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The Cliff

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The Cliff

A Novella

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

by

Beatrice Ann Wedd

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	1
Chapter II.....	15
Chapter III.....	26
Chapter IV: Nicholas.....	30
Chapter V.....	44
Chapter VI: Nicholas.....	54
Chapter VII.....	63

I.

In the foremost days of December, I stopped my tour at the edge of a cliff on the coast of the Irish Sea.

The cliff, which might better be described as a hill, hugged rocks of such a variety of color that I daren't describe them to you, though I did to a sketchbook. And the tour, to which I referred, was really a long walk with a dog. As I would later discover, things are not always as they first appear.

Aunt Abigail, with whom I was staying during my winter holiday, had prescribed the walk with force. Force was consistent with Abigail's character. I considered her to be, by nature, violent. Abigail scrubbed her cheeks every day. She told me that she did so to keep clean, but I suspected a different reason. A man named Mr. Hannigan, shaped like a pinecone and balding, came to the cottage to see Abigail often and usually unannounced. I discovered the correlation between the cheeks and Mr. Hannigan within my first week on holiday.

The dog began to bark and I squinted my eyes, noticing a stranger sitting near the edge of the cliff.

He looked smart, even from where I stood several yards away in the tall, dead grass.

He wore a crisp Etonian jacket and was leaning backward, looking wistfully out at the sea.

My spirits had been low since an argument with my aunt. To revive them through conversation seemed possible, and so I approached him.

“Good afternoon,” I said, still standing a few yards from him.

He looked up, startled, and I congratulated myself on my stealth. Leaning back further, he blinked. I noticed details about his appearance. I did this always and with everything before me. Most prominent: a flash of confusion slithering across his dark, low-set eyebrows; eyes that were slanted slightly; four crumbs falling from his collar; a deep but short scar on his dimpled chin; and the shortness of an index fingernail. I felt an instant attraction to the structure and expression on his face—not because he was as handsome as some I had imagined, but because he looked like he could teach me something.

“I’m a poet,” he said, by way of an introduction.

“You are a poet. And is that why you sit here; are you looking for something to describe? Poets are so good at that.”

“No, I am not.” The blunt edge of his reply surprised me for I thought the coast more splendid than any in Europe. This I told him, in what some may have called a didactic tone.

“Forgive me. I’m from America, which is where I get my inspiration. For Christmas, I’m staying with friends.” He told me this in a quickening tone; the implication being that he would like to leave. With eyes showing more interest in the scenery around me than in me myself, I grew offended by his indifference.

“What’s your name?” I asked. I hoped he would ask me mine as well so that it might prove my substance.

He said nothing.

“My name is Nora Donnelly.” I curtsied while gathering up the dark brown fabric of my skirts. “I study literature at Oxford, though I’m currently staying with my aunt. I’m also on holiday.”

“Hello Nora, I—.” He stood and a light grey notebook fell from his lap, settling open in the tall grass. I noticed its proximity to the edge of the cliff and wondered how much he would mind if it fell. Would he be angry? Was he a Mr. Rochester? I had another, stranger thought. What if he had described the grass before crushing it—to what literary term might Professor Crest ascribe that? Thinking of my old professor, my head suddenly felt foggy. The stranger ran the hand with the short fingernail through his hair. “Why are you—,” but I stopped listening. I hated questions like that one. I felt disappointed in myself for the collapse of our conversation.

“I’m leaving,” I said and turned with an abrupt jerk. I walked in long strides back to the cottage. The dog struggled to keep up.

Three days later and six miles from my aunt's cottage, a body washed up on the coast.

I found the body while on a midday walk—two a day had been Aunt Abigail’s prescription. Walking with the dog, I beat the grass mercilessly with a stick and thought of the poet perched on that cliff.

It was an exciting thing to have transpired—here of all places, on the outskirts of Ballyvoy—and especially since nothing but tediousness ever did pass in these parts.

At first, I thought the body was just another pile of algae. I wondered if I could write about it: how it had washed up from hidden places in the ocean, or how a mermaid had used it as a crown before sending it out to sea. I narrowed my eyes, placing a hand above them to block out the sun.

I stared at the form for a few moments. It was entirely black which made it difficult to anthropomorphize. Its humanness, in fact, revealed itself only through a small hand which stuck out from a sleeve and which I could see, from the cliff's edge, was drooping on a rock. The idea of it being human pressed into my mind and I did shriek, though I later told my aunt that I did not.

The dog, hearing whatever noise I had emitted, ran to fetch Abigail at such a speed as to become an energetic blur of slobber and coppery fur.

And so, after a moment of contemplation, I made the decision, for I worried that the ocean would take her if I did not.

Hitching my skirts, I began the descent and placed my feet on rocks I soon felt sure would slip. Every shift reminded me of the slope's unforgiving angle. I couldn't help but picture my own body at the bottom, draped over that rock like dulse.

