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Coup De Grâce

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Coup De Grâce

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Human Rights
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Introduction To The Fiction:

In many ways, my life has been an attempt to break cycles. As a child one of the first things I learned how to do was recognize patterns I see in the world and then place myself within them: My earliest conceptions of reality were patterns and myself. As I have gotten older and studied more, I have accumulated tools that prepare me for processing and potentially breaking these cycles I observed in the world and had found myself, at times, trapped in. I wanted to pick the path for myself that would give me the greatest array of tools, the clearest trajectory towards active change. For a while I thought that path was law and politics. When you're a little kid, 'the law' is everything. It is the first conception for many children, including myself, of rules for the outside world. I found peace in this structure. I wanted to know how to change the world, and it seemed that I could do that if I became a lawyer or a judge or politician. Those fields encourage their students to study the law thoroughly with the eventual hope of evolving those laws, or at least helping others understand them.

When I was in high school, I had an opportunity to take a Criminal Law course, my first time in an official law class. As I made my way through that course, a wonderful exploration into the basics taught by a local Kings County Judge, I learned a lot about the law and about myself. Everyone around me was dead set on being a lawyer, and not in the same way I had been. I was interested in law as a means to an end, whereas my peers in this course picked out their law schools when they were born. The law was not just a component of their experience, it was everything.

Many of the students around me had a very idealized version of the study, a critique I only feel comfortable making because I assumed the role of the only student in the class that

would dare criticize the accepted truths we were being taught. To my surprise, and to the surprise of my peers, I had no personal qualms with critiquing existing structures. There are the people that learn the rules to the game so they can win it, and then there are people who learn the rules to the game so that they can change them. I wanted to change them.

Of all that I learned in that course, probably the most resonant was the association between respect for the constitution and success in law. I used to have a great deal of respect for the constitution. But that was only when all the knowledge I had about it was positive. As soon as I became aware of the world beyond my classroom, my perspective evolved. We should learn from the past but we should not live in it. If the governing documents which set the standard for our civilization speak specifically to a bygone era, the world we create around them will echo that. It was fairly clear to me pretty early on that a document written in a completely different time would need to at the very least be adapted in order for its relevance to continue. But I fell into the pattern so prevalent in America: assuming everyone thinks the same way as me.

In my mind, the flaws in the constitution that I observed were fact, not opinion. Therefore, I expected others to have made them too. All of this culminated in my surprise as all of my classmates and my professor looked at me, recoiling as if my attack on the Constitution was an attack on their firstborn child. That reaction, I believe, had more to do with turning me off of the field than the actual arguments made. As I watched my classmates' faces contort, their instinct to protect what they know taking over, I observed something new. The relationship between Academics and their material runs far deeper than fascination and study. For many, it is an intimate, personal relationship. As human beings, we search for ourselves in our material, and when we find it, that is a hard thing to let go of. The personal and intimate nature of the

relationship between many lawmakers and their material indicated to me that no matter how hard I worked or how well thought out my ideas were, the sanctity of that relationship would be blinding to any work I did. I realized after that class that I likely would not find the path to action I was searching for in the study and practice of the law. If anything, that dynamic caught my eye and began to foster my curiosity even further.

When I got to college I needed to decide what to study. I compiled all of my interests: advocacy, education, action, etc. To me, Human Rights seemed like the best of all of my interests. Of course, I did not actually know what Human Rights as a field or its practices looked like. In my mind using logic and reasoning I put together a general idea of what I thought my experience on that path may look like. To me, human rights would teach me the fundamentals and tools without the constraints of practicing law. The hope was that it would be the best of both worlds: academia and intellectual & creative freedom. But when I began to explore the course of study, I observed that human rights is, at its core, contradictory. Fundamental aspects of its nature are inherently undefinable. Not only are there no uniform answers to the questions that make up the field, but if there were, what we consider to be the field of human rights could fall apart.

This discipline like many in contemporary academia and activism is man-made. The rules and constructs intrinsic to each action and exploration within it originated from the human mind. What are now considered the 'rules' of human rights are those original thoughts refined and ratified through study conducted by yet more human minds. Though the study that the fight for Human Rights inhabits undoubtedly is the product of human innovation, the origin of the fundamental rights themselves still faces debate.

At the core of the Human Rights agenda is an almost mythical concept: The Human Rights Doctrine. This doctrine is meant to be a mission statement. In theory, this Doctrine should be a widely accepted cumulative encapsulation of the aims within the field. However, due to the fundamental differences in every single person's perception of something as personal as human rights, the Doctrine is shrouded in equivocation.

Nearly every Human Rights Professor I've ever had has brought up the doctrine and posed the question of what it really implies. The students go around and answer, but every single one is a bit different. I've never gotten a direct answer from the professor, and that would simply seem to be because they do not know. *They can't know.*

I have always been obsessed with answers, so this did not sit well with me. I have always wanted to know exactly what the solution to the problem was and whether I got the right one. I never showed my work until the teacher reminded me, because that did not matter. The only thing that mattered was the conclusion and if I got the right one. When I moved into studying specifically human rights, that habit remained. So for me, given my learning habits, the idea of a doctrine seemed like a godsend. Finally, there was a score card. I soon realized that what I considered to be my only hope of a finite solution was anything but. I would never receive a direct answer, a checklist of what I needed to do to participate in "human rights". Instead, my perception of the field was flooded with more questions and uncertainty.

