughts were drawn to the gregarious girl he saw at the party. Then, a different girl in the same body. The one sitting alone with her modest sandwich. The one sitting alone at the café. Reticent. Forlorn. *Something must have happened at the party.*

Every day for the next month, he watched her from his spot at the picnic table with his friends while she sat on the wall. Some days she had a sandwich, other times she only had a small snack of carrots or a sliced apple. Every day she sat there with her meager lunch, watching everything going on around her. Her wardrobe seemed to consist of only t-shirts, sweaters, hoodies, sweatpants, and skinny jeans. He could see by the way her eyebrows scrunched slightly that she was lost in thought. The way she looked around was different, almost distant; her posture starting to slump until one day when he glanced at the wall, and she wasn't there. He stared at the spot, waiting for her to appear. *She's just running late. She's just held up in her last class.* He waited and waited for all of lunch, but she never appeared.

Over the next few days, he kept looking over to her usual spot, but she was nowhere to be seen. *What happened to the lively girl he saw at the party? What about that other version he saw after the party, the one that simply sat there, observing everything around her? Where could she have gone?*

The week passed and he never saw a trace of her. It was the weekend when he saw her again at the café near school. After that, he had made a habit of going there often just so he could see her. She was still alone, but something was different about her. Something seemed off. There were days she didn't show up at school but appeared at the café in her usual corner spot on her laptop, taking small sips from her cat-shaped mug. *Why would she be skipping school?*

Then, one day, she wasn't at school or the café. An entire week went by and he didn't see her in either of her usual spots. *What happened to her? Where is she? Why haven't I seen her anywhere?*

A week turned into a month without a single sign of the girl that had captured his attention in the last two months. It's almost as if she completely vanished...or didn't exist at all... During this time, he started asking his friends about the girl.

"Hey, you know the girl that used to sit on the wall over there?" he pointed.

"Yeah, why do you care about her? She was such a weirdo, sitting all by herself. Didn't she have any friends?" one of his friends answered.

"Do you know what happened to her?" he questioned.

"I dunno," his friend shrugged.

"I heard she slept with Bryce Easton at that party a couple of months ago," another one of his friends added.

"Ooo, does someone have a crush?"

"No!" he said a little too loudly, causing a few people to glance in their direction. "I was just asking," he mumbled, pushing the remainder of his lunch aside, his mind still on the girl. He was grateful when the lunch period ended.

After school, he walked to the café. His next best hope would be the barista since the girl was a regular until recently. He approached the order counter apprehensively.

“Hey, what can I getcha?” the barista asked with a friendly smile.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, “I had a question actually.”

The barista gave a curious look, “what is it?”

“A girl...I don’t know her name, but she came here often and sat in that corner usually, on her laptop wearing headphones,” he pointed out the corner, “I haven’t seen her around in a while and no one at school seems to know what happened to her or where she went. I was wondering if you knew what happened to her or where she went...” he trailed off.

“Oh! You mean Madison? She’s a good friend of mine, came here often to visit me at work. The most she told me was that something happened a few months ago. She said she didn’t want to talk about it, but I could tell it’s really bothering her. She’s seemed off lately. Then, all of a sudden, she just stopped answering my calls and texts. The last I saw her was about a week ago at the park. She disappeared before I got the chance to talk to her though,” the barista sighed. “I really wish I could help her, or be of more help.”

“Thank you, you were all the help I could’ve wished for...” he glanced at her nametag, “Valerie,” he smiled a little at the barista before leaving.

*Madison. That’s her name. Something definitely happened at that party, but what?* The question remained on his mind as he decided to walk to the park, hoping to see Madison there.

The park consisted of an ornate fountain in the center with a stone pathway surrounding the fountain. Then, it was covered in wide open grass with the occasional tree to provide some shade. When he got to the park, he walked toward the fountain. There were various pennies, dimes, nickels, and even quarters in it, even though there was a sign specifically indicating,

*Please do not throw change into the fountain. Thank You!* Sitting on the edge of the fountain, he scanned the area. He saw an old couple sitting on a bench, a mother and her young daughter, and a guy running with his dog. No Madison.

Just as he was walking out of the park to leave, he caught a glimpse of her. That warm chocolate brown hair. She was sitting against a tree, alone, with her laptop.

“Hey,” he said walking up to her and stopping a couple of feet away.

She ignored him and continued typing away on her laptop. *What the heck could she be doing on her laptop with no Wi-Fi, anyway?*

He sat down next to her, leaving a couple of feet between them. “Don’t we go to the same school? I’ve seen you around, but you just disappeared,” he said, trying to fill the silence.

After a few moments, she finally spoke, “I didn’t think anyone would notice...or really care,” she sighed. “Why do you care?” She hesitantly asked the next question, “Wait...are you that guy who kept looking at me during lunch? That’s kinda stalkerish you know.”

He laughed a little, “My name is Luke.”

“I still don’t know you, though.”

“Well, we could change that.” He winked jokingly.

The corners of her mouth twitched as if she was repressing a smile. “One, that’s really cheesy. And two, how do I know that this isn’t some sort of trick or something? What if you have some sort of ulterior motive?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I don’t, I promise,” he laughed. “I can prove it to you if you’ll let me.”

She pauses for a moment, anxiously considering his offer. *It would be nice to hang out with someone. He won’t do anything to me. Why would he?*

“Okay.”

They spent the entire afternoon together. They went to the movies, then stopped at McDonald's for some French fries and ice cream. "I don't know what's in their meat, and I don't want to find out," Madison had said. They sat in McDonald's for a while, just talking. In reality, Luke had done most of the talking, but Madison enjoyed watching him talk. Whenever he got excited about something, he would talk faster and louder, and his hands would move faster as he spoke. As they spent more time together, she started to relax and smile more at his jokes. Before they knew it, it started to get dark outside.

"I, um, had a good time, Luke. Thank you," she gave him a sincere smile.

"Can we do this again, maybe?" he asked, hopeful.

"Sure," she agreed. They exchanged phone numbers and parted ways.

They ended up spending almost every afternoon together for the next several months. Gradually, Madison became more comfortable around Luke. She began to trust him more and let her guard down around him. Meanwhile, Luke fell for her harder than he could have ever imagined. She was absolutely beautiful, inside and out. Words could not describe his adulation for her. He never got the courage to express his feeling to her. To tell her how much he loved every single little quirk that she called flaws.

Eventually, Madison trusted him enough to tell him what had happened all those months ago. The thing she couldn't tell even her best friend. Something about him radiated integrity and compassion and made her want to open up to him.

"I know you've been trying not to ask," she started.

"Ask what?" he replied, confused.

"Why I haven't been at school? What am I doing all alone, not at home? What happened to me?"

He didn't know what to say. Yes, he had been wondering, but he didn't want to push her. "Well, yes, but..." he trailed off.

"I don't know how to say this other than to just say it outright. At that party at the beginning of the school year, I was raped," she said quickly, all in one breath. He let out a gasp but didn't say anything, allowing her to continue. "I don't know how, but I got drugged. Then, some guy from school started touching me and I tried to get him to stop, but he wouldn't. Then, he took me to a bedroom and I tried to fight back, but-" she broke off. Taking a deep breath, she continued. "I left the party right after. I couldn't believe what had happened." He wrapped an arm around her, giving her a comforting hug. "I went to the doctor by myself to get checked out, but they called my parents and told them what happened even though I begged them not to. My parents started blaming me and yelling at me that I had let it happen. They were horrible. So...I ran away. And now, here I am."

They sat there in the park for a while, not saying anything. He kept his arm around her in a comforting gesture. He was at a loss for words. *How could someone do that to her? How could her parents blame her for something she had no control over? She doesn't deserve any of this. She deserves to be happy.*

The next day, she texted him after school, right before they would normally meet up. *I can't hang out today, sorry.*

*Why not? :(*

*Something came up. Thank you for everything.*

*You showed me happiness, and I will be eternally grateful.*

*What are you talking about?*

*Madison?*

*Madison???*

She stopped replying. *Oh my god, is she okay?* He ran to the park where they usually met and did a quick scan of the area, but she was nowhere in sight.

### Present Day

With a bouquet of flowers in his hand, he walked toward her headstone and read it for what seemed like the millionth time:

*Madison Susan Walker*

*June 11, 1996 - May 13, 2014*

Day after day, month after month, he said nothing of his affection.

“I am in love with you,” he whispered to the headstone before him.

## Under a Different Sky

When Damian was a young boy, he always thought the world was full of good. That all people and things were benevolent, and nothing would ever change. Throughout most of his life, Damian's idea of a perfect world stayed true. The kingdom he lived in, named Acestria, was one of the wealthiest and successful settlements in the Vale, ruled by the royal Brigant family, King Flint and Queen Leyte. The couple were admired by their people, commoners and lords alike, and under their leadership, Acestria endured a peaceful era for the longest time in history.

Damian had a secure home to tuck into at night, his parents loved him more than anything, and he was fed the best food one can ask for. At sixteen years of age, he felt complete, though of course, he had his whole life ahead of him, and couldn't wait to train to become the best swordsman alive. That is, until a devastating war fell upon Acestria. His father was sent directly to the frontlines to fight for his kingdom, and his mother was stuck at home dealing with the turmoils around her. As for himself, Damian didn't know what he could do to help his sunken kingdom.

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"It's becoming late." Damian abruptly mumbled under his breath, shaking his head to snap out of his distracting thoughts and causing his large crimson curls to bounce wildly as he did so. He rubbed his right eye and sighed, his head turned to glance at his familiar surroundings. He pushed himself up from his laid back position in the dull green grass speckled with autumn leaves, able to see the quiet orange-yellow forest in front of him and the smooth boulder on his left, sunlight beating down to warm his body despite the occasional chilly winds. This was his favorite place to be, which served as a getaway for when he needed time to himself.

Unfortunately it was about time to head home; he wouldn't want to be late or worry his mother. She already had a lot on her plate these days.

“Come along, Hak!” Damian called out, his silver eyes focusing on the rock where a large Shepherd dog appeared from behind it, his tail wagging excitedly back and forth. “Let's go home, boy.” Damian mumbled in a softer tone after he rubbed the top of Hak's head, laughing when his dog began to lick his hand in enthusiastic strokes. If he stayed any longer, his hand would be drenched in slobber by the time they arrived at home. This in mind, he gave one final pat to his companion, then pushed himself up to a standing position and brushed the bits of grass off his dark blue cloak and gray pants.

With a quick stretch above his head, Damian began to head into the forest; his boots making soft thuds on the ground followed by little thumps created by Hak. A few steps into their journey home, Hak suddenly rolled over onto the dirt floor. His brown belly was exposed to Damian while he let out loud pants of joy.

“Hak, not now!” Damian sighed in exasperation and placed his hands on his hips, knowing exactly what Hak wanted. He couldn't help but crack a smile when his dog acted playful out of nowhere. Not to mention he was staring at Damian with those needy chocolate brown eyes. “Ugh, fine.” He would huff lightheartedly a moment later as he crouched down to rub Hak's belly a few times, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. His dog loves belly rubs at any place and any time. Even when he was a wee little puppy, he demanded them at least once a day!

“Okay, okay.” Damian declared in an authoritative tone, standing up after he pecked Hak on his perky black nose, which resulted in a joyful bark from his dog. “That's enough belly rubs for the moment, time to head home!” He wanted to help out for dinner in case there was a need

for assistance; otherwise, he wished to relax by the fireplace and speak to his mother, maybe ease her troubles if they spoke of more calming topics.

With this in mind, Damian would break into a hasty jog, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to check if Hak was following him. Of course, the loyal Shepherd trotted after him. His black ears were alert for any dangers ahead as they continued on the trail towards the northern border of Acestria.

Upon bursting out of the flame-colored leaves, Damian shielded his eyes from the bright sunset, the sky illuminating in a pink and purple dusk shade now. From his spot among the scrawny shrubs, he would be able to spot the tall stone castle on the top of the mountain with its four towers in each corner, a dark green flag flapping majestically in the breeze. Matching green banners hung from the additional wall made of stone bricks surrounding the castle, meant to provide protection and stability. Speckles of royal guards stood on the top of the wall every few feet, wearing their silver armor with gold lining along the edges. A lone black raven perched on the edge of the iron gates, its head cocking from side to side as its dark eyes watched over the kingdom, almost serving as a guardian.

