

A
Way
To
Run
Away

Deandra Jane Henderson

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for thalia <3

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*a way to
run away*

get a new job

It starts with a text. He's got money, lots. Occupation: Lawyer at Exxon. When my phone vibrates in my back pocket I am at Pierre's house buying weed, four hours into not showing up for my dish-washing shift. I am smoking through the feeling that the relative stability I've been enjoying for the past year is about to melt away with winter. I can't shake it; things have been normal for way too long. Right now, nursing a joint on Pierre's balcony and trying to slow my random, panicky breathing, I am vulnerable. Of course I get a text from the Devil.

His name is Patrick Abbot. He's offering me money for pics and conversation. He is "curious about trans". You and me both, buddy. I don't even know how he found me on Facebook, I barely use the site. Oh, right—I am in a trans support page. He probably scrolls through there, looking at posts venting about addiction, harassment, mental illness, checking out profile pics, dick in hand. Circling us at our weakest: a vulture. And an Exxon lawyer! I can't imagine a more despicable career. Running defense for the people killing the world. Or offense; maybe he prosecutes activists, works to get indigenous people jailed on terrorism charges. And he wants to fuck little old me. Would that make me a collaborator? I can tell he's not a bot or a scammer, his Facebook profile is extensive: wife and kids, pictures of their house in a Texas suburb, their other house on a beach in Florida, a golden retriever, date on a yacht with the missus, racquetball with the lads from the office.

I stub out my joint and realize I've been scrolling this guy's profile for ten minutes. I guess that means I'm seriously considering responding. Is this a new low for me? You can't usually tell until you hit the ground. I breathe in chill air and look down from the balcony, surveying my surroundings: the sun crests the brown brick apartment across from me, the cars clogging Lafayette shriek and shine. Downtown Detroit, March. I can't shake the feeling that I'm living the beginning of something significant; everything is portentous. Maybe I should wait till I'm not high to text back. Between two balusters of the balcony rail,

a corn spider is crawling on her web. It glistens. Who am I kidding, what was the last serious decision I made sober?

—hello

The response is immediate.

—Hello there beautiful! Looking to make some money?

Unfortunately.

—yes

If I'm doing this, I might as well play the part.

—please :)

—Send me your Cash App.

—\$aliceB123

My phone buzzes. I just received \$50. Jesus Christ. That's food for a week, if I'm smart and planning meals. Two weeks, if I'm dumb and skipping them. I wonder what \$50 means to him.

—There's more where that came from, Alice. But you have to address me as Daddy. Can you do that?

To know your limit is to cross it. This, it turns out, is not mine. Not even close.

—yes, Daddy

Buzz. Another \$50.

—Good girl. I want a pic of you. Keep your clothes on. I want to see what you're wearing.

I open the door and go back into the apartment. Might as well take a decent mirror selfie if I'm going to keep this fish on the hook. Pierre's stretched out on the couch, playing Xbox. He's a skinny trans boy with long hair, soft face, old mastectomy scars peeking through a loose tank top. Older than me by a decade, mainly a friend but also a plug.

“You headed out?”

“Yeah, in a sec.”

His bathroom is clean enough to make me ashamed thinking of mine—shit, Jenni told me it's my turn to scrub the tub, totally forgot—and the mirror shines with recent Windex. I look okay. Minimal makeup, just eyeliner I didn't wash off last night. My job is the one place I don't wear makeup; it melts away in the steam of the industrial dishwasher, and I don't like the attention drawn to me anyway. In the kitchen everyone's too busy to bother me, but I have to walk an obnoxious distance to the parking lot down the street.

Why does so much of my life revolve around men? I'm always either avoiding their wrath or begging for their money.

I let down my hair, a bleach-fried halo that refracts the bathroom light. My clothes aren't impressive, just a blouse and jeans. Why am I worrying so much about what I look like for this monster? The money. I don't know, maybe I'm getting some perverse pleasure from this. Something like the initial guilty thrill you get when you start presenting feminine and a guy hits on you at a bar. Trained to want to be wanted. It fades fast, with repetition and maturity. When you realize the danger it represents.

I snap the photo.

—here you go Daddy

—Beautiful.

\$100 appears. I have made more money than I would have had I attended my shift. Much more. And it wasn't so bad. This is what it is, right? To work? You find someone to obey. I've just bypassed my shitty managers, the small business tyrant owner with the Corvette that comes in once a week to yell; I've found someone higher up. Closer to the dark heart of this capitalist nightmare machine. I have worked as a dishwasher for two years and my hands are beginning to show the wear. There is a scar on the side of my left hand, rough skin; layers burned in scalding water when I was first hired, burned again before I had time to grow more. Chewed up to make rent. And that's not even debilitating; Jenni will have back pain for the rest of her life from work at the Amazon warehouse. What's a selfie compared to that? I take a few with tits and ass to send him later.

think it gets better

Depression goes along with being trans. They pair like coffee and biscotti, and you're the biscotti, and the coffee's cold, and you're being dunked so many times you go totally numb, but instead of getting soft and sweet like biscotti you get hard and bitter, and worse at metaphors. Some people say they go together because both are mental illnesses—this is called comorbidity and it's your million dollar word for the day. When someone believes this, they often express it using cheaper ones. Other people say that they go together because being trans sucks so very very much—not as a mental illness but as an unfortunate situation that causes people to fear you, jobs not to hire you, and men to attack you—which is depressing. This is a viable theory, but I'd be dishonest if I didn't admit that the worst cruelties are the ones we enact on ourselves.

Like this situation: when the wave hits—and it hits hard, hard as a train, as a dad; my limbs go limp, brain blank; I almost fall on the potatoes in the produce section—my first thought is, how do I look? (This is a cruel thought, but not the cruelest). I'm not crying yet, so my mascara is fine, but is my hair set the way I like, or has a pin come loose in the stumble? What will my fellow shoppers tell their partners when they get home—about the troubled young lady having a bad day at Kroger, or about the potentially dangerous freak having a meltdown? Or maybe they'll be enlightened and won't say "freak," but have a frank discussion about the aforementioned mental health statistics. I hate statistics. I am not one, not yet.

It is possible that I am a freak, though. If this were my first time blowing snot into the sink at a store as I weep—I seize up, shoulders and throat, I gasp strangled sobs—then it could be a freak accident, but it's at least the second—a lady comes in, takes one look and decides to hold it, leaves—so I guess I just can't help being a freak, accidentally.

Waves. Some are ripples, some tsunamis. In the troughs, the water's still there, just less. These past few months have been okay. I lost my dishwashing job in March, but between Patrick

and unemployment checks, I've made enough to pay back Jenni for the rent she floated me in December, my Mom for the heating bill she covered in January, and Pierre for the many, many eighths bought with IOUs. Talking to my benefactor makes me sick, but at this point it's a job like any other. I don't miss the feeling of my life being fed along the track into that metal monster, to be melted in scalding water along with scraps of half-chewed hamburger and congealed cheese. I do miss feeling like my life wasn't entirely beholden to a man I wish was dead. Trade-offs. In my gut I know that this episode would be happening either way, it's been overdue.

At least I have money. Happiness is expensive—well, I guess money can't buy happiness; I should say not being sad is expensive. Ways to get out of the house, socialize, create, actualize, those are expensive. This shit—I wipe my nose and eyes raw with a bathroom paper towel—is free.

Money helps, but you can't bribe a tsunami. I can barely see straight. I walked, so I call Jenni for a pickup.

"You can't walk home because you're too depressed?"

"Yes."

"...Okay. Be right over."

A weird request, but odds are, this isn't the first time I've made it. Jenni and I have shared a long and turbulent decade, and in high school, I was often in need of a lift. She is familiar with my moods. I leave my grocery cart drifting around the aisle. Potato casserole can wait. I probably won't be eating for a while anyway; it might go bad.

She doesn't say anything at first, focusing on driving. I take the time to breathe: in count to 5, hold count to 5, out count to 5, repeat. Jenni's got a round face and a button nose; round shoulders leading into big tattooed arms, warehouse-worker muscles coiled underneath fat. A foot shorter than me and about twice as strong.

"Let me know what you were planning on getting, I'll pick it up for you next time I go shopping," Jenni says.

I nod my thanks, words elusive.

"Did anything trigger this?" she says.

I shake my head no, slowly, like through water. Jenni makes her worried face—her lips pressed together with just the slightest downturn, a deep crease between her brows.

“You know, I could get used to this,” she says. “I can talk shit and you won’t even talk back.”

I frown.

“Sorry, not the time. Just trying to keep it light.”

She’s got a tattoo of a demon lady roasting a heart on a pitchfork, the most faded piece in her sleeve. I remember when she got it: she was seventeen and used a fake ID. When she turns the wheel its face disappears from sight, when her arm returns to resting position, it appears again. I play a game of peekaboo with her demoness as she ferries me from the relatively safe but anxiety-inducing atmosphere of Kroger, to the dangerous but comforting atmosphere of our apartment, full of pillows and weed and my own thoughts.

I dash up the wooden staircase in back, feeling woozy, knocking my knees against the edge of a stair. That’ll bruise tomorrow. I fumble with the keys until Jenni catches up with me (walking at a normal-person pace) and turns the knob. Oops, we keep the back unlocked. Silly me.

I pull off my shoes without untying them, yanking hard, and throw my purse in the corner, vaguely in the coatrack area. Our place is one long hallway, with a kitchen/dining room/living room at the end, a bathroom and two bedrooms along the hall. I run to the living room and try not to look at the kitchen. I fail. I still haven’t done the dishes. They’re piled up pretty damn high. It’s funny how bad I am at getting those done, considering I’m a dishwasher. Ex-dishwasher. What am I now? Definitely not something that has any aptitude for doing chores. I’m an anti-roommate. I’m actively a detriment to the upkeep of anything. I walk into the living room and lie face down on the couch. It smells like cigarettes because it’s from my grandma’s old place. She used to sit on this couch and chain-smoke and tell me about her life, her mistakes and her bitterness. I loved my grandma. She died of lung cancer, surprising no one. This couch smells like her death.

On the coffee table is a bong and a grinder full of weed. I greedily pack the bowl, spilling precious crumbs on the carpet. The door to Jenni’s room shuts. Thanks for the ride, bestie.

After the process of getting high, breathing heavily, listening to music shaking, I embark on some minor psychological self-harm. I stand in front of the mirror in my room, staring at and phasing in

and out of visual frameworks. There is no stable form. I'm hot, I'm ugly, big, small, man, woman, skinny, fat; I am as changeable as the sea. It all depends on angle, camera lens, outfit, lighting, sobriety, mindset. Are you hydrated? The only commonality between my shifting forms is that I hate them all. (This is a cruel thought, but not the cruelest). Even in the brief moments where I appear something like how I want—sexy; girly; sad in an appealing, mysterious way; wan in a heroin chic way—I hate myself for abiding by the standards of men. All the other moments, I think that something as ugly as me doesn't deserve life.

It's a wave, right, when I say wave I mean a force of nature. I've been having these since I was a kid, they are triggered by nothing specific, they hit with the psychic slap of a migraine, something immutable, something you can't argue with, you just cope. But I don't want to imply that it's just a lack of endorphins, I hate when people say that, I hate psychiatry. I mean, yes I am experiencing a chemical lack, but you wouldn't say that to someone whose mom just died, you wouldn't try to flatten that grief to something mechanistic. But when it's a great overwhelming grief without an explicit trigger (especially when it's just some dumb tranny, who, it is understood, are ill as a matter of course) it gets compressed into "Major Depressive Disorder," made into a disease and filed away.

A disease is a helpful category that ensures no one gets blamed. Fuck that. My sadness may not have a specific cause but it has causes. I'm not fighting a nameless foe, there are just so many names my brain can't pick one, so it shuts down periodically and I get bowled over.

I cry and mope for hours. Eventually, I fall asleep on the couch. Sometime in the middle of the night I wake up and look around, wondering where I am. The glow from Jenni's Xbox is the same blue as the alarm clock I used in middle school. Suddenly I am 13 again, scared and alone. I draw my knees against my chest and hug them, rocking, realizing (this is the cruelest thought) that I haven't changed a bit in eleven years.

fall in love

This time, it's not getting the best of me. I have a hookup scheduled and I refuse to cancel. I'm hoping if I start crying it'll be during sex, and I can play it off as ecstasy. I'm not exactly horny—I'm barely inhabiting my body right now, I'm somewhere next door—but I'm sure she can fuck me fine with no one home.

Her name is Daria. Yes, like the show. She is the sexiest woman I have ever seen. Her hair is black and messy and smells like coconut. At the bottom of her stomach there is a patch of slightly loose skin where it has grown and shrunk; I like to press my face in it. Sometimes I think about sinking in up to my shoulders. Often.

I pull up to her home—a beat-up Northend duplex that was red at some point—and my stomach is doing flips. Anxiety, anticipation. And hunger, right—I didn't eat yesterday and refused to this morning because I'm planning on getting my guts rearranged tonight. Afterwards, I'll eat. Daria's a good cook, way too good to love a girl with an eating disorder. I don't deserve her. Good thing I don't have her in the first place. There is a decrepit crabapple tree growing on her unkempt lawn. The ground is littered with its droppings and well-fed ants. I knock on the left door; she lives on the first floor.

"Hey there." Her voice is smoke-fucked; she'll never get above a baritone and it's so, so sexy.

"Hey Daria."

"Come in babe," she says. My inner thighs twinge—God help me. The wave definitely hasn't killed the drive yet; I guess I should be grateful.

Her living room is plush, warm. Band posters cover the far wall; a bass stands up in the corner. She's not in a band right now but she plays gun for hire gigs around the city. She sits down on an old (love) seat. Tight pants, a loose cardigan that lets one sharp shoulder and brutal collarbone show.

"What have you been up to hun?" she asks, grabbing a half-cigarette from the ashtray. The whole place smells like cigarettes; it's like walking into her mouth. There's no way she's getting that security deposit back.

‘Hanging in there, you know,’ I say. Good one, you really sold it. Did my voice break right there?

“Yeah, I do,” she says.

“Do what?”

She cocks her head.

“Know.”

“Oh, right. Um ... how are you?”

“I’m alright. I got this contract to play bass on some tracks for a local band. They’re signed, so I’m actually getting paid paid, not like, in beer,” her cat Pix, an old and ugly Maine coon, ambles up and brushes against my leg. I give his head a scratch. I can feel my nose twitch. Allergies. “Which is new for me in terms of recording. So I have some cash. I was thinking I could take you out?”

“Like, with a gun?”

She laughs. “No, for Chinese. You said you like Chinese food, right? There’s this place nearby that has good dim sum. I know I normally cook, but I’m not really feeling up for it today.”

I blush a bit, realizing we have a “normal”. Hearing that she’s not up to cooking makes me relax. Daria loves cooking, so that’s a sure sign that she’s feeling shitty. It’s good to know I’m not the only one having issues. I don’t want her to be *depressed*, but I also don’t want me to be depressed, so I don’t think what I want is relevant here. What matters is that we’re on equal footing.

My stomach grumbles. So much for not eating.

“Yeah, I’d like that,” I say.

We walk to a strip mall a few blocks away, horns blaring as we cross Woodward, Daria humming a New Order bass line I recognize because she’s hummed it before, me thinking how amazing it is that we have both a normal and a before, that we have history. First China Palace appears in block letters bolted over a swinging door. A DoorDash driver is emerging as we enter, and he says sorry ma’am as he skirts around us, then does a clear double take, ogling the trannies as he gets in his car. I grimace. Daria’s face is a mask, but something in her eyes hardens.

Little platters soon cover our table. Buns, dumplings, fried chicken and pork. Red, green, and brown cups of sauce. Green tea. This is delicious; I can actually taste the sour sauce through the anhedonia. A couple of sleepy endorphin receptors spark somewhere in my brain.

“So, are you recording full time now?” I ask.

“I wish. No, I’m still at Costco,” she says. “It pays the bills, more or less. Are you still dishwashing?”

“No, I quit actually,” I say, sheepish. “I’m doing sex work now, I guess. I have a sugar daddy.”

“That’s cool,” she says. I don’t feel cool. “You know, Alice, I feel like I don’t really know what your thing is, you know? My whole world is my music. Sometimes it’s the only thing that keeps me afloat. Do you have something like that?”

My thing? Is “you” a valid answer? “I like reading,” I say.

“What do you read?” she asks.

“I read a lot of fantasy. But other stuff too, I like classic literature. I read *Jane Eyre* last year,” I say. “But I haven’t been able to focus on much lately.” Except you.

“Wow, that’s really impressive. I’ve never made it through anything that long,” she says, leaning down to slurp pea shoots. Lucky greens. “What do you think has been holding you back lately?”

“Just depressed,” I say. She looks to me for more detail. “Um, well, I don’t know. I had this downturn around the beginning of the year. This always happens to me; I was doing well for a while and now it feels like everything is fucked.”

“You poor baby,” she says, frowning. “I’m gonna treat you extra good tonight.”

“Please do,” please please please please do. “What about you? How have you been doing emotionally?”

“I’m doing good,” she says, mouth full of duck.

“But earlier, I thought you said...”

Daria shrugs and swallows. “No, I’m doing just fine.”

Huh. Well, it’s not my place to pry. We eat in amiable silence, Daria clearing 3/4s of the calories, me focusing on shrimp and tofu, big night, you know, a girl’s gotta watch what she eats.

I bring up the DoorDash guy in passing. Daria’s unbothered attitude is impressive, but I want to commiserate. It’ll bother me until I do. Moments like that collect on your skin like ticks and sometimes they’re in a spot that requires someone else to pull them off for you.

“I didn’t notice.”

She’s lying. We always notice.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Want some of these dumplings?” she says, pushing the plate towards me. We have normal, history—and now we have lies. We might as well be dating. Condensation on the dumplings reminds me of sweat on skin.

She’s anatomically blessed. I use poppers to get my body to comply. I take a deep chemical breath—my head gets hot and full—I press my face into the pillow as she enters me. Bright, perfect pain. She fucks the brutal circling thoughts away for an hour.

After, she holds me to her breast, warm and wet with sweat, lube drying on my thighs. The sex was great but I have a problem to confront: I don’t want to go home. Right here, with her, is better than the rest of my life times ten. A pros and cons list forms in my head:

Pros of Staying

comfort

astounding sex

she’s flawless

she makes the pain go away

Cons of Staying

she hasn’t offered

Eventually Daria stops stroking my hair, gets up and says she needs to shower. I get the message. Outside, the street screeches. The sun burns my eyes. The world is huge; full of tiny discrete things divided by infinite gaps.

On the drive back home, everything I see hurts. It is spring; I pass a park. A constellation of wildflowers, little purple and white dots on wide green hills, scrapes across my brain like sandpaper. Why is everything so pretty? On the way over, all I noticed was the rusted out swingset. Fuck this, I can’t be in love, I’m a grown ass woman and too busy, too ill. The gray filter that depression casts is fighting with love’s technicolor bullshit. I hate everything except for her.

spend time with a friend

Lena is a tall girl with pimples, a Jew-fro, and a fat ass. She's on estrogen but doesn't try very hard to present feminine. Not that she's butch—today she's wearing bright pink lipstick and a sundress. It's the compulsion that's missing. I spend every second analyzing how I am perceived, hours picking outfits, hundreds on makeup. She doesn't. The lipstick doesn't "do her any favors," as my mom would say unprompted about ladies she saw on the street, and she hasn't shaved her legs or face. She's like a superhero.

She knocks at the back stair entrance. I'm about made-up, just putting the finishing touches on my eyeliner. "Come in, it's open." Lena enters. She always walks like she's going somewhere specific and is late, leaning forward and striding, swinging her hands back and forth. Her head peeks into the bathroom.

"Hey girl," she says.

Her voice oscillates; her sentences begin as a soft baritone and rise into a nasal squeak. I pull my hair up in the usual pony.

"So where are we going today?" I ask. We've just planned to walk around vaguely. She invited me, saying it had been a while, and I hadn't thought about it, but she was right.

"I was thinking we could walk down to the park nearby, catch up."
"Sounds good."

It's a beautiful day. 73, sunny, a slight breeze. Lena's dress dances. Everything is wet from the storm last night. It was one of those Spring storms that bring soft, kind rains, with winds that sing through the budding trees. Lena leaps over a puddle, landing just on the edge. Water splashes and dampens the ends of her dress. I walk around as she snorts in laughter and wrings rain out of the fabric.

We step into a corner store. *Ding*. There's a man arguing at the counter, trying to use his EBT on a 2\$ coffee from the machine. The counter guy is explaining in fragmented English that the coffee is hot which makes it prepared, which makes it not eligible for EBT, I'm sorry, that's just the way it is. Lena absently nods at the employee's greeting and stomps down towards the cooler aisle.

She grabs a bottle of Mexican Pepsi, the kind with cane sugar. They have glass bottles, which makes them feel realer somehow, even though it's still just Pepsi. Like somehow we still haven't gotten used to plastic, even though all the objects we interact with every day are made of it, even though we are made of it, even though babies are born now with plastic already in their blood. I grab an Arizona. Aluminum is timeless.

Another aisle. Lena looks at me and grins as she inspects a rack of makeup.

"What do you think, Alice? Would this look good on me?" Lena asks. She holds up a stick of bright red eyeliner. It would pop against her greenish eyes. They shimmer with earth tones; they also look very tired.

"Yeah, that would slay," I say.

Lena winks and tucks the eyeliner in her bra and we keep walking.

"Isn't makeup such bullshit? It's so fucking expensive," she says.

"It's the woman tax," I say absently, approaching the counter with my Arizona. The man arguing looks at the two of us, confused. He mumbles to himself as he leaves the store. We pay and follow.

"It literally is. Women are a gender made of stuff. I never had to buy so much shit when I was a man. I mean, I know I don't have to, but sometimes I need some red eyeliner to feel real, you know?" Lena says. I take issue with the phrasing.

"You were never a man, you were just living as one," I say. We are walking towards a park. Maple trees are shaking rain from clutches of buds.

"I don't really see the distinction," Lena says. I don't have a response to that—everyone has their own makeshift ontology. Whatever.

The grass is dewy and vibrant, dandelion-dotted. Two teenagers are playing Frisbee, shouting and laughing. A lady is walking her dog. We sit down on a bench and open our drinks. I light a cigarette and Lena asks for one. I light it for her, smiling. She looks cute inhaling. She huffs the cigarette like it's an airbag in a falling plane.

"I didn't know you smoked," I say, drinking tea.

"I did in high school, then I quit. I just picked it back up recently. I've never been able to quit drinking without smoking. That's been my quest lately." She takes a red metallic poker chip from her bra lining—how many things does she store in there?—and flicks it to me. The words "1 month" shine emblazoned on the front.

“Congratulations,” I say, meaning it, but feeling dumb, having nothing more to add.

“Thanks,” she says with a small smile, taking back the token. She scratches her shoulder blade absently, looking embarrassed. “It’s been a long road.” It’s hard for me to imagine Lena addicted to anything. She is so strong and self-assured. If I were her I would not need to escape myself, would be happy. Maybe she’s quitting not as a matter of survival, but as a trial of will. A way to improve herself. This may be dumb, but it’s my first thought. A second doesn’t come. Lena mercifully abandons the subject. “Yeah, anyway. Quitting cigarettes is a long ways away for me.”

“It’s funny. The doctors all say it’s especially bad for you when you’re on estrogen, but we all smoke like chimneys.”

“I think girls like us have a hard time imagining a future with us in it. Maybe we just feel like no one is gonna let us live that long.” Lena takes a long drink of her Pepsi.

“It’s cause we’re all so new. Like, our whole life feels like dead weight so the future is hard to imagine. Cis people don’t get that.”

“I don’t know,” Lena says, exhaling smoke. “A lot of times I think that we’re actually just the same as everyone else. Our problems seem like these big mystical conundrums but they’re actually just exaggerated versions of universal issues.”

“Give me an example.”

A jogger runs by, top 40s blaring from a little speaker strapped to her waist.

“I mean, isn’t everyone’s past dead weight? We have a dramatic division between now and the past, but thinking of it as a separate person is so unhealthy. It’s why we’re all so fucked up. It’s like living in an abusive relationship for years—you get out, you try to pretend like it never happened. But it did, and eventually you need to reincorporate those years into your life. You need to create yourself.”

“What about dysphoria? That’s a trans specialty.”

“Nope. Think about it. An anorexic cis woman is starving herself to look more like she thinks a woman should look like, right? That’s dysphoria.”

A cool breeze presses my hair against my cheek. Maybe, maybe. Sometimes I think everyone’s the same; sometimes that everyone is irreconcilably different. Maybe those statements are equivalent.

Lena's point is rational but I feel like she's missing something. I can't think of what.

We wander around, silently, in our own thoughts. Under a willow we stop and watch a monarch butterfly. It floats around Lena. She extends her hand and the butterfly lands on it. For one second, the monarch sits on her ring finger and Lena is wed to the world. Only a moment; then it flies away. We watch it until it's too far away to see.

"How are you, Alice?" Lena asks.

"Bad," I say, then, embarrassed by the truth, I backpedal. "I mean, not everything's bad. There's a girl I like, Daria. We've been seeing more of each other lately."

"But, bad?"

Lena is too sharp.

"Yeah, pretty bad. Depressed."

"You want a hug?"

I let her pull me into an embrace, nose pressed in her curls. I'm holding my breath the whole time, tense. I don't let myself relax because I might cry if I do. She lets me go and I smile and pretend it helped.

"Thanks," I say,

"Anytime girl," Lena says, and I know she means it.

We walk down a wide alley between a boarded-up deli and a barbershop. It smells of rotting food. A group of ragged tabby kittens are devouring the remains of a KFC bucket that has been unsuccessfully tossed in an overflowing dumpster. They look up as we pass, mewing horribly. It's a sound that assaults some part of me, hurts me. It sounds too much like a human baby. Lena squats in front of a filthy runt at the edge of the pack. The cat sniffs her fingers, raising its tawny hackles, then struts away. I dig in my purse and retrieve a stick of beef jerky I've had in there all week. Suddenly we are surrounded by twenty howling, desperate kittens, wide eyes looking up at us. I unwrap it and drop it in the middle of the pack, confident they'll find an equitable system of distribution.

As we reach the main street, a car zooms by around a corner, and there's the sound of "faggot" dopplering away, crystal clear.

"Fuck you, asshole!" Lena yells after them, throwing her empty bottle pointlessly down the street. I'm hoping they don't turn around and kill us, so I flinch and say "Lena, don't," but they're gone. The bottle *plinks* against asphalt and rolls to rest on a storm drain.

“Dicks,” I say.

In front of my apartment Lena hugs me again and insists we hang out soon. I assure her that we will. She walks towards her bike and I admire her butt in a friend sort of way. I whistle and say “Hey! Your ass looks great!”

She beams, hops on her bike, and rides away, waving goodbye until she turns out of sight at the end of the block. As I walk upstairs my pocket buzzes. There’s a text from Patrick.

— I have an offer for you baby. 5,000\$ for a night with you in my beach house in Florida. I’ll also pay for your flight and dinner.

I log into my bank account. With Patrick’s help it’s still not empty, but a sudden expense could leave me on the street. It wouldn’t hurt to keep my options open. 5,000\$ is a *lot* of money. Am I okay with the prospect? No emotions rise immediately to the surface, which could mean I’m fine with it, or it could mean I’m too out of it to know. 5,000\$ is a lot of money. I should send him a good photo, then think about the offer more.

My mirror confirms my suspicions that the girl tax, unjust as it may be, is at least being spent to great effect. I look hot. Sad, but hot. As Mom would say, brushing finishing powder across her face after two hours of me sitting enraptured on her bed, watching her work magic at her boudoir—if it weren’t for Maybelline, Daddy wouldn’t have looked at me twice.

—ill think about it

appreciate art

“What are some things I could say to impress her? Like, if I see a pretty oil painting, what’s a good word for that?” I ask.

Jenni looks up from her book and rolls her eyes.

“How about pretty?” she says.

“Come on Jen, work with me. Last week we watched a movie and Daria knew all about French New Wave, she knew the director’s name and understood the themes of the movie and I had no idea what she was talking about,” I say. I am applying lip liner and adjusting the lining of my blouse. The elastic on this one makes my tits really pop, but it keeps shifting to the right and getting bunched up.

“You know how many bitches are into French New Wave? Also film bro assholes, like, if a guy starts talking about Godard at the bar are you hot for that?”

“She’s not a guy,” I say.

“You know that’s not what I said,” Jenni says. “I’m just like—I’m sure there’s plenty of things you know more about than her. You’re a smart girl.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, does she read? You read a decent amount.”

“She doesn’t really read.”

“Well, there you go.”

“Why are you fighting me so hard on this? It’s not that deep.”

“I just don’t know why you think knowing some artsy words will impress this girl. She should love you for you.”

“You sound like my mom.”

“Sometimes moms are right.”

“Surely you don’t mean that.”

“Well, not my mom, but I assume it happens.”