That tends to be the case for me when dealing with things on a primarily theoretical basis, and The Doctrine exists largely in theory. It is simply a general promise that there is a purpose somewhere, despite how different that purpose may be for everyone. So how do you find it? And how do you make it meaningful? How do you fight for what is "good" if you don't know what

“good” means to other people? If you don’t know what “good” means to the people you are fighting for?

I was discontent with the lack of definitive answers. I did not understand why these teachings were so admired, so valued, when they can not actually create a uniform standard for right and wrong. I have come to the understanding that the value of these ambiguous structures is tied into the occurrence I first observed in that criminal law class so many years ago. Scholars cling to this amphiboly because it gives them the freedom to create their own situations. Making your own rules, while sometimes a blessing, can also be a curse. It all comes down to how much you trust these individuals to make rationals that do not endanger themselves or others. But you can not simply trust. People are much darker creatures than we like to believe. Another age old human truth. You give a man fire, he’s more likely to start a fire. You give a man a gun, he’s more likely to shoot it. Not because he has a stronger moral inclination towards violence, but simply by opportunity.

The college system in itself is a study of the abuse of power, somewhat as a result of the opportunistic nature previously mentioned. The way these institutions are structured gives a select few the opportunity to have nearly complete control over how adolescents experience their transition into the adult world. And much like generations before them, it must seem nearly routine for professors and staff to abuse this great power they have been given. The most painful part is that education is a human right. People will always have the need to learn new skills and ideas, and the solution in contemporary society is to seek out a higher education. Not only that, but the type of institution you select dictates largely what your trajectory may look like after your studies conclude. All of the eggs are in one basket, and the people who are holding the basket

have a distinct and disproportionate power over the young minds they are charged with fostering. These adults in charge were once children, just like those classmates of mine who clung to their constitution with vigor. But now, the objects of their affections have shifted. The academic relationship very easily becomes dangerously personal. I have watched first hand as adult men gathered up young girls like trading cards, creating the ultimate confidant. The girls start to change, they think they are learning because he is a teacher. Slowly, they begin to feel it too. The intimacy, the intense indescribable understanding. But they were made this way, formed by those more powerful than them, those they trust, into exactly what a book, or paper or construct could never provide their idol- human company.

I should have fallen victim too. I was a prime candidate. My whole life I have been scared of wasting my potential and that is because everyone in my life has always feared that too. They said it out loud to me, in the classroom, at parent-teacher conferences, and I began to say it back. That is how humans learn: they hear and repeat. They echo. I grew up as an echo of everything adults were afraid of. That is what those men look for. Echos.

Any noise put into the world has the potential to be manipulated, and I was a loud little girl. I did not realize it at the time, but when you make your voice heard you allow yourself to be seen in a new way. Now I am a loud woman, and everytime I open my mouth, and everytime I ever will in the future, I make myself vulnerable. Every new idea I share provides a window into my mind and my thinking. No one told me when I was little that sometimes others will try to climb in through that window you have so naively opened. It is difficult to quantify the way that feels, and even more difficult to communicate it to others.

In my attempts I returned to fiction. It has helped me heal and understand my experiences in new ways. Writing has always been in my heart and on my mind. More than Law or Politics or Human Rights. Even as a little kid, when faced with struggle, pain, the seemingly endless torment of my own mind, when there seemed to be no way out, I would write my way out. There is something in words that provides a kind of freedom that nothing else can. When faced with a feeling like the kind my journey at Bard has led me to, the kind of feeling that left me profoundly changed, I knew I could only capture it in fiction. This story is my attempt to do so.

Coup de Grâce

1.

I arrived at the college in the late summer. It was still warm but within a week, sharp dryness returned to the air. I arrived with one suitcase. The terse woman at the main office soon added a worn black key to my collection. The key fit into my door lock, but not quite right. Everytime it was a wrestling match, a dance to massage the key into a battered and bent keyhole. Over time, every attempt would become more and more of a burden. The lock creaked beneath the weight of expectation, but finally gave a reluctant, defeated click.

Inside, the walls were old plaster and cinder block. *It would be too great an expectation that I should make peace with this place.* The window in my room was painted over, pulls and all. Despite the peeling paint and scuffed up floors, the view was almost worthwhile. Right in front of the window stood this expansive tree with branches that twisted and curved up all around. *Jack's Beanstalk.* It had beautiful flowers in the spring.

Beyond the tree outside my window was a valley. And in every stone building just like mine all along that valley, young people plodded along on their various journeys, unaware that this place has darkness. There is a madness in the men and a wickedness in the women; young prodigies with voices like quicksand and hands that move with the menace of past experience. There are people that pull you in. You know from the moment you meet them that you will always be tied together somehow for the rest of your life. Charizma's black-hearted twin, with a face that attracts you to its symmetry, locked in a dance of compulsion. It's not allure, temptation, or predisposition- *It is gravity.*

I met her in the fall, somewhere between breathing and sleep. I had just set down my bag when she appeared in the doorway. I watched her enter and make her way to one of the bare cast iron beds, wedged in between a small wardrobe and the far wall. I in turn nudged my suitcase to the opposite side of the room, where my identical bed and wardrobe stood. When I turned back she had already begun removing folded garments from her case.

