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THE LEATHERMAN and other short stories

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THE LEATHERMAN
And Other Stories

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

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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The Leatherman

This time, I'm the first to see the Leatherman arriving at our house. I almost drop everything when I see him walking towards me. It's so cold that I'm the only one out in the woods. The rabbits I'm picking up from the snares are almost fully frozen, the fur prickling at my hands. It was something we have to do every morning and today I've drawn the short straw.

He's in that same leather patched outfit, the one he made himself from scrap patches. I can see the thick stitching on it- jacket, pants, boots, even gloves and a hat. The outfit makes him look even broader than he is, bear-like. In all the time he's come over, I've never seen him take the jacket off.

Usually when the Leatherman arrives, it's a special occasion. But this time, when I see him walking down the hill, I want him to leave. Jenifry doesn't need another reminder of the things she can't have.

Jenifry is my eldest sister and she's the strangest. She has her own room, tucked right next to the chimney on the second floor. My youngest sister, Imogen, was so upset when she found out. I know she wanted to have that space to herself after Grandma passed. Most of the time, Jenifry hides away in there. If we want to talk to her or need her for something, you have to

walk up and knock, hoping she'll crack the door open. Other than that, her room is forbidden. When we all have dinner together, she makes sure to stay for as little time as she needs to. She slides in and out of rooms, in and out of conversations, but never linger long . Mother and Father don't know what to do with her. If she was like Jeb, my eldest brother, then they would be fine, because he is just angry-disobedient. They can send him outside to chop wood for a while and that tempers the rage. But Jenifry is nothing-disobedient. It's not that she's trying to be cruel, or disobey. It's more that she doesn't care anymore. She only does the bare minimum and so the distance grows.

I can't really think of one point where it started being worse. Instead it's like it started piling on top of each other, over and over. So Father just whispers to Mother in the bedroom, they make her talk to us, spend time on longer chores, spend more time with her during classes.

It was around the time between spring and winter, where the whole world was mud, that things changed for me. I was in my room, sitting on my bed. Darning the sweater I burned was taking longer than I expected, but I knew I had to finish it or Mother would be mad. Someone knocked on the door. I nearly jumped and my needle went tumbling to the floor. I was expecting it to be Mother coming to get me, but when I opened the door, Jenifry was there instead.

She looked funny. Face all flushed, shifty eyes, hair tied up in a half-hearted bun. Her sweater was rumpled and there were little snarls poking up out of it. Her hands were shaking.

"Do you know where Mother and Father are?" she said, almost out of breath.

"I think Father's in the curing shed, and Ma had to go find the goats," I told her. Jenifry didn't seem to notice my response. Instead, she leant down close to me. Around her was a strong, chemical smell that burned up into my nose, enough to make me pull back.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“What kind of secret?” I asked. It was a fair question. If it was too big or too bad, I wouldn’t want to know. Maybe I should’ve asked for a trade. Like, you keep my secret, I’ll keep yours. She grabbed my arm and the smell became stronger. I remember that her nails were painted sparkling purple, still wet enough to smudge, and they dug into my arm. Too shocked to move, I just went along with it. She pulled me down through the hall and into her room.

I still don’t know why she chose me. If you made a list of who Jenifry would trust the most, I would think myself last. When we talked, it was about common things, like the boys being annoying, or my trouble with homework, or how the animals are doing. I always was the one who started those conversations, but she never knew how to keep them going. So those words petered off and there was silence again.

The Leatherman is standing in the center of the path, looking right at me. I walk up to him. He could definitely hear me long before I got close. Whenever I wear snow goggles, I can’t wear my regular glasses under them so I stumble into things. There’s no chance to be sneaky. He’s pretty stone-faced, but I’ve learned to look at the little things. Something like a smile crosses his face as he watches me come closer.

“Hello!” I say. I’m all out of breath. “You wanna walk with me back over, Mr. Leatherman?” Even with my glasses, the sun creates a little halo around his head, shading his face. I don’t think I would ever get tall enough to catch up with him.

He grunts. That’s a yes. I don’t think the Leatherman knows English that well. I can hear him muttering sometimes, words I don’t understand but which flow up and down. I’ve never asked where he was born. Before I talked with Jenifry, the outside world didn’t matter. But now?

Could it be across the country? Across the sea, like in Europe? Imagine traveling across the ocean, where you couldn't see any land at all, just the wide expanse of water.

We walk for a while in silence. The crunching sound of snow under our boots. Were he able to see inside my head, he would be shocked to find how much my mind churned.

The Leatherman moves lightly enough to not even break the top layer of snow. I can hear his breathing, wheezing and wet. Winter is the time of rest for everyone else, but he always walks. Right now, it looks like he won't ever stop moving.

Father says we're people who like our privacy. That's why we live out here. The Buckout homestead stretches for acres. The whole of the land is private, including the road. Every year, I have to go around with Father and re-put up "No Trespassing" signs. Sometimes, he goes around in a loop of the property, trying to see if anyone has been around, but it's too much land to patrol regularly. The only person that's allowed in from the outside world is the Leatherman. Mother says it's lucky when he comes. In return for helping him, and serving the feast, all will turn out well for the rest of the year. The crops will grow. The rain will fall. The animals will stay healthy. Goodness towards others brings goodness to ourselves. What would happen if we didn't invite the Leatherman in? I'm not sure. I hope the Leatherman enjoys coming here, though I do wish he could come when it's green and full of life. There's plowed fields for corn and for wheat. There are stables for the horses and goats and chickens. Down the hill is a pond where we cut the ice from in the winter, and fish from when it's warm. The garden is very big, fenced all around to keep the deer out, full of herbs and veggies and fruits. On the far end of the field, before the woods, there's a few gnarled old apple trees, the fruit surprisingly sweet. Through all the woods, there's plants to forage, like ramps in the spring and blueberries in the summer. Jeb knows the

best spots to find mushrooms. Father has set up solar panels so we don't have to rely on the grid for electricity. We only really have it for the water pumps, anyways. Whenever I ask Father about it, he says we've always lived here, that it's family land, and this is the way we are meant to be.

Above us far up in the sky, a bird circles. It's probably a hawk, with the size. How far does he fly, to come over here?

"Hey, Mr. Leatherman?" I ask. We are close to home by this point. The sun has risen further, sending glittering crystals across the ground.

"Yes?"

"How far do you walk to get here?"

"365 miles."

"Is it scary?" I'm so close to him, I can smell him. It's that leather scent, unmistakably animal. Whenever we cure skins, I'm reminded of him.

"Hm," he says. I wait, biting at a piece of skin on my lip. His face is slightly smeared with dirt, like he tried to wash it off with a cloth but didn't get it all. Stabbing his walking stick into the snow, he mutters sharply. Unlike the other times, it's almost familiar. "For me? No. For you? Yes." I don't really know what to say to that.

We aren't supposed to want to go into the outside world. We aren't supposed to want to leave. If I keep talking, I would be sure to tumble everything out. It's better to stay quiet.

When I look up at the sky, I can't quite see the blue the right way. My goggles tinge it, transform it from bright blue to a muted gray. I resist the urge to pull them off. At my side, my fingers tap tap tap on my leather bag, finding a melody.

The first time Jenifry brought me into her room, I was surprised it didn't. If she didn't want us in there, there must've been a reason, right? It was smaller than the other rooms, more cramped with the slanted ceiling from the roof. A window nook with a desk pushed into it half-blocked the dresser. The bed was in the far corner from the door. Everything in it was painted white- the walls, the ceiling, the doors, which made the wood floors look even darker. Otherwise, it was plain. One of Mother's blankets was thrown over the bed. A lamp with a pinhole shade sat on the dresser, right next to a hand mirror. Bundles of lavender, mint, and rosemary were hung in front of the window, scattering dead leaves all across the desk and windowsill. I could smell them, alongside the fresh rain. I hovered for a while, right by the door.

"Well..."

"Are you going to close the door?" She wasn't even looking at me, rude. Still, I closed it, having to push a bit at the warped wood.

Jenifry paced back and forth before flopping onto the bed. It squeaked loudly, and we both winced with the noise.

"So," she began, and then trailed off.

"So..." I said, moving forward the slightest bit.

I'd never seen her be so tongue-tied before. Finally, she pulled out something from under her pillow. Thin, shining, bending under her grasp. With a sigh, she patted the bed next to her. I didn't know what to do except sit down. Little flutters ran through my stomach, around and around, enough to make me nauseous.

"Have you ever wanted anything different from here?" Jenifry said, her jaw set as squarely as Father's.

“I mean, it doesn’t matter right? You know we can’t leave the grounds.” It was a rule that our parents had drilled into our heads. Even if they can leave and pick things up, talk with people, we can’t. It’s more dangerous for us. If we try to leave, we won’t come back.

“I know that, Cecily, I know what they say, but there’s so much more than that out there. More than what Mother and Father say. It’s not all doom and horror and... just look.” She held up the magazine then flipped it open to a two page spread.

On it, there was a glossy, sharp photo, in full color blues. A warping, rippling, submerged cave. Every wall and arch was carved like ice in a stream. White stone reflected water so intensely blue it looked dyed. These were nothing like the photos of the world our parents had shown us. When I was younger, I would always have nightmares about them.

“These are the Cuevas de Mármol,” she said, stumbling on the pronunciation, “The Marble Caves.”

“Jenifry, what?” I said, “You can’t- where did you- Jenifry!”

“So, these are caves that are only accessible by boat. They formed over thousands of years, can you believe that? All by the water, rushing up against them.”

“Jenifry, I know about erosion,” I said, “but why do you have this, it’s not safe-“

“That’s not the point, Cecily.” Her tone was so sharp it shocked me. Her eyes were glinting and watery. “I’m sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have asked you. Could you just forget this happened?” She was talking faster, shoving the magazine away from me.

“No, I like them,” I said.

She froze. The slightest, barest twitch twisted her lips. “You do?”

“Why would I lie about this, Jenifry?”

“I don’t know, so you can tell our parents as soon as you leave this room,” she said, wiping under her eyes with her sleeves.

Ok, maybe I had thought about that. If I told them first, then I wouldn’t get in trouble, it would only be Cecily. “No, I won’t, I swear.”

“You swear?”

“I mean, it’s pretty cool.”

“Would you want to see more?”

The Leatherman doesn’t look like he belongs next to our house. The whole thing is painted bright red. I don’t know where or how Father got that color. In the basement, I found where he stored cans and cans of the stuff, all stacked up. One of them had leaked, letting thick red ooze onto the concrete floor and dry in place. In the spring, we plant butterfly bushes and wood sorrel all along the pathway to the house. The Leatherman pauses just at the base of the porch, looking upwards, taking in a deep breath.

“Are you okay?” I ask. He’s so still. I’m about to speak again when he just starts walking like he never even hesitated in the first place. We go up the steps and to the front door.

As soon as I get inside, Mother swoops in. I swear she has a sixth sense for these types of things. In a flurry, she offers to take the jacket and fusses for him to sit, why didn’t you tell me he was here! Her hands clasp around his arm and guide him further into the house. I can hear voices in the other rooms. There’s Father, entering in from the back porch, wide shouldered and welcoming. There’s my brother, Jeb, thudding down the hallway, before Mother tells him to wash his hands which are still smeared with reddish rust. There’s Imogen, walking in all perfectly pressed. My youngest brother, Winston, must be sleeping right now. In a moment, the

entryway, the living room, and the hallway down to the kitchen becomes packed with people, hitting up against tables and vases and the portraits on the wall. Most of the time, our family only feels large during dinners, when we all squish ourselves around the wood slab table. Even then, people might not come, and there's enough room for us there. I linger in the doorway, running my fingers over the cold metal buttons on my jacket. No, I shouldn't walk in yet. I have to make sure that I don't bring the snow in with me. So, while everyone everywhere is talking, moving, yelling, I take my time, hitting my boots free of snow and carefully hanging up all my gear.

I'm not the only one to hang back. Up at the top of the stairs, I can see my sister, lingering and watching, just behind the banister. No one else could notice her watching from there, spectator to the squall. I don't need to ask what she's doing. The Leatherman is a head taller than the rest of the crowd. For a long time, she waits there, just sitting. I can't remember the moment that she leaves.

The magazine wasn't the only thing she had. As the weather warmed, and the world slid into spring, Jenifry showed me more and more of her collection. She didn't hide her things in one spot. I began to feel that, when I pressed on a floorboard or poked a piece of the wall, or lifted up a shelf, I might find a secret thing there. There even was the smallest of doors, just enough to crawl into, almost invisible between her desk and the dresser. In her pillow she hid candy, the sweetest you could taste, like mint had punched your mouth. She told me not to worry. No one would find it.

Her collection of forbidden books was kept in a box under the floorboards. While we had approved books downstairs, there weren't too many of them. Mother only wanted us to read what she chose. Of course, Jennifry's were very different. Tour pamphlets of different places in

the world, short novellas full of romance and scandal that made me blush up into my roots, fantastic adventures with swords and dragons, historical books that were so dense I lost interest in a second. Jenifry spent the most time with this language book. She told me that she wasn't sure how to pronounce some of the words, and that she wished she had a cassette tape or a dvd. But every day, she would pull them out and go through the lesson, whispering weird curving words with e's and u's that made you use more of your lips. It never seemed like any trouble to her. No, instead it was like she lit up. This is what she wanted more than anything. Just to let herself be known.

Her favorite thing, out of it all, was her phone. That was the worst possible thing to have here, and we both knew how horrible they were supposed to be. She kept it the safest place of all, in that little hidden closet and only took it out when she knew Mother and Father would be gone for a while. A bunch of stuff was in there that Grandma left behind when she died. In here, stuffed behind a piece of wood, in a paper bag, she kept it safe, alongside her headphones and her portable charger. I was still afraid when she took it out. Father and Mother said that the emissions from it caused cancer. She told me that she had been sleeping by it for months without any problems. There wasn't too much she could do on it, though. We didn't have any WiFi or data out this far. There was one thing we could do, though, that amazed me more than anything. The songs.

While Jenifry chose her locations, her cities and ports, I chose music. I could keep talking forever about those songs. If I was able, I would sit there for hours, letting them all wash over me beat by beat. There were so many more than what we had at home, on the records. Instruments

that I couldn't imagine making those noises. Even the ones I thought were strange, the ones that made my ears hurt, I wanted to keep listening to. I wanted to know what other people wanted to hear. Maybe, because I was hearing the voices, I could go away. Meet someone from beyond us. But of course, I could never listen for long. Even the barest creak sent us stiffening. Someone moving downstairs? Quick as anything, we had the phone tucked away, me working on a needlepoint, Cecily at her desk on her typewriter. Music became my personal ghost. I found myself humming songs under my breath, without even realizing it, and I would have to stop myself. Other times, my foot would tap the beat while we were sitting at breakfast, and I would have to hold my knee down to stop. Worst of all was at night. I swear, I could hear them, so loud and vivid next to my ear, settling into my soul. A whole band, able to play any instrument. I would sit there, stare at the ceiling, commit them to memory, until, finally, I fell asleep. Sometimes, they even entered my dreams.