I knew that I should have waited for my aunt to come but I wanted to be the one to help. Walking through Ballyvoy, the villagers would gather around

me and pat me on the back. “That was so very brave of you, Nora. You saved her.”

I reached the body after ten or so minutes.

Unsure whether it was dead or not quite, I pressed my fingers against the neck. I felt nothing to suggest life. The skin was as cold and damp as the sponge perched on the edge of Abigail’s kitchen sink. The body was stiff. Its skin was translucent. Greenish, blackish markings pocked its surface. I looked at her as one looks at a dead deer or other such animals. I felt exceptionally removed, observant, and calm.

I picked her up without disgust and carried her up the landslide. Being so close to those rocks that I had sketched earlier, and being now in the sun, I noticed that they were mostly red and grey. I wondered why. Was it an effect of the light?

The weight of the girl on my back was difficult. She was stiff and heavy. I slipped and had to use one hand to pull myself forward. After a few steps, I decided to drag her up.

There were many thoughts in my head as I did this, but mostly I was surprised at myself. I congratulated the speed at which I was able to understand that she was dead. I remembered Jane Eyre and the death of her schoolmate, Helen. She took very long to recover. What a sad girl, I thought; I ought to write her.

I smiled and reached for another rock. I was dragging her up the hill with one arm and hitching my long skirts up with the other.

Standing at the top of the cliff was the poet. With his arms crossed, he looked at where my head came over the boulder as if he knew that it would. He stiffened when he noticed what I was struggling to drag. He offered me his hand. A disturbed expression crossed his face before being replaced by a flippant one.

“Who’s your friend?” he asked as we placed her on the ground. He was eyeing the body with an eyebrow raised, while probably repressing whatever disgust he may have felt.

I ignored him because I found his humor inappropriate. I checked her neck once more in the hope of finding some pattering of life.

“Nora, who is this?” He sounded more serious now.

“I found her down there.” For a moment, with my fingers still pressed against the body, I was reminded of a play that I had seen with my mother called *The Lady from the Sea*. I had always been closer to my mother than my father or my uptight, older sister, Hannah. Every Sunday, my mother and I would walk to the only theater in Dundalk to see a play. Now, as I crouched at the cliff’s edge with the frothy sea laid out below, I remembered the Norwegian play about a young woman who began to lose her mind after the death of a family member. I remembered how her love for the sea had inspired my mother and me to take a trip up North, to Ballycastle.

“She was just lying down by the shore,” I muttered. “I think she must be dead —”

“I think so too.” Nicholas nodded grimly. “You found her just now?” He looked down the landslide I had climbed up.

I looked past it at the sun setting over the ocean. I noticed a trail that spread from the sun to the spot where I had found the body.

“I wonder where my aunt is. She should be here by now—”

He looked back through the path of waist-high grass through which I had walked. If we traveled for five minutes we would come to a fork: left towards Ballycastle and right towards the cottage.

“We’ll have to fetch the police,” he said, “This girl is dead, Nora, and you found her.” He was treating me as if I had not saved the girl myself. I did not like this. I felt myself becoming paranoid. Could he tell that I wanted the praise?

“Go home,” I ordered, struggling to remain calm. “I’ll take her back to my house—before I fetch the police.” My eyes grasped at the tall grass’ glistening blades. Could I hide her in the grass if he went to the police? Where would I hide, though? The sea seemed like the only option. I could jump toward that rock I had seen.

He paused for a moment. Following my eyes, but not my train of thought. “I’ll carry her,” he said. “Just lead the way.”

He dropped her several times before we reached the fork. “How in God’s name did you carry this? You’re a half-foot smaller than I am!” It was the third time she had fallen. This time her neck bent at an odd angle as it

knocked against a log. We looked down at her for an instant, listening to the crack in her bones.

“Be careful,” I admonished. “And do try not to curse in my presence.”

“Why don’t you walk ahead and clear a path?” His feathers had been ruffled. I smiled and decided not to clear a path but to continue on at his side.

“It’s very sunny today.” I created an umbrella with my hand. “Where in America are you from? You never said.”

He grunted as the dead girl slid stiffly down his back. Her hand brushed against his crotch. He grimaced. “Y’know, small talk is difficult when you’re carrying a dead body.” He cleared his throat, “I’m from Charleston, South Carolina. That’s why I have such fine manners.”

After a moment something occurred to me. “Why do we tell people where we are from? That is to say, what if I followed you back to America...” He looked down at me, perplexed. I realized what he must think. I nevertheless liked the feeling. “Maybe that was how this girl died...maybe she just told the wrong person—”

“Charleston is a big city,” he cut me off. “How much further ‘till the cottage?”

“What’s your name, first, before I tell you?” I looked up at him and let my eyelashes fall slowly—conscious that batting eyelashes had worked very well for Marianne Dashwood—I tried to ignore the face of the dead girl pointed at me.