Eyeliner from tear duct on out, quick eyeshadow, pink and brown, just enough. I carve a face from ambiguous terrain. Today, my bestie meets my crush: a key moment. And after the double date, bliss: Daria and I have agreed on spending some time together, just the two of us. I have been looking forward to it for the past week.

“Look, I just don’t wanna sound uncultured,” I say, stepping away from the mirror, satisfied. “She’s an artist.”

“She’s in a rock band.”

“That’s art!”

“But it’s not like, high art. And maybe you *are* uncultured, Alice. You’re into fantasy novels and Ariana Grande and shit. Who gives a fuck.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better, you’re failing. Are you gonna help me or not?”

Jenni sighs dramatically.

“Sarah’s coming. Why don’t you ask her? I’ll remind you that I only took two and a half semesters of art school. I lift boxes for a living. Sarah’s literally a gallery curator.”

“Fine, fine,” I say. “Why is she coming anyway? Didn’t you guys break up?”

“This last one was the fifth time. Or sixth. It’s ambiguous,” Jenni checks herself in the mirror—teeth for food scraps, hair for frizz, nose for snot. It takes her maybe twenty seconds to feel ready. “We’re still friends. Separating and getting back together is like a game for us at this point.”

“You’re out here playing separation games with women and I’m dying just to land one,” I say, putting my finger in my mouth and pulling the trigger.

“Hey, I put in my time. I had seven girlfriends during that time at art school. It was a mess,” Jen says, patting my back. There is a knock at the door. “You’ll catch up eventually. Come in! It’s unlocked!”

Sarah walks in on 3 inch heels, unbothered by the stairs. She has a bob and severe wrinkles beside her lips. Jenni hugs her and takes her jacket. Underneath she’s wearing tights, a pencil skirt, and an emerald blouse. No bra: her tits don’t need any assistance.

“Hello love,” Sarah says, leaning to kiss Jenni on the cheek. In heels, she is as tall as me. “And it’s good to see you again Alice. How’s life?”

“Stressful,” I say. “I lost my job.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she says.

“It’s alright. I’ve got a man who pays me to send him nudes, so it’s not all bad.”

“Sounds like a job to me,” Sarah says.

“She’s being modest,” Jenni says. “The guy is crazy about her, and rich as hell. Alice is Detroit’s preeminent sugar baby.”

I roll my eyes. Sarah sits on the couch and places her arm over the back. Jenni sits beside her.

"We should be leaving soon. We're meeting Alice's girlfriend Daria there," Jenni says, re-lighting a joint.

"She is not my girlfriend," I say, defensively, like a child. Jenni smirks.

"Then who is she?" Sarah asks. I take the joint from Jenni and blow smoke in her face. She flips me off.

"She's a lover, I guess," I say. "I'm trying to change that, but it's nothing official as of yet."

"Alice is trying to impress Daria today with her takes on art," Jenni says.

"Yeah," I say, blushing. "Any ideas? Jenni said I should ask you."

"Oh did she?" Sarah says. While she talks her fingers trace circles on Jenni's shoulder. "I'm not much of a critic."

"Oh come on," Jenni says. "That's literally your job."

"Not criticism, curation," Sarah says. "I'm not much of a critic. Besides, as someone who has taken many girls to art museums, coming up with takes is a risky game. She may disagree with it, and that could be worse than saying nothing at all. If you really want to sound smart, just spout some unobjectionable historical info."

"I'm not sure I know enough about history for that," I ask.

She shrugs: "Make something up."

"See, what did I tell you? Sarah's the man," Jenni says.

"I'll give it a shot," I say, regretting this whole conversation.

Jenni stubs the joint out. "Ready to go ladies? I'll drive."

Every time I see Daria it's a new shock. Like I forgot just how good she looks, just how much I want her.

It is a gray, overcast afternoon. The sidewalk is wet from last night's rain. She waves at us, saying something that is lost in a strong wind. We exit Jenni's car and cross the street. My hair is blown horizontal, covering my face. For a moment I am blind, my world all blonde and fragments of light.

"Hello," Daria says, coming back into view as I gain control of my hair (shock! still perfect.) She exchanges names with Jenni and Sarah while I stand there and fidget. Daria shoots me a wink. I grin like an idiot.

"Time to stare at some art," Jenni says.

We walk into the museum and discuss our route. Jenni is interested in the East Asian wing, which was recently expanded. Sarah is interested in the contemporary section, and Daria suggests walking past some statuary on the way out. I shrug: "I'm happy with whatever."

Japanese prints: contemplative mountainsides, castles, peasants in rice paddies. Chinese tapestries of dragons and lions and kings. Every conceivable sort of buddha: serene and warlike, fat and starved; stone, ceramic, gold, paint on patterned cloth. In the Southeast Asian section there is one so thin you can see each individual rib jutting from his wooden flesh. He is sitting with one leg crossed horizontally, the other bent, resting his hands across the knee, and his chin on his hands. Eyes cast downward, maybe asleep. The shin bone protrudes horribly, like the calf muscle is in the process of sloughing off.

"Holy shit," Daria says, leaning over a small statue. "Look at the arms on this guy."

The guy in question is a ferocious god of copper. He has the face and horns of a bull, and is holding a nude woman with her legs wrapped around his waist. All of his features are manifold: his legs flow backwards in a succession of identical layers; his arms not occupied with his lover are flung wide, sixteen pairs, eight tall, two deep. Each hand is holding a unique object.

"How do you even get detail like that in metal?" I ask.

"It's cast metal, so they'd have to carve a mold," Jenni says.

"Well, for something like this you'd carve a statue first out of a softer substance, then make the mold around that," Sarah says.

"I failed metals class, I don't know why I'm even trying," Jenni says.

"Are they fucking?" Daria says.

Jenni crouches down to get a better angle: "Oh my god, they rendered his balls and everything."

"Stay classy Jenni," I say.

"I'm not the one who made the statue," she says.

Jenni has turned to look at the starving buddha.

"Isn't he beautiful, Alice?" she says.

"He looks so sad," I say.

"He is sad. The Buddha had to first try depriving himself before he realized that it wasn't the path to enlightenment," Daria says. I glance at her, impressed. She shrugs. "My grandma was a Buddhist."

"I thought Chaldeans were Catholic," I say.

"They are," she says. "She was a hippy."

Daria rarely talks about her family. I want to learn more, but the other two are moving on, and seeing the Buddha with an eating disorder is starting to make me feel sick.

In the modern art section, Sarah really comes alive. She moves between huge canvases and mixed media sculptures, pointing out genius, giving context. She and Jenni start arguing over the artistic merit of a very simple painting—just a brown square, in a beige square, on yellow.

"I'm not saying it's bad, it's just not impressive," Jenni says. "Like, if the top of the impressive spectrum is that statue with a million arms, this is the bottom."

"That's why it's called minimalism, babe," Sarah says. "Because it's minimal."

"I know, and I just don't buy it. I never liked this sort of stuff," Jenni says. "Anyone could do it."

"I think you're underestimating the skill required, but it's irrelevant. There's more to art than technical skill."

"Yeah, apparently."

This sets Sarah off; Jenni grins at me as she begins a lecture.

"Are they actually fighting?" Daria says. We walk together into another room. There is an old man sitting on a bench, drawing in a sketchbook. Graphite scratches fill the air.

"Yes, but they love it," I say. "Jenni isn't even a modern art hater, she just said that to fuck with Sarah."

"That's funny," Daria says. "I don't think I could ever enjoy fighting with someone I love."

And who is that? She starts a circuit around the room, eyes on the art. Mine flit, unable to focus on art for long when her face is right there. Later, what will we do? A sunset walk by the river, or better, down an ugly concrete way, so that there's nothing for her gaze but me.

"I think the only one I fight with is myself," I say.

Daria points at a painting. "Look at this. You ever feel like this?"

A constellation of black and white splotches; a center of brilliant orange and red. Like fire, or autumn, or a flower.

"Absolutely," I say.

I admire the way her eyes jump from splotch to splotch—bright, engaged, sure.

"I've always liked paintings like this. There's something totally honest about it," Daria says.

We pass a statue made of brass wire. It is human-shaped; angular planes of parallel lines suggest limbs, a semi-circular crest suggests a head. I point at the plaque showing its name: *L'androgyne*.

"Hey, I think I know her," I say. Daria lets out a false, short chuckle and turns away. Her phone rings.

"Oh, I gotta take this," she says, answering. "Hey Abby. I'm at the DIA right now. No, it's not a bad time."

Jenni and Sarah rejoin us.

"I'll catch up," Daria says, walking away.

"What's that about?" Jenni says.

"Her friend Abigail is calling her. They play music together," I say.

"Gotcha," Jenni says. "Well, she knows where we are going next. Let's take the elevator. This one's cool."

I text Daria the plan to make sure she doesn't lose us. Being made a third wheel for any amount of time is a tragedy. The elevator is huge, with walls of polished brass. Our reflections waver around us, like kelp in clear water. Sarah's blur shifts towards Jenni's. They kiss and merge. I turn around.

"Broken up, huh?" I say.

Jenni laughs. "Oops."

"Life doesn't really move in a straight line, does it? It keeps looping back to this," Sarah says. She draws away from Jenni and meets my eyes. "How about you, Alice? Have you wowed Daria with your exhaustive knowledge of art?"

"No," I say. "No, I haven't."

"That's too bad," Sarah says.

"You're just not good at faking, Alice," Jenni says. "Everything you think and feel is right there on your face."

"Whatever," I say.

"I think it's one of your best qualities," Jenni says.

"I hate it when you're nice to me," I say.

"I know," Jenni says.

Daria finds us in a hall lined with statuary, stonework, and pottery. We pass a statue: a woman standing, wrapped in a veil. Marble drapes over her form as silk; head, face, hands, all shrouded. It is so convincing, a childlike part of me is sure she was once alive.

"Whoa," I say. The three stop walking and join me.

"You like that babe?" Daria says.

"Yeah," I say.

I am trying to decide what her face is saying, underneath the veil. She looks content, even happy. But it is hard to say for sure. Her eyelids push against the fabric, very visible. Maybe puffy. Maybe she has just finished crying, and now smiles.

"Beautiful," Sarah says, leaning down to read the placard. "1872, Giovanni Benzoni. It's neoclassical. Carving statues with draping fabric was huge then. It was a way to show off, I mean, to be able to carve this—you'd have to be an absolute master."

"Who was she?" I ask.

"Let me see," Sarah says, pulling out her phone. "Okay, it's Rebecca, from the Bible. It's supposed to be her on the day of her marriage to Isaac. Do you guys know that story?"

Daria and I shrug. Jenni sighs.

"I can't believe I'm the only one here raised by actual bible thumpers," Jenni says. "Rebecca gives some water to a guy at a well, and all his camels. Then Isaac marries her because she was so nice, or something. Is this really not ringing a bell for you guys?"

"In my defense, the services at my church were all in Syriac," Daria says.

"Vaguely familiar," I say. "But I meant who is *she*, the woman this statue is based on. He didn't sculpt this from his imagination, right?"

"You're right, I'm sure he used a model. But Wikipedia doesn't say who," Sarah says. "And I kind of doubt we'll be able to find the answer. Sometimes models in history have been the artists' lover, but mostly they were just random hired women. In many places at the time, being a model was seen as akin to being a sex worker. Whoever posed for Benzoni is probably lost to time."

I want to jump on the plinth and give her a hug.

"What do you like so much about this piece?" Jenni says.

Fuck, everyone is looking at me. I turn away, embarrassed. So much for Alice the Art Understander. The plan was to sound smart; now I'm staring at a statue and asking dumb questions.

"Let's move on," I say.

"Are we ready to head out?" Sarah says.

"Pierre's new partner Monique works at the gift shop," Jenni says.

"We should stop in and say hi."

"Let's do it," Daria says. As we head towards the elevator, she runs her hand along my spine. I shiver, stop. She presses herself against me.

"You looked like you were going to cry at that statue. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, of course," I say, turning around to face her (shock! still perfect). "It was just really ... really pretty."

"Well, I thought it was sweet," Daria says. "I like how affected you are by art. It's something I struggle to maintain. It's easy to get so cynical, or detached, that you forget how to do that."

Amazing stuff, Alice. You failed at the goal you assigned yourself, and still somehow managed to impress Daria. I was so engrossed in the statue it barely registered, but didn't she call me babe earlier? Maybe she actually does like me.

The gift shop is visually overwhelming; so many images repeated across so many surfaces. We meander towards the checkout counter. Priceless, one of a kind pieces of art transformed into cheap, million of a kind pieces of merchandise: coffee mugs, t-shirts, keychains, journals, socks.

"Are you thinking of buying that?" I ask Jenni, seeing her finger the hem of a Diego Rivera mural hoodie.

"Honestly, this shit bums me out," she says.

"...yeah, me too," I say. "But I'm not even sure why. I mean, it keeps the lights on."

"I hate seeing all this great art being used as just another way to move product," Jenni says. "But complaining about that is like complaining that the sky is blue. That's all anything is."

"So, who's Monique?" Sarah asks.

"Oh, right," Jenni says, dropping the hoodie. "Follow me."

We wait in line behind a man in a polo shirt and khakis, apparently buying everything in the store, given the amount of scanner beeps. He talks relentlessly.

“Yeah, I’ve been in contact with a potential client out in LA, so I’m flying out to see him this weekend. You’d be surprised how much business gets done on the weekends. Well, that’s the life I’ve chosen, you know, never really in one place for long. This guy’s a big shot distributor, so we really wanna bag him, but of course I gotta play it cool to get good rates. You’d be surprised how much of sales is really just acting ...”

He goes on like this. I can’t see Monique behind his back, but I can hear their desire to be done with him in how the beeps grow closer and closer as the conversation drags.

“Alright, your total is \$346.82,” Monique says at last, cutting him off. They sound tired.

“Great. Before I go, do you have an Instagram?” he says as he picks up three overfull paper bags.

“I have a boyfriend,” they say. The guy mumbles something and walks away.

“Hell yeah you do,” Jenni says, approaching the counter. Monique’s face lights up. They are short and chubby, with corkscrew curls. When they smile it reveals a set of buck teeth. “Jesus, what a douchebag.”

“You’d be surprised how many of those we get here,” Monique says. Jenni snorts. “I didn’t know you were gonna be here today.”

“Yeah, figured we’d stop in. We’re still going to look around, I just wanted to introduce my friends here. This is my ex Sarah, my roommate Alice, and this is her ... her friend Daria.”

“Nice to meet you all. Hey, don’t I know you from somewhere?” they say to Daria.

“Maybe. Have you been to any shows lately?” Daria says.

“You kids have fun! We wanna do some shopping,” Sarah says, pulling on Jenni’s arm. They walk off.

“I went to a show at El Club last week, could that be it?” Monique says.

“Oh yeah, I played bass for the opener,” Daria says.

“Oh my god, that’s so cool,” Monique says. “I’ve always wanted to play live.”

“What do you play?” Daria says.

The exchange continues. I shift my weight onto my right foot, then my left. I fiddle with my hair. They discuss favorite musicians and swap Instagrams.

"I'm gonna go check out the merch," I say.

"Sure thing," Daria says without looking at me. Ouch.

I rejoin Jenni in the middle of a diatribe.

"Plus, she didn't even like this city! Diego dragged her ass out here, but now every rich white woman in Detroit has a Frida tote bag and Frida earrings and Frida tampons. Not to mention she was a fucking communist. This display would have made her puke."

Sarah turns to me: "What's wrong honey? Are you upset about the Frida Kahlo merchandise too?"

I nod in the direction of the checkout counter.

"Oh, I see. Your girl's got a new friend," Sarah says. "Are you jealous?"

"They're *really* talking," Jenni says. "I'd be mad too. This is your date."

"What can I do?" I say, shrugging. "She's a social butterfly. She's got more contacts in her phone than I have...than I have..."

"Weed crumbs in your bedsheets," Jenni says.

"Yeah," I say.

"And you're bitter about that?" Sarah says.

"No, I like that she's charismatic. It's part of what attracts me to her," I say.

"Alice is never bitter," Jenni says.

"Fuck you dude," I say, placing my head in my hands and taking a deep breath. I turn to walk back to Daria and find her in front of me.

"Hey, I was wondering where you went," Daria says. She leans down and kisses me. Firm, hot.

"Right here," I yelp.

"Are you guys buying anything?" Daria asks.

"I'm definitely getting Jenni this," Sarah says, holding up a Frida Kahlo calendar.

"Fuck off," Jenni says.

"If it doesn't go right on the wall of your living room I will take it as a personal insult," Sarah says. They walk together, bickering, toward the checkout counter.

"I have a little something I wanna give you, Alice," Daria says. She holds out a closed fist. "Guess what it is?"

I already know what it is: a cute gesture that makes me feel like a total asshole. I was so busy being jealous I didn't even think to get Daria a gift. At the gift shop.

"I really have no idea," I say.

The reveal: a decorative keychain with a painting printed on it. A nude woman, blonde, is shown from behind. She is leaning over and brushing out her hair. The lines are thick and rough.

"It's by Degas," she says. "It reminded me of you."

I don't deserve Daria or anyone else or life.

"What's it called?" I ask.

"The tag says ... Seated Nude Woman Brushing Her Hair. Not super creative with names, I guess," Daria says.

"I love it," I say.

"Alright lovebirds," Jenni says, returning to us with a bag over her arm. "Are we ready to go?"

"Yeah, I really gotta run. I have practice at 5," Daria says. My stomach drops. My face grows hot, my ears ring. My stomach hits the ground and splats.

"Wait, what? I thought I was going with you afterwards," I say. Jenni and Sarah exchange looks in my peripheral.

"Meet you outside," Jenni says. The two step out.

"Oh, hun, I meant to tell you earlier. I'm sorry," Daria says. "Abigail wanted to run over some songs with me tonight. We are thinking of starting a band together."

"But, like—we planned this a week ago," I say, not even close to crying, not remotely, totally calm. "You're really bailing last minute?"

Daria looks around, like to see if anyone's watching. Whatever.

"We kind of sketched out the day, I didn't think it was a concrete plan," she says. "Let's just reschedule, okay?"

I want to blow up, or break down, but some angel of grace passes through me, and I just sigh.

"Alright."

Outside, the wind still blows, but the sun has come and burned the walkways dry.

"It was good meeting you two," Daria says to Sarah and Jenni.

"Likewise," Sarah says, shaking Daria's hand.

Daria kisses me again and leaves. I am surprised to find my eyes dry at her departure, her change of plans; I just feel empty. The three of us walk in the opposite direction, towards the car. Jenni has her arm around Sarah's elbow; they both seem cheery.

"So, what did you think?" I ask.

"She's hot as hell," Jenni says. Sarah whistles in agreement.

"Did you like her?" I ask.

"I think I need more time than that to make a blanket judgment on someone," Jenni says. "Besides, what I think doesn't matter. What matters is if she makes you happy."

"Well, I'll make a judgment. I like her," Sarah says. "She's a real catch, Alice. Smart, sexy."

"I don't really like that she changed plans on you like that. She seems a bit ... preoccupied," Jenni says.

"Honestly, I like that about her too. She's a girl on the move," Sarah says. "She's busy with her music. What's more attractive than that?"

"I'm not saying she's not attractive," Jenni says, unlocking the car. I climb in and frown at the back of Jenni's headrest.

"What *are* you saying?" I say.

"Bitch, I don't know," Jenni said. "You're in love with her, right? Why are you so desperate for my approval?"

I shut up and let her drive because I have no clue.

help with the plasma shortage

When my car starts making a funny noise, I try to ignore it as just one of those things that machines do sometimes. At first, it's a rattling, but soon the rattling is joined by a screeching, and I know that I need to take it in. Great. Patrick hasn't been paying me lately, so this is the worst possible time for this. He still talks to me, so I'm not screwed, but apparently he is on some extended trip with his family in Tahiti, or was it Hawaii? Some resort with pristine policed beaches. I'm not sure if his wife knows about us, you never know nowadays, maybe she's into it. But apparently he's got no time on his vacation for little old me. So I'm out of work. He gets vacation, I get unpaid leave.

His offer to fly me out sits there like a baggie of heroin on a nightstand. Each time something goes wrong its appeal grows, its downsides look less and less relevant.

The mechanic misgenders me but I get the feeling he is still operating on the very gendered assumption that I don't know anything about cars. I get this impression from the insane asking price and the fact that he tacks on a couple other fixes he insists he can't let me drive out of there without. His assumption is right. I know how to drive, because I have to to survive, but the innards of a car are as mysterious to me as my own. If a doctor tells me I'm gonna die, I believe him. Same shit, yes sir, how much to fix my car?

So, I am making a trip to the plasma bank. This is something I haven't done in a few years. It is one of those acts that makes me face the reality of my own poverty. I tell the mechanic to hold my car overnight. Walking out of the garage, I watch an oil-stained man fiddle with a radio playing oldies rap. Another yells at him for a torque wrench, the upper half of his body hidden under a rusty Ford.

Daria has not responded to my last text, or the one before that.

—hey, would you like to go on a date soon?

Radio silence for weeks. I have not heard from her since our museum make up date, which involved not much conversation and only a brief fuck. She did cook me a lavish meal—pistachio-crusted salmon, topped with caramelized shallots and roasted green beans—

but she doesn't like people in the kitchen while she cooks, so I was banished to the living room to scroll my phone for two hours. I'm not sure we are at "drive me to the plasma bank so I don't miss rent" right now. Lena bikes everywhere and Jenni is at work, so I text Pierre. He obliges. While I wait for my ride I walk to the gas station next to the mechanic's shop to buy smokes.

"Give me a pack of Spirits. The blue ones," I say to the man behind the counter, pointing through the bulletproof glass. At the other checkout window there is a man ranting while he counts out change from the pockets of an oversized green coat. Knotted brown hair falls around his head like the roots of a tenacious tree.

"7.99 is your total," the cashier tells him.

"And it's coming, you know it's coming ... the end man, the end. Babylon. It says it there, it's all in Revelations, you've read Revelations, right? The government is all corrupt, and they're sacrificing kids man. Men are becoming women and women are becoming men. It's the end times, you know. Fire and blood. You know I'm right man, you know," he says.

"7.99 is your total," the cashier repeats; he does not appear to know. I take my cigarettes and walk towards the door, but I stop myself from leaving. It'll be a while before Pierre's arrives anyway; I want to hear this out.

"I got it right here, 7.99, right here," he says, upending a handful of coins and crumbled bills onto the counter. I am impressed with the grace of the cashier, who shows no sign of exasperation as he begins to count. "The Whore of Babylon, Mystery, she's the mother of all the whores. That's OnlyFans, man, she's making all the women into whores. And in the end, everything is upside down. That's why kids don't respect authority anymore, and why they don't know whether they are girls or boys. My little girl don't even talk to me anymore, man. That's Satan."

"You are 23 cents short," the cashier says.

"Aw, I'm sorry, I really thought ... just give me the 40," he says. The cashier takes the crumbled bills and the prophet scoops the coins back into his pockets. He grabs his Steel Reserve in its paper bag; as he turns we lock eyes for a moment. Ice blue marbles veined red. "Fire and blood," he mutters to himself.

I walk out, *ding, ding*; he is close behind me. I stand on the curb and smoke, waiting for Pierre.

"Can you spare one?" the prophet says.

I hand him a cig and lighter, waiting for signs of danger in his posture. As a daughter of Babylon and a sign of the end, I'm not sure I'm his ideal smoking partner. But on the other hand, I also can't extract my future from seas of blood and skies of fire. Nations sinking into the foam. Is it fucked up that, on some level, I believe him? Sometimes I do feel like a sign of collapse. Not a cause, but maybe a result. Manhood so cracked and crumbling that girls like me fall out. And without Man, what is there? No God, no kings, no families, no good and evil.

I'm expecting a sermon, but my smoking companion is quiet, watching cars pass. Maybe he's tired, or maybe he can sense I'm already on his level. Apocalyptically minded. He sits on the ground, coughing into the arm of his coat, a slimy grinding noise deep in his lungs. Washes it away with a stream of malt beer. Across the street two pigeons are fighting, or maybe flirting, it's hard to tell. Flapping wings, pecking, and angry coos. We both watch the show.

Pierres rolls up, his arm out the window, slapping along to Zappa on carmetal. His car is a squarish thing that makes a noise just like the prophet's cough. On the side, rust colored paint fights with the real thing for territory.

"Need a ride babe?" he says, stubbly face smiling.

"Thank you so much," I say, taking the peeling passenger seat. Goodbye, friend. I hope the end times treat you well. "You seem like you're in a good mood."

"I guess so," Pierre says, driving off. Marks the shade of fresh blood ring his neck.

"Things working out with Monique?" I say.

"Very," he says. I smirk. He blushes. "Where am I taking you?"

"To the plasma clinic in Ferndale. And are you doing anything today? Could you pick me up a few hours later? I'll fill your gas tank," I say.

"You'll do no such thing," he says, pulling out into the street. "I don't want your literal blood money. I got you."

"Are you sure?" I say.

"I think you buy so much weed from me you forget I have a day job," he says. "The bank pays me well."

The sputtering of the engine and the squeaking of this seat make me wonder, but I won't argue.

"Thank you so much," I say again.

First, on a clunky old Dell, there is an offensively thorough test I have to take before I can donate blood. Sell; donate is a misnomer. I don't do this for any virtuous reason. Many of the questions are about my sex life, trying to suss out if I might have HIV—trans women only recently became eligible—and prying into my health (fair), my family's health (I think Mom's anorexic, I know Dad's alcoholic), and what sort of illicit drugs I do (whatever I can afford). I lie, of course. Today I am a sober virgin born of healthy sober parents.

The main event takes place in a huge warehouse full of beds and humming machines. Three rows of beds, maybe twenty per row. Most of these spots are taken, hosting poor people in various states of consciousness. A nurse leads me to the closest open bed and instructs me to lie down, wheels over a cart and prepares her equipment.

"You'll feel a pinch," she says, searching for a vein. The plasma needle is long and fat. She tries one spot. The gleaming fang plunges, stab, I wince. Dry. She tries again. Dry. "Your veins are tricky," she says in an accusatory tone. Sorry ma'am, I'll try harder. Again. Finally, she strikes gold. Blood meant for my lower arm is rerouted through a tube, loop de loop, around a whirring gray machine with a blinking display, and into a plastic bag.

"I'll be back in an hour," she says and shuffles off.

I close my eyes and try to float away, searching for the ragged edge of consciousness, trying to find the first sign of blood loss faintness, trying to pull at it, tear it, drift away. It works a bit, I feel something akin to calm, I drift a bit side to side. Then all calm is dispelled by a voice next to me.

"You're pretty good looking, you know that?"

I crack one eye and look over, hoping this is not directed at me. In the seat next to me is an older man in an undershirt; crucifix on a field of chest hair. He is definitely looking at me, no doubt. So not in the mood for this. I try a new tactic. Maybe

if I turn him off. I swallow, try to drop a register or two. I do my best man voice: "What do you want," I say. It sounds silly. My voice tends towards a lower resonance, but it's not masculine. If this voice I'm doing isn't feminine, then it's definitely its own third thing.

"Just wanna chat, lady," he says. "Where are you from?"

I'm so fucking done. Normally I'd leave, or make a scene, but I have to sit next to this guy for the next hour, and if I fuck that up, then I don't get my money. "I have a dick dude," I say quietly.

"That's no problem, baby, no problem," he says. Fuck my life. The gambit is a total failure. He's not bad looking, honestly, in a grimey sort of way, but he's got the same needle stuck in his arm. This man is as poor as me, and therefore not worth my time.

I close my eyes and reach for that faintness again. Why the fuck didn't I bring headphones? My neighbor either doesn't get the message or chooses to ignore it. He keeps talking at me as my blood is siphoned away. My phone buzzes. Daria has responded to my last text.

—sorry for the late response, ive been so busy. i would love to meet up soon. would you like to come to a show of mine?

Yes, yes, yes. But don't respond, not yet. She is two weeks late; an instant text back from me would look desperate. It would also highlight the disparity between our lives: hers, full of music and activity, me, well, it goes something like this:

"Come on girly, give me a smile. Come on now," my plasma neighbor says.

"Shut up!" another donor says from across the aisle. An older woman, a romance novel in her lap. My knight in shining armor. "Please, pardon my French, but goddamn. People are trying to relax here."

My suitor appears hurt. He looks at me, as if for assurance. I look at my phone. He slumps back into his chair, grunts, vanquished. Finally, peace. Plasma leaves my arm and I'm not sure what plasma is exactly but the feeling of its loss points to its importance, my brain fogs, yes, there, take my plasma and give me money and fog, a bloodloss fog, a peace like death.

Do I want to die?

The question floats forward. An old question, maybe the oldest, but one I refuse to humor. There are no refusals now, and I'm selling my humors. If the thirsty machine drank, drank, drank until my heart went slack, would I thrash? Would I fight for my lifeblood?

The nurse comes for my admirer, removes the needle, gives him a Gatorade.

"Thank you sir. Take a moment to rest before you walk around," she says. "You may feel faint, but it will pass. When you are ready, come to the next room and they'll get you your money."