“Good Morning” I said. I hadn’t spoken much that day and the words got caught in my throat. It was enough to make me self conscious but still audible enough to elicit a response.

“Good Morning.” She didn’t look up from her task as she spoke, but her tone was not insincere.

“I have an appointment out of town tonight and I won’t be back until tomorrow,” she continued. Her suitcase was now nearly empty but for a few remaining garments on one side. She closed the vacated trunk and it clicked shut. She turned to look at me again.

“I trust you’ll leave my things as they are.”

I nodded. I wondered if she would introduce herself. I couldn’t bring myself to ask for fear that she didn’t want me to. As if somehow she knew, like she could read my thoughts she spoke again,

“I’m Elizabeth Sallinger. I assume you’re Olivia. The Dean told me you would be here.”

“Olive. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Elizabeth. I’m sorry I don’t know which dean you’re talking about. They didn’t tell me anything about you.”

“Don’t worry, dear. Dean Pierce and I spoke this summer about living arrangements for this term.”

She still called him Dean Pierce then.

“You should have made an appointment. Luckily, I can tell you anything he would have, but it will have to be tomorrow. I have to go.” She picked up her trunk by the handle and made her way across the room.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said.

She nodded and strode out the door, pulling it closed behind her. When she returned the next morning, her trunk was once again full, but this time not with folded garments. I watched from my bed as she lifted the lid and carefully unpacked one book after another.

We did not speak much then.

They were by every philosopher I knew and many I didn’t, each binding in a different state of age. She stacked up the volumes and placed them under the bed one small tower at a time. By the time the season's began to change, she was running out of room. I didn’t know where she got them then. I borrowed only two during that time: one was that first week, a worn Nitzche. The second was later, I remember, because a little notation appeared on the first page. *For Liza, From Jackson*. Those books belonged to her now just as they belonged to each other: locked in a waltz of influence and hidden in the dark.

That was the beginning.

2.

It is hard to explain the way we fell into each other. She was brash and organic, unlike anyone I had ever met. And slowly, what began in silence grew into understanding. The first few nights I laid awake in my bed, listening to her breath. After a week, we had found a tentative rhythm, both of us tiptoeing out to the edge of the acceptable every time that we spoke. She would disappear some nights. Sometimes she was with Pierce, but other times she left her suitcase behind, slipping back in through the door when she thought I was asleep. She was a mystery and she liked it that way. That worked for me. I craved closeness, friendship, just like every one of us did. But the kind of person I was then, and the way I maneuvered through my experience, I was content with our silence. But things would change, some for the better, and some for the worst. One of those changes came in the form of Jackson Pierce.

Dean Pierce was one of those people that extends beyond charisma. They captivate, you can sense them coming like a vivid perfume in the air. It trickles in slowly and then when you are unsuspecting, it twists around you entering through any open wound. They creep in through all of the gaps, pouring themselves into you. The philosopher's way of life. To sit in your leather chair and bend the people you talk down on until they break. The philosophers have mastered the art of saying everything and nothing at all. That is how he spoke. And how she spoke when she was with him, and eventually how she spoke on her own. *Positive reinforcement*. They make their ideas your ideas and you don't even see it coming. You only know it's happening in the aftermath, when you get home and crawl into bed but can't seem to sleep, tormented by the truth you thought was so simple.

The library stays open all night. They want you to study, to have stimulating conversation, to find academic salvation in the aisles. Maybe some did. But there was a distinct separation between those with silent study on their minds and those who wished only to sit in silence until someone interrupts them, unknowingly awakening a beast. The philosophers live for confrontation. Dean Pierce was no different.

The night that we met was one of those late nights. It was dark and the cold wind made the outside air crushing. Though many had sought refuge in the library that day, most had trickled out, returning to the warmth and comfort of the dorms. When I got there the lights were low and though some of the remaining students spoke to one another, the tone in the room was subdued, almost calm. I identified an open seat at a small table by the window. I quickly made my way over and sat down, removing my coat. I don't remember what I was wearing underneath. Funny.

As I began to take my books out of my bag, I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“Olive?”

I turned around to see Elizabeth standing beside the next table over, her coat draped over the chair I had my back to moments ago. She is not alone.

“Elizabeth. Hi. I thought you were out of town tonight.” She smiled. “Tonight is our tutoring.”

“You have tutoring at this hour?” I replied, much more honestly than I had intended to. I quickly regretted my exclamation, but before I could apologize Elizabeth started smiling.

“I knew you had that in you,” she said as she looked me up and down. “True expression isn't confined to daylight hours. I mean, why are you here this late?”

I looked down at the books on my table. “I have reading to do for my politics class tomorrow.” I could tell from her face that she was not satisfied with this answer.

“You thought I was away. The room is empty. Why read here and now instead of in the comfort of your room?” It was more of a pointed inquiry than I was expecting.

“I guess it’s easier for me to think here where there are other people around.”

She smiled smugly.

“Exactly,” she replied. “We’re here for the same reason. True expression is also not confined to solitude.”

As she said it she looked over her shoulder and met the gaze of the man that shared her table. And then, in a motion totally unexpected, and that would prove to be indescribably important, he turned to look at me.

