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## Bruised Oranges

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Bruised Oranges

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

by

Blair Peppe

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

## Clemency

Mike stood in the only clear space of his living room, a four by four foot shag carpet oasis. He slouched against the fireplace behind him and stared at the clutter that consumed his living room. Large boxes labeled “keep,” “donate,” or “toss” took up the majority of the floor space. Mike had promised Johanna that he would organize the piles, but the task was so overwhelming he did not know where to begin. School uniforms collected dust in the corners. Bouquets of flowers drooped in their vases wherever there was space, each complete with fleeting notes of sentiment tucked between their stems.

The only light came from the afternoon sun that seeped through the broken cream canvas blinds (A week ago, Mike could have sworn he saw passerbys pointing at him through the window, and he pulled down the blinds with such fervor that they broke, and so they remained permanently drawn). His doctor told him he would experience occasional blurred vision for up to two weeks after the accident. Perhaps the cloth that bound his head was wrapped too tightly, but the house smelt still these days instead of the natural smell that is unique to each home. Mike turned to the glass of whiskey resting on the fireplace - a quick burn to jog his humanity. He could have stood like that for hours - staring dumbly at the whole mess with one hand in the pocket of his khakis and the other grasping amber-colored temptation. He checked his watch every three minutes, then he would forget that he had checked it and check it again. Sometimes he had to give the numbers a second to stop dancing.

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Johanna gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles. She could have sworn she felt Melanie kick the back of her seat. Her mind was playing tricks on her, and she couldn't believe

her daughter was gone; she felt her motherhood ripped away from her. Johanna kept looking at the passenger seats and the ones in the back through the rearview mirror, hoping to see her daughter smile or even ignore her while texting on her phone. She told herself she wouldn't look again, "for at least another five minutes," and watched the digital clock in her car with agony. How many happy birthdays can fit in five minutes? She began to hum to herself, and recalled home videos of candles being blown out, rabbits being pulled from hats, and gifts being opened with sticky fingers; She found herself back at square one.

Since driving was not distracting enough, Johanna tried to concentrate on an orange that rested on the dashboard of her car. It had just enough potential energy to slide to the opposite side every time she made a turn, and although this action was repetitive, the suspension of its mission interested her as she made the last few turns before reaching her street:

*Highland* - Johanna slowed her speed to 30 and turned right, the orange rolled left. She broke her promise, again, and after another disappointment, became distracted by her own appearance in the rearview mirror - she looked motheaten.

*Sycamore* - Johanna turned left, and the orange rolled right. She noticed her speed and thought of imaginary children who live in houses nearby. She slowed her speed to 10 mph.

A car honked behind her and one old woman flipped her off while passing on her right. It seemed like road rage got worse in the area with every passing year. She hated driving through their neighborhood. The only reason she had decided to move to the area was because Mike insisted the district had the best private schools. Johanna didn't really mind either way, she went

to public school and she thought she turned out pretty well (generally, that is to say, if she heard this during her drive she would probably find it hysterical considering the state her life was in). They moved anyway. Their neighborhood was situated between the outskirts of a wealthy suburban area and the seedier part of town. The community was a strange combination of middle class people with an upper class complex. Neighbors gossiped about who was wearing what while the fifth house to be robbed in the area that month was ransacked.

Johanna procrastinated her arrival at the house by driving around the block a few times before parking in the driveway. She sat in silence for a moment and stared at the orange - it was perfectly ripe. Her mother always told her not to waste food, but Johanna could not remember how the orange got there, who put it there, or when, and for that reason she welcomed the orange to roll back and forth on the dashboard whenever she drove until the day when the overwhelming presence of mold would make her eyes water.

She had decided to buy groceries in bulk at the local supermarket to minimize future social interaction. The cashier had asked her if she was restocking her bunker. *There is no reason why I should have to carry this all alone.* She looked at the house and knew the likelihood of Mike sitting on the couch exactly where she left him or “doing” some equivalently idle activity was high. The lights were now turned on downstairs, upstairs remained pitch black. Mike hadn’t been upstairs since he returned home from the hospital, he slept on the living-room couch while Johanna slept in their bed upstairs. She thought about the probability of her husband having made any progress in cleaning, *very low*. She grunted and rustled with several grocery bags dramatically in an attempt to guilt Mike into coming out of his hole.

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Mike heard Johanna's performative struggle with the grocery bags in the front yard, and he knew this display would buy him time to finish his drink. Mike threw blankets on the boxes, and pushed a box behind the sofa with his foot to give the illusion of accomplishment, or at least some type of change.

"So, no progress?" Johanna said, surveying the room.

"Tomorrow," Mike said, holding a conversation with the middle of his wife's forehead. Looking at her in the eyes was too difficult, the puffiness was a reminder of the pain he'd caused her. The two of them together looked like an uphill battle. Mike moved towards the regifted giraffe coat rack Johanna's mother got for them as a housewarming present. It was hideous and they both despised it but they had to keep it out because his mother-in-law was a fan of the surprise visit or "drop-in." He removed his father's fisherman's coat from a hook shaped like an elephant's head just as Johanna placed her outerwear on another hook shaped like a lemur with scoliosis.

"You're going out?" Johanna asked.

"A bit."

"You're not driving." Johanna ordered.

"Obviously, not with a broken arm," Mike said, waving his cast in large circles above his head.

“And with no license,” Johanna bit back.

“Or with the slightest desire to sit behind a wheel ever again Jo-”

But it didn't matter because Johanna raised her hand at Mike, and there is little he could think of to defend himself as the man responsible for their grief, he was the one picking up Melanie from the school dance that night and he was the one who played chicken with a semi truck on the highway while trying the change lanes. In the process of learning to live with the weight of his daughter's life on his shoulders, one of the first things he had learned was that his character would be damned, and he felt deserved every bit of it.

“Are you coming home for dinner?” Johanna asked in a hushed tone which made the question seem like a threat and sent a shiver down her husband's spine. Mike believed it was a combination of the shock of the past few weeks and a desperation for return to normalcy that made her want to share meals with him, even if they just sat in silence the whole time.

“Possibly.”

“We're having the Lesters' lasagna tonight.”

“I've had lasagna four times this week.” Mike could still taste the overpowering salt used in lasagna number three.

“Well at least they're trying.” Johanna was ready to respond with a stinging truth to anything he said.

“If dinner gets cold, I'll just put it in the microwave, there's an open house I'm looking at and I want to get there before it closes.” Mike struggled to put his arm through the second sleeve

of the coat, which was turned inside out and also too small to fit his cast. He was still persistent, as if he believed if he tried harder he could make the coat arm bigger, make it bend to his will.

“We’re not moving,” Johanna stared daggers at him but he refused to look at her. She couldn’t imagine leaving the house with all of its memories. Even though she hated the neighborhood she wanted to die in this house, or stay until the structure collapsed from some act of God.

“It’s the next step,” Mike challenged her while he tried putting on the coat from a different angle.

“I’m not moving my life again because you feel uncomfortable.” Mike took a break from his negotiation with the coat; These words floated, dissected around his head, bumping and bruising his mind. He had been told the world did not revolve around him since kindergarten, but he wished it would for a little while.

“My name is on the house so ultimately it’s my own fucking decision isn’t it?”

“Moving isn’t going to help,” Johanna said, quietly reminding herself to walk on eggshells because he had been especially prone to mood swings recently; he’d already ruined the blinds, and she didn’t want anything else to break in their house. A vein on Mike’s neck began to throb as he resumed the battle with his coat. Johanna sighed and helped him place the coat on top of his right shoulder, so that the right sleeve hung over his casted arm and rested at his side like a ghost’s limb. He omitted a grunt of appreciation under his breath and left the house.

...



Halfway up the block, Mike checked his watch, again. He couldn't read the street signs, but he knew the way by recognizing visual cues: left at the house with the single phallic bush in the front yard, right at the house with bright orange paint, another right at the -

"Mike! Are you okay? Are you lost?" A short woman with an unfortunate brown bowl-cut appeared out of thin air.

"Fine, just walking around the neighborhood," Mike had forgotten to plan the route around Christy's house ; she was a member of the PTA at the local high school where he taught, and a creationist, and she never let anyone forget that about her (it was like she wanted that written on her gravestone).

"That is so good, you know my mom's friend Jean did that every day, and she lived to be a hundred years old!" The brightness of Christy's whitened teeth made Mike's head hurt.

"The kids miss you at school." She offered after a pause.

"They'll survive." Mike taught Algebra to freshman at the local public high school, which reminded him he needed to turn in his notice.

"I have a little something for you and Johanna." She opened a large canvas tote bag that also seemed to pop out of nowhere. She pulled out two Bibles and placed them in Mike's hand.

"Uh, thanks." Mike half expected the holy books to burn his skin.

"One for Mr., and one for Mrs., so you guys can read it together in bed and talk about different passages," Christy flipped her hands in the air a little and glanced up at the sky, "so cute!"

Mike checked his watch. He wondered if it would take seven days and seven nights for Christy to leave him alone.

“Turning to God gives so much support to a couple in turmoil, He takes care of *all* of us, you should both come to church this Sunday!” She religiously chirped.

“I have plans Sunday.” Mike’s head was too foggy to come up with a better excuse.

“Well, the great thing about church is it happens every Sunday,” Christy chuckled while twisting his arm. Mike realized had this conversation been on the phone he could have left the room, made a sandwich, come back and she’d still be talking.

“Oh, before you go,” Mike tuned in at the mention of freedom, “ I forgot I made you and Johanna a lasagna, let me get it from the fridge.” She vanished into her house to grab the fifth lasagna.

Her house was modest, and just on the brink of needing a new paint job. It was a simple house except for one addition - an elaborate decorative fountain that released a thick stream of water from the mouth of Jesus Christ. Mike was officially conditioned to hate lasagna. Running made his brain hurt, but he sprinted to the end of the block anyway.

Mike turned left at the Arco, where he had awkwardly seen Christy’s son kissing Melanie some months ago while he was stopped at the traffic light. He was only ten minutes away from the local university’s shuttle stop, and it was only ten minutes until dark, so far the conversation with Christy hadn’t thrown him off schedule. He stopped briefly at a liquor store to buy a pocket sized gift for himself later and tossed the bottles in the dumpster around the back, they would only slow him down. Ten minutes later he rounded a corner and saw the bus stop, and, like clockwork, a young girl with a buzzed head and blue backpack with paint splatters stepped off the shuttle and started to walk north, up the block and away from him. All it took was a name and desperation. He waited for her to get ahead a bit before he started to follow her.

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Mike followed the girl for about fifteen minutes. He became nervous after realizing she was heading towards a bad part of town, the street lights flickered in tandem with his brain. His feet began to drag, and the girl looked over her shoulder. Mike put his head down. Another block passed - the girl looked back again. Mike knew it had to happen soon if it was going to happen at all. He thought of Melanie, and all the potential moments and experiences which had turned to rubble in the span of a mere minute when the car flipped.

The girl looked back a third time and quickened her pace, the sound of her rustling pants reached a higher pitch and tempo the faster she walked. She pulled out a flip phone, and tried to remember some piece of helpful information from the workshop she took on campus safety during orientation. Mike watched the doors begin to close on his last chance. He ran again, chasing her as his brain knocked against the sharp corners of his mind. He pushed her against a brick wall and kept her there with his casted arm while his other hand shakily unbuttoned her blouse. He ripped her blouse open, revealing the fresh, long, pink scar which came from the heart transplant she had received two weeks ago. Mike pressed his ear against her new beating heart - the way it thudded reminded him of the sound Melanie would make when she stomped up the stairs to her room after a fight, it sounded like the choreography for the high school production of *Cats* she was in where she played "alley cat #2," and the thudding also sounded like a crash.

"I'm so sorry Melanie," Mike whispered. The familiarity brought by the sound of the heartbeat made him believe these palpitations and vibrations were his daughter's. He collapsed into the girl's arms

"This is all my fault."

The girl looked down at Mike in confusion, unsettled by the sight of a grown man and complete stranger crying into her chest. She slowed her breathing and tried to bend her back as much as possible to make her chest more concave.

"I just wanted to hear her heart beat one last time."

...

Mike laid on the cement sidewalk in a fetal position, covering his eyes which were stinging from the mace the girl sprayed in his face before sprinting away. He had considered this outcome as a possibility. He had no interest in fighting off the pain, and it could've been because he was drunk or because he was already in a world of it before and another twenty pounds of guilt or shame was no bother at this point. He wasn't sure if what he had done would be beneficial in any measure, but it was unbearable to refrain from grasping at any shred left of his daughter. He could do everything in his power to mourn her properly, and recognized there were many options of how to continue. So he chose to never fully mourn, keeping one foot firmly in denial. He planned to attend the girl's college graduation, and perhaps he could give her some advice about entering the adult world (which made him chuckle because this seemed the most ridiculous, that a young soul could benefit from his council). He knew that when the young girl

did eventually cross the stage at graduation and receive her diploma, that it would be Melanie's heart palpitating with excitement.

When he came home it was about one in the morning. Mike purposefully strode towards the living room and saw Johanna was one step ahead of him. She was passed out on the couch holding a pile of Melanie's clothes close to her body. He placed the quilt Johanna's mother had made for Melanie over her, and walked over to one of the boxes to find a memory for himself to crawl into bed with.

## For Sale

Diana etched the name of her third miscarried child on the baseboard in the bathroom of the only house she'd sold in the past three months. A splinter lodged itself in her thumbprint; Her finger flinched on the "o" in "Anthony." Her mind leapt to the memory of her husband's reaction, and the frustrated tears they wept together. She thought of her nearly beloved spiraling down their toilet bowl. She understood it would take five flushes to completely remove the only mark he had on this world. Her husband, Jack, said he had to work late that night; She heard him stumble in the hallway at three in the morning, the smell of alcohol became more apparent the closer he got to their bed. Diana lifted their bed sheet over her nose and mouth for a chance at breathing without retching. He kept his clothes on and lazily threw himself on top of the covers, which made the pungent scent of drinking to forget permeate Diana's subconscious. She dreamt of small blonde children, clothed in traditional dirndls, running around a German brewery.

When she woke up early the next morning, at eight like a normal person with a weekday job, Diana made a point to open the curtains and windows even though Jack groaned in protest. She asked him where he was last night, and even though the question was fair game, emotional sensitivity was so high that this conversation escalated to a two hour argument, which ended with Jack leaving her. He was suddenly gone. He took all of his belongings, but felt fine leaving his dirty laundry and beard trimmings in the sink.

Diana became aware of the painful hexagonal imprints embedding in her knees and rose from her crouched position. She looked at her carving; Her child's existence was now simply a whisper across the wood. She had done the same with the others, Violet and Jacob, in different houses. It was odd, but it created a memorialization and closure which soothed Diana. She never knew for certain but she could guess that these etchings would disappear under a fresh coat of

paint chosen by the new homeowners, and so even the faint carving of their names could not avoid temporality.

In the front yard, Diana struggled to find solid ground as she awkwardly wrestled with the “for sale” sign, which contained an obnoxiously large airbrushed photo of herself taken on her first day of work at Blue River Realty fifteen years ago. She hated how compelled she was to look at her own hideously naive and colossal features in her headshot every time she entered and exited one of her listings; the human brain is not physically capable of ignoring something so large in its periphery. When she did look at it, her gaze was drawn to the rigid corners of her smile, seemingly incapable and maybe even frightened of moving an inch. Diana held that smile for the photo, and then felt like she had to hold it for the rest of the day and the next fifteen years while she was at work once she realized it was practically a job requirement. Her gaze in the photo revealed how uncomfortable and unnatural it felt to wear a blazer in her late twenties. She pulled the real estate sign from the green lawn like the sword from a stone. The fleeting thrill of success Diana experienced after overcoming this small challenge concerned her. She thought back to the previous morning when she found her co-worker Craig in the break room staring blankly at the vending machine while holding a steaming kettle by its sides with no tea towel or pot holder, the sensation should have prompted him to scream. He held it for five seconds before noticing his burning hands. Since that day, the co-workers would sometimes gather in the break room and see who could hold the kettle the longest (Diana could hold it for up to 10 seconds). There seemed to be a disturbingly direct correlation with seniority at the company (Barry, who had been working for Blue River for 20 years could hold it for 17 seconds!).