When the nurse leaves the room he chugs the Gatorade in one impressive go and walks, stumbling, towards the office. As he leaves, he looks at me one last time, lecherous and sad.

Another twenty minutes pass before I'm told I have given enough. Detached from the machine, I take their advice and sip my Gatorade for a while, waiting until the fog clears. They give me a card with 100\$ on it. When I feel normal again I miss the sway. The question falls away. What I want doesn't matter; I have things to do. Like text Daria back:

—id love to go to a show with you :)

go to a party

Summer has begun, and things are progressing with Daria. She really did start that band with Abigail. Leg Room. They're great and have been getting booked consistently. Daria plays bass, Abigail is the front woman, singing and shredding guitar, drawing every eye in the room. Except mine—mine are glued to Daria's middle and index fingers, flicking up and down on the strings. I've seen every one of their shows. Last week, she introduced me to her bandmates as her girlfriend. We hadn't had a discussion before; it just happened. I looked at her, stunned, then smiled and nodded at her friends, beet red, like yes, I am her girlfriend, I was totally aware of this.

I am so proud of her. They booked a show at a semi-semi-major venue, something Abigail sees as a clear step towards a record deal, and are having a party to celebrate, which I am of course invited to. The upwards trajectory seems clear for the band and me.

My mood has improved. Funny how having a social life does that.

I'm wearing a blood red halter top that shows my midriff, black jeans, high red wedges. I drag a nude pink across my lips. Daria wraps her arms around me from behind and crosses them in front of my belly button. She nibbles my earlobe and inhales.

"Your hair smells amazing."

Electricity runs from my tailbone to the back of my skull.

"It's a new shampoo. Rosewater."

She turns me around. Deep smoky eye, black lipstick. She's wearing a mesh top with no bra, nipples on display. Daria is a rock star. My girlfriend is a rock star.

"You are gorgeous, Alice. I can't wait to show you off."

I let out a squeak.

"Let's get going," she says.

I hear laughter from the other side of the fence. Clinks of glass, lighters, bass.

Parties haven't been a part of my life for years. In my teens I was a background character at countless house parties around

Warren, then in the city during an aborted attempt at college; going from beer to liquor, to codeine, to pills, K, whatever; and always pot, so much pot. Before transition I always gravitated towards the scene that offered the strongest chance at oblivion, always trying to stay one step ahead of my body. Eventually time and experience dissolved the allure of strangers' houses. There is so much bad waiting for you—standing at the corners of the crowd, knowing you don't fit in, or late at night, when it's just the puking horny stragglers, in the dark upstairs bedrooms, in the eager maw of early morning. But now, I have Daria. I belong here. I smile, approaching the door.

"Hey angel!" Abigail says as we enter the house, running up to Daria for a hug. She's got platinum hair down to her ass, thousands of dollars in tattoos, a nose ring, weighs in at maybe 110 wet. She turns to me, hugs me as if we're old friends. "Nice to see you Alice, welcome to my home."

It's a red brick bungalow with a large backyard. The living room is full of strangers milling about, sitting on a plush leather couch and chairs; in the back a table is covered in drinks. There's a man behind the table, mixing. He's got long locs, a droopy mustache, and gauges, reading labels with sleepy bloodshot eyes.

"We have free drinks, mixed by the lovely Andrew, and some food in the dining room if you want," Abigail says, "Outside is where most of the people are congregating. Oh! I almost forgot—Daria there's this guy from Last Tuesday here, you have to meet him. He says he loves the single."

"Who did you meet last Tuesday?" I ask.

"No, Last Tuesday is a band," Abigail says, giggling.

"They're totally blowing up right now. Shit, you have to introduce me," Daria says, grabbing Abigail's arm and beginning to walk off. Then she pauses and glances around like she's forgotten her purse. She meets my eyes. "Oh, Alice, I'll just be a second. You wanna just get a drink and mingle for a bit?"

Mingle. I try to remember the last time I mingled. Some mild-mannered queer bar night in Ferndale, before Covid and after transitioning, sometime in that brief splash of light when my life for the first time opened up, then folded in on itself like a flytrap eating its prey.

The pandemic may have left my social skills to atrophy, but my liver is a prizefighter.

"Sure, I could use a drink," I say. I hazard a kiss on the cheek. She allows it.

"Have fun babe," Daria says, then disappears into the house with Abigail. For a moment the word "babe" sits in my chest and warms me like whiskey. Then it fades, so I approach the bar and ask for an old fashioned.

Andrew grabs bottles and a glass without looking down. He is huge, at least twice as wide as the kitchen chair he is perched on. Should I make conversation? He doesn't invite any. His movements are slow and deliberate, unscrewing the bottle of bitters with a twist, a pause, a twist, a pause. The silence is making me more uncomfortable than small talk could.

"So ... are you a bartender in real life?" I ask, then blush. What the fuck is real life supposed to mean Alice?

"Huhuhugh," he giggles, a low liquid sound, like pouring milk from a gallon jug. "I guess work is more like real life, yeah? Time-off sort of feels like a dream. And in this dream, I'm going through the same motions that I would at work, just at Abigail's house. Dreams are like that sometimes."

"Um..." I don't know what to say to this generous, contemplative response to my faux pas.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Alice," I say, thankful to return to within the confines of party conversation.

"I'm Andrew. You can call me Andy, though." He finishes the old fashioned with an orange slice and hands it to me. I pull my wallet from my purse, searching for singles to tip him with.

"Thanks for the drink, Andy," I say, stuffing a few crumpled bills in a mason jar full of them. There's no one behind me in line, so I loiter for a second. Andy seems nice. "How do you know Abigail?"

"I'm not sure I really *know* Abigail. She's kind of too cool for that. I mean, I guess Daria knows her. They spend a lot of time together. To be honest, Abby doesn't really hit me up..."

Andy trails off and pulls at his mustache. He doesn't seem upset by his assessment of Abigail, just thoughtful.

"She used to play solo gigs at the bar I worked at," he says, putting the bottles back in place. "Just like, her guitar and a mic. My girl's come a long way. How about you?"

"I'm Daria's girlfriend," I say, feeling wildly out of place. The pride that bubbles up in my chest from my connection to the band apparently changes based on proximity to said girlfriend.

"Oh, cool, cool," Andy says. He stands there, fiddling with his facial hair. "Hey you don't have a hair tie do you?"

I fish around in my purse and pull one out for him.

"Thank you kindly," he says. He wraps it around the base of his hair once, gathering it into a loose tail. Then he sits, leans against the wall, clasps his hands between his knees, and sits there, staring off. I look behind me to see if he's looking at someone specific, but I don't see any of the crowd looking back. I sip my old fashioned.

"Sorry," he says randomly, interrupting the silence. "I'm off a crazy edible. Forgot how to talk there for a second."

I nod knowingly. "No problem."

"Bartending is easier high," he says, chuckling. "Most things are, really."

I am hit with a sudden sense of kinship and affection for this awkward stoner, but a gaggle of petite women who I am not convinced are 21 abruptly come in from outside and form a line behind me, loudly discussing their orders, so I have to go. "Talk to you later, Andy," I say, leaving for the backyard.

White Christmas lights are strung along the fence, stretching around the whole yard. In the center is a fire pit with a roaring bonfire and a ring of seats. At least fifty strangers are mingling around, talking in circles. Around the central pillar of smoke, fifty smaller plumes rise from cigarettes and joints into the night sky.

The moon is bright, but the only visible star is the North. Abigail lives in a nicer part of Downriver, but the relative wealth of this neighborhood doesn't make the air less poisoned, the stars more visible. Orion's pants must have fallen down by now.

I approach the nearest group. They are formed into a circle, and no one moves to let me in, so I linger behind someone's shoulder and try to listen to the conversation. They are talking about some scene drama.

“...and Henry got kicked out of Daymaker years ago, so it’s not like it’s not known he’s toxic.”

“Why the fuck are they still getting booked then?”

“Cause that place is run by a fucking Republican.”

“Yeah, what do you expect from...”

I can’t make heads or tails of it. I spend some time wandering between groups, exchanging names. A short woman with many piercings offers me a cigarette, which I accept gratefully. People are friendly enough, but the small talk just slides across me; I find no ins, nothing to expand on. I thought Daria meant it literally when she said she’d show me off. I want to be led around on her arm. Now, I’m showing her off, flashing our relationship around because it’s common ground, something I can whip out and say “look, this world is large but we know the same person, so here it shrinks.” But there are only so many times I can stomach saying “I’m Daria’s girlfriend.” If I am her girlfriend, why am I alone at her party?

I look down and realize my drink is gone. Oh, look at the time! I welcome the excuse to go back inside. I get another old fashioned.

“Do you know where Daria and Abigail went?” I ask Andy.

“No, sorry,” he says, pouring. “Somewhere upstairs, maybe. It’s a big house. I’d ask around.”

I nod and hand him another crumpled bill. Okay, beginning Operation Find Daria So I Can Stop Feeling Awkward. Codename: GIRLFRIEND. I step through the door from the living room into the dining room, sipping my drink. There are two people in here, sitting at a table. A small, muscular man with a music note tattoo on his shaved head is deep in conversation with a person wearing a sweater vest, shaking their hands wildly as they speak. The conversation is political; I hear the words “imperialism” and “neoliberalism” and “cancel culture.” My drink lends me the strength to interrupt them.

“Hey, sorry to cut in but have you seen Daria?”

Sweater vest is annoyed.

“No, sorry,” they say curtly.

“What about Abigail?”

They both shake their heads and turn away.

“Anyway, as I was saying...” Sweater vest begins, dismissing me. Okay, dining room clear. The mission continues. I step into the kitchen. A drunk woman is rifling loudly through items in the fridge,

hanging onto the door for support. Her search for snacks dislodges a hot sauce bottle, which falls on the ground and rolls towards me. I pick it up.

“Want this?” I ask.

She nods, grabs it from me, fills her arms with food items that in no rational circumstance should be seen together, and shuts the fridge. She sets hot sauce, apples, leftover pasta, sliced Colby-Jack cheese, and ketchup on the counter.

“What are you making?” I can’t help but ask.

“Not sure yet,” she replies.

Focus, Alice. Remember the mission.

“Have you seen Daria or Abigail?”

“Ummm ... Abigail went upstairs earlier, I think.”

“Thanks.”

I leave her to her own devices and head back towards the living room, passing clusters of people and engaging none. I climb the staircase, feeling a bit dizzy. I’m drunk, but not too drunk. As drunk as a party requires. The old temptation to seek annihilation is there, on my tongue, but I don’t want to indulge it.

The doors up here are all closed, save the bathroom, which is empty. Feeling perverse (but just drunk enough to not care), I listen at the door of one. Nothing here. At another, I hear the sounds of fucking. Not Daria. If there’s one thing I know about her, it is how she sounds during sex. There are several voices coming from the final one, and the smell of weed. It has to be here. I knock.

“Hey, it’s Alice, is Daria there?” I ask.

There are sounds of shuffling, then Abigail opens the door. She steps out and shuts it behind her, not revealing what’s inside.

“Hi Alice,” Abigail says. She smiles big and white. She is holding a thin blunt in one hand, between two long acrylic nails, one pink one white. A blunt has never been held so elegantly, like a paintbrush, or a single red rose. “You said you’re looking for Daria?”

“Yeah,” I say. God, Abigail is gorgeous. It’s intimidating. Her makeup must’ve taken hours. I do not see a single pore or blemish or spot of discoloration on her perfect porcelain face. “Is she in there?”

Behind her, the conversation begins again. There are at least three people talking. Someone laughs, and it sounds like Daria. I hear the scratchy depth, the sound I adore.

“Listen, we’re in the middle of an important conversation right now. Could you come back later?”

My face grows hot. I feel silly. I thought seeing my girlfriend was a given, and now I’m being told it’s contextual.

“What are you guys talking about?” I ask. It is only for a second, but I swear I see Abigail roll her eyes. In a blink she is back to smiling and holding my gaze.

“Band stuff, you know,” she says. She plays with her hair, like she feels uncomfortable about this situation, but it comes across as a practiced gesture. The rest of her body radiates nothing but comfort in her skin, her home, her right to deny me access to Daria.

“Can I just talk to her for a second? Tell her I’m out here,” I ask. I assume Daria didn’t hear my request, or she would’ve come out instead of Abigail.

I’m not a bad girlfriend, I want Daria to do her band stuff, I just want to see her, to kiss her once, because she brought me to this party and we are dating. That’s not unreasonable, is it? Abigail takes a slow drag on her blunt. Then she blows smoke at me—not aggressively, but gently and with intention. She is shorter than me so she has to blow upwards to reach my face, and she does, with pure conviction, smiling benevolently, as if she is doing me a favor. I blink, sweet-smelling smoke clouding my sight.

“Not right now, babe. Your ‘girlfriend’ is in the middle of something,” Abigail says, finishing her exhale. Auditory quotation marks hang unmistakably around the word “girlfriend.” “Don’t worry, I’m sure she’ll hit you up later.”

She turns around and reenters the room. I can see Daria’s head for a brief moment, just the curve of her black hair, and then the door shuts. Did this bitch really just do that? I stand there in stunned silence for a minute. What the fuck. I walk down the stairs, eyes burning. No, I won’t cry. That felt like high school, and if it was, I certainly would. But I won’t. Because it’s not.

My mission is a bust, so I return to Andy and ask for another drink. Strong. A line has formed, so there’s no more time to talk. He is in the zone, pouring drinks wordlessly, humming, but he gives me a warm smile that I don’t think he is giving anyone else. It feels good and gives me an excuse to come back for a fourth drink. By the seventh drink, the excuse has run thin. I can’t really focus on his face at this point.

The world is spinning, so I sit down in front of the fire pit. I am a sock in a dryer, being tossed around and cooked. The chair is placed too close to the flames. My eyes water but I don't trust myself to get back up without puking, so I just close them and stay for the ride.

Much later a drunk man comes over and tries to strike up a conversation, eyes locked on my tits the entire time.

"Hiya I'm Pete."

"Hi."

"Wendy's friend."

I have no idea who that is.

"Cool."

"You're really pretty."

"Thanks."

"Do you wanna get out of here?"

"No."

He wanders away. This sucks.

God knows I've been too drunk at a party before. I can manage. I've also been hit on, talked down to, made to feel unwanted. Nothing about this situation is new, but it's embarrassing to tally how many times I've experienced it. Does anyone ever learn everything? God must be rolling his eyes, wondering why he gave us memory if none of us would use it. Well fuck him, anyway. No one asked for this.

I'm not going to cry, but if the smoke makes tears fall, that's its prerogative. Daria abandoned me. I mean, Daria doesn't need to escort me around everywhere. I'm a big girl. But tonight hurt, and I don't feel big, I feel very small, a white-hot ember, whirling on its way to the dirt. I've never been a sad drunk (the drink helps with the sadness, that's the problem, the whole point) but I am certainly drunk and sad. I text Jenni.

—this party blows!! daria ditched me to go talk to a band

guy and all these people r laaaaaa and im toodrunk

—told u that crowd was bullshit

Did she tell me that? I don't remember. Maybe I should pay more attention.

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you," Daria says. I snap to attention, like a private when an officer enters the room. I smooth my jeans and hair, clear my throat, rub for melted mascara under my eyes—but I know it's futile, and I'm a total mess. You can't look suave past .20 blood alcohol content, it's scientifically impossible.

“OhhiyeahI’mrighthere,” I say eloquently.

“I can see that,” she says, sitting in a chair next to me. “You’re pretty close to the fire.”

“Yesp.”

“Wow, you’re really drunk,” she says, bemused.

“Sowry.”

“It’s okay honey—it is a party after all. Let’s get you home.”

I stumble past statuary on the way out. A garden gnome and two Marys leaning at odd angles, peeking from coneflowers and Queen Anne’s lace. Through the fence gate, into the black night. Gravel crunches, crickets chirp as Daria helps me into the passenger seat of her Accord.

I lean my head out the car window, totally sideways. Mailboxes and trees rise from the bottom of my view to the top. Horizontal planes zipping by, giving the impression of descending. Deeper and deeper towards home. Not home. Daria’s house. Many layers pass; we hit the freeway. Daria rolls up the window and I lean my head against it, looking at her.

“Why did you leaveme?” I ask.

“What?” Daria asks, eyes on the road.

“You hung out with your other friends the wholetime. You didn’t even introdushe me to any of them” I say.

“Sorry babe, I didn’t realize you needed me to guide you around the whole time,” Daria says. “I thought you’d be okay on your own.”

That phrasing hurts. This situation hurts.

“I jush wanted to hang out with you ... Abigail was a totalfucking bitch to me, she wouldn’t let me see you,” I say.

“Hey, don’t talk about Abigail that way,” she says. “She’s my friend.”

“Then why was she so fucking meantomeI meanI’m your *girlfriend*,” I wait for a response and when Daria begins to give one, starting with the word “Babe,” I cut her off because the word babe reminds me of my next important point. “It was my first time at a soshial event with you as your girlfrehehensm,” the word girlfriend falls out like a mouthful of pebbles, illegible as I begin to cry.

I’m sadder than I’ve been in years. Grocery store freakouts, impulsively quitting my job, floating in weed-assisted catatonia for days on end—these moments are punchlines compared to the pain a relationship emits in turmoil, the red pulse it releases as it is harpooned.

Why am I interrogating something I can't afford to lose? This pairing is officially only a week old and it's already load bearing—now that I've put it in jeopardy I can feel that. And I *am* putting it in jeopardy. Daria called me her girlfriend; I agreed. We never hashed out what that meant. Our relationship is a contract made of assumptions about mutually held beliefs and needs. If I test it too early, it may dissolve.

I cry, and blubber, and contemplate this, phasing in and out of consciousness. My stomach does flips.

"You're so fucking drunk Alice. Let's just talk about this tomorrow," Daria says in a hard tone.

"You can't even respond to my..." I say, trailing off, laying with my cheek against the window, fogging it and watching black, grey, white, blue, and red blurs pass by in the night.

We get home. I can tell I'm not going to remember this moment, this argument, tomorrow. Right now, it is real for me, but then, it'll just be something Daria holds against me. An imbalance in shared memory; always mysterious for me because I will believe her intellectually—yes, that sounds like something I'd do—but remain incapable of internalizing, because it is a story about me that I am not party to.

The moon is a perfect circle, and as bright as she was before the first factory went up. A space cut out of the sky. A peephole into a house of white light. I vomit on Daria's car.

Whiskey and stomach acid stain my shoes brown. At least now there will be some convincing evidence for this night.

Things are very blurry.

"There there," Daria says, brushing puke-crusted hair out of my face. "It's okay. It'll all be okay tomorrow. Alice, sweet angel. You're so sweet. It's okay, I'm not mad at you. You're so beautiful. You're so fucking sweet."

make a phone call

"5,000\$?" Jenni says, placing her coffee and book on the kitchen table and sitting across from me. I have just told her about my standing offer from Patrick. I'm staring at my Cheerios, pushing pieces around the bowl with my spoon, watching them go soft and then squishing them against the side. Not hungry. "Are you gonna do it?"

"I don't know. I don't think I'll like it, but I've never made money doing anything I like. I guess I'm just worried that after it's over, I won't be able to look at myself the same way. Like it'll change my relationship to my body," I say. Jenni drinks her coffee and holds my eyes.

"Well, if it's gonna fuck you up, don't do it, of course," she says, shrugging and setting down her mug. I can tell she's jealous of the offer but is trying not to show it. Jenni doesn't even do men, but poverty makes everything negotiable. She thinks I'm going to be passing up a huge opportunity, but knows it'd be inappropriate to press me on it. Being friends with someone for so long makes communication effortless, but concealing thoughts impossible, which presents its own set of problems.

"If the guy wasn't working for Exxon it'd probably be different. Thinking about his job makes me want to puke," I say.

"Listen, do whatever you want. But I don't think this is an ethical dilemma. They're already fucking us, you might as well get paid," Jenni says. She opens her book to a dog-ear. The water-damaged pages are stiff and splotted blue.

"What are you reading?" I ask.

"It's a collection of Adrienne Rich poetry. John K King was getting rid of it," she says. John K King Books is a four-storied used bookstore in downtown Detroit, sprawling and dusty and magic. "I was actually thinking of going later today. Are you down?"

"Maybe," I say. I toss the Cheerio mush and do some dishes while Jenni reads. They aren't even piled that high; this past month my dish-doing has reached the necessary level, much to Jenni's relief.

I wouldn't say I'm not still depressed, but some days the sluggishness recedes before a manic, anxious energy. Time with Daria is

improving my mental state, but I don't get enough of it; her busy schedule precludes that. This could be fixed by living together, which I have been thinking about. But until that imagined future arrives, I have to deal with the hours apart from her, which can be so dull that they don't register as living. Only Daria's black stick-ons can slash through the Saran-Wrap over the world.

There have been hiccups in the relationship, but no deal breakers. Her friends don't like me? Fine—I am not dating her for her friends. She is sometimes distant? Fine—aloofness is sexy; rockstars should be aloof. Now that I'm used to it, I'm not sure a clingy girlfriend would work for me anymore.

It is summer. Children's laughter and shouts echo from the street below. The sidewalk is full of men going shirtless in gym shorts talking to women in crop tops, stepping out of the way for joggers in sweatpants and sports bras. Our window unit is blasting at full power, and we have had to start taking the trash out early to dissuade flies. I watch one of those flies land on the top of my head and swat it. Holy shit, is my hair that sweaty?

"When do you want to go to John K?" I ask Jenni.

"Probably soon," Jenni says without looking up from her book.

"Okay, I'm gonna take a shower, then I'll tag along."

In the bathroom I peel off my pajama shirt, which has apparently attempted to merge with my skin during the night—the apartment has no central air, and my box fan is broken. I observe the curve of my stomach in the mirror. Before the wave hit, I was 145 pounds; now, I'm 130. Unlike during my anorexic teens, I find no satisfaction in seeing my body like this—it hurts, seeing all the curves I've developed melting away—and I wonder if this time I'm going to shrink until there's nothing left.

Cold water to lower my body temp, body wash on my hands. I wipe grime from my feet and bra lint from the underside of my tits. Bathing is another rhythm I've been struggling to keep up with. Like eating, it is easiest to justify bathing when I think about giving Daria something nice to hold.

I turn off the water, wrap myself in a towel and head to my room. My dresser drawer offers no inspiration for me today. All I see are piles of unrelated fabric. I grab a random tee and jeans and throw them on, not putting on a bra, letting my hair drip onto my back.

I find Jenni in the process of tying her shoes. Do I really want to go to the bookstore? When's the last time I read? I join her in getting ready, searching around for my purse.

"God, I'm always fucking losing things," I say.

"Same, same," Jenni says.

"Think we'll ever get our shit together?"

"I doubt it."

"You know who has her shit together? Lena," I say, suddenly thinking of her confident stride.

"I don't know. If everything was perfect, why would she leave?" Jenni says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"You don't know?" Jenni says, standing up. "She's moving out today."

"Moving where?"

"To Georgia."

"Wait, what? When?" I say, louder than intended. "Are you sure? She didn't fucking tell me that!"

"She's been posting about it on Insta all month," Jenni says, looking surprised. I haven't checked a friend's Instagram in at least that long. "She said she's all packed, so I imagine it's happening soon."

"Why didn't she text me directly?" I say, face hot, feeling panicked.

"I don't know," Jenni says. "She told me about it when we hung out, and that was over a month ago, so I think she's been planning it for a little while at least."

I haven't seen Lena since May.

"Shit, okay, I gotta try to catch her today. Just go to the bookstore without me," I say, spotting my purse on a chair, pulling on my sneakers and running out the door. As I dash down the stairwell I call Lena. She doesn't pick up. The heat of the day staggers me as I emerge onto the street; I wipe my forehead, already sweating, and dash to my car. The hood is splattered with an impressive amount of pigeon shit. The inside is an oven. I roll down the windows and drive. The seat is red-hot agony against my ass and thighs. Lena lives only ten minutes away, but reaching out has seemed untenable these past few months. I've felt busy, despite my empty days and persistent boredom. I park alongside her apartment complex, not paying the meter.

The door to her building is rusted and peeling. It lolls on its hinges, unable to stay closed. I yank it ajar and jog up the stairs. Why would

she leave? A flickering light helps me in my ascent. Metallic graffiti shimmers the words "BIG SETH" over black scribbles. I wonder who Seth is, if he still keeps in touch with his friends. On the top floor, Lena's door is unlocked. The apartment is nearly empty—just boxes, a ragged recliner, and her.

The sun is at its height, level with a large window on the east wall, facing me. Lena is a shadow on a wall of light. I blink, and she disappears. I imagined it. This place is empty. The boxes have nothing in them. Anything that Lena wanted has been taken with her. It hurts to know that this does not include me. I throw myself onto the recliner and let out a long sigh.

I stare at the wall while the sun moves from its perfect angle. Beams hit the floor and diffuse, filling the room with soft radiance. Dust motes sparkle. This recliner is falling apart, a spring is digging into the small of my back, but I don't shift, I don't want to move.

I get a return call from Lena.

"Hey Alice, what's up?"

"Have you left yet?"

"Yeah, I'm at a rest stop in Kentucky right now. Pierre's filling up the tank."

"Pierre's leaving too?" I yelp.

"What? No, he's just driving me down to Georgia."

"Georgia?"

"Yeah...wait, why are you calling Alice?"

"I didn't know you were leaving. I wanted to catch you before you did."

"Oh. Wait, you didn't know? I've been posting about it for months... I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you call me directly?"

"Alice...we don't talk that much, I just figured you'd see it on my story like everyone else. And honestly, I thought maybe you didn't want to talk to me. Like I wasn't sure you liked me that much anymore. It's dumb, I know."

The math of how much actual time we have spent together coils in my stomach. Red hot guilt. She must hate me.

"I'm sorry," I say. The exposed foam of the torn recliner is soggy from my wet hair. "I should've spent more time with you."

There is an awkward silence.

“Um...it’s really okay Alice. I’m not torn up about it.”

“Why are you leaving?”

I hear the sound of a lighter sparking.

“Just needed a fresh start. Shit’s been hard for me lately. I found out about this commune in Georgia through a friend, so I’m going to live there.”

A commune. Sometimes I forget that there are so many ways to spend a life.

“Oh. That sounds nice.”

“I hope so. I know communes are escapist bullshit and not real politics, but the fact is I need to escape.”

“Right.”

“Listen Alice, I have to go. I’m going to miss your company down here. Don’t take it personally, really.”

“Can we stay in touch?” I say. Tears are streaming hot down my cheeks. I should’ve done more. I should’ve been a better friend.

“I won’t have access to the internet, and the cell service is spotty. Honestly, that’s the thing I’m looking forward to the most. I’m tired of being hooked up to the matrix all the time, it’s fucking with my brain. But there is a mailing address, which I’ll text you right now. Feel free to write. And, if you’re ever in Georgia for whatever reason, come on by. You’re always welcome. You can bring Daria or whoever too.”

I picture Daria’s leather boots caked in red Georgia mud.

“Thank you,” I say, forcing myself to breathe normally.

“I love you Alice. Don’t worry, I know we’ll see each other again.”

“I love you too, Lena,” I say, wanting so badly to beg her to stay, but the guilt uncoils and speaks with my voice: “I’m proud of you for doing what’s best for yourself. I hope the commune is everything you want and more.”

“Thank you Alice,” Lena says. I hear a car door open and close; Pierre saying something off to the side. “I have to go now. Take care.”

Lena hangs up.

I take a deep breath and feel the shrinking of my life, or the growth of its empty space.

I get a call from Jenni.

“Hey I need help,” she says.

“What’s up?”

"I'm stuck on the shoulder of I-75, near exit M10. My fucking car broke down," she says. I can barely hear her over the roar. "I'm gonna have to get it towed. I need a lift."

"Damn what the fuck, okay. Lena's already gone so I have nothing keeping me here. I'll be there in ten."

"Thank you, thank you, see you soon."

She hangs up.

When I pull up, Jenni is sitting on a small patch of grass beside the freeway, leaning against the guardrail and smoking a cigarette. She looks dejected. Her car, a many-miled dirt-brown hatchback, is smoking as well.

"Dude, you won't fucking believe the day I've had," she shouts over the roar of cars.

"Did something else happen?"

"While I was waiting for you, this old guy pulled up and asked if I needed help. When I said I had a friend on the way he asked if it was my boyfriend and tried to get my number. He was like two hundred years old."

"Disgusting."

"I told him my boyfriend was coming to pick me up and is a cop. That's my go to."

"Glad to be of service, ma'am," I say, tipping my imaginary cop hat. "Before I go, I have to ask—do you have a boyfriend?"

She snorts.

"How long till the tow truck gets here?"

"At least twenty minutes. I have literally no clue how I'm going to survive if my car is bricked. I might be fucked."

"Let's worry about that later," I say, also having no clue. "Can I have a smoke?"

She nods and we smoke together. I watch clouds drift by. The humidity crackles. On the horizon, gray banks are gathering.

"It's totally gonna rain, isn't it?" I say.