The Acestrian castle definitely appeared beautiful at this time of the day, having sharp contrast between the sunlight hitting one side of the building and a dark shadow on the other side, it in turn casting onto the ground. Damian smiled softly to himself, nodding his head to the castle while Hak opened his mouth to pant with his large pink tongue hanging out. They were almost home.

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“Hello, mother.” Damian expressed in a low voice when he entered the opulent dining room, spotting the Queen by the velvet curtains, the skirts of her sapphire gown cascading to the

floor in beautiful layers, and her hands on the windowsill. Queen Leyte would do this often whenever her husband was out to war, or any battle for that matter. She merely stared outside with dazed emerald eyes as if her King would appear out of thin air at any second. Hak unintentionally helped out by barking aloud, dashing over to excitedly greet her although his excitement may be due to the scent of pork chops on the table.

Leyte snapped out of her entranced state and shook her head, turning to gaze at Damian with her eyes widening a slight bit. “Oh, Damian- welcome home!” She replied, her voice sounding rather strong yet still distracted by something. She tucked a strand of bright red hair behind her ear while walking towards him, enveloping her son into a warm hug. “How was your day, darling?”

“It turned out well, thank you for asking, mother.” Damian thought back to the morning he spent down at the barracks where he helped recruits practice their swordsmanship. They were improving day by day thankfully. “Any news?” He asked after a hesitant pause. His mother would know what he meant by that, the silent unspoken words: ‘Will father return yet?’

Leyte released a soft sigh, her gaze turning crestfallen at the thought. “No, not yet.” She uttered sadly though she put on a reassuring smile for the sake of her son. “Soon, I hope.” The Queen murmured, more to herself than anyone. She leaned down briefly to rub behind Hak’s ears, giving the dog attention as well.

“Soon.” Damian agreed wistfully and pulled out a chair for his mother at the rectangular mahogany dining table, deciding to make the most of the present rather than speculate about the future. The crown prince smiled and gestured for Leyte to sit at the table, ready to do anything to let her feel better. He settled down into a seat himself, motioning for Hak to come closer. His bowl of water was already filled next to Damian’s chair.

Their dinner commenced when a timid maid entered the dining room, bowing deeply to her Queen and Prince before she placed a plate of steaming potatoes and pork chops in front of each person. Damian quietly thanked her and began to eat after his mother took her first bite, occasionally taking a sip from his glass of water. It wasn't five minutes in before the doors abruptly opened and the Royal Advisor poked his shiny bald head in, calling for Leyte.

"Your Majesty, the council needs an emergency meeting to discuss devastating news!" He exclaimed and tapped his foot impatiently as Leyte sighed to herself, her cheeks flushing pink from exhaustion and worry. She turned to Damian and said in an apologetic tone, "I am sorry, darling. Please enjoy dinner, I have duties to tend to."

With that, Leyte tossed her napkin on the table and hurried out of the room without time for Damian to reply, or at least say goodbye. *So much for a peaceful dinner.* The Prince set his fork down and stiffened, staring to his unfinished meal. *What would this new news be? It must be important if a meeting was organized.*

Ever since this war broke out, Damian felt nothing but uncertainty in the air. There had to be something he could do to help, right? Yet, here he was sitting in a lavish dining room, eating fancy food while his kingdom was out there starving! Some were unable to scrape enough silver to buy a meal everyday, and he was privileged to go to bed with a full stomach because he was born into a Royal family? No, that was not fair and it never would be.

Damian's gray eyes glossed over with tears, sick from thinking about how the commoners suffered while he bathed in wealth. His mind spun and his hands shook. What could he do? He doesn't have the knowledge to start any reforms to help the impoverished people; there would be too many weaknesses and loopholes in his makeshift plans. He couldn't go

around handing out gold coins to them either as the advisors would be enraged at his recklessness.

The red-haired Prince took a deep breath and grasped at the table, attempting to calm himself. Suddenly, an idea clicked into his mind. He jolted up in a heartbeat, his chair scraping loudly against the wooden floor. Hak howled at the screeching noise and looked to Damian like he was insane, but he wasn't. He knew how to help his Kingdom, and tonight, he would execute his plan. Even with his limited power, he would try his best.

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The full moon shone above, illuminating the shadows casted by torches lining the insides of the castle wall. Orange lights from a handful of rooms in the castle added to the brightness of the night, and a chilly breeze caused nearby trees to sway gently.

A figure crept along the side of the wall, dressed in dark clothing to stay hidden in the night, a cloak fluttering after him which was accompanied by a hood over his face. It was Damian. He wore a white face mask with dark blue swirls encarved around the eyes, his gaze on the Royal Guards marching on their patrol. Looks like being the King's son came in handy after all. He memorized the paths these guards followed by heart at this point, and knew there was a tiny window of opportunity for him to escape the castle grounds without being spotted.

Damian crouched next to the ladder leading up to the top of the wall, first listening for any footsteps before he climbed the rungs as swiftly as he could. He pulled himself onto the edge and immediately dashed to the right side where the drop to the ground would be the least. Damian reached behind him to sneak a coil of rope from his heavily packed bag, tying the rope to a hook kept snug into a deep crack in the stone. He tugged on it once to check that it was sturdy, flipping around to make his descent to the grass floor.

Halfway down, a pack of footsteps sounded above him, startling Damian. The rope slipped from his fingers and he gasped, skidding against the wall before landing on his rump on the ground, his heart too busy racing with adrenaline to react. He froze, waiting for the guards to raise the flag for an intruder. However, there was nothing. He had to be more careful next time. Damian wouldn't wait around a second time to be caught. Pushing himself up to a standing position, he then hoisted the backpack over his shoulders and jogged into the Kingdom with the destination of the commoners' neighborhood in mind.

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Damian paused for a moment under a giant oak tree and leaned over to put his hands on his knees, catching his breath from the long jog. Upon lifting his head, the view of the wooden cottages and their dull purple brick roofs came into view. Each cottage had a few steps leading up to the door, most of them worn out from the time they were built nearly thirty years ago. The flowers which usually littered the grass were wilted and shriveled up. This wasn't what his kingdom was supposed to be like.

The Prince straightened up once more and began his task with a determined expression on his face by the looks of the thin line of his mouth and his steely silver eyes. He hurried up to the front door of the first house with his backpack slung on only one of his arms now so he had easier access to them.

Damian reached a hand into his backpack and pulled out a tightly wrapped square package about the size of a book, stuffed with a bag of fresh vegetables and cooked meat as well as thinly folded white clothing. The food came from the kitchen and the clothes from a storage in the castle. There was so much of an abundance of both materials that no one would ever miss them or notice they were gone. No need to hoard these items when they could be put to good use.

He placed the package on the doormat and moved onto the next house, repeating the same thing over and over again until a line of cottages were supplied. Damian shivered in the cold night, yet continued to push forward. He wanted to at least get one section of the neighborhood complete and he was sure he packed enough supplies to do this. Damian jogged on the stone path, slowing to a stop on the corner where the road to the tavern and marketplace led. He noticed that there was a lack of business in these areas lately.

When Damian approached the steps to the next house, out of the corner of his eye, he saw groups of huddled figures on the side of the paths, laying in the grass. He squinted in the darkness, trying to see what exactly this was as the light from the street posts didn't do much. After a few seconds of his eyes adjusting, Damian took in a sharp breath of air. There were so many people - at least ten - out on the streets in this type of weather. Of course, how could he be so clueless? They were from the slums.

Damian kept his footsteps as quiet as possible, heading to the group after hastily placing a package on the front porch he stood on. He hesitantly gazed at them, soon realizing they were asleep. Most wore dirty ragged shirts and pants with patches and holes in them, some without shoes even. None of them deserved to live this way.

The Prince knew there was no doubt in what he had to do. Although he packed enough for two rows of cottages, he had to help these people too. He stacked his remaining packages in fives and slowly set them down next to each group of people, hoping it would help them through for now. Damian eventually turned on his heel to trek back to the castle with his empty backpack, only to hear a raspy, "Thank you."

His eyes widened and he whipped around to look for the source of the sound, finding it in an older man whose cheeks drooped and his face appeared fatigued, yet there was something else

there. A glimmer of hope? Damian couldn't find his voice to reply out of sheer shock of being noticed. He stared at the man sitting against the side of a shop, his feet extending to the curb of the street. He was bundled in a single thick blanket and his clothes were as torn up as the rest of the people surrounding him.

When about a minute passed, the man extended his quivering hands to the masked Prince, shivering in the cold despite having a blanket. Damian sucked in a breath of air and approached one small step after another until he reached him, uncertain as to what to do or say. Out of instinct, Damian grasped onto his frail hands and held them, feeling the dry cracks in his palms and fingers which sent a deep shot of empathy into his heart. He couldn't figure out why he wanted to apologize to this man.

“Thank you... for being a light for the rest of us. Your kindness will be remembered, young man.” The man spoke once more, his voice cutting off near the end. His tired eyes were focused on the expressionless mask. Damian's breath caught up in his throat. Did the man recognize him? It didn't seem that way. He nodded his head once and squeezed his hands gently, almost not wanting to let go before he backed away. Damian eventually hiked the backpack over his shoulder, easing onto the path leading back to the castle.

At the foot of the hill, Damian glanced back one final time to the cottages and streets which housed the people, his people. This was the best way he could help out, and he would try to think of other things he could do too. His heart already warmed from the deed he accomplished, and he knew he would come back the following night, and the next one too. He wouldn't be able to feed everyone each day, but one or two guaranteed meals would help. Pushing the mask closer to his face, Damian sighed in relief and a proud smile formed on his

face. *I can do this*. A surge of motivation gave him the energy to break into a dash in the direction of the castle and await for any rumors in the morning.

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“Hak, enough boy!” Damian exclaimed out loud and laughed, squirming underneath the Shepherd’s muzzle as the dog tried to cover his face in licks! He sat up in the grass to wipe his face with his sleeve and rub Hak behind the ears, rolling his eyes at the excited pants he heard. “No more licks.” He demanded in a playful voice, unable to be distracted from the happiness building up in his chest, a feeling Hak was willing to share in!

It has been a week after delivering packages and several rumors have brewed up from the suspicious commoners. Plenty thankfully spoke of a masked hero coming to aid them in their time of need. Some say it’s the tavern owner, or the blacksmith working on his irons during the day and handing out supplies at night, but it wouldn’t matter to Damian. His people were grateful and they were gaining their hope once more, and that’s what counted.

Damian shot a joyful grin to Hak and kissed the tip of his nose, putting an arm around his furry companion as he stretched out his legs. He rested the side of his head against Hak’s and gazed up to the cloudless blue sky above. He no longer felt useless to his kingdom, in fact he was working hard to boost his people’s morale. The Prince knew things would only become better after this, and his father would return home soon. He believed. It was funny how different things were a week ago. Damian felt as though he was living under a different sky, one where hope still exists and now simply became visible to the eye.

## La Cosa Nostra

Louisville Kentucky, January 1928

I jerked awake as the train car came to a stop at Louisville's Union Station. Looking over at my father I checked whether he'd noticed that I'd been asleep since we'd left the city limits of Chicago. He idly twirled his Homburg hat in his hands; I tried not to show my annoyance at his nervous tick. Who was supposed to be the adult in this situation? I composed my features to hide my frustration, "*Pater*, don't be so worried, we're only here to meet with Luciano. It's not like we're doing anything illegal."

I smoothed my dress from its hours of being rumpled on the stiff train seat. I stood as gracefully as I could, taking on the air of a lady. Glancing at my father, I sighed, I knew my father wasn't ready for this trip, but Capone insisted. I suppose this was our punishment for refusing to claim our family. My father may be afraid of a made man, but I'd been raised in this world, I knew I held all the cards even if no one else could tell.

My father was in for quite a shock when he married my mother. He was just the playboy of Chicago until his dad made a deal with my grandfather. It wasn't until after the wedding that *Pater* knew what kind of family he'd married into. That's the beauty of arranged marriages, the fathers take care of the money and the secrets. The children just had to show up at the church, and *never* ask questions.