“I’m Nicholas.”

“Nicholas Nickleby!” I laughed.

“Who? Oh, a Dickens character.” His bewilderment deepened, turning dark for a moment as he stared ahead.

Not knowing how to reply to the shift in his mood, ten minutes passed in silence before we reached the clearing where my aunt's cottage stood.

When we arrived, she rushed out of the blue door, her tweed jacket covering only one shoulder. “The police are on their way,” she yelled as she ran across the lawn. “Mickey seemed agitated. I thought it must be you, dear Nora!”

Nicholas set the body down on the lawn. “Boy, she’s fast for an old lady,” he squinted as she pummeled closer and closer, moving in zigzags like a drunken donkey. The dog nipped at her ankles as she ran.

“You should see her when her man shows up. Even more like a bee’s bit her ass.” Nicholas laughed in surprise but stopped suddenly. “It wouldn’t surprise me if you were the same way--with your man.”

And all of a sudden, his eyes were particularly blue. I was about to assure him that there was no such person, but my aunt reached us before I could.

“Oh, good god no—!” She wailed and threw herself across the dead girl’s chest. “The lord giveth and he taketh away, ain’t that the truth! And, oh Nora!” Taking my face in her hands, she cried out, “Poor soul, so fragile herself!” There was a small scar just beneath her nose, probably from vigorously kissing Mr. Hannigan’s beard.

I smiled with half my mouth and wished that she would let go of me before Nicholas said something. Before he had a chance to, she turned towards him. He was now the only one left upon which to pounce. “You’re Cassidy’s nephew, aren’t you? Well, bless my soul, I’ve seen you in pictures—you know, you’re more handsome standing right there! Thanks for the help. The name’s Abby. Goodness, come inside. Leave the girl.”

“Will the dog...chew her?”

“Mickey’s a good boy. Don’t worry now, goodness, you’ve done enough worrying by now, I’m sure of it.”

She turned and briskly walked away. Once she was out of earshot, a grinning Nicholas looked down at me and said, “Goodness.”

Laughing, we followed her into the cottage.

There wasn’t much to worry about once we were inside, sitting at the table sneaking glances at each other and drinking Earl Grey. Besides, my aunt never stopped talking long enough to give us a turn at worrying.

My aunt was a large woman. She had long red hair, turning grey only at the roots. She kept it braided most of the time, in a crown like her mother had, and her sister had, and my mother also.

The police arrived just ten minutes after we did. They talked to me and then to Abigail. They asked me questions about why I had moved the body and became less suspicious when I told them I’d worried the sea would drag her away. They were polite, mustached, and calm. An hour passed and two sergeants carried the girl away on a stretcher shaking their heads.

“I’m sure it’s another prostitute,” said the Chief, “washed up from Dublin. You know how it is with those girls; nobody misses ‘em except right after the act. Er, so to speak, ma’am—,” he stuttered when he noticed my aunt’s blanched face, but she just shooed him away.

It began to rain when the police left, and so Nicholas agreed to stay the night.

He slept in our living room on the big brown sofa with Mickey.

Later that same night I awoke suddenly and with a jerk.

Sitting upright, I exhaled into my long tangled hair, which lay about my face in a sweaty nest. I had been dreaming an awful dream about the girl whom I had found—except, strangely, it was as if I had not only found her but that I also was her. Although an odd dream, it was familiar as well: In my mind, I stood once more at the edge of the cliff. The wind was fierce, blowing salty air all around, and it pushed my skirts inwards so that they rippled against my knees. In the distance, I could hear the call of the seabirds. I felt at peace for a moment. That tranquility broke as an old man crept up behind me and, wrapping his withered hands around my waist, rasped into my ear, “Bright Star, would I were steadfast as thou.” Then he pushed me down the cliff. I rolled slowly over greying bodies as I fell, but not just any bodies; these were my friends: Jane Eyre was there, with glassy eyes and blood dripping from the crown of her head. She smiled slowly and pushed me over Bathsheba Everdene. Nicholas stood solemnly at the bottom while leaning over the dead prostitute. As my body stopped rolling I lay next to her, Nicholas and I looked

up at Professor Crest, at his fading voice, which trembled as it went on reciting the poem.

Perhaps a sip of water would help.

But I only reached the top of the stairs before I stopped, because from there I could see into the dining room where Nicholas and my aunt were sitting. They seemed to be arguing about something. It was late and the light in the room was dim—coming only from a candle in the middle of the table—but I had no need to see them, if only to hear what they were saying.

“You don’t understand,” Nicholas exclaimed, “that doesn’t worry me. I could talk her out of it—“

“You’re too simple, boy! Or perhaps too young.” My aunt’s whisper was shrill. “It isn’t of any use for she won’t listen! Have you not noticed? How does she dress? She lives in another world—as if she’s a character from one of those books she’s always studying.”

Nicholas leaned back in his chair. He started to drag a hand through his hair in frustration.