Everytime, when the Leatherman comes, my mother makes her special pie. It's something that needs prepping far in advance since he always comes near winter after the fruit is gone. She preserves the apples for it, suspends them in spiced syrup, puts them in the basement and warns everyone to not touch them. When he comes, she begins. Kneels, re kneads the dough, turns on the oven, rolls the crust. I'm sitting in the kitchen with her, watching as she works. It's just a dough day today since it has to sit overnight. I've tried to help her before, but any time I touch it the dough turns out wrong. My job is to entertain Winston, the baby of the family. He's strapped into his high chair, wiggling the whole time, gnawing at the cracker I gave him. Pieces of it, all soggy and wet, keep falling out of his mouth. Behind me, the thud-thud of Mother kneading could almost be a song.

“Mother?” I ask, wiping a bit of spit off of Winston’s lip. His hands come flying up to hit me out of the way.

“Yes?” She’s not looking at me, but at the recipe card at her side, which she definitely doesn’t need anymore.

“Have you always made this pie when the Leatherman comes?”

“Not always. You wouldn’t remember it, but the first time I made it was the first time you were around for his visit.”

“I remember I was terrified of him.” I would always run out of the room or I would stay right by Imogen, who was just a bit older than me, but much braver. Mother laughs and nods. The sun streaming in behind her sets everything glowing: the potted herbs kept in from the cold, the hanging glass ornaments, the copper pots and pans that only she can use.

“Well, the first time, you weren’t worried at all. You reached right up to his face and tried to grab the nose right off of it! I’ve never seen him so shocked.”

“And the pie?”

“Oh, yes, the pie. We didn’t have the whole feast yet, but that time I decided I was going to make a pie, special for all of us. It was from one of Granny’s recipes that I found in the attic with everything else, just stored away! Everyone loved it, but especially him. The next year, I made sure to have extra.” She puts her hands on her hips and looks down at the dough. “I think it’s done, right?”

“Uhm, it looks...shaggy?” Is that the right word for dough? Or is it just bread? I swallow. Something clatters to the ground near me. Of course, Winston is knocking his plate to the floor. By the time I retrieve it, Mother is already busy again, her back to me.

When I was younger, I loved this time, even if I was so scared of the Leatherman. This year feels different, though. I can't help but wonder about the other places, the far away ones. Before, they were abstractions to me. Places of potential sin, like everywhere was. But now I know the specifics, every day a little more. There was that amazing one of the city skyline, all of those lights along the water, blocking out the stars. What if I was able to go one day? How would the food smell? The different spices and colors and textures, the sort of foods we never got over here. What would a pineapple taste like? A durian? A passion fruit? Jenifry and I have started to debate about fast food. She really, really wants to try McDonalds, but I still think it looks gross. That Big Mac, no way. Especially if they put weird stuff in the meat. My hand, running across the table, catches on a notch, and I wince, sticking my finger in my mouth. Damn, someone must've carved into the table. Probably Jeb. It's usually him. I can see the reflection of the light on Mother's head turn dim and flickering. The lump at the back of my throat thickens. I go to curl up on the couch and try to ignore the sugar in the air.

After dinner, I help Imogen get the dishes cleaned. There weren't too many plates. It wasn't the big celebration yet, just what was already cooking, and the Leatherman didn't even eat with us, just took his plate outside with him. Usually, the room is quiet as we wash and dry. We don't ever talk. There is a window right by the sink, looking out over the backyard. Right now, I can only see my reflection. Imogen thrusts her hands into the plugged basin of water, scrubbing them roughly. I run the grayish cloth, worn by wash after wash, over the edge of the plate.

"I noticed that you and Jenifry are...together, more often," she says. The sound is so sudden I almost drop the plate I'm holding.

“Uh, do you mean me hanging in her room?” I say, then bite my lip. She nods and wipes her forehead with the back of her arm.

“Are you mad? Because she’s just been helping me, I was complaining to her about space and stuff and I needed to do homework so she said I could use her desk and-“ I take a breath, a long one and put a plate down. Imogen laughs, all light and breathy-like.

“Oh, no, I’m not mad.” Hands in, out. The water sloshes up and over the sides, deepened to murky brown. “I’m glad.”

“Glad?”

“Mother and I were talking about it. It’s so nice to see Jenifry more involved in the family.” Mother was talking about me? Is she still talking about me?

“Then, I’m glad you’re glad,” I smile, though it feels so fake and stretched.

“We’ve all been worried about her,” she says. Imogen wasn’t worried about Jenifry at all. The whole family knew that, it was so obvious.

“Yeah, I have been worried,” I say.

“Make sure you finish drying the rest and put them away please.” Reaching down into the sink, Imogen unplugs the drain. I stay there, and watch as the water sucks and sputters, swirling down. The floors creak as she leaves. I finish drying the dishes.

In the mornings, I always have to go check on the chickens and the ducks, though the chickens are much, much better. We have these red types that I forget the name of, more chunky than our usual ones, that are really good at surviving the winter. I know I shouldn’t’ve, since they are all used for meat at some point, but I named one. Marmalade, I call her. She’s the smallest one with white tipped feathers on her butt. When I sit down, she’ll come over, wagging, and sit

right on my lap. She's my favorite. If I could bring her inside and have her stay in my room I would, Sometimes, I'm afraid that Father'll go out one day, into the coop, and he'll walk back out with her dangling from his hands, her neck already broken. He showed me once how he did it, once. Hold them under his arm, snugly tucked, then use the other hand to snap the neck. Make sure you're right by the base of the skull, he said. Then it'll be painless.

Today, everything is glittering with ice. Overnight, the temperature dropped down and Mother had to make sure all of her dough was still okay. I have to hold onto the latch and let the heat of my hand melt it before I can open the side door. The chickens tumble out in a flurry, half slipping down the ramp and fluttering in burst to the ground. We don't let them free roam, especially in the winter, when they sneak into any warm place they could find since we don't have a livestock dog to watch them.

The inside of the chicken coop is damp, surprisingly warm. The hay doesn't look like it needs to be shoveled today so I just do the basics instead, getting the feed and serving it outside, refilling the water, making sure none of them are hurt. In the winter, they can get frostbite on the wattles. Then the eggs. I check every single nest, but focus on the brooding hens. The pecks really don't hurt that much. I stick my hand underneath the feathers and hay, feel around for the smooth surfaces. One that I pull out is speckled, dark upon light. It's surprisingly large, I almost have to hold it in two hands just to be safe. As I'm spinning it round and round, I hear the conversation. Just beyond where I am, muffled by the walls. When I poke my head out, looking over to the shed, I can see them through the window. Two figures. One is the Leatherman. One is my sister.

The shed is where the Leatherman sleeps when he's here. Everytime we offer to make him a bed or to find a space in the house, he refuses. Instead, he comes to the tool shed. Tool shed is a really bad name for it, but it's true all the tools are stored there, alongside the woodworking carpentry parts and the forge. There's a spot in the corner, away from the doors, where he sets up his bed roll, nestled by the wall, and a storage cabinet. It's a small space.

There's no need for me to listen in. I already know what they're talking about. But I take extra time on my chores, despite the thickness at the back of my throat. Go around to each chicken, double check on them. Refill the water. Get extra scraps from the kitchen for them to eat, even one of the mice that the traps caught. The Leatherman and Jenifry don't come out, for the whole time that I'm there. By the time I go back inside and shake the chill from my skin, the few eggs I got are completely cold.

One night, Jenifry asked me for a favor. We weren't as busy with the farm, since it was in-between planting seasons. There were a lot more caterpillars in the garden this year, but I would bring the chickens over to deal with those. As the sun rose into the afternoon, I was laying in her room, flat on the floor, one earbud in.

"Hey, Cecily?" she asked, which I almost missed. When I looked up, I could half see her at her desk, tapping her pencil against her lips. Mother had given her an extra passage to go over today.

"Yes?" I said, sitting up and scooting towards her.

"Just get up Cecily, you don't want splinters?!" Jenifry was fussing over me already, reaching down to try and pull me off the ground.

"Calm down Jenifry, I'm fine," I shook her off. "So?"

“So...some people are having a party tonight, and I was thinking of going to it.”

“What?” I shouted. She threw a hand over my mouth. The sounds of the house echoed around us, creaks and moans. But no one was walking up to check on us. Soon, she let go. “How did you meet them, what, when?” I twisted the threads near the bottom of my skirt.

“They come to the woods sometimes, near the south edge.”

“Jenifry!”

“I just met them one day and they were nice, stop freaking out. Where did you think I got everything, anyways?” I froze.

“Uhm, I don’t really...”

“Could you just try to cover for me when I’m gone? And when I come back, just let me in,” Jenifry said, “And no more questions, okay?”

“Can I meet them?”

“Cecily!”

In the end, I was always going to agree to help her. I think she knew that.

When she left for the party, I almost didn’t recognize her. It was a quick look, as she walked down the hallway to the window at the back, which opened without any sounds at all. There weren’t any lights on. She had let her hair down, like she always did when we were alone, but it was smoother, and shining. Her clothes were new. A pair of rough, blue pants, ripped and frayed, a black shirt, a flannel, since the spring nights were still chilly. She had gotten makeup, from somewhere, and had done her best to put it on, with gloss on her lips and mascara on her lashes.

When she snuck out, I felt a shiver run down my spine like spiders' legs. It was almost enough to get me to yell out, to tell her to stop, come back. Instead, I gave her two thumbs-ups. My mouth was sealed. So she left.

When she got back in the morning, and I let her in, she asked me how it went. Her eyes were shining, cheeks red, the smell of wood smoke and cherry and beer on her. I just told her, fine. Just fine. I don't tell her how Mother and Father didn't even question what I said. They just accepted it and moved on without asking for clarification. Is that better? Or is that worse?

Just before dinner, the Leatherman brings out gifts. We all sit together in the living room, the whole family, squished into couches and chairs, the floors if we need to. I get a corner of the couch, while Jenifry is sitting on the ground below me, cross-legged on the carpet. Even when I offered to move, she said no. In the corner, a record player turns, crackling out a soft violin, and the fireplace is blaring, the smell of popping oak rising in the air. Before Jenifry and I talked, I always thought the gifts were amazing. From part of the world I had never seen before. One time, he brought me a piece of crystal, with a mosquito suspended inside of it. He never told me how it happened, though. After he left, I would carry it with me everywhere, placing it like a little buddy by my side. I don't know what happened to it, but one day it was just gone. Mother always said I must've lost it. Now I'm not so sure. Now I can see that everything he brings out fits up with what my parents say.

He opens his pack. Bags of candied lemons and oranges, so strong the smell seeped through, that's for us all to share. Winston is too young to really get good things, so he instead gets a little unfoldable mobile, all strung with stars. Jeb gets a new hunting knife, perfectly sharp, while Mother gets a collection of beeswax candles that smell like jasmine. When he brings

out a book, I get excited. Maybe, just maybe, it'll be something we can read that's different. But then he flips it over, and I see that it's only a sketchbook, made of pressed blue paper, which he hands over to Imogen.

Mother and Father are watching as he hands over my gift. The little satchel drops heavy into my palm. I don't really know what to expect when I pull it out. A small compass, made of brass, tilting this way and that on a long chain.

"Now you won't be getting lost anytime soon," Father says, laughing with all of his teeth. The rest of the family laughs too, oh yes, always getting lost, oh it's so nice. I keep smiling and put it on, the metal resting cold on my skin.

August was the worst month. Yes, it's warm, but at what cost? Everything was hot. Every year, it's gonna get worse. The past few days, we all ended up just lying down in the basement since we couldn't do anything else. At least down there it's cold. Mother kept asking Father, we should've gotten some fans, at least to use now. Jenifry spent the whole time tucked by the boiler, which was now turned off, hidden away from everyone. So many of the plants wilted, or died, even with the irrigation, and one of the younger goats passed on. Luckily, all the chickens were ok. For once, I had left all the doors open, hoping to get a breeze in. What would the Leatherman say about this?

Now, at least, it was bearable. Everyone was outside, enjoying the breeze. Except for one. I knocked on Jenifry's door, tickling my nose. One, two, th-three, our symbol. The windows were open, bringing in the hot smell of dry grass, and tufts of dandelions. Did Jenifry die in there? Or was she asleep? I couldn't hear anything happening. I was leaning my head against the wood, about to knock again, when the door cracked open. Nearly falling, I caught myself on the

door frame. Her eyes, pink carnelian, peaked through to me, set in a washed out face. Already, she looked sour.

“What do you want, Cecily?” she said.

“Oh, I was wondering if you wanted to go to the lake with us. Jeb and Imogen, and-“

“I don’t want to go anywhere. Leave me alone,” she said, glaring at me. Okay, that was rude. I glared right back.

“Jenifry, I’m melting when I’m standing here, why won’t you just come down?” I said. Even standing up here on the second floor for a little bit caused sweat to spring up on my forehead and under my arms, and breathing felt like sucking through cotton. I’d be trying to think of cold things, like it would trick my body

“Cecily, I’m fine. Just go outside if you’re hot.”

“Jenifry-“

“Just go,” The door began to close, and I rushed in. Too forceful, really, so I pushed right through the door and over balanced. Almost like instinct, she took her arms and grabbed onto me, stopping both of us from falling. Like a hug. I don’t think we’ve hugged in a long time.

“Cecily.”

“Don’t think that I’m a fool or something, Jen, you never think that!” I glared up at her. “I can tell that something’s wrong.” Sweat beaded on her upper lip, along her hairline, and her eyes were weeping red. I could feel her hands unclenching from my shirt. I stepped back, reorienting my feet underneath me. She didn’t look at me, just went over and closed the door. Hopefully, she wouldn’t be too pissed. She dropped down on her bed, which cracked loudly. I shuffled over, and sat down next to her.

“What’s wrong?” There was a stain on my skirt, one embedded into the fabric, and I ran my fingers over it.

“If I tell you, you can’t tell anyone,” she said. I scoffed, and swung my legs, the sweat on the back of them sticking to the blanket.

“Jenifry, I can’t believe- what do you think I’ve been doing?” I stopped as she looked up. It was that same look again. The one from the first day.

“It’s bigger than that, Cici.” I think that’s what made it stick. The nickname. I knew no one used it anymore, because Mother didn’t like it, and I was too old anyways. Even Jenifry had stopped.

“Jen,” I started, “I promised before, and I meant it. I won’t break that now. I won’t say anything.” It’s strange, hovering on the side like this. Waiting for her response. It did take time. Enough for me to notice the scurrying of the spider on the ceiling, near the edge of the wall.

“I’m thinking of leaving,” she said in a whisper. I could barely believe it, when I heard, as if my brain had misinterpreted the words.

“What?”

“I said, I want to leave, Cecily.” She sat up. Arm thrust down, shoulders back. Hands bunching into her skirt.

“But, that’s not...” I shrunk the words as I spoke them.

“Why? Why can’t I leave?”