Diana put her weight on a tiny pebble that had snuck into her right shoe. She quickly threw the for sale sign into the trunk of her car, and covered its face with her worn out blazer.

Diana lived in Playa Vista, California, and every time she was forced to endure the hellish commute home (which ranged from forty-five minutes to two and a half hours depending on the time of day) she drove past the Ballona wetlands which made her eyes sting.

Traditionally, wetlands offer the perfect nursery for the offspring of many birds, frogs, and small fish. Diana had purposefully moved close to the Ballona wetlands for this reason. She liked hearing the sound of young birds chirping, walking through the tall grasses, and watching the tadpoles learn how to swim, all of them shepherded by their mothers. Wetlands are already furnished with tall grasses and natural sun-soaked lighting and warm waters which provide a stable environment and neighborhood for newborns in spring. Ballona's ecosystem once bloomed, but recently it began to erode from pollution. The birds flew south one winter a few years ago and never returned, except for the occasional odd heron which showed up every so often, the only one who apparently didn't get the message. Conservation groups were formed, and these members were pretty much the only people allowed to visit the wetlands now for restoration purposes only, but no one had seen them enter with their trash bags and pick up sticks for at least six months. Diana wanted to help but couldn't bring herself to witness the nursery's deterioration. The grounds omitted a toxic saline odor which burned the inside of many local noses each day and had the capability of traveling miles in any direction with the proper gust of wind. Sometimes Diana worried the scent had adhesive properties, she imagined it stuck to her clothing, a wafting briny shadow that followed her everywhere.

The next morning, Diana collapsed into her office chair with an intense amount of fatigue that had gradually accumulated with every passing morning that week. Ed, the head broker, called her into his office through a crack in his door. Diana breathed deeply and pinned the corners of her mouth into a rigid smile. Ed could almost be physically described as lanky except



for his stomach, which looked like he was perpetually holding a balloon under his shirt.

Sometimes, Diana wanted to pop that balloon.

“Good morning Ed, how are you today?”

“Fine. Diana I’m going to be to the point. Your performance has been suffering recently, you’ve only sold one house in the past three months.” He spoke sternly, though this was actually an achievement since the government had just announced a recession (at least this is the excuse the other real estate agents and brokers were using for their current dip in sales).

“Well I was out sick with the flu for two of those weeks,” Diana remembered sitting in a corner crying and making frequent bathroom trips to discover yet another ruined pair of underwear. *Some flu.*

“We all get sick, but it’s ridiculous to just sit in a corner blowing your nose for two weeks, letting life pass you by.” Diana cringed - “life” the way Ed was talking about it could definitely not be found in her cubicle.

“I’m sorry,” Diana somehow managed to utter. Her performance was normally outstanding, she had a gift for marketing the sale of a house as the sale of family life. This was the real reason why Ed was aggravated by her absence.

“You know what wakes up the human mind? Challenge! I think you need a challenge, a little pick-me-up, and I’m going to give you one. You know what I’m going to do for you? I’m going to let you sell the house on St. Anthony st.” Diana’s stomach churned at the dark irony of the location. Ed seemed to always think she needed a “pick-me-up” when there was a house none of the other agents could sell.

“Barry’s selling that one.” Diana answered

“Barry doesn’t want it.”

“Why? Barry wants everything.”

“Well he doesn’t want this, anyways people grow.”

“There must be something wrong with it.”

“There’s nothing ‘wrong’ with it at all. But it's been on the market for way too long and it’s embarrassing at this point. I want you to go over there today and look at the property.

Become one with the house, it will tell you how to sell itself. I think it just needs a ...” Ed became distracted flipping through a glossy magazine on his desk, this always indicated the end of a conversation with him.

“A.... motherly...feminine... woman’s touch.” Ed became gradually fixated on an oily bikini model. Diana had to clear her throat to bring him back to reality, which she could tell he resented.

“I need the clientele details”

Ed dialed the receptionists’ line and barked the order, keeping the phone secure between two plump neck folds (another disproportionate aspect of his body).

The house on St. Anthony street was a typical charming variant of the smaller standard suburban homes found in the Miracle Mile district. It was a light blue one story house; It still had the family scent of the previous owner - an Irish Catholic family with six children. Typically Diana welcomed this smell and it made her excited and hopeful, but today it made her nauseated. Everything had a fresh coat of paint, it had high ceilings and the rooms felt open, free, and connected. In the front yard, Diana sat in a tire swing connected to a large tree where the previous family had left painted handprints on the knotted bark. She took off her pumps and let herself breathe for a minute, the lawn was made of soft long grass that cradled her feet like silk

and bent to her will. A ring of sunflowers had been planted next to the tree on the other side of the charming cobblestone path that led up to the front door. The light dappled and danced through the tree branches, creating an abstract pattern that bounced off the exterior during sunset. Diana let herself turn slowly, the way gravity intended, and allowed herself eight minutes of grass time before acknowledging the problem at hand.

The house next door looked like the island of misfit holiday decorations. It was difficult to take in all at once, Diana tried to and gave herself a migraine. She had to analyze the house one piece at a time. From what she could tell, it seemed to be, at its structure, also a modest one-story house. It was painted a gothic grey with dark purple shutters. A sinisterly large black metallic spider with fangs and glowing red eyes acted as a stylistic placeholder for one of the windows. Diana squinted at it, it appeared somehow crucial to the structural integrity of the house. In conjunction, there were three comically large inflatable holiday-themed decorations in the front yard; the disruptive whirring of electricity gave posture to a mummy, vampire, and the grinch. It was mid-March.

The next day, Diana knocked on the neighbor's door. When it opened, her heart traveled through her body, somehow thudding at her feet. Of course this was Juniper's house. She felt a memory wrap around her, and then remembered that the last time she had seen her was a glimpse over her shoulder, through the crack of a door that closed behind her. Diana had left her without any words, hoping it would make things easier for both of them. A few months before she left Juniper, Diana had lost her parents. She desperately wanted to start her own family, but Juniper didn't want kids. She was content with the way things were and wanted to live in the present, which she firmly believed would be impossible raising children.

Juniper's initial shock faded and she smiled wryly, which prompted Diana to recognize the awkwardness of the situation. Her face felt so hot, she knew there was no way it was not a noticeable shade of crimson. Her limbs felt embarrassed to be attached to the rest of her body.

"I knew this would happen someday. What, you only just now realized that you left your Chuck Berry records behind?"

*Is she the same?*

"Hi... Juni-per, it's a pleasure to see you," Diana stumbled through her words. Her formality and proper language made Juniper's eyebrows nearly rise to her hairline. Diana could only imagine the snarky judgement she was passing on her appearance. *She probably thinks my drab pantsuit and blazer matches the walls of where I work, and she wouldn't be that far off.*

"You wanna come inside or are you just going to loiter?"

The two of them sat at a coffee table in the kitchen. Dishes piled in the sink, stained with ready meal leftovers (I could tell by the stack of cardboard boxes on the counter that she was in the process of breaking down). There was clutter everywhere, but the trash was organized into five separate bins: paper products, plastics, metals, glass and food waste.

The inside of the house was less gothic, for example, the walls were buttercup yellow. Juniper's art also helped. She was in the middle of painting a large oak tree on her kitchen wall before Diana knocked on the door. She painted portraits of her friends in her walls too. Diana wondered if there were any clean glasses in the house because she counted about ten of them holding murky water and paintbrushes.

Juniper lit a cigarette and opened a bag of barbeque chips, she liked the way the two tasted together, the smokiness of each compliment the other. She had once told Diana she was the barbeque chip to her cigarette. Ten years had not done much to Juniper, her old habits

seemed immortal - she still dyed her hair black, wore thick eyeliner, and chewed her nails. When Diana made a joke about one of the pillows looking like one from the cafe down the street; which is when she mentioned she also still stole creamer, stirrers, splenda, throw pillows, and silverware from local coffee shops (even though she could afford these items, she explained it was an unwritten but common human law that these items were up for grabs). Then she asked me what the hell I was doing there.

“I’m actually the real estate agent selling the house next door,” Diana nervously tapped her loafer against the coffee table leg.

Juniper was always very expressive, and her eyes, mouth, and nose, responded freely to Diana’s every word in fluid movement .

“Well, at least it’s you this time, there have been strange middle-aged men nosing around my property, and they’ve all been trying to get me to make changes to my own house.” Juniper stared at Diana as she nervously twisted her wedding ring

“So you too, huh?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to,” Juniper’s eyes flashed, “you always fidget when you’re lying, uncomfortable, or about to ask for something, Di.” Di couldn’t help but smile at the sound of her old pet name.

Juniper nodded towards Di’s wedding finger, “So, you went through with it then,” Juniper said, more as a matter-of-fact than question.

“Yes.” Juniper exhaled smoke in Di’s direction.

“Mrs. Jack Baker, what a name.” Di wondered how she knew her husband’s name, and then remembered she had drunkenly added Juniper to their wedding invitation list. She must have received it, she just chose not to go, which Di understood but she was still disappointed.

“Well, it’s what I wanted, family, kids - ” Di said.

“So how many kids do you have?”

Diana bit her lip, her hand moved to her ring again but she stopped herself before making contact, scratching her hand awkwardly instead. Her mouth pinned itself into a rigid smile once more, and through excellent dissociation and tightly gritted teeth she was able to say:

“Jack and I are starting our family now, we’re trying for a baby”

“What else would you be trying for?” Juniper sneered, then apologized when she noticed a brief passing expression of genuine grief on Di’s face. She poured her jasmine green tea in the mug they bought on their trip to Monterey Bay - it was painted like the ocean, and the handle was a fat and happy elephant seal (this actually made the mug extremely difficult to hold and consequently drink from, which made them laugh, especially when they watched house guests fumble with it). Di watched Juniper skillfully sip from the mug and caught a glimpse of comforting familiarity in Juniper’s tender gaze which hardened after a few moments

“So, what did you want from me?”

“I was wondering if you would consider putting your decorations back in storage, just temporarily,” Di quickly added when Juniper’s eyes rolled, “I understand we all procrastinate holiday clean-up, but I’m concerned it might have an effect on potential buyers and their opinion of this house that we’ve been trying to sell for so long,” she spoke like a politician, picking her words carefully and trying not to offend her.

“Oh do you?” Juniper sarcastically responded in a high-pitched nasal tone. Just like that, the two relaxed into their natural roles.

“Juniper.”

“Well, why should I?! The kids love it.” Actually, the neighborhood children were terrified of her house. Di had met with the family who was trying to sell the house and they told her the kids believed it was haunted, and created myths about the mysterious witch owner with flashlights under their faces. Every time a potential buyer walked past the neighbor’s house the large inflatables lurched forward upon detection of movement and loom in their faces and terrified their children.

“Well when were you planning on taking them down?”

“I wasn’t.”

“Juniper-”

“Look no crime is being committed here, you’re trying to change things for your own personal gain. You can’t control everything. Jesus fucking christ Di, your old habits are immortal.”

“And what career path have you chosen?”

“Professional gambling, honey, I’ve still got the eye.”

*No, She hasn’t changed a bit.* Di recalled one weekend the two of them spent in Hawaii, all paid for by one trip Juniper made to only a few casinos in Vegas.

“So you haven’t changed either.”

“Yeah. My job still makes me happy and it pays well.”

“One day that’s going to bite you in the ass, the house always wins.”

“You would say that,” Juniper chuckled at her own joke and Di hid her giggle in a napkin.

“Actually, I guess in a way it’s already biting me in the ass, I’ve been gaining some weight from eating too much casino food.”

“Well it doesn’t really seem to be - you don’t look - I mean, you look great.” Di stammered.

“Flattery’s not going to work, I’m not removing the decorations.”

“For me?” Di stared at Juniper and tried to use a look that would have worked years ago.

“For old times.” Juniper cocked her head and smiled, her blood running hot under a cool exterior. Di stood up from the table and smoothed out her pantsuit. She extended her hand to Juniper, who stared at the thing until it was shamefully removed. The embarrassed appendage led Di out the door as if it had a mind of its own.

That Sunday Di drove to the listing five hours before the open house. Five new decorations had been added to Juniper’s front yard. There was a mini sleigh with a zombie fellow sitting in the back, a giant blow-up jack-o-lantern, a four foot tall gravestone (which was also politically charged as it said “RIP USA”), and a band of mariachi skeletons that danced and played “Feliz Navidad” any time someone walked by. The lawn was covered in thick layers of fake cobwebs, the green color of the lawn could barely be made out. Di gripped the stake attached to the sign so tightly she was surprised it didn’t snap in half. *I did not expect this, but I should have.* This was how they fought: Di would fall under the pretense that the two of them had made a reasonable agreement and then Juniper would challenge her.



It took Di five minutes to walk up the path through the holiday store booby-trap Juniper had created. The door was also covered in cobwebs, but that did not deter Di from slamming her fist against it repeatedly - she also refused to use the giant bat knocker Juniper had added. She never opened the door, and Di knew she was either out of the house on purpose or inside doing something like watercoloring a landscape while ignoring her.

Only two couples came to the open house, one of them thought the neighbor's house offered a "real vibe," but then again that couple's credit score was too low for Di to even consider selling to them. The second couple left when she could only give them vague answers to their questions about the neighbor.

The next morning, Di woke up with a pink highlight in her hair that accompanied a searing migraine. After an unsuccessful day of trying to sell the house on St. Anthony street she went to a bar for the first time in ages. She hadn't had a drink in a while, because alcohol and pregnancy don't mix. After three gin and tonics she asked the bartender for a napkin and pen and began to plot her counter-attack. She created a list from memory of all the decorations, and identified the "big-ticket items." The rest of the night was hazy, but her fingers and bathroom sink were pinker than usual so she assumed she dyed the section of her hair in a drunken frenzy. For the next four days, Di was successfully able to remove one large eye sore, or a few of the smaller ones, from Juniper's front yard every morning for four days. The pile in her trunk grew and showed her progress. But, on Thursday, Juniper caught her trying to remove a gravestone.

"Hey that's my property!"

"You started it!" Di screamed in a childish and high-pitched tone that alarmed both of them but was also oddly humorous. They both laughed together instinctively. Their fights always ended in laughter.

“Why don’t we make a bet?” Juniper offered

“You expect me to play a card game with you? I haven’t touched a deck since we were together and you’re a professional gambler”

“To make it even we can play gin rummy.” Di had beaten Juniper multiple times at gin rummy. They missed the flight home from Hawaii because they were so immersed in the game, and Juniper kept insisting on a rematch.

“Okay, if I win, you have to take these fucking decorations down.”

“Language. And if I win, you have to leave Mr. John Jacob Jerry Baker.” Juniper mocked while placing weight to each word spoken.

“Why would I agree to that?”

“Because I think when it comes to your marriage, you feel like you could take it or leave it.”