I thought they might be talking about me, but how could they, because what did they mean by “another world”? The phrase was strange and made me pause for a moment. I had often thought about that same idea. It seemed to me that everybody’s world was a different one from the next. As if we walk around in separateness, moving in and out of each other’s spheres but carrying our own reality along with us. I clung onto the banister and tilted an ear towards them. I was grateful to be sitting out of view.

“You can’t stop us from seeing each other if that’s what she wants.”

“I could and I will. Look, Nicholas, I don’t mean to be rude. I know she’s a very pretty girl. We’ve had days like this, of course, young men coming by trying to help her. They think that they can do something for her, but she has to do it herself.”

He paused, considering what she had said. Perhaps he was also considering giving in. He rubbed his hands together and, after a long moment, spoke. “You say she thinks she’s in another world? What have you done to bring her into this one?”

“I think it’s time that you left, Nicholas.” My aunt stood up.

He made few protestations before giving in. “Very well.” He said.

I felt my heart begin to patter. Would he give up so quickly? The others generally take longer. “One question, though, before I go.” I pressed my ear against the banister so hard that it hurt. “How long has she been like this? Did something happen to make her act this way?”

“That’s two.” I could see my aunt's lips scrunching up in my mind. She let out a long sigh and spoke, “She had this professor, you see. She trusted him and he took advantage of it. He—” Her voice lowered so that I could not hear. I thought of creeping down a few more stairs but feared their reaction should they see me. Her voice rose again, “There, listen to me. Will you go now, before she wakes up?”

Nicholas’ face was out of view, having now almost reached the front door.

I could see him putting on his jacket. “Thank you for your hospitality, ma’am. I’ll go.”

“You’re a nice boy, Nicholas. I didn’t want to be so harsh, but—”

“I understand. Goodnight.”

Forgetting the water, I let him leave and, as I laid down in bed later that night, I wondered whom they had been talking of. My grandmother with her share of troubles—perhaps her?

I blew out the candle and fell asleep, to a night less haunted by ghosts from the past.

II.

There was a bright light the morning after it happened; searingly bright. I remember someone saying that it had happened. I don't remember it happening. Frustratingly, nobody would tell me what it was, though I asked, so what "it" was is nothing, at least according to my memory, and what else is there?

My father was in the room, uselessly. He did nothing but fan the confusion with gestures that were unappreciated. Eventually, the fire caught, and it blew up into a fiery moment as I whispered, "Leave me be."

It was late spring and the weather was bleak in the rainy way.

For two years now the question sat behind my eyes like a termite, burrowing in and out, but in fragments or flashes that mean nothing to me.

I sit at this white desk, tracing my fingers along the lines where it has aged and I wonder how I could not know something. How could it happen but not so importantly that my mind did not hold on to it? Or was it too important?

Before I could write an answer, I heard my aunt call me. I stood up. Walking through the hallway, I passed the door on my left with a brown knot in its center. This was the door through which I was not permitted.

In the kitchen, Abigail took an apple pie from the oven. "Have a seat." she gestured to the table. "I made you a bite, dear, and then I have a question."

The room was dim, nearly like a cave with its round shape and one window. Every wall was covered, as was the case with most of the house, with portraits from her own past or her family's (that is, our family's), or sketches of the area.

“Now,” she said as she lifted a blanket, displaced her yawning gray cat, and sat. “What is it that you would like to do with yourself, while you're here in Torr Head?”

The question, like so many others, bothered me. I felt my mind begin to race at the idea of coming up with an answer that would satisfy her. Her eyes were keen and sharp and some reddish curls had come undone from their braid. She leaned forward on pudgy elbows and I observed the small creases in her dress as they lengthened with the movement: like shadows, or nearly.

I let the wind drive through the window and upset my hair. And I took in a deep breath of it. “I would like to leave,” I said. “My thoughts have turned and I need the change.”

I stood there feeling I should ready myself for an argument.

As I predicted, her cheeks flushed and she turned to busy herself by cleaning flour and bits of pie crust off the counter. “You would, would you? Well that is just wonderful. After all I've done I receive nothing—no gratitude? Your sister was right, Nora. I should never have taken you in.”

I had a hard time hearing her over the clash of dishes and the scrubbing of the counter—perhaps this was intentional.

She turned and, at least for a fleeting moment, seemed the spitting image of my mother. “I wish I knew how to help you—.” She muttered the words and turned back to the counter. Her eyebrows creased in concern. “Never mind—forget I said that.”

Feeling overwhelmed, I left and returned to the white desk that age had creased and cracked.

In the morning, my aunt apologized for her outburst. She told me that she loved me and that this was why she had been upset.

“Of course, Abigail. I understand.”

But of course I did not, for how could I? And so I laid in bed that night until very early the following morning. I felt somewhat afraid of my own dreams, yet also of having upset my aunt who, if I am being truthful, intimidated me. She cared for me in a very attentive manner at least. It stung to realize that I might have hurt her, yet I believe that this is because I did not yet trust her.