“Father says it’s not safe!”

“Who cares what Father says? We both know it’s bullshit,” she spat out. I flinched. “I hate this. I hate this so much,” Jenifry pushed her hands into her eyes, hiding her face from me.

Was that why it took me so long to realize she was crying? I could never remember her crying, ever. In a scramble, I pressed right up against her side, arms around her.

“What can I do? I can talk to him, if you want?”

“It’s not that, Cecily. It’s-“ she fumbled, breathing in all sharp and shaky, “There’s so much I could be, you know. Instead of stuck here, the same thing over and over. Everything is the same.”

“But there’s...it’s so dangerous, you wouldn’t even know where to go, or, or-“ I couldn’t even finish the sentence as she shook her head.

“I don’t care if it’s dangerous, I know that it is. But if I don’t go, I don’t know what I would do with myself. It’s more than just leaving, Cici.”

“What about coming back? They would never let you come back, Jenifry.” *I would never see you again, I think.*

“Then maybe you could come out and meet me instead.” Her words hit me with all the force of a concussion. “I don’t know, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s okay.” Lie. Her phone had fallen on the floor, face down, but I don’t know when, and I can’t tell if it’s cracked or anything. Now, when I tried to look at her, she wouldn’t look back.

Leatherman is in the back again. He’s standing on the ridge that looks over the lake, so still he looks like a statue. There’s a bench right next to him that he could sit on if he just pushed the snow off. A stream curls up from the cigarette he’s holding, white smoke on white snow. That must be why he’s so far away from the house, my parents would kill him if they saw him smoking it, especially around us. Bad for your health and bad for the environment. How could

you bring that here? I stand next to him, wrapping my arms around myself, and try to ignore the smell. Everything looked quiet now. The snow over the banks, blue tinted ice, thick enough to cut. Pines, and oak combine in a dark oil smear.

“Hm.” I turn, see the Leatherman looking at me. His lip is raised just enough for me to see his gold capped tooth. He raises an eyebrow at me. For a moment, I don't truly know what to think of it. Like he's waiting for an answer.

“AC/DC,” he says. Turns to look back over the lake. There's a cardinal flying across. Then my heart plummets down into the Earth.

I was humming the song. I was humming the song and I didn't know. He knows, and he'll tell Mother and Father, and then they'll know. Jenifry is gonna be so mad at me, how could I do this to her, how could he know the song? Behind my scarf, my breath, which keeps picking up, is fogging my glasses. The Leatherman is a blob of a man next to me, smeared. I keep waiting for him to move. Every inch of my body is poised to run. But he does nothing.

“I know about Jenifry,” he rumbles. He brings the cigarette to his lips again.

“Huh?”

“I know,” he says. Still, I stare.

“I'm not Jenifry though.” Even if she met up with him, that didn't mean she mentioned me.

“I don't care.”

“So you won't tell Mother? Or Father?”

“No.”

“You can’t just say no, what does that mean, what if-“ He places a hand on my head. I feel like it covers the whole surface with a palm, warming it. Then, he smiles. Tries to smile. I, ever so slightly, relax my shoulders, and move my foot away from the run position.

“She told you?” I ask. A nod. “And you don’t mind? About me, or her?” A shake of the head. Something about the smile he has says he has known for longer than I have. Longer than the conversation in the shed.

“Jenifry is leaving,” he says, tilting his head back. I swallow, suddenly aware of my own throat.

“Y-yea. I know that.”

“Can’t return after.”

“Mother and Father told us.”

“But you, understand?” He looks down at me, squinting. Reading my face. What is there to understand, that is more than what I already know? She would leave, she would leave and leave the room empty for another to take, for the dust to settle in the spaces. It would be quiet again. My stomach does the one two flip again, twisting within. Suddenly, he looks impossibly sad. Dropping the butt, he stomps his boot on it, crushing ash and snow together. Then, clapping his hands, as if to remove dirt from the gloves, he turns, and walks back toward the house. The cold seeps into my fingers and lips, deeper.

“Do you think she should go?” I can’t help myself from calling after him. It’s dangerous, to be sure. Especially if one of the others is nearby. The Leatherman stops, and I push through the chill. “Jenifry, should she go with you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“But if you think it’s dangerous or something, then it does.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“But-“

“Cecily.” I snap my mouth closed. This whole time, I never thought he knew my name.

“She won’t be happy here. Not if you make her stay.” He doesn’t even stay to hear my response.

One moment there. The next, gone.

The night of the feast arrives. The whole table is set, with a long lace tablecloth, brass candlesticks, and Mother’s finest china- a mishmash of different sets. All of the candles have been lit, so bright that it’s like sunshine. Everyone gets a glass of blueberry wine that they made over the summer, but the younger of us get it watered down a lot. When I’ve snuck a taste of full wine, I’ve never liked the taste. This year, Mother went all out, setting out platter after platter. It was almost better than Christmas.

Jenifry’s chair remains empty.

The bare spot is glaring as we sit, but no one else mentions it. It’s like it’s not there in the first place. I get served a full plate, but every bite is like glue in my mouth, clinging to my throat as I swallow. There’s no way that wouldn’t be noticed, so I keep going, cutting up bits into smaller and smaller pieces. Maybe I’ll get sick, and have to leave anyway. Or I could fake it, but then Mother would be disappointed. In the middle of it all, the Leatherman looks at me. A chance connection, as my eyes flick away from Jenifry’s empty seat, back across the table. No blinking. In the light, his eyes become pale gold, reflecting the light. I freeze mid-chew, and look away as quickly as possible. The tines of my fork scrape against my plate, softly screeching, but leave no mark.

In the end, I don’t leave a plate for Jenifry outside her room. Someone would notice it.

The night was bright with stars. When I look outside, I can see them strewn against the dark sky, impossible in number. Jenifry tried to teach me about space, and all the different types of constellations, but I don't remember any of the shapes. We've left the window open, despite the spiders. Whenever the weather started to get cooler, they always popped up more in the house, skittering all around. It really didn't matter what we tried to stop them. Sprawled across the bed is Jenifry, facedown. I contorted myself into an upside down position, legs propped up against the bed frame, and holding a book above my face. The darkness combined with the thudding heartbeat through my skull made a mess of the words, but I wasn't focused on it anyways. Instead, I took the book, and laid it on my chest.

“Hey, Jenifry?”

“Yeah?”

“How'd you get interested in all of this?” I patted the cover, even though she couldn't see me, and I couldn't see her. “I mean, you brought me in, but, I dunno, did you find it on your own or something?”

“I mean... I've been interested in it for a while? I think when I got older I just started wondering about everything. Especially what Mother and Father say.”

“That's it?”

“What do you mean?” She actually seemed confused.

“I thought it would be more dramatic or something.” Oh, it's hard to shrug when you're lying upside down.

“Nope. I'm glad Mother and Father don't know, that would make it more dramatic. They just think I'm depressed about the world ending stuff.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t thought about that for a while. “If you left...would you go with him?”

“What?”

“Him. The Leatherman.”

“You know, I’ve thought about it. Makes it easier, you know.” She seemed calmer this time, tapping a finger on the wall to plan it as we speak. How many plans did she have? Jenifry always seemed like a planning person, making sure everything was perfect, so it would all go right. Even now I could only listen to music out loud when no one was home, or I had to keep it on low volume. That wouldn’t happen when she left the homestead, traveling the world with her new friend the Leatherman. A chill ran over me, from my chest into my toes. Choking. Curling into myself, I wait for her to keep talking.

“Cecily, you could come with us too, you know?” The softness in her voice rings across the walls, and out into the sky.

“What?”

“You could leave with the Leatherman.”

“Me?”

“It would be great, right? We could actually go see the world instead of just talking about it.”

“But-“ But what? But what about Mother and Father? Yes, Father, who was demanding, who believes in himself so much you can’t say anything against him, who makes us all scared to even look at the world outside ourselves, but also cares for us, feeds us, shows us how to identify flowers in the woods, to listen to the birdsong, who spends hours carving the smallest figurines out of wood, and hides them for us to find. Mother, who stands by him. She believes too, in our survival above all those others out there, that they will get punished by the force of nature. But

she also makes us treats for our birthdays, creates our own bedtime story, and uses every day to make sure we are happy. What then? What about our siblings? What about the house, red siding aglow, cradling everything I know in its halls? Yes we could leave, leave and find something else, something new, but how? Oh. She was still waiting for me.

“I’ll, I’ll think about it. I’ll let you know,” I said, hearing the wavering up and down in my voice, whistling. Next to me, Jenifry shuffled around, till I could feel her sitting right next to me.

“Don’t worry. We’ll see the world together one day.” In the dark of the room, her hand reached out, and clasped mine. It felt like a promise.

I can’t say what wakes me up. I’m usually the deep sleeper in the family, and could sleep through snores and storms. Now, I feel a jolt. My eyes are open even before I realize, heart pounding as I lay under the covers. From my bed, I can see the sleeping form of Imogen, curled up in bed. There's no sign of her waking. Her mouth is half-open, heavy breaths coming from a slightly stuffy nose. Something is wrong.

From my bed to the door is around 13 steps. Some of those go right past the end of Imogen’s bed. I know exactly which boards creak the loudest, and which spots to avoid. Quick, turn the door handle, slip out through the smallest gap.

The hallway is quiet, and dark, barely illuminated by my half-covered flashlight. My footsteps are muffled by the long carpet, dense cords poking into my feet. Standing out here, among the rows of closed doors, and the creaking roof, feels surreal. Quiet. Could it be a dream? I pinched my arm. From Jenifry’s room, I can look down to the lower level, and try to see if anyone else is awake that could see me. Nothing. The house yawns cold and empty, fire long

gone. So I tap on her door, the barest sound. There's no response. When I kneel down, and tilt my head to look through the crack at the bottom, I can't see anything either. No worries. Just go back to bed. Instead, I turn the handle, and push the door open.

It's not locked. Now, shadows lay hazy in the corners of the room. Now, it feels so much smaller, like the slope of the ceiling will fall down and crush me where I stand. A cut of light crosses the floor to my feet. But no time, no time. My heart is beating so fast, little thumps down to my toes. I step closer, my eyes wavering in the darkness. It takes too long for me to realize that the bed is empty. On the pillow, laid in plain view, is her phone. The headphones and battery are nestled in next to it. Like a gift.

Jenifry is gone.

The moon is full tonight, so bright that it's almost like daylight. The cold has gotten to a point where I can't feel my nose, my fingers. I had made sure to grab my snow clothes from downstairs, moving as quietly as possible. Still, a numbness can crawl up and through any fabric, as I walk down the road. In front of me, one after the other, are two lines of footprints, pressed into the snow. That's the trail. So I follow. I follow until the house is a distant memory, until the whole world is nothing but trees and snow, until all I can hear is the rasp of my breath, deep in my chest. It feels like I'll never stop.

At the far end of our road, there's a bridge, made of old worn stone. That's the landmark. The stopping point. The only time I've ever been over there was to repost the perimeter with new signs, so no one would come in. I remember that it looked so plain. So simple. Just a running stream, rocks through it smeared with moss, grasses poking up. Nothing like the hard line it should be. When I was younger, Father sat me down and told me of the boundary. I remember I

imagined it like a huge bubble. You would press and and press against it, but you couldn't come through. He was certainly serious enough for it. You can never leave, he told me. None of us can. If anyone leaves, they can never come back. Don't ask was only an implication. Now the stream is mostly covered in white. A curling cut of dark water lazed through, black glass. That was it.

The footprints lead across the bridge.

My feet brush the edge of it. I could take one step, just one step forward. I could go on it, and find them. Tell them to come back. Tell the Leatherman to stay for longer. Tell Jenifry that she can't leave me. Maybe I could even go with them. Everything is so so cold.

Then I see them.

Reflected snow light washes them in a haze of gray. They move as if through mist, each step drifting further and further away. From here, I can't even hear their feet crunching. If they went too far, just a bit too far, I wouldn't be able to see them anymore. How can I stop them? What can I do?

I yell to her. I yell longer and ever than I ever have before, ringing out across the sky and the snow and the dark. The wind keeps entering my mouth, pulling the words away from me, twisting into nothing.

For one desperate moment, I think I see them stop. See, instead of indistinct figures, twirling with the snow and wind, something clear. I think that she turns to me. Turns back. The glow of her face in the night, the palest white, like the curve of the moon. And then the snow shifts again, twirls away, and they're gone.

Ride the Line

Watch the road. It stretches pencil-thin to the horizon, shimmering with noon-day heat. You've been stuck here, for a time. Try to track the landmarks- a dip of dry grass more dead than living, a distant jutting rock cut like a knife, an abandoned gas station bleached blue. Don't worry. You'll get there in time. Just find the ride.

The crosses were the most prominent, stark white in the stretch of earthy browns. They sprouted up alongside the road when we drove, one after the other, impossible in number. Tucked along curves, or down rock-strewn slopes, lashed onto cliff sides, or twisted around the few trees. How long had they been left there for? With the way the wind blew out here, it could be anything. Sometimes it felt like the desert could consume you in hours.

There weren't only crosses. There were piled stones, stacked up one on top of the other. A large rock, like an actual gravestone, stuck firm to the ground. Flowers- fake flowers, not the real ones. The silk would get bleached but it won't wilt away. Real flowers shriveled into nothing. A plush toy, sun-blown to bits, the saddest of them all. That had to be a child's, right? Combine them together, just to mix it up. Or add a photo, large enough for the drivers to see. Now, instead of an ambiguous death, there was a face to recognize. That always made it worse.

When we drove, I kept a tally of them all. That's not the plan I set out with. But after we drove for so long into the same sky and sand, I had to do something different. Before we left, I had prepared. Audiobooks, ones I kept saying I would read and never did. Podcast episodes, which I had listened to already. There was probably far too much true crime, but I enjoyed it. Music. I even got some CDs, in case we couldn't find any signal out there and the downloaded music on our phones didn't sound right. How many times can I listen to ABBA before I get sick of it? But after all this time, all these miles of driving, I ached from it. He was being silent anyways, gaze locked to the horizon, uninterested in conversation. I just sat in the quiet. In the clatter. Kept my eye stuck on the road, smeared gray and yellow. And I would count.

The sun glared through the windshield. It had just started setting, tracking its way down the blue sky. What time was it? Our clock got reset last time our battery died, and we hadn't fixed it yet, but the grumbling in my stomach told me it was later. There's only so much trail mix you can eat in a day before you get sick of them. Time to pull down the visor. Oh, sweet relief.

"You know, you should keep both hands on the wheel at a time," he said from the passenger seat. Oh, I thought he was still asleep. Pushing the seat back, he put his feet on the front dash, bare, pale. I imagined us crashing- would they fly through the windshield, spinning into silver shards? Or would the airbag snap them back? Or would nothing happen at all? I realigned the nose of the car. There's no one on the other side of the road. There hasn't been for miles.