Jenni groans and buries her face in her hands. I hack a smoker's cough in response. The dark edge of the horizon moves closer.

"Let's smoke in my car. Fuck it. I'm not getting wet on top of everything."

"Why not mine?"

"I think the condition of your car takes priority, considering it can actually move from one place to another, which is the whole fucking purpose of a car. And I know you always made a point not to smoke in there."

"Is it safe, with the engine smoking and all?"

"I really doubt it's going to explode. Hey, if it does, at least we'll be warm."

Hard to argue with that logic, especially with the drop in air pressure and temperature making the hairs on my arms stand on end. We climb into Jenni's immobile car. She doesn't turn it on, but it's still better than getting wet.

"You know I started getting harassed by men as soon as I hit puberty? I developed these so early," Jenni says, gesturing with the cigarette at her double D's. She leaves her door cracked and blows smoke that way. "Shit was hard. All of a sudden, every pervert thought he was slick. One time I was waiting for my dad outside the men's bathroom at Target and a guy came out and tried to convince me that I was supposed to go home with him. I was eleven."

I don't know what to say. The grass on the shoulder waves.

"So many of my friends in high school ended up dating older men. It's so common. It all starts with those fucking weird compliments. It's like a collective, group effort grooming. I guess I'm lucky that I was never attracted to men to begin with."

Maybe the grass really is always greener. There's nothing society punishes more harshly than female puberty; at least I got to process it as an adult. Maybe I dodged a bullet.

"I fucking hate men. I don't care if it's wrong. I've never been given a reason to feel otherwise," she says. The tow truck is pulling up. The clouds are overhead now; everything grows dark. Drops begin to fall. We step out of the car and Jenni tosses her cigarette into the road. "Well that was depressing. Let's get the fuck out of here."

In my car, Jenni hands me a book. It is a small red volume, missing the dust jacket. On the spine it reads in gold: *An Accessory to Fashion Crime*.

"I got this for you, it's a great find. It's a memoir written by this queen who worked as a wardrobe designer at an old drag venue in New York. I flipped through, she sounds like a riot. It's a real piece of queer history."

I flip to a random page.

Lucy cried before her show again. I don't know how she manages to feel bad with all the barbiturates she's on, it's really something to behold. I told her to look on the bright side—at least she was washing off that ass-ugly makeup job. She didn't seem to find my comment encouraging.

I laugh and set the book aside. The rain is picking up now. Time to go. I merge onto the freeway as my field of vision explodes into droplets.

“Thank you so much, Jenni. This is really sweet. It looks amazing.”

“Think nothing of it. Thanks for picking me up.”

The day is thick with the shriek and spray of speeding cars, all late for somewhere and leaving wakes behind. Puddles splash as we round curbs; I wince as my car hops over city roads that are more pothole than asphalt. Jenni reads Adrienne Rich pissed, swearing to herself as she tears a page from turning too fast. She sighs and puts the book aside.

“How are you feeling about Lena leaving?” Jenni asks.

“Sad,” I say.

“Think you might visit her down there?”

We pull into our apartment’s parking lot.

“I don’t know. I can’t really picture myself out in the forest with a bunch of hippies, or anarchists or whatever. I’m kind of a city girl,” I say. “Then again, how good is that working out for me? I don’t blame her for leaving. Lena always knew herself, what she wanted. So she wanted out, and she went for it. I love her for that.”

We step out.

“Wait one second, I need another cig,” Jenni says. She hands me one and we lean against our building, under an awning. “So ... do you want out, Alice?”

Of my body, my brain, absolutely. But out of Detroit? I’m not sure if I care, I’m not sure if my environment is an essential component of my life, or just an elaborate set that I enact my bullshit in front of.

“I don’t know what I want.”

“Well I want you to be happy.”

"Thanks, Jenni. You're so good to me. I feel like my life's not really going anywhere. The only thing progressing is me and Daria. Fuck, I want to move in with her so bad."

"Oh? You haven't mentioned that before," Jenni says.

"Well, it's not a real thing. We haven't talked about it, it's just something I've been mulling over," I say.

"Well, you and I need to talk about it. The lease will be up before you know it," she says.

"You're right. Fuck, you're right. Why does time move so fast?"

Jenni realizes her cigarette is burnt to the filter and crushes it underfoot. "I bet it'd move slower if I switched back to Spirits."

"Would you miss me if I move out?" I say.

"Not in the least," Jenni says. I frown. She punches me on the arm. Ow. "I'm kidding. Of course I'd fucking miss you, you're my best friend."

"Would you be mad at me if I moved in with Daria?" I ask.

Jenni rolls her eyes.

"You're an adult, you don't need my approval. But ... ask Daria what kind of future she wants with you. You might not like the answer, but you need to know that before you make your decision," Jenni says. "Sorry, I know it's none of my business. I just ... I worry about you, I can't help it. But no, I won't be mad. I want you to do what's best for you."

I wrap an arm around Jenni and kiss her on the top of the head.

"Once I figure out what that is, I promise I'll let you know."

watch the clouds

Summer is at its zenith here in mid July. Pierre, Monique, and I sit on blankets tossed out on sand by the Detroit River. Seagulls whirl and cry. The sun is bare and brutal on a cloudless sky, but there is a merciful wind, and Monique had the foresight to bring a cooler full of drinks.

They look good together. Monique is short and sweet; Pierre looks taller, harder by their side. We're all in the least clothes we are allowed. I'm wearing daisy dukes and a crochet bikini top that soaks up my sweat. Pierre is in gym shorts and taking full advantage of the privilege of toplessness, scars to the wind. Monique is in a sundress; their thighs spill out like honey. They keep staring at me and then looking away. I'm certainly not in a very flirty mood, so whatever is going on in Monique's head will have to stay there.

Pierre passes me an unlit joint: "Do the honors?"

"My pleasure," I say, and Monique holds the lighter for my inhale. I cough and hate how it sounds. Today I woke up on the wrong side of my body and the sweat doesn't help, knocking my voice down an octave by smoking won't help, but maybe the high will balance that all out.

"What a beautiful day," Monique says. We all nod. The river shines with veins of gold. I watch a long cargo ship trail by far off, its old smoke stacks dragging steam across the horizon. It moves to the right, Eerie-bound. Maybe it is headed to the Atlantic. Belle Isle is bustling today—first dates at picnic tables, readers alone under trees, a family having a barbecue. We sit on a secluded strip of beach, bushes hiding us from the other park-goers.

"I'm glad I've learned to like summer. I used to hate it," Pierre says.

"How could you hate summer?" Monique asks.

"Leg shaving season, I guess," Pierre shrugs. "So much more attention on your body."

"Yeah," I say. "Everyone gets to look at every part of you. No more covering up; if you cover up, you just get too hot and look even weirder."

"It's so crazy, you two hotties wanting to cover up so much," Monique says. Pierre shrugs again.

"Summer's better for me now," Pierre says.

"It's best to like all the seasons, right? I'm still working on winter," Monique says. "I hate the damn cold."

"Well at least if you like winter you can rest easy knowing it's not long for the world," I say.

"Oh. Damn, I didn't think about it like that," Monique says.

"My bad," I say.

"No, it's okay," Monique says. "It's good to be aware."

"Yeah, I find it comforting to talk openly about all the scary shit in the future," Pierre says. "No point sticking our heads in the sand."

"Thinking about climate change makes me think about my sugar daddy," I say.

"Wow you have a sugar daddy? I didn't know that," Monique says. "I mean, not that I'm surprised. You're a babe."

I feel too gross to say thank you. "Yeah he's a lawyer for big oil. I've done some research on his cases recently. He's a piece of shit."

"Well I'm glad he's your piece of shit," Pierre says. "Seems like he pays well."

"Yeah. Yeah, he does," I say, sighing. "Blood money."

"It's all blood money, honey," Monique says, stubbing the joint out on the bottom of their sandal.

Apparently no one blames me for working for Patrick except myself. I should feel twice as guilty to pick up their slack.

Pierre sets up a speaker and starts playing R&B. We lean back, light another joint. Monique and Pierre cuddle up and spend time pointing at clouds, naming their shape. They are dry clouds, with jagged edges and quickly changing forms.

"You see that one, Alice?" Monique says, shifting onto their side and looking at me with their head on one hand. "It's a bird, right?"

"I see a bat," Pierre says.

"It doesn't look like anything to me," I admit. All I see is exposed drywall: peeling paint on a big blue ceiling.

This skill that humans have, to recognize forms in other forms, must have something to do with the ability to love. We see our mother's face in our partner; we see a human child in the big wet eyes of a puppy. We see ourselves in others and vice versa. When Monique looks at me, their creative faculties must be working overtime. Today,

washing up, doing makeup, I saw a collage of flesh and wasn't able to recognize it as a face. Perhaps I am a person in the same way that cloud is a bird.

We lie in amiable silence for a long time. The bad thoughts are becoming an issue.

"So, how'd you guys meet?" I ask, to break the dangerous silence.

"I bought a lot of coffee at Monique's shop when they were working as a barista," Pierre says. "I had a crush on them for months."

"I can't believe you were so shy," Monique giggles. "You could've gotten my number the first day."

"I didn't wanna be a creep, you know. I was a lot more assertive before transition," Pierre says. "Not gonna lie, being a man is a lot harder than it seems."

"Tell me about it," I say. Pierre laughs.

"Eventually, after I caught them staring at me enough times that I was sure I wasn't imagining it, I got the courage and asked for their number," he says.

"He hadn't realized that I had followed him on Instagram a month before," Monique says.

"Sorry ... I suck at social media," Pierre says.

"That's cute as hell," I say.

"Mmhmm," Monique says. They kiss.

"Remind me, how'd you and Daria meet?" Pierre asks. "I can't believe I still haven't met her."

"Yeah, sorry about that. She's very busy," I say. "We met on Tinder. It didn't really turn into a relationship until like a month ago. We um, we became girlfriends at one of her shows."

"She's very cool," Monique says.

"You guys know each other?" Pierre asks.

"Oh, we met at the DIA a bit ago," Monique says. "You guys looked cute together, by the way."

"Thank you," I say. Oh god, the DIA trip. Change the subject. "Pierre I never asked, how did driving Lena to her commune go? What's it like?"

"The drive was nice. The views are beautiful on those highways down south, driving through the mountains. We had a good talk on the way. Lena has been going through a lot of shit this year that I had no idea about," Pierre says.

“Me neither,” I say, relieved that I wasn’t the only one clueless. But then—if Pierre didn’t know, it’s possible no one did. Poor Lena. “I wish she had reached out more.”

“Yeah, but that’s kind of just how Lena is. She needed to face it on her own,” Pierre says.

“What happened?” Monique says. “I mean, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“She was dealing with addiction,” I say.

“Yeah, and that has been the case as long as I’ve known her, but something bad happened to her last year that triggered a downturn,” Pierre says.

“Oh. I didn’t know about that,” I say.

“Well, I don’t really know either,” Pierre says, lying back again to watch the sky, which is beginning to grow dark. “She never told me what it was. I always felt weird asking. We were close, but not that close. Or, I don’t know. Maybe I just don’t feel right asking anyone to tell me about their trauma. All I know is that near the beginning of the year she started scaring me. We had plans to go to a show but she was awol for all of January. When I finally got a hold of her in February she was totally out of it. She lost her job and hadn’t left her apartment for weeks.”

Lena awol last January. I guess I wouldn’t know. Most of that time I spent washing dishes and watching shitty TV with Jenni. Did I really not hit her up in all that time?

“Why do you think something happened? Maybe she was just depressed,” Monique says.

“Some things she said, and how weird she was acting. She was—honestly I don’t wanna talk about this anymore. She clearly didn’t want people to know,” Pierre says, “I shouldn’t have said as much as I did, it’s none of our business. Weed makes me run my mouth.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Sorry I asked,” Monique says.

“You’re fine babe,” Pierre says, kissing their cheek. “Anyway. The commune, it’s called Wisteria. It’s lovely, it’s in the mountains, surrounded by woods. I only stayed for a minute but I think Lena will do well there, I really do. Everyone seemed nice, it seemed tight knit, but not creepy or culty. Just a genuine place for lefties that want to escape the world. Maybe I shouldn’t say that—lefties that want to make a different one.”

“Lena seemed content to call it escape on the phone, so I think you’re fine. Wisteria sounds too good to be true,” I say. “I hope you’re right about it. Lena deserves the world. Or at least a part of it that is good to her.”

The sky grows darker still as the sun falls towards the horizon. Dull water sparkling with nightlights, dull sky. A moment of silence for us, but not the island. We listen to the soft crash-crashing of waves climbing over each other and falling down again. We open up the cooler and I pass out beers, hands cold with ice water. Rub it on my shorts, crack the beer, enjoy the *biss* of escaping carbon.

Drink, chat, long moments of silence. Soon empty cans outnumber full ones. By dusk, we are out of beer. Monique rolls another joint, and Pierre sits up and kisses their arms, then their shoulders. Monique giggles. As they lick the rolling paper their eyes meet mine for a moment and I am acutely aware of the moisture on their pink tongue. Then they look away and down at Pierre. Pierre looks away from them and at me.

“What do you think, Alice? Should we call it a night?” he asks, voice laden with implication.

East of the river in Canada a cloud of gulls rises into the sky. They fly across the setting sun as shadows. I do not want to go home. There is a pile of dishes there and worse, me, who I do not want to be alone with. Hanging out, I have escaped myself a little bit—some of me is in the air, in the exchange of words between us. Alone, in silence, I am only what I carry inside. Alone thoughts will cry to each other and multiply like dark birds. Louder, louder, until they are unavoidable.

“No, let’s stay,” I say. Pierre smiles and gestures for me to come a bit closer. I lean my head on his shoulder, rallying my willpower—I will not cry here into Pierre’s shoulder when he is obviously trying to fuck. He smells good, like weed and boysweat. Monique moves to Pierre’s left and leans on his opposite shoulder, then reaches around his back to grab my hand. We sit like this, cuddling and watching the setting sun. When it passes below the horizon, falling somewhere in Canada, there is a single perfect second of calm. Then, Pierre grabs Monique’s face and kisses them hard. They moan. Monique’s hand is still in mine; they give me a squeeze. Pierre breaks away from Monique’s lips and advances on me. When he kisses me I don’t move, I just let him chew my lips. A fish on warm wet worms.

I've wanted to fuck Pierre before. He is sexy as hell. Monique is even sexier. I should seize the moment. But we are living different nights—they have just watched a beautiful sunset after a lovely day, and are about to end an ideal day with an ideal fuck. I, on the other hand, have just seen a red circle die on a black plain after a day of desperately trying to keep my shit together. That disparity smothers the desire I was trying to kindle.

"Are you okay, Alice?" Pierre says, breaking away. There is fear in his eyes. I look away, tears in mine. "Oh my god I'm sorry, I thought we were on the same page. Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you're fine, I just—" I say, then choke. I get up, grab my purse, brush grass and dirt from my thighs, and walk to my car.

On the ride home I feel impossibly big. My hands are octopuses on the steering wheel. My shoulders reach out in either direction as infinite planes. A giant outcast from heaven.

After parking I check my phone and find texts and two missed calls from Pierre. The texts read:

—I'm so sorry, I must have misread things. I'm so sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable

—❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤

—Let me know if you're okay. I'm so sorry

—You definitely don't have to respond but I want to explain that I really thought I was getting signals to go ahead, Monique also thought you were down. They also apologize fwiw

—I love you girl!!!

Poor Pierre. This hurts him, always so careful to not be that type of guy. Still not used to inhabiting the male role, fucking up a social queue and being terrified that he has played the part of the aggressor, the part of being a man he does not want to touch.

I can't make myself respond to him right now. Tomorrow I'll clarify things. Upstairs in the apartment, Jenni isn't home. I switch the light on and see: crumpled couch cushions, an overfull ashtray, one of Jenni's books (*To The Lighthouse*) spread face-down on the coffee table, dirty dishes, a shirt and pants lying inert on the floor like a corpse, the window and the dull blue city night sky. The bad thoughts come roaring, doubling, blotting out.

When I was a kid, Mom and I used to watch American Idol together. We were both rabid fans. The good singers were fun, but the real entertainment came from the failures. Someone would come in, bright-eyed, clearly riding all their hopes on this one moment. After getting interviewed, giving their life story, often tragic, they'd step in front of the judges and confidently squeal out some total shit. The judges would tear into them and kick them to the curb. This was during peak Idol, so the whole nation was laughing at them. It was a total humiliation. It was hilarious.

And underneath it all there's that unavoidable question: how did no one tell them?

Their whole life, they wanted to be a singer. Maybe they had some doubts about their own ability, but every time they voiced them, they were barraged with blind encouragement. Lies. There are so many links in the chain of events that lead to someone auditioning for Idol. Friends, family, teachers, audience members at each recital. For someone to arrive at a point where they thought they were a good enough singer to perform on national television, there had to be a hundred complicit parties; not a single person in their life honest enough to tell them they stunk.

Perhaps this is why Monique calls me pretty. Perhaps my ego is also sustained by a series of well-meant deceptions.

I know, at least, that when I look at myself and say "you look good today," it is some sort of lie. What does "good" matter if I want something else? If someone says I look good and I still see hell in the mirror, who is fooling who—I them, them me, me myself? I have hated my reflection since "I" first emerged from the fog. As soon as I learned that the thing in the glass was me, that "I" had a "me," that "me" meant a body, I have hated myself. At my best, with makeup right and stomach empty, I feel a relative pride, the feeling that a found-object artist might have when she has constructed an impressive sculpture out of trash—it may be the best-looking junk on the block, but it will never be marble. She can't love it *as marble*.

Everyone keeps telling me that they love trash art, that it's beautiful, that I should be proud, that the standards of classical art are problematic and outmoded, but what if I want fucking marble? What if I like its patterns and color and the way it gleams when polished? What if I've been taught since birth that sculpture = marble and have gone to the DIA and

stared in awe at the Veiled Lady, convinced that the solid block of stone was once really silk draped on skin, transformed by magic? Fuck off.

The metaphors help. Abstraction helps. It helps to intellectualize my dysphoria and consider how it is informed by male beauty standards, and how, as Lena insists, cis women also experience dysphoria. Whenever a bad thought emerges, I can tell myself why it is problematic or false or universal and therefore worth ignoring. I can go for months at a time like this, barely registering self-hatred before I dismantle it, an almost unconscious defense. But this is just repression.

Whatever the source of this pain, nature or nurture, social structures or neurological ones, it now lives in my body. Perennial: I burn, slash, and pull at new growth, but its roots sit far within the eternal earth, unmoved.

Again with the metaphors. My defenses are down; thoughts are slipping through. Hate, hate, hate. Maybe my powers of repression are busy with too much else—anxiety about my tenuous employment, embarrassment over my conduct today, generalized climate-doom—or maybe I’m just overdue. It doesn’t matter. The mirror hurts, even in a brief moment; walking towards my bedroom, passing the open bathroom, my reflection burns my periphery.

I curl up on my bed and hide under my quilt. I pretend that this is the void before embodiment, a theoretical place where maybe I was whole. I’ve been told that the “born in the wrong-body” schema is problematic, and I agree. I love trans bodies and know that they are not unnatural or less-than. A trans woman’s body is a woman’s body, not a man’s, and a trans woman’s body is sacred and worthy of protection. We are not wrong. But when I imagine—and here the bed-void flares around me, here I shake with dread—when I imagine absolution it is a sharp blade and a sure arm, a god in a dim and bloodstained room; arcs that cleave shoulders, ribs, arms, stomach, mandible, and skull; a stitcher-god who rifles through the pile that was me and creates something good.

go to church

“Dude, Pierre’s still apologizing,” I say. I’ve just texted Pierre for the third time assuring him that the scene on the river was on me, he didn’t do anything wrong, really, it’s okay. The sorries keep coming.

“Pierre’s just like that. He has a complex about his sexuality,” Jenni says. “Like, when we were both lesbians he was a total playboy, but now, he’s scared of fucking up. One time he complimented my tits then felt bad about it, and he wouldn’t stop apologizing for days. If he’s getting annoying just ignore him for a bit, he’ll calm down eventually.”

“I feel like an asshole,” I say.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” she says. “Neither of you did.”

“Maybe not morally wrong, but it definitely wasn’t cool. I just ran off without saying anything, like, what the fuck’s wrong with me?”

“A lot of things,” Jenni says.

“Thanks for that,” I say.

“No problem. Hey, are you doing anything this Sunday?”

“No.”

“Would you do me the biggest favor?”

“What’s that?” I say.

“Would you come with me to my niece Marys confirmation?”

“Confirmation?”

“Yeah, like, at my family’s Catholic church,” she says with a forced smile. “I love my niece to death, but you know how my family is. Her dad is a piece of shit and I don’t really talk to my sister anymore. I really don’t want to go alone.”

When was the last time I was in a church? I was maybe 14 when I decided I was done with boring services, shitty protestant soft rock, and painfully hip youth group leaders.

“Sure, sounds fun,” I say.

“It won’t be, but thank you,” Jenni says.

I stifle a laugh and it turns to a snort. Jenni scowls.

“This is hard enough as it is,” she says, turning to look at herself in the mirror.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I say, coming up behind her. "It's just—I'm not used to it. You look great."

Jenni pulls at her stockings and the hem of her dress. It may be the first time I have ever seen her in a dress: square-necked, navy blue and dour.

"If you need to wear a dress, why won't the church force me to wear a suit?" I ask.

"It's not the church that's the issue. The dress code isn't really enforced, the worst you'll get is stares. It's my parents that are making me wear this fucking thing," she says. "Your clothing is out of their jurisdiction."

"I honestly don't mind conservative dresses like this," I say, examining my ankle-length black thrift find.

"You look hot. You can do trad. It's not so fun for me. Memories," she says, sighing. "Come on, be honest. How bad is it?"

She looks how a dog does when dressed in a halloween costume: uncomfortable, silly, embarrassed without knowing why.

"You look like a million bucks," I say.

She punches me on the shoulder.

"You're a shit liar."

The church in question is called The National Shrine of the Little Flower Basilica. I have driven by it many times, never going inside. It is a hard thing to miss. The chapel is modest—pretty gray brick, a green copper roof—but positively dwarfed by the tower that stands proudly at its front. On the limestone tower is a limestone cross complete with limestone Jesus, all huge and done in a somewhat incongruous, cubey style. Jenni says that this is Art Deco.

"This is also," Jenni continues, stepping out of the car. "The place where Charles Coughlin made his broadcasts until FDR shut him down."

"Why'd FDR shut him down?" I say.

"Because he loved Hitler so much and we had just declared war," she says.

"That makes sense."

We approach a couple standing by the entrance: Mom and Dad. I have met them before, but it has been years, so Jenni introduces me like it's the first time. The pair make no indication that they remember

me or that they'd care if they did. Jenni's parents are short and round and both look unhappy to be there. The resemblance is uncanny, but I think better than commenting on it. Jenni taps her foot anxiously as I shake their hands; I doubt she's ever been so eager to head inside a church. We exchange the barest of pleasantries. A big, apish man walks out and stands next to the parents, towering.

"Hello Jennifer," he says. I've heard Jenni's full name so rarely, for a moment I think he is talking to someone else.

"Hello Steve," Jenni says. "Where's Cathy?"

"She's inside getting Mary ready," Pete says. He looks at me, starts to extend his hand, thinks better of it. "The service is about to begin. We should head in."

We enter the church and join the people in their Sunday best finding seats on pews. Jenni picks a spot several rows away from her family. I can already feel my ass protesting the hard wood.

"Here goes nothing," she says, sighing. I'm impressed by the catholic brand of nothing, which is much more elaborate than I am used to. A choir begins to sing.

"Who was that guy?"

"That's my sister's husband," she says, whispering. "He's a piece of shit. My sister was actually pretty cool before she married him."

I shut up as service begins.

I see the bishop in his white and red robes and his impressive hat, I see the altar and the tall gold candlesticks holding candles and lit wicks, the smooth stone walls, the other officiants in white walking to and fro in practiced ritual patterns. I hear the choir, the adults holding broad expansive harmony and the children angelic highs. So much time and wealth and love put into enacting this ritual on Mary and her peers. Pretty, but what else? I look around. Some people, like Jenni, look bored; some are attentive, some are overcome with rapture. Have I ever known the divine? As a child, maybe very early, there was a presence I felt in church. It's hard to remember now. And there have been times when I've taken psychedelics and touched some entity, universe-wide and drawing breath. But it never sticks around after the drugs leave my system. What kind of a god is that?

The choir stops, the bishop intones, his voice solid, beginning a prayer. Kids stand ready to receive God, in white dresses and white suits. So much artifice so much sandstone so much for what? I don't feel Him.

God to be God must be universal, but he is clearly not. Maybe spirituality is a gene, like cilantro. To some people, cilantro just tastes like soap.

Mary is anointed with oil and initiated into the holy eternal system of the Roman Catholic Church. She looks the same with the oil on her head as she did before. But she smiles so big I can imagine the sins of the world evaporating off her shoulders.

When the service is over people stand up, politely chatting. Mary files off the stage to give her mom a hug. Jenni turns to leave.

“Don’t you want to go say hi?”

“There’s a reception at my parents house. You don’t mind, do you? It’s just down the street.”

“No, I don’t mind.”

As we head to the car, Jenni asks what I thought.

“It was pretty,” I say.

“Yes. It is that.”

“Do you believe in God Jenni?”

She shoots me a quizzical look.

“Service got you feeling spiritual? Please don’t tell me you’re converting; I won’t be able to be seen with you in public.”

“It’s just a question, Jenni. I’m not really sure how I feel. I think I want to believe.”

“No, I don’t believe in God. I had more than enough of that bullshit as a kid.”

“Not even a universal force? It could be the divine feminine or something, anything.”

“What, are you bringing back Michfest now?”

“Stop being difficult.”

We arrive at Jenni’s car. She slaps the hood.

“I’m 2000\$ in debt from all the repairs I had to put into this car. If there is a God, they owe me an explanation.”

The reception is in the backyard of a pretty suburban home: green grass fenced in by a high white fence. There is a folding table laid with charcuterie, pre packaged vegetable-and-dip sets, and an array of pops. It is hot now, almost 90 degrees. Foreheads glisten, church clothes pits are stained dark. Jenni’s relatives don’t pay us much mind. There are a few shirtless boys running around underfoot, their little button-ups thrown in a pile on the ground.

"You must really love your niece, huh? To go to her confirmation when you hate the church so much?" I say.

"I do, yeah. She's half the reason I keep in touch with my family at all," Jenni says. "It's not even like we are that close. I mean, it's hard to tell with kids. I don't know if the time we spend is formative, or if she is gonna forget it all in a few years, like, if she even gives a shit. But I think she does. Maybe I'm delusional, but I think she thinks I'm cool."

"You're not delusional. Everyone loves their lesbian auntie. It's like, a trope," I say. I watch Mary navigate her party. She plays with the boys for a bit, then is called back by her mom to hold court, flitting between relatives, receiving cheek pinches and where's-my-hugs.

"And what really keeps me coming back is the idea that by being here now, I can shape who she is in the future. Like, maybe when she learns what being gay is and when her parents and her Sunday school teacher tell her it's wrong, she'll think of me and question that. I really don't think that kids have hate, I really don't. Just look at her. She couldn't hate me, she'll know better. She couldn't."

Jenni trails off and I'm not sure who she's talking to: me, herself, or Mary.

"Holy shit Jenni, are you crying?" I say.

Jenni wipes her eyes. "What, you cry all the fucking time. I'm not allowed?"

"No, it's just ... you never do," I say. I reach out and squeeze her hand. She leans her head against my arm.

"Thanks for coming, Alice," she says.

"Come on, you're my bestie. This is nothing," I say.

"It's not nothing for me. Being here makes me feel like I'm in the grave. Or the womb. Somewhere where I can't fucking move."

"Wanna bail?" I say.

"Yeah, let me say bye to Mary first."

Jenni walks over to and hugs her niece, picks her up, swings her around as she squeals. Mary whispers something in her ear. Jenni whispers something back. Mary giggles and waves at me with a big gap-tooth smile. Jenni gives her a kiss on the top of her head and walks over to her parents. They exchange a few words, hug tersely and break.

"Alright, time to go," she says.

“What did you whisper to Mary?” I ask as we open the fence door and walk down the street.

“She told me she thought you were pretty. I agreed, and I ... I told her that you used to be a boy,” Jenni says. “She was impressed.”

“What the fuck?” I say.

“Sorry, it was an impulse thing, I wasn’t really thinking about outing you or anything. And I know you were always a girl, I just didn’t know how else to explain it to a kid, you know?”

“Why’d you want to say it at all?”

“It’s like I said about me being gay, right?” Jenni says, lighting a cigarette. Teardrops still cling to her lashes. “She’s seven now but in a few short years it’ll go to shit, it’s gonna be makeup and training bras and men trying to get in her pants. I just thought that maybe it would be good for her to have a positive memory of a trans person. Someone living outside the bounds of what she’ll be told is possible. Does that make sense?”