Before this moment, I don’t think that I understood the power of a look. I studied the concepts of perception, but to read about the experience is completely different. There are some people who can look at you with everything they have ever seen burning behind their eyes. A glimpse inside, the raw chemistry that contorted in their soul seeping out. When he looked at you it felt like pure energy shooting through your chest.

“Liza, have you introduced me to your friend?” His eyes remained fixed on me as he spoke. I saw Elizabeth’s face fall slightly as she watched him watch me.

“Of course. I’m sorry. Jackson, this is my roommate Olivia. Olivia, this is Dean Jackson Pierce.”

His smile turned into a small smirk, his lips curling up. When he spoke he did not just speak to me he spoke into me, his words somehow more powerful than his gaze.

“Call me Jackson, Darling.”

He extended his hand. I took it. I thought maybe once he shook it he would finally break eye contact. But I was wrong. His touch turned out to be as powerful as the rest of him. Touching his hand, feeling his skin on mine, it felt as though I were touching a venomous creature, feeling the poison ooze in through the skin. The entire exchange couldn't have lasted longer than five minutes, but soon he would come to dominate my time here.

Because that first time he saw me something changed. Completely and forever. As he looked at me I could feel his pulse quicken, hear his heart beat faster and louder in the quiet of the library on that cold night. His eyes felt violating, dangerous. And he knew that. He saw me recoil just slightly as he looked at me, felt my fear as he touched my hand, and as he did he realized he liked it. His eyes gave him away. He was a man who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. And now he wanted something new.

He was a man, and a man in the image of the complex system that kept the college running. Men take what they want. It is not necessarily that they are born violent. But they are made to be so. When you grow up unbothered, never contradicted, there are certain lessons that are never learned. A boy that is raised not being held accountable for their actions grows into a man that will never be held accountable for his. I didn't know. All the rules of this place. When I arrived here I expected to learn, to meet people of the world, to study society and the world and learn what I could really do to make a change. I was really just one of them. The crowds scooped up by the handful and dropped in the valley. Made to run like little mice in their enclosure.

The men in white coats come in and watch us go. Sometimes they even reach their hands in and pick one up. They wrap their lanky fingers around it and squeeze so hard as hard as they can until they hear a pop.

I felt it infecting me, the evil that lived there. Maybe it was there already, in some way. Dressed as youthful curiosity, camouflaged, waiting. But something about this valley sweated out the inhibitions of its inhabitants. And so the game began.

3.

I went back to my room that night and laid in bed until the morning thinking about the way he looked at me. Then, I went to the library and looked him up. I found one book tucked away in the P section. And then I sat down and I read it. I don't know why. I couldn't tell you. But do you know what it is like to really read a book? I read his book and I can tell you I've never read anything like it before, and I consider myself fairly well read.

This book: It moved inside me. It was warm and alive and it had a pulse. An audible one. I thought that his touch, his deliberate and eloquent speech, were intoxicating, but that was nothing compared to this. I had to read books like this all the time as a student. There is a fairly consistent circulation of names and credentials that are all passed around and then packaged for the next generation. This writing was always a regurgitation that made the task of consumption feel burdensome, exhausting. Sorting through heaps of information growing more and more watered down every page you turn, farther from the meaning you search for. But this book was viscous, thick. It moved smoothly like music. I wasn't aware that was something that words such as ours could do. Maybe I could learn from him after all.

He had other plans.

The evening of my second Sunday was one of those nights Elizabeth had gone out, and darkness crept onto the horizon. I lay in my bed as I felt the sun setting just out of sight. Hours passed. She didn't return. Eventually, I fell asleep. When I opened my eyes next she was lying on her side in her bed. In the dark haze I thought she was asleep. But she was looking at me. She met my gaze. *Certainly she would not speak.*

“Do you ever wonder where I go?”

She asked it matter-of-factly, for just a moment letting me know how much she knew.

She would never make that mistake again.

“I asked if you ever wonder where I go,” she repeated.

No.

Liar.

I stayed silent, and slowly the silence turned to sleep. But that night something happened to me. I felt curiosities cold, long fingers sliding underneath my sheets, running up and down my back, dialing in the code, disarming the alarm.

The next night as she bustled around our room, collecting whatever she wished to bring on her adventure, she turned to me.

“Jackson asked me to come over tonight.”

She pulled a bottle of tequila from the crevasse between her bed and the wall and began to wrap it in an old sweater. She inhaled and then spoke again.

“You should come with me.”

I was surprised to feel my heart leap into my throat. I tried not to let her see. She was not watching me anyways.

“I couldn’t,” I choked out, “Besides, I was not invited.”

She turned to face me, and her expression took me by surprise. She looked upset, sad, almost betrayed. But she quickly brushed away any visible emotion. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. She walked across the room and threw it onto my bed, like it was hot to the touch. It was a note from Pierce.

9pm.

Bring Olivia.

“Are you ready to go?” she asked.

I wasn't. Should I change? Was I wearing too much makeup or not enough? He asked for me. I felt dizzy. I looked at the paper on my bed. That was the first time he wrote my name. Even though I felt sick, I did something I am not proud of. I went.