"Yes, Mr. Feet-Off-The-Dash," I said. I wasn't used to seeing him smile with his new scruff. It was thicker than it had ever been at home, a weird in-between of stubble and a beard. I

kept trying to subtly tell him to get rid of it. Even if he looked nice, the burn on my skin was the absolute worst. “There’s no one else on the road. We should be fine.”

“Oh, is that what they taught you? Thought you remembered 10 and 2.”

“9 and 3.”

“What?”

“9 and 3. That’s what I learned.” My hands shifted, stretching my knuckles.

“Oh, drivers ed. You scam us all.” He refolded his legs into a lap, and I felt that line of tension leave my back. Ok, that’s better now.

Part of me wanted to keep watching him. There, the angle of the neck as he leant his head back, muscles shifting as he swallowed. The sliver of skin at the waist as he moved, pulled up, the trail of hair down. The flex of muscles, not too defined, but visible, especially on his arms. No matter how much he called himself a philosophy nerd, you could tell he used to be a jock. If we met in high school, we definitely wouldn’t’ve dated. Now, we were gross and sweaty with day-drive grime, our attempts at cleaning in bathroom sinks with washcloths and bar soap not enough to get us fresh. He definitely was glad I brought all the dry shampoo with me now, even if he complained about the powdery feel of it. The wheel hit a hole and the car shuddered underneath me. No, refocus, back to the road. The feel of the fake leather on my palms, sticky. The fuzzy dice we got as a joke, bright pink and shimmery. The taste of salt fighting my strawberry lip balm.

“The next time we stop, you want to take over?” I asked, eyes blurring. I knew this was the right way, we had checked it all before, but the worry lingered. My mind had shut off the last, how many miles? Getting used to the road was just an aspect of that. Maybe I should pull out the map? No, there wasn’t a turn, just head straight.

“Sure thing, as long as I can get some coffee to wake up,” he said, looking behind us for cars. I mean, at least he was trying to be subtle about it. Before, I had snipped at him for looking too much, but that was because of the sun. They all zoomed past me, going 10, 20 above the speed limit, letting the road shoot them forward like bullets. I kept my eyes on the road. There wouldn’t be any change of signal out here would there? No, it shouldn’t be too much farther. Next to me, he clicked on a radio to rustle through the static. The different buzzes faded in and out, interjected by a clatter- close to music, but not quite. For a moment, as I looked out, I thought I saw something along the road. A burst of bright colors, despite the heat, spilling out over the ground, where the guard railing had bent and buckled. I couldn’t look closer. By now, it was already gone.

You always liked the color white. Never, ever wear it after Labor Day, fashion bullshit you don't mind. You let the long skirt swirl around your legs, keep your feet bare in the dust. You know how to get the stains out, don’t worry, and your soles have worn into leather. This is what they used to do, right? This is what you need to do? No mind for the prickling ground, the tips of glass or stone. Solid. Unbending. The pavement shimmers in the heat. When you walk, you’ll be seen. Do you remember how you learned to drive?

One of the first places we stopped was the Salton Sea. He said it was his idea, but I’m pretty sure I was the person to tell him about it. That whole day, we drove along the receding shoreline. There were so many different sculptures there, junk-built things and found objects. A boat, propped up in the sand, far from any water, the hull painted bright yellow with swirling faces. They grinned down at me, as if they knew something I didn’t. A mast made of driftwood,

stretching far far up into the sky. All across were draped bits of torn fabric, mostly white, drifting in the breeze. A wall of TVs, rusting, the screens painted over and over, surrounded on all sides. Don't trust the media, ha, and I listened to him scoff at it. Lines of cars parked, as if for sale, but the interiors were gutted, and the remains were rusted red. I'd always thought that the old style of cars were so nice, even if they were unsafe. Now, at least, the cars crumpled instead of us.

There was a visitors center. A whole wide open parking lot, surrounded by palm trees, and a little modern building, proclaiming *Welcome All*. New, and well kept, I was shocked to see. Yes, there was the whole art sculpture thing going on, and the sea itself, but it all felt more unofficial. A space left between. Decaying. Poisoned. As we drove up, he kept talking about the meaning of this space, as a symbol of humanities hubris- look, we try to build these things, mess with the way of the world, and this is what happened. How could anyone have thought this would work? I hated when he got the tone in his voice, that 'I'm so smart, and they're so dumb,' voice. Especially when he got all pondering on the state of the world, humanity can be so stupid. When I complained about it, he always said I was over-exaggerating. No, even better- he would call me naive.

It wasn't the best day for a visit. The usual blue sky was covered with a sheen of clouds, gray and murky. Not quite rain clouds. Just gray. Still, the sun seeped on through. What we read when coming up always said '*Make sure to keep the windows closed when you drive up*'. He had AC, luckily. I still remember when the AC broke in the car at home, and it would just keep leaking that cooling fluid. No money to fix it, we spent the summers with the windows cranked down, letting the wind try to cool us down. Now, the smell of sulfur hit me all at once, instead of seeping in, bit by bit. I lifted one hand up to cover my nose, and heard him laugh.

“I mean, we read about this before coming here,” he said.

“There’s a difference between reading it and smelling it.” I couldn’t stop from wrinkling my nose. As he popped out of the car, I watched the sun slip over his face and wash out his tanned skin. I joined alongside him, twining my hands with his. Piano fingers.

“Do you want to go inside the visitor center first?” His breath blew past my ear as he leaned close. I leant into his side.

“What’s even in there?”

“I dunno, but we could go find out.”

“Oh, yes, let’s learn the magic of farming mishaps and shitty water,” I said, poking into his side. He groaned, pulling away from me.

“We might as well. We’re already here.” His bag slouched off of his shoulder and he had to swing it back up.

“Come on, we could just go walk on the beach and then head over. I don’t want to find out something that ruins everything.” I tried to stop any sort of whining from coming into my voice.

“That would be horrible advertising, honey.”

“But…” My tongue froze.

We ended up going to the visitor center.

My feet sunk into the salt-white sand as I walked along the beach, drifting closer and closer to where the water touched the shore. No matter what they said, I wouldn’t be bathing in the sea. Even if there were health benefits. All I could smell was that buildup in the air, the decay of the plants and the fish and the evaporation corrupting all the freshwater. The salt of the water

crusted up around the water's edge, near to my feet. There, half decomposed, was a fish, bones crystallized, eyehole facing the sky. Another one. Another one. Piles of puzzle pieces, left to dust. There were no bottom feeders in the lake, so the bones just stayed there, sinking to the bottom before drifting up to shore. Hit them against the tide, again and again, before they crumbled into sand fragments. What would happen if a human body got dumped in here? Would it sink to the bottom, unable to be seen, unable to move? Or would it, eventually, drift onto shore like so many others, dry in the sun, and stick to the ground? Would anyone be able to recognize them?

Along my wrist, my pulse thudded. When I looked down the beach, I could see him, poking at something in the grass. Could he feel the thrumming, where his fingers once laid, even as he stood so far away? When I wiggled my toes, the fragments of bone slipped in-between.

Instead of finding a place to sleep for the night, we ended up camping out. It was an old parking lot, backed by a half-destroyed building. Maybe it was a motel once. Wouldn't that be funny? The pavement was scattered with sand, and of dead palm trunks poked up at haphazard angles, the remnants of the tropical feel this place tried to hold.

Before, when we went into town, I felt like everyone was watching us. Like they knew that we were outsiders. It's different being there as a visitor, and leaving with the sunset. No, he said, let's find a parking lot, and stay for the night. They won't care. Let's save money, let's be frugal. Through the cracked windows that sulfur seeped in the cold night air, teasing my hair and tingling my nose. There was enough room in the back to lay down, squished against each other. His arms wrapped around my body, trapping me to the heat of his chest.

I did try to sleep. I always tried to sleep. Insomnia had been a problem for years, no matter what I'd tried. Yoga, melatonin, turning off all electronics an hour before bed. Listening

to white noise or seascapes, trying to exhaust myself during the day, drinking a glass of warm milk. Nothing worked. Part of me hoped that it was the place that made me unable to rest. That driving around all the time would relieve my brain and allow me to rest. Nope. Everything was the same. I was always waiting. Waiting for the crunch of gravel, the glare of headlights. Waiting for a tapping on the window, the figure behind him glinting and glaring. The moon wasn't giving much light, still stuck behind that cloud layer. Maybe, impossibly, it would rain. Something sharp poked into my side.. I stifled a wince, biting my lip. Careful. Between two fingers, I grabbed down and heard a slight crack.

There, bring it up and squint. Try to decipher the shape, thin, bending, pale. A sliver of fish rib, white enough to be seen, is grasped between my fingers. Cracked in two.

Testing, testing, one two? Sing as you walk along as you go, and plumb the depths of your brain. Ignore the ring in your ears, over and over. Raise your voice above it. What songs do you remember? Blues, solemn slow stop or rhyming, old classical or pop station bubblegum or heart pounding rock, feel the strum of drums and piano. Keep trying, now you'll have the time. There's no one out here to hear you sing, so don't worry about the tune. Are these the songs you love?

What was the plan? Together, we made a route. It was part of the caveat- if we are traveling around like this, we need to have some plan. There was the spontaneous aspect he wanted, trying to not constrain ourselves, but I insisted. We both make a list, and have the places we want to go to on them. Put down where they are, if they cost anything, if there's anything we need to know. I do admit, I had more than him. I couldn't help it. I scrolled through pages and

pages of travel blogs, then websites, then YouTube videos. Here are the places you need to stop and here are the hidden gems. Here are the parks, the natural spaces, where you can camp for the night under the stars, and the ones where you have to leave, don't try to stay too late they will kick you out. Here are the tourist traps to go to, part of the experience, and here are the ones that are skippable.. Where to avoid if we wanted to stay safe? What to bring with us, to store in the car? What to do if your car breaks down, if you are injured, if you need help? Failsafes. When I told him about my planning, my research, he smiled. He forgot to use his retainer after he wore braces, so it isn't quite perfect.

“Don't you think this is too much?” he said, “I know you're nervous but we don't want to be too constrained. What if we see something we want to go to, and we take a detour?”

“It's not too much if we want to be safe.” My hands crinkled the paper, obscuring my careful script sloping across the pages. It's one of the pages on supplies to bring. Don't be too loud. This is a logic based conversation, not about stress or fear.

“Remember,” I told him, “We're driving through mostly desert. There's so much open space out there, and if we get in trouble, or anything happens...”

“If anything happens. If...” He reached over, trying to grab my hands, and I accepted. They were so dry- I kept telling him to not use 3-in-1 soap, that shit kills your skin, but I think he gave it up in-between. “You do other stuff more risky than this, I don't understand why it makes you so nervous.”

“What?”

“You know, you don't mind going out at night to a party with your friends if you don't know the place, or like-“ He cut himself off. “Just, we'll be fine. You have all of this planned out already, and if anything happens, we'll figure it out. We always do.”

So I let it go. Of course, I let it go, I couldn't think of anything good to say. Why was he so fucking good at reasoning? I didn't want a reason. Something in me gnawed, up and down the spine, into the throat, something not quite worry or fear or anger. I couldn't even name it so why did it matter?

There's so many stars in the sky. You've heard people talk about that before, the effect of light pollution on the sky. But it's different when you see it now, in the wide stretch of waste, away from anything at all. Lay on your back, look up, up, up. Not that rust tinted blue, no, it's deep and endless. Scattering twinkling gems. Are they cold up there? The stars, I mean, Millions of years between them, the negative space humming. No change of connection. There's no air in space, but would they still feel it? You can feel it. The goose pimples up your arms, bare, the leeching heat from the sand. The rocks that dig into your back. Pain up the spine. Arms. Legs. Head. The cold couldn't be helping that but you shouldn't move. The stars are here, after all. Maybe in the morning.

One night, we stayed in a motel. It was a bitter night, when we started to let the sound of ABBA fill the silence. Eventually, he got annoyed and turned it off. Now I could just hear that gritted breathing. The motel itself was a shitty one, plopped down just off the highway. Probably built in the 70s, with the remaining off-orange tiling and blue accents still stuck tight. A long line of doors and windows, all covered with a shade. Empty. Flickering yellow lights shone on a gravel parking lot, and I had to resist grabbing onto his hand because he hated being touched when he was upset. The crisp scent of bleach saturated the covered walkway, too strong. Stabbing. I saw one other car parked there, dust so thick that the smiley faces drawn on it were

already half covered. A creeping sense of wrong rumbled in my stomach, wrong stretching out into the brush and the wire fence and the screech of something in the distance. Remember ladies, trust that intuition. He was scowling, that familiar notch between his eyebrows deeper than ever.

“Do we have to stay here?” I had to say it, though it stuck to my teeth. He sighed, kept facing forward.

“We’re both tired, I can’t keep driving, not like this.”

“But-“

“There hasn’t been anything else in miles. What do you want to do?”

“We could just, sleep in the car-“

“Again? I need a bed. We are sleeping here.” Not even mad. Just dry, snapping. I traced the indentations on his face with the shadows. Ok. Ok.

It was even worse inside. The carpet was a mottled mix of purple and green, so pushed into the ground it became hard. Honestly, I would've preferred linoleum, maybe then I would know it could be cleaned. The light was tinged yellow, like the cigarette smell permeated into the glow itself. The buzz of the AC rang in the room, almost covering the soft crackle of music from a radio. Some sort of country, twanging away too excitedly for the hour.

The man at the front counter barely blinked when we came in, a glaze over the eyes at the late hour. Whenever I see a man with one of those mustaches, the barest scraggly things, I get grossed out. Luckily, he didn’t seem to be interested in us. In me. Shock of shock, he’s not a creep. We buy a room- over priced, somehow. Are you together, the employee asked, and I said yes.

Of course, a man would hand the key to the other man, even if I was the one who paid. That was the deal with my boyfriend. One time he paid, the next I did. When he got the key handed to him, he just strode forward to the room so fast I could barely keep up.

I got one look into it and said no, no, no.

I showed him. I showed him that, when I lifted up the mattress, it was soaked with uncomfortable stains, pressed deep in, too close to something that could ooze from a body. I showed him that the sheets were barely anything, more tissue paper than cloth, and do we even know the last time they were changed? Do you trust the under sheet? What about the pillow? Before we left, he made me leave the black light behind, telling me that we already have too much stuff, why would we use that? Never mind the potential for bedbugs. Even now, as I stood in the center of the room and tried not to breathe, I could feel the beginnings of little legs up and down my legs. I hadn't even shown him the rest of the room before he snapped.

So, the agreement. We take the sleeping bags from the car, and put them on top of the bed. We'll find a place to wash them right after, and we can store them in plastic bags in the meantime. There we go, done. No, I wasn't, but he was obviously.

When I laid down, soldier-stiff on the right side of the bed, my mind kept turning. I stared at the window, doubled covered by both cloth and those clacking blinds, broken and stuck in place, I began to create a shape in the darkness. Perhaps someone had died here. That wouldn't be a shock; people die all the time. Not even murder or maliciousness. Just drifting off in the night, a sickness, old age. Drugs. Always drugs. Maybe the stains were them soaking into the mattress, and, if I closed my eyes too tight, I could see their hollow faces imprinted on the back of my lids. Like fireworks. No, ghosts weren't real. People were though.