I would never let myself be in that situation. The only way to not be put into an arranged marriage is to control the *cosa nostra*, to beat them at their own game. That's why I came to Louisville with my father. There was no way my father could carry out business with Luciano, once again I'd have to make deals I wasn't supposed to know about. I wouldn't be my mother, the *cosa nostra princess*, I wouldn't let this life control me. No matter what titles they would try

to give me, I knew exactly what we were: we were just another mafia family trying to control any illegal dealings in the southside of Chicago.

I stepped out of the train car, using the offered hand of the train carriage conductor. I straightened the fur collar of my alpine winter coat. Most of the men and women in the train station were staring at me, trying to guess at who I was. I lifted my head higher while holding their attention. Not that their attention was that nice to have, I was used to being watched but I didn't like it. The watchful eye in the *cosa nostra* were cloying. Men like Capone weren't the most attractive of men, making their attention so much worse. All of them were rather despicable men, but I wasn't exactly the great lady I liked to portray myself as.

I straightened the fur collar as my father got off the train. He looked around warily, "Will you stop looking so guilty, *Pater*?"

Ever since my mother had died of the Spanish Influenza after the great war, *Pater* had a constant air of anxiety. My grandfather had made sure that my family was taken care of after his princess' death, but he began to age so much faster since he'd lost both his wife years ago and his daughter so suddenly. He'd passed away in his sleep. They said it was of old age, but I was doubtful of their conclusion. The people I loved the most were disappearing before my very eyes.

It wasn't just my father who was worried. Everyone was skittish about what would happen to the syndicate with the head family dying in rapid succession. No one could guess who the Southside of Chicago would be controlled by. *Pater*'s nervous nature was one of the many things that made living with him so difficult. I suppose that he was nervous because of Capone taking over after my grandfather. My direct lineage to the position put a target on both of our backs. Unlike my father, I refuse to live in fear, Capone wouldn't dare lay a finger on me. I'd

already made sure that I had dirt on him before my grandfather had died. Capone was a young, foolish man, he made it impossibly easy to collect information on him. He was still only three years my senior, but he wasn't terribly polished in his business dealings.

It was the same with all the made men in the city, spending too much on brassy broads and bootlegged booze. It didn't take me too long to find Capone's absolutely unorganized finances. For months I'd been collecting dues from the families in the syndicate, making myself a necessity for the *cosa nostra* to function. I read his correspondances and then burned them, until I'd found his desperate letters to his doctors. Each one regaled his complaints of the bad blood he'd had since his early twenties. I kept those letters, knowing they could be of help in the future.

I was here to do the same to Luciano, I couldn't risk him trying to use me against Capone. Reminding myself of my purpose, I began to stride out of the station, leaving *Pater* to practically sprint after me. The cold hit me. Even after Chicago's frigid winds, I still resented the chilled air. I gently tugged my cloche closer to my neck, missing the long hair of my youth that protected my neck from harsh winter weather.

A maroon Studebaker automatic sat outside of the station with a driver leaning against the side. At the sight of me he jumped into action and opened the door while holding out his hand to help me in. I gave him my hand as he assisted me into the car. I sat down on the stiff leather seat quieting the voice in the back of my head that told me I should be terrified of the man I was about to face. I didn't have the time to be scared, there was a job to be done. I was shaken out of my reverie as *Pater* ungracefully fell into the backseat, heaving to catch his breath. Barely sparing him a glance, I knocked on the wall separating the driver's bench from the back seat, telling the man to go.

I calmed my frantic heart as we pulled away from the station. The automotive drew stares as we rolled through the city. I smirked, Capone had kept his promise to have us travel in the best fashion. Blackmailing him was one of the best ideas I'd ever had; he was far more helpful this way. I sat in silence on the way to the hotel. I could tell *Pater* was impossibly nervous without even looking at him. Once again he was twisting his Homburg and he was sweating like a sinner on Sunday. I refused to look in his direction; he would only serve to frustrate me.

When the automobile stopped, the facade of the Seelbach threw a shadow over the whole street. A doorman rushed to open the door of the car before the driver could even stop the car. As I stepped out of the car, I tried to remain as elegant as possible, *Pater* made no such attempts. A bellboy was already unloading the luggage, I gestured for him to follow me into the hotel. I wanted to see my luggage at all times. All my years within the *cosa nostra* had taught me to not trust anyone, especially the staff. There was hardly any member of the staff that was only working for the hotel, and I had no way to know who they were truly working for.

As I stepped into the Seelbach lobby, I looked around with a practiced look of casual disinterest. I'd seen far grander rooms in my life, men of power like to be surrounded by things that they think reflect their power. Yet, there was something about this room and its mix of history and the gilded detail that captured my attention. The beauty was almost enough to take my breath away as I took in each aspect. I glanced at the swooping grand staircase, its faintly veined marble created a delicate but sturdy appearance. Raising my eyes I took in the painted leather that covered the upper walls. The dark, intricate woodworking that made up the crown moulding paired perfectly with the emerald green marble, accenting the golden cloth that covered the walls. I made sure not to look too impressed by the splendor of the room.

As *Pater* approached me after he finished checking in, he handed me a key and said, “We have two different rooms. We should go and freshen up quickly. I’m told Luciano will be here within the hour.”

I raised my eyebrows, within the hour? Luciano was a prompt man. I couldn’t complain, after years of Capone constantly being an hour late, this was a relief. This was one of the few times we could meet with Luciano. His *cosa nostra* was in New York and none of Capone’s men were allowed there, something about Capone having history with a family in the east side of the city. I wouldn’t waste this chance to try and leave the *cosa nostra* that seemed to be slowly taking away my family. I wanted out, but I still needed the protection of a family.

As soon as I got to my room the stress that had been plaguing me all day crashed over me. I could only hold off the worries of the day for so long. I sat in the overstuffed, purple velvet chair next to the window. A maid slowly unloaded all of my clothes into the wardrobe, I tipped her graciously once she’d finished. I held my head in my hands, trying to ease the headache that had been slowly building all day. When I looked at the clock almost forty five minutes had passed. I guessed that Luciano was about to come and my father hadn’t come to my door to escort me down to the club under the hotel. The club was the main reason that Capone had arranged for us to stay at the Seelbach. I felt the anger rise in me, why the hell would my father think he could handle a man like Luciano by himself?

I hurriedly changed my outfit to an evening dress, not bothering to call for a maid to help. I glanced in the mirror to check makeup and to straighten my bejeweled headband. I grabbed an evening purse, throwing in my lipstick and room key. Rushing out the door and down the stairs, I pulled on my pristine white, elbow length gloves. I clumsily fastened the buttons at my wrist. Once reaching the lobby I circled around to the left of the stairs to the hidden flight of stairs. I

slowed myself, fixing my dress one last time, and began to walk down the stairs to the restaurant like the lady I was supposed to be.

The Rathskeller was lavishly decorated like the lobby above it. The glamorous tiles, making up the dimly lit designs that covered every inch of the wall, made every voice within in the restaurant echo. The cacophony of voices rang in my sleep deprived mind, through the noise, I listened for my father's simpering voice. I looked around, with my chin tilted up both for effect and to be able to see over the crowd better. The pillars holding up the low arched ceilings provided hidden places for made men to conduct their business. I spotted my father's head across the room, already I could tell he was conducting business without my guidance.

Without showing any of my apprehension, I made my way over to the table. Weaving my path through tightly packed tables, I fumed at my father for excluding me from this meeting. I caught the attention of both my father and the man I assumed was Luciano.

Pausing once I reached the table, I levelled them both with an icy stare, "Good evening, gentlemen. Is there any reason I was excluded from this meeting?"

My father remained cowering in his seat, made nervous by both Luciano and my own stony features. Luciano stared at me blankly as if I didn't matter, "I want to know why Capone wanted me to meet with an unmade man and his daughter. I don't care who your grandfather was. You are of no use to me."

I felt my anger rise up within me. I hadn't gotten to where I was in life by merely my grandfather's influence. I opened my mouth, most likely about to embarrass myself, but a woman's voice cut me off.

"Those are some strong words coming from you, Lucky." A lilting voice with a heavy French Carribean accent cut in. A finely dressed black woman stood from her seat a table over.

Her whole figure demanded attention, nevermind how tall she was. This was clearly a woman who was supposed to be both feared and revered.

She regarded Luciano with a disdainful look, “You have no room to talk. Who paid for your way to America? Yeah, your father that’s who. Don’t act as if family doesn’t matter to you. You know exactly how high her position is.”

She let out a joyless laugh, “You probably did months of research before you came here. You know who she works for and how far she’s gotten by herself. She did the exact same thing as you, but you think you can shame her just because she’s a woman.” She scoffed, “That only makes you a coward despite your reputation.”

“You have no reason to be here, St. Clair. This isn’t your town and you don’t have business here.” Luciano’s voice was shrill as he addressed the dominating woman. I could tell Luciano was nervous by the way he shifted in his seat; this woman created an aura of power around her. The woman slowly sashayed over to where we sat. The command and control she had over the situation was palpable. She was everything I wanted to be.

She laughed off his menacing tone, “Maybe I’m looking to expand. Since all you Italians have control of New York, I can’t very well expand from Harlem. Besides, when one of the main, what do you call it, *made men* leave the city, I want to know why.”

St. Clair looked over to me, “If you want to have any real dealings in New York, I’d recommend that you leave Lucky here alone. I’m the lady you should be talking to.”

Luciano straightened his shoulders to appear more opposing, “Of course you’d say such a thing. And yet, who here controls all of the men in downtown New York?”

St. Clair snorted at his intimidation tactics, “Well, I have it on good authority that you can’t keep a good hold on the new police chief and he’s coming for you. New York will need a

new man when you finally leave the streets.” She leaned down, slowly getting closer to Luciano, watching the fear grow in his eyes.

“I have every intention of taking everything you once held dear. I’m telling you, New York doesn't need another man, what they need is a woman. So watch your mouth around me.” She looked over at me, entirely ignoring my father, who’d slowly been sinking in his seat throughout the conversation.

Luciano slammed his large fist against the table, St. Clair didn’t spare him a glance. Trying a last attempt to gain everyone’s attention, Luciano jumped to his feet, “How dare you assume... You don’t even know... “

His raised voice hardly carried over the din of the restaurant. During the whole confrontation not a single head had turned. The chatter and clinks of filled glasses covered any sound of our heated discussion. St. Clair levelled him with a withering glare, “But that’s the point, I do know. I know exactly what goes down in my city. And you’re a fool to question it.”

Luciano grabbed his hat and spun on his heel. He tried to storm out of the speakeasy but was deterred by the dozens of tables in the cramped room.

St. Clair sat down across from me. She levelled me with an appraising stare, “You want in?”

I didn’t even have to think, “Yes.”

*Pater* looked at me in disbelief. For the first time since I’d entered the room he seemed to know what he was supposed to be doing. “The family... Betray the *cosa nostra*? ... I’ll be killed... You’ll be killed.”

His voice was steadily growing in pitch, his eyes glancing between St. Clair and me nervously. St. Clair narrowed her eyes at him, it was the first time she'd looked at him let alone spoken to him, "And who are you supposed to be?"

*Pater* made an attempt to gain some of the dignity he'd lost. He straightened his shoulders and cleared his throat. "I'm her father, and she will be doing no such thing."

I threw the him darkest look I could muster, "You don't speak for me. I'm a grown woman, I'll be speaking for myself, thank you."

A visible shiver passed through his body, I vaguely wondered if it was due to my cold tone. I looked over to St. Clair who I was surprised to see looking at my father. Carelessly she glanced over him, "I wonder what kind of father you've been. Just a moment ago, you worried about your own life over your daughter's. Such a statement would make it seem as if you didn't care about her."

Her captivating eyes slid over to meet my stare, "I think from now on, any business we do together should be done between just the two of us. I have no use for this man"

Slightly shocked at her assessment, but not disappointed, I managed to stutter out, "I... I think that for the best as well."

She stood up and gestured for me to follow her through the subterranean tunnels that connected the Rathskeller speakeasy to its stocks of moonshine and bourbon. "Now you're going to call me Madame St. Clair or Queenie. I don't allow disrespect in my syndicate but we're a family no matter where we're coming from. You'll always be dressed in the best clothes, if you can't afford it I'll take care of it. I don't care about you Italian families, you are not as scary as you like to think. You have my protection, and those made men won't be able to lay a finger on you."