I grabbed my coat and following a short distance behind Elizabeth we made our way across the cold, dark campus. He lived closer than I thought. When we got to the apartment door, Elizabeth knocked. Almost instantly, Dean Pierce appeared at the door. He looked...normal. Comfortable. Something about it did not feel right.

“Ah. Girls. Welcome.”

He smiled and held the door open for us to enter. I don't know what I was expecting, but certainly not what I saw. It was a small office, with a desk and chair, one window. There was a keyboard against one wall and an old guitar propped up beside it. The rest of the room was taken up by a basic sofa, wood frame and thin cushions. It was clear it had been fashioned into a makeshift bed, covered by a thin blanket and accented by a single flattened pillow. He wasn't wearing shoes. When we stepped inside, I watched Elizabeth remove hers. I begrudgingly slid my own shoes off and placed them with Elizabeth's. He took our coats and hung them from pegs by the entryway. He motioned us to the bed-clothed sofa and pulled his desk chair around to face us. Elizabeth did not hesitate as she took her seat on top of the blanket. I reluctantly sat down

next to her. The blanket was scratchy like the kind they give you on an airplane. *That green wool so unforgettable.*

Elizabeth handed over the bottle she had so carefully carried, near full of tequila. He smiled and reached around for a small metal goblet on a shelf above his desk. He poured himself a drink.

“Liza?” He inquired.

She nodded. She seemed more reserved than usual. Even though she was directly next to me I could feel her pulling away, like I repelled her. He reached into one of the drawers in his desk and pulled out a paper cup which he filled part way and handed to Elizabeth.

“Olivia?” He turned his gaze to me. Again I felt the energy that radiated from him as he stared into all the parts of me.

“I don’t drink.”

I intended it sourly, but he only smiled. He seemed amused. He poured himself another goblet full before setting the bottle on the floor by Elizabeth’s feet.

“So...Olivia. What are you doing here?”

His favorite question.

“You asked me here.”

I spoke simply and sharply. He was much too close, too focused. It felt violating. I refused to give him any shared emotion to cling onto. He was like a frog with a long sticky tongue, and I was determined not to let him swallow me.

“Not here in this room, silly. Here. The college. Everyone has a reason, a call to the valley, an escape from somewhere else. Why are *you* here?”

He lifted his eyebrows, expecting an answer.

“To study.”

I bent over slightly, matching his gaze.

“Why are you here? Running from something?” I spat back, motioning down at the makeshift bedspread I was sitting on. I expected him to recoil, but instead he smirked.

“You’re sharp. I like that.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You didn’t answer mine.”

It was at this moment Elizabeth stood up and excused herself to the restroom. We were momentarily both distracted, having both forgotten Elizabeth completely. She was sitting right there but I couldn’t even see her. I watched her go out the door and the moment it shut behind her, he was next to me. He sat where she had been, but closer.

“Since you won’t answer, I’ll answer for you. How much do you want to bet I get it right?”

I could smell his breath. I felt dizzy. He continued.

“You don’t know why you’re here. Just another in a long line of things that you wish you knew... I mean all your life, being told you know everything, it’s not easy when you realize that you really know...nothing.”

He smiled and continued, moving in closer still.

“It’s like there’s this constant pain in your stomach all the time. Sometimes, you think you can feel it, leaving you.”

His hand was on my arm now.

“All of your hopes and your ambitions. I mean, you were going to be somebody...All your life you’ve been so afraid of that, haven’t you?”

“Afraid of realizing that you’re just another one of those people, that the more different you try to be,” he grazed his hand along the side of my face, “the more like everyone else you really are.”

As soon as I felt his hand make contact with my cheek I leapt up.

“Get off of me!” I shouted. “I don’t know why I even came here tonight. I’m going home.”

He stood up and followed me to the door. I reached for my shoes but he stepped in front of me, blocking the way. He wasn’t a big man, that’s why I was surprised when he pushed me back down onto the couch with one hand. I realized two things as my head hit the wall, first: if he wanted to hurt me, he was more than able, and second: I needed to get out of there. I stood up again, but he stepped in front of me again.

“I am not messing around. Let me out of here. Now.” I spit the words right into his face.

“No one’s stopping you.”

“You are. I need my shoes.”

He glanced over behind him and then back at me and sighed.

“I like it like this. Being taller than you.”

He moved in again. I shoved my hands out in front of me and pushed him out of the way. I struggled to put my shoes on, my heart beating out of my chest. I should have just taken them and ran.

“Oh come on now, stop, don’t be upset,” he said over my shoulder. I turned around to face him, my back to the door.

“No, you stop. You seem to be under the mistaken impression that I like you, so I want to clear things up: I don’t like you, I don’t buy your pitiful act for one second, and don’t you ever lay your hands on me again.”

I grabbed my coat and stormed out. I shouted, “Elizabeth! I’m leaving!” to the hallway and ran down the stairs and out the door. I didn’t stop running until I got back to our room. Elizabeth didn’t come home that night.

I tried to sleep, but all I could think about was what Pierce had said. Maybe he was right. I had a direction, I knew where I was going but now, I’m just sitting here on a shelf all alone, waiting to grow up. I wanted to change the world, but I guess that’s crazy. I mean there are billions of people, and all of them want to be the one that changes everything. I couldn’t shake it. It was like after that first night everything was different. Louder.