There was one point, where I was in between awake and asleep. Where I opened my eyes, and found something. The door, which I stuck a chair under, had its handle start to turn. Heard it, in the darkness. The faintest clatter, echoing out. From the outside. Then, again. Someone was trying to get in. The curtains, which I was happy about before for the thickness, now worked against me. I couldn't tell if the light had changed from the outside, or if a person had walked past. Next to me, he breathed, in and out. Should I wake him up? Would he be upset? He needed to sleep. The chair is there too, that would stop it. Do they have copies? Did I hear a key turn? Flight or flight? Freeze. Don't even breathe. I just kept my eyes peeled wide, hand close to his arm. Close enough to grab.

The next morning, when I told him about it, he laughed. "You must've been dreaming; no one tried to come in. I do know that, I do."

But I was awake. I was watching, and even now I felt the tiredness dripping into my skin, but he didn't notice it. On the other hand, he was much better. Even with the barest help of a rock mattress and a sputtering shower, no breakfast or coffee even, his mood had improved tenfold. I could see the smile lines near his eyes, the dimple in his cheek as he cradled me close. The smell of his aftershave hit me in waves.

"Don't worry, we're safe here." His hand came up, brushing through my hair. "It was probably just the stress. Or, maybe someone got the wrong room, if they were trying to open it. It was late." Comforting. Why did it then prickle at the back of my neck, like the bugs had gone under my skin and made it too small?

"I really thought I saw something." But the waver in my voice was betraying me. Maybe I did imagine it.

“I know. Don’t worry.” His hands were clasping mine, so warm. “How about we go and find a diner or something for breakfast, just to see if we feel better?” We. We. So kind to include himself, when I was the one freaking out.

“Ok, yeah, sure.” I shook my head, pushed my palms into my eyes. Maybe then I could press away the eye bags. “Let me just ask the front desk if they have a map or something, there was no signal here last night.”

“Or he could give us directions on where to go? We should also get gas, right?” he said. I just nodded.

On the way to the diner, as we walked on the crumbling sidewalk, I saw another memorial. Lashed to the wire fence was a bouquet of dried flowers, small buds interspersed with seed pods and crinkled branches, bound together by yarn. Underneath was a small cross, made from unfinished wood, and large, crooked nails. I stopped to look at it, tried to read the lettering, but it had faded too much for me to see. Just the impression of letters along an empty road, backed by a gravel lot full of concrete and rebar and piles of dirt. Lonely. We walked on.

Hello, hello? Open your eyes past the yellow line. Do you know where you’re going? Perhaps, once before, you could keep it. Once before, you chose to come here, to the sun and the stretch of sand and the long line road. And you had to be going somewhere, right? Right. They’ll keep asking you that. Where shall we stop, where are we going, the burbling of cities on your lips. You see hands on the wheel, feel like twisting the spine, honk the horn thrice. You can touch pale flesh to glass, to see the dusty imprint of palm and fingers. You are here. Maybe during the ride, you can find where you were going.

Hikes were more his thing. I still walked with him, but with much less enthusiasm. He was ahead of me, striding with long legs, backlit by the sun. It was hotter than usual today, baking down on the ground. I could see the cracks in the dirt, where the top had baked into a crust. If there was any rain that did come down, the water wouldn't even be able to seep into the ground. There was no way for me to catch up with him, even if I did walk faster-he's the go on a run at 5 am everyday kind of guy. The combo of a dry mouth, new hiking shoes that always squeezed my feet in the wrong way, and the beginnings of a headache were just fucking everything up. Why did people do this for fun? I stopped, panting, before leaning down and rubbing my calves. Fuck, the sun was so bright.

"Hey!" I heard him shout, and I looked up. He was standing on a rock further up the hill, classic explorer style, looking down at me. "Hurry up! It's not too far."

"Give me a sec!" I yelled back. Breathe in, breathe out. If I got to the top, the view would be worth it, and we packed the lunch we got from the cafe in town. Look at the positives. Like the ground in front of you. The scattered cracked stones, the small tendrils of plants, dense stems and tiny leaves, and a cluster of red ants, scuttling through in a line. There it is, nature. A hand tapped my arm.

"Shit, it's just me," he said, holding his hands back from where I reared up. Once again, my heart had picked up, fluttering through my chest.

"Jesus, don't sneak up on me."

"Well, the rocks were really loud when I walked down, so it wasn't sneaking." God, why did he look so okay right now? Hair more tousled than messy, barely any sweat on him. A spike of annoyance shot through me. Or was it the headache?

“Yeah, okay.” I turned my head back down, to look at the ground. I could hear him shifting next to me, see his worn-in sneakers, spattered with dirt. The whine of some bug swirled around my ears like the weaving of a loom. Oh, there’s some glass, green, from a beer bottle. That’s a dick thing to do, carry in and carry out all the litter.

“So... should we go?”

“Huh?” I looked up. He was tapping his foot, and I watched as he looked down at his watch.

“If we get up to the top in time, the light will be perfect, so we should hurry up.”

“How long is it to the top?”

“Around thirty minutes? Then an hour walking back down,” he said. An hour and a half? That wasn’t even including the ride back.

“Is it...” I fell off, and he blinked at me.

“What? What is it?” he said. His nostrils flared, ever so slightly, even when his tone remained level. The smallest of cracks.

“I might go back to the car.” I didn’t look at him when I said it, letting the words fall into the sky beyond. He was quiet. I dared a glance.

“What do you mean, you want to go back to the car?” Genuine confusion, across every bit of his body.

“I’m sorry, but I have a headache and it’s just getting worse, so I don’t think I can finish a full hour and a half hike.”

“But-“

“But?”

“I can’t just let you walk back alone, so I’ll have to walk back with you, and…” He rubbed his head, looking back over his shoulder at the hill upward.

“I’ll be fine, I’ll just go back and sit.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point then?” I put my hands on my hips. The throb of my head rumbled alongside my heart and the heat, up into my throat and my eyes. The sun burned brighter. “I don’t feel good! What do you want me to do?”

“You were fine one second ago. Let’s just sit for a moment and then-

“That’s what I was trying to do, and then you came back and got annoyed.”

“Well, excuse me for being concerned. What do you want me to do?” He wasn’t even yelling; that was the worst bit. “I knew this would happen, I knew you would make up some excuse to not do this hike-“

“It’s not an excuse.”

“Oh, really? So you were so excited to come on this trip and walk with me, and have this time together?”

“I was, actually.”

“You know, this only happens when I want to do something. Not when it’s something that you want. Only with me.” It fell out with a thud, ending any other words that would come out of my mouth. Hopefully, we’re alone out here, I bet we’re echoing all throughout the valley. For miles around, a hiker might notice the faint sound of the couple fighting. I licked my lips, suddenly feeling dry.

“I’m walking back with you.” End of the conversation, he walked right past me, and headed down the hill. Always first in line.

Once we came back to the room, the headache had blossomed, full force and pounding. Even in the car, the sway of the road sent my stomach spinning as I leant my head on the window, trying to get the last bit of coolness. Counting my breaths was the best way to deal with this, deep ones, in and out. He didn't come in with me, instead dropping me off outside. I was barely on the sidewalk when he pulled away with a screech, the exhaust washing into my face. Just get inside. Good thing we're on the first floor.

I was laying on the couch for a long time before he came back. Maybe I could've laid on the bed, but the couch was closer to the vent. This was a much better place to stay compared to the rest, a full bed and breakfast with lacy trim, a soft bed, and full AC. The whole space was icy cold now.

What did they say when we came in? It was late at night, when I went downstairs to ask for more towels, telling the clerk my boyfriend had spilled water all over the bathroom floor so all of them are unusable now. As I was talking with her, this small wrinkled old woman, she got a glint in her eye, beyond the reflection of nighttime fluorescence. "Do you know this place is haunted? Oh yes, it is. Room 213, when it was first built. There was a woman who stayed here, from out of town. One time, there was a huge commotion in there, yelling and shouting everywhere, but no one checked in. When they went in to find her, the next morning, she was dead. No one knew who she was. No one came to claim the body. No one was charged for the crime. A tragedy, right? Such a tragedy."

I heard a car pull up. The door opened behind me, but he didn't turn the light on. For a little while, he shuffled around me, from couch to bed to bathroom. The light turned on, and water ran. I closed my eyes again and shoved my face into the pillow. Maybe the pressure

would help it go away. He knelt beside me, the creak of the floorboards under my feet, and he ran his hand through my hair, massaging my scalp.

“I got you an ice pack and stuff, ok?” he said, speaking in a whisper, rumbling alongside his fingers' gentle touch. It felt heavenly. I could only nod, but I would have loved for him to stay longer.

“I'm sorry I yelled. It was just the headache”

“I know.”

“Thank you, for the ice pack.”

“It'll be a bit before it freezes, so don't thank me yet.”

“Still,” I hummed, melting a bit further down. Perfect. He started to pull away.

“Get some sleep-”

“You know I love you, right?” It was muffled by the pillow, but I said it outright. He froze. The room expanded and fell in a second, turning around me, thumping into my skull. In the quiet of it all, I could hear his breathing. He reached down, and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear.

“I know. I love you too.”

I couldn't see his face as he said it

You are sitting in the passenger seat. Look outside the window, see the sky speed by, the warping of the stars. The seat is what? Soft this time? Leather? Stained? If you look at the profile of the man woman person next to you, what would you see? If someone held a page up, could you draw them? What's the contour? What's the line? Will they speak to you with kindness, or turn their palm into a fist? This has always been warned about- for both of you. The

danger in the small body. The threat that those lovely eyes can hide. Oh, you know it well. You've been burned so deep before, so deep it left you hollow dry and bleeding, left you crumbling in the dust behind. Now, it's just about the rush of wind through the window, as the road stretches out behind. Taste the salt on your dry lips. Don't worry about the chariot. Don't worry about the driver.

I watched him at night, the way he laid there. The way he breathed. I couldn't bear to wake him, but I couldn't rest. So I got up and walked, back and forth, in the living room, resisting the urge to go outside. Walking always helped me, but going out at 2 am was never safe.. I checked and double-checked my list, bit my rough lips to blood. I always swung between over-preparedness and underpreparedness. Depended on the day. He had told me to cut down on some of the things I wanted to bring, that there wasn't enough room. On the side of the room was a pile of left behind things, too clunky or large or unnecessary. What kept me up wasn't a regret. Not quite. The closest thing I could call it is a longing. I wasn't sure what it was for yet. We had set off early one Friday morning, when the sun had barely started emerging, and the sky was still dark. He had gotten his car, a large, green thing I had a love-hate relationship with. It was old, always smelled something like gasoline, and during rainy days it rolled and groaned all the way down the road. Luckily, there was enough room to fit everything into the backseat, and to sleep laying down in the flat of the trunk. Off we went.. Home sweet home.

The sun blared in as we drove, bright red and pinks, as the world changed from city to suburb to empty. Of course, the rumble of the car lulled me to sleep for most of it, drifting in and out with the sound of top 100 pop, then to some stern radio show, here's the traffic, then the state of the world, isn't it fucked? If I was awake enough, I would've told him to turn it off, but now I

pressed myself further into the car window. The cold rumbling hit into my head, over and over. No worries, not now. No thoughts about him, no thoughts about them. No thoughts about me. Just the car and the road and the sun warming my skin. I turned to face him, curling up. There I could watch, watch as the sun rose up and the golden glow spilled over his face, his blue eyes almost consumed by it. How his finger tapped on the steering wheel to the beat, how his brow wrinkled and unfurled, how he smiled, unconsciously, bringing his dimple up to his cheek. What was it they said? That people were the most beautiful when they don't know you're looking at them? Yes. I agree.

In those kind moments, you forget your rage. Silly. It's never gone, not really. Still that rumbling acid reflux. Maybe that's all you were before. Or maybe it's the remnants of all you kept inside. So salty, clinging to your throat and lips, ready to spill. Don't worry. You can still use it, down the line. There is plenty to rage for. There are plenty who deserve it.

In the lot, curving past the metal rail, there was a thin elephant path winding along. I had stayed behind when we stopped, and he had to run to the bathroom. At least, that was what he said he was doing. I think he was getting annoyed at me. Now, I was leaning on the front bumper of the car, carefully avoiding the touch of my bare skin on the metal. And I waited. Of course, I noticed the path. Of course, I wanted to follow it. Yes, there was the safety, the thrumming thought of you don't know who was out here, is this safe to do? But still I picked my way down the thin path, surrounded by dry stem bushes and tufts of grass. He'll just be over the hill. The path opened up into a clearing, invisible from the road and the lot. It wasn't large. On the farthest side, straight across where we walked in, there was a cairn.

The rocks were a strange cool color among the sea of warmth, piled one on top of the other. Nestled among the stones were tufts of fake flowers, Christmas wreaths, and greenery. There were candles at the base, half melted, tucked among crumpled up paper held down by stones. It was only when I got closer that I found they were notes, the small lines of pink and red and black peeking out. Should I read one? No, that would be intruding. Instead, I sat down, curling my feet underneath me as the dust stained my jean shorts. Breathe in, and breathe out. The dry smell of dust lingered in my nostrils. This felt different to the other ones, the graves that we drove by. It was a weight that draped itself across my back and wouldn't move, caressing my cheek, telling me to sit, and rest. The sun throbbed overhead, no longer yellow, no, it was white, cascading down onto me. Suddenly, absurdly, it almost looked as if a body was lying there, encased in stone, left to linger at the side of the road.

I returned to the car before he even had time to look for me.

“Do you ever think about all the crosses we pass?” I said, perched on the curb. He had just gotten back, even finding a vending machine that somehow still worked. Did I trust those cans? It was because of my comment that he coughed on his drink, and wiped his mouth.

“Jesus, why would you notice that?” He flipped his sunglasses up, letting me see his eyes. They looked more brown than hazel today, but the anger in them burned. Yep, wrong time to mention it. He was already annoyed.

“Don't sound so grossed out. I was just watching and I saw them.” No, I didn't mention the counting I'd been doing. I didn't mention the little gravesite, just beyond the hill. Instead, I bit my lip, hoping not to break the skin, as he continued.

“You’re already so fucking anxious when we drive, Jesus Christ. Why would you do that to yourself?” He was rubbing the bridge of his nose, already red with sunburn.

“It’s not that big of a deal.. Why are you acting like this?” My anxiety wasn’t even that bad right now. How would the graves change that?

“It’s fucking morbid, and you already are acting all weird-“

Weird? I wasn’t acting weird. With the way I was sitting, he towered over me, shadow casting downwards onto my face. I stayed still, glaring right at him. His mouth opened and closed, flopping uselessly.

“You know what, no. If you can’t see it, I’m not even going to try, okay?”