Di knew it was strange, but even with all the chaos Juniper had brought back into her life, she was still just thrilled to feel alive again. She remembered taking cold cleansing breaths at the peaks of peaceful hikes, the feeling of plunging her hands unapologetically into cans of acrylic paint, and then pressing them against the porch steps of the duplex they rented together. She smelt the roses Juniper gave her on their one-year anniversary on their three year anniversary, and then the bitter leather scent of the cab which drove her away. Di accepted the stakes and challenge after waiting a few moments to imitate some form of contemplation. Also, she was expecting divorce papers from Jack any day now.

Juniper couldn’t help but show off while she shuffled the deck. She dealt the cards and maintained the integrity of the stockpile and the discard pile. Throughout the game, Juniper remembered to reorganize these piles into neat stacks after Di would lazily toss the cards in the

general direction of the respective piles; it was the only time she was ever obsessively organized. Barbeque dust stained each card.

Di's heart raced with excitement when she was dealt a terrible hand. For the first time in her life, losing was gaining. She was apathetic about her bad luck but wore a mask. Juniper was first to reach the agreed upon 100-point mark and was victorious. The game was over, and Juniper raised her eyebrows, allowing them to do the gloating for her, she had won the game. She gave another smirk. Diana leant in and was met with cold air.

“Oh, Di, I have a girlfriend,” Juniper said, gesturing to a small picture frame on the wall to the right of them that came out of nowhere. To Di, the woman in the photo looked like a different version of herself from an alternate reality where her life hadn't been ruined by her own impatience and self-sabotage; and where her botched pink highlight was a deeply fierce and royal purple. Di had especially seen herself in Juniper's girlfriend that morning, above her bathroom sink, after she caught herself singing in the shower for the first time in years. Now, that part of Di, the faint whisper of potential possibility of a sun-soaked life, was leaving just as it arrived.

“You didn't expect me to wait for you, did you?” Juniper asked coyly. She lived off of playing games, economically and spiritually; Diana had become one of them.

“Why did you make these stakes if you didn't want to be with me in my life? Why do you care? Why would you want to fix something that has nothing to do with you?”

“Why would you ask me to ‘fix’ my front lawn? Why would you assume I would do it for you? Why would you assume you have that control?”

Diana realized there was a much bigger game Juniper was playing. Her winning prize was the satisfaction of knowing Diana was willing to risk her life to chance, and also the sweet

rejection she delivered to her when she told Diana she was spoken for. Juniper gathered all the control in their relationship for herself, just as Diana had done when she left without a word all those years ago. Diana felt nauseous, the way so many declared ownership of her so that there was nothing left, even her own body would not bend to her will. She wondered if some people were predestined for misfortune, and then thought of her children who had only ever experienced pain and suffering if they had grown enough to feel anything at all. In her train of thought, the inflatables became symbols of everything her children were deprived of. A world with Santa Claus, the Grinch, sentient pumpkins, and ghouls - These characters that appear in stories that Diana had prematurely filled a pale yellow bookcase with. She saw babies, eagles, pollution, and unjuiced lemons all bundled into years which had brought nothing to fruition.

When Diana came to, she found herself in Juniper's front yard with a pair of scissors in her hand. Bits and pieces of the holiday blow-up decorations lay scattered around her, defeated. Diana's shaking hands were bleeding - in her blind passion of destruction, the position of the scissor blades in relation to her skin was not a priority. She held the decapitated head of an inflatable snowman, and her blood made it look like Frosty's head was also bleeding. The lights inside the house were still on, but Diana was completely alone outside. The front door was locked. Diana looked through the windows, hoping to see even a glance of Juniper's silhouette.

## Shadows

SARAH:

When I looked inside her coffin, I noticed that her fingernails were still colored with the pink “bubblicious” nail polish I gave her before homecoming last week - Was Chloe thinking of her own death a week ago, while Piper and I sat on her bed, painting each other’s nails and curling our hair? Did she ever wonder what her funeral would look like?

Her father stood at the podium and spoke the best he could about the fleeting existence of his seventeen-year-old daughter. He read part of her last diary entry aloud to celebrate Chloe’s talent as a writer, but I knew if she could hear it she would scream her head off. He thought he was sharing her creative writing, but in his hands he held a little book with real experiences his daughter had, she just had a beautifully descriptive narrative style; Both of her parents worked full-time so when she did see them she preferred to bond as much as possible and talk about the things going well in her life. She was religious when it came to diary entries and maintaining the sanctity of privacy - the little book not only had a warning page with threats and swear words, but also a lock and key which she kept on a chain around her neck. I felt unsettled thinking about the steps her father had to take to retrieve the key. Her parents had little respect for personal boundaries, and she knew this, which may have been why her entries were so cryptic. She even told me once that she went through her diary after every month with a black sharpie, redacting everything (ripping the pages damaged the binding). Maybe she should have waited until the end of the month to kill herself since. It was mid-September, so Chloe’s father was able to read aloud one of her last thoughts:

*When the stable ground is torn from underneath your own feet, you can't even trust the shadows around you. This reverberating world becomes unrecognizable.*

These words did not sound like her, but neither did her death itself. Although friends and family gathered to mourn Chloe, what she wrote made it clear that no one actually knew her (this was made painfully obvious by her own parent's misinterpretation of her documented life events as fiction); At least I felt like I didn't know much about her, I only knew she was alone. I watched her father try to control the lump in his throat as he finished his eulogy. I had known her family for a while now, I had kept Chloe company at a few of the parties her parents would throw for work. It was agonizing to watch her dad, his tearfulness made my eyes blur. He made eye contact with me in the first row and I knew if I blinked water would be sent down my cheeks and her father, a sensitive soul who once cried with us when we watched the movie *Titanic*, would crumple to the floor space behind the podium. So I broke from speech and gaze; I stared at the ceiling for a while and tried to think of something trivial like auditions for the fall talent show at school, hoping my tears would eventually slide back into their ducts.

I had been best friends with Chloe since elementary school, and when we met Piper in freshman year of high school the duo became an inseparable trio. We could have conversations solely based on facial expressions. I knew what one slightly cocked eyebrow on Piper's head meant, and she knew exactly what was implied when the right corner of my mouth slanted downwards; And, of course, Chloe could read our expressions very well, I thought it worked the

other way as well but there was no way I could make that claim when I had no idea she was suicidal.

...

PIPER:

The discomfort of the cold draft and wooden pews kept me from dissociating into oblivion. I wondered what she would have thought of the flowers - lilies, the traditional mourning flower instead of sunflowers which were her favorite but were not on theme. She would have made fun of the giant mole on the priest's right eyelid, probably saying something like "would you like some priest with that wart?" or "which one do you think is doing the talking?" I couldn't stop thinking about these things, even at night, especially at night actually. Whenever my heavy eyelids fluttered shut, I saw Chloe; So I kept them open, but I still saw her in all of my surroundings, and replayed memories in my mind until the sun came up. I was so depleted because I was having my own funeral service for Chloe in my head constantly.

On top of this (my own mind) school also felt like a prison more than ever. Every time I went to my locker, I expected to turn and see Chloe fumbling with her combination, or a tap on my shoulder admitting defeat and asking me to do it for her. I dragged my feet from class to class. Sarah and I chewed in silence during lunch until she said she had to go print something before class. I guess I could have gone with her but I wouldn't be able to add anything to the experience. Chloe was the glue of the group, and it was difficult to ignore the vacuum she had left.

SARAH:

After lunch, Chloe's lab partner in Chemistry, Molly, came up to us in hysterics. We stared at her blankly until she left. At the beginning of the school year, Piper, Chloe, and I traded our locker assignments with others so that we could all be next to each other. Molly overheard and traded lockers with the person below Chloe; I knew Molly liked her and wanted to be her friend but I was still alarmed by her emotional display. Piper said she thought she was just trying to get attention from the drama, which I thought was a pretty spiteful comment, even for two teenage girls; I felt like a part of her was jealous of how easy it was for Molly to emote, but I didn't have the bandwidth to say anything.

The school guidance counselor called us into her office. She gave us some pamphlets on grief, and then a very specific one about losing one of your closest friends to suicide. She said we could find peace in creating a timeline of our friendship with Chloe. When we left the counselor's office Piper mocked her efforts and started turning the "literature" she gave us into paper airplanes. I made a crown out of one of mine and played along with her, but as soon as we parted ways to go to our next class, I started constructing the timeline in my mind, starting with high school.

During freshman year, Piper and Chloe threatened to message my crush on Instagram if I didn't go with them to welcome dances and football games and "put myself out there." Our school was single-sex, and unfortunately, none of us were gay (we figured if any of us were, we would have made out by now), so we had to go to school-organized events to meet boys. Even



though we knew everyone would naturally separate themselves based on gender to make themselves more comfortable - the boys would clump in one corner and the girls in the other.

Sophomore year my parents gave me their old car and didn't mind where I went with it. I usually still told them where I was going even though they typically stopped paying attention before they had all the details (I told myself this came from a place of nonchalance and trust rather than disinterest). On school nights after homework, Chloe and I would just drive around blasting current hits, relieving ourselves from teenage angst by turning up the volume and taking turns sticking our heads out the window.

By the summer of junior year, all three of us had the fresh self-confidence and pluckiness to go to our first party outside of the kids we knew from our "brother and sister" schools. We collectively agreed that we would die happily if we never went to another football game. We had wasted too much time trying to socialize with teenage boys who were actually trying to watch the game.

...

I cleaned out Chloe's locker alone because Piper said she had to train for cross country tryouts next week, even though there was rain. I could only assume that Chloe's parents were grieving privately, so I decided I would bring a box of her things to their house. The inside of her locker normally looked like it belonged in a "Back to School" catalogue - she maximized space and kept everything organized. But when I opened the locker, loose papers fell out, and it was filled with a mess of used wipes with mascara and clumps of her hair tangled with elastic bands and bobby pins. I wondered how many times in the week leading up to her death I had stood with Chloe by her locker; How many times it was open and all the times I didn't look inside. I like to think if I did notice that I would then know something was wrong.

A brown leather handbag stood out from the rest of the junk. This was the first “real” bag she ever owned. Her mom bought it for her last summer, and when she wore it out for the first time there was a charming personality change in her etiquette and posture. I think the brown leather and sophistication of the “piece” (which is how Chloe referred to the bag) was a token of adulthood. So when we got an invitation to go to our first real party she felt like “an adult woman” (she told me this after picking off the crust on her sandwich).

We got the invitation from a goddess we volunteered with at our local church’s soup kitchen. We had been trying to become friends with Bella for a while, and we thought she was a feminist icon. She was also very stylish, she had a tattoo of forget-me-nots on her right bicep and an eyebrow piercing she totally pulled off. She had her own apartment and was on a full ride scholarship at Boston University. When she asked for our phone numbers to start a group chat we all scrambled to give her our phones so she could put her number in. I hated myself for not charging mine.

The night of the party, we planned out the lies we would tell our parents. Even though Bella worked at the soup kitchen with us, she was still a college student and we couldn’t risk the possibility that the age difference between us would worry our parents and forbid us from going. Misdirection was the backbone of the operation - I said I was sleeping over at Piper’s, and Chloe said she was sleeping over at my house because her parents didn’t trust Piper’s parents. Piper’s parents just asked us to lock up the house once we were back for the night. We split cab fare three-ways in cash so as not to cause Chloe’s snooping parents any suspicion. None of us had been to the neighborhood before, but it had a fashionably weathered feel to it that matched

Bella's style. Her apartment building consumed the whole block, and it was difficult to find her place, all the units looked the same and were marked alternatively with numbers and letters

When we did find Bella's apartment, she opened the door and looked massively relieved. There were two other girls there slurping down jello shots. Apparently, Bella was not having much luck making friends at university. So, she put a flyer in her apartment building advertising her party. She had pit stains under her arms and poured us all very strong drinks with jittering hands. A while later, two men knocked on the door. I wished Bella had told them they had the wrong night. There weren't many of us to talk to, and I eventually found myself cornered by one of them. He asked me what grade I was in. I said I was a junior, He assumed I was enrolled in college and I corrected him, which, in the end, did nothing.

People came and went but the drinking never stopped. Eager to blend in and prove our worth to Bella, the three of us sacrificed our livers in beer pong. Eventually, Bella went to her room with one of the girls she had been so blatantly flirting with all night. Piper was outside smoking a cigarette with the other girl, and one of the men said Chloe was in the bathroom throwing up. He said I would be able to see Piper from the spare room window, which I didn't find that interesting. Then he said we should probably go check on Chloe, who was in the bathroom attached to the bedroom. He let me stumble ahead of him, saying something like "ladies first." At this point, I was so drunk that my eyesight changed shutter speeds, everything was blurry and moved slowly. When I entered the second bedroom I heard him close the door behind him. I heard the lock click. I heard my heart beating in my mouth.

I noticed strained and muffled noises coming from the bathroom, a man was moaning - very different from the sound of Chloe hurling. I felt uneasy and disturbed, but at that moment I was too out of it and confused to piece together exactly why. Until the hairy arms of the man

who followed me into the bedroom wrapped around my torso. His meaty grip constricted my livelihood. I wriggled once and he silently and firmly pushed me onto the bed. I tried several times to pick my head up in the hopes that the rest of my body would follow, only to be pushed back into the mattress. I shut down. I stared at the ceiling and heard screaming, I wasn't sure if it was in my head, if I shouted out loud, or if it was Chloe in the next room, or both of us. The night turned into glitches after that. I felt suffocated, and then I felt nothing at all.

The next day the three of us woke up in Piper's bed, with no memory of how we got there. My underwear and shoes had disappeared.

PIPER:

I have probably accumulated about ten hours of sleep in total over the past week. In Geometry class, my exhaustion singed the edges of my eyes while the teacher gave the class a word problem about the rate of a cell phone plan that made me think of Chloe, because everything does.

The night after homecoming last week, she called me in a panic. It sounded like she could have been drinking, or maybe she had bad reception. She asked me if I had thought about Bella's party, and if I remembered her going off with one of the guys. I wondered if the pause I left was as long as it felt to me. I said no. I lied. The truth was I didn't know, and I had a sickening feeling something did happen. Chloe and Sarah were silent the next morning, which was very strange for them but at the time I thought they were just hungover. I noticed scratches on Chloe's wrists. When I asked her about the marks she said it was from Bella's cat, which I thought was strange because I saw no trace of pet ownership in her apartment. Sarah also asked

me if she could borrow a pair of underwear from me, and said her period ruined the other pair, but we were on the same cycle and mine ended a week ago.

The phone call ended with me trying to assure her (and myself privately) that I was gone for too short a time for anything to have happened. But in hindsight I was so drunk that I lit the wrong end of my cigarette. My concept of time and place was not reliable, but I kept that to myself because I didn't want her to worry; and I didn't want to worry myself about what could have happened for the brief period of time when I had stepped out of Bella's apartment. But why trouble ourselves with something unknown? After the conversation, I thought I had swept the whole night under the rug, but I didn't. I was still trying to, and I was failing. It's hard to sweep a whole body under a rug. My Geometry teacher smacked her ruler on my desk and I was brought back to the hypotenuse.

At night, I lay in bed while visions of long intrusive arms penetrated my subconscious; it was unbearable. I sat up and tried to breathe. Chloe's last recorded words echoed in my mind; I turned on my bedside light and looked at my own shadow cast against the wall. In the context of her last written words, my silhouette seemed malevolent.

I stared at my upright outline for a moment, and then suddenly, it started to move without me. As it waved its limbs from side to side while I remained as rigid as petrified stone, it was clear I had no control. The shadow extended itself to the height of my bedroom ceiling and towered over me; It was completely detached from my own identity, and for a minute I was jealous of this. The silhouetted being motioned towards me with its right limb, the gesture felt like an invitation. I lightly placed the pad of my pointer finger on it's right limb and the resulting sensation was excruciating- scalding cast-iron grips clung around my forearms and pulled me

towards the wall. My fists pressed against the wall and I couldn't break free. My skin felt like it was bubbling, and then it felt nothing at all. Everything faded to black, and I went limp.