Throughout the night I tossed around in the bed, struggling to become comfortable, as well as with what I would have to say to Abigail. There were so many words from which to choose and even more ways to react.

I rolled over onto my side and noticed a beautiful thing: A sliver of our sunrise as it slowly, very slowly indeed, seemed to tiptoe across the brushed grey floorboard. I inhaled the smells of the night wafting through that crack in the windowpane. The evenings were becoming warmer, I observed, with a feeling of disinterest.

I imagined that, quite soon, my aunt would be here. She would flurry about the room like a trapped bird, preparing it for the summer months. Really, there is not much to prepare. The room is remarkably bare for my having been here nearly sixteen months. This I said aloud to see how it sounded. But the pitter patter of a mouse's paw was all that replied. And the howl of the wind, I suppose, although that did nothing to comfort me and so I did not focus on it.

And then I felt the loneliness settle into my chest, once again, as it had frequently in the months since Nicholas had left me in this place.

I felt a tear glide down my cheek as I remembered my family, and my friends Jane, Bathsheba, and Marianne, and of course my Nicholas--but then again he had never really become mine. More tears fell and they joined the first and formed a small rivulet so that the two raised freckles on my cheek felt like boulders. Heaviness settled in. The pain in my chest grew stronger as I looked around at the bleak and empty room.

Not willing to bear it any longer I drew back the duvet and rushed to the desk: eager to escape the pangs of this clenching and wringing and grinding within me.

I wrote down these thoughts on the parchment that my aunt had supplied, and it helped for a moment, to situate myself if nothing else. But as I dipped my quill into the inkwell over and over, it toppled down and spilled. I became even more frustrated and began to pull at my hair.

Will you look at this mess you've made?

I abruptly stopped crying and withdrew the hand from my neck as I heard her voice. Menacing quietude.

I shivered and felt my hair and was shocked to observe that it was matted and unclean. My thoughts turned towards Aunt Abigail and my brows furrowed. She was charged with the task of tending to my appearance. I felt the sting of loneliness churn inside my chest, felt it turn hot as I became angry.

I ought to march down this hallway and rub my filthy hair all over her, I thought, standing abruptly. Would she still love me after that? I grabbed my quill with only one thought: I would pierce her somehow. I would pierce her with her own quill.

My hair now bothered me excessively. It had come undone from a bun during the torments of my evening and I felt the oily strands as they brushed against my cheeks. I screamed aloud as I stabbed the quill into my thigh. My only thought: it would feel better than the oiliness of my hair or the hatred towards my aunt. Better not to harm her, I thought, not yet anyway. I tried desperately to calm myself by pacing the length of the room over and again. "Abnormal." The word seemed to have cauterized the backs of my cornea. I abruptly stopped pacing and collapsed onto the floor in front of the fireplace.

My aunt found me there in the morning and she let out a great yell. Needless to say it woke me. Mickey raced up the stairs and began sniffing around my face.

I noticed a small puddle of blood that had formed around the quill, which was neatly stabbed through my nightgown and into the pale flesh of my lower thigh.

The event was positive in at least one way: Abigail bathed me at last, which she really should have done many days prior. She was forced to because I might have caught an infection.

And yet her hands on my back, rubbing concentrically inwards and outwards, disturbed me. And the feeling of her wrinkled palms themselves as they slipped below the arch of my back sent gooseflesh spiraling up my arms.

I leaped up in the bath and screamed, “How dare you!”

Water ran down the length of my body, trickling over my breasts and dripping heavily from the bottom of my still-no-less-tangled hair. The look of horror on her face only increased the burning inside my chest. I stepped out of the tub and stormed from the room.

She left me alone for several days following what she described as, “Pure and utter absurdity!” and we only interacted when she handed me trays of food.

I would leave the room to use the bathroom—and only then.

One such time, I passed the door with the knot in its center and I heard a voice. Her voice. Confused, I stopped and pressed my ear to the door in order to listen.

“She loses her grip more every day, Theodore—yes, as you predicted. I care for the girl and—why yes, I know I shouldn’t. You don’t need to remind me.

What I need is a solution. Before it's too late. Anything or anyone really." Here she paused for a moment before saying—as if she were having a conversation, which I found incredibly odd— "You aren't listening. She harmed herself several days ago. Did you read the report I sent?" The report? I thought. She paused again. "Well, perhaps you should...before making suggestions on how I—." I heard her stand suddenly and, worrying she would come to the door, I hurried back into my bedroom.

Once inside, I leaned against the door to stop my heart from pattering. Who could she be speaking with? I thought. Who could she be speaking with here in Torr Head in nearly the exact middle of nowhere?

