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No Stranger Than You

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No Stranger Than You

**Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College**

by

Rebekah Sicari

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2020

Farrah leaned her head against the window of the taxi. She wanted to be polite with the driver, but the jet lag made her hazy and incoherent. That's the price you pay for time traveling. The international date line sliced right through her in a clean sagittal cut. Half of her here, half back there.

“So where are you coming from?” The driver finally asked.

“Oh, I'm American.”

“I can hear that. Where in America?”

“Uh, well I moved around a lot. My last apartment was in San Francisco.” She was rummaging through her carry-on for a sweater. 15°C weather in June would take getting used to.

“Oh! I know San Fran! Yeah, I crossed the bridge when I was visiting my Uncle.”

Considering her circumstances, there was something deeply comforting about the fact that everyone is a tourist somewhere. She could feel just that much more assured, she wasn't really an outsider, just a different kind of insider. By the end of the cab ride she managed to refrain from giving any more information about herself besides ‘San Fran’. There were some details that should go unspoken in this new place. Why provide a wave for an echo?

The cab driver dropped her off in front of the house. Farrah was trying to figure out if this house had been abandoned or neglected, either way the wear showed. The front door had a ripped screen window with no glass, rust slowly colonizing the hinges. The windows had accumulated clouds of dust, without any sign of a curious handprint. A healthy scattering of Darwin's barberry lay along the sides of the front. She could have sworn she read about that being potentially quite damaging to the local ecosystem. The sides of the house were not in terrible condition, albeit there were some greenish-brown stains on the side paneling that suggested there might have been some bushes recently cleared out. It was a bit overwhelming to imagine a place with more bushes. The

front yard had a scattering of shrubs, laid out like a checkers board. Standing on her new front walkway, she turned to survey the neighborhood. The house to the left (well, her left when facing away from the front door) shared a portion of its front yard with hers; there was no clear division. That house had a nice high fence clearly delineating its backyard; she could see the roof of an old shed peeking over it. That house surpassed her humble home in both height and width, but appeared to also have two stories. To her right was a deserted one-story home, with overgrown grass and a 'for rent' sign giving her the side-eye. It was a little strange to see two houses that until now were both unoccupied, but this didn't seem to be a very busy neighborhood. It was a mismatched little triad of houses.

The front steps made a slight creaking noise under her weight. Farrah roamed the hall, each footstep reverberated back to her from across the way. That reminded her to buy carpets along with a mattress for her bed. Every wall was the same dulled eggshell white, save for this one portion of the bedroom where there were remnants of torn navy-blue wallpaper. A staircase greeted the visitor at the door. The most recent installment appeared to be the railing. It had a glossy veneer with strong pillars connecting it to the stairway. The upstairs was far more crowded, the only bathroom was placed next to the large bedroom. Leaning against the doorway to the bedroom, Farrah felt this place was too big for one person. Yet at the same time she struggled to imagine even just two people living here. That would be a stretch with the tiny closets. It must have been built by someone who wanted to feel small. She envisioned the timeline of the house, being managed and mismanaged again and again. Then in the end they leave you to roll the dice with your hosts one more time. And then, here we are.

The first night she slept on the couch in the living room. Her sleep was dreamless (so far as she knew) and welcome. The sound of an electric saw at 5 am was less so. No, not this. Did this

really have to happen? Of all of the things that could have happened, did it have to be shit neighbors? This was meant to be a new beginning; she didn't want it to start with hostility. She wasn't the one who usually handled these situations back home.

How was she supposed to go about this? In a way it was an exciting new problem. A social problem, how people interact. If you can design an airplane to fly, design a bridge to function, if you can design a vaccine from infection, then why couldn't she design a problem into a truce? Maybe that was naïve, but she was between blind optimism and avoiding resolution. Okay. She would get up, get dressed, look presentable but approachable, and maybe she could manage to strike up a conversation. When she was little, they used to have to introduce themselves to the neighborhood whenever they moved.

Say your name, be cool, explain that you're new. They'll notice the accent, let them. Just ask questions. Nobody thinks you're strange if you ask questions. What is their name? What do they do? Do they have kids? Why the fuck are they using industrial equipment at 5 am don't they have anything better to do? Okay, not that one. So are they into wood working, or whatever that sound was supposed to be?

As she left the house she practiced in her mind exactly how she would knock on the door: smiling, pleasant, like someone you really don't want to bother. Maybe even bring up her job; usually people lightened up when they heard she was an environmental engineer. A wonderful balance of money and morality, almost as good as being a doctor. If they only knew.

When she headed towards the noise, she discovered that it was coming from the open garage on the right side of the house. Step one already had to be altered. Oh, and the person behind the power drill looked about nine. So steps 2 through 9 also had to be altered.

“Hi,” Farrah said.

She barely glanced up. Her goggles were way too big for her face. “I don’t talk to strangers.”

“So you do the safe thing and work with carpentry tools?” Farrah was now an outside observer to her own behavior. So much for being composed.

“I am being safe; I have goggles on.”

“Well now you’re talking to me. Um, are your parents home? I’m-”

“Busy.”

“Oh, well could you let them know I stopped by? I just wanted to introduce myself-”

“You can try that again. But I can’t tell them. I’m not allowed to talk to strangers.” With that she turned back to her work, it looked like she was building some kind of contraption. Gumball machine, maybe?

Farah drifted in and out of listening to her podcast while she tried to make up in caffeine what had been lost in sleep. Mainly her mind wandered right back to the house, to the neighborhood, to her new neighbors. A new beginning presented itself, or, well, she forced a new beginning to present itself only for everything to complicate in new ways. By the time she was ready to leave for work the sawing had stopped, and she now saw her little nemesis waiting at the far end of the block for the bus.

Every now and again a thought would enter Farrah’s mind and just hover there, tenaciously present. Sitting in the back of her ride, with a terrible headache on her way to begin her career all over again, her new fixation involved cars. The air conditioner was on full blast, some weird new age meditation music was playing just loud enough that she couldn’t ignore it. She wanted to ask the driver to maybe turn, well, everything down. He didn’t seem too friendly, so she decided to avoid any provocation. First thing I’m getting, she repeated in her mind, is a car. She could wait on

furniture, but she couldn't be relying on ride-shares and cabs. Mobility was far more important than comfort for the time being. The loan was supposed to cover that anyway.

She froze before entering the building. This was a big reveal: time to pull up the curtains and find out what she picked! Fortunately, she was far more persistent than the lingering trepidation. She marched through the doors, entered the elevator, and advanced to the woman at the front desk.

"Hi." Farrah's voice went impossibly high. "Um, my name is Farrah Wallace. I'm one of the new engineers?"

"Oh, yes. Stu told me someone would be coming in today. I'm Dana." She gave a quick wave hello.

"I'll go get him, let him give you the grand introduction, mission, propaganda, whatever."

Farrah laughed too hard at the overtold joke. Whatever, things were starting to move, as long as she could move.

"Ah, nice to meet you. I'm Stu." Shake his hand. Good eye contact. Look confident.

"Nice to meet you."

"Alright well first I'll just. Show you around." They turned and started walking through her new workspace. "How was the flight and everything?"

"Oh it was fine. When I'm used to the time-zone I'll let you know."

"Wait when did you get in?"

"Around 3pm."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And you're already at work? Wow. If I'd known I wouldn't have asked you to come in today."

"Oh no its fine, I'm gonna get the bulk of my move in done this weekend."

"You sure?"

“Oh yeah, believe me. I’m very all or nothing with productivity. I just need to jump right back into work.”

“All right, well you know we’re very excited to have you, so I’m not going to challenge that.” Stu still looked a little skeptical. Farrah shrugged it off. It only had to make sense to her.

“I wouldn’t want you to.” She said.

Stu left her at what was now her desk to take a phone call. Farrah traced the outline of her workspace. There wasn’t much for her to actually do today, just suspend the inertia. She did try to briefly scan a reef inspection report but the nausea from being thrown backwards in time ravaged her attention span. She still felt very much on guard here. Although, in many ways it wasn’t all that different from what she was used to. For example, she was one of two female engineers on the entire team. And she already knew a degree from M.I.T. can balance out your identity just enough to the point where you are deemed ‘probably fit’.

“Alright, Farrah.” Stu returned. He motioned for the proximate employees to join them. “This is Mike, Dylan, Michael, Jared, and Nick.” Wow, what memorable names.

“Hi, nice to meet you.” she smiled wide, wide enough that she could no longer see their expressions clearly.

“Ah, our first American in a while.” One of the Michaels said. Or wait, no, that’s Mike? It’d be nice if they’d at least get different haircuts.

“Did we ever have an American?” Dylan or Nick asked.

“Yeah remember Andy?”

“I thought he was Canadian?”

“Well, either way. Stu was mentioning your recent contribution to a study on genetically modifying coral. I was just wondering why you wouldn’t take into consideration focusing on reducing the problematic factors in the environment, like why can’t we focus on reducing water pollution?”

Finally, their conversation was in her domain. She could let her guard down in a world of empirical studies and logical proposals. Personal matters could be left at the door, just don't forget them on your way out.

“Well see here's the thing. I normally would agree with you on CRISPR. Most of my research on coral reefs thus far involved other methods like cross-breeding them to be more heat-resilient. But if we can learn more about the coral genome through CRISPR, I do genuinely think we might, at some point down the line, be able to use genetic engineering. Or just find out what genes to look for when determining species that are better acclimated.”

“Right but how effective are those methods, even? And then there's the issue of just how invasive it all is, right? And then the consequences of a so-called super-coral could completely screw us over in the end. It's basically another cane toad situation.” Dylan rambled. Farrah wished she could run an experiment on how these guys usually spoke to new colleagues. Gender as independent variable.

“I'm going to safely assume we can all agree that coral and toads are not the same.” She said. Jared laughed at least. “We're working with the same basic species here, it's a matter of creating resilience. And yes, we're far from being able to effectively do that. Frankly, my preferred method would be to propagate already existing heat-resilient strands. I'm not deaf to concerns over potential implications or even flaws of the technology, I'd definitely want to proceed with caution. But the problem is how much time do we have to be cautious? So far trying to reduce tourism and water pollution hasn't been enough to stop the ongoing threat. We should at least be studying this in case it turns out fifteen years down the line it's our last option.”

“I don't think you're going to win this one, Dyl.” Jared said.

“No I don't think so either. Might be out-classed here.”

“Out-classed, or maybe I just put in a lot more time and thought into this.” So long as Farrah smiled and looked pretty, they would likely take this as more friendly than it was.

“Well yeah, I’d imagine- it being your area of expertise and all, yeah.” Michael the long version said. Her mind circled back to her car as she spoke with her new colleagues. If she could befriend just one of them, maybe she could get a ride to the dealership.

Jared was nice enough to give her a ride to the nearest dealership. He seemed about forty, the scattered strands of red hair against a nearly total gray head helped her learn his name: Ja-Red. They spent most of their time talking about his kids and discussing how they both got into their careers in the first place. At one point, Jared said “The one really nice thing is knowing that I get to leave a mark, ya know?”

Car sharks and loans aside, she finally was able to get her very own car. Now that she thought about it, this was her first. All the others she used to drive were shared. That was exciting, granted maybe a little adolescent, but she wouldn’t shun the occasion. Driving back, she tried to make it back to the house without a GPS. She had read about a study where they found that taxi drivers who memorized their routes saw a growth in size throughout certain regions of the hippocampus. She wasn’t too sure on the validity of it, having not looked too closely at the study herself. But there was something to be believed about memory. If she learned her way around, the country would be etched into her mind in a new way. It would be a gained familiarity for herself. But when she wound up at the wrong part of town twice (somehow she managed to make the exact same wrong turns) she finally accepted that she still needed her phone.

She got in around seven o’clock at night. The house, she realized while parking in the driveway, was as alien to her as she must be to it. The relief of being home hadn’t yet been earned. She headed up her walkway and saw a new face lounging on her front porch. It was a man, maybe in his late 30s, dressed in jeans and a worn t-shirt. Faint circles under his eyes gave away his exhaustion. His hair in messy waves that seemed to have minds of their own.

“Hi.” Farrah said. She clung to her keys, rearranging them in her knuckles like claws. One giant drawback to being on your own is just how cautious you have to be.

“Hi. I’m Sean. I live next door. Maia said you talked to her earlier?”

“Maia? Oh yeah, I swung by earlier to introduce myself to the neighbors. Is that your daughter?”

“She is indeed. She mentioned something about you telling her she can’t use her saw?”

“No? No why did she say that?” That came off as far more defensive than it should.

“Alright, yeah sorry about that. She just really wanted me to ask so.”

“So you asked.”

“Yes, yes I did. So where in the states are you from?”

“Oh, uh.” She smiled, clenching and releasing the keys. “Well I moved here directly from San Francisco.”

“Ah, west coast. So I guess you’re unimpressed with the beaches here?”

“No I haven’t, seen the beaches. Um, so just so we’re clear I didn’t mean to bother your daughter in any way I just really didn’t know the person in the garage would be a kid, and from there I was only there for like a minute I just wanted to know if you were home.” She was talking herself into a trap.

“Oh no I believe you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Maia tends to be a little sensitive around the carpentry stuff.”

“Oh, she seems like a sensitive girl, yeah. Well I’m sorry I have to head inside I need to finish up some things for work, but it was nice meeting you. I guess I’ll be seeing you around.”

“Oh for sure.”

And just like that. Gone. Thank god. “The hell was that?” she asked herself as she shut the door. She tried to go over everything they said to each other, to make sense of it, make sure she didn’t imagine it. Maybe it was time she found a therapist. If nothing else to have someone else to

cross-reference with. Granted, maybe there were other reasons. She settled herself inside, and started searching for takeout places nearby. There was a lot to think about now. She had only been here a day and already the neighborhood seemed to be pulling her into this odd other world. Who even was that guy? Thinking back, that garage was actually pretty nice. Was he a carpenter, too? Did those guys make a lot of money? Her high school boyfriend had an apprenticeship, he certainly liked to make it seem like there was money there. But she wasn't sure. Maybe his wife did something, but wait is that guy married? In a way she was thankful for the neighbors. To focus on something new and strange and inconsequential, it was refreshing to say the least.

Unfortunately, that focus dissipated when she checked her phone. Missed calls from the bank. She tossed the phone aside and threw herself on the couch. Dwelling on why was far less distressing than how, she at least knew why. Even though she didn't like to think about why, even though she'd rather abscond from why until it eventually starved and wasted away. Why made the how seem worthwhile.

She sighed, retrieved her phone, and started scrolling through old photos. Looking backwards had no real point to it, other than fulfilling a sick desire to torment herself. Reliving the start of their relationship made the ending seem like a cruel joke. She remembered feeling pulled towards him, in this rush where all the carefully plotted details of their lives were disbanded from their bodies. There was an unsustainable energy between them then. And she had the most insidiously apt line to solidify her judgement: they just looked so good together.

Even now, she could see how those photos worked. She hated them, but they worked. Farrah stopped scrolling to focus on a picture of the two of them on her 22nd birthday, their faces plastered with shortsighted smiles. She pulled and twirled frayed blonde strands; her hair looked the same as the day the photo was taken. When she was about eight or so her hair started to turn dark

brown; that was when mom brought her to get it colored. The key was to highlight it in such a way that it looked perfectly natural. She could still hear mom's voice: "You have such pretty hair, why not try to save it?" Now thinking about it, she liked her natural color; a rich hue similar to that of espresso peaked from her roots, incapable of being permanently suppressed. The manifestation of her genetic expression. Granted, she had dyed it a bright flaming red her freshman year of college, but maybe that was merely a different kind of genetic expression. Here's to another one, she thought. Then she walked to her bathroom, parted her hair into six mini ponytails, and snipped each off. Six, five, four, three, two, one.

Her transition from her old life to the new was like the journey a diver made from air to water. It was an unfamiliar state: her pace, the pressure, the life around her, all of that changed. It wasn't until her third night on the couch that the initial charm began to wear thin. Whenever she couldn't fall asleep as a child, she would go to the living room and curl up on the couch, staring at their small tv screen on mute. Times change: nowadays she actually liked having the volume on.

Wednesday morning, she got the first email.

Farrah. Where the hell are you? I keep getting calls from your mom. I know I'm probably the last person you want to be hearing this from, but everyone is really worried about you, and I just need you to contact them. Please call them. I know you changed your phone number. If you need your parents' numbers again I'll give them here. I hope you'll respond, Derek.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck." Farrah sat looking at her laptop. She forgot to change her personal email. The same thing that kept her from deleting the account also forced her to continue checking. She had told her sister she was moving away, but every time she thought of talking to mom directly she got overwhelmed. She wanted to be without need of any commentary. In a way they should have known. That was what drove her insane. They should have known. The last phone call with her mom was just, well, it was-

"Hey sweetie."