I woke up the next morning with my face pressed against my rug, on the floor space between my bed and the wall. For the rest of the day, I tried to convince myself that I was sleepwalking and having a bad dream, and that there was no need for me to be afraid of my own shadow.

SARAH:

I couldn't stop thinking about the tragic pit in my stomach. I made my mom take me to the doctor's because I was convinced there was some type of parasite squirming and expanding in my intestines, maybe even laying eggs. My blood and urine looked completely normal. I did have very high blood pressure. The doctor told me grief is a sickness too and I rolled my eyes. I missed Chloe; The feeling clung to me and added a layer of agony to every waking and sleeping moment. I was perpetually moving through a spider's web, invisible strands of tension haunting my body and accompanying every movement.

The last thing I wanted to do was go and see my little sister's play, a modern-day adaptation of "Peter and the Wolf," complete with hip hop dance numbers and a kid with a speech impediment rapping about the woes of being a bird. I couldn't tell if the play was exceptionally terrible or if I had become bitter. The back of my thighs fused to the plastic seat covering as I watched my sister devote all of her energy to her performance as "Duck." I hoped that would be the closest my sister would ever come to being swallowed whole. The play ended with words from the sweet pig-tailed narrator: "If you listen very carefully, you'll hear the duck

quacking inside the wolf's stomach, because the wolf in his hurry had swallowed her alive." I imagined Chloe screaming in the belly of the beast.

PIPER:

In health class the next day, we watched a VHS tape from the nineties (so roughly twenty years ago) about our changing bodies, and the responsibility that comes with it. Sarah and I were in the same class and we normally played MASH during these videos while the teacher checked his phone, but today we were in no mood - a randomized dream life seemed so out of reach that any result of the game seemed mocking. So I ended up paying attention to a recorded lecture given by a couple both dressed in toner and business casual.

About a minute into their speech it became apparent they were going to be discussing why young people should be saving themselves for marriage. The man was as shiny as a penny and rolled up his sleeves before he spoke, so the audience knew he was about to get serious. He talked to the crowd of high school girls about the biology of the human male, and how wearing midriffs was an invitation for them to gawk and hit on women and girls because exposure of the womb activated their primal instincts. The woman was perky and spoke of her previous lifestyle as a "loose woman" (before she found God, and her bronzed new man). Shiny said he loved Perky despite her sexual history, and I had to turn my chuckling into a cough *wow, what a saint*. The man whipped out the old no one will buy a cow if they can get the milk for free analogy and I rolled my eyes with so much vigor that a short dull pain briefly rang from my eye sockets. Perky spoke about how so many women have come to her, saying that their promiscuous behavior is a result of their strong desire for male attention. Together, they spoke about how no

one wants to buy a piece of used tape, chewed gum, or a pair of used sneakers (I looked down at my older sister's hand-me-down dirty white tennis shoes and tucked my feet under my chair).

All of my female peers were old enough to recognize how insulting the video was. The message of the lecture was redundant and only informative in all the different types of ways women who have sex for fun are garbage. At lunch, Sarah broke fifteen minutes of silence:

“If you were a piece of gum, what flavor do you think you'd be?”

I stared down at my yogurt.

“Don't know, what flavor would you be?”

“Chewed.”

“They wouldn't make a chewed flavor.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Sarah muttered to her bread crust.

“What?” Five counts of silence seemed to bloat the spatial distance between us.

“Do you regret going to that party? Sometimes, I wonder-”

“I regret the hangover” I tried to steer the conversation.

“Right, right. But I wonder, sometimes - I think Chloe was really upset by that night.”

“There's no use in torturing ourselves over what things that *might* have happened.”

“I could have said something, I felt she might have been upset, but she never said anything, but I could have asked.” Sarah rested her face in her hands for a moment. Her rambling guilt made me uncomfortable, and it was irritating. sent a rush of shame through my body which collected in my shoes like wet snow, making me cold and uncomfortable.

“Breathe, Sarah,” I tried to calm her down, “there was nothing really to say, nothing really happened.” She looked up from her palms, and I was shocked to see tears welling in her eyes.



“Were we at the same party, Piper?!”

I stared at the yogurt dolloped on my plastic spoon, but I still felt the top of my ears become warm from Sarah’s frustrated gaze. I allowed the heat from the top of my ears to spread to my face while I concentrated on the drops of the yogurt slowly falling from my spoon. I was an ant underneath a magnifying glass, and I was being studied, and I worried my ugliness would be seen. Eventually, I shrugged as a response, and Sarah balled up her brown sack lunch and stormed off. I finished lunch alone, and I wondered what I would look like if I was a roll of duct tape.

I never understood why some Christians admired saints for their self-inflicted pain. Inflicting themselves with pain in an effort to bring them closer to holiness and God, but as I allowed my limbs to fall asleep while I sat crossed-legged in my wooden desk during history class after that lunch, I understood. I couldn’t believe what I had done to Chloe. I guess it was more what I hadn’t done that made me ashamed, I ignored her because I didn’t want to see the ugliness. I wanted someone to make me sleep on a bed of nails like St. Rose of Lima. I deserved to have someone slowly peel my skin off piece by piece, or gauge my eyes out with a melon-baller. I deserved nothing short of pain. I stared at an etching of Chloe’s name on the arm of my desk and shifted all of my weight onto my legs, welcoming the pins and needles.

SARAH:

When my younger sister asked me how my day was on the walk home from school, I said it was gut-wrenching. The sweet little one gave me Pepto Bismol when we got home. Piper

refused to talk about the night when everything went wrong. My mother always told me “don’t try to buy oranges at the hardware store,” in other words, I should have expected this reaction from Piper since she’s never been a good friend to talk with about serious things. I remember when my guinea pig died and she said I could just get a new one, a better one (I think it was a joke). She was a good person, but she was limited, and that was her choice, which meant I was alone.

Our power went out because of a raging storm, rain rapped on our windows all night. I lit a candle by my bed and tried to read my history textbook because I was not ready to be alone with my own thoughts. I stopped before reading the section on Joan of Arc because I really didn’t feel like reading about women being screwed. I became distracted by my shadow, it maintained my basic posture while gently wavering and flickering with the candle’s flame. Then it began to act independently, it brushed its fingers soothingly through its silhouetted hair. I thought I was hallucinating, but when I waved my arms around in the air, my shadow stayed still. I felt shocked enough to scream, but also shocked enough to be speechless, so I sat on my bed facing my shadow in awe, with my mouth gaping. The shadow then gently held its hands behind its back, it was a captivating and unencumbered entity. Chloe often walked with her hands held behind her back, and watching the shadow assume her posture and sway back and forth with the flame was comforting. For a moment I wished I could join it. I could live peacefully in a two-dimensional reality. If the shadow could not conform to me and bring its healing energy, maybe I could conform to it instead. Chloe’s death had left me in a state of mental anguish, and I did not mind being reduced even further, to the point of two-dimension when I would finally feel no pain. When my dad taught me how to swim in the ocean, he said we had to swim through and dive under the crashing waves to pass their breaking point to reach that area where we could

float on our backs. Maybe that's what life could be like. I wanted to join my shadow, to become the spirit of something inanimate and uninhibited - incapable and therefore free of any form of pain.

The house was quiet, everyone was asleep. I watched my shadow glide to the back of my bedroom door and beckon towards me, coaxing me, asking me to follow. I turned my door knob slowly, and crept around the house, carefully selecting which floorboards to tread on and trying my best to avoid the creaky ones. I kept the candle held against the wall to keep the projection of my guide; My adrenaline or some strange presence must have kept my hand steady because my heart was beating so vigorously, it was a miracle I didn't accidentally drop the candle and set my house on fire. My whole body should have shook from the vibrations. We went down the hallway, past family photos and christmas cards, to the laundry room. The shadow extended one of its limbs to the cabinet above the washer, where we kept our cleaning supplies; and when I opened the cabinet it gestured towards the bleach.

The motion was an invitation, as well as the answer to how I could join my shadow. I saw the appeal of becoming disinfected. I hadn't felt clean in a while. The day after the party, I took a shower and kept turning the hot water faucet to the right until I felt myself about to burn. My skin was red and raw, but I still felt contaminated - my insides needed to be cleaned. Right now, they felt stained with Chloe's blood. *Poison can kill poison, that's basically the whole concept of bleach.* I picked up the bottle and it was almost empty. I was about to see just how much was left when I heard the light shuffle of my mother's slippers shuffle, the sound brought me back to reality. *If I died this way, my mother would disintegrate and then her spirit would haunt mine.* I

blew out my candle and rushed back to my room. I pulled my bed covers to my chin, the sheets rose and fell rapidly with my heart beat. The school guidance counselor said that Piper and I may experience feelings of anger towards Chloe from abandonment. I didn't feel that was the case at all, but if I did have some unregistered resentment towards her it was completely gone and replaced with the searingly painful knowledge that the assault made her believe that taking her own life seemed to be the only way it could ever be hers again.

## PIPER

For the twelfth night in a row, I laid on my back and thought about Sarah and Chloe. I couldn't bring myself to address the tragedy surrounding us, but I also knew that my ignorance disavowed our friendship. I never liked to talk about this stuff; life is too short to pay attention to the potentially horrendous and the avoidance of these things had served me greatly so far, but now it seemed like an act of cruelty. It's just that there were so many other things I'd rather talk about. Even though all I could think about was what happened to Sarah and Chloe while I was outside that night.

My body reacted to my chronic anxiety in a very visceral way. The pit in my stomach deepened and filled with pools of acid, which collected and then shot up the back of my throat, leaving the soft tissue raw and sore in its path. I sat up and projectiled this venom all over my bedspread. The stench from my stomach acid and bile was putrid, and while I would have preferred to let myself sleep in it because I couldn't be bothered to show that amount of care for myself, I knew my mother would be livid. So I lit a candle and gathered the soiled duvet under my right arm and quietly made my way down to the laundry room in the basement. I watched my

bedding spin around in the sudsy water and wished I could be thrown in a machine that would turbo clean my brain.

The entrancement broke when I detected movement in my periphery. I noticed my placement of the candle projected my shadow perfectly on the wall to the left of me. I was able to convince myself the other night was a vivid dream, which was probably in reaction to the new sleeping aid my psychiatrist gave me; but it was harder to convince myself of that now, especially after I childishly pinched myself. At first, the shape took the form of a non-threatening, genderless being. But then it began to elongate itself, and when I turned and gave it my full attention; it twisted and morphed into the outline of a horrific creature. The shadow had long and curved horns that came to a fine point. It's whole outline was intimidatingly massive, but it's biceps were twice the size of the rest of its body. The creature had claws that were roughly the same length as it's horns. The talons on its right hand pierced through a small animal sacrifice that it presented threateningly. A suffocating stench (the smell of rotting flesh mixed with raw fish) started to collect in the basement, which already had no air flow.

The shadow stayed still with its right limb raised. I realized my right hand was raised as well, and when I shook it out, the creature followed suit, although it still had its prey attached to its talons. I moved my whole body to the right, and this time, it followed, conforming to my movement. It was a message - *this is my current form*. The shadow nodded. The recognition was shameful. It elongated itself, and as it bent its form and extended itself to the ceiling light, the pit in my stomach began to deepen. I became increasingly more hollow every moment the creature grew, and I was worried I would be engulfed entirely.

I grabbed a hammer from my dad's toolbox on top of the dryer while I felt myself start to crumple into nothing. I pictured Chloe and Sarah, at the bottom of a pit, decaying. I started to swing. I hit the wall and the creature began to dart along the walls, expanding and contracting its shape to avoid my blows. I finally cornered it and hacked at the white plaster. A high-pitched scream bounced off the walls and threatened my ear drums. I pictured the man responsible for all of this and anger propelled my motions. Each swing gave inspiration and power to the next. I could have continued the attack until the hammer broke in two, but my mother had come downstairs and grasped my arm firmly before I could take another swing. She grabbed the hammer and turned me towards her.

"Piper! What are you doing to yourself?" She yelled, staring at my hands. Pain started to slowly throb in my fingers and then swarmed to my whole left hand. The shadow was gone. I looked down and saw my skin and the hammer covered in blood. I had pressed my own hand against the wall and hit it repeatedly. The blood curdling screams belonged to me. My ring and pinky finger were gnarled and bent out of shape, and the place where all my finger bones connected gradually started to feel more shattered as my adrenaline wore off. I crumpled into my mother's arms and cried as she called for my father while holding me like she was sheltering me from a storm.

I was filled to the brim with speechlessness. Denial gnawed at my soul, but there was no way I could ignore this. The four hours in the emergency waiting room didn't help either; it gave me a lot of time with my own thoughts. I did not like the mirror the creature held up to me, I hated it so much because it reminded me of my ugliness. My ugliness was specifically hideous

because it was a choice, and it not only offended those around me, but sometimes destroyed them. I had also been damaged, obviously.

Since I obliterated my left hand with a hammer, I was able to take a week off from school on the basis of physical and mental health. I saw Sarah eating lunch by herself at our picnic table on my first day back. I sat across from her, eager to listen and redeem myself. I was naive to think she would be even a little happy to see me.

“Where have you been,” Sarah stared at her bag of chips and then looked up and noticed my cast.

“What happened?” Her harsh gaze softened and swarmed with compassion, and I wondered why I rarely did the same for her. I looked into Sarah’s eyes with genuinity for the first time. Neither of us would be able to process the night of the assault without the other. Kind of like how before this all happened, neither of us could get through a football game without the other, but far less simple. The circumstances would change as we grew but the pattern of dependability would stay the same. I wished there was no need for situational adjustments, because the circumstances seem to get grimmer and grimmer with every year of our life. Maybe it’s a part of growing, or becoming a woman, but I just thought it was a bummer that we couldn’t have problems about things like dress-up anymore.

Chloe, Sarah and I had experienced the most extreme and harshest conditions of humanity, and we have been bound, ever since, by this horrific insight.

“Will you sign it?” I asked as I handed Sarah a pen, she wrote “Together, we aren’t broken” and signed it “CSP” (our initials), And I smiled for the first time since Chloe’s death. When it was time to get my cast taken off, I asked the doctor if I could keep it. He was puzzled but shrugged and handed it to me. Later, I visited Chloe’s grave and lay the cast at the base of

her headstone. I put a bunch of sunflowers on top of it because I didn't want her parents to see it when they visited; They would have moved it. I hoped my offering would keep us connected, even with one of us beyond the grave.



### The Parasitic Mushroom

I woke up in a dewy field, laying under a large oak tree with thick maternal roots. I was clammy and damp, but my body didn't feel sore at all. The arrangement of the roots created a soft nook in the ground that seemed like it was made for a child to curl up and take refuge in. It was an appealing resting place, and a collection of fungi had also found comfort in the tree's base.

The night before, I admit I had been especially childish for a child who I believed to be a mini-adult. Laura, my roommate, said that she would have the first shower since she was three months older than me. SHE WAS ONLY THREE MONTHS OLDER THAN ME. I was thirteen, and she was thirteen and three months old. She made me hot with anger, and she knew it too. That's not at all close to how it works. No one celebrates birthdays by month. In the obituaries, you never see "Mr. so and so lived to be sixty-five and three months-old." Laura was taking an obnoxiously long shower (sentencing me to an unpleasantly cold one), and I didn't want to see her smug face when she would inevitably come back to the room. I had been very kind to her, I never said anything about her disgusting athlete's foot. I had no choice but to leap out of our floor-room window and escape into the cool night air.