Why do I have to be a teachable moment? Can’t I just be pretty? Mary waving at me, laughing without malice. How long before she learns disgust?

“Yeah. It’s a nice thought, for sure,” I say.

“Are you mad at me?”

“No. No, it’s fine, just maybe ask next time.”

“Of course.”

“Honestly, I’m just happy she thought I was pretty.”

Jenni laughs. “Everyone thinks you’re pretty Alice. Now let’s go home so I can get out of this fucking dress.”

admit there's something wrong

Daria strokes my hair, head in her lap. Noon sun slants from the window to my face; I bask. Her bed is a mess: pill bottles, panties, a hitachi, and charging chords are strewn across the sheets alongside us. *The Velvet Underground* is playing on her speaker. Lou Reed sings about blue birds, and the words of a girl called Candy.

"Do you want to fuck again?" Daria says.

"I don't know, I'm pretty tired," I say. I turn and yawn into her thigh. "Do you?"

She shrugs: "I don't know. I just thought you might like to."

"You know you never have to put out just for my sake, right?"

"Right, of course. I just want to make you happy," Daria says. I purr and nibble her thumb.

"You're doing that right now," I say.

She smiles and leans over me. It is as warm in her shadow as it is in the light. We kiss, she pets me more. Tingles envelop the whole of my earthly form.

"Move in with me, Alice," she says.

"Okay," I say, and laugh.

Another hazy hour passes like this. My hair pet, body soothed, dozing, drifting off during one song and reemerging at the end of another. Could it really be like this, every day? Just me, Daria, the sun, and a rotating cast of bands. Pix meows, competing with me for attention. I scratch his neck through his knotted mane. You too, buddy, you can be part of our golden future. Even if you do make my nose twitch. Around one my stomach growls.

"What if I made us a celebratory dinner tonight?" I say.

"That's a nice idea," she says. "Are you sure you want to cook? I don't mind."

"You always cook, let me do this one," I say. It's true I haven't touched a stove in a long time, but I can follow a recipe. "I'm sure I can manage some chicken and rice. I'll just walk down the street to the store."

"Sounds lovely babe," she says.

I get up and search around for my clothes. Jeans on the floor, long sleeve Leg Room tee on the bed, a sock in one corner, its twin in the other. She watches me, naked, a sheet laying across her hips like cloud cover at the base of a mountain.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” my goddess says.

I laugh, blush, and cover my face with my hand: “Oh my god stop, no, you are.”

Outside is a bit chilly despite the sun. It is September and the air is starting to grow teeth, testing. Hot summer one day and shivers the next. I already miss the bed, Daria’s arms, her thighs, her. Living together? It sounds like paradise. I walk down the street and let the prospect settle on my horizon.

I love her and want to live with her. But now that the idea is no longer hypothetical, I have to face the facts. Daria makes me feel good, but I’m still all sorts of fucked up. In my current state, I’m not good enough for her. Questions swarm like gnats with worlds attached: what do I want from life? Why, and who am I? Who knows. More practically, what is going to happen in the evil future, can I bear it, and do I want to? First is unanswerable, the second is likely no, and the last has to be yes. Why am I like this? How can I get better? What does better look like?

Maybe I should get medicated. It has been a while.

The grocery store is full of the sounds of ungreased cartwheels and old air conditioning. An infant cries somewhere. I grab a basket and search for ingredients. Basmati rice, lemon, garlic, onion, maybe some carrots? Whatever chicken is both cheapest and not expired. It’s funny, this transmutation: I show my tits to Patrick, he gives me money, I turn it into food, Daria shows me hers. From faux love to real.

In the wine aisle, I spot Andy, shuffling between Cabernets and Merlots. Meeting him is my only fond memory from that night at the party—not that there are many to compare it with. After chatting with him, things are fuzzy. One stable interaction surrounded by vague shapes. I hope I didn’t make a bad impression. Seeing him in the wild, I realize that he is much taller than me, at least 6’4, 6’5 with the locs. He looks like a lost grizzly bear.

“Hey Andy,” I say.

“Oh shit Alice, whatupdoe?” he says.

“Just getting some stuff for dinner.”

“Same. You wanna walk out together?” he says, placing the wine in his cart.

“Sure.”

Andy stows his groceries in an admirably clean back seat.

“I was just about to light up. Do you partake?”

“Daily.”

“My kinda girl. Care to join me?”

We get in the car. I place my grocery bags between my feet. A blunt sits in the ashtray.

“Help yourself,” he says, fiddling with the radio and his phone, queuing up music. I start to light the blunt and nearly drop it when screams suddenly blare from the speakers. He grins sheepishly and lowers the volume. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. I’ll change it to something more vibey.”

“I didn’t really peg you as a punk.”

“Ex-punk. I don’t do pits anymore,” Andy says, grinning big and pointing to a missing tooth I hadn’t noticed before. He changes the music to chill rap.

“Honestly the tooth gap is kinda cute,” I say, inhaling and passing. Smoke swirls around us. I cough. “Damn this shit is strong,”

“I don’t fuck around. Don’t overdo it though,” he laughs. “I weigh a lot more than you.”

“I guess so.”

“No guess about it,” he laughs, slapping his stomach. “I’ve been fattening up for winter.”

He really is a bear.

“You’re trying to gain weight?” I say.

“Surely am. Nothing keeps you warmer than a few extra pounds.”

“You’re a strange guy, Andy.”

“Just a lifetime of smoking and thinking. And eating. And thinking about smoking and eating.”

“I saw you buying fennel. I’ve never had fennel, what are you planning on making?”

“I’m not much of a cook, really. This is for the missus. I just get what she tells me.”

"Are you married?" I ask.

"Not yet, but we will be. I'm saving up for a ring."

"Congrats. What's her name?"

"Asia," he says. He pulls out his phone and shows me his lockscreen. It's a picture of the two of them in front of the grand canyon. Andy looks younger; he doesn't have the locs. Asia has an athletic build and is almost as tall as him.

"She's gorgeous."

"Yeah, I know," he smiles. "We've been together since high school."

"You guys must be so good together," I say, hoping I don't sound bitter, picturing Neil, my high school kind-of-boyfriend. Buzzcut skinny mixed Neil, same class, one foot my senior. Neither of us sure if two boys could date, who the boy was, what was implied by that, what it meant when he kissed me against the chain link fence while 10 Mile roared. Neil expecting rough trade he saw in a porno, me expecting us to marry after Obergefell v. Hodges.

"We are. I mean, it's not always easy, but shit if it ain't worth it," he says, taking one last look at the picture and putting away the phone. "Okay, your turn. Where are you from Alice?"

"Warren," I say.

"Hey, we were practically neighbors. I grew up on the Detroit side of 8 Mile," he says. "Do you miss home?"

"I mean, it's only like a half hour drive," I say.

"Yeah I know, but sometimes it's not the same, you know? I live in Midtown now and it's nice, and it's safer for sure. But if I don't do anything on the Eastside for a while I start to feel crazy homesick. Same city, but you know, it's really not. I get sentimental about shit like that."

Mom in her couch watching out the window for hours, eyes following the passing cars. Riding my bike to Jennis past strip malls and endless parking lots. Sitting in the front of the bus because no one else liked to, praying no one would break the trend. Reading books under the pine trees, page after page until Dad finally left.

"I hated Warren. It's nothing but shitty boring suburbs."

"Come on, Warren's not that bad. You gotta know some special spot, it's your hometown."

"Hm. I really have to reach."

"Then reach."

“Okay. There’s this abandoned harrow out in the woods my friend Jenni, and I, and all the other bad kids, used to go get high at. I guess I have fond memories there, relatively speaking.”

“That’s the spirit. What’s a harrow?”

“They’re used for sowing fields. I have no idea why it was there, I mean, Warren doesn’t really have farms like that. Imagine this massive, rusted out tractor. It had this contraption out in front with these wheels that look like saw blades all like this in a row,” I say, using the blunt to draw a horizontal line in the air. “Twenty of them at least. You could climb on top of it and sit in the seat, and there were all these levers up there, and every square inch was covered in graffiti.”

“Oh, I bet there’s a million local rap and hardcore albums out there with that thing on the cover, huh?”

“Oh yeah. And they’re all terrible, each and every one.”

He laughs. “See, I knew you could think of something.”

“I don’t know if abandoned farm equipment exactly contradicts what I said about Warren being a shitty town.”

“Asia’s cousin had this Oldsmobile on bricks in his backyard. In high school, me and Asia probably spent damn near a million hours making out in there cause we couldn’t get any privacy at home. It was wack, but sometimes I still miss it,” Andy says. He takes a long, long drag and closes his eyes like he’s reminiscing. “You know what I’m saying?”

Fuck, I’m crying. I don’t know if it’s the weed, or the sentiment, or the thought of my first time making out (I cried then, too). I turn aside and make myself cough so that I can surreptitiously wipe my eyes.

“Yeah, I feel you,” I say in my least teary voice.

“Shit Alice, are you crying?”

Goddamnit. “Yeah, this weeds crazy dude.”

“I warned you. But hey, that’s one of the good things about weed. It helps you process things. Just let it out.”

I glared at him through tears. His blurry face is open and sincere.

“I’ll pass,” I say. But now there’s no reason to hide my efforts, so I dry my eyes viciously on my sleeve.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. Crying helps.”

“No. Crying hurts.”

“Not crying hurts worse.”

"If it helped, I would've been cured a long time ago."

"You're already crying, so what's the harm in letting it out?"

"It's this fucking weed, fuck me, this is devil weed."

"Hey, this shits fire. Don't blame the bud just cause you can't take it."

"You're right, I'm sorry. I'm just fucking dumb. You warned me not to smoke so much."

"You're not dumb. Everyone greens out once in a while."

"Yeah. I guess so."

"You know, Alice, you can be really negative sometimes."

I laugh, a deep gut-laugh. Andy looks vaguely worried and this makes me laugh some more.

"You alright?" he says.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Fuck. Sorry, it's just, like, I know I'm negative. People just don't normally point it out like that."

"They not paying attention?"

"Stop, stop, you're gonna make me start again," I say, giggling. "No, I mean, people say they are worried about me and stuff sometimes. But I guess most of my friends are just used to it. Shit, I must be miserable to be around, right?"

"There you go, you're being negative again."

"Oops."

"Why don't I drive you home?"

"Hey babe, im back!" I call as I shoulder the door open. Daria walks from the living room and takes the bags from me. She makes a face.

"You smell like a skunk farm."

"I ran into Andy," I say, shrugging.

"I see."

I followed her into the kitchen. She starts to remove the ingredients from the bags and arrange them on the table. Her hair falls around her face, sparkling in the overheads like obsidian flow.

"Let me do all that," I say, placing my hand on her arm. "I don't want you lifting a finger."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, of course."

She leaves the kitchen looking disappointed. But Daria will have to learn to let me cook sometimes if we are going to live together. I want to care for her too.

Live together. I still can't believe this is really happening. I am going to see Daria when she falls asleep—not just smoking a cigarette and passing out after sex, but dead-tired, drifting away in my arms after a long shift—and when she wakes up—not just yawning, sitting up and giving me that look that says it's time to leave, but waking up to the sizzling of bacon and eggs and me humming one of her songs as I make breakfast.

I start peeling the onions and vegetables. In the other room Daria fiddles on her unplugged bass. Chopping, crying for the second time today.

"Hey babe, why don't you play over the amp? I'd love some music to work to," I say.

"I prefer practicing quiet, honestly"

"Oh. No prob."

I take out my phone and put on a playlist. Daria gets up and moves to the bedroom. Oh well. When the vegetables are done I wash the rice and set it to boil.

The chicken and vegetables are a bit overdone, but the rice comes out flawless. Not bad for a girl who's lived the past year eating takeout and ramen. Feeling artistic, I arrange the chicken on top of a bed of rice and place the carrots and broccoli in a half-circle around the right side. Voila. After cleaning off the table, filling glasses with water, and setting the plates across from each other, I call "Come and get it!"

"Looks great," Daria says with a kiss on the cheek. I pull out the chair for her, and sitting down, raise my glass for a tap water toast.

"I am ready for this next chapter of our life together. May we share many more meals," I say.

"Cheers," Daria says. Clink. She takes a bite.

"How is it, babe?" I ask as soon as the fork leaves her lips. Still chewing, she grunts and points to her mouth. "Sorry, no rush. I'm just anxious with it being my first time cooking for you."

"I can tell," she says, swallowing. "It's good."

"Really?"

"Really," she says.

We sit quietly for a while. My plate is almost gone before a quarter of hers. I consider how fast she's eating relative to how long it's been since lunch and calculate how good she actually thinks it is.

"I know the chicken is a bit dry, I'll do better on that next time," I say.

She rolls her eyes. "It's fine babe."

"And the vegetables—"

"Are overcooked too. And the rice is mush, and the whole thing is oversalted," she says. "I know. It's fine. You don't cook a lot, I'm not expecting to have my mind blown."

"Right," I say. Gulp. Come on Alice, let's not make it a third time.

After dinner Daria takes me to the bed that will soon be ours and tenderly removes my clothes. She trails small kisses from my left wrist to my left shoulder, around the neck, and down the other side. Tingles explode everywhere her lips touch. Then she kisses my mouth, abruptly and hard, and I jerk away.

"Everything okay?"

"Sorry, I just...can you just hold me for a bit?" I say.

"Of course," she says, pulling me tightly against her chest, cooing and stroking my hair.

"Sorry. I had an emotional day earlier. I'm alright," I say.

"Shh, shh. You don't need to speak," she says. So I don't, and no tears come. I turn my face towards her body and feel her nipple piercings, one cold against each cheek. "Shh. You're so sweet and precious. You are like a puppy, or a baby. No one could ever not love you."

visit home

It's been months since I saw my Mom. Guilt, and the hope that revisiting my past could help me figure out my present, have set me on the road to home.

Every time I return, I expect it to have somehow sunk into the ground. None of the requisite parts remain—Dad, me, the early 2000s, are all gone—but the one-story brick house still squats there in the shadow of the same pines I first smoked weed in, the same ones I learned to hide in. Their needles are patchier, have lost some of their sheen, but they are the same trees. My Mom is now too old and stiff to rake, but the maples that mark the property line on the right side have cast their oranges and reds across our yard, just like every October. It doesn't seem possible, but a house has no problem continuing. My family was just an accessory.

The only human remnant of that dead era is my mom, living here by herself. I picture her like the ball in Pong, bouncing from couch to counter to bed, emitting lonely two-bit beeps. Her name is Susan Blake. It used to be Susan Anders, and before that it was Susan Kowalski, and before that it was Susan Dunn. I've only ever known the latest of the Susans; the one that shares my surname. She was born poor but married rich, twice, very young, before marrying my father, whom she presumably chose for love, because he was never employed for long, or very well. I've never understood that. I can't imagine loving my father if I wasn't shackled to him by genetics.

I remember Mom with blonde curly hair, precisely styled into sweeping wings that leapt off her brows to frame her face, and blood red lips drawn in a frown, small, to minimize wrinkles. My image of her is several years out of date. Nowadays she is graying, slacking on dying her hair; and her facial expressions have almost recovered from that self-conscious tic. She frowns nice and big now.

I find her in the living room, on the couch, nursing a cup of coffee and watching TV. She's wearing an ornately embroidered blouse, heeled sandals; her arms shine with bangles, fingers with rings and glossy pink acrylic nails, ears with diamonds I'm not sure how Dad

managed to afford. And I know that he was the one that bought them—he didn't let her keep jewelry from her previous men. Mom is so beautiful. Beauty was the antecedent to most of the important events in her life, including the mistake that led to mine. She pauses her reality show and jumps up to come greet me. We exchange hugs, kisses and hellos. I accept her offer for coffee and join her on the couch.

"What's new with you, Mom?"

"Can't you tell?" she says, beaming, getting up and doing a twirl. "Dr. Patterson prescribed me Ozempic last month. I mean, the results speak for themselves, really. I feel better than I have in years."

She does look smaller than the last time I saw her, but that's always the case. After Dad left and she crossed 50 she started shrinking rapidly, like their marriage was the only thing really filling out her form. Like a wineskin with the cork pulled out, left to drain.

"That's great, Mom," I say, sipping my coffee. It's good she's happy, at least, right? I just want her to treat herself better. No one else will.

"I think your father will be happy with the change. We've been catching up on Facebook recently."

"What? Why?" I say.

They periodically make these attempts at reconnection. Online, because Dad is bouncing around between different states, none of them Michigan. They always end with one of them blocking the other, and another year of radio silence.

"Because he's your father and I love him," she says.

"I just don't get why you give that asshole the time of day," I say, taking a breath, ready to launch into a tirade, but release it as a sigh.

"Ti—Alice," she says. I wince at the aborted first syllable of my deadname, which rings with old pain, even in a split-second flub. "I know you and your Dad had some hard moments, but you have to try to forgive him. He's a complicated man, and he's changed a lot since the separation."

"He put us through hell, Mom."

"Oh, you're exaggerating," she says, pulling at the ends of her hair. "There were a lot of good times."

"Do you even know where he's staying right now?"

"Your father is a very private person. He needs his space," she says, grabbing a tissue off of the coffee table and blowing her nose. A couple tears form and slide along her lashes, thick with mascara.

"Okay, Mom. I'm sorry," I say. I don't want to upset her, or to fight. Maybe this can be a pleasant visit for once. "How's work?"

"Oh, pretty good. I'm making good money still, which I thank the Lord for," Mom says. She's not particularly religious these days, but she is thankful. "There was some drama, though, the other day."

"Oh yeah?" I say. This coffee is over-brewed, I wish I asked for sugar.

"So, Judy was talking to her boyfriend on the phone yesterday, as usual, and Sandra finally called her out on it, because she was holding up the line and there was a patient trying to get through to set up an appointment, so she got written up..." The words start to pass through my mind without registering. The wallpaper, alternating pastel fruits and flowers, is beginning to peel, so that some peaches sport wormy holes where old dark wood is seen. Fuck. Now that I've asked about her job, I've invited the return question. Stupid, stupid, stupid. "How about you honey? Have you found a new job yet?"

I hate lying to her, but it has always been easy. Mom is deeply gullible, the only person I can really fool. I invent a partial truth that she won't see through. She cannot know that I've been living on the dime of a strange man. In front of her, I'm ashamed. She never had a kind word for whores.

"I've been helping Daria with music stuff. I really think they're going to go far."

"Oh, that's nice honey. But are you still looking for a real job? I mean, how much money can you make doing that?"

"It can be a real job!" I say, louder than intended. "Umm ... I mean, managers of big bands make a lot. I'm not at that level yet, but I'm doing okay..."

"Oh, I'm sorry honey, you're right. I don't know much about music," she says. The guilt of shouting stabs my stomach. "Me and your father used to go out all the time, but nowadays I don't know much of what's going on out there. I'm sure Daria's band is very good." Mom puts her hair in her mouth, chews it, and spits it out, then does it again, not making eye contact. The knife twists.

"No it's okay Mom, I didn't mean it like that..."

We sit in silence for a moment.

“So, how are you two doing?” Mom says. “Is it getting serious? I’ve still never met her, you know.”

“Oh, it’s going well. We are actually planning on moving in together.”

“Oh, that’s so good to hear!” She says. She stops fidgeting and grabs my hand. “So good to hear. Everyone needs someone to love. And you know Alice, I have no issues at all with it being a gay relationship, I really don’t. I love love, you deserve love. You really don’t have to hide your girlfriend away; I won’t say anything to embarrass you honey.”

“Daria is super busy right now, but I’ll bring her here to visit soon, I promise Mom,” I say, squeezing her hand. I’m not sure if I mean it or not—I don’t like visiting here, and for some reason I can’t imagine Daria meeting my Mom. I’ve never met Daria’s parents either. Bringing her here would be unpleasant in some way or another. Is it essential? How can you ever really know someone without knowing their parents, the genesis of all their quirks, traumas, neuroses—probably some of the good qualities too.

“I think I’m going to have a lie down, honey,” Mom says, getting up, wavering. “Help yourself to anything in the kitchen. Don’t leave without saying goodbye, I just need a quick nap. Sorry honey. My blood pressure has been low again lately.”

“Of course, Mom. Love you,” I say, getting up and giving her a gentle hug. She mutters “love you” back and sways off down the hall to the master bedroom. Opening the fridge reveals three sticks of butter, a carton of eggs, and three half-eaten boxes of takeout. I inspect them—a Greek salad, a Caesar salad, a house salad—and they all smell foul. The anchovies on the Caesar shine darkly, wet black worms. I throw the salads away and wander down the hall to my room.

Thinking about it, I don’t know much about Daria’s parents. They are Chaldean, they live in Sterling Heights, they supposedly stay in touch—that’s the extent of it.

My old room hosts my bookshelves, still full of my childhood reading material, and boxes of various items I haven’t had space to claim, and Mom hasn’t had the heart to toss. The bed I took with me to my apartment; anything else is on a shelf or in a box. Each box has a word written on it in sharpie—“toys”, “photos”, “clothes”—but I know that the labels are non-comprehensive.

The clothing box is full of fragile knick-knacks wrapped in old tees. I recall a ceramic cow I got at a tourist stand on a family road trip. I can picture it—it had a brass bell that actually jingled and a label on the base that said, “I Love Moo”. Dad saw it on the shelf and started cracking up at the tenuous pun. I watched him laugh so hard tears ran down his stubbly chin, embarrassed in the unsure way a child is when they think their parent is acting strangely, but recognize that the display could be some adult ritual they haven’t yet been taught. Mom grabbed his arm and said “Babe, people are staring,” and Dad clammed up. He insisted on buying me the cow as a souvenir even though I wanted a hat.

I giggle. I Love Moo. It is kind of funny; funny in a stupid, wrong way. An ill-advised pun that doesn’t land but makes everyone feel a little awkward when you tell it. Give me a decade, and I bet I’ll be cackling too.

All these boxes hold items like that. This room is emotionally booby trapped; full of trinkets that contain tightly wound parcels of memory. Once you allow the first thought, the flash of recognition, an entire scene expands in a blink and fills the world. I want to burn all my old junk, but Mom won’t let me. I walk away from the boxes towards a bookshelf.

No, no, be real. I could never bring myself to burn all this shit. My whole childhood is invested in these objects. Destroy them, and where would all those memories go?

An *Akira* box set, the first four *Harry Potter* books, *The Hobbit*, all 74 volumes of *Bleach*, a rainbow of paperback pulp arranged by color. Back then I read shonen manga and fantasy; things that passed time but never threatened to change me. Looking back, I can remember a violent aversion to media that I saw myself in. I stopped reading the fifth *Harry Potter* book because, as I and the characters aged, I began to see the story through the eyes of the girls. It became impossible to process a story about a boy going through adolescence, something both immediate and completely foreign to me, and late-night reading sessions would fade into witch-dreams that I didn’t understand.

The exception that proves the rule is there, on the bottom shelf. *Alice and Wonderland*, and *Through the Looking Glass*. When I first read them, at age 8, I allowed myself to be Alice. I hadn’t yet been informed that I wasn’t a girl, so I giggled at the puns and characters,

and I shrunk and grew and forgot myself along with her. My namesake and I grow closer as I age. If there is a rabbit hole, by now I have fallen down it.

Picking up the book, flipping through, I find a section that I drew all over in pen. Woodland critters play in the margins around Alice's conversation with the Cheshire Cat. At some point I underlined a section I liked:

"Cheshire Puss," she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider.

"Come, it's pleased so far," thought Alice, and she went on. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where—" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"—so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

I put the book back and take a rattling breath. Calm down, Alice. It's just a kid's book, a raven is nothing like a writing desk, and Lewis Carroll was a pedophile. It's nonsense and you are not going to cry.

I whimper. My body spasms as the reservoir breaks, tears flow freely. I kneel in front of the shelf and sob.

I don't miss my childhood, which I remember as a vast stretch of confusion and pain—yes with periodic bursts of intense joy, but always fundamentally malformed in some way. I just miss being a

child. I remember that at one point I wasn't fully aware of the bounds of my own existence, and I'm sad that every second I get farther away from that ignorance. This is a sadness that will never go away. My chest is tight, hot, wet. This is a sadness that could carry me away with it, if I let it, and I don't want to spend any longer at my Mom's house, so I force myself to breathe deeply and wipe my eyes and nose. I stain the crook of my shirt black with tears and yellow with snot smeared like butter across the fabric. Standing up I get lightheaded, place my hand against the wall, steadying myself. My eyes cross and uncross. I walk down the carpeted hallway to my Mom's room and knock.

"Yes honey?"

"I'm headed out, Mom."

The door swings open and Mom's face peeks through.

"Oh, okay honey," she says, sounding despondent. "I love you. Visit soon."

She hugs me and I realize how small she is, just bones under a tiny blanket of loose fat. I squeeze her, nose pressed into the spot where gray hairs are reclaiming dyed territory. A few tears fall onto the top of her head.

I wish she'd sell this house. My bedroom, my dad's office, my dad's side of the bed; they all remain untouched. She only uses half of the square footage, and the past doesn't help pay the mortgage.

I wish I could support her financially. Then I could not come home for months and not feel so guilty. But I can barely take care of myself, so that's out of the question. Mom is better on her own. She has had fifty years to develop ways to cope. It's either deal with this guilt or come back here and break down.

"I'll make sure I bring Daria next time, Mom. Love you," I say, kissing her head.

My car smells like Febreze and burnt rubber. The freeway is an infinite treadmill whipping by under my feet.

believe you can reach her

Right when I put her tit in my mouth, Daria gets up without saying a word and walks to the bathroom. She closes the door and I hear it lock.

I walk to stand outside the door. There is water running.

"Daria? Are you okay, did I do something?"

No answer. I wait outside, pacing around the kitchen. People can switch like that and leave you clueless. Nothing foreshadowed, she's just in another place now and I'm left wondering. My heart is beating fast. She could be slitting her wrists in there for all I know.

After ten minutes (I'm watching the clock) she opens the door. Her nose and eyes are red, hair fussed. She avoids my eyes and walks back to bed.

I don't join her yet, I just look at my feet. I have bony feet. You can see the metatarsals straining against the skin. My right big toe is crooked. Everyone says they don't notice it but I can't help fixating on its slant whenever I look down. When I was thirteen, I fell off my bike and cracked my foot; that's how I learned what a metatarsal is. The doctor said it didn't need a cast. It was late at the urgent care; he looked tired and ready to go home. He didn't even take an X-ray. It healed wrong, now my toe is a few degrees slanted from where it used to be. That's how I learned that some things break and never go back to how they were.

"I'm sorry," Daria says. She has closed the drapes, blocking out the city light, and turned off the bedside lamp. All I see is an orange dot floating in the black. She sighs and the room fills with cigarette smoke. I leave my feet and lay down next to her. I want to hold her because I know that whatever I'm about to offer in words will be inadequate, but right now physical gestures make even less sense.

"You did nothing wrong," I say.

"I know, but I'm sure that didn't feel good." Her voice is steady, calm. She's had this talk before, just not with me.

"Do you want to talk about it?" The inevitable sentence. The played-out plea of a helpless lover.

“No.”

Yeah, I figured. I lay down, staring at blossoms of static in the dark. The original pastime. True dark doesn't really exist, we're always projecting these light shows on ceilings or the backs of our eyes. When I was a kid, I used to stare at the black for hours before falling asleep, and on the bad nights, I'd see ax murderers and spiders emerging from the corners of my room. Tonight, I just see clouds of visual noise, orange and pink. She snubs out her cigarette and they become blue.

She's closed off. I'd discuss the whole thing if she wanted, but she doesn't.

“Hey Alice,” she says just as I am drifting off, about to enter a stressful dream based on stressful thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“Let's try again.”

Does anyone really know anyone else? It doesn't seem to matter as she grabs my thigh and my misgivings melt into the mattress. She doesn't cry. Whatever it was, it's been pushed away again and our bodies still understand each other just fine. The back of my eyelids are pink again.

move out

The air is cold, the trees are charcoal-gray and bare. The leaves on the sidewalk are red and gold and crunch underfoot as Jenni and I stack boxes beside the couch, chairs, table, and tv. The coffee table is mine—burn-marked from missing the ashtray, water-stained from missing the coaster—and I feel guilty as I place my loyal companion on the curb. He's beat-up, ugly, and there's no room for him. Relatable, but oh well. I'm taking my Ikea dresser and little bedside table; there is space enough for them.

Our apartment is empty; it holds only muscle memories now. Sit here, lay here, walk around that table there. All void. Time to learn a new space, a new person.

"I think that's the last of it," Jenni says, wiping her brow. "Where's Daria with the van?"

"She should be on her way," I say.

We smoke and wait. Fall hit hard this year. There was a week where the temperature spiked and everything was green and warm and happening, then the leaves caught me by surprise; the world folded in on itself and began to die. Now, nothing sounds better than a long, cozy winter, hibernating with Daria.

Four years together in this place. College dropout slump, weed haze, quarantine. So much happened here. Well, really just a few things—eating, sleeping, going crazy, watching movies—but what we did, we did a thousand times.