“Hi.” Farrah didn’t have the heart to tell her mother she was day drinking, whether or not she had the stomach to handle the Jägermeister needed further evaluation.

“How was your day off? You and Derek do anything fun?”

“No, no. Just.” Don’t slur. Careful. “Just kinda hung around. Went to the gym earlier. Derek’s out right now.”

“Oh I don’t like that, where is he?”

“I don’t know, mom.” That much was true. He didn’t mention where he was headed when he slammed the door on her.

“Well, your father’s looking good. Not out of the woods yet, though.”

“You need me to send something again?”

“Well, no I don’t need you to. You know. We’ll just see how much insurance covers in the end I guess. So.”

“I can send a check again if that helps. But I do have to start saving for the wedding.”

“Oh, great.” She could hear the tenor shift. “So Martin isn’t covering it now.” Martin was Derek’s father. Farrah was still unclear on exactly what he did, but he had an MBA from Wharton, and apparently that was all she needed to know in Derek’s eyes.

“No, no he is. It’s just that, you know we have a lot of people to invite. I was thinking of getting a wedding planner, you know they’re not like rich-rich mom.”

“Oh please. Please. That house. Seated 30 people. I know they have a maid-”

“Okay, okay. Look it’s fine. Wedding’s still not even set so.”

“Are you two ever getting married?”

“Okay, one second, you’re mad about cost the next you want us to rush to the ceremony?”

“I’m just saying. I mean Jesus when I was 26 I was married, had a baby, and I was working so I don’t know what you mean when you act so busy.”

“Okay. Look. I had a really rough day. I don’t need this.”

“Rough day? You didn’t work!”

“Goodbye.”

No, there was no point explaining herself to mom. Continuing to lend money would provoke a hellacious inner battle. She expected Allison would have told them, but she never explicitly asked her to. Or maybe Al did tell them, and Derek was lying. Maybe.

Al had always hated Derek. Farrah never imagined she would eventually come around to that position herself. They met in class their senior years, in an elective called ‘The Strategy of Starcraft’, or something like that. Derek sat next to her first day of class. He turned to her. “You know, I’m a little nervous about this class.” Farrah stared at him. She raised her eyebrows. Go ahead, she thought. “I heard the core requirements meant understanding the twenty-sided die *and* speaking perfect elvish.”

“Oh, sorry. So you’re not the type of person who meets those?” he smiled. She wished he hadn’t.

She decided, needless to say, they were the only two students in the room who could pass for normal. On their fourth anniversary, Farrah made the joke, “that’s our entire relationship, you know? Pass for normal.”

“You don’t honestly think this constitutes passing, do you?” He said.

“Well, okay. Passing for normal, it’s-it’s not like two defined categories. More like a gradient.”

“Right but which part- which component of the relationship are we talking here?”

“Give some examples.”

“Like, okay.” He pulled out one of those stupid pens he spent 20 dollars on and sketched out a web on a napkin. “So let’s say this is how we individually appear alone. This is how we communicate in public. This is appearance.” And so on and so forth. He actually ran out of napkin before they could

finally play the game of categories.

“I’d say I’m more normal socially than you.” Farrah said.

“Okay, woah.” He leaned back. “In what way?”

“Like I don’t collect things. I can wear a wrinkled shirt. I show concern for others.”

“I have concern for others.”

“I said show. You know I’m less anal about everything. People relate to that.”

“People relate to irresponsibility.”

“See remember what I just said about showing no concern for others?”

“I am concerned. I get concerned when they can’t manage their own shit. Like ironing their clothes, or remembering it’s been four years and not five.” Her excuse that the card store only had fifth anniversary cards and up failed, though she never thought it wouldn’t. Giving a card to someone you saw everyday just felt weird, like you were establishing that there was something that had to be said over distance.

“Look if I could be a planner, I would be. I just kind of move along my walk of life.” Admittedly, Farrah thought to herself, it was less a walk and more like sudden sprints in between stasis.

“Life’ doesn’t have a walk. Sure there’s things pre-determined for us, but then we have a hand in how much control and responsibility we take for that.”

“Is this when you come out to me as a conservative?”

“I mean it. I was born smart, sure. But someone else born just as smart with similar homes could be a total fuck up, because he didn’t take control over what he had.”

“Isn’t that more like choice, though? Not control?” Farrah said. “Look. I had my palm read once.”

“Of course.”

“By a friend. For free. And honestly, I think the details were bullshit, but he mentioned something interesting about the way lines curve. Like things aren’t always a straight line to an end. You could

be doing everything right and things shift anyway.”

“If you got charged for that *I* would personally go and ask for your money back.”

“Look I don’t believe in it! It’s just fun. It’s like, you’re thinking of yourself in a different way.”

“I thought people usually come out of things like that saying their psychic could like, figure out really secret things about them. Like the fact that they’ve made a decision or kept a secret before.”

“I already said I agree with you! Jeez! Look. Okay when you read a horoscope: it’s super vague yes, but it gives just enough that you can pretend it fits, I guess. But what I like is that even when he said things that didn’t make much sense for me, I could imagine myself like that. Like there’s this secret self I don’t know. Am I transformed? No. Is it a fun mini experiment to see if you can imagine yourself as someone you’re not? Yes.”

“What did he say that was so wrong?”

“Uh, that my family line was braided and broken, so I probably come from a mixed family. He said my life line was weak so I might have certain ailments either,” she put up air quotes, “‘of body, mind, or soul.’ Oh and he said my love line was strong but braided and also kind of choppy.”

“Well that’s how we know it’s bullshit,” he said. “No fucking way your love line is strong.”

“Oh my god, coming from you that’s hilarious.”

There was something in moments like that, escalations without climax, that left Farrah frustrated. She tore up the little pamphlet of the show they had just seen in the meantime. She hated their anniversaries the most. When they had first met the idea of seeing a show and having an early dinner would have seemed absurd to the point of being nonsensical. Like if you asked someone to take their shoes off before leaving a house.

Frustrating as it was to be given Friday off, at least now she finally got to move into the house. Between the loan, her private account, and pawning the ring, she had enough of a budget to

make herself a home. At the same time, something had caused her to hesitate from settling in. She could easily run any time if she slept on a couch near the door. But if the house became hers, really hers, that implied something far more consequential than she felt ready for. She shoved herself through the doors of the furniture store; those anxieties would consume her if she didn't resist.

Over the course of the day the two life lessons she gleaned were that furniture shopping for one is a soul sucking experience and that interior design was meant for the truly deranged. As she tested out mattresses, she could feel the frustration start to take its toll. Really, how bad would it be if she just blindfolded herself and picked at random? But everything had to be perfect. But who said that? It wasn't the end of the world to make the wrong choice here. Sure, it'd suck to bring something back and pick again, but this wasn't some massive commitment. She needed to keep that in mind.

Their apartment had been fully furnished back in San Francisco. Farrah remembered looking over Derek's shoulder a few times to nod in approval while he searched. For her space was something you either lived in or designed to make life livable. They agreed Derek would be covering most of the cost for the time being; between Farrah's debt to school and home she was restrained. He didn't seem to mind it at first though: within a month of living together he proposed to her at their New Year's Eve party, in front of everyone, in said apartment. Romance and entrapment are separated by a degree of interpretation.

"Would you say you prefer firmer mattresses, softer, more in between...?" The salesperson was a young girl, couldn't have been older than 22.

"You know what, I don't think I ever made up my mind about that. Frankly I don't know how I survived this long." The girl was completely stoic in response to her joke.

"You can take this quiz we have here to decide what mattress type you'd like."

“No, no it’s fine.” She had enough to figure out on her own, determining her ‘mattress type’ would only add to the confusion. She turned and laid down on the next mattress. It was a queen size; a little big for one, but Farrah did have a tendency to stretch and contort in her sleep. There was a period of time in grad school when Derek’s shins were perpetually bruised from her unconscious fidgeting. No, it would be nice to have a large mattress for one. And it was genuinely quite comfortable. It was made from memory foam that molded to suit its sleeper. She felt it push up at the curve of her back. “This one feels alright.” She finally said.

Farrah used to think she had a decent eye for things. Staring at the various curtain and rug sets she learned that it’s one thing to appreciate the appearance of something while you’re fixing it, or after you’ve constructed it. But to visualize and concoct a purely aesthetic idea clearly required a new way of seeing. Why would curtains matter? As long as they blocked out the sun when she needed them to; wasn’t the idea that they’d be pulled back most of the day? She chose the blackout curtains. Those would help with sound problems, too.

The one piece of furniture that had caught her eye was this lamp. It had a porcelain base with painted red and blue flowers. What was really interesting was the shade, it was thin with some threaded designs patched on. When the lamp was turned on, the delicate patterns formed elaborate shadows on the wall. That made her think. She also bought a lamp stand with a thin flimsy shade. If she cut off the fabric part, that left her with a stand with a metal circle at one end. She could stop by a craft store and grab some prisms.

She made the mistake of checking her emails when she got home.

Farrah, I just got a call from Allison. Are you in Australia? People are trying to find out where you are. I know you’re mad. I’m trying to give you space. Please reply, at least let me know you’re getting these emails. Derek.

The other was a reply from Allison.

Farah, look just facetime me. I won't tell mom and dad your new number. I just need to see that you're okay. Mom keeps calling Derek. I'll fill you in when you call.

That was admittedly much harder to ignore. But if she called Allison, Allison would tell their parents, her parents would call Derek, and Derek would call her. It was shocking he hadn't tried to call her via Skype by now. Maybe he was expecting her to call him. And then he could explain to her how erratic she was behaving, how this instability wasn't good for anyone. He'd have answers to her reasons; he'd explain how unfair she was in her judgement of her circumscribed life. Now, the best thing you can do, little girl, is go back home, beg for your old job back, and marry the only person who could be big enough to move past this.

For Derek, and she knew this in the way he used to look at her while driving, in every passing comment, in the far-off stares that let her know he wasn't really listening, she was a resource of passion. He had said that the moment he fell for her was when she threw a beer can at him during an argument over some policy at school. Farrah didn't remember this, but considering her track record, that definitely happened. For her, he was more like the idea of a person. Someone who knew where they were headed, who could handle the stress of a challenge. She knew if she stayed there with him, she'd be with someone who managed to match her intensity in an entirely different form. "I feel like you two are kind of like a balance in one way, but like also somehow quadruple the amount of extra." Her roommate Dawn once mentioned when they were out getting drinks. But over time the, as eloquently worded by the resident west coast hippie, "amount of extra" morphed into something alien to her. Arguments couldn't arise and dissipate frivolously, now they lingered in the background, hid in passing remarks. They didn't confront as often as they withheld. Their discussions now had arsenals. This had been a gradual process; Farrah didn't recognize just how much had been lost until one weekend when he was away for a client out of town.

“When does he get back in?” Allison asked over the phone.

“Um. Sunday night. He said probably around 9ish.”

“Oh god. How is he not exhausted?”

“Yeah.” Farrah hadn’t thought about that. She hadn’t thought about him that weekend, all that she had noticed were the spaces he left behind. She felt settled in those spaces. You aren’t able to feel just how much tension had built up until you’re able to move freely; your shoulders loosen and your jaw repositions. But he probably would be tired. She could see him sitting on a hotel bed, leaning in to his laptop, his face settled into that default he made when deep in thought, eyes scrutinizing every detail. His resting face forced you to think through an explanation for a problem you hadn’t posed. Farrah thought to herself then: there’s a big difference between guilt and shame. And when there is no one around to tell you how you ought to feel, is that how you really feel?

“Hello?” Allison asked.

“Um, yeah. Yeah. It really sucks. But Monday’s a holiday for him so.”

“Ah. Balances out.”

“Yeah.”

When Derek got home, Farrah did her best. She ordered from his favorite takeout place. She had considered cooking, but she got crunched for time with the Alameda Creek Restoration project. She sat close to him while they ate, asking, listening, yearning for something to ignite. When kissing him that night she tried to press herself as close as she could- maybe the numbness was all for a lack of friction.

It felt like a bad hookup she’d had in college. Mechanical. Cold. Cheap. She lay there in his arms. His left arm was positioned awkwardly under her shoulder. There was no way she could be comfortable like this. He mercifully started tossing and turning, releasing her. Through a slight

parting in the curtains she could see a round incandescent light peer through. What made the moon so beautiful to her was how it took the best parts of the sun and made it palatable. She could enjoy the astonishing power of a star without suffering from any lasting damage. Tonight it was especially bright, though. And why was it flickering?

Just then the street light died, killing the distraction in its crib. But a profound thought is a profound thought. She lay there wondering what has to happen to a mind to get it to a point where it convinces itself a light bulb is a celestial object.

Her little artistic experiment was surprisingly fruitful. After cutting out the fabric of the shade she hung the various dollar crystals on the metal rings, positioning the differently shaped prisms into a chaotic pattern. She couldn't play with colors without dwelling on their meaning, how they behaved. Blue and violet: the most intense of the colors, in a way. Violet light had the highest frequency. Red was the last color to reach earth in a sunset. It was like the fading light wanted to make itself known. And then there was everything else that fell between, all carefully categorized by the imperfect human eye. But design was more about how you saw them than it was about their essential nature. Farrah stepped back from the prism piece. That was enough worrying about colors for at least a lifetime. She walked over to her cabinet.

She settled on her back porch and started drinking her little victory gin. Things actually seemed to be fine. She managed to hold it together. It almost made her wonder if things ever really were that bad, but she pushed that thought away. That wasn't allowed, not during victory gin time. She still hadn't decided if she wanted a TV or not. Looking out over her still quite decrepit yard was entertaining in its own surreal way. Back in California she didn't often get to just sit and let her mind wander. There was always something. It was a double-edged sword: she kept preoccupied so her mind wouldn't drift to her predicament, but her disregard for the circumstances only sunk her

further. The constant momentum created an inescapable trance. Days, months, years, they were her enemies. Her time was less a constructed set of points A to Z, and more this incessant approximation of things she forgot to do. How many times did someone remind her that the date was coming up, and how many times did she blatantly ignore the closing window?

A strange purple light emanated from the neighbors' window. It was coming from a room on the ground floor. Either they were aliens or trying to make a point of something. The small shadow that rushed into her field of view seemed to agree as it leapt from their yard into hers. Farrah held her breathe. Staying perfectly still she tried to conjure up an exit strategy. She had just been reading about how locals had license to kill invasive critters, but for her to partake seemed admittedly somewhat hypocritical. Besides, envisioning herself killing another living thing, no matter how justified, was absurd. The chances she had that in her? None.

“Brrrr.” The little creature chirped at her. Wait, was that?

“Hi” she whispered over and over, raising a hertz and lowering a decibel with each incantation. Eventually the scraggly feline was just close enough to see, but not enough to touch. Farrah went back into her refrigerator. There wasn't much for him there, but she did have some leftover shrimp from earlier in the week. She tossed it at his feet. The two fugitives found each other in that moment. Farrah sat comfortably in the semi-darkness, letting the Saturday night sky and the mongrel near her feet be all there was for the moment.

All it took was a light drizzle Sunday morning to detach a gutter from the side of the house. “Shit shit shit shit!” Farrah clenched the ends of her kitchen table. “Okay.” She said. “Okay, it should stop raining in a little bit. Yeah. Weather app says yeah. Then we'll fix the fucking gutter.” She sighed and laid her head down on the table. A new move meant new experiences. Experiences with heights.

She had noticed an old ladder in the backyard when she first moved in, it was almost totally submerged by the overgrown grass. It was rusted and only retracted at the center, which meant transporting it would not be easy. She held it vertically, it rose high above her head. She imagined herself in a mini parade to the side of the house. The actual mechanics of fixing the gutter wouldn't be too hard. Just some screws, maybe a few extra for reinforcement. The Second story of the house was narrower than the first, and right above where the gutters divided those stories there was a little platform. She could probably climb up there and reattach the gutter from that position. She threw on her old high school sweatpants and oversized t shirt and pulled back her hair into a tiny ponytail. She put on a poker face for herself: she needed to at least look like she'd done this before, vague solace that it was.

“Woah, that. Does not look good.” Sean said. His car hood was open, he was looking for something. If he knew what, Farrah would be shocked.

“Oh, Yeah no. It's not a problem.” Farrah was trying not to sound out of breath. That ladder was heavy.

“Sure? Need any help with that?”

“No, I think I got it. How hard could it be right?”

“Okay,” he said. Great. Now she had an audience.

She positioned the ladder against the side of the house well enough. She held her breath. Climbing. She'd seen worse, higher. She did get pushed to walk around the Grand Canyon. She even stood at the edge- well, near the edge. She held Derek's hand the whole time. “But what if I fall?” He asked. “If one of us has to go down we'll take the other down with em.” She said. That was one of the last times they agreed on something.