“Well, I can’t fix anything if you can’t tell me what the problem is, right? Or can you not actually think of anything?” When I stood up from the curb, I nearly ran into him. We were face to face, breathing heavily, and I could feel that pool of blood in my cheeks, hot and burning. Go on.

A car drove into the parking lot. The moment dropped, and he turned away. I couldn’t even tell if he was listening to me anymore.

When we drove away, rounding beyond the rock, lower down, the rest of them were revealed. The crosses. White protrusions laid bare upon the swath of blank dust, empty, alone. I wondered, where are their flowers? For a moment, in the passing glare of the sun, I could see more. White, gauzy forms, suspended in heat. No eyes, but I knew they could see me. Then we turned the curve, and they were gone.

It wasn’t anyone’s fault. The accident, I mean. The tension of half-baked arguments from the days past, seeping into the air vents, the side mirrors, the underseats scattered with trash. I

was never good with confrontation. Or wasn't good enough. Too afraid to bring anything up, to mention how this wasn't working, we shouldn't have done this. There was an us together so long that the thought of separation was a carved hole in my skull. But being together was the spike. Now, the explosion. Me, driving. The sky, a searing blue above, no clouds, just sun.. Him, sitting next to me. Stiff backed, like he was aware of any movement and was stopping himself. Except the knuckles. Clench, unclench, white, red. No music. I don't even remember what it was we fought about. All that matters is that there was one.

And then suddenly I was in the air, spinning. Now, the glass had become crystalline around me, shards of stars that burned. Now, the world was thudding and rushing and wrong. There was no one moment of collision, or loss. There was only the speed of pain and numbness, a rushing fire to soft cold. Stillness. The world kept swirling around me, dancing. Something was digging into my back, my side, but I couldn't move. The stars winking in, winking out, were trying to tell me something in code.

I never turned to look for him.

Oh, you remember now? Yes, yes, good. You still need to find a ride.

Misplaced Hearts Society

The exact start of the ‘heartless’ phenomenon is unknown. Trust me, I’ve done the research. There’s been evidence of it for millennia of human history. Historical accounts, diary entries, medical diagrams, sculptures. A stone carving in a cave, depicting a solitary standing figure, chest pulled open by its own hands. Inside the chest cavity, smeared with black paint, was a carved heart. Shriveled. Small. Almost missing.

The figure had a wide white smile on his face. He was alive, despite it all. On the periphery were other figures, standing at a distance. They stared at him. In awe? Fear? Who knows? There is a manuscript that tells of a devil wearing human guise. It is revealed by the lesser heart contained within its chest. Of course, the proof is found only after they killed the person. Then there’s that tragic love story, where the beautiful princess got cursed due to her unkind, and selfish actions, and her heart shriveled inside her own chest. She could never love again, no matter how hard she tried. Eventually, she died alone.

Look throughout history, what can be seen? Pretty much every monster story- zombie, revenant, ghost, vampire- can be traced back to the heartless. The dead are found unburied, with their chests cracked open, just to be safe. No matter where I turn, from book to book, the heartless are treated with distance and hostility. Even among warrior cultures, the heartless are cursed to wander back and forth, never finding a place to call home.

Think about it. The importance of the heart, the center of the body, containing soul, will, logic, reason, emotion, purpose- take your pick. Passion and love carry you through, sending you forward, leading you to cherish them above all others. What would happen if someone didn't have it at all?

Even with all of these stories in books, truly being heartless is pretty rare. The official name for the condition is Rhys-Lumer Syndrome and less than 1% of all babies in the US are born with it.

My parents didn't talk about how they found out that I had it though I do know that they learned about it early on in my life before my first birthday. Even though it was rare, the condition was pretty easy to diagnose. Heartbeats are very important, after all. I know that, in the attic, there are photos of myself tucked away, all happy and smiling. None where I am in a hospital or covered in wires or in pain. No record of those days. It was like they threw away that entire part of my life, never to be mentioned again-. I couldn't even find records of the doctor that first diagnosed me, or what he did to find out I had it. Later when I went to doctors, I had to bring pages and pages of paperwork with me so they didn't get confused if tests turned out strange. The name Rhys-Lumer came from two places. One part came from the doctor who discovered it- Nikolai Lumer. The other part was named for the person they studied, Rhys Cox. It was only discovered that Rhys Cox had the condition after he died when they conducted an autopsy. His heart was so hidden and small that they thought he didn't have one at all. They preserved him, keeping his heart in a jar of formaldehyde, so it could be displayed as a medical marvel. After years in a private collection, it was stolen. It's rumored to have been displayed at a freak show, but that's unconfirmed. It was lost, somewhere in the world. The rest of his body,

stored in Berlin, was destroyed in the air raids during World War II. How odd to be known for a missing heart, even though that was the only part of himself that remained..

What did it actually mean- Rhys-Lumer Syndrome? Officially, it's when the heart is abnormally small, or malformed, yet functions at a normal capacity. People with this condition are told they should be able to live a normal life. I spent multiple days in the hospital, hooked up to various monitors, but eventually they had to let me go. No other test said I was unhealthy. Those weren't the only doctors, of course. But that was the start.

My parents drew the line at any sort of surgery. This was even after I grew up, and failed to find an answer from anyone else. Treatments, yes, but nothing permanent. Medical ones, like beta blockers, to help with my heart rhythm, but they made me feel all faint and flustered. Then, the more natural methods. Different diets, cutting gluten, or sugar, or adding different superfoods. Yoga, meditation, even acupuncture. I would be sitting in my room, just waiting, and my mom would come with a new idea. *Here's a vitamin I found online, here's a new supplement.* I guess the one thing I should be thankful for is her limits. It was a personal rating system. None of that harmful shit that pops up on Facebook, like drinking essential oils. It helped that there aren't usually symptoms, things that make me unable to live, breathe, dance or sing. Whenever I asked, they told me that they didn't want me to go through that trauma of surgery since I was already fine. But I think it was really fear that stopped them. That the doctors, when they cracked open my chest, revealing that shriveled cavity to the open air, would make my body realize, oh, this isn't right. And whatever magic that was keeping me alive would be dispelled. So I remained the same- just heartless.

Sometimes, when we were home alone, I would ask my mom to listen to my chest. I would sit on the couch, and she would lean her ear against me. I imagined her hearing a

whistling wind through an open cavern, or the wash of waves upon a shore. Then, I would do the same to her, listening to the thumping of her heart, pushing blood through the body. I usually ended up falling asleep after that, lulled by the steady beat. Later, I would wake up in my own bed, alone.

In kindergarten, for show and tell, I told everyone that I didn't have a heart. This was the first time I had really told anyone about what I had-. I remember that all the kids thought it was so cool. I also remember the pinching of my teacher's face- a young woman who really seemed to dislike children. She always wore bright magenta. Like wearing a bright color would help her seem more approachable. *You shouldn't lie like that. Apologize to the class.* I didn't understand. I wasn't lying! She kept insisting, until it made me burst into tears. I ended up going to the principal's office. I didn't hear what the adult said after that. They kept me on a bench in the hallway while my parents arrived. But from then on, she acted strange around me. If we had class assignments, she would give them to me, or call on me for an answer. But she didn't ask me about my day, or give me compliments on my work. It was like there was a wall between myself and her, which she didn't want to cross. Maybe she thought it wouldn't matter that much, or that I wouldn't notice. But I did. Of course, I did.

So yes, when I was younger, it was cool. Other kids would come up to me, asking if the story was real. One party trick I had was letting them listen to my silent chest. I was friendly with all the students, moving through multiple groups, though I wasn't very close with anyone. There were the rare, cruel ones. Ones who had heard fairy tales, asking if I really didn't feel things, if I was really cursed. In "The Snow Queen", a shard of ice goes into a little boy's heart, and he becomes cruel to everyone around him. With that one, I would tell them that my heart was always like this, and I was never cruel to anyone. It didn't take too much to convince them.

Of all the people I met, it was the parents who changed things the most. The ones who made the world cruel.

There was this one time that I was at my best friend's birthday party for a sleepover. It was back in elementary school, and we spent all of our recesses together, making potions out of sticks and mud. But it wasn't the party I remember well. It was later on, at night. Everyone else was in the basement- her house was huge- but the bathroom down there was occupied. So I went upstairs, to the one right next to the kitchen. To my shock, I wasn't the only one up there. Her mom and a neighbor were chatting in the kitchen while cleaning up. Empty pizza boxes and piles of paper plates were still scattered around alongside stray popcorn and cups of half-drunk soda. The whole kitchen gleamed around them, otherwise perfectly clean. There was a corner there, where I hid, as soon as they said my name, crouched along clean off-white walls. They weren't even trying to be that quiet.

"I can't believe the attitude of that Teresa girl," her mother said, leaning back against the counter. I always thought she was the prettiest lady. Behind her, the dishwasher buzzed. "You would think that she's the only person at this party."

"Lauren," the other woman said, only lightly scolding. "You can't blame her for that."

"I don't care if there's anything wrong with her, that doesn't excuse her actions. Honestly, I told Dale we shouldn't even invite her, just in case." She paused then leaned over to the other woman, "I heard she killed one of the chicks in the classroom, and blamed it on another kid."

I felt anger, burning in my gut. I wanted to tell her what actually happened, that if it was anyone in the classroom, it would've been that kid Thomas. He didn't care at all about the chicks. But the other woman didn't even stop her. Instead, she gasped.

"No, really?"

“Well, who else could it have been? She was seen going over there without any supervision, and then, at the end of the day- the chick is dead! Smushed to a pulp.”

“Well, it could’ve been an accident.”

“Really?” she said. “An accident? At this point, she shouldn’t even be in the school. There’s been all the other incidents that we’ve complained about.” Other incidents?

“Her mother has been pushing back against those pretty strongly,” The other woman said, “I think she’s been at every meeting we’ve had this year.”

“You can really see that she's trying, bless her heart. But at some point she has to do what’s best for her daughter.”

She was standing there, so certain, and so in control, perfect hair and perfect smile. Now, instead of that anger, I felt sick. It churned all the way up, unable to stop. I ran back into the bathroom to throw up. My mom had to pick me up afterwards; I’d been kept quarantined away from the other kids in the front sitting room in case I was contagious. When she asked what happened, I just told her I ate too much sugar.

After that, I wasn’t invited to my best friend’s parties anymore. Whenever I would go up to talk with her, she would ignore me, like I wasn’t even there. After I walked away, I could hear her laughing with her friends. I would call that the tipping point for everything. The kids didn’t like me as much. Why hang out with someone scary? The chick story was spreading around the school, up and down the hallways, turning into something worse. One kid even said he found me covered in blood, the bodies still underneath my feet, laughing. But the kids he told believed it.

There were certain points in life that allowed for reinvention. But the whole time through high school “heartless” swung from my neck in neon letters, impossible to remove. It wasn’t

until I went to college that it was different. A new city across the country, new people to meet, new things to do. Just new. I remember, when I first stepped off the plane, the air smelled different, dense, almost smoky. A perfect time to change.

Even without the nickname, I was still the same person. I didn't connect well to other people. Even in orientation, people seemed to swerve around me, as if repelled. Clubs already had an established hierarchy, with nowhere to slip in. Parties were times to perch in corners with a drink and watch everyone else get shitfaced. The few friends I had, if you could call them that, were distant. I had never dated anyone, not that I tried. The fact I'm still a virgin shocked some people- even more when they found out I wasn't religious, or saving myself for marriage. Classic loner. Apparently, I was comfortable in my own, far-away skin.

I had only gone to a therapist once, one of those school recommended ones. I didn't like the color of her hair- a dyed fire hydrant red. She didn't like my non-committal answers, how I lounged on the couch, or the way I never talked unless prompted. *How are you doing today? Did you talk to anyone in your classes? Here, these breathing techniques may help with your anxiety. Why do you think you can't connect with people? We can't do this unless you really try.* She's right. The final straw was when I mentioned that I'd never had a crush on anyone, never dated. Or had any desire to. She wrote something down.

"Why do you think that is?" she asked

"I don't think there's a reason for it? It's just who I am." I was sprawled on her couch, trying to sink into the sticking leather. When I said that, she looked disappointed.

"Terry, we've discussed this before. The only way to start connecting with people is to put yourself out there, not to dismiss them outright."

"I know that, but I don't think this fucking applies here."

“Why not? You’ll only find love if you are willing to connect with other people. For some people, it just takes longer to feel that spark, but one day you will. You don’t have to worry about it.” The way she smiled at me, it’s like she’s changed my entire world. I left the meeting early, and never went back. I was upset that I told her. What did I expect, when everyone else thought there was something wrong with me? Having a therapist say it was worse though. She still thought, in her own way, that I was wrong and needed to be fixed. Fuck that.

I lived the same way for 3 years. I woke up way too late for a functional person, past 11 am. Took a shower, ate cereal with almond milk, and hoped that no one else saw me stumbling around in a haze. Instead of living on campus, I got an apartment with two other people that I never talked to. They never asked intrusive questions about me, like, ‘why do you stay here over the summer?’ so that worked out well. All the classes I took were late afternoon and night ones, so it was less crowded on campus. On the weekends, I helped stock shelves at the grocery store, which was the most boring job I had ever had.. Riding the bus back home, I felt a connection with the other commuters, dreary-eyed and washed out by fluorescence. There wasn’t not much room for talking with people, or going to clubs, or finding a party to hide in the corner off.

One Wednesday, I accidentally slept through my alarm. It was earlier than I was used to getting up, but I needed the credits. It wouldn’t be as bad if I didn’t use the bus to go everywhere. Now, I was running through the campus quad, trying to pass by the slower students. The soles of my shoes were so thin, I could feel the pavement through them. Maybe that’s why, as I was heading down the steps, I hit another person, and almost fell to the ground.

When I turned to apologize to her, I froze. There was a strange familiarity to her. I know you somehow, I thought

Cheeks burning red, I was all ready to leave and never turn back, feelings or connections be damned. But she was ready, passing her pile of papers to one arm, and holding out her other hand to shake. Val. Valeria Roberts.

We don't have time to talk for long. Instead, she gave me her number, scrawled across a small piece of paper she found in her pocket. Her handwriting was looping and round, pressed deep into the surface. The paper itself was the size of a business card. Flipping it over, I read, in simple, blocky font: *Misplaced Hearts Society*.

Misplaced Hearts Society was, apparently, a support group for people like us. The heartless. I was shocked that there were enough people in this area to even have this group in the first place. When I first read the name, I laughed, right in the middle of a lecture. The term "misplaced" was so strange. As if our vital organs had just wandered away, and one day, and then, oh look! It was behind the dresser this whole time! But despite myself, I was drawn in by it. So after class, Val and I met up for coffee.

The sun had lessened a bit, tendrils of clouds seeping over the sky. Maybe it would rain? That would be nice. The world just felt better after it rained, like a sky-wide refresh. Now, we were sitting at a small table in the corner, enveloped in warm wood and crushed coffee beans. This was one of my favorite places to go on campus. I mostly went late at night or early morning, since it stayed open for a long time. The barista somehow always remembered my name and my order. Sometimes, I felt bad because I never remembered theirs in return.