"What's your best memory at this place?" I ask. Jenni thinks in silence for a minute.

"Okay, you know when Covid first hit? There were a few weeks when we were both off from work, before anyone knew just how bad it was going to get," Jenni says. "And we just looked at it as a vacation and played through Halo 2 together and smoked like a pound of weed."

"Yeah, that was good," I say. "Those few weeks feel so innocent in retrospect. Like ... like picking flowers before a storm."

"Or in front of an oncoming train," Jenni says. "What about you?"

"When we first moved in, maybe. We had that party. Pierre brought his dickhead cousin and he got drunk and kept misgendering me," I say.

"You like that memory?" Jenni says.

"Getting misgendered sucked. But having a room full of my friends yelling at the guy doing it felt amazing. I felt very safe and looked out for, and that was important for me at the time," I say. "Plus, when Pierre made him apologize to me he looked like he wanted to die, he was so embarrassed. It ended up just being funny."

"Yeah, that was great," Jenni says. She sighs. "I wish we took more pictures."

"Yeah, me too," I say. Our home is slipping away.

At least the bad times fade too. I'm happy to leave the tears, vomit, and torn-out hair where they lie. The Leg Room van rolls up and belches to a stop. Daria hops out of the passenger side door, revealing a column of platinum hair falling behind a worn blue coat. Oh right, it's Abigail's van. She stays inside, keeping the engine on and fiddling with the radio.

"Hey babe, hey Jenni," Daria says. "Big day."

"Hi hun," I say. "I'm all packed up. My boxes are the ones on the left."

"Cool," Daria says. She pops the trunk and starts to move boxes.

"Jenni, are you sure you don't need our help moving your stuff to Sarah's?" I say.

"No, it's fine. I can afford the U-Haul," Jenni says.

"So, are you guys getting together for good now?" I ask.

"No. It's only a U-Haul in the literal sense. Sarah and I are separating for good, actually. I'm gonna be staying in the basement," Jenni says, squatting to grab a box. "She made the boundaries pretty clear."

"Oh I'm sorry, I didn't realize. When you said you were moving into her place..."

"It's only a temporary arrangement. But it's fine. It might be a bit awkward, but we're still friends. There's more to life than dating," Jenni says.

Maybe to some lives. The van is a big blue box with space enough for a band's gear or one girl's accumulated junk. I join Jenni and Daria in loading it up. The back of Abigail's head bobs to Teen Spirit but she doesn't look back. Silent treatment? That's not fair, I'm the one who's supposed to be mad.

We're done in a couple trips. My life—without any real estate, a real job, or any valuables— is eminently portable. Daria asks Jenni for a cigarette and they lean against the apartment wall. While she lights it Jenni says something, but it's hard to hear over the music. My name comes up; I can see it on her lips. When I close the trunk, Abigail calls me over to the driver's side window, turning down the radio. Alright, I'll bite. I walk over. This is the first time I have seen her outside of party-mode. She is not wearing foundation; her left cheek is dotted with acne.

"What's up?" I say, wary. I scan her face for malice and find peeling lips, tired eyes.

"Are you excited to move in with Daria?" she says.

"Um...yeah, of course."

"Not taking that coffee table, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, it's pretty beat up."

"Yeah ... so, what's up?"

"Shit," Abigail sighs. "I suck at this. Listen, I'm sorry I was cold to you at that party. We got off on the wrong foot."

"Oh." Something pleads in her eyes—a desperate shard of light. Real remorse. The burning resentment I have nursed for the past 5 months sputters and goes dark. "It's totally fine."

"No, it's not. I know I was a bitch," she says. "I think I forgot my meds ... but no, that's no excuse. I'm protective of Daria, and sometimes that can be really toxic. She's just had such bad partners, you know?"

No, actually, I don't.

"Totally," I say. "It's really okay."

"Well I'm glad you don't hate me. You seem cool, and I'm glad you're dating Daria."

"Thank you," I say. What I know rearranges: Abigail is no longer an enemy; Daria's previous partners hurt her, I have a legacy to avoid living up to. I feel dizzy.

"Time to go babe," Daria says, grabbing me from behind. I jump, then relax. She presses her nose against the side of my neck. Precious pretty nose. Who hurt you, and how?

"Let's do it."

An Accessory to Fashion Crime falls out of a box spine-up, splaying its pages on the front step of Daria's house. I haven't read a word since receiving it from Jenni; honestly, I had forgotten about the little red book. I pick it up. It has opened to a spot in the middle, now stained with dirt. As I pull the door open and maneuver the box past the frame, I hold it with my other hand and read.

We feel the loss of Miss Angel more keenly with every passing day. Ever since Dolly took over as manager, she has become, to use Lucy's words, "a complete fascist." There are longer rehearsals, shorter breaks, and stricter rules.

Intrigued, I set the box down and lay on the couch.

A month ago she demanded that Mabel stop working the corner directly outside the venue. In fifteen years of standing on that corner, no one had ever told Mabel what to do. Once, she would've beaten Dolly silly, but she's an old mare now. She left, and no one has seen her since. I think that Dolly should get along with the working girls, seeing as she can take such a massive stick up her ass.

We eventually learned that the landlord requested that Dolly deal with the "criminal element" on the property. Lucy says if those orders were followed, he would be the first to go. Mr. Marelli is a bigot and a gangster, but when Dolly hangs the "no loitering" sign, she struts like Moses coming down the mountain.

look inside yourself

Psychedelics make good milestones. Shrooms—when I started high school, when I graduated, when I dropped out of college—mark important transitions in my life. Moments strung together by mycelium. Today, I am finally done unpacking. On the shelf my knickknacks intermingle with Daria's, my pills in her medicine cabinet, my clothes in the dresser. Crumbling by hand a clutch of dry stems and caps Pierre gave me this summer, brown powder and boiling water. Making tea.

The ground outside sparkles with the year's first real frost. A string of footprints break its surface, leading to the driveway. Daria's away at work, then Abigail's, and she doesn't really like shrooms anyway. I don't know if I exactly enjoy them, but I appreciate the insight they can bring, the resolution, the growth. They are like therapy, except they actually work.

Set and setting insisted Jean, the upperclassman who first sold me shrooms, sitting hunched in his skunky car in the high school parking lot. He may have been held back twice, but Jean was no fool. I've never gotten scared on shrooms beyond brief panics at passing sirens. My setting: moved in, cleaned yesterday, the place looks good. Set: all things considered, I'm in a good mood. Motivated enough to finish unpacking in two weeks is a good showing for me. Maybe the bar's low, okay, on the ground, but hey. We work with what we've got.

I lay on the couch, turn on some Slowdive, and sip the earthy tea. Down to the dregs, then I slurp those too, slimy and blanched fungal flesh. Jean also said that if you can't handle the taste, you don't deserve the trip. There are few things in this world I can't force down. I set the cup on the bedside table and lay back, staring at the stucco ceiling, jangling reverb all around.

Breathe. Nausea comes in waves, the waves are made of molasses, my body grows heavy. Here I go. It's been a hard year Alice, but you've almost made it. You've made it to the other side.

The stucco bumps begin to slide around, alternating rows passing each other in opposite directions. The ceiling is just white and tiny

textural shadows, not too interesting, but I give the show a chance to build. It would be hard to move right now anyway.

How much did I take again? Pierre weighed them, it wasn't more than a few grams. But it's coming on strong—the ceiling breathes deeply, fractals crisscross red green and blue—and the album is only on the fifth track. Were they penis envy? I know those are supposed to be stronger than the other kinds, but he'd tell me right? I've never had penis envy, the mushroom or the feeling.

Calm, Alice. Getting higher than expected is a good thing. You love being high.

I breathe with the room and start to relax. I sit up. My stomach churns, full of magic tea, rocked by a moving world. Everything is alive. The bedsheets are made of long pearlescent worms, processions of dots that crawl; on their poster Bikini Kill plays their instruments in black and white and I swear they are strumming in time to the music, Kurt Cobain too, his hair growing and falling out and shining; the light falling from the window is a lightning bolt, or a crystal, or a supernova. Tears in my eyes, those move too. It's a beautiful world, beautiful and insane. When depressed I feel small and the universe feels big, dead and empty. But no, it's alive, it teems. Like a jungle with trees so big you can never see their tops, you only know the canopy from the shadow in which you live. Trees with knowledge beyond human reasoning, full of howling monkeys, spiders, parrots, cruel animals that chase and eat each other. Not an unknowing universe but a universe that sees you, knows you. Isn't that so much worse? Sight can be kind—Daria sees me and I see her—but no she doesn't, she's not here, I am under the macrocosm's unloving gaze.

Fuck, I need to pee. Stop this train of thought; in fact, blow up the tracks and shoot the conductor. Isn't it so nice to live in this new house with the one you love? Focus on that. Daria, Daria, Daria, my everything. Warm love fills my chest, but quickly drains. It is so hard to draw comfort from her when she is away.

Okay, here we go. I get up and find the squirming floorboards solid. I move my limbs through the molasses. One crook-toed foot, then the other. A century ago in Boston a molasses tank broke and a bunch of people died, drowning in hot syrup, the stuff too thick to swim through, limbs heavy just like this. Okay, stop, new metaphor. My limbs are heavy like lead. I sit on the toilet (don't look down,

don't look in the mirror, it's not worth it) and pee. Snyder knew that Flint's water was full of lead but he covered it up, everyone knows, the charges were dropped, kids are still sick with lead, people buy bottles instead of risking the tap. Okay, no lead or molasses.

I get up and my body decides I'm not done, a trickle of pee slides down my thigh. Gross, Alice. Cleaning up, I consider how gross a body is. Not just mine, everyone's. Everyone's connected, one big organism, meaning I just pissed on everyone's leg. Sorry Mr. President, I meant no disrespect. Back to the bed. Some long instrumental song is playing, one from the back half; a steady beat and a cold drone. All bodies do is consume life and excrete waste. Death machines. Piss making factories. Jungle beasts, molasses fish, leaden demons. Breathe. Fractals denser and denser, I cannot see the room anymore, all there is is an evolving rainbow grid seamless and my thoughts, no, just the grid, my thoughts are the grid. I am scared; the tesseract world spins, the yellows and greens give way to bloodred.

My organism joins with the bloodred world in a continuous horrific stomach pit dread and lower gut grief. Thoughts are razor blades. I'm going to get stuck like this. Just horror, forever, like Sisyphus but very sad, like needing to scream and having a mouth but screaming won't relieve the need so you might as well keep it shut.

Please don't send me to the psych ward. Not again, not again. There are moments I don't think about. If I return, will I remember? Maybe brain breaks and I'm back there, the last time, continuity of fractures, picking up where I left off—mom's pills, dad's rage, dad's car, mom's tears, blank walls, white and blue pills, group therapy, one on one, group therapy, group therapy, bad food, red pills, throwing up. And touch those memories, what say the rest? Maybe all the dead float to the surface, the really bad ones, the mummies, sunk so far in the bog they aren't remembered in dreams?

Nonononono. Fuck that. Look past the fractals Alice, come on, not your first rodeo (Texans torment bloody tortured bulls). Look at your hands, ground yourself. Hands are ground: vast landscapes, craters on mudflats between stoney blue ridges. But they breathe. They breathe like lungs.

Stop this next part, stop what's happening. Album's over, maybe I just need new music. I put on Loveless—bigger sounds, louder, blot me out.

Feel around for my phone. Chase the symbols as they dart around the screen, pin them down with my thumb. What if I call Lena? Lena would know what to do.

The phone rings. Wait, she's out in someplace nowhere Georgia with no cell service or internet. I try to hang up the call, but my thumb is slow to obey, and a voice rings out through the dream. Real, not imagined. It's Lena. Lena! Lenalenalenalena.

"Hey Alice! Can you hear me alright?" Lena says, her voice crackling.

"Is that really you?" I say with difficulty. "I thought you didn't have a phone out there."

"I mean they didn't confiscate my phone," Lena laughs. "There's just no service in the mountains. I hiked out to the nearest town today, so I've got a couple bars. That's such amazing timing, that you called me right now."

"Yeah."

"Are you okay, Alice? You sound kinda weird."

I struggle to remember how sentences work, how the words link to each other, one after another in a straight line. She has said something about bars (I could use a drink), couples (I wish Daria was here), phones, mountains. Forgetting comes in waves. It recedes and I speak from a mouth miles away.

"I'm tripping balls," I say. "I'm on like ... a gazillion shrooms."

"Oh shit! You having fun?"

"No, I think. No, I think I'm having a bad trip."

"Oh no. Do you have a trip sitter?"

"Not really," I say. "Daria's not home today. I'm all alone at the house alone."

"Oh right I remember you mentioning Daria. You're at her house? Wait, do you guys live together?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Um ... like three weeks."

"Congrats. But girl, you're crazy for tripping alone in a new place. Why don't you call Pierre, he's a trip guru."

"Okay I will ... but don't hang up, I miss you."

"Aw, I miss you too. Okay, I can chat with you for a bit. Are you still freaking out?"

Across the room the television is a big black cave and seems to be growing each second.

"Yeah, a little."

"Take a deep breath. Remember that it'll pass. Nothing is forever, least of all this. Everything is okay. Breathe in, out."

I follow her breathing instructions until I stop, some unknowable time later, calmer.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah."

"You wanna talk more?"

"Yeah."

"How are things over there? I miss everyone so much."

"Um..."

"Shit, that's too broad of a question, huh? Don't stress, I'm gonna call Pierre soon and talk his ear off, I can get the full update then. Let me see ... how's the new place?"

"It's nice."

"And what's new with you besides that? You seemed like you were doing pretty bad last time we hung out, back in May."

Bad? Bad? Oh Lenalena, who ran away. I'm badder than the spider which is throwing jagged shadows across my breathing ceiling, I'm badder than the sigils the shadows write in the light, bad patterns, what is bad is what I have.

"I miss you so bad," I say.

"I miss you too," Lena says. She sounds choked up. "Shit, I'm getting too deep again. I just really want to catch up."

"How is it over there?"

"It's amazing, Alice. I wish you could see it. Everything is built by hand and beautiful, and the people, the people are even more beautiful. I feel like I have a purpose here," she says. "I'm totally sober and I don't even mind. There's a routine and always things to do, but also freedom, because everything is voluntary."

"Wow."

"...yeah. I guess I miss being in the real world sometimes. This still seems like more of a vacation to me. Like, nothing I do feels like it's part of something bigger. Which is nice, because the bigger thing I'm usually a part of is America, which I hate. But like, this place feels unreal to me because of that separation. Like living in a dream."

"I think I am in a dream."

"No, Alice, you're in the real world. You're just high."

“Well, I am part of America. Belly, beast.”

“God, I suck at trip sitting. You’re fine though, right? Don’t do anything crazy.”

“Okay.”

I curl up and close my eyes, imagining Lena in all her glory, at home in her commune and skin. My stomach does a flip. The world is heavy; the iron branches that hold the real in place press down on me with infinite weight.

“I’ve had some bad trips myself. I know it’s scary, but it always passes.”

Can I get something off my chest?

“Everything passes. Well, except me,” Lena laughed.

Sometimes I feel like you left because I wasn’t there for you when you needed it. But I know that that’s not true, I know you did it for you.

“I can’t even say how good it is to hear your voice, like, really. I miss Michigan like hell.”

Did it feel good to do something just because you wanted to?

“Alice? Are you there?”

Yeah, I’m here.

“Hellooo”

Oh, I’m speaking in my head aren’t I?

“Sorry. Hard to talk right now,” I say.

“Right. I’m gonna call Pierre for you, okay? I wanted to call him anyway. I’m sure that if I explain the situation, he’ll head right over. You just sit tight, okay?”

“Thank you Lena.”

“Everything’s gonna be okay, alright Alice?”

Such a big proclamation from someone so far away, so not on shrooms.

“I love you,” I say.

“I love you too Alice,” she says. “Goodbye.”

She hangs up. The three best words in the English language, followed by the worst. Pierre will come, I guess, I guess. Sometime. He’s only a half hour away, but how long is half an hour?

Eyelid visuals: shots from movies; iPhone app UIs; fragments of Daria, Jenni, Lena; a vibrant shoal of fish of a species I’ve made up. Nothing too horrible; Lena’s kindness soothed me. Sweet Lena.

So much for insight. What have we learned today, class? Never bet on Alice’s brain. Well, the walls still breathe. There’s still time. I still breathe. There’s still time.

Knock at the door. I walk over no problem, the molasses lead seawater has grown less dense. On the front step are Pierre, and Jenni, and Sarah. What the fuck. Two's more than I was expecting already, but Sarah too? I don't know her like that. Mortified, I forget I'm tripping for a second, instincts kicking in.

"Hi guys, what's up? Please, come in," I say. They follow me inside.

"Want something to eat?" They exchange glances.

"Lena told me you were having a bad trip?" Pierre says.

"Oh, right. I think I've come down mainly by now," I say. I feel ill and have to sit on the couch. "Well, maybe not totally. Why are the rest of you here? I thought you had work."

"Hello to you too," Jenni says, face glowering in squirming shadow stuff.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that, I'm glad to see you," I say.

"It's okay, calm down," Jenni says. "I called in sick so we could do our annual David Lynch marathon."

"Oh, you shouldn't have stopped just for me, you didn't have to do that," I say. Ruining plans, that's so me.

"Yeah, we kind of did," Jenni says. "Can't let you go crazy out here."

"I wasn't doing anything anyway," Sarah shrugs.

My lip quivers. Waver, wavering world.

"I mean, it's no big deal," Jenni says. "We already got through Blue Velvet and Eraserhead, so we're making good progress."

"Maybe let me do the talking for a second," Pierre says, eying Jenni with dagger flames. Don't fight over me, dear friends.

"Listen, I'm okay now. I'm still tripping but I've come down a lot. I just got scared earlier," I say.

"Did something happen?" Pierre says.

"No, it was just ... the horror of living, I guess," I say. The world is not so warped that I don't catch the looks of worry Jenni and Sarah exchange. Pierre's eyes, also worried, stay firm with mine.

"Listen, I'm really sorry you've had a bad time with the shrooms I gave you. I brought some Xanax. If you're still having a bad time, I really recommend you pop a couple and just conk out for the day."

When I asked him if taking shrooms would let me talk to God, Jean said, "A trip is really a trip inside your own head. So you might meet what feels like God, but it's really your higher self. And that is

God, dude. That's God." Why did I think that there was anything worth seeing inside my head? Was all this just wasted time? Maybe I should stick it out. I almost broke my brain today. Maybe I should pack it up. Going crazy doesn't teach you anything.

"Yes, please. Xanax sounds lovely," I say. Pierre walks to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. Jenni and Sarah sit next to me on the couch.

"Sorry for all coming in here like this, I guess it's kind of overwhelming for you," Jenni says.

"I'm just glad to have people who care for me," I say.

"We do, Alice," Jenni says. "We really do, we want you to take care of yourself."

Pierre returns, I swallow the pills.

"Want to put on some music while we wait for it to kick in?" Pierre says. I hadn't realized that the album had stopped. Now that I have, the silence seems monumental. There's really nothing without music sometimes, nothing but you. But the rhythm—the one, two, one, two—that's like the shrooms, that's breath, right?

"No, I think I've had enough music for the day," I say.

"Alright, suit yourself," Pierre says, sitting by my feet. I pet his head, which I have never done before, but right now the boundary between people is thin. He pushes his head against my palm, like a cat does. Soft hair and pleasant oils.

Jenni mentions an issue she is having with a new coworker and the three of them chat. I interject some, but it's hard to keep up, and I understand that they are just killing time. They didn't come over to talk about work. They came here on their days off for me, Alice, the inconvenience who only sort of works. In any sense.

I really should just get into Xanax. This shit rocks. What kind of moron prefers a drug that makes you think to a drug that makes you forget? I wanted a breakthrough. Breakthrough what? There's nothing in my way. It's just the past grabbing at my ankles. I should talk to a psychiatrist about Xanax, or otherwise, about my past, which is less appealing. Or maybe I just need to be on an SSRI like everyone else. I lean in the crook of Jenni's shoulder, sweater wool rough against my face. "I love you guys so much, you are so good to me," I say, dropping tears into the warm hollow.

"We love you too, Alice," Pierre says.

"I love you to death, honey. But you need to get your shit together," Jenni says. "No more eating shrooms at home alone on a weekday. You're lucky Pierre was off work."

I'm an erratically employed sugar baby, every day is a weekend for me. I work from my polished mirror, I'm usually alone and at home. But, fair play. My shit is catastrophically untogether.

Stumble to bed. The floor no longer draws breath, although it does gently spin. Pierre pulls the covers up over my shoulders. Such a kind man. It is only 5, but sleep calls. I'll be asleep when Daria gets home, that'll be a first. I hope she sees sleeping beauty and nothing else. Jenni says something but it floats away ungrasped. Eyelids heavy and the back of them have no movies screening. Fuzzy, warm, floaty, good adjectives. And what did we learn? Take Xanax? Go to real therapy?

That I've got a long way to go.

get your shit together

The next morning I explain to Daria what happened as she gets dressed for work. She seems disappointed in me, running around, not quite meeting my eyes. I don't blame her. The aftershock lingers. Intermittent tremors wrack my body; I hug myself steady, try and fail not to whimper. Once clothed, she sits beside me and strokes my head with one hand, scrolls her phone with the other.

A week passes before I feel normalish. I stay in bed almost the entire time, scared of bright light and the noises of the street. Daria makes me food each night and I fuck around on my phone during the day. Send Patrick photos from my backstock. Bursts of static and color haunt the corners of my vision; there's no telling when they'll fade.

It's time to make a change. I schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist. The news elicits praise from Daria: "That is such a huge step, babe! I'm proud of you." She looks relieved.

His name is Dr. Ahmad. The Zoom call lasts twenty minutes, and he says the follow ups will be shorter still. This dynamic is new to me. My last psychiatrist took his sweet time and was always in front of me, a flesh and blood authority. Dr. Ahmad's head floats in his digital square, face webcam-stretched, audio clipping. Every few seconds he pushes up his glasses, which keep sliding down his nose. He asks me short questions on my background and what medicine I have tried before. I consider myself a straightforward case: sad stoner, depressed doll, unhappy unmotivated unwell whatever just give me my meds dude. And he does, on one condition—I have to see a therapist.

He gives me two options for referrals. One is a younger woman with some experience serving queer clients. The other, an old colleague of his—emphasis on the old. I'm wary of what ideas an old therapist might hold, so I decide to try out the first option.

I hang up the Zoom call with a referral and a script for Lexapro. Serotonin receptors, prepare for impact. I hope it doesn't feel like Zoloft. My years on Zoloft were so bleak and gray they led to me rawdogging the past decade. The fact that psychedelics don't work on

SSRIs was also a turn off, but after last week, I am prepared to never trip again.

Leslie also works through Zoom. Her set-up belies her age: good lighting, good sound. She smiles at her desk, her whole upper body in frame. White blouse, silver bangles, blonde bob. I sit at the dining table with my laptop and play with my hair.

"Tell me about yourself, Alice," Leslie says.

This is the part I hate about therapy. The open ended questions.

"Um ... my name's Alice. Well, you already knew that. I'm 24, I live in Detroit with my girlfriend Daria. Anything specific you want to know?"

"Could you tell me why you're here today?"

"I'm depressed. I mean, I always am. But I've been really depressed for the past year or so. So I finally decided to come in."

"Good, good," Leslie says, nodding, sympathetic, knowing. This is the part I hate about therapy. A stranger, acting like she cares. I wait for a moment for her to continue, but she doesn't; it's up to me.

"My self esteem has been really low. I've got no motivation, like, I normally read, but this year I barely have at all. I cry all the time, I'm dysphoric. It's just been miserable, you know. The whole package."

"Have you been diagnosed with anything?"

"Major depressive disorder."

"I'm sorry to ask you this, but I have to. Have you been suicidal at all?"

So many doctors have posed the question to me in the past that it is almost nostalgic. I have answered "no" to it more times than I can count. I am often telling the truth.

"No," I say.

"Great. Again, I'm really sorry to ask. I know it may be hard. Have you ever attempted suicide?"

"No."

Using the standard definition, this is the truth. I have taken things without knowing what's in them. I have driven on the freeway faded as jeans. But I've never taken the initiative.

"Good. You mentioned dysphoria before. Can you explain to me what that's like for you?"

Isn't she supposed to be some sort of expert?

"Uh, it's just like, when I feel bad about my body."

"What sort of thoughts do you think about your body?"

"Can we just, like, move on from that? I don't really want to talk about my dysphoria, you know, it's not the main thing here."

"Of course, of course. Thank you for letting me know what makes you uncomfortable. It's important to communicate boundaries here."

"Right," I say. Silence. I'm not sure what to say now. She is holding the same exact smile, is the call frozen? Wait, no, she blinked. "Um, so, do you have any advice or something?"

"It's not really my place to give advice."

"Well, advice on what to talk about at least?"

"I prefer to let the patient lead."

Fuck me, I can't believe I'm paying for this.

"Listen, if I wanted to talk to a brick wall, I can do that at home," I say. "Well, I am at home, but you know what I mean."

"By brick wall do you mean a literal brick wall, or your living partner?"

I stutter and shut my mouth. Leslie smiles, I look to the side, trying to think of things to talk about, anything. Our time runs out.

I am sick; my stomach is trying to escape. When I stand up, it tries to crawl up my throat; when I lie down, it tries my ass. Two weeks on Lexapro. How am I supposed to tell if my depression is improving? Any gains are cancelled out twice over by this nausea.

Dr. Ahmad calls it an adjustment period. My body may need time to get used to the meds. What is Lexapro even doing down there, isn't it supposed to be inside my brain? Daria joins Dr. Ahmad's chorus of encouragement: stick it out Alice, getting better takes work. Okay. I'm giving it a shot.

"When's your next therapy appointment?" Daria asks over Saturday morning coffee.

"I didn't like her, so I'm not going again," I say.

"What? Don't you need to see a therapist to get the meds?"

"Well, yeah. Not that the meds are going very well," I say, realizing keeping down this coffee is an impossible task.

"But you're still taking them, right?"

"Yeah, don't worry."

"Okay. Why didn't you like the therapist?"

"She wanted me to do all the talking. It was a lot of dead air."

"Isn't you talking like, the point of therapy?"

"Not if I don't know what to talk about," I say. I get up and dump the coffee; better in the sink now than in the toilet later. "I'm going to see a different therapist Dr. Ahmad recommended. I'm hoping he'll be more helpful."

"Okay, as long as you have a plan."

Dr. Sendy doesn't do Zoom, so I drive out to his office in Farmington Hills. I wear a modest dress and wedges. Maybe I'm overdressed, but I want to look good.

The wall on the left is plastered with diplomas, awards, and certifications. Compared to Leslie's Zoom background it's an impressive showing, but I'm not encouraged by the dates. Dr. Sendy is old, really old. For all I know, when he got awarded those, being gay was still in the DSM. Hunched posture, wrinkles, liver spotted claw clutching a pen over an open notebook.

He is wearing a pair of golden spectacles, a gray golf cap over what I imagine is a brilliant bald spot. A white moustache hangs down over his upper lip, flopping as he says, in a creaky-firm voice: "Hello Miss Blake. Please have a seat."

My ass sinks into the plush couch. He clicks his pen and writes something. A heavy, metallic click. That pen is gorgeous, probably antique. Leslie barely took notes. What could he be writing already? Is he analyzing how I sit down, how I cross my legs, how I brush my thighs off even though there's nothing there?

Well, at least he called me Miss. Maybe his ideas are newer than his pen.

"Today we will start with some background information, and discuss what you're hoping to get out of our sessions. Then, if there's still time, we will talk a little about your current situation," he says.

"Okay," I say. His eyes are kind, I think. Maybe the twinkle is a quirk of aging.

"I see here that Dr. Ahmad has prescribed you Lexapro. How are you liking that so far?" he says.

"It makes me nauseous," I say. Click, scratch, scratch.

"Yes, that's a common side effect. Have you noticed any other changes?"

"Not really. I've been a bit sleepier, I guess," I say. Leslie hadn't even asked. "Hey, if you know about medication, why do I need to go to two different doctors?"

"While technically I am certified to prescribe medicine, my speciality is therapy. I prefer leaving the medicating to psychiatrists. Tell me, have you ever been formally diagnosed with any mental disorders?"

Deja vu. How many times do I have to tell these people I have depression before they cure me?

"I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder a long time ago," I say.

"Yes? What age?"

"I don't know, twelve maybe?" I say, and brace for the scratching. It's like he's engraving my tombstone.

"And were you prescribed anything back then?"

"Zoloft."

"Did it work?"

"Kind of. It stopped me from feeling anything at all. So I quit."

"Have you ever tried to commit suicide?"

Again. "No."

"Good. And what brings you to therapy now?"

He speaks fast for an old man. I feel sort of interrogated, but I prefer it to Leslie's passivity.

"I'm depressed."

"We just spoke about your diagnosis. Would you say you are currently in a period of being more depressed than usual?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"For how long has this been going on?"