Do you know what it is like? To feel everything? Every step you take, every place you go, each little thing you do, being under observation. I felt it in my bones, in my skin, like a chill. It crept up on me. He crept up on me. Every morning I woke up and felt everything. There was danger in it all.

4.

She didn't come home after we left his office that first night, and when she did reappear her gaze shifted slightly whenever I looked at her. I had worked so hard to earn her gaze over the past weeks, to even soften it slightly. But now it all felt undone. Eventually, we were both back and getting ready for bed, something we seldom did in unison. Neither of us wanted to speak first. I expected her to guide me in my approach, but I realized quickly that she had no intention of acknowledging that the previous night had even happened at all. I could have let it go then, but I was curious and Elizabeth was my only friend. She was older and withdrawn but that just drew me to her more. We lived together. My limited world within the college consisted of very little besides her. If I wanted to continue to chip away at the porcelain cast she resided in, I would need to tell her the truth. Always. I started by telling her about what happened after she left the room the night before.

I don't know what I expected of her. Maybe an inquisitive eyebrow, a guttural sigh of disapproval, some sign that at her core she understood my fears. But instead she just looked sad. And not in a way I could have ever prepared for. I watched her face as I spoke to her, and it hardly changed until I finished. Once the words had finally escaped my chest, the pressure that had been building in there began to subside instantaneously. But Elizabeth's face, overtaken by sorrow, had not a look of pity or remorse, but one of lugubrious envy. As soon as I saw it I could never unsee it. After I told her what happened, the way he pushed me, the things he said. I told her all of this but right there on her face anyone could see it: She wished it had been her.

She would not make such a waste of his affections.

I hoped maybe she would speak and it would abate all of my fears.

“He likes you,” she said.

She wouldn't meet my eyes as she said it.

I recoiled.

“That's how he treats people he likes?”

I shouldn't have gone that far. She immediately reacted to my quip. She was upset. She finally looked at me, but now with all the animosity I had earlier dreaded.

“You don't understand. You're lucky.”

With that, it seemed that she couldn't stand to be in a room with me any longer. She stormed out, leaving me alone to decipher what she had said.

I needed to understand. Elizabeth was smart. She had lived, you could feel it as soon as she entered the room. Surrounding her all the time were her adventures, perfuming the air she shared with those fortunate few. So what was it about Jackson that had done this to her? She became a fraction of herself, like he cut her out of a magazine and glued her to a popsicle stick.

Made to order.

I realized that Jackson had a rare super power. He could say the most empty things and be believed every time. How could he do that? It is a skill, to be so truly evil you can grow like a virus in the heads of every person you select. Rewiring humans with the power of his speech. That's what he did. This whole time, I thought he just destroyed people. But it's so much more than that. He makes people destroy themselves.

Well, I decided I would not be another conquest. I would find his secret, the source of his magical effect. I would take Elizabeth and I would do what I came to the valley for in the first place: change things.

5.

I would have to behave. At least for a little while. He was not afraid of me. I needed to keep it that way. Small men try to be big.

Small women come up from behind.

The idea he planted in my head that first night had begun to grow roots. His voice haunted me in every silence. It was a constant discomfort, like an itch that never quite subsides.

I would need to go back. Sometimes the only way out is back in again. I did it for Elizabeth. All of it was for her. I don't think I ever had a friend like her before. I had never shared so much space and time with another. I much preferred it to being alone. I would not go back to solitude. But she was in deep and she wore her shackles proudly. I could break them, set us both free. But I needed to be patient.

Elizabeth had told me about the clock tower. I knew they met there sometimes. Special nights. Top secret. Every present guest was sworn to secrecy. To me it seemed theatrical, but to her those nights were sacred.

It only took one week. One week of nodding, smiling but not at him. Every time he saw me he would try to engage me. I would simply go to Elizabeth. I could tell he was beginning to grow desperate. It was odd to have someone so intoxicated the moment you enter a room. It was harder to resist than I expected. But I had to stay strong. On Friday, Elizabeth would hand me another piece of paper, this time all it said was *Clock Tower, Midnight*. Elizabeth told me we would go tonight and to bring my invitation.

When we reached the base of the clocktower, she approached the small cobwebbed door. It looked as though it was sealed shut. She boldly knocked three times. We waited. Only

moments later the door swung open. When she had told me about the clocktower I pictured a small basement with dirt floors, dark and covered in dust. Once we ducked through the doorway the room opened up, and at its center was Pierce.

I met his gaze and behind his eyes the room changed- stone, yes, but the walls had bookcases and they looked clean. It all looked clean. Even the tile floors were pristine. The whole room was tinted orange. In the center was an ornate wood dining table and ten elaborate chairs with velvet seats. It was like the college library but furnished with greater care. Pierce was at the head of the table.

I felt the dizziness smash into me again. There was a toxicity in the air all over the valley, but in this room in the dark, in his eyes, it was poignant. I blinked rapidly.

The shelves disappeared, the ornaments with them. It was just as I imagined, dust. There was a table but it was old and small, low to the ground. The chairs were not velvet but worn, cheap wood. They were tiny like children. The only large chair was the one sitting Pierce. Also in the room were four girls I had never seen before. Elizabeth immediately walked over to where he sat and placed her invitation on a small stack by his side. I took the cue. I followed her, still discombobulated from my journey into the space behind his eyes. I placed my invitation down. He looked at me.