The event troubled me over the next few days. A voice in my head began arguing with another and their disputes became ugly. I could not understand why my aunt kept me from that room. I started to believe that she must be insane for I could come up with no better alternative.

She may harm us, Nora...but we could do it first.

She's always watching.

Tonight, at midnight. While she sleeps, crack open the window and climb down the oak.

The final solution felt the safest, though it gave me chills to hear it spoken in an eager and girlish voice.

I could hear my heart pound throughout the evening.

At five, Abigail knocked on my door carrying a tray of dinner—mashed potatoes, lamb, and green beans. Prompt, as expected. I opened the door but

was sure to avert my eyes. Hers would have felt painful. Large brown orbs, concern dripping and spilling over like primordial ooze. I felt the guilt for only a moment before nodding, taking the tray from her, and closing the door.

I ate the food this time.

We cannot go hungry, Nora. Not with so much at stake!

This voice was harsh and urgent, like the evening wind that came in through the window, and yet I stood there for a moment and thought.

Was this the right choice?

The thought disappeared as quickly as it had come.

I hitched my skirts up, grabbed a cloth sack filled with a kitchen knife I had hidden in the walls several days ago, some bread I had saved, and a map of the area and, carefully, I climbed out of the window—from the cottage in which I had lived in for nearly a year now, by my estimate, though I'd meant to only stay for Christmas.

Climbing down the oak tree, making sure not to slips on a dewy branch, I thought again of the dead girl I had found at the bottom of the cliff several months ago. I wondered for a moment where Nicholas would have gone after my aunt had asked him to leave. I could try to find him now, I thought.

I paused.

Leaning against the trunk of the tree I saw myself running through a vast meadow, several miles from Abigail's cottage. It was sunny and warm and Nicholas stood at the other side. He took his hat off when he saw me and his

face split warmly. With outstretched arms; I ran into his embrace and felt, if only for a moment, at peace.

Through the kitchen window I could see my aunt preparing a pot roast for the next day. She bustled about, not knowing I was sitting just feet away from her in a tree. I felt the pangs of guilt return.

You cannot trust her, Nora. Go now--while you still can!

Jumping the rest of the way down, I landed on my feet. Mickey, whose droopy ears never missed a thing, barked from inside the house and fearing discovery I ran. With no time to consult the map, I ran in the direction of the forest.

I kept going until I could no longer hear Mickey barking nor my aunt calling for him to be quiet. I sprinted until the guilt had dissipated or at least somewhat.

I had never planned to make it past my aunt's property and so I did not know where to go once I had.

I knew the area quite well from having walked around it, but it looked different in the dark, without Abigail nearby nor Mickey to guide me. Furthermore, with my heart pounding so loud that I could scarcely hear my own thoughts, I forgot which path led where.

Later that same night, perhaps around midnight, it began to rain.

At this point I was somewhere in the middle of the forest—a large and densely populated area, which surrounded the entire acreage behind Abigail's

cottage. It was completely dark by then, for the rain had blocked out the stars and the moon; I began to worry that I had made the wrong choice.

I thought of the map that I had packed. If I pulled it out in the rain it would be sodden.

“You want a map of the area, isn’t that so, Nora?” My aunt asked while walking through the open doorway and into my bedroom—this during the time when I had been allowed to leave the cottage; the earliest weeks of my stay—“This, here, was the only one I could find. I hope it’ll do.” She brought it over to the desk, where I read a book on edible plants. I thanked her as she left. The map in hands, I traced a finger along the page; marking carriage paths and county lines. The pages had been crisp and taut. I had felt eager to explore the new land.

Now I stood below the trees and storm clouds, and the eagerness dissipated. What a contrast! The rain beat down upon the map turning it flaccid and ineffectual. The lines and paths merged together as the page folded in on itself. I felt a sag of defeat and folded in on myself.

What an effort it takes to be alive in a world that is set on seeing you fail.

Folding the map and placing it back into my rucksack, I turned my attention towards finding a place to sleep.

I walked for what felt like miles—although, truthfully, it could have been no more than one. I lost my true north and my sense of time. I began to wonder whether I was walking in circles.

Worse than anything were the curses which they threw against me.

Leaving at night, in the dark and cold. You could stumble off the cliffs or meet a wolf.

What were you thinking? Or were you at all?

Everything felt sodden and inconvenient as if God had created the night sky only to slow me down. My skirts, which were now choked with mud and rainfall, were far too long, and so I tripped over them. But most inconvenient of all were these tears! Each one pulled my spirit further down until I could do nothing but lean against the budding trees.

What a blank life.

Nothing for you, Nora, not anymore.

I felt the absence of my friends. Remembered Jane's story of tearing through the moors to escape one solitary life for another life even more so. "Who in the world cares for you?" she had asked herself.

And now who in the world cares for me?

It was no more than a few hours later when I found an abandoned shed. Although it was decrepit, I curled up inside and pulled my sodden skirts around myself for something like warmth.