Both of us got hot drinks, hers a bitter mocha, and mine an unsweetened mint tea. The heat warmed my hands, always a little too chilly, and the soft smell of mint curled up to my nose. We started off talking about little things, those softball questions kept in the brain for ice-breakers. *Where are you from? What's your major? How about your star sign? Your favorite book?* The whole time, I was waiting for her to talk about heartlessness. Who knew, maybe she had a radar for those things, and that's why she gave the card to me? My eyes tracked her arm—her right arm. She wore a bracelet, a black silicon band, easy to miss. Oh, shit. I was suddenly aware of my own bracelet, a chunky silver chain, clinking on my wrist. I forgot I was even wearing it.

Most of the heartless had one of these. It had our condition printed out on it in plain, easy to read text. You wouldn't want to be in an accident, have people come to revive you and OH NO, you don't have a heartbeat. Time to use CPR, or an AED, or something. I think that more people have died from people fucking up their medical care than from the actual condition. I start picking at the skin around my nails. The eye contact to the bracelet is what got her.

“Would you like to join me?” she said. Her voice was very nice. Deeper, with a hint of raspiness. Her black nails clicked across the table. “For the meeting. It's every Thursday afternoon, at 4'o o'clock, and you can just show up.”

I had to resist the urge to walk away immediately. Something was swelling within me, less like a tide and more like a breaking dam, pushing me to move, move, move. Too many times people offered me things for their own profit, rather than to actually help me. “Was that the reason you wanted to meet up with me?” I said, not quite keeping the ice out of my voice.

“No, of course not! I just thought it would be nice to have someone come with me.” Her face was open and earnest. Behind her glasses, I could see the glimmer of gold around her eyes,

makeup smudged by the heat, but not fully gone. I sipped my tea before answering. Getting it in a ceramic mug was a mistake.

“I’ll think about it.” That’s what I came up with. Not much but, I didn’t want to outright say no. Just maybe, a vast ocean of maybe, I could stop by one day, and steal some free snacks. This was a testing point, too. Would she just leave now? Since I said I wasn’t interested? To my surprise, she let it go. To my surprise, she stayed.

We kept meeting up after that. It was hard to figure out times to meet, since she was a morning person, and I mostly stayed up at night. Most often, we returned to the coffee shop, staying in that same corner spot. She kept trying different drinks each time we went, Lavender Latte, London Fog, Ca Phe Trung, Cold Brew Floats. I always got the same drink, every time. You can’t fuck up a teabag. Later, when she was studying, we would meet up at the 24hr diner, all sticky vinyl seats and faded linoleum. Technically it was the shitty diner in town, but it was always empty so we kept coming back, overlooking the over-salted, over-sweet food. Somehow Val was a snob about coffee and drinks, but not for food. Other times, we went to movies since they had a discount for students. I remember, when I was younger, thinking that people faked enjoying kisses, because you just thought they were romantic and you had to do it. Finding out people enjoyed it was a shock to me. But it’s so wet, and you can get your teeth clacked together, I thought Gross.

For a good while, Val never asked. But one day at the coffee shop, earlier than usual, with both of us sleep-deprived and giggling, I had a change of heart. Ha.

“Hey,” I said, “Is... the club still happening?” I tried to be all casual. The fact we never met up on Thursday afternoons was a very clear indicator that they were still happening.

“Oh, yeah, they are,” she said, a light glinting in her eye. “Would you... want to come?”

She was so pumped I was asking, I could see it.

“I mean, if you could give me a ride.” I took a sip of my tea, wincing at how hot it was.

“No, wait. I actually wore you down?”

“No, I decided on my own that I want to go now.”

“But would you want to go without me?” she said, smiling. I rolled my eyes at her.

“I mean, if you don’t want me to go-“

“No, nope.” She reached over to me, and grabbed my hands. “Trust me, it’ll be great. If you don’t like it, then you’ll never have to go back.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

The group was held in a church basement. Literally under the eyes of God. When she first drove me there, I felt a sudden fear. Was it a cult? Or even a general congregation, tricking me to come and join the worship? It was the only space they could get, it turned out..

Stepping down into the room, I was suddenly reminded of CCD, and those few times they would have parties with parents. The too-low ceiling, heavily water-stained, and the scratchy green carpets, dirt embedded in no matter how much you vacuum. One table held refreshments, a few capri-suns and juice boxes, bags of pretzels, and those cheese peanut butter crackers. The bottom step creaked as we walked in, and I was suddenly confronted with many eyes.

It was only Val’s hand at my back that kept me from walking away. Instead, I huddled further into my hoodie, hoping that I wouldn’t seem too conspicuous. There were four other

people in here, sitting in scratchy chairs forming a vague circle. To my surprise, there were two other chairs open, placed right next to each other. Nice, I guess? I didn't stay standing for long, rushing over. When I sat down, the chair creaked, and the dust that lingered in tickled my nose. They were all talking before I came in, and it picked up again now, rumbling back around at a much lower volume.

The range of people here was staggering. There was an incredibly old man who looked like he could blow away at any second, talking to an absurdly fashionable person, with a shaved head and huge sunglasses. Another girl was younger, around 16. She wore the largest boots I'd ever seen, chunky and black with buckles all up the sides. Then there was a middle aged man with surprisingly bright blond hair. When I made eye contact with him, he smiled broadly.

He introduced himself as the head of the group, Markus Moore. He began the meeting with a sunny, wide smile, which fit perfectly onto his face. This is a place where you won't be judged, he said, a place where you can express yourself. I got the sense he used to be a camp counselor, especially with his khaki shorts and tall socks combo. He had everyone introduce themselves, in a circle, pronouns included. Charlie: old man (he/him) , Kat: teen (she/her), and West: fashionable (they/she, but 'they' was preferred). When I introduced myself, it felt like the words were scraping out of my throat.

I spent the meeting just watching everyone. They talked about their days, the people they talked to, the things that annoyed them. Charlie said he went to a book club which met monthly. It seemed really nice for him, but I was also sad to know that he had more friends than me. The only person who was close to me in energy was Kat- she didn't talk much either. I still couldn't bring myself to say anything, so instead I bit the edge of my nails and waited until it was over.

The main part for the heartless was when Kat mentioned trouble with doctor's appointments.

"This most recent one, I went in for a specialist, and I had to fast, but when I got there, they had to reschedule it, it's been months already."

I could see the tensing of her jaw from where I sat. Everyone groaned, and nodded, the universal commiseration of the struggle. I hadn't gone to the doctor since I came to college. Unless I included that therapist. Everyone else gave good advice- who to call, what to do. Getting her parents involved would help, mentioned Marcus. Commiseration over the fucked medical system.

Marcus had us all repeat a mantra. He had been pretty hands off for a lot of this, only interjecting for those emotional clarification bits. This part I had to join in for. The mantra? *I have no heart, but I am not heartless.*

At the end of the meeting, I got all of their contacts, lined up in a row. Next to each of their names, I put a heart.

The days didn't change all that much after I started going. It's not like I expected a major change, but I still felt disappointed by it. I still had my late as shit classes, occupied by all the other dark eye bag lurkers on the campus. I still never saw my roommates, and still ate so much fast food that Val ordered me salads and made me eat them, to not die of scurvy. My phone still remained silent. The only real difference was that I made sure I went to bed a bit earlier the night before the group, so I wouldn't be too tired for it. I drove over with Val, and I listened in on the conversations, hoping no one asked my own opinion on something, spoke the mantra, and went home.

Through them all, I did learn things. West was a fashion influencer, and body-positivity activist, which explained how they're always so perfect looking. Even the iced coffee cup they carried looked fashionable. If you mentioned a person in the area, especially in the arts, there was a huge chance that they knew them. They had the type of energy I would've hated in high school, that bubbly, popular kid feeling, where you can somehow do everything at once and still excel. None of the popular kids I knew back in high school were nonbinary, though. I learned that Charlie was retired, had an old cat at home that hated his guts, and volunteered at the public library. Every time he came in, he wore a different colored scarf, in a range of colors and patterns. One time he wore one, turquoise with sparky thread and butterflies, that I think I last saw back in 5th grade. Marcus, our wonderful leader, was the perfect embodiment of a dad. Khaki shorts, button ups, a beard, a dad bod. Evan, his son, was 5 years old, and Marcus would take any chance to talk about him. From the photo he showed, all curly brown hair, tan skin, and dimples, I couldn't tell if Evan was heartless. From everything I read, the condition wasn't hereditary. My parents were so happy about that, look, you can still have kids. I didn't mention how I didn't want kids in the first place, or how I would actually need to find someone to date me, or how I never wanted to get married. They still didn't know.

When West came in late to one meeting, disheveled and sweating, we all noticed. I don't remember how many sessions it had been at this point. When they sat down in their seat, nearly dropping their bag to the ground, I winced. We all just waited for them to start speaking. No pressure. It did take a bit, after Marcus talked about the most recent school project that Evan completed, that they spoke.

“I don’t want to take over this meeting, everyone-“ they said, before breaking off. To my surprise, I could see the sheen of tears in their eyes, and a redness that couldn’t be fully covered by makeup.

“We’re here to listen to you, West. Whatever you need,” Marcus said. West nodded, and breathed in deeply.

“So, there’s one of my friends that I met, you know, and we’ve been talking more often, collaborating. We were hanging out yesterday and he mentioned one of those romance novels we all read when we were younger, Arisen,”

Oh god, that fucking book! That book haunted me. So many people loved that bullshit romance, oh who will she choose, the perfect man who is actually boring, or the bad boy with no heart. When it first came out, I did read it. I was hoping that the heartless character would be the chosen one, and would be in love, be the endgame. One of those, oh, he never needed a heart to love you moments. Of course, instead, he got his heart back, through the main girls' love for him. Disgusting. I burnt the copy I got in the backyard, as kindling for the fire pit. My mom was so mad at me that she actually ended up grounding me.

“So, I mentioned the whole heartless trope, and why I didn’t like it, and he got this weird look on his face. Like he was confused, or something. So I told him about me, you know. Being heartless.” The tears in their voice were thickening.

Shit, did I have tissues with me? I tried to grab those travel packs for allergies but I’m not sure if they were still in my bag.

“What did he say?” Marcus gently prodded.

“He was fine, I thought, and he was asking questions about it, so at first...it was fine. But then he mentioned my whole job, you know, and he said, Why haven’t you told your audience

yet? It was such a weird thing for him to say. When I told him I just didn't want to, he said I was being deceitful. That, by not telling them, I was lying, especially since so many of them just want to fuck me," They said, with a bitter laugh. The buzz of the room thickened around us, surrounding my body with small prickles. "He wasn't even trying to be rude. That's the worst part. He genuinely thought he was being helpful." Sniffing, they wiped under their eyes. "It wasn't even anything that bad, I'm probably being over-dramatic--"

"That's bullshit," I said. Fuck, that was rude. Everyone looked at me. Someone coughed, but I'm not sure who.

"Would you like to continue with that, Terry?" Marcus said, after I clamped my mouth shut. I blinked at him, before turning to West. They nodded at me, and I breathed in.

"One, it's not a deception. No one needs to know your medical history when they watch you, I don't give a shit if they think it changes you. And two, that other fucking comment, about the audience wanting to fuck you? Such bullshit, and uncalled for. He's fucking jealous or something, because that was personal." My volume was rising as I spoke, but I was really pissed.

"And having RLS doesn't mean you can't have sex or fall in love with people." Marcus added in a much more subdued tone. "It's a very problematic idea, and you were right to speak out against it."

"It's not just that, though." They reached up and rubbed their hands over their face. "I wish it was. Before, when I started this whole thing, I told myself, hey, I can come on and be heartless. Open and proud of myself, while also doing my fashion thing. But then...then I got scared. What if it changed things?"

"Would that really be a bad thing?" Charlie added. "Change always happens, so it's better to control it."

“That’s not what my brand is, though. I’ve built everything up on this different idea of myself. If people realize that it’s constructed, then they’ll see me differently.”

“Then fuck them. They weren’t your friends, or fans, anyways.” Kat interjected, a straw clutched in between her teeth like a cigarette.

“It’s not that simple, Kat,” West snapped. Kat opened her mouth to speak again, but closed it after a glare from Val.

“If you don’t want to tell them, then don’t tell them. People don’t need to know everything about your life. But if it’s hurting you more to stay quiet, then maybe rethink things. I don’t mean changing everything, just-“ I started off so strong and then faltered at the end, falling down into myself. The first time I’ve talked and this is how it went. I could tell they were waiting on me to continue, but I pulled away instead.

I kept my mouth shut the rest of the time.

We ended in the same way as always. *I have no heart, but I am not heartless.*

After that meeting, West started inviting me out more. I did have to tell them about all my shit, that we would probably have to meet up later on in the day, or at night. That I wasn’t the biggest fan of crowds, at all. They tailored the places we went after that. Small hole in the wall restaurants with the most absurdly delicious food. Museums, but the smaller ones, with fewer people. Used bookstores hidden in basements, and thrift stores off the beaten path. West loved to pick out outfits for me to try on, telling me to go outside my comfort zone, and find something new to wear. It’s surprising how many things I actually liked. My favorite was this jean jacket they found, where the back and arms were painted with black and white faces. The first time I wore it on campus, over another sweatshirt, Val nearly spat her drink out. Sometimes, when West

and I were out, we happened to meet up with one of their friends. Or acquaintances. Or co-workers. There's so many people they know, it's hard to keep track. I can't ever tell them where West and I actually met up. After all, they didn't know about the heartlessness. When I looked at them, during those meet-ups, I tried to find the hidden bits of them. Would this person care if West told them about being heartless? Would they be accepting? Or would they turn away?

Part of me was afraid that, once I started going to the meetings, Val wouldn't want to hang out with me as much. Having constant coffee conversations would drain anyone, right? Maybe once she achieved her goal, we would separate. Now, it felt like the inverse. In the afternoons, she pulled up in her car, music spewing out from the windows, and drove me to campus. I never expected her to be a country music lover. We had study sessions in the library, her with perfect organization and pastel highlighters, and myself with half crumpled pages because I misplaced my folder. She even brought me to a boba shop one day, to watch as I tried it for the first time. Yes, I had to ask them to make mine less sweet than usual, and no, I definitely didn't choke the first time I took a sip.

"You've been talking more in the meetings," she said, sipping noisily from her drink. It was bright orange with pink and red pearls, almost toxic in color.

"Have I?"

"Oh, yeah, 100%. I think helping West out started it." When I think back, I found that she's right. I had been talking more in the meetings. Nothing deeply emotional.

"Is that good?" I asked. "Did someone complain about me?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course it is! Why do you think I invited you to join?"

"Ok, yes, but you had no idea I would keep coming."

“But you did.” She tapped her nail on her drink, now painted a shimmery blue. “So that’s what matters.”

One day, after a meeting, Charlie came up to me. The scarf he was wearing was a watercolor pondscape, reflecting his pale blue eyes.