The gutter was only, what? 2.25-2.5 meters high at most. Not nearly as daunting a height- but this was minus the hand plus the climbing. She gripped a rung of the ladder; she hadn't noticed how damp and slippery it was before. She could do it later, at least return with a towel or something, but now she had to show that she knew what she was doing! Two fancy degrees and a whole 27 years lived- she could fix her own goddamn gutter. She began with a fantastically swift start, striking while the iron was still hot. By the time she reached the mid-way point the ladder had crescendoed into an atonal rattling. Farrah could feel that a distance had formed between herself and the Earth, a numbing unfamiliarity and uncertain end. The distance didn't last too long though, once the ladder started to depart slightly from its leaning and she abandoned ship. One of her lucky shrubs broke her fall.

"Woah!" She saw Sean look up from over his car hood. Did he even drive? "You alright?" He made his way over hesitantly.

"Yep, fine. Just." She held up her hand to let him know she didn't need help, then hoisted herself up. Her arms were a little scratched, but her head and limbs were relatively intact. "No, I'm fine. It's a little slippery. Then the ladder started shaking, so." She looked back up; the ladder didn't even fall with her.

"If you want, I have a ladder that might work a bit better I could-"

"Nah, no. This should work fine. I just gotta be more mindful I think, so." She turned and looked back at the gutter. Her right foot barely made the third rung before a familiar ringing feeling overwhelmed her. "Oh c'mon." She said quietly. "Not even that high." She retreated down the ladder. Maybe she should wait until the stinging in her arms and legs went away and she was back to the more suitable emotional state of indignant rage.

"Last January I was fixing the roof of our shed, ended up dangling from the edge for solid two minutes. Maia had to coach me down." Farrah laughed.

“Yeah, I mean I can do this,” she gestured up. “But,” a fall can really sober a person to admit their defects, “I sort of have this thing about heights.”

“Oof, how was flying over here then?”

“Downed some sleeping pills and a Bloody Mary. Which sucks, I’m sure the view would have been nice if I was conscious for it.”

“Well, that’s the way to do it.” He then said “You sure you’re okay? That fall looked-”

“Oh, that was nothing. Really.” Her left hand was slowly forming a fist. She didn’t want to ask, this guy was weird, she didn’t want to- “Uh, hey actually, do you think you can hold the ladder for me? I can do the rest. But, it might help me if I know the ladder won’t slip.”

“Yeah, of course.”

Farrah inched her way up. Her trick this time around was to only look where she placed her hands, letting her feet find their way to the ascending rung. She was about three quarters of a way there when Sean decided to coach: “You’re almost there, you’re good.”

“Yeah, I know that.” She wished it didn’t come off as harsh as it did, she didn’t want to insult the safety net. She wavered at the top momentarily.

“Uh no be careful!” She didn’t dare look down, but she imagined Sean clinging on to the ladder.

“Oh, never mind, she’s all right.” Farrah gritted her teeth. Did she really seem that fragile? That fall was nothing!

Farrah clambered onto the narrow platform. “Shit. I forgot the tools!” She yelled down.

“Oh, here.” He grabbed the box in one hand. Then he climbed up and handed them to her and climbed down.

“Show off.” She said, taking the tools from him. It only took her about 20 minutes to reattach the chute. She added in some extra reinforcements where needed, then pulled against the gutter to check

its strength. Sean had gone back to his car work in the meantime, but rushed over when he saw her starting to descend.

“I got it,” she said.

“So you keep saying.” He said.

Down. Done. Farrah exhaled. Her head cleared as she felt the ground push up at her feet. “Uh, thank you. Really.” She turned to him.

“Oh, no worries. That was nothing.”

“I haven’t been in a house for such a long time, I forgot just how much maintenance they need.”

“Yeah, yeah. In a way it can be fun when it’s a side project. But something like that? Sucks.”

“Well, good luck with your car?”

“If I can figure out what the noise is.”

“Want me to have a look?” She asked. She walked with him to the car, brushing him aside before he could point vaguely at the hood. “What did the noise sound like?”

“Whenever I start it, it makes this loud sort of squeal? Like a-” Farrah looked at the serpentine belt and was able to ruin Sean’s rendition of his car’s agony.

“Ah, Serpentine belt’s loose.”

“Oh, if that’s all.” He said. “I’ll just um,” he looked where she was pointing. He tapped a pulley gingerly, then put his hands on his hips.

“Here, I’ll tighten it for you. Battery usually won’t run right without the proper tension.”

“It’s that obvious I don’t know what I’m doing?”

Farrah smiled, then pointed at the spark plugs. “What do these do?”

“Those. Oh, pssh. That’s easy. They um. Send the secret special messages to the car?”

“...messages from what? Your own mind?”

“Well where else would the sparks come from?” He poked around some more, “but my favorite is

this little grenade pin.”

“Dipstick.”

“That was uncalled for.” He paused. “Is that seriously the name for it?” Farrah nodded. She grabbed the socket wrench from his supply kit. Her fingers searched for the adjustment screw, finally tracing the wing nut she needed to work on. She started to turn it.

“You do this kind of thing for work?” He asked.

“No, my dad was a mechanic for a little while, I liked helping out. I thought it was fun.”

“Well between you and my daughter I guess I’m the one with the weird definition of fun.”

“I’ll agree with that.” Farrah looked up at him for a moment. “Is she interested in car stuff, too?” Be nice, she told herself repeatedly. Ask about his kid, be nice.

“Yeah, a little. She likes basically any activity that involves building things or figuring out how some contraption works, you know?” He watched carefully as she was checking the belt. Farrah grabbed between two of the pulleys. There was a nice quarter-inch distance just about. “But do you do something similar to this for work?” He asked. Farrah was becoming cognizant of how irritable she was. She rubbed her forehead, trying to force the pressure to go down.

“No, I work as an engineer with Morphum. ‘s an environmental firm.” She looked up at him.

“Alright so what I need you to do is turn the car on, and I’ll see if I fixed it here.” Sean followed promptly. “Alright, belt motion good.” She leaned in. “No weird noises from the alternator. Should be good for now, but you should get the belt fully replaced when you can, make sure they check that there’s nothing else going on there.”

“I doubt it. I had an engineer check it for me.”

“Oh, I bet they’d love to hear that.

“But really, thank you.”

“And now we’re even.” She gave a slight wave. “Well, nice seeing you. Maybe we can do this again

some time.”

“Sure, I can wreck my car again, you can fall off a roof.”

And after that, they parted, having fulfilled some neighborly obligations that she used to think were just suburban legend. Closing the door this time felt a little less like a reinforcement. Her clothes had become stained with gutter gunk and plants, and dirt, and oil. A horrifying mosaic of manual labor lay across her chest. She inspected the rest of her person in the upstairs bathroom. Her face had a couple scratches and smudges, to say nothing of the scabbing marks on her legs and the ghost bruises that she was sure would arrive blue as ever the next morning. It was a vision she wasn't used to seeing, but she was more curious to see the crude depiction than anything else. She tossed her yard uniform into the hamper and jumped into the shower. She sometimes had this day-nightmare that someone might break in while she was alone. Having a hungry feral cat sneak inside and claw at the bathroom door didn't help to quell that fear.

Gato had returned, thus solidifying their little feeding ritual. She tossed some aging shreds of turkey breast on a paper plate for him. She had to be prepared next time, she planned to pick up some cans of elderly cat food (based on the gray hairs sticking off his brown chin).

Settling down on her couch, Farrah spent the rest of her night trying to catch up with her work. They all had to give presentations tomorrow morning. Even if she could weave moving in, falling off a ladder, and being accosted by an ex-fiancé into a cogent excuse, she wouldn't want to.

She video-called Allison very briefly later that night. She 'just forgot' about the time difference so Allison wouldn't want to stay on for too long. All that Farrah needed to know was that everyone was still alive, anything more would be far too much. “Oh, sorry, I'll let you sleep. You look really tired.” Farrah said.

“No, no.” Allison could barely enunciate. She was trying to sit up in bed, wavering slightly with

exhaustion. “Um. You feeling okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah I’m fine. Just finishing up a presentation, moved in my stuff. It’s good.” Farrah was crossing and uncrossing her fingers on her left hand, hoping that Allison couldn’t see her haircut through half-closed eyes. Luckily, the conversation amounted to her asking the same exact question three times, until Farrah said: “So, I just wanted to let you know that, I’m here. I’m safe. I’m doing good. I’m just, you know. Busy. So, I’ll let you go.”

“Okay,” Allison almost drifted off, but didn’t forget to add, “love you.”

“Love you, too.” Farrah hung up and leaned her head against the bedpost. Once she had moved in with Derek, she basically only saw her family through a small screen. Landing a good job and established boyfriend was the culmination of her mitosis. She turned from a daughter into a series of phone calls, cards, and checks contained inside. But as she laid down trying to fall asleep, she couldn’t stop dwelling on how the gap had grown. She anticipated this distancing, wanted this distancing even. But her decision, the extent of furthering she’d gone to, that contained a message to both herself and her family. She curled up into a ball in the center of her new mattress. It molded around her, forming a small, warm imprint that she could take refuge in until morning.

* * *

“Hey,” Dana was hesitant to interrupt their meetings. Farrah welcomed the distraction. Dylan’s presentation was insufferable, and she was far from ready to present anything herself. “Could I borrow Farrah for a second?” What a horrible phrase. Like you could borrow a person. Farrah left with her. “Is this about the parking?” She asked.

“The what?” Dana asked.

“I use the administrators’ parking spot, I think if I cry I can get out of it when I’m caught.”

“No, no.” Dana put her hands up to slow Farrah down. She hated when people did that. “There’s a

man here to see you, he says there's something going on at your home?"

"Fuck." Farrah said. Of course when she was just starting to make progress on her house something would go wrong. The sentence 'Sean what's wrong what happened' nearly escaped her mouth when she walked right into Derek. He was in a nice button down with slacks. His crew cut only slightly ruffled from travelling. He stood arms crossed, feet apart, back straightened, he could coach a self-help seminar. You wouldn't know he had just been off a plane. You wouldn't know a lot.

"Hi," he said.

"What?" She said. He was actually here. He really was. Did he fly all this way for-

"I tried emailing you." He said. "And I left a Skype message. You didn't see any of them?"

"I did, I did, I- fuck." She covered her face. Stupid. You stupid bitch. You fucked it up and now it's all fucked and you fucked. "Um, look let's go outside, I'll buy you a coffee or something."

"Sure." They walked out side by side. There was no more love lost now than there had been the moment she left.

They sat down at the Starbucks two blocks away. Once they sat in the middle of a crowded bar while he ended their argument by listing every single thing she had done wrong that day, knowing Farrah couldn't yell back. He was calm when more than two eyes were on him. Then when behind closed doors-

"Look Farrah, I don't care what you're doing with your life now. I mean clearly you're going through something, but I- I just want the ring back."

"I don't have it, I pawned it for cash. I was going to send you the money when I had enough but lately I've been-"

"I don't want money from you. If it was about money I wouldn't fly all the way to nowhere to see you. That ring is mine and I want it back."

"I went to the pawn shop in El Monte, the big one?"

“I know. It took me forever to track it down. He raised the price on it by the way. Apparently the variety of gold in it went up.”

“So you do want money?”

“I want you to buy it back from him.”

“How much is it going for?”

“9,450.”

“Derek I can’t afford that. Not now.”

“Oh but you didn’t care that I would have to buy it back?”

“I- no. I didn’t th-”

“You didn’t think. I know. Look, I really didn’t want to see you. But you don’t get to start your dream or whatever this is using my ring.”

“I hated that ring.” That awful gawdy ring.

“I’ll leave you the account to transfer it to. I want it by the end of the month.”

“You really don’t care how much you’re screwing me right now.” She could feel her voice cracking.

Don’t. Keep it together. Whatever he does he doesn’t get to see you upset.

“Just be glad I’m not asking you to fly back to California and buy it back yourself.”

“Well I’m glad you’re really moving on with your life.”

“I hope you come out the other end of this.” He could always do you one better. “So, I guess you’ll have to get back to work.”

“Do you one better.” She said standing up. “Let’s go down to my bank, I’ll withdraw the money, hand it in cash to you right now.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t have the money. I’m giving you until the end of the month.”

“Before you sue me? Or whatever legal thing you’d use?” Farrah wasn’t sure how, but she knew he’d get the money from her eventually. “Fine. I want this to be over. So fuck it. Let’s do this together. I’ll drive.”

As they left and started heading towards her car Farrah was desperately hoping that today wasn’t the day she’d get a ticket. That would really ruin the power of the moment. Luckily it wasn’t. He sat in the passenger seat once she had cleared it of her folders and empty packages.

“When did the hair happen?” he asked

“Uh, got this done a few weeks ago now.” She said.

He just nodded. He hated it. She wanted to like that he hated it but. Well his opinion still had weight. There’s no point asking why.

“You look the same,” She finally said as she turned onto the road for her chase.

“Yeah, Eileen was trying to talk me into letting her cut my hair for me.” She always figured it would be Eileen. She didn’t figure so soon.

“Well, alrighty alrighty here. We. Are.” She said as she parked. “Let’s do this thing!” Nothing felt real in the moment and it was perfect. It was like realizing the monster was only chasing you in a dream. C’mon nightmare, she thought, let’s play this out until I wake up.

Farrah hurried into the bank, Derek trailing behind her like a relentless but unimpressive specter. She had to keep reminding herself that this banker didn’t know about the loan. Nor would she even care. Her shame came from an imagined authority. ‘You needed it for that?’ She took deep breaths, a futile pass at lowering her heartrate. “Hi,” she smiled wide. “I need a bank draft for 16,000 dollars.” She had to stop and think about the conversion to US dollars. It was a young woman at the desk. Her eyes widened a little at Farrah.

“Oh! Er, Alright. We will have to put in a report for-”

“It’s for our new car,” Derek said. “This is a one-time withdrawal, we just moved here.” He smiled at her, resting on elbow against the desk. His own little claim to the territory. Farrah couldn’t believe she didn’t see this coming.

“Oh, it’s just for book keeping purposes. More to do with us than you!” She said.

“Right, of course I figured. Thank you so much.” Derek said. He had mastered a demeanor that guaranteed a friendly response, no matter what he actually said. It was bizarre how much impressions mattered to him, even the most meaningless ones. It felt almost sinister to her now.

“So where in the states are you from?” She leaned forward.

“Ah, that obvious? San Francisco.” Derek said. He shifted closer to Farrah.

“Oh, wow. How are you liking it here?” She seemed barely focused on filling out the report. A robot could have done it. Would have too, had it been a smaller amount.

“Oh, I mean it’s beautiful here. And the people. You know Californians are supposed to be nice, but you guys really upstage us on that front.” He said. The banker seemed sorry to say goodbye to them, well, to Derek. She turned to Farrah.

“Welcome to the country,” she had a wide grin. “Oh, and best of luck with the move!” The banker’s eyes benignly admired Farrah. Yep, Farrah thought. I’m real lucky.

“Where can I drop you off?” Farrah asked as they left. He was carefully tucking the cash into an envelope.

“I have a flight tonight.”

“Wow, not even a moment to see the sights huh.” This was fun. Real Fun.

“No,” He scoffed. “No. way.”

“So this was sort of about the money.”

“That why I spent 1400 dollars just to get here and back?”

“Still a net profit.”

“I got what I wanted from you. We don’t have to speak.” This was the last time he’d get to do that, right?

Farrah pulled up right outside his gate. “I hope you feel better,” he said and slammed the car door. His anger was deliberate to the point of seeming rational. That must have been appealing at first. Farrah drove home. On her way back she called Stu to explain that she had to leave early because her house had a fairly severe (but manageable!) gas leak.

“Oh that sounds dangerous, you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah, yeah. My neighbor feeds my cat during the day and he caught the smell in time.”

“Great neighbors.”

“Yes, I’m very lucky. Um. So I’m sorry but I don’t think I can come back in. I want to make sure this all gets taken care of.”

“Oh of course. You can have the rest of the day off. Be careful. See you tomorrow.”

The moment Farrah got home she flopped onto her couch, burying her face deep into its cushioned edge. Her pulse was ringing in her ears, disrupting her throat and chest. She got up and rushed to her bathroom to wash her face, which at this point had been smudged with a conglomeration of makeup and sweat. The tears started coming in with the warm water, but she could feel the difference between the two on her face. The tears were denser, closer to the skin, leaving a stinging trail from the eyes to her chin. She must have felt hurt, she couldn’t just be crying for nothing. But. More than anything she felt-

“Empty.” She turned to the next cabinet. She was sure she had a bottle of wine that was-

“Empty.” Well that was it. She didn’t want to have to drive anywhere. Were there services that delivered alcohol? Must be. No. It was better to get it herself. She threw her coat back on and walked out the door.