She abruptly stopped her casual yet quick paced steps and whirled to face me. “I won’t have you changing your mind either. If you want to follow your precious father home, I recommend you leave now, because there won’t be any turning back.”

I hastily nodded, unwilling to miss the chance that I’d been trying to create for the past five years. She gave me a questioning glare, tilting her head to the left, “You any good with numbers? That’s my main business, gambling, investment, lottery, you know. I’m in every business in Harlem, and don’t forget that.”

I wordlessly nodded but after a moment's pause I spoke up, “I’ve been managing Capone’s finances for the last four years...” I trailed off, unsure of how to prove myself to this impossibly accomplished woman.

She merely nodded one last time and began to guide me up to the hotel in silence.

Harlem New York, October 1935

I walked into the apartment of the retired Madame Queenie. It was lavishly decorated as a reminder of what her years of effort had gotten her. My shoes barely made a sound on the thick Turkish carpets that covered the marble floors as I made my way through to her private office. I knocked on the heavy oak door that was already partially opened. Queenie looked up at me from a letter that lay on her desk.

She gave me one of her rare smiles, “I’m so glad you were able to come. I’m going to be honest with you, I need a favor.”

I owed this woman for the life that I'd been able to achieve, of course I'd do almost anything for her. "Whatever you need, I think it's high time I start paying you back for everything you've done for me."

She shook her head at me, "It was no problem, you've paid off any debt you've had. I wanted to know, do you still have any blackmail on Luciano?"

Even after all these years, I'd made sure to always have blackmail on him. He was the one man still living that could link me to my old life in Chicago. I gave Queenie a small smile and nodded.

She let out a full bodied laugh, "I was so hoping that would be your answer. I know a man that needs to be taken down a few pegs, he's gotten a little too cocky for my liking." I raised my eyebrow at her ambiguity.

She began to look over her work again, but then paused, "One more thing, could you send a telegram for me? I promise it's the last thing I'll ask you to do." She gave me one of her rare smiles, with a sad look in her eyes.

"You sure about that Madame?" I doubted she would ever be able to leave this world behind entirely.

"I think you can call me Queenie by now. And... Yes. I want to leave this world behind, it ages a woman and I want to rest more than anything." She looked me over, appraising me just like the first time we met. "Don't stay in the game too long; even you'll need a break someday."

Once she'd handed me the telegram she wanted me to send, I left the room pondering what she'd said. I looked down at the paper, with only seven words on it.

"As ye sow, so ye shall reap"

## Midnight Sky

He stands patiently in front of me. Carved by years of work and stress, it seems like the lines in his forehead and around his eyes are deeper than ever. The once pepper black hair I had always remembered him with is now sprinkled with salt. But his smile, wide and toothy, is familiar, even after our seven years apart. His arms open and I rush into them. The embrace is brief but warm in the bustle of the airport. People are racing past and grabbing bags, trying to get to their next destination. This moment is so temporary in their minds, it's so permanently branded into mine.

"How was the plane ride?" Mom says, choking slightly on the words. Her eyes are glassy and tears are streaming down her cheeks. Her whole face erupts into a large smile.

"Long, but fine. Just ready to be home," He smiles back.

We all stare at each other, using the seconds that tick by to let the reality of the situation sink in.

"I'm ready to go," he says with a sigh of relief.

We all agree and walk out of the airport and into the car. The ride is long but peaceful. He and Mom talk in the front and Kat boisterously chimes in, either talking about herself, or commenting to enhance Mom's stories and add humor. Mom occasionally laughs at Kat's comments or his jokes. Her laugh is clear and rings throughout the entire car like loud silver bells. She hasn't laughed like that in a while. However, I sit in silence looking out the foggy car window. White powder falls from the sky and quickly melts onto the glass, leaving a trickle of water behind. It's dark, and just as we begin to pull in the driveway, the moon peeks out from a cloud and illuminates the blackness with its silvery glow. Mom parks and we all pour out of the car, everyone carrying the many bags from his trip into the house. We each have deep purple

circles underneath our eyes. Mom's face is worn and Kat's blinks are slow and frequent. The day was long exhausting and full of anxious waiting. Unanimously, we agree to get some rest.

In my bed, the sheets are soft and cool. I pick at one of the loose strings in my quilt and lay on my back staring at the yellow stars plastered on the ceiling. I insisted we paint them there after our camping trip in the mountains, so I could always fall asleep looking at the midnight sky. During the trip, I had swum in the lake close to the campsite, picked out all the constellations, and eaten my first s'more. I had stuffed the white sticky goo and sweet chocolate in my mouth savagely. It is one of the happiest nights I can remember. That was before he left.

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I wake up to the blinding white light of the sun as it penetrates my windows. The covers that were once so neat the night before are now mangled and twisted from my restless tossing and turning. I get out of bed and look out the window. Mom's car is gone. She must have left for work already. I get dressed, go in the bathroom, and rake my tongue across my fuzzy unbrushed teeth. After scrubbing off the fuzz and combing my fingers through my tangled hair, I head downstairs into the kitchen and pour myself a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. Mid bite, I hear the soft wail of the floorboards. I look up. He's there.

"Hey," he opens.

"Hey," I repeat.

"Kind of early for school to start."

"I guess so."

He walks carefully to the white metal fridge. He lifts his arm and wraps his hand around the handle to the door. He pauses.

“I missed a lot of these moments,” he says staring at the pictures on the fridge. There's one of Kat holding a bass after her first fishing trip, grinning ear to ear. There's another one of me holding a golden trophy after one of my soccer tournaments. I look down at my red high tops and study the scuffed plastic toe cap.

“Yeah, you did,” I whisper.

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I scrape off the pristine, untouched snow from the windows. Inside the car, my teeth begin to chatter, and I quickly put the key in the ignition waiting for the wave of warmth to envelop me. After a few minutes, the car becomes toasty, and I slowly back out of the driveway onto the slushy black road. The drive to school is short, and once I reach the main building I park in an empty space close to first period. Slamming the door closed, I rush inside, find the door to Mr. Peter's Calc class and slide into one of the open desks towards the back. I glance at the clock. I have a few minutes before class starts.

The white board in Mr. Peter's class is always disgustingly dirty, even after he erases the stray ink lines from his Expo markers. A small bobble head of Darth Vader sits on top of his chipped wooden desk, next to his “World's Best Teacher” mug full of sharp yellow number two pencils. Cindy Smith loudly enters the room, chattering at the pack of girls following her to a seat in the front. She waves and flings her perfectly manicured hands around to emphasize the juicy gossip she's just heard. Her blonde hair is curled into perfect coils and they bounce around sporadically as she drones on. As they bounce, the scent of unbearably strong strawberry shampoo oozes from them and permeates the entire room. I close my eyes and focus on my rhythmic breathing.

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The pink leotard strapped around my body itched and scratched against my sensitive skin. The sparkly puff sleeves it had suffocated me. Irritatingly, I had to rearrange them. As I stood beside her preparing for the first dance, I could smell the pungent strawberry scent of Cindy's shampoo.

*This is so stupid. Why did Mom put me in this ballet class?* I thought.

Ms. Perkins walked to the front of the room and people's conversations gradually began to wane until there was a deafening silence.

"Welcome, everybody, to our little dance recital. I am so proud of all the girls! They have been working so hard!" she exclaimed excitedly. She spoke for a few more minutes, then shuffled hurriedly to the boombox in the left corner of the room. Annoyingly loud music began to play, and all the small girls arranged in a perfect line began pumping their arms and kicking their thin legs to the beat of the song. Ms. Perkins suddenly rushed back to the middle of the room.

"Will all the dads please join their little girls for a father-daughter dance," she shouted over the blaring boombox. This part was not rehearsed.

Slowly, all the men in the room lifted themselves from the metal foldable chairs and walked up to their daughters. Some started to wave their hands in the air or twirl their daughters around. I desperately scanned the audience left sitting down and found Mom in one of the chairs towards the back. I felt my face contort into a look of fear, and she quickly rose, sensing my alarm. She dashed next to me, put her hands on her hips, and swung them in a circle. There she was. The only mom dancing in a sea of little girls and their fathers. The song seemed to last forever. When it finally ended, all the dads, and one mom, returned to their seats. My face felt hot from embarrassment.

“Why did your mom dance with you? Why isn’t your dad here?” Cindy whispered quietly before the next dance, her eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“Are your parents divorced?” questioned another girl beside me.

I remember staring at the wooden floor and squinting my eyes to avoid any tears from escaping. I felt violated.

“My parents aren't divorced,” I whispered back.

And with that, the incredibly loud boom box began playing again. The next dance had begun.

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After the bell rings and Calc ends, I rush to English class which is located on the other side of the large school building. The rest of the day progresses slowly. It’s filled with classes, tests, and people. When the last bell rings for the day, a mass of students desperately trying to get home floods the halls. Once outside, I unlock the car door and jump in the front seat, slamming my bookbag next to me on the floor. I start the car and speed off. In the short drive, the sky begins to turn from a light blue into a dark violet. A few stars are beginning to shine.

I reach home and park the car in the driveway. I enter through the front door and immediately smell the food Mom is cooking for dinner wafting through the entire house. I head upstairs with my belongings and into my room, jumping on my soft plush bed. I plug in my white headphones and blast my music. I then immediately rip open my bookbag and begin devouring the Calc problems Mr. Peter assigned in our textbook. I’m almost finished when I feel a light tapping on my shoulder. I look up. His mouth moves up and down, but I hear nothing.

“What?” I rip out my headphones.

“I just wanted to tell you that Mom says dinner's done. It’s tacos.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Sure.”

He turns to leave, walking across the carpeted floor until he reaches the door. He stops before exiting the threshold. He turns back around.

“How was school?” he says.

“School was fine,” I answer.

“That's good. I,uh, got something for you while I was gone,” he says, gently setting down a copy of R.L Stine's *Night of the Living Dummy*. I hadn't even realized he was carrying it in his hand.

I grab the book off the corner of the bed and stroke my finger across the raised dots that fill the word *Goosebumps*.

“I used to love these. It's been years since the last time I read the series,” I say in amazement.

“You were reading them right before...” he drifts off.

“Yeah, I remember now,” I say, quickly filling the empty air.

“Yeah.” he says back.

“But I finished the series a while ago. I don't really read these types of books anymore.”

“Oh, right, of course,” he said suddenly looking down at the his gray socks, “I don't know why I assumed...I guess I just thought...” He pauses for a few moments, then turns around again, slowly walking towards the door.

“Hey, wait,” I say right before he leaves.

“Yes?” he says spinning back around.

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Of course.”

He then turns back around for the last time and crosses the threshold leaving my room once and for all. I stare back at the book and study the horribly wicked grin of the ventriloquist dummy on the cover. I smile a little. Soon, however, I catch a whiff of the tacos Moms cooked, and my stomach begins to rumble. I get up from bed, putting my clac problems aside, and gently place the book on my mahogany night stand beside my lamp. I glance at the book one last time and head for the door. Dinner is waiting.

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The air is thin and crisp just like the night of the camping trip. Even with my thick jacket, I shiver in the cold. I rub my red, frozen hands together and breathe on them. My hot breath defrosts them a bit and the numbness subsides. I've always thought the forest behind my house was beautiful. The pine trees are alluringly large and there's a barren pathway that leads to a clearing. When I was younger, I use to lay in the clearing staring at the night sky after dinner, stroking the prickly grass and gazing at the twinkling stars. Tonight, as I lie in the clearing, the sky is even more stunning than I remember. The stars are a bright white and the moon is alarmingly large. I take a deep breath and exhale. The fog streaming out of my open mouth forms thin, wispy clouds, but it soon disappears. The steam that was once so pronounced is gone. It is absolute nothingness.

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I sat staring at the warm fire, picking off the sticky, white marshmallow goo from one of the sticks I had used earlier to make smores. Tears were welling in my eyes, but I pretended they were from the heat and smoke of the flame. Kat and Mom were already asleep. It was just him and I.

“But, I don’t understand why you have to leave,” I said, sniffing.