I rubbed my eyes and looked around. I assessed the morning daylight and decided it must be around six, hopefully. There was a chance the supervisors hadn't noticed my absence yet, so I made my way back to the Wohngruppe. I oriented myself; I walked a couple minutes north and after recognizing a sun-dial, I knew I was on the east edge of Großer Tiergarten Park. The staff members (my administrators and supervisors) would be walking by soon on their way to work. I started to run; The worn down soles of my shoes seemed to gravitate towards the crevices that the cobblestones created, and I had to be careful not to twist my ankle.

I climbed back in through the window of my room, which was conveniently on the first floor. Laura ignored me. She just stared down at a magazine. I almost got away with my night excursion. But one of the administrators swung the door open for room checks before I could completely change into my day clothes. I had been there three months, which was not long enough for me to tell the difference between the three administrators, who, in my opinion, bear an uncanny resemblance to one another. She noticed the mud scuffs I had lazily left under the window.

-Emilia, step forwards please.

Her chin wobbled with each syllable. I tried to take off my muddy boots quickly and suspiciously wrestled with the laces. The administrator said it was pointless, and drew my attention to a trail of dirt leading from the window directly to where I was standing.

“I promise to clean the wall immediately.” Deflection was potent in my words.

“Were you out last night?”

“Like a light, I slept very well Ms.”

The administrator rolled her eyes.

“In your bed?”

“No!” Laura decided to conveniently end her silent treatment at that very moment to snitch on me.

“Where did you go?” The administrator asked.

“Somewhere free of her sour athlete’s foot.”

Laura burst into tears, but I swear, it was fake, so I sneered. Then she lunged towards me and started to pull my plaits. I tried to twist the skin on her forearm but the administrator pulled us apart before I got the chance to really get in there, so Laura won. The administrator scolded

both of us, and then sent her downstairs to join the others. Then, she wrote on a pink slip and handed it to me, which meant I had to meet with the counselor that day. I knew art therapy was on the menu, and I made a specific mental note to draw the underside of Laura's flakey toes; Maybe it could get me my own room. The administrator also handed me a blue slip, which meant I had to see the doctor, they probably would do a drug test and general examination to make sure I wasn't following in my mother's footsteps.

After this prescription of consequences, I asked her if I could lay down and skip morning lessons because I wasn't feeling well, which was actually true. At first, I thought maybe my body was simply experiencing intense nausea as a physiological reaction for my distaste towards the consequences. But I felt myself getting worse with every passing moment. I couldn't explain it, I felt confused and invaded. I thought it could possibly be the flu or a cold (the consequences of sleeping outside). The administrator studied my face while genuine concern gradually spread across her own. I couldn't see myself, but I wondered whether I was starting to look like death just as much as I was starting to feel like it. She said it'd be better if I stayed out of the way today- I think the snarkiness came from a place of wanting to grant me permission, but also not wanting to openly encourage staying in my bed in case I was faking (Which I had done on countless occasions). I thought this was smart, because almost instantly I wished I was feeling well enough to drag myself to classes and activities just to spite her. But I physically couldn't, and the administrator knew that if spite could not motivate me like it normally does, I definitely wasn't faking this illness.

*The night Emilia spent cradled by the mossy ground, she also lay next to a group of parasitic mushrooms. The fungi would be undocumented and unnamed by mycologists in her lifetime; It would eventually be identified and named "neurocordyllus." The fungus benefits*

*from the damages it can inflict upon plants and human beings. The spores can permeate through human pores, and once they do their cells multiply and follow one another in search of the brain. In Emilia's case, they first collected and attached to the base of her brain stem. This was the site of origin, but it would spread much farther.*

When I woke up from my nap, my brain felt overcrowded. Every orphan in the Wohngruppe was given one pillow that was so thin I could probably get more comfort from a folded up sweatshirt if I had one. There was a suggestion box that gathered dust in the corner of the living room downstairs, but if directly asking them wasn't going to help I highly doubted wasting paper would. I also saw Big Lisa put her chewing gum in the box a few days ago. Clearly the administrators and supervisors viewed the box's purpose itself as a very minor and forgettable suggestion.

I was more exhausted than before my nap, but I needed to make the appointments so I dragged myself to both. There was an American couple visiting in the afternoon and I wanted to meet them. Their names were Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson; and the head administrator said we were lucky they were giving us the time of day because Americans had been adopting mostly asian babies recently. I lazily threw on my mother's robe and slippers to go visit the counselor. I was too drained to change, so I convinced myself that I could throw something else on just before the couple arrives, and if not, it might play to my advantage to present myself as the most in-need as long as I simultaneously maintained a cheery disposition.

When I walked into the counselor, Tobias' bright yellow office, he looked at me with disappointment. He thinks "robe" is the wrong word to describe the only thing I have left of my mother. He calls it a piece of cloth, an "overthrow" if he's feeling more sensitive. Her robe used to be a deep blue shade, but it had turned pale and greyish with overuse. I knew I dressed

like a cartoon character, but at least there was consistency. The familiarity and consistency of its daily use was comforting. I sucked and chewed on the ends of the sleeves, which made them crusty, but also made it mine.

“Emilia, I thought we discussed this, at least let us wash it for you.”

“Tobias, I thought we talked about *this*, you’re never gonna land someone with that tie selection.” He always wore ties that resembled the same irritating and nonsensical patterns of cheap hospital art and carpeting - random circles and squiggles that made my blood boil. Who would design something like that? Who would buy it? Well, apparently Tobias.

“Let’s make a deal, I’ll buy better ties if you wash the overthrow.”

“Okay, but I might not get to it today, I’m very tired.”

“I bet you are, I heard about your night time excursion, what happened?”

“Laura was playing the older sibling card again - a) she’s not my big sister, b)

she’s only three months older than me and c) that does not give her the right to use the shower before me.

“Were you going to shower?”

“No. But still.”

Tobias rubbed his temples. I wondered if he was counting backwards from ten in his head.

“Emilia, the way our Wohngruppen works is that we *are* family. We collaborate, we negotiate, we work with each other. Can you understand that?”

I nodded apathetically. I think Tobias had worked at the Wohngruppe long enough to accept our session as passing. I decided then and there I would do anything, say anything, to leave. He told me to write an apology and give it to Laura the next time I saw her. I began to

stand up, but then he clarified that he wanted me to write it then and there, just a paragraph. He handed me a piece of paper and a pencil. I couldn't grasp my pencil very well and the lines I had created on the page seemed to swirl and dance as much as the pattern on Tobias' tie. Somehow, I was able to cobble together a generic and half-hearted apology. After I showed it to him and he was satisfied, I was free to go; I crumpled it up and stuffed it in the suggestion box when I passed it on the way to the medical room.

The "physician" had a degree from the local nursing school in Berlin. He had no title, and didn't want us to refer to him as a nurse, so we called him Mr. Müller. First, I peed in a convenience store drug test cup, the two of us made awkward chit chat for three minutes before my results came back clean. Then, he asked me how I felt while taking my temperature, which I just ignored until he remembered these two requests were incompatible and nervously chuckled to himself. Once he declared that I didn't have a fever, I told him about my exhaustion and nausea. My symptoms were intense but new, but Mr. Müller suspected that it was all simply a result of spending the night outside. He prescribed a big sleep; he said it could wait until after the American couple had left, so I wasn't upset by this. I was more surprised than anything that the administrators and supervisors would allow me to meet the American couple in my state (I didn't have time to change out of my mother's robe, but if I'm being honest I knew I was never going to have time to put on something decent). I felt like a bruised fruit, they probably wanted to try to sell me before I became completely rotten. In a silly attempt, I tied a red ribbon around my ponytail hoping it would draw attention to me and bring more femininity to my janitorial image.

At around three in the afternoon, all eight of the girls were herded into the living room by the supervisors, the space had never looked cleaner. Standing in front of the fireplace (that was simply decorative, the room was actually very cold), were Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson. The

head administrator introduced them and they smiled and waved at us; their demeanor mimicked a kind of wholesomeness I had only seen when we watched a television program called *The Brady Bunch* in our english lessons. They exuded a type of familial otherness I had only seen on a twelve inch screen, it was warm and welcoming. As Mrs. Stevenson over-enunciated her own hello to all of us, her eyes glistened with eagerness and anticipation. They said they wanted to get to know all of us because they were writing a research article, this was an excuse many potential parents used when they came to the Wohngruppe. I could never decide whether it was to spare feelings, assess our true characters, or to make things less awkward if they decided they didn't want any of us. Whatever the reason, it was pointless because the administrators always told us so we could be prepared to put our best foot forwards.

We waited in the living room while the head administrator led the American couple to a private room, when she came back she sent in the first girl; each of us would get about ten minutes to make an impression. I was always last, not as a "best for last," but more as an afterthought. They were sitting on the same side of the table which was nerve-wracking - why did the visitors always sit on the same side of the table? As they registered my features, they began to look at me with gaped mouths and pale faces.

"Lily?" Mr Stevenson asked, like that was my name and he had met me before. The Mrs. elbowed him while her gaze fixed on me. I felt her scan me from head to toe. There was hefty silence before she gestured to the seat in front of them with a trembling hand. The chair was awkward to pull out, its legs made clumsy sounds against the wooden floorboards. I stared for a moment at the mug rings on the table before the Mrs. piped up.

"I apologize for our surprised expressions, you just remind us of our first child."

An undeniable weight was added to the atmosphere of the room. Mr. Stevenson

obsessively polished his glasses. I broke the silence this time.

“My name is Emilia, I am thirteen years old, I’ve been here for three years.”

“Where were you before then?”

“Nowhere. “

If these were the parents I wanted, then they wouldn’t probe, it shouldn’t matter. Mr. Stevenson finally looked up from his spectacles, folded his arms across the table, and leant in towards me with a kind expression.

“What are your interests, Emilia? What makes you tick?”

The question made me feel disoriented at first. Typically, couples would ask about how we like school and how we got along with the other children. Then, they would ask a few very specific and targeted questions which placed words in our mouths (the example that first comes to mind is when I was asked by a farmer whether I liked farm animals and how I felt about working on a farm). I was derailed for a moment, and then my heart started to fidget while my mind raced to come up with the best answer. They had given me no clue on what they were looking for in a child, so I had no choice but to be honest, which was exciting. I told them about the pile of biology books under my bed (from life in the Arctic to insects in the Amazon), my collages (made from the counseling brochures downstairs to other counseling brochures downstairs), and my poetry notebook (from crap to crap). It was hard to talk about myself genuinely, and I was worried that I was so out of practice that they would think I was lying; But, they seemed understanding and empathetic towards my nerves and nodded as they



listened to me. They simply emanated encouragement. They reminded me of penguins, bonded and waiting for an egg.

“What do you both do?” I asked.

“Well,” the mother bird smiled, “I am the leader of a parish in Boston, and my husband is an artist.”

“We met when I volunteered to paint a mural on the side of the local community center. I had a job as an accountant for a law firm for about ten years to help pay the bills, but I’ve been able to quit recently and focus on my art. I’ve been able to really focus on my art.”

I asked why. I learned about the death of his father and the assets he left the American couple. Mrs. Stevenson then admitted one of their first thoughts was to use part of the inheritance to adopt a child. I pretended to act surprised. We continued to talk for another half hour, about what life could be like for me in America, and religion (yes I would convert to Christianity and join them, I wasn’t going to let that get in the way of basking in their parental radiance). Eventually the head administrator rapped her knuckles on the door and opened it ajar

“Is everything alright here?” She looked really concerned, and I wondered what she thought she was going to find (Did she think I had tied them up or something?).

“Yes! Oh I apologize, we lost track of time in discussion with this beautiful child,” Mrs. Stevenson said.

The head administrator looked confused, and for a second, I also wondered who they were talking about; But then I turned to her and delivered a beaming smirk. I *am* beautiful. I wanted to say *I told you so*.

...

Mr. and Mrs Stevenson apologized to me for booking their departure flight the night of their visit to the Wohngruppe, but I couldn't have been happier. I didn't say goodbye to Laura, even though she was in the room when I packed my trunk (she didn't say anything to me, so why should I?). I didn't say goodbye to anyone I didn't legally have to get out of there. Not that I didn't have some sentiment towards this place - It's possible it existed somewhere deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep down.

I felt small watching the giant airplane park at the gate through a large glass window. When the pilot introduced himself over the intercom, he said the large hunk of metal I was sitting in was going to be flying in the air 38,000 feet (about 7.2 miles) above solid ground and the ocean. If something went wrong, I wondered if it would be better for the plane to crash into the earth or plunge into the sea. Mrs. Stevenson noticed the beads of sweat taking shape on my forehead, and placed my right hand in her left while the other rummaged through her bag and snapped open a small baby blue suede coin purse. She placed a small yellowish round pill in the palm of my hand and gave me a plastic cup of water. I asked her what it was.

“Oh it's for anxiety, headaches, bad days...” she trailed off.

And then, I guess I woke up in America.

The cab ride from the airport to their house took three hours. I think. I was honestly nodding in and out and all I could hear in the background was “poor thing.”

I was often told, like most children, that if I kept my mouth open in shock for too long a bug would fly in. I considered this a purely cautionary tale until the cab parked in front of what Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson said I could call my new home (but I didn't feel comfortable with that yet). It was a colonial multi-story house painted blue like a robin's egg with white shutters. There were pink tulips planted tenderly in the front yard. There was a garden gnome, and a friend for him in case he got lonely I guessed. Two large oak trees were planted in perfect parallel to each other across a charming red brick walkway. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen a lawn with no cigarette butts. I was shocked; and my mouth hung open and refused to shut. This idiot fly viewed my tongue as a landing strip, and then shot to the back of my throat. Mr and Mrs. Stevenson ran to my aid when they noticed me sputtering and choking on some invisible force. I was too embarrassed to let the fly out of my mouth... so I swallowed it; I didn't want a shameful moment like that to be their first memory of me living with them. Once I collected myself, I complimented them on their home, they said it was new for them too. They'd only been living there for a year.

The truth is Mr and Mrs. Stevenson had agreed they would rather be haunted by the memories of Grandfather Stevenson than the memories of their own daughter, Lily, who had passed away before she could even learn how to write her own name. So when Grandfather Stevenson left them his house, the two of them moved in as soon as possible. They asked me if I wanted to see my room and I had to ask them to repeat their question because I was confused.

They led me upstairs and down a long corridor to a room on the right, which they said was mine and also right next to theirs. I opened the door to pleasantly painted pale yellow walls

and a FULL bed with a quilt on top that Mrs. Stevenson said her mother had made before passing away. There were two tall bookcases with works of American fiction they wanted me to read at my own pace because a lot of the children in the schools have read them. Mr. Stevenson also pointed out texts from his art history collection, and Mrs. Stevenson showed me the Bible she got me in the drawer of my nightstand. What I found most holy, however, was the private bathroom attached to my room.

I was so overwhelmed and excited that I started to feel intensely dizzy. I told Mrs. Stevenson I was feeling strange from the flight, and she said I probably have something called jet lag. She also told me I could call her mom if I wanted, which made me feel even more nauseous and I tried to remember where my mother's dressing gown was in my case. I just smiled and Mrs. Stevenson told me the best thing would be for me to take a nap. When I laid my head on the pillow, my skull felt enveloped in the first class softness of the silk pillowcases the Mrs. said she bought to make my hair soft.