“Hey,” Sean was watering the car, large puddles formed at his feet.

“That is such a waste of water.” She said

“Well good evening. I’m trying to become a car person, like you.”

“I give it a week.”

He laughed. “Yeah, that’s fair.” He paused. “So uh, I ran into your coworker today.”

“What?”

“Yeah he swung by the house, said they needed you for some emergency meeting and they didn’t know where you were. Everything alright?”

“Yeah. Yeah it’s all fine. It is what it is.” Had Derek always been this insane? Then she thought to herself: so long as everything was numb, “hey, um, wanna grab a drink?”

“I can’t go out. Maia is at a friend’s. I need to make sure she gets back alright.”

“Oh but you’re game?”

“Of course.”

“Good to know. I was going to go on a liquor run. It’s been that kind of week.”

“I got a few old beers that may or may not be still good to drink. I think if they expire they just get stronger, right?”

“You know what, sure. Science can be whatever we want it to be.”

“Exactly.”

It turned out that Farrah’s back stoop was just large enough to hold the two of them. A little uncomfortable, but she would take being awkwardly close over being alone.

“So I take it that guy wasn’t really your coworker.”

“Gee what gave it away?”

“You wanna talk about it? I mean I don’t have to know, I just-”

“No, no. So long as we’re being transparent. Um. Yes. So, that was my ex fiancé.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Um, our relationship. It wasn’t good? Like, I was in a lot of college debt, so financially things could’ve been worse, but, ya know could’ve been better.” Then there’s dad’s hospital bills, she thought. “Well, my family wasn’t exactly rich growing up. We had to move a lot so my dad could find work, so we never got to stay in the best places. And then meeting Derek-”

“I was going to ask his name eventually.”

“You know he had money, good job, I made most of my friends on the west coast through him. I mean everything just looked great, we had these big fancy jobs, nice apartment.”

“But?”

“Well, soon you realize that you have a joint bank account, but somehow you never get to buy or use that money the way you want, because that’s selfish. And then you can’t eat whatever you want, or drink too much, because that’s unfair to him, and his dad had drinking problems. Then you can’t tease him in front of his friends anymore, no matter how light-hearted, because that’s humiliating and he works with them. Just, I had to live the life he wanted, I guess is what I’m trying to say. And it was like, I mean I don’t want to get into it too much.” Farrah placed her thumb at the top of the beer bottle, creating a weak vacuum. “And now he knows where I live.”

“Should we call someone?” he asked.

“There’s like actually no chance that that would help anything. But. Thanks I guess.”

“He just showed up? Just, what? To spite you?”

Farrah curled her fingers and began tracing the underside of her forearm. “Who knows.” Farrah had to resist divulging too much. The over sharer in her was dying to take over. To be known, to be worth knowing, to have someone else care to know. But she had to draw boundaries. There was a vulnerability to being known as well. “So how is everything with you?” Farrah asked.

“Eh, the same really. Maia’s having a rough time in school. Keeps getting into little scuffles.”

“Other kids can be jerks.”

“Oh no I mean with the teachers.” Farrah laughed. “Well they want to put her in like this, managing behavior class or something? Like speech class for kids with tempers I guess?” he said.

“She probably just needs to be in a gifted class.”

“I mean I think so too, but what makes you think that?”

“Oh, I knew kids kind of like her. I mean, okay I didn’t know mini carpenters. But she likes doing things on her own, probably doesn’t respond well to too much structure, I mean I don’t know man I don’t have kids and I’m kind of a mess right now but like. I think that is what helped me.”

“I don’t even think she was considered.”

“Well that’s fucked.”

“Yeah. Her mom thinks she needs more guidance. She wants her in math camps and all that.” He then added “Since our divorce she’s been trying to be more involved with Mai.”

“How does it work between the two of you?”

“It works fine. She’s traveling all the time for work, so I get her most of the time. Maia goes on certain weekends, some holidays, things like that. That isn’t like. A problem you know?”

“What’s that like?”

“I mean. In a way I hate it even more.”

“Hm.”

“Like, we can talk and we can manage and I don’t think it’s for a lack of anything. If we hated each other and fought all the time then it would all feel worth the trouble. Like at least then the divorce means getting out of something. But this? This is just.”

“Numb.”

“Worse than numb. Everything is still there but we just don’t have it.”

“Who wanted the divorce?”

“Her mostly. I think we just lived a bit differently.” He was still hiding something too. Fuck. Fine he didn’t get to know about the ring then. “Hey,” he said, “So Maia likes building things, right?”

“Seems it.”

“Do you think maybe you could let her shadow you or something? Like get a taste of proto-engineering stuff?”

“Uh, I mean it might be a bit boring for her, but sure.”

“Great, I need someone to watch her next week. School’s off next Monday and I have plans to visit a friend.” Didn’t Maia have a sitter? Did she need one? How distant does her mom travel?

“Oh, yeah sure I could watch her. Bring her to work and stuff you mean?”

“Yeah. I’d pay you for it of course.” She wanted to say no. She really did. Why offer money, did he know she was in a bind? No, it was just a courteous thing, right?

“You don’t need to pay me. And sure, just remind me and stuff. Been forgetful recently.”

“I know how that feels like.” They just let it hang there. They were these free-roaming bodies that had nowhere else to turn. At the very least she didn’t have to be sober, and she didn’t have to be alone.

“Anyway,” She finally said. “You know the one thing I always knew for certain, like, about me was that I’d go into science. But now, like. I’ve had this story idea stuck in my head for a while.”

“Hm.” He said looking at the ground.

“And like, I can’t story tell for shit.” She laughed. “I just can’t. I look around where I am and I see what’s there and what can be made but I can’t actually make something out of nothing.”

“Well it’s never out of nothing,” he said.

“But you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, Yeah.” He said. Something was up with him.

Maia came in around nine. Later than expected, but Sean seemed unphased by this. He got up and brushed off the dirt from the steps. “This was nice.” He said as he left.

Farrah went to feed Gato. She wasn’t aware how much she had until she stood up. Once Gato got his meal she sat on the kitchen stool with some water. Money was going to be a little tight this month. And the next few after that. At least she’d been here before. She still could feel burns on her hands from espresso machines, the exhausting terror of being the night-shift cashier, cleaning the mess left by drunken 20 somethings on the diner tables and floors. But then, just like now, she couldn’t be mad about it. She would become a machine programmed to work, drink, and sleep. It was far easier to sedate herself than to consider just how badly she was being fucked over. And hey, the most physically taxing thing about her job now was getting a paper cut. She could preserve life to afford abandoning her own.

Farrah often felt that the world she inhabited was an excessively fast one. But there were these moments where it reached an even higher level; it was the kind of euphoria that was pain, not pleasure. It was delusion, not enlightenment. But how was she feeling now? That wasn’t what this was. This was the feeling after the crash. Like when you’ve been pinned down by a wave. Afterwards your body is aching with exhaustion but adrenaline still pumps through your veins. She stretched out in her queen-size bed, as her limbs reached for the edges she wondered if it was more frightening to make it to the end or stretch on indefinitely.

* * *

The little bird sprawled on the back steps greeted Farrah Sunday morning. There was a large cavity in its chest, organs had been transferred. She couldn’t acknowledge that the heart had been ripped out. She was barely capable of retaining focus on the black and white figure, and yet she didn’t look away.

“Mraow!” Gato appeared from the morning mist and began doing figure eights through her legs, finally pausing at the little avian tragedy. He looked down at the bird, up at her, down at the bird, up at her.

“Shit, Gato.” Farrah said. She let her exhaustion give her pause. She wanted to scold him; she didn’t want this to be a habit. But she wasn’t sure how fair that was. To him this was probably a gesture of love. She started laughing uncontrollably, small tears filling her eyes. Dust pans, as it turned out, are actually quite useful and not, as she had said to herself while shopping, “totally fucking useless if you have a vacuum.” Maybe she could borrow one from next door real quick. Sure it wasn’t the same as asking for sugar, but she was fairly certain that was never actually a thing. She could use a garbage bag, but the idea of having to feel the outline of the corpse was a tad too macabre for her.

“Hey.” She said as Sean(thankfully) opened the door. “Um, sorry about this but do you have like a dust pan I could borrow for like, maybe just five minutes? I forgot to buy one.”

“Uh, Sure?” Sean rubbed his eyes. He was already dressed, or maybe he hadn’t gotten undressed from the night before. “Can I ask why?”

“Oh, my cat killed a bird, and I just, you know. Don’t really want to have to touch it.”

“He WHAT?” Maia ran up to the door.

“I took in a stray cat and he-”

“What kind of bird?”

“Um, it’s black and white, I don’t know what kind-”

“Why didn’t you stop it?!”

Farrah looked at Sean, expecting him to take over. Nope. Nothing. “He must have brought the bird to my doorstep overnight. I’m trying to get him to live indoors, but it’s hard.”

“Let me see.” Farrah reluctantly let her follow, not before looking at Sean and saying “Oh no, don’t worry about it.” He accepted the critique with a quiet nod before heading back inside.

Farrah stood there, trying to sneak her morning coffee as Maia started to cry. This was definitely not her job.

“Where’s the cat?” She finally asked. “Where is it? Where’s the damn-”

“I’m really sorry, Maia.” Farrah said. “I’m really sorry, um, did you know this bird?”

“Tuki? Yeah I feed him every morning but he didn’t come because your stupid ugly cat killed him.”

“Oh Shit.” Farrah took another sip. She didn’t go to school for this.

“Where is he?”

“Look, I don’t know where he is. But I’m really sorry, I’ll try to keep him inside-”

“You know that’s a fairy tern right? They’re endangered. Your cat murdered an endangered species. That’s even worse.” Maia was struggling to keep her sentences strung together through her heavy breaths.

“I didn’t know, I’m sorry.” She said. “I’m sorry about the little guy-”

“Tuki.”

“I-yes, Tuki. But I’ll try to get Gato to stay indoors.”

“No I don’t want him near our property.”

“He’s just a cat, Maia. Cats do this. Look,” She softened her voice. She could still hear in a distant memory the way teachers spoke. Like there was some code for calming kids. It was all she had to go on. “I will try to find him, and I’ll keep him inside. If you want we can say a little goodbye to Tuki, but I’m not getting rid of Gato.”

“All he does is kill little birds.”

“He doesn’t just do that.”

“How do you know? You don’t even know where he is!”

“He sleeps here sometimes overnight. He’s a nice cat, if you’d want to meet him.”

“I don’t meet murderers.”

“There is no way you can ensure that.”

“Yes I can.” What does that mean?

“What do, what kind of bird is this? Fairy...?”

“A fairy tern.”

“Alright. What do they eat?”

“Fish.”

“Okay well what if Tuki ate my fish?” Farrah was only semi-conscious of the fact that she was arguing with a nine-year old about the morality of the food chain. But there was no way she was going to back down now.

“But fish are really dumb, so it’s not the same.” Maia said.

“How you figure?”

“Have you seen them?” Honestly this was a little difficult to counter.

“Well, have you seen Gato?” She asked.

“No, I don’t want to see him.” Maia said.

“Maybe you’d change your mind a little though, he’s really sweet.”

“I don’t care, he killed my favorite bird.”

Farrah sighed. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry. How about we give Tuki a nice send-off? And I promise you I’ll try to keep Gato from killing any more birds?”

Maia dictated to Farrah the exact burial traditions they had to follow. She placed the limp bird in an empty box, and set it right outside her window. She let Maia say her final goodbye (although she drew the line at making this a three-day affair). They agreed to bury Tuki three meters away from the spot where Maia feeds the birds. Maia wouldn’t feel comfortable placing food right above where his body was, but she also wanted him to be somewhere meaningful. When the whole

ordeal had been weathered, Maia and Sean waved goodbye. Sean closed the door with a “see you tomorrow!”

Tomorrow? Shit, she had to bring Maia to work the next day. She suddenly found herself envying a deceased ave. Endangered or not, at least those birds didn’t have to talk to human children.

Farrah couldn’t keep thinking about it. That was a problem for a different time. But right now she was all alone. Right now, she was in soft pajamas, hugging a pillow close. No one was expecting anything from her. A scratch at the door did challenge that. She walked over and let Gato inside. He wouldn’t enter unless she walked into another room. They had to do a whole dance: first she pretends not to notice him, he sneaks inside, then she briskly closes the door before any unwanted creatures slip by. The cool breeze bit her legs as she shut the door; winter wouldn’t surrender without a fight. Gato sprawled on top of an old uncovered radiator. “How is that comfortable?” She asked him. He slowly blinked. She wondered what other animals he must have encountered day to day. The other weather-beaten strays, large aggressive birds, rats of all sizes. Cats were naturally solitary hunters. They had to be in order to make it this far. Farrah figured he must have chosen this place because he knew, as far as shelters go, it was the closest he’d get to being alone. Farah retreated upstairs for the night, and the two lone souls in a house built for solitude fell asleep.

* * *

“Why do you have so many empty boxes?”

“Don’t touch that.” Farrah said.

“Well, why?”

“I had to order things, and I keep forgetting to recycle them. Is that exciting?”

“Not really.”

“Wh-” Farrah stopped herself. She prayed she could sever her own tongue. It had a conspiracy with the side of her personality that was best kept apprehended. What could she possibly say? Children were beings from another world. Sources of endless questions and more energy than she could ever feasibly conjure. “If you want, we can stop somewhere and grab a quick breakfast.”

“I want to get a coffee.”

“You drink coffee?” She nodded quickly. “Um, you know what they probably have food at the office.”

Farrah’s left eye started twitching the moment they entered the elevator. Fortunately Maia didn’t notice (she surely would then need to know what causes muscle spasms). She was too engrossed with her line of questioning as it was.

“So like how does an elevator work, what causes the pulleys to move?” “Does this office have a vending machine?” “Why is your hair lighter at the ends?” In response to which Farrah resorted to answering “I don’t know,” even when that wasn’t true.

“You don’t seem to know all that much,” Maia finally said.

“Well then I guess you and I have that in common.” She responded. She spotted Jared from across the hall. This was suddenly a miraculous sight. He could be canonized for this.

“Hey, Maia, this is my coworker Jared. Jared, this is my friend’s kid Maia. She’s shadowing me today.”

“You’re not friends with my dad. He doesn’t have any friends.” Maia said.

Farrah grimaced. “She’s cute.” Jared said. Maia made a face. Farrah went in for the kill.

“Well y’know, just trying to pay it forward for the next generation,” she ruffled Maia’s hair. She could already see the headline: ‘local engineer slashed to bits with carpentry tools’, but it was so worth it.

“Can we do something now?” Maia asked. It was a bit discourteous, but oddly restrained for her.

“Yeah I’ll show you my desk.” She widened her eyes. “Bye Jared!” Well, he was useless. Didn’t he have kids?

“Okay,” Farrah said. “So. Here. Is. My...Stuff!” She gestured dramatically to the mess of papers.

“What kinds of things do you build?”

“Build? Well I do mostly bio-engineering but I once had to help construct a canal for the wildlife actually.”

“My friend’s dad builds trains.”

“That’s a mechanical engineer.” Slipping into condescension wouldn’t help anything, but it might eventually teach her not to talk like an idiot. “I’m an environmental engineer. So my job is to try and figure out ways to help fight or acclimate to climate change.”

“What does that mean, ak-la...?”

“To adjust, basically. Like say a species of plants is dying from not enough water. Maybe we can build irrigation systems in that environment, maybe we can increase the population of plants that are better suited to that environment, or maybe we could genetically edit the plant to need less water.”

“You can do that?”

“Well yeah, I mean the latest technology is promising, but so far we haven’t been using it much.”

“Why not? Like if it helps plants, and can help climate change?”

“Um. Well it’s still somewhat new, and there’s a lot about genetics that we have to research and study. We have a ways to go before it can be used for anything major. Also, some people are worried about what happens when we genetically engineer other beings, especially when doing that in humans.”

“Wait how does that happen?”

“So there are multiple ways you could do it. The latest is a method called CRISPR/Cas-9. So there’s

this protein we found in a species of bacteria, which is called Cas-9. It basically acts like a scissor, and we can use that scissor to cut out specific sections of the DNA; we also use something called Guide RNA which directs the protein to the part of the DNA we're cutting. From there we can edit or add in new DNA." Farrah squinted at Maia, hoping her simplified version made sense.

"And that changes the animal?"

"Yes, I mean not automatically, but pretty quickly. DNA makes up your genome. Your Genome is like your formula, it decides what traits you have, so if I change the formula--"

"You change."

"Yes, in a way." Maia was leaning forward, intent, listening.

"Why did you choose your job?"