“Good. You learn fast.”

He smiled. He was clearly satisfied that I had accepted. Elizabeth took the chair closest to him on the side of the table and I sat on her other side, gripping the edge to try to ease the disorientation. We watched silently along with the other girls as he picked up the stack of invitations, seemingly about to pocket them.

I swallowed hard.

He saw it. There was no hiding in a room this small. Instead of tucking the paper into his jacket pocket, he stopped. He looked at the paper and then at me. He got out of his chair and stood up. I tried to concentrate, to close out the buzzing wafting in with every breath. Over and over, with rhythm and isolation, *not me not me not me*.

But then it was too late. He was already behind my chair, predictably uncomfortably close. I could feel his breath in my ear. It was warm like a fever.

“Do you trust me?”

The words were quiet but echoed, his lips like a conch shell enveloping my open ear. I breathed again. In and out. Don't let him see. I could not let him know that I was beginning to feel afraid.

“No.”

I turned my head away slightly, pulling back from the stickiness of his whisper.

“I'll tell you what. I'll make a deal with you.”

I kept my gaze directly in front of me, pushing myself as far from the back of my head as I could. I do not make deals with men like him. Then, inexplicably, he reached around and placed the meager stack of papers in front of me. The invitations. I tried to resist but I was weak. I turned to face him.

“What is this?”

I tried to make the words as sharp and poisonous as possible. He leaned in like he had that first night. Now I could not just feel his breath but I could taste it.

“Insurance.”

He smiled.

It must be a trap. I looked at the invitations in front of me, thoughts racing through my already turbulent mind. I could take them and run. Who would stop me? I could go to the headmaster. A dean inviting a select group of young girls to an out of service basement late at night, there were bound to at least be questions...

No. He would not surrender himself to me. If I moved forward even a little he would see. He would know. This school is old, and it was certain he was not the first teacher to take things too far. Nothing would happen. He had given me a gun, but not before removing the bullets. He was smiling. His pleasure grew every moment he was in control. The beast inside him became larger, fiercer, as he watched me gain hope and then lose it. It made me angry. A new kind of anger. I wanted to spit in his face, to wrap my hand around his neck and watch his violating eyes burst. I wanted to run, now more than ever. I could not stop him, but maybe I could free Elizabeth.

But Elizabeth. She brought me here. If I moved to the door, if I gave up their game, he would never forgive Elizabeth and she would never forgive me. I looked up at her. Her eyes were afraid. She flickered back and forth between my face, the invitations, Pierce, and the door. She saw it on my face, and on hers she pleaded with me.

Don't.

I could not lose her. Not like this. I looked at Pierce and I nodded. With that I had accepted his deal.

“Let's begin.”

6.

What happened next rushed in all at once. It played out like an unfurling tapestry ornamenting a tilted stage. The vertigo grew only stronger. The room contorted. It moved and melted and reformed, shrinking with every furtive glance. I tried to keep my eyes focused, to tune out the rushing in my ears, but I could still feel the lingerings of his breath on my neck. I was afraid. I was falling. He mechanically retrieved seven tin cups from under the table and set them out. One for everyone. He then retrieved a bottle of amber colored liquid and proceeded to fill each cup. As he poured over my shoulder, I could smell the alcohol. It was strong and unmasked. Even just the odor burned my nose. He returned to his seat and raised his cup. The other girls followed his lead. With my hands shaking I picked up my cup. He drank and so did they. I looked at the liquid and tensed my muscles. I would need to drink it and I would need to be as strong as I could.

He was watching me. Waiting to see what I would do. My lips quivered and my throat begged me to reconsider. I inhaled and then, before I could lose my strength, I drank. I felt the liquid the moment it hit my tongue. Everything burned. My cheeks felt hot. I forced the offending potion down my throat. I felt it burning all the way down, into my chest.

Don't react.

Nothing had been more important. I steadied my lips and clenched my jaw. The whole time I watched him, watching me. I had not flinched. He was impressed. I felt sick. From the drink bubbling in my stomach, but more than that from the look of enchantment in his face. I wanted him to be afraid. I wanted him to see me for what strength I had. I wanted him to be disappointed by my resistance. But he was *impressed*.

That was the last thing in focus that night. After that, it was all blurry. Just a little bit, fuzzy around the edges. I could see his outline stand up, I heard his voice begin to speak. But it was like a vibration. In order to catch the words, I had to focus everything on each one. Isolated phrases. The other girls watched with rapt attention. But I could only look at the table in front of me. It was the only thing that was not moving.

“.....in us it is written the violence. How are we to be? Put on earth with a fire, a need to be our truest selves. But society! They do not want you to be true. Truth is the enemy of suppression. The truth is that all people have that voice. The little rhythm inside says that life is as simple as crime and punishment. You earn each breath and each word. Why can you not earn retribution? The larger many are unable to see the truth. To accept that humanity craves release. I am not like them. Neither are you. That is why you are here. We are not blinded by the bureaucratic order. We do not blindly accept the version of reality spoonfed to us. We are the free thinkers, the liberated few. This room is the only honest place, and you are the only honest people. So let us be honest.”