Just as I felt myself start to get used to the soft mattress, a sudden blinding pain projected from the nape of my neck to my forehead; it felt like someone was sweeping broken glass across my soft brain tissue. My vision became peppered with black spots that would not disappear even when I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them again. I tried to rest but that did not make things better. A small yellow light floated in the center of my vision every time I dared to close my eyes. When I reopened them, the black dots would get bigger, and then when I closed them again, the yellow dot would grow larger. I chose yellow. I closed my eyes, and allowed the yellow and blinding pain to consume me. I only hoped any visceral reactions would go

unnoticed by the couple I was trying to call my parents, I didn't want to be a burden to them already. The agony I felt ripped my mind from my body and transported my consciousness to a different metaphysical plane.

*The neurocordyllus cells that had collected at Emilia's brain stem began to advance their structure by working together to take its form as a mushroom. The cap of the mushroom had to break through the earth, or, in this case, the nape of the host's neck. Other specialized spores were sent to permeate the frontal, temporal, and occipital lobe, with the goal of traveling to the core of the brain; This parasitic activity produced auditory and visual hallucinations.*

I was suspended amidst the yellow light. A Jesus-like figure descended and walked towards me. I say "Jesus-like" because he was white with the stereotypical, old testament, pristine, glowing white robes - But he insisted he was Jesus and pounded his fist into a wall (which he seemed to will into existence) when I insisted he was not and a figment of my imagination.

"Take what I say seriously, Emilia. Your world is doomed. Your generation becomes more and more distracted from the absorption and retainment of the lessons in the holy book, the Bible. Civilization will fall from this. You must tell Reverend Stevenson that God's hands guide her in loving support. He is weaving your journeys. Tell her everything happens for a reason, and that Lily misses her."

When I came to, I was contorted in a tangled mess with the bed sheets. There was a loud ringing in my ears, which faded into pounding that I could hear coming from the other side of

my bedroom door. I didn't have the time to wipe the drool from my mouth, but I did find the politeness to run to the bathroom and christen it with my lunch after I quickly turned the doorknob for them. I heard both of them rush towards me as I leant over the toilet bowl. Mrs. Stevenson knelt beside me and lovingly held my hair back. I heard a gasp from both of them. I assumed it was a reaction to my projectile vomiting and I tried to apologize through episodes of heaving.

After I caught my breath, and my stomach gathered some solidity, I told them about the dream I had, and the dull pain I felt which I dressed-down as that jet lag they were talking about earlier. Mrs. Stevenson interpreted my dream as testament to her God. She ignored my descriptions of pain and the tiff I got in with Jesus, picking and choosing what she wanted to hear.

“My dear, you didn't have a dream, you had a *prophecy*! All of my sermons preach a return to the study of the holy books! And Lily is still with us in spirit.” Her eyes teared up.

I wasn't sure I agreed with her, I wasn't sure about anything except the confusion and throbbing of my own mind.

Mrs Stevenson wasn't just looking at me anymore, it felt more like she was *beholding* me, and I felt beautiful again even though I was still on my knees in front of the toilet. The pedestal she was constructing for me was enticing, but it also felt a little too high. I began to feel nauseous again but this time I swallowed my vomit.

“Dear,” Mr. Stevenson interrupted timidly, (I was learning more about their relationship with every passing hour), “we have to consider the threat this thing poses, Emilia, dear, you need to see the back of your neck, and then, I think we should all go to see the doctor.”

Mrs. Stevenson rambled about natural symbols and their biblical connections to the Garden of Eden while my fingers trembled to the nape of my neck. I felt the smooth top of a mushroom cap, and a small stem underneath. The texture changed from what felt like a normal smooth surface to scales, to soft tissue, and to little cactus-like needles. Mr. Stevenson grabbed a hand-held mirror and stood against the large bathroom mirror, so I could see the thing. Mrs. Stevenson talked about the Archdiocese of Boston while I watched it’s color morph - changing from light pastels to spotted dots against contrasting colors with rhythmic and artistic awareness - oranges against blues, pinks against greens, purples against yellows, etc.

Mr Stevenson mentioned that these abnormal features, this type of... (he paused) mushroom, would not be found in the Garden - which seemed to infuriate Mrs. Stevenson, who led him out of the room by his sleeve.

Mrs. Stevenson’s side of the conversation was still very audible through the walls. She accused her husband of being dangerously focused on the science of nature, and failing to recognize that God had created that science. She told him not to undermine her spirituality, her profession, and the holy institution which bound them in marriage (the last part felt like a threat). I couldn’t hear Mr. Stevenson that well at all, but it was clear he lost the fight, and I could tell it wasn’t the first time. I felt uneasy but I told myself I could wait for this feeling to pass; I could still wake up tomorrow and realize it had been a dream. I also realized I didn’t really have

another option. I wasn't even positive what the name of our state was. I carried my limp body to a bed that felt too big for me that night.

...

The next morning after breakfast, Mr. Stevenson awkwardly patted me on the shoulder before leaving to paint in a studio space he rented. A few moments after the front door closed behind him, Mrs. Stevenson told me to try on a dress from the wardrobe in my room because we had a very important appointment. Mr. Stevenson explained to me the night before, while he was teaching me how to play chess, that all the clothes belonged to Lily, but if they didn't fit, Mrs. Stevenson would take me shopping and buy a set of new clothes that did, it's just that, they were on a budget. He stared at the chess pieces and left a lot of gaps between his words. His stuttering sentences bounced off the spacious rooms of his giant house, the echo made him recognize the paradox of the lifestyle he was describing and he laughed. He explained to me that his father had left him the house and a few grand (all of this went over my head because I was unfamiliar with American currency, but he pressed on and I pretended to understand). The take-away seemed to be that they inherited the appearance of wealth from Grandfather Stevenson, but didn't have enough money to match the rest of their lifestyle with the grand house. Though the was big, there was little furniture inside, they lived minimalistically because of their financial restraints.

I felt conflicted as I put on Lily's pale yellow Sunday dress, and I felt dread leech into my bones when it fit perfectly, and I felt even more shocked when moments later I found myself instinctively twirling in it. I stopped myself and stepped out of it, quickly, but also carefully so I wouldn't ruin it; I couldn't wear something like this, it felt morally wrong, like I was taking Lily's place rather than being an addition to the family. Plus, I wasn't a huge fan of my knees.



But, Mrs. Stevenson had said that she thought I'd look pretty in it and I wanted to show her. I stared at the dress and then came to the conclusion that it was okay for me to wear because she asked me to, and she was the adult. I changed back into it, and made a quick apology to Lily in my head, hoping the dress wouldn't suddenly compress against me and that her spirit would resist the urge to suffocate me. Mrs. Stevenson said I was the prettiest girl in the neighborhood, and she led me to her car and pretended not to hear when I asked her where we were going.

...

I sat next to Mrs. Stevenson in a room heavily accented with Virgin Mary statues and crucifixes on each wall. An old man wearing white and gold robes entered the room and sat across from us at a plain wooden table crowded with what I could only guess were copies of holy texts or sacred literature of some kind. I had hoped a little to be driven to a man in a doctor's coat with test results and brain scans on his office desk. I wanted to roll my eyes, but I was in the presence of a holy man and I am superstitious - I simply want to avoid offending any religions in case one of them is correct.

The man of God was only able to speak after Mrs. Stevenson gave a long-winded monologue explaining the miraculous nature of my situation. She said I had received a message from God, and that the implications of the message were that He wanted Mrs. Stevenson to lead their church in new reforms.

"Mrs. Stevenso-"

"May I remind you of my title."

I thought that was bold, and the indoor climate seemed to agree as I felt the room get

much colder. The man of God looked a little scared and shocked for a brief moment, then smiled warmly.

“Reverend Stevenson, I apologize, I didn’t mean my address to mislead you. If these revelations are holy, I agree they are also groundbreaking, and our community deserves to know of any instruction from God. But, we need to be diligent. Is the girl religiously observant?”

“No,” She answered for me, but she was also right.

“Have the doctor’s been able to give any medical explanation for these visions?”

“None at all!” The Reverend lied, she was really good at it too.

She looked at me, I didn’t know what to do as a person sitting in a room where I was being talked about importantly, but in third person. I remembered the head administrator telling me how to behave before I left the Wohngruppe, she said children should be seen and not heard. I stayed silent, but privately, my thoughts were racing with my blood and I felt uneasy. I was reminded of the schemes my mother used to include me in, like when she left me at a table outside a cafe and told me to act groggy. Then she would beg a diabetic for insulin claiming I was in danger, and pocket it so she could sell it on the black market later. She said it was for us, but the money was always gone overnight while she left me in front of our small television set. The situations were similar in that I felt uneasy, but there was a different type of desperation that the Reverend was operating under. I couldn’t detect any monetary drive, which I found comforting. I felt like I should calm down; the way she was reacting to the mushroom growing out of my head was strange, but then again the thing itself was absurd. Who was I to say the fungi wasn’t an act of God when I was not completely certain what it was myself?

“I will send a message out to the Archdiocese and see what they say. I have to spread the good news!”

Reverend Stevenson stood up and put her hands on his desk in a commanding way. This was also very bold, I felt scared for the man of God.

“Don’t forget who helped deliver this revelation, surely, you won’t fall to the sin of pridefulness?” Her eyes glinted, and my mouth was bound in a silence of true shock - it was bone chilling.

“Of course not, leave your phone number and email address and I’ll pass it on so they have a way to contact you.”

The Reverend wrote the information down on a post-it before the man of God could finish his sentence. Then, she demanded the personal contact information of the Head of the Boston Archdiocese, and he gave it to her so she would leave faster.

...

The drive home started with the Reverend talking at me about all the strides that were made today. She spoke to me about figures of the past who have a gift from God similar to mine; she gave Joan of Arc as an example, which did not help me feel easy about my future. Part of me also wanted to laugh, the idea that I was some kind of messenger for God seemed hilarious, especially when I thought of all the times I’d bullied Laura. The only thing that felt god-like was the way the Reverend beamed at me. Her right hand grabbed mine lovingly while she used the other one to drive, and even when she made turns she did not let go.

....

When we got back to the house I was still hesitant to call home, the Reverend told me to sit down at the kitchen table and wait for her. She mentioned that she would take me to see my first American grocery store earlier that day. So when she brought out gauze and scissors, I assumed she was going to bandage my head to hide the mushroom. I didn't want to scare anyone.

The Reverend stood behind me and parted my hair. She said there were now four mushrooms sprouting from the back of my head. I started to hear snipping, she was taking trimmings from my mushroom.

"Ow, that really hurts," at first it was a lie, I just wanted her to stop because things were getting weird and progressively more uncomfortable. I just wanted Mr. Stevenson to take me to the doctor's.

"Sacrifices are painful, it's not easy being chosen ones, but If I can just sample a part of what you experience, I will get a better understanding of what our Lord wants from us," she took another snip, and that was when intense pain transcended me again to a different realm.

I was suspended again, this time half in light and half in dark. In the dark, I heard Mr. Stevenson come home and shout at the Reverend. I imagined I was slumped over the table. She presented the clippings to her husband like she was showing him a relic, delirium in her eyes. In the light side, I felt a terrifying presence compel me to turn towards it, even though I begged myself not to. The Jesus-like figure approached me in robes again, but this time his garments morphed the same color patterns and textures as my mushroom had presented earlier. His authority felt much more recognizable, but it was terrifying.

“What do you make of this?” He extended his arms and his robes started dripping with blood.

“Who's blood is that?”

“Yours.”

*At this point, the fungal cells had spread to all areas of Emilia's brain. They fought for control over her brain chemistry. There were very few uncontaminated cells struggling to operate.*

I wanted to run away, but I knew my infected body and brain would follow; and even if I could somehow operate without them, I would have nowhere to go. “Jesus” seemed to read my thoughts, and with malicious glowing eyes, told me there was nothing I could do - I was sick of hearing that. I wanted control, If not over my body, over my mind at the very least.

*The two were becoming inseparable. The human brain is a “privileged site” for many parasites. Their infiltration eradicates the individual's free will.*

The sound of the Reverend smashing a plate on the floor brought me back to Earth. Mr. Stevenson was trying to wrestle the clippings out of her hands. The shattering sound faded into that high pitched ringing that I wanted to pound out of my skull. I ran to the bathroom, and grabbed the kitchen scissors on the table in front of me on the way out.

I locked the door behind me, and I soon heard the pounding of fists on the other side. It didn't seem like an act of God to plague me with these horrific visions. At this point, I couldn't see anything except a blinding combination of shapes and colors, and I didn't see a holy purpose to that either. I was in excruciating pain; If no one was going to relieve me of it, I would do it myself. I couldn't wait any longer for the Reverend to turn into a mother, and I didn't want to wait for her anymore because she was insane. I cut at the site of contamination. Then, I started to pull the roots out. Blood splattered onto the bathroom mirror. I felt a momentary release from the torture, and then I felt extremely light-headed. Again, black spots danced around my eyes until they consolidated into one threatening mass. The cold tile floor welcomed the body that slammed into it, one which no longer belonged to me.

I fluttered into consciousness briefly when Mr. Stevenson lightly held my hand. My half-present mind was able to recognize features of a hospital room, except everyone in the room was wearing big shiny yellow costumes. Mr Stevenson stared at me while the doctors talked around us about my condition. I was in so much pain, I welcomed death. But first, they gave us a moment alone. Mr. Stevenson began to babble about what he had done to me, so I had no choice but to spend my last few moments explaining to him how my death did not rest on his shoulders.

### “The Red Queen”

In 1970, my dad told me my mother was going to live in an “institution” for her “issues” before he dropped me off for my dentist appointment. His gaze was cool and empty, the only emotion I could detect was from some slight facial twitches, which I knew were abnormal. I was

thirteen years old. To be fair, there was no instruction manual or pamphlet on how to deliver this type of news, and the end result would always be the same, my mom would still be institutionalized and I wouldn't hear from her for the next five years.

It was easy to let my jaw drop so the dentist could rummage for plaque in my mouth. I stared at the train model whizzing around on tracks that outlined the perimeter of the ceiling and remembered a time when my family sat on our living room floor assembling a train model on Christmas day. The set came with a conductor's hat and whistle. I remembered the fight I got in with my mom over who the conductor should be. She referenced matriarchs of the animal kingdom, and that was that, and to be fair the conductor's hat fit her very well. In hindsight, she had been getting worse for a while. I knew something was wrong when she started calling me by another name, "Alice."

Both my parents were born in England and moved to America to start their family while my father furthered his medical career at Boston Medical Center as an anaesthesiologist. We moved into a suburb. My mother apparently assimilated very well with the salt-of-the-Earth people in Boston who gathered in bars to yell at the Yankees. She wasn't a fan of sports, but she loved to join in the shouting because it was cathartic for her. She had a lot of pent-up anger and didn't believe in therapy, but I think she was just terrified of what she would find if she ever did attend a session. Years later my father told me that my mother, Evelyn, had a complicated relationship with her mother (my grandmother), who was also named Evelyn. My father could not elaborate on the complexities of their relationship because my mother was very guarded about the topic, but he told me my grandmother called my mother "mini-Evelyn," even in her speech at their wedding.

Granny Evelyn passed away when I was twelve. I remember an uncharacteristic staleness settling over the house around this time. I had never met my grandmother, all I knew was that my mother called her “eccentric” (the parameters of that term were never explained to me); one time my father agreed with her and my mother became suddenly defensive, because only she was entitled to say such things about Granny Evelyn.

I remember the funeral vaguely. One particular memory remains crisp. I grabbed the hand of a man I believed to be my father, only to look up and see the confused face of my grandfather, whom I had just met at that moment. His confusion changed to a brief but beaming smile, and I could sense grief pulsating through his clammy palm, and it was so palpable that I did not let go of his hand like I normally would have when I used to grab the hands of strangers at grocery stores. I felt a strange obligation to hold on until my bladder was about to burst, and I was forced to leave him.