"Well," Farrah sighed. "Well I always liked science, and I especially liked building things and experiments. I got really into environmentalist stuff when I was a teenager. It was all kind of natural, I guess." Farrah actually hadn't given it much thought before. It was this core part of her world, and she never once bothered to question it. It didn't make sense to question her refuge, saving the planet and herself. A passion that guided her through high school, college, grad school, to get her here; something that powerful wasn't questionable. Why couldn't it be that way for everything?

The two settled down at her desk. From the moment they sat down all the way until lunchtime, Maia did not stop talking. "So wait, would the fish also have to be engineered? Would their babies need to be engineered or would that be like passed down? What if you make a mistake and the coral is all messed up and stuff?" Farrah knew all, well, most of the answers to her inquiries. But each time she gave the standard answer: "well that's what we're trying to figure out." She thought it was a clever line, but after repeating it for the twelfth time Farrah had to accept the phrase's shortcomings.

"Our teachers mentioned that climate change makes the water rise. So, would you have to make

people into mermaids?” Farrah looked long and hard at her expression; she really couldn’t tell if this was a joke.

“Well you can’t really change a creature’s species like that.”

“What species are mermaids?”

Farrah paused. “Well that’s something to...figure out.”

“I would think they’re like. Mostly fish. Probably all fish.”

“But they have human heads and abdomens.”

“Yeah but if they breathe water they might have gills.”

“Don’t they also breathe air?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well anyway. So like with CRISPR. I can’t turn a person into a bird. But let’s say that person has cancer, I can take some of their T cells, which fight disease, edit them with CRISPR, then inject them back in, now programmed to fight the cancer cells.”

“But like why can’t you take it a step further and give someone wings?”

“Genetics are way more complicated than that. Even the therapies we’re using now aren’t perfect. Besides, that can’t work with the laws of aerodynamics.”

Maia stared blankly. “Okay so,” Farrah went through the long form of explaining to a primary school student that basically you need light bones to fly. It wasn’t until she noticed Michael snickering that she recognized she might have been overestimating Maia’s comprehension.

Lunch came at a charitable time. Farrah took her to the small chip shop next door.

“Aren’t you going to get anything else?” Maia asked. Farrah had settled for some chips and side salad.

“Eh, it’s hard for me to eat fish anymore. I’ve been trying to eat less meat.”

“Don’t the vegetables feel pain too?”

“Yeah but they’re dumb.” Maia shrugged. Farrah was catching on to her logic.

“I haven’t been here for seven months.” Maia looked around.

“Oh yeah? Your dad took you here?”

“No, my mom. My Dad never leaves the house. Except like today I guess.”

“I had noticed.” Farrah said. “You close with your mom?”

“Yeah, she’s travelling the world. She sees everything. She’ll take me with her when I’m old enough to fly.” Farrah paused. Was it lying to Maia if she let the parent’s lie be? She didn’t think she could handle giving Maia a massive clue to her situation. They sat throughout the rest of lunch, Maia asking questions that Farrah endured valiantly.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” “No.” “Girlfriend?” “Also no.” “Friend?” “You’re asking the deep questions now, Mai.”

The fatty fish and early afternoon sun conspired to make for a very sleepy kid. Maia rested her head on the desk in the back, content to tune out most of the weekly meeting. Farrah would glance at her every now and again enviously.

“So,” Farrah said as they drove home, Maia in the passenger seat. “What’s the verdict?”

“Offices are boring.” Maia said.

“No disagreeing here.”

“But I like the Crispy stuff.”

“CRISPR? Yeah.” Farrah said. “Well, it is complicated. There’re definitely some limitations with it. But how we specifically are using it, I think at least, is fine.”

“Yeah I thought about it I don’t think it should work on people. Besides like if they’re sick and stuff.”

“Even if it makes them mermaids?”

“Yeah, like. What do the mermaids eat? Can’t be fish right?”

“Some fish eat other fish.”

“I don’t think I like fish.”

“I think I like them, or I care about them. But no, wouldn’t want to be them.”

They pulled into Farrah’s driveway. Maia gave a quick wave goodbye and jogged to her front steps. Sean was in the front yard, seemingly fixated on making sure this one rose he was trimming met some esoteric definition of perfect apparent only to himself.

* * *

First month’s rent forced her to turn her attention towards her impending crisis. Farrah took one last look in the reflection of her car outside the bank. She went with the same outfit she chose for interviews: dress pants, plain white blouse with her navy blazer. She shook hands with the banker, Craig, wishing she could bolster up enough pride to drown out the fear.

“Well, yes. Okay.” Breathe. “I’m deeply in debt, and my credit’s bad, so I was wondering what I can do to...change that.” Smooth. She had written that on a flashcard she kept in her back pocket. In her personal opinion, faking her own death didn’t seem like a bad idea- a skeleton probably looked like a better option to a lender than her. “Well I recently moved here from California, and I took out a loan to cover the cost of moving in, and the first couple month’s rent.” She continued to explain.

Craig was, well. Helpful in whatever way he possibly could be. The bulk of his advice more or less amounted to what she had gathered in her research. “Bottom line?” Farrah asked after his ramble.

“Bottom line: we get this payment plan worked out. The number one problem I see in cases with poor credit is when people fall back on their payments.”

“You know a huge chunk of my job involves working with numbers, but with payments and loans, I don’t know I guess there’s a mental block there, huh?” Please smile, she thought. This is awful

enough.

“Oh, what do you do?”

“I’m an environmental engineer, I also occasionally collaborate on bio-engineering projects.”

Craig’s eyes widened. “Oh, wow.”

“What’s wow, why is that...?” Craig’s plump face went blank. He didn’t have it in him to answer.

Sean had been kind enough to join her in her ‘pity party’ on the back porch afterwards. A short mental respite from her ongoing attempts to wriggle off a hook that only seemed to dig deeper.

“Look, you don’t have to tell me,” he said, waving his drink up and down. “But-”

“How am I this broke with my job. It’s fine.” She clenched her teeth for a moment. “So, my Dad’s in remission with lung cancer.”

“Oh god I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks, yeah. He seems to be getting stronger, but, it’s been a tough few years.” She stared down at her feet, trying to let the words just be words. “So his hospital bills have been piling up, and he doesn’t have private insurance, and my parents live in South Dakota now and can’t leave because it’s where my mom works, and-” Farrah’s mouth was drying out. “Long story short: I send money to help out.”

Sean nodded; he knew she wasn’t finished. “And now,” Farrah continued, “Between that and my student loans and some, admittedly poor choices on my part...” She waved her arms up “I am totally fucked!”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Well, you mentioned you were working over-time, right?”

“Overtime.” Farrah nodded. “Also, I mean if I don’t get a raise in the next year or so it would be insane.” Here came the turn. “But actually, I’m still not sure if-” She stopped and made a pained

smirk. “Sorry. I’m just going in circles at this point. Honestly, I don’t know when or how or if this is going to work out. It’s.” She picked at and re-adjusted her clothing. She felt very exposed. “It’s freaking me out a little.”

“It *will* work out.” he said. “You have your job, you’re smart, you’ll figure it out.” Farrah smiled. Sean scarcely knew any details about her situation, but his consolation was still heartening. She wished she could bottle this moment; there was never a time when generalized encouragement wasn’t welcome.

“And you know, if you need-” he began again.

“Ugh, it’s whatever.” She stopped him. “Just, let’s talk about something else. Please.” They froze there for a moment.

“So, Maia has been asking me nonstop this whole week if she can visit you at work again.”

Farrah laughed, then she saw him shrug and nod. “Serious?”

“Serious. She likes you. She doesn’t usually get along with, well, anybody.”

“Maybe that’s why.” She pressed the cold end of the bottle to her head. Her place in the world of kids and model-behavior was not a topic she was keen to dwell on. “Okay, really important question: worst drug you ever did?”

“Oh no.” He leaned back. “No, no way.”

“Okay fine. I’ll tell you, because I’m fun. Okay so the weirdest experience was probably when I dropped acid at an aquarium.”

“Oh god, no that would have freaked me out.”

“No, no. It was honestly really fun. Me and my friend Dawn just spent like hours with our heads against the glass at the jellyfish tank.”

“It wasn’t hours.”

“No,” she laughed. “It probably wasn’t.”

“I used shrooms a couple of times, but that’s it.” He admitted, smiling a little.

“I think back when I did shit like that, I don’t know I think I did it for the wrong reasons.”

“How you mean?”

“I. Okay so um.” Farrah paused. She wanted to get this right. “I think I just wanted to get outta my own head, I didn’t do it for spiritual shit, or anything like that. I just wanted to leave myself behind for a little while.” Adolescent reminiscing wasn’t nearly as fun or uplifting anymore.

“So does the girl get over the moon?”

“Hm?”

“In your story. Or story prompt.”

“Oh yeah talk about acid trips. Um, I think it’s left ambiguous.”

“Why? Why can’t she move on?”

“Well once you get to the point where you’re in love with a giant rock, there ain’t no turning back.”

“Fair enough.” Farrah rested her head in her hand. They were both individually shielded by these paper-thin membranes; what could pass through was distinct and limited. Gato trotted over from the shrubs. “Ah, there’s the bird terrorist!” Sean said. Gato barely looked Sean’s way and jumped up onto Farrah’s lap, kneading her left leg as he saw fit.

“He’s spending less and less time outdoors.” Farrah said. “But it’s hard, the moment a door or window is opened he’s out of there.”

“Oh you’re not so tough with the little bells are you?” Sean placed his fingers in front of Gato. Gato squinted.

“You have no idea how many collars I went through until I found one he couldn’t take off.”

Eventually Sean was able to scratch under Gato’s chin. Gato’s purr was a little irregular, it was short and quick with his breaths. Farrah stroked his coarse fur. You couldn’t fake this kind of

affection. Somehow or another she earned his trust, and she could be certain. She could reassure herself in all that was known.

* * *

All of the little noises in the office, the keyboard typing, the frustrated page turns, the rupturing printer, they all came together into this invigorating hum for Farrah. It pulled her out of one part of the mind, into the other.

“Morning!” Stu made a quick wave.

“Oh, hi. How are you?”

“Well, I’m good. Good. Listen, I just wanted to let you know how much we all appreciate adding you to the team. I mean really. Total honesty: I think a lot of the guys are working three times as hard now to keep up.” Farrah grinned at the hyperbole. Why shoot herself in the foot by ruining a good moment?

Here she had a little more dominion. Here she had some control over how they saw her face. Then again, Dylan was really pushing that notion.

“Hey, by the way,” he said as they were passing each other at the coffee station. Farrah didn’t even know they had been speaking to each other. “Mike and I are going out for drinks, you should come.”

“Oh, the others can’t make it?”

“No, no. Everyone’s busy. Just Mike, me, Mike’s girlfriend Ash.” There it was.

“Uh, maybe another time? Might have to stay late at the office tonight.”

Farrah turned and went back to her desk. She had dealt with worse, far worse. Her first job had been with a fairly major organization. The stress was worth the accomplishments, until one day when she turned down an ‘offer’ from a regional division manager. Within a week she’d been

informed that an email had been sent out criticizing her work and ‘value’ to the other managers. Derek had wanted to report him when she told him about it, but she convinced him otherwise. Risking what she had worked so tirelessly for, paired with the humiliation of it all, it just didn’t add up. The return on investment of resisting seemed too low. Moving to the firm in San Francisco, it manifested in smaller (but no less pernicious) doses. If she was lucky all it would take to stop them was to talk about her most recent trip with Derek. Sometimes it helped to show pictures for an added kick. Theoretically she guessed she could have still used those photos, if she hadn’t recently deleted them. Maybe she could find a stock photo on the internet and crop herself into it.

“Hey,” Jared scooted backwards from his desk. “I’m working on the investigation report for Great Barrier Island, I could use an extra set of eyes.”

“Oh, sure.” Farrah pulled up her chair.

“Thanks. You doing overtime again tonight?”

“You know it. My Fridays are wild. You?”

“Nah, Warriors on tonight. I will starve before I miss that.”

“Jee for a second I thought you were going to say you had to look after your kids.”

“Oh yeah, them too. But hell man, you must be exhausted.”

“In a way it’s nice. Although I am now convinced that this office is haunted.”

“What, the missing coffee cups? That’s just because Stu keeps ‘accidentally’ bringing them into his car.” Farrah laughed. The great refuge that was a decent coworker. Their dynamic was a non-threatening puddle of intimacy to make the day go by. For a little while she could pretend there was no ring or Derek, because to Jared she didn’t have a ring or a Derek. To Jared she was just some workaholic young folk.

Being the only one in the office was, admittedly, a little unsettling. Tiny noises grew in volume now that the bodies that had obscured them were gone. She leaned back in her chair. She

fought against the burn-out valiantly, but after three sleepless nights and enough overtime to be mistaken for two dedicated employees, the crash was inevitable. Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life, unless you're forced to do it so much you exhaust yourself. That was the problem with getting paid for a passion: her survival and her interests were in a constant competition for priority.

Stu would need to see results from her overtime, apparently he believed that Americans made use of 40-hour weeks. Farrah stood up to take a brief walk around the office; maybe a bit more circulation was all she needed. She weaved throughout the various cubicles, her left hand tracing the outer edges. By far hers was the messiest, no surprise there. Lisa, the one other woman engineer at the firm, kept her station almost completely barren. The two of them hardly interacted; their projects never seemed to converge. That, compounded with a difference in age and education, formed the absurd presumption that it was better to keep them separated. Farrah wished she hadn't inadvertently abided by this. She continued moving along. Michael's had the widest array of pictures, which would be fine if it weren't for the fact that all the pictures were just photographs of him on what looked like green screen backgrounds. At least Farrah assumed he had never been on the moon, if he had been there he would have to wear more than a t shirt. And here she was, on the other side of the in-jokes. Her time here consisted of being bogged down with work, avoiding too much friendly contact with Dylan, or indulging Stu. She was in the office but never a part of it, hovering along its surface. But as she sat back down at her desk, and rejoined the world of Seabins and pollutants, atoning for her Derek-related mishaps trounced any work-life beyond paychecks and something looming so large to be past her perception.

That weekend she slept. And drank cheap beer. And slept. And ate microwave meals. And slept. She was in a primal state, like a wolf who must harbor herself in a cave until her wounds are

healed. By Sunday morning she was starting to return to her baseline. She even turned to work on the stormwater project, and this time on her own volition.

It was around 11 pm when she put her work aside for the night. Farrah sat hunched over her laptop on her bed, her true crime show at the highest possible volume: “Picardo’s testimony led the police to a list of potential suspects for killing Hoffa, all some way or another connected to Pro Ponzano.”

“That son of a BITCH!” Farrah spoke through her cereal. The Skype ringtone tore right through this moment of bliss. Derek still hadn’t changed his picture on Skype, it was the one she took of him at the Grand Canyon.

“Fuck.” She sat up and wiped her face. Luckily, she was in her cute pajamas. Wait. She ran to her bathroom. Her skin looked clear enough, she brushed on some mascara and ran a quick comb down the left side of her hair. If he was going to become a regular surprise she might as well play to win.

“Hi.” He crossed his arms. “Did I wake you up?”

“No, I was just getting into bed now.” She carefully nudged the cereal bowl out of view.

“Okay. Just wanted to let you know I got my ring back.”

“Mhm.”

“And I was able to comb through all the pre-registered gifts, made sure everyone got their money back.”

“Oh, shit.” It wasn’t that Farrah hadn’t considered that-she just hadn’t thought about it long enough. “Thanks.” She said. Unwanted images of awkward phone calls and phantom gifts engulfed her.

“But.” He looked up and tightened his jaw. “I don’t know I just, I don’t like where we left things off.”

“Ah.” Farrah said

“Is that really all you can fucking say?”

“I don’t really know what to say.”

“Jesus Christ Farrah, what the fuck did I even do?” He was making the first move. Now it was her turn to take it a bit further. Then he’d go further, then she’d go further, then he then she then he then-

“It wasn’t just about you,” Farrah said.

“Then why didn’t you tell me anything?”

“Well it wasn’t not about you.” Farrah used to have reoccurring dreams where she wanted to scream but couldn’t. That same feeling rose to her throat.

“I had to tell people you left me. And constantly they ask me what happened and I don’t have an answer for them!”

“What does Eileen say about it?”

“I wasn’t going to marry Eileen.”

“Well who knows.”

“You don’t get to just leave people, people who loved you, who did things for you, who paid for you, you don’t get to just fuck off onto some island just because you’re what? Upset? Manic?”

“I,” she tried to interrupt. “If I talked to you, or my parents, or Dawn, or anyone, you’d all just tell me I was being crazy. And I really-”

“Oh right! We’re just so awful- I forgot!” Tiny streaks of red were emerging from his neck.