“My work doesn’t have enough money to pay me and I can’t find a job here,” he explained. “I have to move away for a little bit.”

“For how long?” I demanded.

“I’m not sure,” he said solemnly, “until I find another job here.”

“Why can’t we go with you?” I asked.

“We don’t have enough money to move across the country, and your mom and I don’t want to take you and Kat from home. All the family is here and so are your schools.”

I could no longer hold in the tears. The water building finally began to flow down my red cheeks.

“I don’t want you to go!” I cried, rushing towards him.

“I know,” he said, tears now building in his eyes, “but we’ll always be together.”

“No we won’t!” I screamed. He embraced me and spoke again.

“Of course we will.”

“How?” I said desperately. His embrace became a little tighter and he pointed at the sky.

“See the stars and the moon?” he said.

“Yes,” I said hesitantly.

“Well, the night sky is the same everywhere. It’s the same constellations, moons, and clouds whether we’re ten inches or ten thousand miles apart,” he explained.

“I don’t understand,” I said puzzled.

“Whenever you look at the midnight sky, just know I’m looking at it too. The sky will be our connection. Everytime you stare at it, know I’ll be thinking of you,” he said.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

I looked up at his face and into his blue eyes. The reflection of the red and yellow flame were dancing in them. The fire began to pop, but then quickly faded into a quiet murmur. The tears that had flowed onto my cheeks began drying. My eyes felt swollen and tired. I was exhausted.

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay,” he repeated.

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I begin walking home, following the yellow light illuminating from the windows of the houses in my neighborhood. The air is turning even colder. I keep thinking of all the moments he had missed and all the times he wasn't there for me when I needed him most. I continue to walk quietly, only the sound of my high tops against the asphalt of the black road making any noise.

I am almost home now. Only a few more houses to go until I arrive at mine. Suddenly, the thought of the book pops in my mind. I picture it there on my wooden nightstand, sitting, patiently waiting for me to arrive and read it. He had given it to me after all this time. Dad had remembered after all this time. I finally reach the front porch. I stare at the dark blue door, the bright lights inside peeking through the cracks, beckoning me to walk inside. I hear loud voices and laughing behind the wooden entrance. I grasp the golden doorknob and push it open. The light from the house floods all the darkness of the night, and I walk into the warmth.

## A Stroke of Luck?

“—and *glissade, saut de chat! Glissade, saut de chat!* Good Alex, good Sophia. Katherine, straighten your legs. And *tour jeté!* Stay on the music!”

A dozen young ballerinas-to-be soared through the brightly lit studio, muscles straining and lungs burning. Class was nearly over, and the past hour and a half of intensive training left them drained, but they fought through the exhaustion, launching themselves into the air as if unbound by the laws of physics.

Class ended, and with a curtsy and a thank you to the teacher, the group exited and headed towards the dressing room, preparing to go home and relax at last. Swiftly changing her shoes, pulling her warm-ups on, and zipping her bag shut, Alex left the dance studio, entering that frigid February air, a sharp contrast to the manufactured warmth of body heat and sweat within the building. She scanned the parking lot, gaze sweeping over metallic gleams of silver, black and blue, spotting the distinctive emerald of her mother’s car.

“Hi,” she said, slinging her bag inside and greeting her mom and two younger siblings nestled in the back seat.

“How was class?” asked her mom, turning onto the street.

“Good,” quipped Alex.

Their journey continued in silence for a minute or two.

“Do you guys wa meand din garl?” said their mom.

Those were not words to be found in the English lexicon, or any other language for that matter. Meaningless gibberish.

“What?” asked Alex, immediately on her guard.

The answer she received was yet more strange utterances that conveyed no concrete concepts, but instead compounded her confusion.

“What are you saying?” Frustration began to creep inside Alex’s naïve, twelve-year-old mind, irritated at a lack of comprehension.

Another communicative failure.

“What’s going on?” Her sister Leah began to fret.

The garbled sounds became more insistent, as if their mother was surprised and annoyed that they were not understanding her. But it was as though a sudden barrier of solid stone had sprung up and split the earth, cruel and imposing, prohibiting any effective communication.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re saying—” Alex was cut off by a loud bump. Their mother had just run over a curb whilst pulling into their driveway.

Feeling woefully ill-equipped to deal with this problem, Alex knew she had to delegate the issue to someone else.

“I’m calling Dad,” she announced the moment the four of them stepped inside the house, ballet bag dropping to the floor with an unceremonious thunk.

“He’s at work. Should we bother him?” worried Leah.

“Yeah, but I don’t know what to do.” said Alex as she picked up the phone and began to dial.

“I’m scared.” Leah whimpered. Their mother continued to babble.

Fear, concern, confusion, anxiety, stress, all dangerous drugs that had flooded Alex’s system. Concentrated emotion coursed through her veins, pressurizing her bloodstream. It was far too much to feel in far too short a time span, and her body shut them down as a defense mechanism.

Instead of suffering through this muddled-emotion-soup, her brain settled for annoyance, a simple, shallow feeling to fixate on. *Hurry up and answer already. I can't deal with this.*

“Hello?” came their father’s voice through the tinny speaker.

“Hi Dad, it's Alex. Mom isn't making sense, she’s just making weird sounds? and it doesn't make sense and she drove over the curb picking me up from ballet and she’s not saying real words and I don't know what to do.” Dark twisting tendrils had wormed their way inside her, lining her stomach and curling unpleasantly. *What's wrong with her?* Alex agonized.

“Okay, I’m coming home now. It’s going to be OK.” their father reassured.

“OK.” said Alex. She hung up. “Dad’s coming.”

“I’m scared.” Leah repeated, and indeed fear was etched across her face, seeping through in the turn of her mouth and the shine of her eyes.

“I know. But we just have to wait. Dad’s going to be here soon, and he’ll know what to do.” The mantle of being the firstborn suddenly weighed heavy on Alex’s shoulders, a plush velvet cloak woven of responsibility and forced maturity. She had to be strong for her siblings, and now for her mother. Any concerns of her own were irrelevant and to be swept aside.

After what felt like eternity itself, their father arrived. A click and turn of a key and a creaking door hinge gave way to a warm, steady, inspired presence. The lifeless, artificial glow of the light bulbs paled in comparison to the bright comfort a capable parental figure brought.

“Hi guys,” their father greeted, a perfect mask of calmness in the face of danger. “Where’s Mom?”

“In the family room,” replied Alex, as the two of them walked forth. Upon seeing them, their mother made more undecipherable noises.

Fear cast its imposing shadow across their father's face for a fraction of a second, but he dismissed it swiftly.

"OK guys, I'm going to take Mom to the doctor. Alex, watch over Leah and Michael for now. Miss Kim is going to be here soon, and she's going to stay with you guys." Their father helped his wife to her feet, and began to lead her towards the door.

"What's going on? Is Mama gonna be ok?" Leah's distress had not been assuaged by their father's presence.

"She's going to be fine. We've just got to go get some help. She'll be fine," soothed their father.

Leah gave a soft sob, but nodded her head.

"Alex, thank you for calling me," their father turned towards his eldest gratefully.

"Yeah," mumbled Alex, unsure of what else to say.

"OK guys, we'll be back soon. You can fix yourself some dinner. Miss Kim is coming, she's going to help. Be careful, I love you guys, see you soon." The front door opened to the gaping black of night and a future that hung in limbo.

"Bye, love you," the children chorused, and the door shut, a heavy foreboding thud that left them stranded and to their own devices.

Alex glanced at her sister, then her brother. Terror and silence stared back at her. Strands of tension were pulled taut through the air, choking and chafing. A hefty unease had taken up residence in the home, but Alex could not acknowledge it, lest she cause her siblings further worry. With their parents gone, Alex was the authority, so she forced her features into something resembling a neutral expression and said "Well, let's find something to eat."

“What is there?” asked Michael, far too young to comprehend the gravity of the situation, and interested merely in acquiring some food.

“Um, let’s see...” murmured Alex, rifling through the pantry with trembling fingers in search of something to scrape together. “I can make you guys sandwiches?”

“OK,” said Michael, agreeable and unconcerned.

“She’s gonna be OK, right?” fretted Leah once more.

“Yeah she’s gonna be fine,” Alex assured her sister as she spread peanut butter and jelly onto slices of bread. *She has to be*, she thought.

Three awkwardly made sandwiches and a half hour later, there was a knock at the door.

“That’s probably Miss Kim. I’ll go check.” said Alex, making her way to the window to peek.

Sure enough, standing there was the familiar face of their family friend. Alex unlocked the door and let her in.

“Hi you guys, how are you doing?” exclaimed Miss Kim, clearly trying to be as amiable as possible so as not to worry the kids.

“Is our mom OK?” Leah cut straight to the point.

“Your mom’s going to be just fine” smiled Miss Kim. “Now, don’t you guys have school tomorrow? How about we get you kids to bed, huh?”

“I guess,” shrugged Alex.

“What if something really bad happened?” moaned Leah, wringing her hands in agony.

“Hey, hey, it’s all going to be alright. OK? Your dad’s with her and he’s going to get her the help she needs. It’s all going to be fine. OK?” soothed Miss Kim.

There was no stopping Leah's worrying, but she allowed Miss Kim to think she had softened her fear.

"Alright buddy, c'mon, let's go upstairs," said Miss Kim, hefting Michael up and beginning to ascend the staircase. Leah followed, footfalls timid and uncertain.

"Really, don't you guys worry about it, OK? She's going to be fine," assured Miss Kim.

Alex hesitated a moment, then took a step and fell into line. She supposed there was nothing else to do but resign herself to rest.

\* \* \*

Alex had been lying in the dark, hopelessly swallowed up by the blankets and drowned in her churning thoughts for what felt like hours now. Confusion pounded at her skull; the surrealness of it all blurred her mind. She'd never seen, nor heard, of anything like that happening to someone before. *What was going on?*

Her thoughts melted into guilt, hot and heavy, clinging to her skin, a filthy film of shame. *I was annoyed with her. I was annoyed that I couldn't understand what she was saying. What if something was seriously wrong, and I just felt annoyed? How awful is that? What's wrong with me? Oh God, that's such a terrible thing; I'm such a terrible daughter. I should have been more concerned. I should have done more to help. I hope she's OK. God, I hope she's OK.*

Brain laced with worry and guilt gnawing at her heart, Alex eventually slipped into a fitful slumber.

\* \* \*

*A sea of black. A sky red as blood. Rain, torrential rain, assaulting the earth. The heavens wept in parallel mourning. Soft murmurs carried along by the winds, tickling her ears and invading her headspace. Thump, thump, thump, thump. The steady march of a funeral procession. There*

*were people, so many people, but when she turned to catch a glimpse of their faces, there were no features to be seen. The faceless mass of strangers surged like a tidal wave, enveloping her, engulfing her. The chants grew louder. “Your fault, your fault, your fault.” “Dead, dead, dead, dead.” A suffocating cry split the murmurs. “We are gathered here today to mourn the death of Mariel Theresa Johnson. Her daughter was annoyed with her, and now she lies in eternal rest—”*

Alex awoke with a ragged gasp, traces of the nightmare still on her lips as she let out a soft, tortured moan. Sweat beaded her brow, and her nails dug into her palms with a harsh severity. Shaking her head as though to clear the panicked fog that threatened to overtake her, she lay back down, heart hammering against her ribcage.

*It was just a dream, Alex tried to comfort herself. She’s not actually dead, she’s going to be fine. Dad said so, Miss Kim said so. She has to be fine.*

Alex curled back up in bed, and she didn’t remember when or if she truly fell back asleep. *She’s going to be fine.*

\* \* \*

The next day, Alex’s father came back. Immediately, all three children rushed towards him, demanding answers.

“Is Mama OK?”

“What happened?”

“What’s going on; is everything alright?”

Their father drew a deep breath and put on a smile, a façade, steeling himself for what was to come. How could he tell his children that last night their mother had been unable talk or move at all? How could he begin to explain the paralyzing fear that she wasn’t really there, the uncertainty of whether she was conscious or not? How could he tell them that at midnight the

doctors at the hospital said they had done all they could do, and had to call in several specialists? How could he tell them of all the drugs they gave to raise her blood pressure, just to help her pull through and see another day?