When we returned home from the funeral, and for months afterwards, my sleep was interrupted frequently by the sound of our corridors creaking. What I thought was a ghost at the time was actually my mother wandering around the house late at night. According to my father, this was around the time when she began to follow in her mother’s footsteps and also became more “eccentric.” My dad thought she wasn’t getting enough sleep. Sometimes, I would be doing homework in my room and hear a wailing sound coming from my parents bedroom. The first time, I was shocked to find my mother crumpled in her closet, clutching a pile of Granny Evelyn’s clothes close to her chest and sobbing into them. After a few similar incidents, I knew I could soothe her by stroking her back, playing with her hair, and making her a cup of tea (these were duct tape solutions).



My mother eventually came across “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” her original copy of the children’s book which Granny Evelyn used to read to her at night when she was little and couldn’t sleep. She began to read it to me every night, and I could tell it was more for her sake than for mine. She assumed I wanted to hear it again, and again, and again. Sometimes I would fall asleep and wake up to her still reading it to me well into the night. That Halloween, I dressed up as Alice, my dad dressed up as the mad-hatter, and my mom dressed up as the Queen of Hearts. However, the next day seemed like it was still Halloween - she kept her makeup on and asked us to call her “her royal highness.” Our house became accented with red, which I didn’t mind, but my father seemed to grow concerned as our furniture was gradually replaced with red velvet pieces. I had never seen his brow more furrowed. She read my diary and made comments about my dreams, and she insulted me for calling some of them disturbing, as she believed all elements of the subconscious should be celebrated. She also corrected my grammar and spelling in red ink, and dotted all the i’s with red hearts. Her delusion reached a strange combination of child-like whimsy and philosophy. This was also around the time when she started to call me “Alice,” instead of Ariana.

One day, my dad came home from the hospital during his lunch break because he had forgotten some important patient files at our house, which you aren’t supposed to take home from the hospital in the first place because of doctor-patient confidentiality (he had been bringing work home to keep an eye on my mother). When he walked in, he found his patients’ files and other bills and papers taped to the surfaces of the walls. Messages were painted on them in red - “God Save the Queen!” “Off With Your Head!” “All Hail Her Royal Majesty!” He found my mother drawing red hearts on the bathroom walls with her mother’s red lipstick - the top of which had been smushed against the wall. My mother used to scream at me anytime she caught

me about to try on Granny Evelyn's lipstick because she said it was strictly for women on special occasions, not dress up; But that afternoon she ran around the house giddy, leaving a red streak from along all our walls in her wake while my dad chased after her. Eventually, he was finally able to get her to swallow a sedative and put her to bed, but only after finding a paper hat left over from our holiday crackers and politely asking her to as the King.

When I came home after my dentist appointment she was gone, and my dad must have scrubbed the walls, but when I think back I do remember a strange red hue pigmented the white walls of our house slightly pink. In the years that followed, my father mentioned very little about my mother, and when I asked about her he would look at me sternly as if I should know better. He didn't think it was a good idea for me to visit her, and I was still upset about the diary, so it was fine by me for the first few months. When I started to ask him if we could visit her, he promised me that I would not like what I would see, and that I wouldn't actually be visiting my mother at all. His words were confusing, but his delivery was too stern and terrifying for me to argue with.

Two years passed and I needed a bra. I was at a sleepover and my friends made fun of me for not taking this step towards womanhood. My dad said it was pointless since "so many girls were burning them anyways these days," and continued to read the morning paper. When I came home later that day, there was a pack of chewing-gum grey training bras lying on my bed, which were too small for me. It was days like these, the ones plagued by puberty, when I especially missed my mother. I wanted her to bring me a hot water bottle on the first night of my period like Hannah's mom did, and I wanted her to stay up and eat junk food with me, and watch Mary Tyler Moore when my first boyfriend broke up with me, like Clara's mom did.

...

Five years after my mother's institutionalization, my dad was diagnosed with a different type of illness which drained the livelihood from his physical being. He was seemingly depleted of everything. This process happened at such a rapid rate, my jaw dropped again when I watched sweat form on my dad's brow and his complexion turn bright red from a sip of wine. A doctor's visit revealed this was the warning my father should have taken seriously. He was diagnosed with stage four liver cancer, which had seeped into his bones and lungs. I saw fear in my dad for the first time, and it was proven even more potent by his flippancy with treatment.

And suddenly, I was alone at his hospital bed-side in my school uniform; where he used to work here as an anaesthesiologist. When I was younger, I remembered coming to visit him on "Bring Your Daughter to Work Day" and sliding down the hallways with him with scrub slippers on our feet. Now, I saw the halls from a different perspective, from the patient's room-out, and a grim hollow feeling clouded over everything. When I looked down at my dad, my attention was drawn to his hand - which had become purplish bigger than his face (made even more disturbing because my dad has a very large head), it was completely ballooned! The medical wristband tape was clearly constricting his wrist and cutting off circulation. My dad just scratched at it when I asked him about it, he said he couldn't feel anything and he didn't seem to care. I hollered for a nurse, didn't he work here? Was there no special treatment?

"Excuse me, I think there's something wrong with his hand, it's really swollen" I didn't want to offend her by being too blatant at first, but the point was moot. The nurse looked at me like I had just undermined her intelligence.

“Oh, sometimes that happens if the I.V is put in incorrectly, let me get the -”

“Really I just think it’s a matter of loosening the -”

“Miss, don’t touch him”

“But what’s the harm in just unwrapping the tape, just to let it -”

They asked me to leave after that because they thought I was getting in the way, but when I came to visit the next day, new medical tape was wrapped around his wrist and it was looser (and also I specifically asked my dad if they had changed his tape and made it looser and he said they did, so ha, but now was not the time for any “I told ya so’s”).

He asked me how my stay with his brother, Uncle Harris, and his wife was going. The genuine look of concern made my stomach turn; the pull-out couch I was temporarily sleeping on should have been the least of his concerns. I looked around at the monochromatic surroundings my dad was confined in. The only break from the wretched and mocking shades of grey came from a small television set in the corner, and this terrible pattern of nonsensical lines and circles (that simply amounted to nothing upon examination, so I think “pattern” is generous) which “decorated” all the hospital gowns and bedding. My dad was allergic to most flowers, so I decorated his room with blown-up hospital gloves which I anthropomorphized with goofy human expressions.

My dad had to crane his neck to look out the window to his left. He sighed and turned back to me wearing an earnest expression that made me put down the hospital glove I was drawing on. He finally told me about my mother, Evelyn Peters, and the details of her demise into an alternate personality as the Red Queen. He explained the origins of the lipstick on the wall, and described the amount of energy it took to catch up to her, which he never really did. I had many more questions, but I could see the conversation was draining for my dad. I knew he

deserved aloof my focus, but I couldn't help but wonder if my mother, her royal highness, knew about anything that was happening outside the institution.

...

It was just like my dad to pass away after giving me a list of instructions. When I came to visit him, a new machine and group of wires seemed to have been added to the collection technology working to keep him alive. I stepped over the tangled mess and sat next to my dad in bed while the nurse wasn't looking.

"Ariana, everyone has to do this at some point. Everyone has to lose their parents, I'm sorry that it's happening to you sooner rather than later."

"Stop."

"You need to get your own credit card, if you don't start building your score now, you won't be able to find housing after college."

"We can talk about this later."

"I'm leaving you the car. Always remember to keep kitty litter, a spare tire, and gas in the trunk. Don't wait for the emergency light to go on before you fill up the tank." I had been known to do this, my dad and I had pushed the car to the nearest gas station on many occasions because of this bad habit.

"If you don't ask your Uncle Harris to walk you down the aisle, he's going to cry, he's very sensitive."

“Well then I guess I’ll have two people walking me down the aisle if I get married, come on dad, cut it out.” He smiled at me weakly and asked me to hand him the Jell-O cup on the table beside him.

We sat together in silence and watched *The Godfather*, one of our favorite movies. It was hard to focus with the background noise of machines, which made me aware of my dad’s fragility and slow breath. Of course, my dad started to crave pasta in the middle of the movie. This wasn’t part of his diet, but I went downstairs to the cafeteria anyways. When I came back I was told by the nurse that she was sorry for my loss. The spaghetti and meatballs I was holding spilled to the floor, and I almost slipped running out of the hospital wing.

I don’t remember how I got home that night. When I walked through the front door, Uncle Harris embraced me, and cried so much he left a large wet spot on my shirt. For some reason all I could think of was how Uncle Harris was such an ugly crier. His face contorted and twisted in a way that was almost gymnastic. I walked to my room, leaving the giant mess of snot bubbles and sweat to be comforted by my Aunt. I still don’t know what was wrong with me.

...

My Aunt and Uncle brought my father’s things back to their house so that I wouldn’t have to go back home, to be honest I probably would have preferred it the other way around but I didn’t want to upset anyone. I loved my Aunt and Uncle but both of them were extremely delicate; it was like the two of them contained all of the emotion for the rest of the family. I decided to keep my father’s saxophone, and my Aunt and Uncle smiled patiently while I played with it and released an off-key and high pitched nightmarish sound.

I came across a shoe box - which I know doesn't sound exciting but my father always hid the most important things in shoe boxes - I opened it, and inside were five birthday cards from my mother to me, one for each of the years she had been absent:

Card #1 - My 13th Birthday - written on a Hallmark card with a puppy on it

DEAR ALICE,

A VERY MERRY BIRTHDAY TO YOU! I HOPE YOU HAVE AN AMAZING DAY, AND A VERY MERRY UNBIRTHDAY TO YOU TOMORROW!

LOVE, MOM

Card #2 - My 14th Birthday - written on a Hallmark card with a red rose on it

DEAR ALICE,

HAVE AN AMAZING BIRTHDAY, I HOPE ALL WHITE ROSES TURN RED FOR YOU.

LOVE, HER MAJESTY

Card #3 - My 15th Birthday , Written on a hand-made card with a drawing of the Queen of Hearts and Alice on the front:

DEAR ALICE,

HAPPY 15TH - HAVE YOU FALLEN DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE? DON'T FALL THROUGH THE RABBIT HOLE!

SINCERELY, THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

Card #4 - My 16th Birthday

DEAR ALICE,

I HAVE YET TO RECEIVE THE INVITATION FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY TEA PARTY WITH THE HATTER. I AM OFFENDED, I KNOW MY PRESENCE AS THE RULER OF THIS KINGDOM MAY MAKE YOUR GUESTS NERVOUS. HOWEVER, I AM STILL EXPECTING A HAND-DELIVERED INVITATION

SINCERELY, THE RED QUEEN

Card #5 - My 17th Birthday - written in the space available on the back of a playing card

ALICE,

THE QUEEN REQUESTS YOUR PRESENCE POST-HASTE IN CELEBRATION OF YOU GROWING ANOTHER YEAR AND HOPEFULLY BOSOMS

THE RED QUEEN

My hands shook when I realized I was holding proof of my mother's insanity in my own hands. My dad's hesitation towards allowing me to visit the institution was clarified. I could understand why he didn't want me to visit her in any capacity, and why he kept her birthday cards from me and just said "she wishes you well" when I asked if she had sent me anything. He was trying to shelter me. The cards eerily displayed a clear deterioration of my mother's mental state. However, along with the delusion, I also noticed that my mother missed Alice, and I was hopeful she and I were the same in her eyes.

I became restless over the next week. Uncle Harris had an obsession with clocks, and his house had several different grandfather clocks which chime every half hour. He didn't silence them at night, and I was raised to believe that a request like that would be rude. I found the copy



of “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” which I hadn’t seen since she read it to me the night before she would be brought to the institution. I thought I could read something in the book which might give me an excuse to visit her on grounds of fate or coincidence. I noticed my grandmother’s name written on the fly leaf in childhood scrawl, and my mother’s name and year underneath it with similar primary school handwriting. I wrote down my own name and the year underneath.

Instead of sleeping, I spent the majority of the next three nights reading and re-reading “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.” My eyelids surrendered on the fourth night and in my dreams, a rabbit hole appeared in the middle of my bedroom floor. I squinted at the opening, and noticed a pair of whiskers twitching from just below the whole. The next thing I noticed after that was a pair of glowing red eyes peeking over the top of the opening in the floor. I was afflicted with the same type of paralyzation that adds panic and anxiety to every nightmare, until the creature showed itself a bit more and I saw it was a rabbit.

Although I was relieved that the rabbit seemed harmless, I still felt oddly intimidated by this stranger and made my breathing go quiet, and I prayed that the beating of my heart was not as loud as it sounded in my own head. I hid under my quilt and curled up, however, before my knees could reach my chest some unknown force yanked my legs towards the hole, I was free-falling, and the interior of the tunnel was embedded with ticking clocks seconds away from celebrating the new hour. Before I reached the bottom of the pit the sound of Uncle Harris’ collection of chiming clocks (I think four in total but it always felt like more) grounded me in reality, and I was so relieved it was only a dream. The beads of sweat that covered the entire surface of my body were a bittersweet combination of residual terror from my nightmare as well as the sweet solace my body took in being grounded in reality.

The next morning I realized the sleepless turmoil I was in was as good a sign from the universe or my dad as any that I should go visit my mother. There had been so many times during our years apart when I squeezed my eyes tight and tried to use my own sheer will power to bring her in front of me, like when I got my first period during gym the week after seeing *Carrie* for the first time. I knew my dad probably made the right call and my mother may have been useless in these situations because of her condition, but I had to see for myself. I personally preferred any impression of her (no matter how unpleasant) than a big, giant question mark. I also rose that morning with a sense of obligation - the rabbit hole had appeared to me, which I took as an invitation.

...

The next day was a Sunday, and I walked downstairs to find Uncle Harris and his wife, who I had started to call Aunt Jenny, getting ready for mass. I told them about my plans to go visit my mother.

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait for us to come with you? There’s no shame in it,” Aunt Jenny said, walking towards the tea kettle as a reflex.

“I’ll be fine, we have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Good luck to you, kid,” Uncle Harris choked before kissing me goodbye tearfully. He pulled his handkerchief from his coat pocket and blew into it. That handkerchief was the epitome of bad hygiene, it had green and yellow streaks on it. I felt obligated to clean and do my Aunt

and Uncle's laundry as a guest so I knew about the weekly wear and tear that poor tissue went through, it was a lot.

My mind strayed on the journey to the institution. I tried to listen to the positive thinking tapes my dad had left in his car, but found them intolerable. My mind wandered to the cards I had found, and I began to realize that they demonstrated a kind of potential of increased hostility towards me, or the character she made of me. This made me nervous, but I reminded myself that mothers have a biological love for their offspring - for example, mother bears - and I hoped this instinct would kick in when I saw her. Of course, sometimes female hamsters eat their young but I tried not to think about that.

I remembered a time when I was eight years old, and I woke up in the middle of the night tight-chested and wheezing. I ran to my parents bedroom, and my mother scooped me up and took me to the bathroom. I had croup, but at the time she had no idea what was happening to me. She ran me a warm bath, and sat on the toilet seat while I soaked. She was panicked, and, being a spiritual woman, felt the need to write my name in the condensation on the bathroom mirror. She claimed a spirit in the house helped her that day - the word "Ariana" became "Ari" and my mother mentally rearranged the letter in her head to read "air." She took this as a sign and scooped me up out of the tub. She gathered me in a towel and walked outside in the cold 50 degree weather; she held me in the moonlight for a few minutes. When she brought me inside, she put me in dry pajamas and bundled me up. My breathing returned to normal. I spent the night being spooned in her arms. I didn't move an inch, not even when my hand fell asleep because this closeness was such a special treat. My mother was there when I needed her, and maybe if I

visited her now, after my father's death, after her King's departure, she would show me the same maternal love or instinct (and I would let my hand go limp).