“How early do you think you can get up?” he said.

“Uh, what?”

“How early do you think you can get up in the morning? There’s a wonderful farmer’s market and art show happening on the pier this weekend, and I think you would enjoy it.”

“Oh, uh, are you showing your art there?” I said. Whenever I talked to him I felt like I should never, ever curse.

“No, no, not this time, though I do have some friends with booths.” He smiled. Fuck, I couldn’t say no to him.

“I usually take the bus, so I can meet you there,” I said.

“Oh, don’t worry. I have a car, I can come pick you up.”

“You don’t need to-“

“No, it’s on the way. I usually go at 9, but we can go at 11 this time.” He could definitely see the tension drain out of my shoulders, “Though it will be busier, so take your pick.” Shit.
Hm.

“I don’t mind going earlier, if there are less people.” It was the better option of the two. I would just try to get to bed earlier the night before, and take off work that day. I made sure to put it in my calendar, just in case. I wouldn’t want to forget it.

It was a surprisingly warm day when we headed over to the water, the breeze drifting in with a smell of brine and muck. The white tents were lined up and down the pier, and into the parking lot, visible from miles away. There were already a surprising amount of people out and about, some walking dogs, others in a family unit, babies strapped to their chests. I had a travel mug of black tea in my hands, brought over to me by Charlie, who somehow knew my drinks preferences. Even if I didn't like caffeine or coffee, I was more tempted now than I ever was before. This was too early.

Walking around with Charlie was infinitely better than I could've imagined. He whispered gossip to me about the tents and the occupants, which ones were worth going to, which ones were fighting with each other, and who specifically disliked him. At one stall, he bought me a jar of blackberry preserves, and one of dandelion honey, which I never had before. The jar glittered when I held it, glowing from the inside. Slowly, he packed his reusable bags, making his way down the line, grabbing Swiss chard and radishes, sourdough bread, garlic hummus. Since he did most of the talking, I just stood by his side, and waited until he was done.

Next, we headed over to the artists who were tucked away into a corner. They formed a courtyard amongst themselves, a flurry of tables, and boxes. There was a huge range of art there: intricate ink work in graphic waves, hand knitted alpaca wool scarves, watercolors of the ocean, oil paintings of overlapping glass. Once again, he knew everyone there. This kind of community was baffling to me, the range of people, the comfort, the familiarity. It almost made my skin crawl.

"You know, all of these people know about my RLS." He said, not looking at me. We were watching over a stall while the owner went to grab a coffee. I almost dropped the hat I'm looking at.

“You mean, being heartless?” I said, and then winced, but he didn’t flinch at the term.

“Yep. They’ve all known for years. My wife did, too.” There was a soft sadness to him, curling around his eyes.

“They didn’t mind? Or care?”

“Well, it wasn’t as official for a while but no. No one cared. If you find the right people, these things won’t matter. Don’t you have anyone that you trusted with this? Who didn’t care?” he asked, I couldn’t help but laugh, short and sharp. The breeze came by, lifting up my hair, and I ran my fingers along the edges of the travel mug.

“I mean, I thought it was my mom but...” I trailed off, and took a sip of my tea instead. “No matter what I did, or asked, she still treated me differently. It was like she always wanted to fix something in my life without actually doing anything for me.” Charlie hummed.

“Have you asked her about it?”

“No. But she wouldn’t listen anyways.”

“Is there anyone else?” Charlie looked so earnest in that moment that it didn’t feel right to tell him no, which was my immediate instinct.

“I mean, I guess there’s Val. She’s helped a lot,” I said, “And you all don’t care either. But you all are heartless also.”

“Is that enough, for now?”

“For now.” The stinging in my eyes wasn’t just from the wind anymore. He didn’t ask me any more questions.

The next meeting, he handed me a drawing. One of those life ones he did during the meetings, sketched quickly with charcoal. In it, I was slouched in my chair, leaning into the

conversation, the smallest of grins on my face. I don't remember ever being drawn before. When I got home, I hung it on the wall of my room, right where the sun hit.

Kat was the youngest in our group, and seemed to care the least about all of this. She was always on her phone, fingers constantly flying across the keypad, typing away to someone off across the world. I could tell she never wanted to be here. Her moms were worried about her, and made her come to the meetings every week. The problems we had were so specific I don't think they could find one for just teens. Here she was instead, among people who got excited when they got a new vacuum, or went to sleep at 8pm. Might be over exaggerating but, even I felt like that sometimes. Especially when talking to Charlie. What time did you get up today? Excuse me, 6am?

Val always told me I should adopt her. One time, after a meeting, I was talking about it. We were in her car, the shades pulled down to block the setting sun from blinding us. The remnants of snow lingered on the ground, turning into mushed slush piles along the sidewalks, and she kept having to honk on people who crossed onto the road without looking. In the background, the soft sound of some instrumental jazz played, all brass. I'd been rambling on for who knows how long, talking about oh, it was great that Kat felt so comfortable today, do you think she was excited? My nails screamed at me in protest as I picked at the skin. When I looked at Val, lit in pinks and orange, I found her glancing at me in exasperation, The intense skill in eye to eye communication.

"There's no reason why you couldn't be like a mentor or something. You act the most like her, anyways," she said. "I do? Wait, I act like a 16 year old?" Please no, I couldn't go back to being 16. That would be an ultimate insult. "You know that's not what I meant; don't change

the subject.” If we were next to each other, she would probably shove me. “I just think, if you are so glad to see her be more open, why not help her? You can relate, right?”

“I mean, I guess.” I knew I could relate. Literally a one to one picture, including our preferences for sweatshirts and headphones. I brought a nail up to get a stubborn piece of skin, and the taste of blood filled my mouth.

“What could go wrong?”

“Uh, a lot? Like you already know I can be a bitch.”

“Yeah, but so can she.”

“Val, please-“

“Really, what’s stopping you?” As we stopped, and sat in the glow of the red light, she could actually make eye contact with me, firm next to all my fidgeting and bunched up hands to hide the blood. Fuck, this is how she got me. I know it’s how she got me. I had to tear my gaze away, and look out the window to talk.

“What if I fuck it up, like say something that offends her and she gets super pissed and storms away?”

“Well, then you go and apologize,” she said. I remained silent. The light turned green, and beneath me the car rumbled forward. “You know, things aren’t unfixable. You can mess up and try again.”

“What if I can’t help at all?” It spilled out of me, sudden and loud. The trumpet blared underneath me, a bolstering rumble reaching up, tingling into my bones.

“You don’t know if you don’t try.”

Try. It always came back to try.

I started to talk to Kat, most often over text, late into the night. She kept pulling me into the things she liked, tv shows and movies, even when I had no context. Then, she sent me tiktoks, so I ended up installing the app. Most of them were jokes I didn't fully get, and fashion, the more alt stuff. In return, I sent her animal videos, and cool art that I found, which she teased me about. Who knew you were such a softy? She could get really fucking passionate about things, if you just asked her the right questions, and let her talk. I learned more about Twitch streamers than I'd ever needed to in my life, but it made her happy. Maybe, just maybe, this wouldn't be as hard as I first thought.

I wonder if it would've helped the rest of us, when we were younger. To have someone like a mentor, or even just the group. To see people older than me, some far older, with a full life. Romances, schooling, jobs, ups and downs, joys and sorrows. People to remember you, to make an impact on. Not just a blatant monotony. Maybe I was just trying to do this for myself. Or I was trying to prove something.

It was a shock one day, as I was scrolling through my phone, and looking at the MHS group chat, that I found I had friends. That I had done all the things that my therapist has told me, putting myself out there and communicating, finding common ground. Was she right all along? Though, there was one thing left. I just had to wait to find love. Surprise, it still hadn't happened.

We were outside, laying on the dry grass field that tickled my allergies. Charlie was wearing a particularly nice silk scarf, iridescent in color, which West immediately complimented. Kat was making flower crowns, and handing them out to the rest of us, while Markus Moore was

cutting up some watermelon. Hopefully the bugs wouldn't crawl in with the juice. Val sat next to me, using a sharpie to draw on my hand.

“We talk a lot about love here, right?” I said, keeping my eyes on the lines being drawn.

“We do,” Val agreed.

“But what if-“ I had to swallow in the middle, and retry. “What if that's not something that you want?”

“Then that's fine too,” she said, before holding my hand gently. “Would you like to talk about it?” Like was a strong word. But want to? That worked far better.

When I was back home, back in the years of middle and high school, my nickname was Heartless. It wasn't just one person who started it, but it came in fits and bursts, building alongside my already stellar reputation. In middle school, it was the age of teen romance. Books upon books of paranormal romance, love triangles, doomed love, tragic love. Anything to make the leading lady swoon. Do you know how many plot points revolved around people being heartless? I'm sure there was one book that started it, where there's the dramatic reveal of the bad boy that he was born without a heart, and he is now changed, unable to love. It ended, ultimately, with him being saved- his heart being returned to him. But there was the insult there- heartless. Cruel. Uncaring. It brought it to the forefront, day after day in school. I had pulled away from everyone at this point, no longer an attempt to make friends with the other. So it stuck to me. Heartless, heartless, they would say. I didn't love anything or anyone. Oh, did that stick. Up through middle school, into high school. It didn't help that I remained single.

So, we have the heart. The heart shows love. Plaster the walls with those paper cutouts during Valentine's Day, cradle it in your arms. Then, there I was. I didn't love. I would watch girls gush over guys, the boys do the same, talking about crushes and dates and what they loved

most for appearance. Take a quiz in a candy colored magazine and you'll find your love language. Maybe you'll get a love letter from a secret admirer. Don't you want to know? Don't you want to love? I didn't. How do you understand what you don't have?

I did still care, of course. I had plenty of room for love- just not that love. I cared about my family very deeply. And with those friends I had, I tried to show my care. Maybe, in the night, I wondered what it was like, and slid one hand over my silent chest. Then I told myself that they weren't connected, and went to sleep. If people gossiped about guys, I didn't interject. If someone asked me out, I would reject them. It surprisingly happened more than once, especially in senior year. At prom, when talking with this other girl, I found out there had been a running betting pool to see who would win my love before this dance. One date agreement, that was it, and you got the full pot. No one won, of course. I convinced them to give the money to me.

You know my reinvention? Part of me thought that, once I left home, I would find that missing part of me. I would find the romantic love, the sexual desire that everyone else has. That I wouldn't have to search for songs that are about something different than love, books where romance is the main goal, movies where everyone has to be with someone. A life plan where everyone knows that, one day, you have to find romantic love. Wouldn't it be sad, so lonely, so tragic? Romance is the deepest connection anyone can have! What if, when I left behind 'heartless', I wouldn't wonder, as I walked into each day, if I was still missing things, still wrong? If the shriveled thing in my chest really meant that I couldn't be loving or caring or kind? Of course, that didn't pan out. To me, that didn't prove them right, day to day. But in those anxious hours, the lonely near sleep hours, I wondered. Is this connected? Am I cursed?

They were mad, of course- for me, not towards me. I thought Kat would run all the way back to my hometown and fight the people that remained. Or maybe track them down on the internet, that would make sense. Comfort, support. The agreement that everything that happened was fucked up, that people should've helped me. Otherwise, they didn't treat me differently. Or said that, one day, it would change, you will find someone.

It was almost like it should be more exhausting, letting it all flow out at once. Especially since I've never told anyone, even my parents. Instead, the main emotion I found was relief. Like something that had been stuck onto my bones was scraped off, raw and fresh. Light. We moved on with the meeting in a calm, lazy way, only packing up once the bugs got to be too much. Not with the juice, just the darkness. When I looked down at my hand, Val had covered it in stars.

One Friday night, once the sun had set, I began to get ready for the art show. I was wearing something nicer than usual, new black jeans and a white t-shirt, adding a necklace with a red pendant. My bracelet, same as always. The jacket that West had found for me, and a raincoat thrown over top, just in case. On my way out, I passed by my roommate, the lanky guy named Ed. He looked a bit shocked to see me. Especially since he was drinking straight from his milk carton in front of the fridge. I couldn't stay for long, but I told him there was a scone in the fridge on a plate, if he wanted it. The door slammed shut behind me, as I left.

The gallery was surprisingly crowded. The front part didn't have Charlie's art in it, but did have a refreshment table. Some people, nearing Charlie's age, were sipping glasses of free champagne- only one glass per person, he told us. I recognized some of them from the farmers market. I could see Marcus, a woman tucked by his side. Probably his wife. As I watched, I saw them lean into each other, hands intertwining. West invited all of their friends from their job,

those people who loved art, chatting away. Kat was with her Moms, walking into the gallery space. I could catch up with her later. I had to cut my way through, grabbing onto Val's hand so we didn't get separated. The crush of the crowd pressed down on me, heavy, but I was able to make it through. Just.

Eventually, we made our way to Charlie. He seemed impossibly happy. As I walked over, I gave him a hug, not too tight. Of course, we gave him his gift, in a simple brown gift bag. It wasn't needed, but I wanted to. It took forever to find that goddamn scarf anyways. It was covered in tiny embroidered bees.

When I entered the main gallery, I saw that the walls were covered with sketches. White squares and rectangles sketched over with graphite, or charcoal. On the wall, they somehow looked even more amazing. A bodega storefront, windows plastered with paper, still closed. A pigeon, close to the ground, and missing one foot. A businessman on a park bench. A teen and a child, walking together, hand in hand. A person crouching down, to say hi to a dog they never met before. An old woman sat at the kitchen table, doing a crossword puzzle- his wife, I remember. There were a lot of her, but not posed. Always in day to day moments, napping, cooking, standing and looking out at the birds. Gazing at the viewer, lovingly.

She wasn't the only repeat subject. As I turned, I could see more and more of our group.. The Misplaced Hearts Society. All of them were drawn during the meetings, some so quick they were only a few lines. Single figures sitting, faces, standing at the water fountain, pairs and trios, sadness and joy and anger. Even though he asked our permission beforehand, it still felt strange to see myself up there, so beautifully drawn.

Among everything else, taking center stage, was a large painting. It took up a good chunk of the back wall, the only thing not drawn with pencil or charcoal, the only thing that had any

color in it. The style was very different from everything else. A willingness to simplify, not have the exact face, expression or likeness. Bold colors and lines, paint so thick in some spots I wanted to touch it.

A simple room was painted. There was a green floor that looked almost like grass, a beige roof and walls. In a circle, there were six people, sitting in a circle. Three on one side, three on the other. I could tell who everyone was, no matter the vagueness of the faces. There was the slouched posture of Kat, almost morphing the chair. There was Markus Moore, sitting among us, built of sunshine yellow swatches, and there was West, all suave smooth lines. Val, who was talking animatedly with Charlie, was colored deep purple and pinks. Next to her, I saw myself. Dark colors, leaning forward into the conversation, a smile on my face. Happy. In the mash of people, of colors, we all almost seemed like one.

“Do you like it?” Val asked, standing next to me.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

This was the only painting that had an official title. *I have no heart, but I am not heartless.*