He couldn't. They were too young. He didn't need to worry them. No matter his own fear, his children needed him. His family needed him now, more than ever. And, despite all his dread, he held a smidge of hope within him as well. His wife was strong, so strong. This incredible woman he loved and cherished was a fighter, and would not allow herself to be taken so easily. They had the rest of their lives to enjoy together. They had children to watch grow up, and begin families of their own.

And so he held his tongue.

And smiled.

“She’s going to be fine.”

The days came and went; the inevitable passage of time refusing to allow one even a moment’s breath. The ebb and flow of the universe stops for no man, woman, or child, no matter what dire situation their mother may be in. For Alex, the successive weeks passed in a blur of forced normality and perplexed fear. She still had not seen her mom, still had received no word as to what state she was in. But there was no sympathy from time. No matter how much she longed for it all to *stop*, to grant her the slightest reprieve in which she may catch her bearings, come to grips with reality, and properly mourn—

*Mourn?* thought Alex. *Is that the right word? Should I be mourning now? I don't even know what's going on at all; how am I supposed to know how to react?*

Regardless, life for Alex chugged along as usual, and she had no choice but to be swept up in its clockwork rhythm.

“Hey Alex, you OK?” asked her best friend Jade at lunch a few days after the incident.  
“You’ve seemed kinda out of it lately, y’know? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no, everything’s fine,” said Alex with a painted smile.

“Are you sure? You seem, I dunno, upset?” Jade frowned with concern.

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s fine. Really.” Alex took a bite of her sandwich, closing the conversation.

“Well, OK, if you’re sure...” Jade trailed off, uncertain of whether to push the matter or stay out of it.

“I’m sure.” Alex took another bite.

“It’s gonna be fine,” said Jade, attempting to reassure anyway.

“Hey, did you do the math homework?” asked Alex, abruptly steering the discussion towards a new topic. “I’ve been, uh, really busy lately; d’you think you could help me?”

“Yeah, of course,” said Jade.

It wasn’t brought up again.

\* \* \*

Alex’s grandparents drove up from Florida to help the family out. They took the kids to school and picked them up in the afternoons. They took Alex to ballet, Michael to soccer, and Leah out for ice cream, a treat to calm her persistent nerves. When Alex asked about the situation at hand, they gave the same platitudes as everyone else.

“She’s going to be fine.”

\* \* \*

Twenty-three days later, she was finally released from the hospital.

By some miracle, she had survived a stroke.

She survived.

Oh God, she *survived*.

She wasn't supposed to.

## The Art of Vengeance

Every morning, as I traipse along the bridge over the Neva river, I hear whispers. Soft murmurs confiding the name of a missing brother to the waves, the retreating liquid carrying the anguish deep inside the murky depths of the river. Hushed confidences, ridden with unshed tears and fury, pouring out of a widowed wife into the body, where she thinks the debris saturating the water will conceal the anger until it is tucked away into a bubble by the trembling seagrass. The river is full of secrets, unspoken words of anger turning the violent tide of the water. The fury of the common people must be hidden in a country ruled by fear of itself. But every whisper, every syllable expressing any feeling but admiration towards the fascist regime, never went unheard. Not in Leningrad.

The Neva river has a special meaning to those whose loved ones have been ruthlessly taken to their demise. It's where the bodies of Stalin's sadistic kills are dumped once they had admitted to crimes they hadn't committed, rebellions they hadn't started. One by one, they fall into the agitated waves, concealed by the raven sheet of night. Like chess pieces, each of the Man of Steel's opponents knocked off their feet with a push of his foot. Checkmate.

My father was amongst the brutally murdered. He was an artist, a creator of paintings so realistic and heartbreaking, they attracted the attention of the Communist government. His art depicted the paranoia and agony eating away at the minds of Russia's citizens. He even dared to paint our dictator, reflecting the perverted way he laughs in merriment in the daylight, and then as soon as the light of dusk fails, slaughters hundreds of innocent souls like pigs. This was when Josef Stalin himself stepped in, murdering my father in the dead of night as a lesson to all the artists of Russia.

But that was a lesson I refused to learn. I spent months after my father's disappearance huddled in a corner of my family's cold apartment, blinded by hatred and loss. It wasn't till I discovered my father's unfinished paintings, all of which boldly portrayed the crushing chokehold Stalin had Russia in, that I promised to finish his project for him. And to myself, I made a vow- to get revenge on Josef Stalin if it was the last thing I did.

Today, I walk along the Neva with a folded easel and can of paints in hand. I am here to carry out my father's job, to fulfill his duty as an artist. My trek along the water, once required by my mother in desperate attempts to pull me out of my depression, becomes a march. To what? I'm not aware myself. My grave seems like a likely answer, considering what I am about to do is a shortcut to the torture chambers deep under the streets of Leningrad.

I arrive at the end of the bridge and set up my supplies, all stolen from my Papa's old cupboard and snuck under my mother's paranoid nose. Today, I am here to paint for the first time since my father was killed, a task I take on against my mother's wishes.

*"No, Anastasia, you must not. Promise me, please promise me you will never create art. I cannot lose a daughter to the prison chambers the way I lost my husband,"* she would whisper furiously, sweat beading on her forehead as her unhinged, tortured eyes hungrily swept over my face, as if seeing it for the last time.

The tumultuous waters of the Neva are the first thing I see as I gaze up at the eerily beautiful landscape. All I am reminded of is the hundreds of mangled bodies hidden behind the seagrass in the depths of the river, their eyes frozen in a state of horror and shock. The ghost of their last words still floating above them in wisps. The thought shakes me from the core of my soul, and I use that feeling to propel my trembling hand to the creamy, white canvas.

A stroke of red. A drop of yellow. Time passes, my paranoia that I am being watched does not. I am alone on the Neva, every stroke of my brush illuminating my path to imprisonment. It may have been minutes, or hours, before I brush the final drop of ink onto the cloth. I step back carefully, gazing at my painting with a heavy soul and somber eyes.

*The noble flag of the Communist party bleeds into the Neva river below, casting a shadow on the terrorized face of the man who falls to his death as the imperial Stalin himself watches. My father, forever frozen in his last moments on the folds of my canvas.*

--

I am quick to recover from the weight of my work. A discreet glance around the bridge tells me that I am not alone anymore. Lone travelers populate the bridge interspersedly, walking to their workplaces in the newborn rays of sun. I'm starting to attract curious looks. This thought alerts me, and I cover my canvas with a sheath of drab brown cloth. Packing up my easel and paints, I hurry along the corroded overpass, the cold of the Leningrad morning clinging to every crevice of my frail body.

My destination is crystal clear in my mind. My father took me to it every time he finished a painting. I would know he was almost done by the way he shut himself in his room, feverishly sweeping strokes of color onto the last inches of canvas as if afraid he would be taken from the world before he could finish. I used to sit outside his studio during these last phases of work, like simply leaning into the wall separating my world and his would somehow connect me to his art. I thought I could paint a small piece of myself into an entirely otherworldly creation, so vastly different from the universe I knew, yet so alike. It was when I heard him drop his soiled paintbrush into a cup of muddy water after what seemed like an eternity, that I knew it was time to visit Uncle Alexei.

Alexei Ivanov is not really my uncle. He *was* my father's agent of sorts, playing a key role in persuading clandestine art galleries to display my father's controversial work, work that disoriented even the boldest of secret societies. You see, in Stalin's country, any creation that could be mistaken as rebellious was strictly forbidden. My father's art could not be mistaken as anything *but* rebellious.

The secret galleries that showcased my father's work were supposed to be just that: secret. They were gatherings of artists with no one to communicate their agony with but each other. But word got out, like it always does. A series of traitorous exchanges later, Stalin himself beat down the door of the gallery. My father was taken that very night. We never heard from him again.

I have not seen Alexei since my father's death. I remember him as a dauntless man, one who unwaveringly voiced his opposition to the sadism of the Russian dictator. He supported my father resolutely, displaying his art with fierce pride.

*"Hopefully, he feels the same about me,"* I think to myself as I walk down the icy path to his home.

I am shaken from my recollections as I reach the gateway to Alexei's apartment. Stepping over the hardened daggers of ice shooting up from the thin sheet of frozen water covering the ground, I lift the brass knocker and tap it thrice, bracing myself for the possibility that he very likely will not grant my request. My uncle himself opens the door, his aging face creased with confusion and pain.

"Anastasia? My child, what are you doing here?" he says.

The sight of my uncle, whom I hadn't seen since my father was murdered, is too much for me. The world around me turns, twisting itself into the spirals of paint I could recognize from

a mile away as the product of my father's clever hand. It's Alexei's steady grip, placed upon my shoulder like he had so many times when I was a child, that brings me back to the Russian brownstone.

"Uncle Alexei, I... I need a favor."

---

It's ironic, really, to see how little Alexei's abode had changed. His best friends were killed in the raid on the gallery, his family was murdered ruthlessly in front of his own eyes. His life was turned upside down in a matter of hours. Yet his linens continue to wrinkle, his dishes continue to accumulate, and his clock is still thirty minutes behind.

"Well... what can I do for you, Anastasia?" he asks uncertainly, ushering me into the crumbling apartment.

"I... I need you to display my painting at your gallery," I say, and once the words are out of my mouth there's no taking them back.

"Ana, my child, tell me you haven't been painting. *Please*, for all our sakes, tell me you haven't been painting. They'll kill us!" Alexei responds, not bothering to conceal his terror. His cowardice ignites repugnance within me.

"I know your gallery is public now. I know that if you display anything like what my father had done we will both be killed. But I need to do this. I need to show people what he's done to us. I need to show people that my father and your family were murdered, their lives cast aside as though meaningless, simply because they dared to open the blood-stained curtain concealing his carnage. I need to show HIM, Josef Stalin, that what he's done will eventually cause him to drown in the depths of his own country's hatred!"

I am convulsing with rage. A fresh flood of fury crashes into my boiling blood. I whip the brown cloth off my painting, violently shoving the unnatural art in his face.

“Uncle, my father and your BEST friend was killed by Stalin. Your family- Anastasia, little Anya and Galina- they were murdered because they were accomplice to your rebellion. And yet, you sit here basking in self-loath and waiting for death to relieve you from this life that you created for yourself! Has it not occurred to you that instead of waiting for time to stop ticking we could be out there, feeding others’ fury, spreading the tales of depravity that we have become so accustomed to? Has the idea of VENGEANCE never crossed your rotting brain? What happened to the Uncle Alexei I knew? The one who leapt at the chance to show the citizens of Leningrad the revolting truths of our country? The one who held my shoulder proudly while I painted smaller versions of my father’s infamous paintings? The one who dared to look Josef Stalin himself in the eye and spit on his newly polished shoes?!”

The poison in my voice surprises even myself, let alone my uncle, who now cowers on the couch, regarding me guardedly.

“Ana, what have they done to you?” he whispers.

“What haven’t they done?” I murmur, malice dripping from my words.

Alexei’s face clouds up in pain. He furrows his brow and chews his lip, a tick I remember only happens when he’s fighting an inner civil war. Then, suddenly, his visage is clear. A decision has been made.

My uncle looks as though he can’t believe what he’s going to say. I lean forward in anticipation, my rage propelling me in my chair.

“There’s an exhibition in a fortnight. C...Come by the gallery in seven days’ time. Bring your painting with you. Don’t be seen, whatever you do. I’d like for us to remain alive till the exhibition is over,” he chokes out, eyes cast towards to ceiling as though accepting his fate.

My smile seems to stretch across the never-ending expanse of Russia’s icy desert. Finally, *finally*, the day has come! I will prove to Stalin that even the Man of Steel cannot erase his unforgivable actions from the minds of an entire country. My father’s death will mean more than the murder of another insolent artist.

I manage to contain my euphoria long enough to extend my hand, which is trembling from the remnants of rage and the budding flower of excitement twisting in my gut.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Alexei says grimly.

I nod curtly, pressing my lips tightly together to prevent squeals of joy from escaping. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this happy. I reach for my threadbare coat and walk to the doorway.

“And Anastasia?”

I turn in the foyer.

“It’s good to see you again.”