The sun was beginning to rise when I closed my eyes and I fell—almost immediately—to sleep.

III.

As is often the case my spirits brightened with the sun. When I awoke the sun was high in the sky and the day was as beautiful as it was cold. A crisp wind blew through the cracks in the shed wafting a sweetly rotten odour.

Lifting myself from the floor I rolled my shoulders, trying gingerly to relieve the aches.

The shed was empty and only as long as my body, although probably twice as wide, so I left feeling thankful that it had not come down on me during the night.

The early bright mapped the area well and I was able to triangulate myself as being somewhere a couple of miles within Ballypatrick Forest.

I'll walk for a while, I thought, and see what I come across.

The forest was very pretty in the daytime. The rain had brought out a number of lovely smells, as it does, and every boulder that I passed seemed to glisten with purity. The creeks were emboldened to course all the stronger; the birds, happily cleansed, sang out their melodies.

Like the birds I felt a sense of rebirth. Of baptism. As if the torment of the past few weeks had been washed away in one evening. I was free of my aunt and, with her, of my obligations. Free, also, of my parents. How very lucky I am to be free of it all.

I felt a surge in my chest. If I were the map I would have become taut. I ran forward for a while, like a hungry animal. I am a map. I sang out. I will lead myself to a better life!

While my joy remained I let it lead the way.

The sun dried my skirts and hair; it seemed to absorb the sorrow in my heart. For a while I was crying out to the sun, lifting my hair up and away from my waist and proclaiming, “Look, look at these rays of my own!” In a meadow—a mile from the shed—I danced about in a circle like a madwoman while dodging rocks and moss until I finally became tired.

I was unaware—then, at least—that a pair of curious eyes were watching me.

And it would be several days before I became aware of those eyes and, more importantly, to whom they belonged.

In a small clearing several paces from the meadow I found a boulder to sit upon.

I soon felt a prickling sensation pattering down the back of my neck and felt it grow more persistent with every gust of wind: a sinking feeling in my gut and the cool wetness of my skirts: the wonder that causes my brows to wrinkle. I felt it all.

If only there were someone around—someone you could ask to help you.

It’s a sorry sight: you alone again.

Do you have friends, Nora? Do you love anyone?

My spirit rebelled against this inquiry, choosing to react with injurious feeling. Yet truthfully I do not remember friends but rather laughing in a small, grey room. (And the warm feeling that accompanies being seen and loved.) I do not remember what things looked like. In truth, I do not remember anything from before the age of eighteen besides colors, shadows, strange mists of understanding and emotion. In my mind, the entirety of my memories existed as a sort of grey shadow, with only sporadic bursts of warmth.

Is everyone like this? I wondered aloud. Am I abnormal?

I sat on that rock for a while lost in my own thoughts. I sat until a need nagged at me. It suddenly felt acute and desperate, calling out and asking that I formulate some sort of a plan. I was aware that the present circumstances would not do for very long. Not for a young woman, at least.

I could not go on sleeping in decrepit sheds and nibbling at stolen bread.

While I sat lost in thought, the rain continued to drip from the jagged leaves. The Dunnock and Blackcap, the Starling, and what I guessed to be a Siskin bird, all chirruped and serenaded one another. I perched on that rock for so long that the clean smell of the wood became somewhat sweet as the sun rose up higher and the day became warm.

Seductive smells from a raspberry bush skated toward me and buffeted my senses only to recoil seconds later—to fly on to their next lover. I closed my eyes and could see the tart pink color of the smell: how sharp and lovely and so disgustingly sweet when rotten.

My heart pattered. Clenching my thighs together, the thought of Nicholas came to me as the raspberry odours departed. I wondered what he was doing; where on Earth he was while he was not here beside me.

And all the while the feeling of being watched grew.

IV: Nicholas

In the months following a smooth liftoff from the Dublin runway, I found myself thinking of Nora more often than I would've liked.

It isn't "creepy," like Jared says, but a sort of contemplation which, for the purpose of my career, should have been indifferent.

This obsession with her mind—with all the ways in which it either served or obstructed her—is irritating.

While I walk through Valhalla, New York; or separate file after file; even watch TV, she wanders through my thoughts, as stubborn a spectral trace as she is a person. I have the feeling that I could extract her if I wanted to, but I'm not sure that I do.

She is, in many ways, dreamlike.

"She's the subject of your research, Nick," Jared reminds me one evening. "But you don't always talk about her that way. I mean, I think if you heard yourself talk about her sometimes, you'd get it. It's like she's something else to you, like a girlfriend or a fantasy or something." Jared wears a sideways grin whenever he has to deal anyone a blow. He knows that I'm sensitive for a guy; he forgives me for it. "It's not your fault you're such a romantic," he let me know with a nudge on the shoulder. "You just know too much. It must be rough." Sensing an invitation to talk about what I knew, I brought up the project. As soon as I did, Jared turned his attention back to the television and

muttered, “Yeah, I can’t imagine.” Jared didn’t like to imagine and, because of this, we never became close.