“I’m sorry.” Farrah said. “Okay?! I’m sorry! I don’t know what you want from me! I- there was just no way I could be there. And that is the only way I can explain it.” She could feel her cheeks burning now.

“Right.” He leaned back. “And New Zealand is just this magical place where everyone understands you and it’s all so perfect!”

“At least you aren’t here.” Farrah squeezed her feet just out of view of the camera. The sentence hovered, unfortunately felicitous. “Look, I can’t- I can’t do this. And it’s like fucking 4 am for you, get some sleep.” She slammed the laptop shut. She would need to get a TV, or something that she couldn’t be contacted through. She got up from the bed; she couldn’t be near her laptop or her phone; they’d been compromised. She lost track of the time she spent pacing to her bathroom, looking in the mirror, then turned back to the bedroom, then back again. Eventually she looked out and noticed the full moon. She grabbed her sweatshirt that had been waiting patiently on the chair and trotted out to her back door. She perched herself on the back stoop, it seemed wider than before. Her neck jolted as she threw her head back to look up at the sky. She focused on the faint halo that surrounded the moon. How could she be there, in the aura of a reflection?

She hadn’t meant to hurt anyone; she was so desperate to get out, that possibility didn’t even occur to her. Of course you didn’t think about anyone else, she thought to herself. You didn’t think, you never think, always about you. Derek, Allison, Dad, Dawn, they formed a hybrid shadow that now loomed in her mind. What if Dad was sicker now? What if she was wrong, and now Derek was with someone else because he deserved someone else? That wasn’t a drunk call from Derek; he was alone and awake. Because of her. By leaving she showed them her callousness. In a way it probably proved they were better off without her. But that thought didn’t mitigate the harm she caused.

Tears rose first slowly, then to giant sobs that would suffocate her if she wasn’t careful. Crying again, Derek definitely knew how to do this. That’s when a small collection of claws were lightly placed on her thigh and she stifled a scream.

“Gato.” She picked him up and held him up to her face. Gato, being a cat, was confused by this. But for motives unknown to people he didn’t resist this contact. “Hey buddy,” Farrah said after a while. “I bought treats the other day c’mon,” she led him into the kitchen and placed him on the table. He

froze where he was placed, tail swinging wildly from side to side. “Here.” She shook the treat bag, then placed a handful of treats right at his feet. He slowly sniffed out in front of him and cautiously munched on the little squares. Farrah hugged herself tightly as she watched the feline eat. She was suddenly feeling very cold.

Gato refused to sleep on the bed with her, clearly this was not a cat of comfort. The bathroom mat on the other hand. Farrah picked up her phone, turned it on ‘do not disturb’ and blasted the loudest ambient music she could to drown out her inner noise. She lay in bed, twisting and turning. The tears would pop up, then lay dormant, then pop up again. She extended her arm out, measuring the empty space that besieged her. Her isolation wasn’t exactly undeserved. The only being in her world who held no crimes against her was currently running his claws into a 2-dollar bathmat.

The daylight slithered through the gap between her blackout curtains, unlocking some system in Farrah; a relic of ancestors that didn’t yet understand that sunlight was not safety and no it was not time to get up. Farrah stumbled into the bathroom; her large eyes were now enveloped by swollen eyelids. She ran the faucet and cupped the cool water in her hands, gently lowering her face into them.

She opened her drawer and pulled out her makeup kit. The swelling could take hours to go down, and she didn’t have that kind of time. She washed her face, the familiar smell of chamomile from her face scrub was a small comfort. Done, pat dry. She put on lotion and then dabbed concealer on the more discolored areas of her face. Covering up ‘crying skin’ was an acquired skill. She placed her BB cream in tiny dots all around her face and neck and started gently rubbing them in. Finally the mascara. Just enough to make the eyelids appear lifted. This was the natural look- a fictitious normal. When she was younger her ‘look’ changed each passing day. She slipped into new

faces with ease. Back then her model for self-expression was variety. But this time was not those times, reasons before weren't the motives now. And the intent in this case mattered the most.

"Morning!" Stu said, taking a sip from what was supposed to be Farrah's coffee mug.

"Hey, how are you?"

"I'm alright. Still shaking off the weekend."

"Well, could you possibly ask for a better place to do that?" This was it. He's in a good mood. "Hey so I noticed my pay roll hasn't come in for my overtime."

"Really? Well I'll have to check about that. I'll be sure to try to get it in by the end of the week."

"Okay, thank you, Stu. Really."

"Oh no thank you. I mean the work on the Great Barrier Island reefs looks, great. Just, we couldn't be happier to have someone at your level."

Farrah didn't have the energy to feign gratitude, she smiled wide and nodded. Will smile for food.

"Ugghhh." Farrah leaned her semi-victorious head against the kitchen cabinet once Stu left.

"Big weekend, huh?" God, Dylan's voice was grating.

"Oh yeah," she said, "the biggest."

"Gah, I feel. I'm still recovering from my Saturday."

"Well, maybe try coffee or something." If there was a god he clearly had something against her. Or a bet with the devil or something petty like that.

"So, anyway." Dylan started to make himself coffee. "What's new, anything, anything going on in, life?"

"Uh, same stuff. Just, you know still adjusting. Working."

"Well did you get a glimpse of our bar scene this weekend?" He was trying to open the part you place the K cup in by force.

"No, no. Not yet. Baby steps." Farrah was beginning to enact plan z, leaning in the direction she

wanted to leave, hoping he would eventually get the message.

“Wait, so you haven’t been to Deadshot?”

“Can’t say I have.” As she was making small steps backwards, he was finally figuring out the large button in the front had a function.

“You have to go there! That’s it.” He turned away from his task of the day to face her. “We are definitely going there; you are not officially a part of the team if you haven’t.”

“Really? It’s around here, or?”

“Uh yeah bit of a ways up town. Best bar here. Got music, great drinks, cool people- young people but y’know not. Not too young.”

“Sounds like a dream.”

“Yeah yeah, we definitely have to go,” This was the part where he’d ask for her phone number. This was a dire situation, Farrah had to think of a line fast.

“Oh, I forgot! I’m supposed to meet Stu in his office about this thing, I gotta run I’m late.” She turned and didn’t look back. She went over to Stu’s office. It would be a good moment to tell him about a recent issue with the Seabin project, anyway.

The workday ran its course, though not without pushing Farrah to her outer limits. The exhaustion was wearing on her at an exponential rate. Once she was parked in her driveway, she leaned her head against the steering wheel. She could rest there a while. No point going in the house. Just a lonely old house too big and too small. Just a-

Knock. “Agh! Shit!” Farrah raised her head to see the aggressor. And of course. “Maia!” She fumbled for the window button to lower it. “What’s up, what’s, what’s wrong?”

“Got locked out of my house.”

“Oh. Well don’t you guys have a spare key?”

“That’s the problem I can’t reach it.” Farrah twisted a smile.

“Oh that’s too bad.”

“Look, just.” She was getting frustrated. Maia didn’t have it in her to ask. Farrah was feeling too tired and down herself to torture her. It just didn’t hit the way it used to. She rolled up the window and left the car.

“Alrighty, where is it?”

“In our garage in the back. It’s hanging on a nail, covered by a hat.”

“Ooo, very clever.” Farrah plucked the hat from the nail and grabbed the key. It was unbearably shiny. They must lose and replace keys at an alarming rate. To the left was a large stepping stool, so clearly Maia could-

“Don’t tell anyone.” She said.

“Tell anyone what?” Farah asked.

“Where we keep our key. We hide it for a reason.” She then thought about it. “And don’t tell anyone I can’t reach it yet.”

“Not a problem, shorty.” Nope. Aw, the magic was gone. Farrah was still holding it in front of Maia, waiting for her to take it. “You want me to open the door?” Farrah asked.

“It gets sticky.” Maia said. As they walked solemnly around the side, Farrah tried to figure out what the lie was for this time. This kid was more than capable- there was no way Farrah was actually needed. The reason kept surfacing to the forefront of her mind, again and again, doggedly buoyant.

“You can come in if you want.” Maia said. “I can pay you for helping me.”

“As tempting as that sweet door-opener money sounds, you can keep it.” Farrah said. “Where’s your dad?”

“Out. He said he had to talk to mom about some things.” Maia folded her arms. She wanted to look tough, probably. But to Farrah it just made her look smaller. Farrah sighed.

“Okay, well I can wait with you until he gets back, but only if you want that, and your Dad’s okay with it.” Maia nodded, then proceeded to text him. She showed Farrah the text pre-sending.

“Perfect.” Farrah said.

They settled down in the office area. She found the source of that annoying purple light, some kind of night lamp. It looked like the type they advertised to help with anxiety. Maia opened up her math homework. “Want me to help with that?” Farrah asked.

“No.” Maia said. About thirty seconds passed when Maia started crumpling her pages.

“Hey, hey.” Farrah wasn’t sure if she should push the book away or, shit this wasn’t her kid. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to go back.” She said.

“Why? Something happen?”

Maia dragged her hand across the desk. “Don’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s okay.” Farrah said. “We don’t have to talk. Or we can talk about anything else.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Fine then, I’ll talk to myself. I love chit chat, especially when other people are there to hear it.”

“You’re weird.”

“What does that make you?” Farrah said.

“I don’t know.” She was scratching her arms. “Just things people say at school.”

“Jeez if you can build your own telescopes and figure out how to make machines with little instruction, I really don’t think I’d value what they say.” Farrah said. She wished there was a right answer, a life lesson or bit of grand wisdom. But she had no perfect lecture to give, and even if she did, it wasn’t what Maia needed.

Maia sat there, her eyes focused on something far from view. Finally she said, “Was it ever rough for you? Like, school and kids and stuff?”

“So rough my country kicked me out.” She said.

“No they didn’t.”

“Yeah. I didn’t tell you? I used to work for the US government.”

“No, you didn’t.” She said a little more animated.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” Farrah turned facing the window dramatically. “But yeah, they asked me to build a rocket so powerful it could take them to Neptune in fifteen minutes.”

“That’s not possible.” She said. She then wrote out the equation $\text{distance} = \text{velocity} * \text{time}$. Farrah waited patiently as Maia looked up the distance to Neptune, then carefully calculated until finally, “here, it says that would take four hours traveling at the speed of light.”

“4.2 hours.” Farrah corrected. “And sure, if you worry about those fake laws they tell you online. They knew that I know how to build something that goes faster than the speed of light.”

“You can’t do that. No one can.”

“Well if I couldn’t then why would the government ask me?”

“You didn’t work for them!” Maia was starting to break into a smile.

“Anyway, I refused, and they threatened to lock me up at Gitmo.”

“What’s getmore?” Oops, Farrah thought. Maybe don’t bring up torture and the Geneva conventions.

“They threatened me with prison,” she said. “So I ran away. And now I’m here.” Maia was shaking her head, but smiling. “So, I won’t tell anyone about where you hide the keys, if, and only if, you make sure not to tell anyone who I was or that I’m a fugitive on the run.”

“But that’s not fair, because if I have to keep it a secret then I can’t find out you’re lying and prove you wrong.”

“I guess you’re just going to have to learn about trust, then.”

“Can I see what you’re doing about the Mangroves?”

Sean came in around 7 pm. “Hey, thanks for looking after her. I wanted to get a sitter but she didn’t want that and after what happened to the last one-” Farrah held up her hand.

“No problem, really. Don’t have to explain.” Farrah was in such a rush to get out so she could have a hot shower and nightcap that it wasn’t until later that night when the question finally hit her: what happened to Maia’s last babysitter?

The woman outside of Sean and Maia’s house was pacing back and forth, like a pendulum, swinging further and further, then finally slowing down when Sean came to let her in. “The hell is going on over there?” Farrah muttered under her breathe as she got into her car. Then it hit her: that was Maia’s mom. Maia had been showing her photos from family vacations that appeared to have been taken in another lifetime. She had no idea what her name was. Just as Farrah was about to pull out, she turned to the empty seat next to her. “Fuck!” She hit the wheel. She dashed into the house. She, quite literally, couldn’t afford being late. Where was the case? She scoured through the whole house, just to be sure that she didn’t have to. But she knew she had to. She left it at the house next door. She headed into her front yard, shielded by the shrubbery. Maia was just leaving now.

“Maia, hey.” Farrah whisper-screamed and gestured for Maia to come closer. Maia froze where she stood and squinted.

“What do you want?” Maia spoke quietly.

“I need your help,” Farrah’s throat strained from whispering. “I need you to get my bag out of your house.”

Maia snuck over to Farrah, eyeing back at her house before she too was hidden by the bush. “Why do you need it now?”

“It’s for a big presentation I have today.”

“Can’t you get it?”

“Mai, if I walk in then I have to say hi and then-” Farrah was searching Maia’s eyes desperately.

There were two options: Maia was genuinely too young to grasp the implication, or she did understand and was fucking with her.

“I don’t want to.” she finally said. “They seemed annoyed about something.”

“Well then you really need to be the one who gets me my bag.”

“I can’t!” Maia was getting tense.

“Look, okay, then sneak in.”

“What?”

“Look, I’ll give you a boost to your office window, you jump in, grab my back, sneak out and I’ll catch you and then neither one of us has to deal.”

“You’re freaking me out.” Maia said. They could both hear yelling now. Farrah saw Maia’s face drop. “I can’t open the screen.” She said.

“You literally were showing me last week how easy it was to break into your own window.”

Maia didn’t answer. She groaned and dragged her feet behind Farrah. Farrah formed a little platform with her hands and boosted her up to the window. Maia pried the screen open and crawled inside.

Now the wait. Farrah held her breath. If they were to get caught it could cause an even greater scene than the one she was trying to prevent. But they were far beyond turning back now. All she could do is remain deathly still and trust that Maia knew what she was doing. Just then her briefcase fell at her feet, then a small body to her right.

“Ugh! Thank you so much!” Farrah said. She waited a moment to make sure no one heard her, then gave Maia a hug. Maia did not reciprocate.

“I missed my bus.” She said.

Guilt expanded with each meter driven. Finally, “I’m sorry.” Farrah said. She bit her tongue in the agonizing silence that came with begging forgiveness.

“Okay,” Maia said. “My parents are really mad; you would’ve made it worse.”

“I know. You feeling okay?”

“Mhm.” She was rubbing her legs and rolling her ankles. Asking her to fill in the details would be forcing her to confront something that she’d rather have nothing to do with.

“So, how close are you to finishing your telescope for the beach?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know.” Maia could barely form the sentence through her mumble. Farrah felt a shudder come over her. The moments where there is nothing to say extend and tether you. There is no escape from that. Her go-to plan each time had been to search for an exit. But there were none here, instead she was trapped in a small metal box with someone who needed what she couldn’t give.

Fortunately enough, once Maia was in school and Farrah at work, their lives could disband for a time. It was a much-needed departure between the two. After all, there was no name for the type of relationship she had with the neighbors. If there was no name then there were no concrete obligations she could be expected to have. But Farrah knew this wasn’t the clever loophole one would hope for. Whatever she was to Mai, she should have been a source of support.

Farrah was doing her best to avoid dwelling on her guilt while she was making dinner that evening. She was starting to get the feeling she should learn how to prepare dishes that weren’t plain pasta or sandwiches. She glanced outside; it was getting close to sunset. She threw her grilled cheese into a Tupperware and went out the front door to witness the day’s final moments.

“Hey, now it’s a party.” Sean was leaning back in a small hot pink lawn chair in his front yard.

“How the fuck,” Farrah began, making incremental steps towards his stoop. “Is it that every time something shitty happens, you just happen to always be there?”

“You know you’re only the second person to mention that to me today, so maybe it’s just a you problem.”

“Me, and that one other person?”

“Exactly.”

“Okay I could spend the rest of my life having this conversation, but like. What the fuck are you doing?” What happened earlier today?

“IIIIIIII.” He sighed, trying to lean to one side but the chair wasn’t big enough to allow for that. Impressive it could hold that much weight though. “Got into a little bit of a stump...stupor? A block.” Was that a lie, or merely a lie of omission?

“Okaaay.” Farrah crossed her arms. “Am I allowed to know what it was you got stuck on?”

“Um.” He said. “You’re American, so you probably haven’t heard of it.”

“Any way I can atone?” Farrah paused. “Wait I fixed your car; I did my part.”

he smiled “That’s good. You’re good. Um.” He pulled at his chin. Even as the light was growing dim, she could see the strain. “I wrote these books, about ten years ago now. They were popular here. It’s kind of what I’ve been y’know. Living on.”

“Oh, so you’re a writer.”

“And illustrator. It’s a kid’s book series.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” They sat there for a while. They reached a level of familiarity where Farrah shouldn’t have minded these gaps of silence. But something was stirring in the silence, missing puzzle pieces that she’d never find, so she was left looking at a jigsaw man. “You know, and every day I tell myself, I’m not leaving the house until I get something done. Then I just don’t leave.”