---

Alexei’s gallery is the polar opposite of his decrepit living quarters. Where his house encompasses moth eaten curtains, threadbare couches, and a shabby beer cart, his gallery is home to gleaming mahogany walls, effulgent crystal chandeliers, and a gilded marble bar full of exotic alcoholic drinks imported from all over the world.

I am sitting at the bar right now, nursing a half-full glass of French wine and watching people traverse the exhibition. My painting has attracted a pool of people yet again; over the past

month, word of mouth has brought hundreds to the exhibition, each hoping to catch a glimpse of the infamous work.

The look on the first viewer's face is something I will never forget. Her name was Anna Petrova, and she was an old widow whose husband was viciously murdered when he and other cotton workers started the Teikovo rebellion. She walked to the painting in a trance, and I saw a symphony of emotions cross her face. Shock. Terror. Anger. Grief. Tears silently spilling from her exhausted eyes, she turned slowly, seeking the artist who dared to paint tragedy in a room full of forcibly light artwork. Our eyes met, and though we exchanged no words, we were connected forever, intertwined by the persistent threads of sadness, linked by the rough ropes of anger.

Anna wasn't alone in her reaction. I watch a little boy now, recognition and despair filling his being as he looks up at my painting. His eyes seem too old for his body; they've already seen the most terrible and violent truths of the world.

Suddenly, Alexei comes up behind me.

"I'll have what she's having, please," he throws over his shoulder to the bartender. He looks at me for a beat too long.

"Is there something on your mind, Uncle?"

He turns quickly to his wine, which the bartender has just slapped down in front of him.

"Ana, my child. Your painting- it's affected our city quite a bit over the past month. My friend told me he heard people on the street talking about starting a worker's strike soon. They said if an artist like you can have the courage to stand up to Stalin, so can they."

I glance up in shock. Alexei's eyes are sincere. A flutter of hope blooms in my stomach.

"O-- Oh?" I stammer out.

“Yes, for better or for worse, there are talks of rebellion. Ana-- I just want you to know that your father would have been proud. He would have been proud that you are insistent on justice for the people of Leningrad. He would have been proud that you are angry, that you are willing to fight. And... I-- I’m proud of you as well, my child.”

I meet his eyes. Eyes that were once creased with laughter, crinkling at the corners with every joke, now contaminated with despair and loss. They mirror mine. I turn back to the gleaming white marble of the bar, and a thought occurs to me.

“H--How did you get the money to build this beautiful gallery? After the secret galleries were burnt down, I mean. You were never exactly rich, and after-- after everyone was killed, I can’t imagine you found work immediately.”

Alexei’s eyes fall. He brings his hands to his face to conceal the emotion flooding it, but not before I see the loss and anger consuming him.

“Did you not see the papers when your father died, Ana? They killed everyone in that gallery but me. Stalin himself visited me, granted an official pardon, and handed me the check to build this gallery, but not before he wiped out my family and friends. He did this so he could be seen as the hero, the noble ruler who forgives his people for their misdoings and whose generosity is known through the land. But he also showed everyone what would happen if they set a toe out of line. I will be a reminder of that for the rest of my life.”

The despair in his voice overwhelms me. Rage towards Stalin and his minions is all I feel, anger at those who tortured Alexei this way. I grip my glass of wine tightly, feeling it crack. Shards of glass pierce my ash white skin.

I turn to my uncle, ready to whisper words of fury.

Then, I see them.

The Red Army, flanked by the Secret Police. Barging through the mahogany doorway, armed with lethal weapons that had the potential to kill hundreds with one shot. I freeze over in shock, unable to comprehend the scene in front of me.

Pistols fire into the crowds at the gallery. People go down by the dozen, each ripped of life with the nonchalant pull of a trigger. The little boy I saw looking at my painting crumples to his knees, his terrorized eyes widened in shock. The stench of blood fills the building, its repulsive tendrils sneaking into my nose and suppressing the blood-curdling scream fighting to be released.

A howl of pain reverberates in my head. I look to my right, unwilling to see what I know is before me.

Alexei is falling, his eyes glazed over with tears as he collapses to the floor. A stream of red leaks from a wound on his chest- tears, pouring out of a grieving heart.

“NO!” I scream as I throw myself onto the floor next to him.

“Anastasia-- my child, remember the enemy. Remember why we did this, Ana!” he chokes out, fighting death for mere seconds of time. And then his eyes close, relief settling into the features once lined with grief.

I whip around, feverishly scanning the gallery for the execrable man who had pulled the trigger on my brave uncle. My hands blindly clutch the counter behind me, searching for a shard of glass, an abandoned gun, anything to kill the men who murder humans like a band of psychopathic hunters in front of me.

Suddenly, a pair of rough hands grips my shoulders, spinning me around carelessly. I am face to face with a policeman. His crazed sneer fills my view.

“There you are, darling. You’re the mastermind behind this whole scheme, aren’t you? You’re the little artist who painted that pretty picture over there.” he spits, grabbing my dress collar and pulling me close. His vile, beer-scented breath sends a wave of nausea up my throat. I gather up a mixture of bile and saliva and spit in his face.

He recoils.

“Just who the hell do you think you are? What’s your name?” he screeches.

“Anastasia Kozlov.”

“Kozlov?”

Recognition dawns on his face. “You’re the daughter of that artist that painted those pictures of Comrade Stalin, aren’t you? Oh, you just wait. You’re going straight to the big man. If we’re lucky, you’ll meet the same end your brave little father met,” he finishes, a demented grin burgeoning over his liver-spotted face.

I kick his shin, hoping to distract him while I arrange the terror engulfing my features into a passable expression of defiance. Liquid fear travels through my nerves, freezing the adrenaline pulsing through my body.

The policeman yelps in pain.

“Oh, you just won’t give up, now will you darling?” he sneers, locking his yellowing eyes onto my blue ones. He lifts a broken wine bottle and holds it over my head, poised to maim.

The last thing I see before I blackout is the blood red of the Communist party badge on the policeman’s uniform, crushing the colors of everything around it with a reckoning force.

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I lay crumpled and motionless in the humid basement of the army compound. The air around me is thick with the odor of stale urine and rusting blood. It is obvious that there have

been many before me in this basement, tied up with the same coarse ropes I am binded by now. Two policemen flank each side of the doorway, motionless and silent.

I try to force myself out of my ropes to no avail. Exhaustion overwhelms me. I keel over in pain and cough up specks of red. Tears gather in the corner of my eyes. How long have I been here?

Suddenly, the heavy door separating me and the rest of the world bangs open.

Josef Stalin himself barges into the basement.

My vision swims. Emotions overwhelm my being. Rage, terror, hatred. One by one, then all together, feelings flood my body, like a tsunami obliterating every sign of life on the Earth it touches.

Stalin slows to a stop in front of me. He stands far too close. I can smell the alcohol leaching out of his pores. The scent of blood lingers near him, a ghoulish sign of the macabre never too far from him.

“Anastasia Kozlov. Painter. Taken in custody for mutinous art form and for spreading rebellious thoughts within the population of Leningrad. Related to the late painter Viktor Kozlov. You artists never learn, do you?” Stalin tuts patiently, as if reprimanding a child for stealing a sweet.

I don't respond. I fight to keep my crazed eyes locked onto his, confronting the man who murdered my father and crushed my country.

“My child, why would you do something like this? You saw what happened to your father. Russia is blossoming. Your city is blossoming. Spreading fear within the people only hinders our progress. I only kill those I have to kill, Anastasia, so I'm going to make you an offer.”

I sit motionless, bursting with rage as tears of fury cut clear tracks through my dirty face. He called me "*my child*", like my father and uncle did. Disgust creeps up my throat, threatening to spill over as Stalin grins menacingly.

"You have two choices. One, you can go just as your father did. Your family and neighbors will be told you died in the raid on the illegal gallery as a participant. They will mourn, then they will forget you. You will be yet another example of what happens if you interfere with the country's growth. Or choice two. I am offering you the opportunity to reverse your actions. Create a piece of art that shows the true beauty of this country, the altruism of the Soviet government. Do so, and you will be rewarded with your life."

My skull threatens to split within me. Confusion ricochets around my head. This is an unexpected turn. The worst part is, I find myself contemplating exchanging my beliefs for my life. Revulsion collects in my throat.

I can't do this. I'm not the person my father made me out to be. My uncle was wrong-- he wouldn't be proud of me. I'm a coward, a faint heart in the face of death, man's most formidable enemy. I bite my lip as I lean towards the decision I know I will loathe myself for making, as if the blood leaking from my lower lip will stop the words coming from my mouth.

I look up at Josef Stalin. His face is entirely too happy, euphoric in a country full of adversity. It is only his eyes that offer a frosted window into his demonic soul. They are raving mad and bloodthirsty. They send every fiber of my being into a frenzied terror.

He seems to sense this; his eerily patient smile widens into a gruesome grin. He knows my decision.

"A policeman will be by soon with a canvas and paints. You have twenty four hours. Make me look handsome."

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My father use to tell me not to judge the people that returned from the Red Army's compound safely, toting Communist badges and a list of alleged insurgents to unmask.

*“Ana, my sweetheart, it is easy to pretend we would act the hero when listening to stories of terror in the comfort of our own homes. These people, they have been through torture we cannot imagine, they have been stripped of their identity, their dignity. Ana, we must not be angry at them, we must pity them. They are the real fallen soldiers, child, not the dead.”*

At the time, I would never have dreamt that death might be a welcome friend at any point. My father's work had me in a rebel's uniform from a young age. This mindset made me believe that the gravest crime one could commit is backing down from their beliefs.

It isn't till many years later, as I silently drag my stiff wooden paintbrush down the canvas Stalin's henchman had shoved in my face, that I fully contemplate my father's words.

I am repulsed with myself. Alexei, my father, that little boy I saw brutally murdered at the art gallery. *What were their sacrifices for?* I might as well paint Stalin's imperial portrait with the blood running through their insurgent veins.

The sketches of Russia's noble leader begin to take form over the tips of the canvas. I cover my head in frustration, willing myself to channel my father's valiant spirit.

Suddenly, I hear hushed voices outside my room.

It's the policemen, unaware that they stand in front of a room containing Stalin's most wanted rebel.

“You heard about that painter girl, no? The daughter of that Kozlov fellow. He gave us some trouble a while back with his art too. I heard Comrade Stalin gave her an ultimatum- die or join his side,” one says.

“Ultimatum? Are you stupid? That’s not what he’s doing. That painting he’s having her create- he’s going to display it to the entire country with her signature on it. He’s going to tell them the story of how she was an enemy of the people. Yet even she recognized the power of the Communists in the end. Don’t you get it, you idiot? She’s going to be used as a martyr. She’s going to urge people to follow blindly in Stalin’s wake after her death. He’s going to kill her anyway.”

Bile rises up in my throat. The world spins itself into those spirals again, my father’s clever hand back to haunt me. I hear whispers all around me.

“*Coward, coward,*” they taunt. The voices are familiar, they are Alexei’s. They are my father’s.

I am going to die anyway. The satanic sound of Stalin’s voice comes back to me.

“*The altruism of the Soviet government, the true beauty of this country,*” he whispers.

Tears leak out of my eyes. I cannot embrace death as a coward. I cannot let my father’s and Alexei’s death go unavenged.

My hands shake in fury. I pick up my soiled paintbrush, slowly, but steadily. Time stops as I retrace the outline of Josef Stalin, noble Soviet leader, onto my canvas. Drops of red and yellow paint spatter my vision. I work with fire, my anger rushing out of me into my painting.

Finally, I brush the final drop of red paint onto the canvas.

I step back to admire my work.

*The menacing Communist flag undulates triumphantly atop a mountain of mangled dead bodies. Josef Stalin himself lies atop the pile, his eyes closed, his arms limp. The totalitarian ruler, finally defeated by the tyranny of his own government.*

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## Sunday

I freaking hate Sundays. Mostly due to the fact that my mother forces me to attend church with her every single week. I mean I love worshipping my main homie God, but I swear my whole church congregation focuses on torturing me. Every little detail of the service annoys me. The main thing being the repetitive songs that the preacher doesn't mind making us sing almost every Sunday. I mean if I have to sing "Amazing Grace" one more time, I am going to beat myself in the head with one of those old dinghy song books that the church casually has lying around everywhere.