"Almost a year now."

"So, you are trying medication. What drives you to pursue therapy as well?"

"Dr. Ahmad told me I had to."

"Is that the only reason?"

"...no," I sigh. He's sharp. "I guess I just know that my issue isn't entirely chemical. I have a lot of baggage I need to work through."

"Good. That is a productive attitude to have. It may take a long time, but we can unpack that baggage in here, together. Normally, I won't ask so many questions. You should be the one doing the

majority of the talking. I just like to get all this out of the way, so I don't have to interrupt you later."

"Honestly, it's kind of refreshing. The last therapist I went to didn't lead the conversation at all, it was kind of aimless."

He chuckles. "Yes, that is a feature of some styles of talk therapy. Now tell me, what is your family situation like? How many siblings do you have?"

"Back to it, huh? I'm an only child."

"Are your parents still together?"

"No."

"At what age did they divorce?"

"Technically they never did. My dad left my mom when I was sixteen."

"How is your relationship with your parents?"

"I don't talk to my dad. I'm close with my mom," I say. "Well, not that close. We talk. You know, that's a hard question to just, like, summarize for background information."

"If you'd like to expound more on it, go ahead. Please."

"...no, that's all I have to say there."

"At any rate, you're right. It's time to get more into the meat of the session. One last question—at what age did you change your gender?"

That's a new one. "Um, twenty. I was twenty."

"And your chart says you are twenty-four now. So, not an insignificant amount of time. Twenty is quite young to figure that out, isn't it?"

"Doesn't feel like it."

"Oh?"

"I just mean that I wish I'd realized earlier."

"If you had, would you have had the means to make the change?"

"Well ... maybe not medically, but I could have transitioned socially at least."

"Would your mom, or dad, as the case may be, have approved of that?"

"...no."

"Alright, I think it's time I let you talk a little more. Could you please tell me a bit about your childhood? Anything that you think is relevant."

It takes a moment to orient myself, after all those questions. And what was that last bit, would I have had the means? Who does he

think he is? But anyway. What about my childhood is relevant? He better not ask me if I played with dolls.

"My parents were lower-middle class. My dad drives trucks. Drove, I don't know what he does now. So he was gone a lot growing up. He was an asshole. My mom is really sweet. She was always looking ahead, looking to the next time he was home. Let's see, what else..."

"What led to you being diagnosed with depression?"

"During puberty, I was a total nightmare. I was really angry all the time, I used to yell at my mom and throw things. I made her life miserable. They took me into the psych ward during one of my really bad fits. My parents thought I was psychotic, but I ended up just getting a depression diagnosis and sent home. I stopped yelling after that, I guess. It's all a bit fuzzy. Zoloft made me a zombie. By the time I got off of it in high school, I had calmed down. But I was still depressed."

"You are expressing a lot of guilt about your behavior in childhood."

"Yeah, I mean, who wouldn't feel guilty? I was a menace."

"Maybe we can return to that guilt later. Were there any signs, back then, of your transgender identity?"

"Do we have to talk about trans stuff so much? I want to focus on other topics, I mean, I'm not coming to you for help with gender dysphoria or anything. It's not really your specialty, right? No offense."

"None taken," Dr. Sendy says. While he talks, he removes his glasses, takes a cloth from his suit pocket, and carefully polishes them. "You're right, it's not exactly my area of expertise. However, we may find it difficult to progress if we avoid the topic."

"Okay, I'm not saying to avoid it completely. But I don't see why I have to search for signs, like I owe you an explanation or something. I'm here to talk about my depression."

"Is it unrelated? Wouldn't you agree that transitioning, this break with your old self, represents a fundamental trauma in your life?"

"What? It's not a fucking trauma, no, what are you trying to say?"

"I mean no offense. I don't think being transgender is inherently negative, a disorder or anything like that. Only, when we speak about early development, we cannot ignore the fact that we are speaking about someone who was raised as a boy, and who is now a girl."

"I was always a girl, I wasn't male socialized or...whatever, it's not like that. And most of my trauma isn't related to transness, I have had

a lot of shit happen to me and I don't want to talk about it like it's all because of my gender, like it's my fault."

"Again, I'm sorry if I caused offense. I'll try to narrow my scope of inquiry. Would you like to share anything about these other traumas?"

I walk out.

Stomach clenches like a jaw. Cloudy liquid spills from my lips into the toilet; water and foam. I haven't eaten in two days. At this point, the issue seems set to fix itself—I can't keep anything down, Lexapro included. When I was sixteen this would have been bliss, but I've since learned to appreciate calories.

The front door opens and shuts. Daria comes in holding a bag from the corner store.

"Vernors and saltines, like you asked," she says. "I don't see how Vernors is going to help, you know, this doesn't have any real ginger in it."

I open my mouth to explain how wrong she is and a spasm hits, I dry heave. Nothing left. Deep breaths. I wipe my mouth and join Daria at the kitchen table. Nibble saltines, sip Vernors (it really *does* help), and do my best to eat.

"I'm never taking Lexapro again," I say. "This is hell."

"Are you sure you won't still adjust? It's only been a few weeks."

I shoot her a scathing look. "Babe, if I keep going like this, I'm going to need a feeding tube."

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry," she says. "At least you have a therapist."

"No, fuck that guy. I'm not seeing him again either," I say.

"Wait, again? What was wrong with him?"

"He dwelled too much on me being trans, and I didn't like how he talked about it."

"How did he talk about it?"

"It's hard to explain."

"Okay, you need new meds and a new therapist now. So, like, what's the plan?"

"Plan? Babe, I'm just trying to—"

Nausea hits. My whole world is my gut, all up and out. I dash and fall to my knees before the toilet. This time, the liquid is caramel-dyed and burns. At least I have variety. Close my eyes and observe the lights flashing with each heave, with each pulse of a growing headache.

A door slams. When I finally raise my head, wiping tears from my eyes and slime from my lips, Daria is gone.

think things can change

There is snow on top of the fence, a white cap on each post: gentlemen lined up outside my window to sing carols. I turn them away because I am busy hating the plate with the persistent crust. My hands are pink from scalding water. Soap, steel wool, brush. It won't budge.

Daria is up to her neck in the bath and she's cleaning up just fine. I can feel the stress melting off her, and because I value equilibrium in a relationship, I'm sponging it right up. The door to the bathroom is ajar and she can hear me swearing at the plates. "Calm down honey, it's just dishes."

Daria is smart enough to know that dishes aren't just dishes. Things haven't been what they are a lot lately. Communication dries up and you start scrubbing the weird dynamics out of inanimate objects instead of your relationship. Weird like how she hasn't washed the dishes in the past two weeks, and keeps taking long baths while I battle immovable stains. Or how when she's out of the bath, she's rarely here. She puts on her big wool overcoat and disappears. During a blizzard last week, Abigail invited her to a party at her place. I didn't want to go and it was coming down biblically, you could barely see an inch in front of your face through the snow. The roads were not safe and Abigail lives on the other side of town, and in Detroit, car city, cut into pieces by freeways, that means getting on I-75. I begged her not to go. I really did, I was freaking out. I begged, tears running down my face, grabbing onto her sleeve. An overreaction, sure. I was drunk. But she didn't even comfort me, didn't even argue; she just put on her coat, her boots, her hat, and pulled dispassionately out of the grip of her blubbing, wasted girlfriend. I watched her black wool silhouette disappear into the white, feeling powerless and stupid.

I just want her to love me. Maybe she does. Or did. But if I did something to turn her cold, or if it was inevitable, like snow, I don't know. Clearly this relationship isn't going to work. When we started dating I would have suffered any humiliation just to have the privilege of licking her toe. Now, I've tasted every inch of her, and what I need is beyond skin.

“Hey honey,” she says. “Can you come here and rub my neck? It hurts.”

“Yeah, babe.” I give up on the plate.

She’s still as sexy as ever, slouching comfortably. The waterline bisects her tits; her nipples are red half-set suns. Her hair is soaped back, her rarely-visible forehead shining—the whole of her face, perfectly proportioned, delicate, elven. I observe how gorgeous she is impartially, rousing nothing. She leans forward and I rub her neck.

“Mmm, that’s good,” she says, but I have trouble believing she feels anything. I know that’s irrational, I’m a good masseuse; it’s just hard to think that way about her right now.

“Can you get me a cigarette? They’re in my back pocket,” she says, pointing a soapy finger towards her clothes piled in the corner. I grab the box, a cig, place it between her lips, pull my Bic from my pocket and light it. She breathes smoke out through her nose and grins. “Thanks babe.”

When we started dating, I thought the chain smoking was sexy, and this sight would have driven me wild. A few months in, I stopped liking it, because I wanted her to be healthy. Now I’m past both. Not that I want her to get cancer, but I can’t imagine being around long enough to see it. She ashes the cigarette by wiggling it between her lips, letting it fall in the water. I get up and walk wordlessly out.

Fuck this. I need to get out of here, out of this fucking apartment. I feel snowed in. If I’m going to sleep in a loveless bed, I might as well make money. I text Patrick.

—does your offer still stand?

—Always.

—i’ll do it. when can i fly out?

—Good. I can get you a plane ticket tonight.

He responds so quickly that I have no opportunity to change my mind. With his money, he opens up a portal leading away from this life, and it sucks me in. I start grabbing clothes and stuffing them in a duffle bag. They’re everywhere, indistinguishable from Daria’s, the hallmark of a late-stage lesbian relationship. And we’re both such slobs—panties scattered under the bed, socks and tights in a pile with her sweatpants and undershirts. We never empty the laundry bin, we just pick from it as needed, and let the stuff that falls stay. I’m trying to fold carefully but feel frantic. Am I making myself the bad guy

here? No, fuck this. Now I'm just tossing stuff into the bag. I grab a handful of travel sized toiletries from the drawer in the kitchen—Daria likes to steal them instead of buying full size—throw them on the pile, then grab my makeup bag, a book for the plane, and zip it all up. The zipper sound alerts Daria.

“What are you doing babe?”

I'm doing something for myself. I'm refusing to do the dishes. I'm doing what you keep doing: I'm leaving without saying why. So I don't say anything. I hear splashing. She's getting up.

Instead of speeding up I slow down, pulling on my right sock gradually, waiting to be caught in the act and questioned. But she's just readjusting. She doesn't ask a follow up question.

I slam the door on the way out.

try to fake it

God, I hate him so much it's unreal. I'm starting to realize that bad guys being charming is an invention of fiction. I hate him; not just what he is, his job, but who he is, how he is. When the server comes over he orders for me, like I'm mute. He doesn't ask, just orders the ribeye for him and the lobster for me. I would've chosen the lobster anyway, I love seafood, but seriously? He says "You'll like the lobster, it's excellent," and gets that and a bottle of wine. The server brings over a wine list, he orders a bottle that costs 200\$, and she does this whole ritual of presenting him the bottle for inspection (he nods), opening it and pouring a small glass, handing it to him for a taste test. I'm totally dumbfounded, and when she hands me a sample I look up at her, unsure if I'm supposed to drink it, or smell it, or what. Swish and spit it out? The server seems sweet, this little Japanese woman with green nails and round glasses; she starts to explain what she's doing but he just laughs and says, "It's fine, thank you," and the whole thing continues. She gives me a sympathetic look. Like, damn hun, you really know how to pick them, huh? Yes. Yes I do.

Our class difference is glaring. The shoes he bought me fit because he asked for my size ages ago, but the dress—a strapless black one with an open back—didn't, no matter how hard he tried to pull it over my ribcage, ruining whatever eroticism the moment could possibly have held. We tried it without the bra, still no go. So I'm wearing the one I brought, the nicest one I own. It's also black, my essential little black dress, because I fell for that marketing campaign hard. I like this dress. It shows off my shoulders nicely, and has a hot v cut going nearly to my belly button. I brought it because if I was going to be a high class hooker I wanted to look the part. To feel sexy; a steak and wine date, not burger and coke. I look good, but the fact is my shoes cost at least 800\$ and my dress cost 20\$ at Goodwill. I wish I wore a stained tank top and ripped jeans. This dress is too fucking good for him.

Who started the whole trend of making villains likable anyway? Who wants to relate to an evil man? I'm realizing, as he cuts into

his ribeye and chats about recent stock acquisitions, that the desire to understand the motives of people who do bad things only makes sense when the motives are interesting—grandiose schemes for world domination—and not banal, like money, which is the only motivation that really exists and the one that everyone innately understands. Calling this guy a villain is giving him too much credit. He's not a mastermind, he's not even master of his own mind, he's just a dull man, driven by base urges he barely parses before immediately fulfilling using his infinitely disposable income.

He doesn't have the weird but (almost) cute anxiety that a first-time tranny chaser has—the awkwardness that comes from the fear that he is doing something that reduces his own masculinity, or that he might mess up, might say or touch the wrong thing and ruin his chance with a strange and beautiful creature. I've had that from guys before, I know it, I understand it. Patrick has no doubts about any step of this process. I am here to fulfill a desire he has, one that he has accepted; he knows exactly what he wants and how to get it. In terms of masculinity—well he knows how to reassert that, so he's not worried that touching a dick might make his own fall off. That's why he's talking about his investments, about “diversifying his money-pair and asset portfolio,” about “derivatives” and “capital gains management.” He knows that I have no clue what any of this means. He likes how I squirm and fork my lobster awkwardly; the blank look on my face when he says the mysterious words. I could ask him—that would give him the extra pleasure of explaining something. Over text I would have just said “What does that mean daddy?” and let the messages wash over me. But now that I'm here, it's all I can do to just nod and smile.

I say “wow” occasionally. He likes that.

Good god. He's not even a hot rich bastard, not even charming. I'd prefer a Patrick Bateman, a Bruce Wayne. Even an old robber baron would be better than this. A JP Morgan with the pocket watch and chain. Those guys had taste, at least. I could maybe be seen on their arm without hating myself. Take me to the opera, or a gala. What is a gala exactly? I could certainly stand to learn. But this guy looks like my high school gym teacher. He's got a piggy red face and a comb-over. These are the guys killing the earth.

I wonder what he brings to the world that I don't that makes him worthy of a standard of living beyond my wealthiest possible timeline. Like, even if I had gone through with college and somehow hopped income brackets, I'd still just be a well-off serf compared to this guy. I mean, he has a fucking Rolex. I bet his house is miraculous.

"Ready to go back to my place?" he asks.

I pause, melted ice cream coming into focus. My spoon is pushing it around the bottom of a glass cup. I guess we ate dessert at some point. Beigish vanilla glistens. I've drunk all the espresso from my affogato and left the ice cream to melt.

"Yes."

He sends for the check. It would be funny if he didn't pay for my half of the meal, then acted confused when I asked him to. But he does. There are no surprises tonight. Soon we're walking the streets of Miami and he's holding open the door of his Benz.

think you can bear it

After he goes to sleep, I fall before the toilet and vomit lobster, two bottles of wine, espresso, semen, and a handful of scallops. No fingers involved; *au naturel*. It's like I swallowed a rat—something writhing inside me, clawing its way out. The whole night's there, in the toilet. I couldn't digest a single part of it.

I rinse and return to bed, hoping there's still enough alcohol in my system to sleep. Watching his chest rise and fall, I just don't get it. I wish I could talk to him, really talk.

How do you sleep? Do you hear the drowned screams of low-lying cities, the shrieks of animals chased by fire, the empty sighs of wells eaten by the desert? Do you feel all the death you midwife because you want a country club membership and the disposable income necessary to get your dick sucked by whatever desperate tranny catches your eye? He snores softly, his head rubs against my knee. No, you don't hear or feel anything. You sleep well.

Most of the stress in your life comes from maintaining your perfect image—the kid, the wife, the apparent lack of transsexual concubines. Well, me too buddy. I'm always fighting with my image. Normally, I just obsess over my body, aesthetics, but right now the reason I can't look at myself in the mirror is shame. Fucking for money is one thing, it's a fact of life. But I feel like a collaborator. Bed-warmer for a monster. Maybe it's irrational—worse beds have been warmed by better women—but the feeling sticks.

I am not going to sleep tonight. I remove the money from its envelope on the bedside table, feeling its weight, the comforting texture of bills. It's real. Spent right, it'll get me through the next several months. Pulling on my nightdress, a sheer white slip, I get up to drift around his beach house, and imagine myself a ghost through the huge window panes that look out onto the sand, onto black restless waters, seamless against a starless sky. A homeless man collecting bottles along the beach might see my pale form and cross himself as I drift from room to room. No, I bet the beach is private and guarded. Maybe a gull, though. Some transient figure that doesn't belong in this constructed paradise, looking at the same.

The walls host a couple pieces of boring art: large canvases marked with docile abstract lines. A mounted plasma screen, five feet across, hangs dark aside from a yellow blotch reflected in the corner: the smoggy moon. New leather couches glower; crumb-less carpet can be seen through the glass coffee table without an intervening smudge. I haven't seen the housekeeper, just her footprints. I wish she was here. My aunt's a housekeeper, my cousin too. I want to talk to her. I want to talk to someone that makes sense to me.

This house is sickening. My john doesn't even have a stake in ownership at Exxon; he's just a lawyer. If this is how the thralls live, imagine Dracula's castle. I hate this fucking world.

The kitchen is huge: pristine stainless steel, with an eight-burner gas range that I'm sure Patrick would manage to fuck up ramen on. The floor is easily cleaned tile; above, a magnetic strip sports an array of long lethal knives. Everything flashes me back at myself, looking how I feel: elsewhere, cloudy eyed, bewildered, still pretty drunk. The living room is shiny too, minimalist and clean. I don't understand this sort of interior design, all reflective surfaces and straight lines and sparse decorations. I don't get it. Give me gold leaf, baroque wallpaper. Give me Versailles. These rooms are so empty. They feel like a machine, polished and kept free of all human clutter. A smart machine: the fridge has a touchscreen display. It's probably connected by wildly unnecessary Bluetooth to the house security system. Shit, his phone probably modifies its advertisements based on what the fridge tells it Patrick ate for the day. This house is a shiny, clean, cold, Wi-Fi capable electric machine, calibrated to churn out another day in this asshole's life. I open the fridge. *Ding!* There is a case of little champagne coolers on the bottom shelf. I pop one open.

Damn, this is really good.

His office is dark. I step in and flick the switch, closing the door so that the light doesn't run down the hall and wake him up. There's a big polished wooden desk. On it, a MacBook, a pile of papers and folders, and a stand holding an ink well and a fountain pen. It looks classy. I doubt he writes much by hand, but it holds a power in it undeniably.

What am I doing here? I'm curious; I have no plan. I am a spirit passing through to somewhere else. I am a ghost, moving without

intent, just an echo of unresolved pains from another life, and I'm opening his drawers.

Top: pencils, pens, rubber bands, stapler, staples, paperclips, miscellaneous cords, a key, sticky notes. Mundane, boring.

Middle: papers. Tax forms and contracts and missives and infographic pamphlets. I'm sure this drawer contains the most concentrated evil of the house. He's a lawyer; these pages are his weapons. I'm sure lives, entire existences of towns and biomes, have been assaulted with these, but they are beyond my understanding and hold no power for me. They are just dead trees in my hands.

Bottom: this one is locked. I try the key from the top drawer. It's a match! Alice Blake, Super Sleuth. I guess he figured the presence of a lock was enough to discourage the housekeeper. He didn't account for bitter, reckless transsexuals—big mistake. Inside is a roll of bills, a mirror, and a baggie. Jackpot! Now this is my type of drawer. The baggie holds at least a couple grams of coke. Suddenly, I'm feeling a lot better about my decisions. I count the bills: two thousand. This is crisp, clean ATM money, the difference between a coke dealer and the rich guy who buys from him. I stack the bills with the others, sans one, take out the mirror, and start lining up. If I'm going to steal from the man that pays my rent, I need some powdered courage. This is my first time snorting out of a hundred—Jesus, it hits like a truck; this must be the only uncut coke in Miami—after this, a rolled single will never be quite right. I feel decadent, wealthy. If Patrick had offered me coke up front, along with a mink stole and tickets to a matinee, I would've been able to stomach this whole thing better. Maybe I have standards after all. I do two fat lines, wash the drip down with champagne. It's been a while. Cocaine is an upper class vice; the champagne too. This is probably the bougiest thing I've ever done. I take the baggie.

Now the ghost is brought crashing down into her glowing, radiant coke body and racing mind. Now, I've done something real. I've left a trace and now I have to commit. I close the drawer and lock it. With luck, he won't notice until I'm back in Detroit.

But what are the odds? And I can't fly back anyway, if I want to keep this coke. To wake up next to him tomorrow is too much to consider. The secret knowledge that I'm ripping him off would keep me centered and warm, sure, maybe allow me to endure, but he's still in charge, and I would be afraid of his wrath if he discovered my transgression.

Is petty theft really compensation enough for what I did, what he is? What can he really give to make up for his sins? That's for God to decide. I'm awake now, I'm flying, I want to live the night I just stole. I can get a Greyhound back home. I'm out of here. I leave my dress and the fancy shoes; they're trash to me now. I change into jeans, a tee, and the sneakers I wore down here, stash the money in my duffle bag, swing it over my shoulder, and tuck the coke baggie in my back pocket. Rifling around on the floor, I find his pants, take out his wallet: 200\$ in twenties. Don't mind if I do.

I take one last look at him. He breathes quietly. Moonlight from behind the drapes casts a white line, splitting his body down the middle. He looks soft and harmless, asleep like this. So does a bear. I could kill him. I could grab a pillow and hold it down, straddle him, hold it down hard over his face until he grows still. Or I could take one of the exquisite knives hanging in the kitchen and drive it into his throat, or his heart. I have no moral qualms about these thoughts. I know that I would not feel bad, he does not deserve to live. He didn't hurt me, not really. He's just another boss. He just deserves it, along with all the other bosses. It would feel good, but it would not solve anything, it would get me thrown in a men's prison and raped and some other man exactly like him would get his job and this house. So I don't kill him. I blow him a kiss and rob him.

This beach house is outside Miami proper, on a secluded drive. I have full reception: the seclusion is a facade, made by strategically placed walls, trees, and empty space. I call an Uber, telling it to take me to downtown Miami, dropping the pin nowhere in particular. I'll do something in the city tonight, and catch a Greyhound in the morning. Wait, where was Lena again? Georgia, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Maybe I can visit her on the way back. I send her a text, out of the blue, impulsive with dumb coke confidence:

—hey, im in florida and might be passing by you tomorrow. im gonna stop by

Then, I recall that Lena has no reception. Well, I'll just assume the invitation stands.

Back home I have the wreckage of a relationship to clean up, and potential criminal charges on the way, but tonight I'll have fun. Shit—when I put it like that, returning doesn't seem great. I will have to, for Jenni at the very least. There are still things I love back home.

But right now, they seem very distant, and the thought of them doesn't stir any feelings in me besides dread.

The Uber driver is a few minutes away. I take a last look at the building. The panes show the whole inside, like a cutaway dollhouse. The usual pareidolia home-face, the window-eyes on either side of the door-mouth, isn't here. Patrick's vacation home bristles with many dark shiny windows and a huge double-doored front, like bug eyes and mandibles. A crouching spider. Asleep. Has it laid its eggs in me?

The Uber driver doesn't ask any questions about why I'm calling an Uber in a closed residential area at 1 a.m., he just drives. Turns out, this place is not far from a freeway that runs across the Miami metro. He merges into a procession of lights across the night. Everything feels glassy and unreal. I'm in control now, but a spirit still. A part of the wild hunt, joining these late drivers in hurtling towards Miami for our revels.

Wow. I am insanely high.

I want trans people. I miss them. I miss Lena, I miss Pierre, I miss Daria despite everything, her body at least. After Patrick, I am craving the look and feel of bodies like mine. Sometimes I forget how much I rely on the love of queer people. Now I'm in Florida, the nexus of anti-trans reaction. They just banned using the right bathroom, right? I'd die before using a men's bathroom now, I am never going back. But it's scary, being out here in the southern night, in an illegal and despised body. I wonder what's still open this late. I google gay clubs and find one not far from the drop-off point. That will do.

have a good time

I haven't gone to many gay clubs. Clubs in general, really, but the specific omission seems more glaring considering their prevalence in queer culture. Then again, it never really felt like my culture. What chance did I ever have to be inducted into it? No one ever took me by the hand and told me "Here are your people." Whatever I know I figured out after the fact, after my second birth cleaved my life in two.

After a few minutes of walking empty sidewalks, I hear bass. The light of the club spills out into the street. I'm ready to dance. I must look a mess—my makeup is smudged, and my tee shirt and jeans combo is hardly club-ready—but I pull my hair into a sloppy bun and hope this counts as a look. The duffle bag rolling awkwardly around on my shoulder doesn't help either. The bouncer raises an eyebrow as I approach. I breathe deeply. I'm not coked out, what do you mean? Then I remember that this is a club and there is nothing strange about being on drugs here. He checks my ID. On my ID I'm about 30 pounds heavier and have a moustache. Once it expires I'll get a new picture, but I've been too lazy, and the look on people's faces is funny. It's like I'm carrying around proof of progress. The bouncer doesn't even flinch, though, he just checks my birthdate absent mindedly, rolls his lip-piercing around with his tongue, and stamps my hand.

"What's in the bag?" he asks.

"Clothes. I'm from out of town," I say, shifting the duffle bag awkwardly on my shoulder.

He looks me up and down and shrugs, gestures inside, and tells me to leave it at coat check.

Lights flash, music fills the world. It's hard to see past the forest of limbs. I stash my bag as instructed, then push my way through the dance floor, feeling arms slick with sweat, heading towards the bathroom.

There's two women at the sinks fixing their makeup, laughing. One is well over six feet; a shimmering sequined dress hanging elegantly off her shoulders. The other is shorter and fat, wearing just a bandeau

on her huge tits, thunder thighs overflowing from under daisy dukes. They look at me and smile.

"Hey girl," the tall one says in a low drawl. She screws the top back on her mascara and puts it away in her purse.

"Hi, I'm Alice," I say, voice squeaking a bit. This is the first time I've spoken this morning. Night. Whatever time it is.

"Hey Alice," the shorter one says, batting huge fake lashes.

I long to know them.

"Do you ladies want some coke?" I say, reaching into my back pocket.

They look at each other, exchanging some knowing look.

"Yessss *please*," the tall one says emphatically. "My name's Emily by the way, this hag is Wednesday," she points a thumb at her friend, who sticks out her tongue. "You're not from here, are you?"

"No, I'm from Detroit."

It hurts how I long to know them. I have no trans woman in my life now, I realize suddenly. I know a few besides Lena and Daria, but not well. Where are my girls that I can speak to with a look? Bemusement, or excitement, or disdain. I don't know what was said because I don't know them.

I place my phone on the counter, take out my credit card and make lines. Whatever happens tonight is insubstantial. Immaterial. Tonight is a place between worlds, a dream out of which the next stage of my life will emerge. Forms and ideas and vague shapes. A life struggling to be born.

"Ooo okay, we love a Detroit girly," Emily says, rolling a dollar bill. "What brings you to Florida?"

"I know it wasn't the progressive values," Wednesday says, putting the finishing touches on her lips.

"My sugar daddy flew me out for the night," I say, then do a line. They squeal.

"Get it girl!" Wednesday shrieks.

"Slay," Emily says, straw in her nose.

"Is he loaded?" Wednesday asks.

"He's a fucking lawyer for Exxon. He's got a beach house out here. Total bastard."

"So you're clubbing together? Is he here?" Emily asks, looking around like she might've missed him walking into the bathroom. She has curly black hair; the ringlets around her face dance as she talks.

"Fuck no. I stole his coke and bailed," I say, giggling.

"Oh my god you didn't!" Emily says.

"No wonder it's so good," Wednesday says, wiping her nose.

"You're a fucking hero," Emily says.

I grin. I'm so proud. Tomorrow, when the serotonin crash hits, when Patrick wakes up and realizes what I've done, my life may be in ruins; now, I am a hero. Trans people are the most badass people on earth and right now, between the praise and the coke, I feel huge, like I'm part of that subversive legacy.

"Let's get it girls," Wednesday says, doing the last line. "I'm gonna get a drink, what do you want Alice? No way you're paying for drinks tonight."

"Just pick something good for me," I say.

She throws open the doors and pushes through the crowd towards the bar.

Emily stays back a second, placing her hand on my arm.

"Are you gonna need a place to stay tonight honey?" Emily asks. I look into her eyes and find that I trust her completely. I could pass out naked on her couch and feel completely safe. Not that I wouldn't let her touch me, if she asked.

"I have a Greyhound to catch in the morning, I was planning on staying out all night and just uber-ing to the station," I say.

"Well if you need it, I live nearby," she says.

"Thanks, I might take you up on that."

We leave the bathroom and catch up with Wednesday. She's arguing with a thin bartender in a tiny tank top. He's shaking a drink for someone else, half-listening.

"What do you mean you're out of grenadine?" she says.

"Are you fucking deaf? Out. O-U-T out," he says, pouring.

"I wanna get my friend a Dirty Shirley. She's from out of town," Wednesday says as if she just proved something. "What kind of bar doesn't have grenadine?"