The institution was at the end of a driveway that was long enough for your mind to run-through all the possibilities of what could be waiting on the other side; or maybe it just seemed that way to me. The dirt road that endlessly stretched before me with no change in scenery seemed like a test of my own sanity. The building was a large, red-brick colonial house, with white shutters and two balconies on the second and third stories. It was surrounded by numerous white rose bushes that grew to what must have been roughly five feet (I was using my own height as comparison). I walked up the front steps and my heart felt like it was flopping one step ahead of me, out of my chest.

The lobby looked like the reception area of the nicest hotel I had ever been to, and it was relieving to know she was spending her time in a nice facility, rather than imprisoned in the filthy halfway-house my imagination had concocted. A woman dressed in baby pink scrubs called to me from behind a giant desk.

"I'm here to visit Evelyn Peters," I admitted nervously. The receptionist raised her eyebrows so that they surpassed the top of her glasses frame.

"Name and relation?"

"I'm Ariana Peters, I'm her daughter."

"Oh, well that's a sweet surprise, she doesn't get many visitors, maybe you could challenge her to a game of croquet? It's the only way we've been able to get her outside," she said, challenging me in her own way. I had to remind myself that she only knew this part of me, and was probably right to assume I was some type of neglectful daughter, who was only visiting now after my father's death so I could protect my claim to the will. Guilt and anxiety washed

over me as another nurse in pink walked me to my mother's room, she introduced herself to me as Nurse Thompson, and she was one of my mother's caretakers.

"She calls me her lady-in-waiting," Nurse Thompson told me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Alice, don't apologize, your mother is very creative and I think that creativity in these places can be slightly stifled and for our patients here who are artistic, their boredom funnels their whimsy elsewhere."

"My name's not Alice, actually, it's Ariana," I said.

"Oh," Thompson replied, defeated. We reached the door and she was patient with me while I took a few breaths before turning the knob. My mother lay in a hospital bed; a hand-held mirror covered her face as she applied makeup using various products which were sprawled across the bed. She moved the mirror away from her face at the sound of company. My first thought was she was considerably paler than I remembered, however, that could have also been an effect from the powder she applied. When she saw me, she delivered a toothy grin which showcased all of her pearly whites and some lipstick stains.

"Alice!" She exclaimed with a royal cadence in her voice, "What a delight it is to see you! Is the mail service poor in your area, I have been wanting to see you for quite some time." She offered her stretched out hand for me to kiss, and I ran over to her bedside and did so, and then I could not help but embrace her, and for a few moments, she grabbed on to me too. But soon after, she pulled away, remembering her high status as she jerked up her chin to its lofty position.

“Actually, mom, I just found the cards you sent me, I was going through dad's things and I guess he forgot to give them to me. But they're very nice and I wanted to come say hello and see how you're doing.”

“Ah, yes, my King, what a tragedy, they delivered the letter to me a few days ago. Don't worry about me. You shouldn't worry either. Our Queendom will continue to thrive since it is ruled by the matriarch. That's not to say I don't miss my King. But everyone knows it's the capture of the Queen's piece that ends the game. Of course, I will miss sitting next to him on the board but the world will continue to turn and the sun will still rise.”

“Mom-”

“Your Majesty -”

“MOM!”

“Alice, I won't play this game with you. Although I will say your presence has stirred me,” She grabbed my face, and twisted it to the left and then to the right, examining it, pinching my cheeks. Then she pulled away and said “You've grown so.”

“And I miss you. Your majesty, I apologize for yelling,” I bowed my head, “It's just a lot to process all of this,” I looked around her room. I could not tell what the colors of the walls were, because they were completely covered with red and black illustrations on pieces of paper that had been taped up - the drawings in marker included of all the different cards in a deck, self-portraits of her royal highness, and what must have been her loyal subjects (I assumed these were based off of the nurses who looked after her) cloaked figures offering her gifts of livestock, harvest, and spices.

“Alice, you have much to learn. You understand that shadows are a two dimensional reflection of our being. And we, ourselves, are the third dimension, but have you ever considered

what your fourth dimensional identity might be? I have found mine, and it is my true self. I used to be insecure about my visions but I now see the truth and I am ecstatic, I am in control, and I am powerful!”

I didn't know how to argue with that. She could see I was confused.

“The late King didn't understand either.”

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We played a game of croquet, and she demanded rematches until I let her win, which I should have thought of before. While I drove towards my Aunt and Uncle's house, I reflected on my visit, and something became clear to me. Although it was clear the institution she was staying in was one of the best in the nation (according to a wall of plaques they displayed in the waiting room), the institution had arguably made her mental state worse; her decorations and her makeup were a testament to what I considered fact - that being cooped up on those grounds, no matter how well-trimmed the hedges were, was worsening her mental health. Then I thought she would probably be better off living with me... and I was launched into a world of possibilities, plans had to be made, our home had to be cleaned, oh I'd have to talk to my Aunt and Uncle, maybe tell a few white lies, I'd definitely have to decide how much of the truth I should disclose. My mother just needed time and space outside of the institution, she needed to move back into our house with me. No human individual is meant to live confined to a specific set of acres. We could live on what we had inherited from my dad for at least a year, and I will have graduated by then, so I could get a job to support us. I pictured my mother and I cooking dinners together again in the kitchen; and this time I would be old enough to do more than just stir.

The next day, I drove to my old home directly after school, and made it spotless from top to bottom so it would be ready for my mother. I hadn't set foot in our home since my dad left to stay at the hospital, however I knew if I concentrated on cleaning I could avoid any time lost by sentimentality. That being said, I couldn't ignore the isolating eeriness I felt when I crossed the threshold of the front door. Cleaning the house was really just a matter of dusting, changing the sheets, cleaning the floors, and scrubbing the bathrooms. I did stop to look at the height chart we had on our kitchen door frame. You could track my growth, and my mother's slight shrinking. I took a pen and marked my new height, and I was excited for my mother to do the same.

I finished cleaning on schedule. I drove back to the institution, this time defeating the taunting driveway with more confidence. When I rushed to my mother's bedside, I knew I would have to play into her delusion to get her to come with me, and that was fine by me, because I was almost positive that after some time outside the deceptively charming red brick walls would help her return to her normal self.

"Your majesty, have you ever considered leaving these walls to survey other kingdoms?"

"I admit so," she sighed, "However, I have thought it best to stay here, after all I have formed such a deep connection with my subjects, and I would worry so if I abandoned them."

She must have felt so restricted by this place that she forced herself into believing she was there to serve some greater purpose. She wasn't in a place to see what this building had done to her because the effect of confinement to this one estate was too powerful. I didn't have any wool pulled over my eyes, though, which meant it was my duty to help her.

"I don't want you to be chained to one kingdom, you have so much potential."

"I have, sometimes, considered myself a ruler worthy of reigning over more... bountiful states."



“Exactly, you are meant for better!” I offered.

“Finer?”

“Yes, of finer quality!”

“Well, I suppose it is important to visit other kingdoms, if only to create allies,” she mulled, “Alright. I will go on this expedition with you, Alice, take me to these colonies.”

We walked outside arm in arm on what the average staff member would view as an innocent stroll through the gardens. Then, I took her hand and quickened my pace towards the parking lot. It was surprisingly easy to get her out of the institution, which was convenient for me at that moment, but also worrying when I thought about it more, because it was clear they spent more money on garden maintenance than security.

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When I took her majesty to our house her first order was to run a hot bath. This, I anticipated, and I had even bought rose petals and scented candles for the occasion. We cooked spaghetti bolognese, using her special recipe which I had luckily found on a flashcard stuck to the refrigerator. It was held in place by a family photo magnet of my father, mother, and I in our Halloween costumes smiling at the passerby my mom had asked to take our photo. When her majesty noticed me staring at the picture she embraced me. I pressed my ear to her chest, the beating of her heart was a comforting rhythm, and I had no idea how much I had longed for it until I was there, trying my hardest to engrave every detail of that moment in my memory, because nothing lasts forever.

She started to rock me from side to side, and she hummed the tune to a lullaby. I became a child in her arms again. I broke down into sobs and she grasped me tighter. I wanted to stop

crying, these were precious moments which I didn't want to waste acting like Uncle Harris. But it was strange, the more I tried to stop myself, the more violent my shaking became. I was unzipped and embarrassed; I pulled away from my mother and wiped my runny nose on my sleeve like a six-year-old.

“Child, do not stifle your emotion, it is a beautiful thing, your tears, they are a sign of your passion,” my mother said, she pulled out a handkerchief from her pocket and dried my eyes.

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The next day we went on a hike. My mother wanted to explore the nature that was outside the walls of her kingdom. This gave me hope, my mother was once an avid hiker and her suggestion that we should “immerse ourselves in nature lore” gave me hope that she was returning to herself again. It was a beautiful day to become Evelyn Peters again. The sunlight dappled through the broad-leafed trees and created dancing patterns of celebration on the ground. We brought a basket to collect “treasures,” out of respect for a tradition we had when I was younger. Of course, my mother called the pinecones and acorns we gathered “specimens” to bring back to her kingdom and examine.

We stopped for a moment to listen to a woodpecker, and after a while of stillness a small rabbit appeared from under the brush and locked eyes with my mother. The rabbit looked like it had just come from defending its own life - patches of fur were missing in his mangy coat and there was also a small collection of foam pooling around the edges of his mouth. He locked eyes with my mother, and they seemed to enter their own silent conversation, which I was left out of. I could have sworn the poor, bitter, gnarled thing snarled at me and then darted up the path. My mother took off and tried to follow the rabbit, which left me to sprint after them. I was taken

aback by my mother's speed, especially considering she had been confined to the institution for the last five years and also believed that exercise was beneath her, and that roundness was a symbol of power. The distance between me, my mother, and the rabbit increased as I struggled to keep up, sputtering and panting until I rounded a curve in the trail. I found my mother approaching two rugged male hikers trudging side-by-side, the rabbit was out of sight. The two men had bundles of camping equipment on their backs, which made their shape as well as the space they took up on the trail double in size. My mother ran to them and hugged them as a singular unit.

"My jabberwocky!" I could hear her exclaim as I huffed and puffed my way over. The men looked at each other in confusion.

"I'm sorry?" one of them offered.

"Apology accepted my love! You must have strayed and gotten lost, my dear, it's not your fault, come now" she grabbed one of the hiker's hands, "let us go and make up for the time lost, with you at my feet, my dear pet."

"Lady, what -"

"I'm so sorry-" I was finally able to reach them before it got any worse, gasping for air, I swatted my mother's hand away from the stranger. She turned to me and struck me with her hand, which felt like a hot iron rod.

"Alice, don't be jealous, green isn't a good color for you, don't worry, I can still have my dear Alice and my dear jabberwocky."

"Woah" the hikers stood in front of us with their jaws dropped, unsure of what to do. I mouthed to them - *I'm sorry, run* - and they clattered away.

I turned to my mother and caught her hand before she could grab the back of their packs, then I had to grab her other hand to prevent it from striking me again. She kicked me, and I fell on the ground and grabbed her leg to keep her from running away, then she fell and we wrestled; and I had to wonder if she was taking classes at the institution, she was really strong. She pinned me down.

“Why, on Earth, would you let my dear jabberwocky go, out of pure jealousy? I thought you had matured, I thought you had grown, I guess I was wrong, which is a first, but you made me wrong!”

The irony of these words stung, I had expected the same growth from her.

“The jabberwocky belongs out here, in the wilderness.”

She collapsed. The ground was padded with dead leaves, which made a loud and defeated crunching sound when she fell by my side and began to weep.

“I want to return to my kingdom.”

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I returned my mother to the institution with the red mark of my mother's handprint across my cheek, and the receptionist must have felt sorry for me because she didn't even lecture me. She probably thought the slap across the face was punishment enough. She told me there had been others similar to me. That was supposed to make me feel better, but I don't understand how another person experiencing the same dreadful evil could make anyone feel better. Great, there's another person just as miserable as I am, that doesn't really change anything for me or them. My mother settled herself into her new room with regality. The staff had moved her to a wing which had a clear view of a dozen or more white rose bushes. I rushed over to draw the curtains so she

wouldn't see them. We spent the rest of the day together; she created new illustrations to personalize her room, and I passed the hours with her taping every one of them to the wall. I understood why she was so insistent that all the walls should be covered, because underneath was the same diabolical, nonsensical, and painfully drab hospital pattern which had enveloped my father and so many others during their final hours.

I kissed my mother's hand goodbye, and I promised to visit her every Friday. She grabbed my hand before I left and whispered in my ear with a choked up voice - "Don't forget"

That night I returned to my Aunt and Uncle's home, they were angry but mostly relieved to see me, which made me feel even worse about lying to them. Uncle Harris asked to see my arms, and I wasn't sure if it was because he was worried I was doing serious drugs or self-harming or both. The three of us sat at the kitchen table with mugs of chamomile tea. Aunt Jenny asked me where I had been. When I showed hesitation she asked me if there was a boy and if Uncle Harris should step out of the room for a moment. I was so uncomfortable with that idea and I told both of them everything that had happened with my mother. They stood up and gestured for me to join them in embrace, and I reluctantly did. I heard them start to sniffle into my shoulders, and my vulnerability was unearthed again, as it bubbled to the surface I started to tear up as well. They grasped me tighter like my mother would have, and this simple gesture released a terrible noise from my core which sounded like the cries of a wounded animal. Instead of whispering "shhh" in a soothing manner, which is instinctive to most, my Aunt and Uncle released their own cries of visceral emotional pain. It was cathartic to see my emotions mirrored, and I realized I clearly had a lot of catching up to do.

Not much protects the human heart. There's the rib cage, cartilage, and muscle tissue - but this conglomerate is a weak fortress. It is extremely easy to stop the muscle that gives life to

the human individual, and it takes even less effort to cease its existence on an emotional basis - which would also mean to halt its function as the site of production for human genuinity. Anyone born into this world is as delicate as the physiological components that keep them alive. The heart works paradoxically as it is gifted with a position of power when it pumps blood to the rest of the body, but then proves itself vulnerable when it becomes plagued with emotions which render human hearts burdened and exhausted. Fatigue is common; and oftentimes the human individual will beg and cry out in pain for their ticker to stand still, so that they may finally be at peace. The Queen of Hearts becomes the Queen of Weakness.

At night, I lay in bed with the same restlessness I had before reconnecting with my mother. I couldn't stop thinking about the white rose bushes, she must have noticed them by now. I knew it would drive her up those god-forsaken walls and no one would paint them for her. I decided to break the rules of my mother's kingdom one last time. I had a large can of red paint leftover from making student council banners for school. I waited an hour after everyone had fallen asleep in the house, and timed my exit to the garage with the half-hour chime of the clocks. I turned off my car headlights well before I could see the institution's main building at the end of the driveway, and parked as much to the side of the road as possible about a hundred meters from the gate. I climbed a tree and hopped over the brick wall attached to the gate. Breaking into the facility proved to be just as easy as breaking out. The light sound of grass bending under my shoes was amplified by the surrounding silence. I approached the white rose bushes by my mother's window, and opened the large can of red paint. It was heavy, so I tried to slosh the paint over the flowers which proved to be pretty effective. Then, I submerged both of my hands in the smooth liquid and used them to cloak the individual flowers in a more honest red. Then, I reviewed my work one final time, identified any white spots, and filled them in with

a brush until all the roses were red; I hoped this would soothe the psyche of my mother's fourth dimensional being.

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