“Hm.” Farrah nodded. “I’m not doubting that your books were popular, but like, how are you able to just stay home?”

“Ugh.” He said, leaning forward. “I do freelance stuff. Graphic designs, that sort of thing.”

“Okay. That some sort of big secret or something?”

“It just, it’s not what I would be doing if I didn’t have to.” He fixed his eyes ahead. “But I did actually use paper today.”

“Fair enough. That’s more than I can say for my colleagues.”

“Well that makes sense: you’re all about trees there aren’t you?”

“More of a water person myself, but sure.”

“Ah wait, so are trees an enemy? Because they need water?”

“Don’t let them know you know that; otherwise they’ll have to kill you.”

“I’ll go down for the truth!” He pressed his fist into his chest. They laughed silently until Farrah realized that at this stage she was too weak to fall out of someone else’s eyes. She turned to the ground. Was it him, or could it be anyone? Wasn’t fair to move forward without knowing. Wasn’t right regardless.

“What was that story idea you mentioned before?” He paid attention, but that could mean anything.

“Oh that fucking mistake, yeah. It was dumb.” She laughed at herself. If she had known Sean wrote stories, she never would have told him.

“Well?”

“Basically I only could come up with one line. And it’s not, even, a good line.”

“I’m waiting for it.”

“There once was a girl who fell in love with the moon.” He didn’t say anything at first. He was just nodding for a while, “Okay.” He then said.

“Okay and it’s shit and you know it but y’know what.” She set her Tupperware down on the ground and turned to look back up at him. “I’d like to see Nabokov make super-coral.”

The daylight subsided along with their conversation. Unspoken thoughts had become so vivid in her mind she had a momentary fear that she might say them aloud. They said goodbye and retreated into their homes. As Farrah was cleaning her kitchen, she tried to shake off what lingered.

* * *

Sending money home wasn't exactly an easy feat now. One major benefit: the distance made it clear that Farrah would not be taking any questions about Derek or her exodus at this time. She wanted to avoid the inevitable confrontations those inquiries required. There was only so much energy she could be expected to spend on a life she left behind. She hadn't thought about the night she decided to leave in a while. The conclusive emotions from that day hovered in the air, stuck to windowpanes and found their way into her food, but she kept the vivid details ruptured. She had become determined to end those thoughts in their tracts, if for nothing else than survival. Even so, fragments of moments pull together; smells and sights and horrid scratching voices paint over what should have been sleep. They were hosting a dinner for Derek's colleagues and a few of his friends. He had gotten a promotion and promotions meant they had reached yet another milestone. Farrah was a bit confused as to why they now had to become dinner party people, though. When she got a raise she commemorated with canned champagne and cold pizza with Dawn. She had taken to wistfully gazing out windows in their apartment regularly, wondering why she should be here, and not anywhere else. The frustratingly hollow crevice between them now had a hot spotlight aimed directly on target. "Well, it's going to be like this!" Mom told her. "There will be good times and bad times and times where you think you'll wring their neck, but you stay. You stay because of the good."

And there had to be truth there somewhere. There was a time when they couldn't keep away from each other, and it was stupid and impassioned and fitting. If they could get those months back,

maybe if they rode this out, they could get those months back. But the concessions she was making were not pushing her back to a better time. Marriage and dinners and work as pageantry; the nights she'd rather spend elsewhere. 'Do you think you want a family one day?' 'Yeah sure, maybe.'

Absolutely not. But the unspeakable barrier he provided, the apartment in Pacific heights, knowing full well you never have to live on microwaved meals and oppressive hopes, that security had its own seduction to it. It was less the passions of young love, more like the ceding touch to the friend who gives you a safe place to stay.

"Are you getting nervous yet?" Derek's sister Taylor asked. Farrah had been trying to evade her all evening. Most times when they were with Derek's family Farrah abided by the policy that the less they knew about her the easier things would be. Unfortunately, all it took were a handful of occasions for Farrah's more indignant side to shine through. And that was all it took to demonstrate how distanced she was from their ideal. Derek had liked her at first because she was the kind of person his parents didn't want for him, but couldn't say no to. Must have been.

"Oh! Ha! Um. No, no I don't think so." Whether or not it was a lie relied solely on what exactly it was Farrah should be nervous for.

"I know, a lot of our parties and gatherings can be pretty overwhelming, especially for people who aren't like us." Oh and thank god she wasn't like them.

"Yeah, well. No I'm actually enjoying it all so far. I mean all this attention? It's great!"

"Haha! Oh I bet you're loving that!" The point was getting sharper and sharper, and Farrah stared harder and harder at Derek. Taylor grabbed Farrah's forearm lightly. "Biggest test is going to be if you can put on a good enough show to fool mom, though. She's still on the fence with this." Other people weren't supposed to see it that way. Her guise should have only been a pretense to herself.

"I don't know I guess I don't see it like it's that big a deal." Farrah said. "Like, we're together, we're getting married, and then go back to our lives. You know?"

Taylor made a face and uttered a weak “I guess.” Derek still hadn’t said anything. You wouldn’t even know he was there.

“I’m not going to see my own goddamn wedding like some big fucking test, right?” Farah said.

Taylor smiled wide. There you see it. That’s not the mother to her nieces and nephews. That was a fling that went on too long.

“Well it’s not just you though, right? It’s all of us getting together to celebrate, y’know,” she gestured to Derek, “both of you.”

“Exactly, so why would I care what anyone but Derek thinks?”

“Well, he might care what his family thinks.”

“Okay, okay.” Derek finally said. “Hey, can I talk to you for a second?” he turned to Farrah.

“No,” Farrah said. “You don’t get to start having an opinion now. Look. If all it takes after six years is for you guys not to like, I don’t know how I speak, or my family, or whatever it is. Then why are we even doing this?”

“Okay, Farrah. Stop. Really.” Derek said. He got to have that say after all. She didn’t get to end things, he did.

Farah went to the bedroom, downing the last of her wine. She sat there for a while, fuming, muttering perfectly-timed comebacks and giving great speeches to a mirror. No one came to see how that was going, no one came to see if the bride was hurt. She hadn’t earned that consideration. And this was life now. You want to be free from roaming the landscape for odd jobs because you’re buried in debt? All it will cost is your body, your voice, and to remain an enclosed idea. This night wasn’t special, it wasn’t different, all it had done was force her to stare long and hard at the future that was impending. A knock on the bedroom door beckoned her out, another concession. The rest of the night was pained smiles, wants to kick under the table, and holding out her left hand so many times she began to feel a slight cramp in her arm.

Farrah waited a few minutes after everyone left, like their shadows were trailing a little too long after.

“You know I’m not going to put up with that shit from your sister.”

“Oh, c’mon. That was nothing, she was joking.”

“What was the joke?”

“You’re being way too sensitive. That’s just how Taylor speaks, to everyone.”

“Well I don’t want to deal with that.”

“She’s my sister.”

“So? I yelled at Allison when she was being a bitch to you!”

“Okay?! God!” He turned away for a moment, then back. “You were, awful! This entire god damn night. I mean do you realize how embarrassing that is? I had my colleagues there. That’s my sister.”

“I. Don’t. Care. How embarrassing it is for you!” She said. “You know what’s really humiliating? Like actually? Having your Fiancé publicly tell you to settle down like you’re the one in the wrong.”

“Well, you were. Sorry I know you think you’re fucking perfect or whatever, but you were wrong!”

“No. No, I really wasn’t. If she didn’t start up again with that weird fucking attitude, god, I would have been fine! I would have smiled and laughed even when your creepy boss was clearly-”

“Oh god damnit I don’t know what’s wrong with you. Jesus you treat me like I’m holding you prisoner here, you’re so manipulative.”

“Manipulative? Jesus I wish I was! When is the last time you ever! Ever, took my side, or did anything for me?”

“Anything for you? I pay for the apartment, I paid for your plane ticket to visit your dad, I-”

“Oh, Fuck th-” Farrah walked out of the room. She held her hands over her eyes, pressing them tighter and tighter, maybe she’d go blind. It would end when he wins. And he probably should have.

She spent that night locked in their shared mini-office. Any other refuge would have been a temporary fix. She sat there, encased in a small dark room, lucky to have a room at all. How many

years did she have left staying here? Did she want those years? Her chances for a clean exit were rapidly receding. So, she did what many caged animals would do when they saw an opening- she fled.

Farrah happened to come across a report from the Morpium firm in Auckland on their local reefs. She had always been meaning to visit labs in that region. She looked further. New Zealand's immigration process, as it turned out, was actually fairly easy. Their immigration website even listed her job on the 'long-term skill shortage' list. Her job application was accepted near immediately. Could she have asked for a better way out? Halfway across the globe she could amputate whatever part of herself that had become emmeshed with this life and the people in it. An excruciating procedure to be sure, but its success was vital.

Why did she do it? Because she could. That answer wouldn't sway anyone else. Especially not her bank account. Mania wasn't her explanation; it was an instrument. At the very least, her departure was her choice alone. But lives, evidently, aren't tenuously thin threads that can so easily be cut. This was a gradual shifting of earth.

The rain pulled her out of her mind for a moment. It really was a beautiful place. That she needed to leave California was without question. But as she sat there listening to the advancing storm, a new question, a far better question was coming to light.

* * *

Beach day had been marked down in her calendar for quite some time. An anticipation she'd refuse to admit aloud woke her up before the alarm. It hadn't even been her idea. Maia followed her the whole way on what was supposed to be her morning jog, and only left when a waterfront-related contract had been agreed upon. As it would later be told, Maia stopped trusting Sean's oceanic

knowledge the day he pointed to a jellyfish and said it was an octopus. The scientist from next door would amend for this sin. Maia now had a new guide for all her inquiries. Farrah had configured all of New Zealand into commutes for work and shopping; she deprived herself of being immersed into her chosen home. So now she'd get to see the famed Muriwai beach, just the icing on the cake that was a forty-minute drive.

"I'm ready to go out on the rocks and use my telescope." Maia held up her latest contraption. She had, according to Sean, found the directions online and constructed the retractable parts from some sanded wooden cylinders that she hollowed out. The biggest problem, Farrah thought, would be lens quality, type, and if she positioned them properly. She offered more than once to help Maia with the project. Maia didn't exactly say no, she just sat there continuing to work until Farrah went away.

"Well that depends on the rock, how far out you planning on going Mai?" Sean asked through the rear-view mirror. It occurred to Farrah this was the first time she was in the same place with the two of them, for all she knew Sean could have been an automaton Maia constructed to assert her authority. Technically that hadn't been ruled out.

"What kind of telescope is this one, again?" Farrah asked.

"Galilelian." Maia was wrestling with Galileo's telescope; she couldn't seem to get it to retract.

"Ahh. Okay. Which lens goes at the eyepiece?" Farrah asked.

"Concave." Maia said.

"And the other lens is a?"

"Convex. I'm not stupid."

"Just checking." Sean glared at Farrah. It was both comforting and curious to see him monitoring their discussion.

"Honestly Farrah, I'm shocked you haven't run into any penguins yet. Once you get initiated you'll

wish you hadn't been." Sean said

"Let's hope Gato hasn't eaten them all." Maia, Farrah's first friend, said.

"I haven't been to the beaches at all yet." Farrah said. "There's been a lot of talk at work about the Hoiho penguins."

"What's going to happen to them?" Maia sat upright.

"Well, on our end we're mainly concerned about rising temperatures contributing to overheating, but from what I understand there's been talk about furthering conservation efforts." Farrah said.

"Can you engineer them to be resistant to the heat and sharks?"

"That'd be a tricky sell, Mai." Farrah looked at Sean to make sure he noticed the progress she'd made in talking to his daughter. "But we're doing what we can for them."

"I feel like people say that, but." Maia finally got the telescope to collapse.

"They usually hang out on the South Island. But if we came across any Hoiho you'd know. No mistaking that scream." Sean said

"They scream?" Farrah said

"Yeah, they spend all their time alone because they don't like each other, then when they see each other again they start screaming." Maia placed her feet right on the center of the passenger seat, slightly pressing into Farrah's back.

There were no penguins to be seen when they first arrived at the shore around 3 in the afternoon. It did seem fitting. It would have felt cheap if you got instant penguins.

Maia and Sean had clearly been meticulous with their planning. A bleak misty day in the middle of the week in September. Besides the odd family and traveling couple, they got this little slither of the area all to themselves. Farrah took her shoes off, feeling the soft texture of the shore that was cradled by the forested cliff. It was early Spring here. "Still too cold to bring your togs."

Sean had said. “What?” “Oh- sorry. Erm, Swimsuit”. Even in the absence of direct sunlight, the water glistened, radiating a dimmed turquoise that she could only imagine was a real spectacle at its peak tourist time. Farrah gazed off into the ocean at the end of the world, far into the deep that even after all these years, was still out of grasp.

“You know it’s weird,” she turned to Sean as they settled on their towels, watching Maia perched on a rock that was no taller than a ruler, “with work I could spend weeks designing projects to clean and preserve places I never get to see.”

“Isn’t that missing something?” Sean said. “Like even in what you’re doing- don’t you need this?” He waved up at the open sea that was gently wafting cool air onto their faces and bare feet.

“No arguing there. I’m supposed to take a trip out to the Otago Peninsula next month, so at least there’s that. But no, so far. These beaches could have been made-up.”

“Oh, I forgot to mention: this is actually just an elaborate indoor wave pool.”

“Wow, and we didn’t even have to pay for it.”

“They only charge if you ask for a bright sky.”

“What about a nice sunset?”

“Forget it.”

“I feel guilty.” Farrah paused; he was still listening. “You know, Auckland isn’t a blank slate. I should have been doing this kind of thing on my own- learning the place, or...”

“Well, there’s always the present.” Then he finally said. “I sort of shoved myself away from everything, so I’m not the person to judge.”

“Well, why?” Farrah asked.

Sean took a deep breath. “I think, y’know between the divorce and my work and figuring things out with Maia. I wish it was just that I was too busy or stressed. But, I dunno, there’s something else there.”

Farrah waited. “Well, don’t stop there!” She finally said. Sean smiled.

“No, no, it’s, I think at least part of it, is that I’m, I don’t know, a bit embarrassed?” He shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it does. But, just for the record: I get scared if I’m so much as a meter off the ground and I face people all the time. So, I hereby declare myself the stronger of the two.”

“HEY!” Maia called out, then immediately covered her mouth after realizing she could scare the penguins. They got up from their spot and made their way over to her.

“They’re Kororā.” Maia said, then handed her telescope to Farrah. “Little Penguins. See.” Farrah picked up the device, and she didn’t know why, but she hesitated to use it. She had to reassure herself quickly that this was a lens and not a looking glass. And sure enough, there they were. She probably didn’t need the telescope to see them, but it was worth being able to watch up close their fat bodies swaying side to side as they climbed out of the water.

“So bizarre to see Penguins near a rainforest,” Farrah said, handing the telescope back to Maia.

“Most Penguins live in warm climates.” Maia said. She kept alternating. Telescope, no telescope. One particularly big penguin had waddled up to another, dipping and raising their head. The other penguin reciprocated the motion. But the group as a whole seemed to prioritize drying off. They then proceeded to make their journey into the forested area, to sleep off bellies full of fish and prepare for the next day. There was a little ‘cave’ that, according to Sean, many of the Penguins liked to use here as a shortcut to their sleeping grounds.

All of the Penguins appeared to be doing just that. There was little planning involved in their formation, or rather, to Farrah there seemed to be no planning. They pushed and moved around one another, squeezing through the narrow passageway in the rocks. They were all passing through,

not one left behind. They organized like atoms of liquid, sliding around, their form at large molding to their route. Or like sand in an hourglass.

They got in around 8 pm. Farrah gave a limp wave goodnight and went to feed Gato. She lingered where she stood above the beast's food dish. For Gato, of course, feeding was preeminent to his human companion's oddities. Farrah turned to look out her window, but only saw her nebulous reflection against the darkness. She hadn't even set foot in the water, and yet the pulse of the waves was ringing in her ears.

* * *

Sundays, Farrah thought to herself as she began to lay out her work for the day, were deceptive. If she wasn't catching up on work missed, she was prepping for a long day tomorrow. Even if she forced herself to set the work aside, there would still be this hollow feeling of anticipation. Knowing you aren't yet in the thick, and there's nothing you can do but sit and let that rush of phone calls and projects and papers sweep you up. Technically a day of rest, but Farrah had struggled since she was a kid to untangle resting from sinking. Luckily enough she had been ingratiated with a hand in just about every project being run. If it wasn't collaborating on protecting the reefs and marine life, it was giving a second opinion on Jared's plans for wind turbines near the coast. There was a warm familiarity to it for her. It did something, it was taking what you were given and planning a way out. Or at least alleviating some burden.