The bartender hands out the drink and turns to Wednesday, scowling.

"This kind of bar, bitch. Now order something or move your fat ass," he says.

Emily is cracking up, I'm trying to hold it together. It's flattering, how she's fighting for me, even if it's a drink I didn't request.

"It's really okay," I say, hand on her shoulder.

“Listen to your friend,” the bartender says.

“Fine,” Wednesday spits. “We’ll have two Mai Tais, double rum please.”

Getting fucked up with other people is a different experience than alone. Cosmically, maybe it’s just as sad, or sadder—that we can’t bear the horror of living, even when we’re with other people; that it’s actually harder in groups, to the point that it becomes impossible to be around other people without drugging ourselves—but it doesn’t feel like that. I am joyous. My body feels light and like I am hurtling across space, even as I stand still and watch Wednesday and Emily step onto the dance floor. Everything is moving, every body glows with alternating purple and red light. The bass punches my bladder like a cock. Emily takes my hand, and I down my Mai Tai in one chug so that I can grab her with both. She wipes the drips off my chin with her palm. That was a boozy Mai Tai and won’t be my last; I know that my hated body will grow numb and that is good, because I know that these girls are drinking for the same reason, this entire club, the world. I place my hand on Emily’s hip and sway with her. Wednesday is dancing with a stud-eared man covered in faded tattoos. I place my other hand on Emily’s shoulder. She grins at me. Wednesday buys more cocktails. I press against Emily. She kisses me. I feel my blood go hot, my groin tense, a vivid feeling that Patrick didn’t evoke a single time. We keep dancing. Wednesday kisses Emily too. Wednesday buys more cocktails. In the bathroom, Emily spits coke back-drip into the sink and kisses me hard against the cold tile of the wall. I start pulling up my shirt.

“You know, you can still stay at my place, even if you don’t want to fuck. I don’t want to make you feel like it’s a requirement,” Emily says.

I shove her face into my tits. She stops talking. A butch with a high-top fade walks in and rolls her eyes before stepping into a stall. I giggle and Emily asks what happened, turning around, which makes me giggle even harder. Wednesday walks in and calls us sluts, which makes me laugh hysterically. The butch says “Can I please shit in peace,” at which point I stop being able to breathe. I slide to the floor, cracking up, tears falling. Emily and Wednesday start laughing because I am. We dance for another two hours. Emily can no longer hold onto me, we’re both so covered in sweat. The coat check girl tosses me my bag. The irritated Uber driver turns up an instrumental

jazz station loud enough that he can no longer hear us talking. Up in Emily's apartment, we finish the coke. Wednesday takes her top off, claiming she's hot, so Emily suggests a shower. Emily rubs soap on one of Wednesday's enormous tits, me on the other. Wednesday's areolas are the diameter of coke cans, deep purple. I ask how she got them so big without implants, feeling their heft, and she credits fifteen years of estrogen plus having two x chromosomes on top of the y. I try not to stare at the track marks on Emily's arms. When it's my turn to get scrubbed I realize that I haven't had a shower since before my date, then realize that the whole ordeal happened on this same night, many worlds away. I refuse Emily's attempt to soap my ass, imagining some of Patrick's cum still being inside of me, dirtying her perfect slender fingers, which have tattoos of stars and hearts on them.

Back on the bed half-dried off, we make out for a few minutes. Emily walks to the kitchen and opens a bottle of wine. Wednesday chides her for interrupting the action, but Emily says the wine is really good. We each get a glass. Emily asks me to nibble her neck. We each get a glass. The wine really isn't very good. Wednesday falls asleep on the couch, immediately starting to snore loudly. Emily says that the other couch is all mine, stumbles to her room, and closes the door. I set an alarm for two hours from now.

reach paradise

The Greyhound station is a concrete cube not far from Emily's apartment, soft-lit by street lamps in a morning drizzle. The sides of the bus run with rain, like sweat on a horse's flanks. The ticket lady's eyes don't meet mine; they're glued to a self-help book the whole time.

I am taking the bus to Milling, Georgia, the closest town to the commune, then walking from there. There are not many passengers on this route from Miami to a town of 2,700. An old lady is snoring loudly with a colorful quilt thrown over her knees. Each of the squares has a person's name stitched on it in a looping script. Her hands look like tree roots. In the back of the bus, a teenager in a blue hoodie is drawing in a sketchpad. He has pimply skin and sad eyes.

Skyscrapers and apartment blocks give way to houses and strip malls, which give way to barns and fields. Sheep huddle together under leafless dogwood trees, their branches blood red. Silos and farmhouses. Sandstone cliff face flies past; veins of quartz shimmer white as the bus sinks into a path cut through a hill by dynamite long ago. Just for a moment I am inside the Earth's body, then it falls away to wide open space. Brown post-harvest corn fields are being picked over by crows. More rolling hills.

My stomach flips with every bump in the road. My head pounds; I can't stop sniffing. I pull *An Accessory to Fashion Crime* from my bag. I packed it for the plane ride, but I slept then, and now I can't, so it is the perfect time. Touching its worn spine anchors me, for a moment, back home: in Detroit with Jenni, in whatever is left of my life with Daria. I read the dedication on the first page:

To Lucy, who I loved until I lost.

We pass an abandoned railroad station. A lone fuel tanker sits in a landscape of concrete and iron. Then, new growth forest returns and everything is green again. The first chapter is called: "Arnette's New Set."

Today, Arnold walked in with a new addition to his "routine," and they are all-natural. Well, maybe not all-all-natural, but the silicone is on the inside, at least. There is not a drop of estrogen in his body, but he somehow managed to find a crank willing to install breasts.

Is it wrong to say that this feels like cheating?

I read for a half an hour.

Before the rent comes due this month we are planning on having a charity show, to raise money to save this place. Again. The rent has increased since last year, as it did the year before that. Every time it does, we act like it's a surprise, so that the new girls don't realize they are bailing water on a sinking ship, and get invested in the production. The smart ones will leave once they catch on.

I am in charge of the show this year. As Lucy is fond of pointing out, I am deeply, deeply stupid.

I close the book and sigh. The coke crash is making me mopey. Did I make a mistake in leaving Daria? No, I didn't and that's what hurts. Was it all a mistake? I'm trying to remember the times she opened up to me.

There was one. She had just gotten in a fight with Abigail, and was unusually talkative about it. Abigail had made some offhanded comment about Daria's shoulders during practice, which set Daria off. What upset Daria most was that Abigail was flabbergasted at her reaction. She was incapable of understanding what she did wrong. We were sitting in bed late at night, discussing.

"Cis people take the obviousness of their gender for granted," I said. "They don't understand that we have to fight to have anyone take us seriously."

Daria sat and steamed, staring at the wall of her apartment. She gripped a handful of bedsheets squeezing her hands white.

“Yeah, and it’s a fight we can’t win. Trans women must be the most wretched things on planet earth. We are women, which is bad enough, but we also don’t get the consolation prize—we don’t get the love of other women. We have to survive entirely on our own ego. If we can’t, we die. And no one bats a fucking eye.”

I offered some simple consoling words, but I don’t remember what, and Daria didn’t engage with them. We went to sleep, both depressed, stewing in our own silence. Her statement rang true, so whatever comfort I offered was hollow.

That was one of the only times I ever heard Daria refer to herself as trans.

More rolling hills.

I sleep at some point, tossing. When I wake up we are pulling into Milling. The bus parks beside a roofed stop, a concrete bench sheltered by glass walls opaque with graffiti: slurs, penises, scrawled monikers, swastikas. I grab a weathered green jacket from my bag and pull it on. An old man sleeps on the bench, backpack under his liver spotted head. I exit the bus, get my bearings. There is a small white church behind the stop. Many black birds cover the roof of its steeple. No one else exits with me. I bet my fellow travelers are wondering at my choice of destination. I wonder the same thing.

I set off on the long road toward the commune. There’s nothing for me here. I walk along the road past the church until I hit the freeway, then I walk along that. My head is pounding, my nose is running, and it’s fucking cold. I pull my too-thin jacket tight around my shoulders. My brilliant planning, coming in clutch—I assumed that winter provisions wouldn’t be needed in Florida, land of sun and rich benefactors. Now I’m somewhere in rural Georgia, shivering. Funny how life unfolds, slapping you for a lack of foresight at every new stretch. Funny how the sun is out and hot on my neck, but my breath is fog.

Cars roar past. I try to pay them no mind. I look at the roadside wood, the thistles and pine. An indent in the brush reveals a big-rig tire lying on a bed of ivy, which curls round its treads, long acquainted friends. The ground is frosted but not covered. Shining grass crackles with every footfall. My left nostril breaths gasoline belches and burning rubber, my right crisp winter plant-breath. It’s a strange effect. I’m refreshed, being more in nature than I have in god knows how long, but I’m between that and an industrial artery, breathing fossil fuel. Nature is relative, as is escape.

My stomach groans. Why did I have to throw up that dinner? It was the best I've had in my life, delicious, decadent. It ended up in the toilet and now all I've got is booze and Patrick's coke bubbling in my gut. At the thought I retch. I dash to the tree cover, doubling over. Clear, foamy puke splashes against a peeling birch, then dribbles onto my chin. I wipe my face against my jacket sleeve. Great. Now I'm truly empty. I want him to un-enter me, but he lives now in the memories of my stomach and rectum and eyes and tongue, so all I've done is dehydrate myself, and stain my jacket.

I continue. My journey began at dawn, I left the bus at noon, and the sun is resting halfway past the tops of the trees by the time I spot the border of my destination. A red sign hangs from a gnarled oak. I can tell it has faded in the elements and been repainted many times. In block letters of many colors, bordered by delicate paintings of purple flowers, I read:

WELCOME TO WISTERIA

YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE SO-CALLED UNITED STATES

I gasp out loud. The absurd proclamation elates me. It's really here. Lena's in there somewhere, in a place that, if not beyond America, at least is not afraid to try.

A path, crowded on either side by dense forest, overhung heavily with leaves, leads out of sight into the wood. I duck below a branch and embark. Enough sunlight breaches the canopy to avoid tripping on roots. The earth is long-trodden, and the cold has made it hard as stone. I walk carefully between patches of light and shadow, eyes on my feet, stopping periodically to read. Smaller signs, of varying degrees of legibility, dot the path, reassuring me I'm headed in the right direction. I read all those that haven't been rendered illegible by the years. There are leftist slogans and symbols: "ACAB," "Bash the fash," "Free Palestine," a hastily circled "A," a hammer and sickle; signs I can't read, in Spanish, Arabic, even a metal sheet dotted with Braille; and more personal messages: "Lucy luv's Tasha," "Here is the place John first tripped."

At a bend in the path there is a large gray stone, almost as tall as me, that slopes backwards into the woods. It has been painted with a

portrait of a woman with green skin and swirling, fiery hair. A sign at the base of the stone reads: "Rest in Power Justine," and many flowers have been tossed on the ground, now desiccated by winter, their colors mute. Somewhere in the woods behind, I can hear the soft sounds of a brook bubbling. I meet Justine's painted eyes and a chill travels from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet.

What did she do to be loved and remembered like this? Have I done anything worth remembering? Am I worth loving?

These are not comforting thoughts, and I feel close to fainting, so I shake the memorial's gaze from my head and walk on. Around the bend the path begins to ascend, first gently, then steeply. My thighs burn; my back runs with sweat. The climb banishes my chill. Panting, I crest the hill at last, and see my destination.

The forest falls away, trees thinning onto a meadowy plateau. Wild grasses and wildflowers, white and yellow and pink, stretch in front of me. On the far side of the clearing, at the edge of my sight, misty green hills rise further, rolling towards the Appalachians. The setting sun is brilliant orange. I walk on a dirt path. On my left runs a chicken wire fence, tied with colorful fabrics and charms. The yard it encloses is empty, save for a lone rooster. He clucks in my direction, unsure, scratching at the earth with an anxious claw. Muffled, raucous bird-speak comes from the coop.

There is a cluster of ramshackle wood structures circled around a commons. Each is painted a different color. People mill about, chatting, carrying wood to a fire pit. A bonfire is being constructed. The sun sinks below the tree line; the orange is snuffed out and replaced by a lavender glow. There is a roar of whoops and applause as the bonfire is lit. Flame leaps from twig to stick to log. I wander towards the pyre in a daze, stumbling. I understand now why Lena came here—my stomach, head, and muscles ache; my brain is blasted by a year of anhedonia and a night of drugs; my lover is alone in the home we used to share, wondering where I am—and still I find this place beautiful. Someone spots me and waves me down. I'm sure I look like a wraith—my hand twitches, reaching to fix my hair—but I stop myself. The tic surges through me and recedes. For once I really, really don't give a shit.

I am greeted by a tall, muscled woman in well-worn denim. A thick braid, black woven through with purple, hangs down her back. She

doesn't look surprised to see me, appearing unannounced at night. She smiles, wide and toothy.

"Hi there stranger!" she says, extending a hand. I shake it. "What brings you out to our corner of the woods?"

"Hey," I say. I'm quiet for a moment. This is so weird. At the fire pit, people are singing Woody Guthrie. "Um, yeah, so I'm looking to visit with my friend Lena, is she here? I tried to send word ahead but I think she doesn't get reception out here, so I don't know if anyone knew I was coming."

"Yeah, Lena's around somewhere. I think she's busy in the kitchen right now."

"Can you show me where that is? Not to be rude, I just, I came a long way, and I really wanna see my friend."

"Of course. What should I call you, hun? I'm Elderflower," she says, quickly adding "It doesn't have to be the name on your birth certificate, or even a name you've used before. This can be a fresh start for you, if you want."

A fresh start seems nice, but I have no idea what needs to be started.

"I'm Alice."

"Good to meet you, Alice. Follow me."

Elderflower leads me around the outskirts of the commons. There are some twenty people by the fire, and I get curious looks, but no one stops us. As we pass Elderflower picks a few lines up the song, belting from her gut:

There was a big, high wall there that tried to stop me

A sign was painted said "Private Property"

But on the backside, it didn't say nothing

This land was made for you and me

She brings me to a building painted in splashes of yellow and pink. One of the doors is cracked open. Wisps of smoke are escaping. I hear Lena's voice shouting obscenities inside, and my heart jumps in my chest.

"Please don't burn down my kitchen, Lena dear," Elderflower says, stepping inside. The walls of the kitchen are studded with hooks

sporting a menagerie of pots, pans, spatulas, knives, and ladles of varying providence, all well used. The smoke is billowing from a large stone wood-fire stove. Lena squats in a ragged white dress, working to extract a blackened loaf with a baker's peel.

"What happened to collective ownership, E?" Lena says without turning around. She drops the loaf on the ground with a *clunk*, squats and goes back for another. "*Your* kitchen! I'm disappointed in you."

"From each according to her ability, to each according to her need," Elderflower says, chuckling. "And girl, you lack the ability. How many loaves did you burn? I'm not made of flour, you know."

"Your name is literally a flower," Lena huffs, out of breath. She deposits the last loaf on the ground and wipes her brow.

Elderflower groans. "Stop making stupid jokes, you have a visitor."

Lena turns around and yelps. Christ, she's beautiful. Her arms are toned; her hair, heavy with curls, reaches now to her shoulders. She rushes over and hugs me, presses her face to mine, smearing me with sweat. I inhale deeply, my face in the crook of her neck. I hug her back with all my strength.

"You came Alice, you actually came."

"Well, I was in the neighborhood, and thought I'd pop in."

"It's so good to see you. How the hell did you get here?"

"You two have fun. Make sure you clean up," Elderflower says, patting Lena on the shoulder and stepping out.

"Sure thing *boss*!" Lena calls after her, to which she receives a middle finger.

I take a step back, and a deep breath. The room wavers.

"It's a long story. First, can I stash my bag somewhere, and get something to eat?"

gaze at the stars

Arugula, beets, candy-sweet dried tomatoes, all from the commune's garden; rosehips and roasted walnuts from the woods that surround it; perch from the brook-fed lake nestled in the valley behind, glazed in balsamic vinegar from Walmart. Wisteria feeds itself—almost. The taste of my exorbitant dinner last night fades to a distant memory. It is not even comparable. Perhaps industry has a taste, perhaps every drop of worker's blood that falls onto store-bought produce at the plantation, the washing floor, the docks, the grocer's, all leave an indelible mark. Lena watches me as I eat, sipping hot cider. I tell her the story of my night with Patrick, and all that came after.

"Sounds like you had some night. So, how do you feel about the whole thing?" she asks.

"I don't know ... I don't feel traumatized by the experience or anything. I feel degraded, but I think that'll pass. Is already passing. It's weird. Really, the gig only took 24 hours. So it should be worth it."

"Was it?"

"I don't know, because I didn't do the job. Last night was hard, but I won't ever know if the work was worth it, because I broke that dynamic the moment I robbed my employer. I'm in uncharted territory here. There may be police waiting for me back home."

"I guess we are both on our own personal adventures."

"And how is your adventure treating you?"

"Still good. I've been learning a lot. About people, organizing ... but especially about myself. I think I know myself better than I ever have before."

"Any revelations you'd like to share?"

"Yeah, I would. Later. Ask me later," Lena says. She takes her empty mug and my plate, which I have scraped clean, into the kitchen. When she returns, she's holding a jar of preserves, and a loaf of bread. "Would you like dessert?"

I nod eagerly. Lena spreads blackberry jam, bright violet, on a slice of soft rye.

"I foraged most of this batch myself. Elderflower baked the bread, as you can tell by how not burnt it is," Lena says, taking a bite. She meets my eyes. "Alice, if you have troubles with the law back home, this is a good place to be. A lot of the folks here are political organizers, or were at some point. The feds would have a field day with this place. No one will ask about your legal status, or why you're here."

I sit, chewing the bread. What to do, what to do. It would help if I knew if Patrick had called the cops or not, but I don't, so I have to make the decision based on what I actually want. Whatever that is.

"Do you remember this?" Lena asks, pointing at her eyes. They are lined with scarlet.

"What?"

"This is the eyeliner I stole the last time we hung out in Detroit. Back in May," she says. "It's my favorite. It's special to me."

"Oh yeah, I remember that! It looks great," I say. Lena smiles and bats her eyes. The red looks good. It brings out the emerald swirling in the hazel.

"Wanna go to the bonfire?" Lena says.

"Yeah!" I say. Right now, I want the night air. That's something. "Can I borrow a coat? This jacket isn't cutting it."

Lena changes into jeans and we both don battered winter coats; handed-down hand-me-downs from Wisteria's common store. There are shapes of people moving in and out of the orange firelight, and many unfamiliar voices talking and laughing, misting in the cold night. An old man is playing fiddle to the beat of a hand drum played by an old woman. Elderflower is wearing a green, white, and black poncho woven of thick alpaca wool. She approaches and offers me a cup of berry wine. Seeing Lena not take any, and feeling my stomach flip at the sight of more drugs, I refuse. Lena takes my hand and we dance mildly together, just swaying. How long has it been since I last danced sober? The music picks up into a jig and we spin around each other, giggling.

"Wanna go on a little walk with me? I'd like to show you my favorite place here," Lena says.

I nod eagerly. She grabs a flashlight from the dining hall and leads me away from the fire, towards the edge of the woods, on the far side from the approach I climbed earlier. Here the ground inclines more, and a somewhat overgrown dirt trail rises into the hills.

“This path leads to the top of Grasshopper Hill, which is the farthest-most part of Wisteria. Past this hill, it’s just wilderness stretching towards the mountains. But on top there is a clearing with an amazing view.”

We walk in friendly silence. The footpath wends by ferns, native grasses, patches of wild mint; under a willow that strokes my hair as we pass, fronds glowing with moonlight. The stars are painfully bright, the space between black—not dirty purple, not black cut with gray clouds, black. Sometimes this black is complicated by bursts of visual snow; my trip follows me still. There are so many stars, more than I’ve ever seen. It is hard to believe they’ve always been there. Detroit is many skies away.

There are trail markers, stones painted along the path. Passing a large standing stone, I remember the portrait I saw on the way in.

“Who was Justine?” I ask, ducking under a low-hanging branch. “That memorial of hers really struck me.”

“One of the founders of Wisteria. She died a few years ago. I never met her.”

“She must’ve been some woman.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard stories,” Lena says. The path is becoming steeper; we lean into our steps. She takes my hand. “She was trans, actually. Fucking beautiful. I should show you a picture.”

“How old was she when she died?”

“I don’t know exactly. Early forties.”

That’s not bad, for one of us. Fuck. Is that really how I think about trans life? She had decades left.

“Can I ask how she died?”

“Sure, I can tell you what I know. What interests you so much?”

“Just curious,” I say, but no, that’s not it. I’m in awe. Justine was a great woman. Asking this, I feel petty, and very small. “Seems like she was loved by a lot of people.”

“Yeah, she was. So, from what I know, she caught some crazy trumped-up terrorism charge for participating in pipeline protests. She was facing life, and the state was dead set on putting her in a men’s prison,” Lena says, her voice low. She squeezes my hand. “She killed herself. Let everyone know what the plan was, said her goodbyes. I guess they even had a party, when she got out on bail. Then she walked into this forest and no one ever saw her again.”

Nothing to say to that. Crickets chirp around us as we near the top of the hill. Knowing that Justine was loved, and killed, for doing what was right, makes me feel even smaller. Here I am craving that legacy, that love, having done nothing to warrant it. If I am in trouble with the law, it is for an act of personal greed. It *felt political*, but it wasn't politics. It wasn't building anything.

"Why didn't she try to escape?" I ask.

"I don't know. I guess she was tired of running," Lena says, huffing as we reach the top. "Or maybe she's still out there, in the woods."

Grasshopper Hill is one of many green hills that stretch darkly away to the horizon, towards the southern tip of the Blue Ridge mountains. The trail ends in a circular glade, no more than twenty feet across. Tall, soft grasses stir in a slight wind.

"Here!" Lena says, letting my hand go and throwing out her arms, encompassing our destination. "This is my favorite spot in the world. Come on, lay down with me."

She sighs happily and lies in the center of the glade. I join her. I breathe out, relaxed. Space, in its full expanse, stretches forever above. There are 7,200\$ dollars sitting in my duffle bag. I trust Lena and by extension her home, so I'm not worried about it being stolen, and anyway it is tucked safely under a bed. My bed, for tonight, for longer, if I so choose. It is not enough money to last forever, but it is cash, and it burns with potential.

Maybe Patrick is blowing up my phone by now, but I've got no bars, so all he'll get is silence. I imagine how his morning unfolded—waking, he reached for my body, felt nothing. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and realized I had left. This annoyed him, because it violated our agreement, but he wasn't surprised. A lay leaving at first light is nothing new. He went on with his morning, showered, brushed his teeth, cleaned the sex from his body. It wasn't until he touched his wallet that he realized something was amiss. Feeling it light, he panicked, rushing to discover what else I had stolen, shouting out loud, calling me a tranny and a thieving whore. He felt used. It felt bad.

Settling next to Lena, I smile, and take back her hand. It is good to realize I regret nothing. Maybe my theft was small, selfish, but it was not bad. I remember Emily beaming at me, calling me a hero. No, I don't regret it. That's something.

This all falls from my mind. We sit silently for a while, just listening to the sounds of the forest and each other's breath.

"Look!" Lena gasps, pointing. A cluster of shooting stars streaks overhead. One, then another, then many; they cut white trails across the sky. We watch the shower until it thins and fades.

"I could just stay here forever," I say, not meaning Wisteria, but Grasshopper Hill, this patch of grass, this moment in time.

"I think I just might," Lena says, meaning Wisteria. "I've been sober since I got here. That was the main reason I left, you know. I relapsed in May and was on a really bad path. Withdrawals nearly killed me the week I arrived. Elderflower nursed me back to health."

"I'm proud of you," I say. Even when Pierre told me how much Lena was struggling, I hadn't really believed it. But she was, and I never knew. I never asked.

"There have been times where I almost slipped. This isn't a rehab, there are drugs and booze here. But I just come up here and sit for a while, and the urge passes."

She puts her arm around me and we sit, wrapped in each other, for some time. It is winter but we make each other warm, our coats crinkling, her breath on my neck.

Eventually we head back, walking in silence, holding hands, each in our own thoughts.

I am boarded in a guest room for the night. A thick blue macramé blanket and plush patchwork pillows welcome me. My body is begging for sleep, but I want to center myself first, to figure out my next move. After changing into pajamas, I sit on my bed and think, staring at the walls until the wood grain blurs and moves.

I consider texting Jenni, then I remember that there is no reception. No internet: this one absence makes my potential life here unimaginable. Wisteria is an island, full of people hiding from their pasts, or from the horrors of the future. It is not real life; not as I've experienced it, growing up in the new millennia. I do not remember a time when I could not reach anyone I cared to reach, anywhere on the planet, with the click of a button. Maybe, with energy exerted in the gardens, time spent feeding chickens, this hidden-away realm would come to be more real to me than the one I had left. Wisteria is opening up before me, inviting me in. It feels as though my life

over the past year has stretched inescapably towards this warm bed covered in handmade soft things.

Instinctually, I fear some sort of trap.

I knock on Lena's door, across the hall from mine. She emerges in a nightgown, curls tucked away in a bonnet.

"Ready for bed?" she asks. "I know, after that night you had, you could use a rest."

"Yeah, definitely. I think I might just step outside for a breath of fresh air first. You wanna join?"

Lena crosses her arms, looks off to the side intently, and thinks for a moment. Then she sighs.

"No, I think I'm good, I'm beat," she says, yawning big. Then she pulls me into a hug, hard and fast, and releases. "Thank you for coming to see me, Alice. I'll always remember this night. I'm sorry I left Detroit so fast, I'm sorry that it came as a surprise to you, I should've told you directly."

"Oh, it's my fault Lena, no hard feelings about that," I say, surprised. I'm definitely the one that owes her an apology.

"I hope you consider joining us at Wisteria. You would make a great addition, really. But I understand if you end up leaving. Please say goodbye to me tomorrow, before you go, if you decide to split."

"Yeah, of course. I haven't made a decision yet, but you'll be the first to know when I do."

"Goodnight, Alice."

"Goodnight, Lena."

The door closes. I pull on my jacket, wander down the hall and out onto the porch. Elderberry is there, smoking a joint. She leans on the railing and looks out onto the commons, watching the smoldering ruins of the bonfire. Her eyes are distant, glazed over, high or deep in thought. Both.

"Can I hit that?" I ask.

Elderberry jumps, eyes suddenly bright. She spins around and for a split second winds up a punch, then lets it fall.

"Jesus Christ, man, you can't sneak up on me like that," she says.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," I say.

"It's fine, it's fine," she says, taking a deep breath and letting it go. "I'm a jumpy person. Here, go crazy. I grow it all here." She hands me

the joint. Yep, this is commune weed alright: it tastes like grass and smells like pure skunk.

"Thanks," I say, passing it back. I watch Elderberry smoke. I'm not sure how old she is. Her skin shines beautifully, but her face bears deep crevices below the eyes. She has tattoos on her neck, long faded, indecipherable. At least 40. Probably more. She strikes me as wise: in her age, her apparent strength, her skills in gardening and baking. I mean, relative to my dumb ass, she's a magi. "Hey, can I ask you some advice?"

She shrugs. "Sure. Can't promise it'll help though."

"I know. I just don't have anyone else to talk to right now."

She shrugs again.

"Are you happy?"

She laughs. "Yeah, sure, I'd say I'm happy."

"How? What's the secret?"

"I'm smoking weed and looking at the night sky. How could I not feel good? This is like, my favorite activity."

"No, I mean, in general. I have these good moments, like tonight, but they are stretched between so much time where I'm sad, or just feeling nothing at all. It feels like my life is a series of little islands, just floating around in a gray mush, and sometimes I claw my way onto one, but it's never clear to me how I'll find the next."

We have finished the joint. My head is swimming. I feel crabby, drained, corpse-tired.

"You got here, didn't you?" Elderberry says, stubbing out the roach.

"Yeah, I guess so," I say.

"Just keep clawing, babe," she says, patting me on my shoulder and heading into the building.

I follow her in and wish her goodnight. In the bathroom, I splash cold water on my face. I brush my teeth vigorously, scrubbing the particles of two meals, booze, coke-spit, and two instances of vomiting. In the mirror, I force myself to meet my own eyes. There you are, Alice. That is, supposedly, my face. Behind it is my brain, which supposedly houses my consciousness, although it also sits undeniably in my large intestine, my hard-driven heart, and I'd argue also in the hair that is tangling up on my scalp and the stubble that is starting to show on my chin. I stare into my eyes until it hurts. There you are, Alice. I press against one nostril, then the other, blowing cloudy snot into the sink. I splash water onto my face again.

Does Daria wonder where I am, and why I left? Did I hurt her? She probably knows exactly why I split when I did. Daria understands distance.

I need to sleep. Tomorrow, I will know what to do.

Walking past Lena's room, I hear sobs. Soft, muffled. Long and rattling, short and panting. Lena's crying all alone. About what, I have no idea.



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