It used to not be this way years ago. I used to enjoy coming to church every Sunday with my mom. It was literally the highlight of my weekend mainly because I was eight and I maybe kind of had a crush on bible study teacher Sister June, but now I am 12 years and I am too old to attend those classes now. Plus I have a new taste in women which consists of ones who don't carry around bibles all the time and wear ridiculous floral skirts. Man I have changed.

Now here I am sitting behind some old women who wears too much perfume and not even the kind that smells good. She also always seems to wear outrageous hats that never match her outfit. I mean come on lady if you are going to buy something that looks that resembles a huge messy bouquet of flowers that looks like it was made for Mother's day by some 5 year old during Arts n Crafts you can at least make it match with your account. Geez, uncoordinated choices in clothing really bug me.

Now where was I oh yeah, slouching down in one of the pews slowly dying of boredom. Well at least that is how I was before my mother whispered something in a stern voice.

“Sit up Mick, you are going to have back problems if you keep on slouching like that.” She didn’t even make eye contact with me as she said this to me. It was probably because she was embarrassed to be sitting next to a child who didn’t choose to sit at a 90 degree angle all time. I mean who would when they are literally sitting in one of the most uncomfortable places ever. My mother always was scolding me and I didn’t blame her. I wasn’t like any of the other children who attended my church. There were only a couple of other children. Hannah, Ron, and Jessica. Those were some I could name off the top of my head. I always disliked Ron because he was the quintessence of how a child should be during service. Every parent wanted a kid like Ron, including my mother. One time I was sitting next to him during service that was a big mistake. That day I happened to be chewing gum and he snitched on me. Not cool. I got in trouble, and all he got was a pat on the back because he was following the rule of not letting anyone eating in the sanctuary. In other words, he was a complete pain in the neck who followed the rules.

Trying so hard to not let out one of my famous dramatic sighs, I sat straight up. This was probably one of the biggest mistakes of my life. The preacher had his eyes right on me as he gave his sermon about how we are not immune to sin.

“We must ask for forgiveness from God...”

The preacher’s voice became quiet mainly because I toned it out. I mean the man has pretty relaxing voice so it isn’t hard to do. The man can literally put me to sleep like 5 minutes after he starts his sermon. Not that I haven’t fell asleep before. His soothing voice was probably the only thing that I liked about the middle aged man who always seemed to grease his hair down. The thing that I definitely hated the most was when he would casually breathe in the microphone. He just had to be a mouth breather.

*Come on doesn't anyone have sense of style or class at this church?* I screamed with frustration in my head because I couldn't do it out loud.

Turning my attention to the man speaking. The man made me angry one again because it seemed like he directed his words towards me as he finished.

"I hope some of the words guide you through this blessed Sunday afternoon." Winking at me before he stepped down from his little pedestal.

*What the hell did that little wink mean?* I yelled in my head. This man is clearly up to something because this was the first time this has ever happened to me. It wasn't one of those normal winks. It was the type that my friends often used when they knew something was up or that they knew something was going to happen. That man could probably be planning to kill me or something. What pulled me out of these awful thoughts was the sound of my mother's voice.

"Stay put Mick, I need to go talk to Sister Mary about next week's fundraiser." My mom informed me as she slid right past me. I didn't even realize that the sermon was over. I was more worried about the man who could possibly be planning my tragic end. I mean, I lived a pretty good 12 years, but I wasn't planning on leaving earth any time soon and I definitely wasn't going to let some middle aged, sweaty, and mouth breather of a man take me out either.

"Does she really expect me to sit here when there could be a man who could possibly kill me roaming around? She insane if she think that I going to sit here." I said standing up from my spot.

I sat back down because there was nowhere I could possibly go. I hated whenever my mother went to speak to one of her friends. Come on I know how women are they can talk about random things such as where they bought their shoes from or why they chose to wear that red shade of lipstick today. As a man I just know these kinds of things.

Silence seeped through the room. The silence was so thick you can practically cut it with a knife, but it should be this way. No one in their right mind would choose to stay after the service ended. Swinging my feet back and forth, I began to grow embarrassed because my feet barely touched the ground. The doctor definitely lied about starting my growth spurt. Note to self never trust a man in a lab coat and insists on wearing ridiculous ties because he wants to lighten up your time seeing him.

5 minutes have passed, Wait has it been five minutes or 5 years. I could practically feel myself aging as I remained seated. My youth slowly leaving me at this very moment. I was becoming something, I feared with all my heart: old. Wrinkles were probably on my face and now I probably have to start eating that weird strawberry flavored yogurt that my grandmother stockpiles in her fridge. Gross. Wait look on the brightside, now that I am alone I can finally get some peace and quiet. No one can bother me. Sweet. Maybe I can accomplish one of the many items on my bucket list. Do a cartwheel in a public area especially the service room of this church. I mean come on who wouldn't want to do this, so why not do it? It was definitely something that I have thought about doing all the time during service. I have my best thoughts during that time. Brushing my hands on my corduroy pants I stood up to survey my area and decided it would not be best to do my original idea. I could hit my head on something. I needed to find something else to keep me entertain.

*Maybe I can sneak into the church's kitchen and find my something to eat?* I can practically feel my stomach digesting itself. My mom shouldn't mind that I am doing so. Even if she did mind, she isn't here she can't really do anything so... Mumbling to myself about how I am practically dying of starvation, I navigated my way through the maze. Coming to a complete stop before I exited the room. I was very excited to go to the kitchen due the fact that I knew there would be

doughnuts there because every Sunday, someone brings doughnuts, but I am never allowed to eat them due the fact they are for the adults. Plus I am not allowed to have sugar before 12 pm.

Voices were talking to each other about something. Looking back, I spotted a door that I have never seen before. There was light coming from it. Taking a deep breath I approached the door and placed my ear on it. I could identify the people as a group of 3 men.

“We need to convince the boy’s mother to join us. Once we gain her trust we can get the boy.” One of the men said.

The one who had a very shrill voice which reminded me of someone dragging their nails across one of those old school chalkboards. Wait no it was ten times worse. If they had a competition for who had the worse voice in the world, he would win first place and probably take home a gold medal. The second voice began to speak, but I couldn’t really decypher what it was saying. This was the same with the third. I looked around before quickly walking away from the door and towards the original door I was going to make my departure from to go look for some hopefully sweet treats. My mouth was practically watering as I thought about the glazed goodness that was waiting for me in a cardboard box.

Walking down the most scariest looking hallway. It was mainly scary because it was full of stained glass windows. Trust me the windows were beautiful when was actual light coming through, but when they were off it felt as if Mother Mary was going to jump out of the frame and snatch me up. I finally made it to the end of the hallway.

“Light.” I dramatically said reaching my hands out as if I was some man who had been living under a rock for his entire life and was unable to see the sun. In other words, I look like a mad man. Finally looking around I spotted what I was looking for. The holy grail. I opened the

box and to my luck there was one doughnut that was left. It was sprinkles, but I was hungry so I ate it anyway.

As I finished my really late breakfast, I made sure to hide any evidence that was left behind from the crime that I committed on this holy Sunday. If someone were to find a sprinkle on the ground they would know that something was up. The way I hid the evidence was simple I wiped the leftover crumbs and frosting on my pants. Not one person would look down at my pants. They wouldn't expect to see a single stain on them because I as one who liked to keep their pants clean. It was in the past and if anyone asked me what happened, I wouldn't confess. I am a great liar too.

I walked down the hallway and back into the service room. I made sure to sit in the exact spot where my mother had left me. As I waited, I began to think about what those men meant by "they could get to me". I didn't know what that meant nor what that were going to do. It scared me to be honest.

What brought me out of my little thinking session, was the sound of my mother's voice. She had a smile on her face. It wasn't a happy smile. It reminded me of one when someone was up to something mischievous. I was very familiar with this smile because I used it most of the time. I didn't get into trouble that much, but whenever I were to even flash that smile my mother would know that something was up. Plus me having a vast knowledge of how people are, I could just tell.

"Come on Mick. Let's go." She said motioning for me to get up to follow her out of the pew and hopefully out of this church.

We headed home shortly after. The day soon changed to night. Monday and the week soon began and everything was back to normal. I was going to school everyday and couldn't wait for

the weekend so that I could sleep in. Well, that is what I wanted but my mother had other plans. Once again here I was going to church with her yet again.

Walking into the door this time, the atmosphere seemed different. It was like everyone had their eyes on me. I don't blame there either I looked like a million bucks. My mother bought me this new vest and I couldn't wait to show it off. I looked around and then sat down in one of the pews. My mother glanced at me once again wearing that sinister smile.

"Today is a big day Mick!" She waved her hands up and down looking as if she were dancing. I knew what this meant. My mother was excited about something. Before I could ask her why. The preacher's monotone voice rang through the whole room.

"Today is a very special day. Someone is joining us today." He said raising his hands being overly dramatic if I do say so myself. Cheers and applauds filled the room. I didn't know why people were cheering because new people joined our church all the time. It was confusing.

"Come join us up here...Mick!" He announces earning more cheers. I stood up. It was a first instinct. I was pretty sure that my mouth was hanging all the way to the floor. I would probably compare myself to someone who saw a ghost.

Someone shoved me to move, that person most likely being my mother. I moved and approached the man who just announced that I will be joining something that I most likely didn't sign up for. As I got up, I was soon followed by other children that I recognized to be Hannah, Ron, and Jessica. They looked the way they usually did, but this time they were wearing long white robes that seemed to be made out of velvet. *What were they doing?* I thought as I began to panic. The preacher step down from his pedestal, grabbing a large black box and approached myself and the children next to me.

“We are so glad that you are joining us Mick.” Ron said flashing his toothy grin. Man, I really didn’t like him.

The preacher smiled and placed the box in front of me, pulling out a similar white robe.

“We are so glad you are doing this Mick!” He exclaimed flashing me a smile. It was creepy. Definitely made me uncomfortable.

“What do you mean? What am I joining?” These were the first questions that popped into my head, so I asked them. I couldn't think of anymore, it was as if my brain shut down. Kind of like the way it does in math class.

“You mean that no one told you. You are becoming one of us! Isn’t that great news?” Ron said nearly jumping up and down with excitement.

“I didn’t agree with this. I don’t wanna be like you!” I declared with the loudest voice I could make due to me being in shock still. But, my plead was clearly ignored because the preacher began his little ceremony.

“We claim this child as one of us. He not only openly opens his heart to God, but solemnly swears to be one of us for as long as he shall live.” He said. This earned cheers from the crowd once more.

“No this isn’t right, I don’t agree with this.” I nearly shouting my lungs out. I glanced over at my mother hoping she would help. Everyone seemed to be ignoring my cries for help. They just remained in their seats watching with pure joy as they watched my struggle. They looked brainwash. The preacher didn’t seem to stop his sermon either. He handed over the robe to the children. I fought the best I could, but my legs didn’t seem to move. I desperately was trying to escape the room. Jessica was holding me in the place. She was really strong girl even though she resembled a twig due to the fact that she was too skinny.

*Mick now isn't the time to judge people. You are about to be initiated into some cult.*

Thinking this as I took a deep breath.

I remained calm the best I could before I planned out how I was going to get out of this situation. Then an idea popped into my head. As they passed the robe, I fake a smile making it seem like I finally gave in. Hannah, the other girl flashed me a smile back. Good, she let her guard down meaning that the other two kids would too.

They passed the robe, like I expected them too. Putting my plan into action, I yanked my arm out of their arms and made a break for the door that was closest: the entrance. Gasps erupted in the air.

“Get him.” was the last thing I could make out before I made it down the hallway. I really felt like I was someone from a horror movie. At least I didn't trip and fall like the cliché characters did. Looking around I spotted one of the empty rooms that was usually filled with Sunday school classes. Opening the door, I carefully shut it as I was safely secured in the room. I began to freak out. Immediately I was asking God to forgive me for everything that I had done to deserve like this. “Come on God. I promise I will never judge anyone. I'll even take the lady with the awful hats into consideration. Just do me a solid and get me out of the mess.” I whispered staring up at the ceiling.

I prayed that they wouldn't find me, but not having any where else to go I knew my luck was running out. Taking one last breath after my little prayer, I heard the door knob began to jiggle. My luck had finally ran out.