The morning morphed into a single organism of hours and minutes, her hands switching from typing to graphing to her notepad to typing again. As the workload lightened, she started drifting from her tasks. She opened her new Instagram profile. She thought while making it she could fill it with pictures of the landscape. Unfortunately the realization came too late with the grainy photos of penguin's backs and poorly lit landscapes that she was in fact not a very good

photographer. Still, it was fun to look at other peoples'. The carefully constructed poses, the attention to timing and lighting and camerawork, all embroidered with syrupy sweet comments. No, she wasn't ready to jump back into that world, of birthday murals and bragging rights. But she couldn't say she never would. Because it was true, there were things you couldn't plan for, there were things you'd want and forget, and there were things you couldn't forget easily.

Farrah laid the laptop on the coffee table. She sat down, fixed her shirt and posture. I'm not there anymore, she thought. What do I stand to lose?. She wasn't exactly sure what it was she needed to say, only that something must be said, for both of their sakes. And that something had to be truthful. To prepare a well woven stream of lies and truths mixed beautifully to form a satisfying conclusion, that would betray a core part of her that only now was emerging. She pressed call. The rings grew longer, her heart was starting to pound into her throat.

"Oh." Derek was wearing his old college shirt. Must have just been out for a run.

"Hi." Farrah said.

"What's up?" They had lost their old way of being. They were now trying to trace out a new dance; one that didn't resemble what they'd trained to do.

"Ugh, trying to relax. It's my day off so."

"Well that's fun." He said.

"How was your birthday?" She asked.

"Ha." He looked off at some point out of her view. "Weird. I think everyone kind of misses having you around."

"I knew it would be boring without me."

"Yeah I guess that's technically true. Or you know, I guess healthy people would call it calm."

"Healthy is boring though, right?"

"For sure."

“Happy birthday. I would have sent you like a message or card but I figured-”

“No, no. You did the right thing there. But thanks. Still recovering though.”

“Dante?” Farrah said. Out of all their friends, he was somehow the best at bringing out the worst in everyone. The number of drunken arguments he started with her alone.

“You know he’s even worse without you there. I think you were a buffer.”

“Really? How is he worse?”

“Ugh, he started arguing with Mariel over monogamy, then he somehow pressured me to order a Four Horsemen.”

“Fuck even I couldn’t do that.”

“He’s just so persuasive, I really don’t know why he doesn’t go to law school.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s one of the few things keeping us all safe.”

He laughed. “Uh,” he said. “So like, are we good?” She wasn’t used to seeing him act like this, less assured, a Derek who had accepted that he lost hold of the reigns.

“I feel like that’s more up to you,” Farrah said. “But I also feel like I owe you a lot.”

“I wouldn’t mind a check for another 10,000.”

“Ha-ha.” Farrah said. At least they were settled now, enough distance existed. “No, like. I mean. I think. Back then. I.” How do you do this? “I was trying to build a life for myself that just didn’t fit.”

“I don’t really know what that means.”

“Um,” Farrah said. “I think when we started being a thing, I was a lot younger, and over time things were changing but.” Say it. “Didn’t you ever feel like we stayed together because we were afraid?”

He was leaning forward, focused. “Maybe, towards the end.” He said.

“But you know, at that point we were kind of stuck. And then you were the one with your name on the lease; I didn’t own most of our shit. So even though we weren’t doing so great, even though I was unhappy, I don’t know I felt like I had no other choice. And that, well it scared me. It scared me

more than being alone, or in debt, or anything.” Farrah spoke swiftly but deliberately; she only wanted to impart what he needed to know. She caused enough pain for him already without belaboring the point. He paused for a moment, taking it in.

“You didn’t tell me anything.” He said.

“Oh come on.” Farrah forced half a laugh. “Somehow things would twist, then we’d be arguing about something you did, then about me, I mean. How would I explain that to you?”

“Yeah.”

“But I should say ‘I’m sorry’ on my own volition. So...I’m sorry.”

“I understand.” This was as far as they were going to get. Sometimes there’s thresholds you can’t expect to cross, so it was all she could ask for.

“So, anyway.” Farrah shrugged. Her palms were sweaty. “How’re things with Eileen?”

“Right, that.” He clasped his hands, quickly looking up then back at her. “No, that didn’t work out either.”

“Oh. Sorry about that.”

“No, at least I got to be the one who ended that.”

“Well that’s really all that matters.” Farrah tensed up for the question which had an answer she didn’t want, and already had. “Just so we’re clear, that weekend in L.A., did you sleep with her?” That was right before they ‘broke up’ for a day and a half. Back then, no matter how many times they parted, they were seamed right back together. By the end there were multiple stitches and gaps between them. Derek paused, he knew exactly what he was going to say, but in his face, she could tell that he would give anything to return to a communication of misinterpretations and vague attacks.

“Yes,” he nodded vigorously to get the word out then slowly froze. “I’m sorry.” They sat there, unsettled by the stillness. But to force a fight was inciting motion backwards, that would have

assumed there was anything that could be saved. “I, I was upset, and seeing her, I just-”

“Don’t.” Farrah said. “It’s fine. It’s. I knew. It’s fine.” Farrah was too conscious now of how that anger she used to harbor was always about herself. “Well, sorry it didn’t work out?”

“What about you? Are you seeing anyone?” His voice sounded hopeful. But for what?

“Oh, no. No.” She said. “No, I think I need some time on my own to figure things out, then worry about that. But. No. Dating right now would be a drain.”

“You’ll find someone.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, come the fuck on.” He was smiling. “You’re like a reluctant extrovert it is the weirdest thing.”

“I don’t even know what that word means anymore. I-we’ve been over this.”

“Only about thirty times though.”

“That seems like low-balling.”

“Well, I’ve been playing on the safe side lately.” He said. “No, I don’t know I mean I obviously don’t know what you want. But you do act like you need people less than you do. And that, that drives me crazy.”

“I don’t know. I really don’t.” Farrah said. “See that’s part of the problem. I don’t really know how I’d define myself. All I know is there is a person there. I don’t know. I guess I didn’t use my teenage years the right way. It’s like I’m still on square one.”

“Well,” he said, “at least you’re being honest.”

Their conversation lingered on. Remnants of a past that wouldn’t die.

She closed the laptop. It came to her then that relief and grief were closely intertwined in some part of her mind that she kept buried.

“No regrets,” She said out loud to Gato, scratching under his chin. Though Gato had no familiarity with Derek, she was sure he at least knew the feeling. He lived without question; it had taken her a

while to get there herself. “Right, bud? Right baby?” He blinked slowly, then opened his eyes into tiny slits. Whether or not Farrah was a people person, she figured out she was a cat person. And how else was she supposed to find that out besides by living alone?

The next morning Farrah felt a lingering sense of placidity. The day ahead of her could just unfold without resistance, free to resemble routine or spontaneity. And eventually the constant threat of being broke would only be a far-from-probable fear, instead of a vague-but-possible-all-else-goes-wrong fear. She even decided she’d try someplace new for lunch. She had to laugh at her own excitement. People only really think of the runaway bride as someone racing away from the alter and down the streets, clutching the hem of their skirt as their veil falls off. But imagining that her daring new life would amount to working at a small firm and getting coffee at not-Starbucks, well, it didn’t have quite the ring of rebellion you’d hope for.

Farrah sat herself at the table by the window facing the shoreline. Sorting through her work files, she let the noises of the little café swarm around her. Mild complaining from the geriatric couple to her left, the sharp laughter from the group of teenagers audible from across the restaurant, a stressed mini-Farrah pouring over a chemistry textbook much larger than herself. That was right, there was a university nearby. One of these nights, she thought to herself, I should go out and explore the city. Maybe finally meet women her age, a hunger for that alliance was imminent. Farrah was almost reluctant to turn to her tasks; she truly felt she could stay there, looking over the water in the company of strangers forever. Even though she eventually caved in and resumed her progress, the outside world remained in her periphery. Here, she thought once the day had ended and she was on her way out. Here was something she had no desire to sever from.

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“Hey, you want to see this?”

“What Mai?” Farrah was trying her best to focus on fixing up her yard. She wanted to keep the place as natural as possible, letting the plant life thrive and grow on its own, but years of lawn work, pesticides and neglect had made the terrain quite precarious. Meanwhile, Maia seemed to have reached a phase of never taking off her roller-skates. A critical period of development that really has only one way of concluding.

“Look, then. I’m only going to do it once.”

“I’m looking,” Farrah had her head turned, hands still tending to the dirt. She had bought this fertilizer that was supposed to be designed specifically for this ecosystem. The gaps in her knowledge on this topic were staggering.

“No, like facing me.” Farrah sighed and flopped backwards, pulling in her knees then shifting in Maia’s direction. At least she had a helmet on.

“Okay.” Maia took a deep breath. Then she spread her arms out wide and kicked herself into a spin. She lifted her leg slightly before stumbling a little, ending after she had made a 360° turn.

“Very impressive.” Farrah said, her left hand slowly creeping back towards the fern she was trying to resurrect. Maia tried to row herself backwards with her hands. Farrah could have explained to her that her method wouldn’t work, or that she should be careful of the rock behind her, but there was great credence to be given to letting someone learn the hard way.

“Yeah, I picked that one up in less than a week, saw someone do that at the park.” She said, struggling to remain on kilter.

“I wouldn’t have guessed.” Farrah said.

“What are, um. What are you doing?” Maia was now trying to walk onto Farrah’s lawn with the skates. Don’t step on a plant, don’t step on a-

“Oh I’m just trying to get these plants to start growing. I think I’m officially anti-lawn now, but I

don't know how to start.”

“Why do you hate lawns so much?” Maia asked.

“They ruin the way the land naturally would grow, they use up way too much water-”

“Don't all plants need water?”

“Well, yeah. Some more than others though, and grass is a very, very, greedy plant.”

“I keep hearing people saying things like that in school.” Farrah wanted to ask Maia why she bothered posing the question then, but she knew the answer.

“Are you getting excited for break?” Farrah asked. It was getting easier, talking to Maia. Farrah was still determining if it was because Maia was getting older or she was. Maybe both.

“Yes! Yes, yes.” Maia kicked her feet forward as she settled beside her, the wheels on her right toe spinning. “I'm going to go see my mom next week, then I'm going to go to Wellington with her, and then I'm going to finally build a model rocket.”

“What are you gonna make it from? Did you get one of those kits?”

“No, no but um, my mom is going to take me shopping and there's a place where she is right now and she says we can get the supplies there.”

“That's exciting! Yeah I remember my first model rocket.” It was actually true. On the last day of her gifted program in 5th grade they got to build their own. Farrah's went the highest, and she angled it in such a way that she was one of the three kids whose rockets managed to both fly and land successfully. She had to fight herself from bragging about that even now.

“Do you think you can help me with it?”

“Like am I able to, or do I want to?” Farrah may have been maturing, but having to go on too long without teasing this kid was simply cruel. “Because I meaaan, I cooould.”

“Stop! Why won't you help me!” Maia slammed her fists down on her knees. She was smiling.

“Well, I mean when is the last time you helped me?”

“I helped when you needed to get your case back.”

“That was then, though. I mean, like. Recently.”

“I showed you my spin move.”

“That’s true.” Farrah nodded. “Fine. I’ll help you build it.”

“Good.” That was about as close to a thank you she was going to get from Mai. The two of them had formed their own little code of sorts. An unspoken alliance of two minds that were reluctantly alike.

There was a small beach right outside the city area. Farrah had seen it on one of her trips to the coastline to monitor the Seabins. She decide, once she finished attempting to re-invigorate the ecosystem that was her yard, it might be worth a visit down. As her new life progressed and she fell further into other lives and projects and activities, there was something that needed to be retained. To speak the words for that something would, in a way, be antithetical to its mission. Regardless of how one would define it, cut it down, make it seem reasonably placed, an evening trip to the ocean to think by herself affirmed this unnamed quality.

Summer was beginning to reveal itself in the cascades of greenery and beating sunlight. Dark hair whipped around her face as she exited the car. She approached the shoreline cautiously, there was no one else but her.

She walked right on the border where the dry and damp sand met, left side warm right side cold. And then when she turned around, her feet traded positions. This balance could have been permanent if the ocean ever made up its mind as to what line it didn’t cross. But with the evening tide her feet were conquered by the water, then the sand started to matriculate between her toes. She kept her arms crossed, held close together, looking out at the horizon from time to time. The rush of the waves, though irregular, coalesced into a soothing background noise. Back in her early days in

the field, when she was a self-denying insomniac, she tried listening to a 10-hour video of looped beach sounds. “Does it work?” Derek asked. “Eh. Maybe it’ll bore me to sleep.” She said. In that moment, walking with ice cold feet in the last remarks of sunlight, she determined that there was no single sense that the beach could stimulate to sooth her. To hear the waves to an end was to miss whatever it was that lured people to the shores. Studies on the matter were still somewhat underdeveloped, but she did get a vague sense of pride when she read about a finding that those living near the coast in Wellington reported having better mental health. For Farrah, it was the unity of her senses beside a masterful life force, where patterns both existed and were altered with each overly ambitious wave.

She planted herself right where she hoped the tide wouldn’t go beyond and grasped the sand beneath her. Moments like these used to consistently be interceded by some internal voice that badgered her over lost time. She wasn’t even really sure what the threat was supposed to be there, but it’s enough to get you moving. Time was wasted! No time to stop and think and sense the world around you. Because that is an improper use of your time. It felt back in those days that she never got to determine what the right usage was. Job before 25, apartment after three years with Derek, married before her cousin.

She lay back into the sand. She had changed the space to change the time. And now that she was at peace with both, all she could wonder is what was she going to do within this chosen axis. Farrah had been so preoccupied with gaining control she hadn’t even questioned what the new perspective was supposed to look like. By the time she had completed her rumination, washed off her feet, and strapped into her car, it was 8:37.

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The ebb and flow of the days went on, the new rhythmic pace fitting Farrah's wants much more. The day of the big storm didn't dare to threaten this, but it brought something out in her. A moment where she could look around, forwards, backwards, notice that her systems weren't just intact but functioning fluidly. As the kettle warmed she turned to look at Gato, curled up soundly underneath the coffee table. More and more he was getting used to staying indoors, days like these were a bit of a relief. Fate had created adaptive circumstances; even though the next warm January night would bring claw marks on wooden doors and an unease in the local aviary community. But this was now, and now there was no need to pray the failsafe bell-collar would do the trick. Now they were here, breathing slowly and observing. All of the pressure and tension held up in the sky was in the midst of a spectacular release. But sunny days would come back, the weather (hopefully) would remain temperate, and doorbells would ring.

"Hi," Maia said.

"Hey."

"Uh, so. Two things. One, I finally got my rocket kit." She paused. "So you get to see me make it."

"Sounds good."

"And two, my Dad wanted to show you this." She held out a sheet of paper. "You mentioned your birthday was coming up, so I think this is supposed to be from the both of us." It was a scene of the ocean at night. The night sky was a deep navy, with swirling cosmos revolving around the full moon. The ocean a bright turquoise, jellyfish of a vastly unrealistic variety rivaled the starlight in luminousness. Right in the center was the image of a girl. She sat in a small wooden raft, knees hugged close, head turned up at the sky. Beneath her was an extensive display of marine life, where all forms were cohabitating peacefully. It disarmed her knowledge of the terrain. Farrah's one sentence had been etched in a fine silver ink, orbiting the girl.

"Dad's out right now, something he had to do for his work." She peered over at the paper. "I still

don't really get it. Like who is the girl supposed to be?"

"Maybe that's part of the conflict: you'll never know." Farrah waved her fingers, enunciating as one would a good mystery story.

"But if she isn't on the moon, and the moon is kind of useless, then why would she fall in love with it? I mean the sun at least gives us stuff."

"Gives us moonlight."

"Exactly, so why not the sun?"

"I don't know, Mai. This isn't really my area." Farrah traced the patchwork sky down towards the horizon, which he divided using a thin golden line. The sky and sea could come close, but never close enough. The only spot where that divide was ruptured was where the girl hovered in her raft.

"There's something written on the back, I think." Farrah turned it over. "I don't know if I was supposed to read it but I did." Maia added.

Twice a day she would visit the shore, and twice a day her moon would bring the ocean to her. One day she went out on her own, to journey along the depths that connected them. Something was decided by her in her little raft, all alone. But what, I'll never know.

"I'm glad he's making things again, but I don't know if this would make a good book."

"No, it probably wouldn't." Farrah said. An unfinished story.

"It is pretty though."

"It is, tell him I said thank- I'll tell him myself later. One second." Farrah went over to her new desk and gently settled her present in the center. She'd need to find a good place for it eventually.

"Right," she hurried back to the front door. "So, where are your plans for the rocket?"