His form took its seat again. I could feel the shift in the room around me. The floor was open. The wall was down. I was beginning to understand. This was a catholic confession but with no semblance of true religion. He was god, and his disciples would speak to him their truths. That is what kept him alive, what kept him so disillusioned. He had created a small world underground of which he was the absolute. I wanted to run. I did not want these strangers secrets, and I did not want to be a witness to their theft. But the room had grown too small by now for me to make an escape. It was like there was a cord wrapped around the table and tied in a big knot. I

could almost feel it cutting into my back. With only liquor and his words, we had become bound together. Only by his hands could we be released.

He stood like a conductor before his orchestra. He could raise his arms and cue a cascade of expressions, pain set to music. One of the other girls who I had not seen before opened her mouth as though she were about to speak, but Pierce silenced her with only the wave of his hand.

“Not yet.”

He looked at me. I quivered on the inside.

“Olivia. You start.”

I did not know what to say. All of the sudden I felt like a child ill prepared for class. I watched the faces around me for some hint of what was expected of me, but they all simply watched me intently, blurring all the while.

“Olivia. The girl who came here to *learn*.”

This time he spoke to them. It would not last.

Soon he was refocused on me. The dizziness had grown only stronger. It surged in waves through me.

“So, have you learned?” He asked me.

I had learned. I had learned about men, about perfume and poison, about the spaces in between. I had learned about quicksand voices and wandering hands, about paper doll girls and boys on fire. I had learned about silence, about movement, and about the ache in the stillness. I hoped he could not see. I composed myself the best I could. Through my teeth I managed to spit out two words.

“Learned what?”

He was amused slightly. He did next what I had most feared he would do: he took my words as an invitation. He moved past Elizabeth, past me, and pulled out the chair on my other side. He sat down and leaned forward.

“Have you learned why you’re here?”

This again.

“I thought you already told me why I’m here.”

Surely he had not forgotten his monologue on assumptions of my inner thoughts.

“No. Not the school. Forget that. Here. Why are you *here*?” He motioned to the room around him.

I was determined to hold still. I would be as dry as the paper he had cut his disciples from.

“You invited me.”

“You came.”

This time his reply was fast and ready. I could say I was being polite. I could simply refuse to play. But he wanted honesty. As much as I loathed the idea of giving him what he wanted, I knew that was what he would least expect. He did not ask me here for acquiescence. I held his gaze. It came rushing in: the anger, the desperation. My jaw unhinged and all at once, I found myself telling him the truth.

“I came here because I hate you. I think you are sick and pathetic. You can find no solace in your own life so you dominate the lives of others.” I breathed in to steady myself. “You steal these girls' minds and hearts but they mean nothing to you. You gather in your dark basement

and suck their souls out and then chew on them. You are nothing. You have nothing. I came here because you want me so badly but I will never, ever be yours.”

He was stunned for a moment. I took advantage of his brief lapse, taking my turn to lean in uncomfortably close.

“Happy?” I said. Now he could taste my words.

But then he smiled. I was confused and disappointed. All of his smiles were frightening, but this was different. Behind his eyes now was recognition, familiarity. I had made a mistake. I had let him in. Just as fast as the anger had flooded in, the anxiety followed. Suddenly, he seemed bigger than I had realized. I stood up. I had to get out of there. The walls were shrinking again, and faster than before. But he stood up with me.

He waved at the girls, motioning them out. I prayed that they would stay, not leave me here, but they did as they were told. Only Elizabeth remained. I was truly afraid now. Before I knew what was happening he lunged at me. He grabbed my wrists, twisting my arms up above my head. I couldn't help but cry out as he pushed me against the back wall, with more force than I could have ever expected. I felt the stones slam into my skin through my dress, and I could feel the blood starting to permeate the fabric and trickle down my back. He pushed up against me, pinning me down.

“I want you so bad, huh?”

“And you will never, ever be mine?”

With every word he pushed harder. He held my wrists with one hand now and his other went to my throat. He began to squeeze.

“Clearly you haven't learned anything.”

I started to feel my legs tremble under me as his grip got tighter still. I tried to look at Elizabeth, but I couldn't move my head.

He pressed his mouth to my ear again, but this time I felt his tongue as it writhed.

“I want you to remember this next time you want to tell me what is and isn't mine. Got it?”

I was gasping for breath by now. I couldn't see or think, all I could do was feel. All the pressure and the pain. I needed to stay alive. I tried to kick but my legs wouldn't move. I was slipping into unconsciousness.

Suddenly, his grip slackened. He released my wrists and my neck and I fell to the dirt floor, clawing at my throat. I breathed in as deeply as I could. The ground was wet. I looked up and my vision began to clear. Elizabeth was standing, wide-eyed. I watched as the broken remains of the liquor bottle fell from her hand and crashed to the floor.

Pierce wasn't moving. Blood trickled out from the back of his head where large chunks of the glass were still embedded. I tried to stand but my legs were weak. Elizabeth came over to my side, dropping the bottle. She wrapped my arm around her and we slowly lumbered towards the door. We threw the combined weight of our bodies against it, and fell out into the cold, open air. It had started to snow.

The end.

Dedication:

To Meg Lacy, Sasha Newhoff, Ben Colling, Jace Epter, Harrison Edington, Eli Ames, and Adelaide Treadwell, for giving me the strength to tell this story, and for believing in me in spite of it all.