Generally, I tried to avoid psychoanalyzing my friends. It’s a difficult undertaking because, when you’ve made it your career, it becomes second nature. I told myself it didn’t matter what I thought because Jared would never know my characterization of him. I would never tell him because I lived with him. Him and another friend from South Carolina named Lucas, in a dingy apartment that costs us each five hundred a month. In close quarters especially, having an opinion on the state of your roommates’ mental health was unwise.

The apartment’s gray walls had a large brown stain in one corner of the ceiling from water damage. It was unfurnished besides a television, couch, plastic table and chair-set we’d bought at WalMart, and a framed photo of Marilyn Monroe that Lucas had brought with him. “Depressing” was the word that Lucas’ girlfriend, Shelly, had used. Depressing. I held my tongue when I heard it. Pretending those exaggerations didn’t bother me had begun to feel like a chore. Just like those valley girls we remember from High School, who complain they’re “freezing” in forty-degree weather or “starving” because they’ve skipped lunch, I took the word “depressing” with a large grain of salt.

“I’ve gotta say, man, I appreciate the advice but I think you’ve misunderstood this whole situation between Nora and me.” It was Friday and Jared and I were relaxing on the couch, talking about our days--each too drained from work to do anything more. A half-eaten box of pizza sat on the

table, alongside several finished cans of Budweiser. As I said the words, a television ad about a spray cleaner violently proclaimed, “This. Will. Change. Your. Life.”

Jared thought about what I’d said. “I hear you, but like I said I don’t think I misunderstood anything. You know how I feel about the situation, man. It’s been five months so I don’t get why you still talk about her.” He avoided eye contact. Jared was a man’s man: so easily characterized that he often teetered on a pop psychology cliché. He liked football, beer, hot girls. He disliked emotion. “I guess I’m just kind of bummed about how you’ve been acting.” He cracked another Budweiser and squinted at the television which had, by then, returned to a heavily made-up blonde going over the latest football play.

I sighed and leaned back into the sofa. Sometimes I fantasized about having a bunch of nice female friends to sit around and talk with, instead of just Jared and Lucas. I liked that sound they made when you talked about how you felt: kind of a mix between, “Aw” and “Yeah.”

Getting up to grab some water, I passed Lucas’ door. On the weekends, he and his girlfriend spent most of their time alone in his room. Once, Jared had asked how they could spend so much time alone and not get sick of each other. His reply: “You’d know if you’d ever had sex.” Laughing to himself, Lucas strut back into his room with the drink Shelly had made him fetch. Jared and I raised our eyebrows at each other as if to say, “He must be insecure about having to fetch whatever his girlfriend wants and, therefore,

transferring his feeling of emasculation onto the ascribed, but ultimately inaccurate, concept that you've never had sex." Or that's what I got.

I leaned against the counter and drank my water. From the couch, with his eyes still glued to the game, Jared asked, "Do you think Shelly's right about this place, man? It is kinda depressing, isn't it?"

"What do you recommend? Do you want to do a Pinterest DIY project with me?"

He laughed and took a long drink from his beer. "Whatever man, fuck off."

My evenings had variety—I think I would've gone nuts if they didn't—but my mornings were pretty much the same. For awhile, I liked the structure and rhythm. It seemed to make things easier and gave me less time to obsess over Nora.

At seven o'clock I rolled over off of my twin mattress. It was on the floor, in the right-hand corner underneath a window. To the left of my futon were a stack of textbooks from school which I'd foolishly bought, rather than rented. On top of them was my prescription for Zoloft, along with a chrome lamp, several books on behavioral psychology, and an alarm clock, which I slammed my hand down on after the third buzz.

Besides the bed, there was a wide bookshelf that took up the wall facing it, a desk with a stressful amount of papers and envelopes scattered on it, and a closet to the left of me that I would blearily stumble towards most mornings.

In my effort to stay in shape breakfast was either a bowl of oatmeal or two hard-boiled eggs on toast.

The coffee machine pissed me off. It was an ancient Mr. Coffee sent to me one Christmas by my second cousin, which usually dripped for so long I'd have to pour it in a thermos as I ran out the door. After months at the same place I still hadn't developed the knack for being on time, so I'd jog down three blocks to the bus stop, have my brief but necessary encounter with the unfriendly bus driver and—nine times out of ten—spill coffee on my freshly-washed gray pants. The commute to work took about an hour, depending on traffic.

The work I did felt unremarkable and so the days blended together. After arriving in downtown Manhattan, I'd step into Kelly's office—my uptight boss would usually nod and, depending on how many minutes late I was, purse her lips a certain amount before giving me my to-do list for the day.

I became a robot soon after I set my briefcase down at the front desk.

Answering phone calls, scheduling appointments, and greeting our clients most days.

Spending my time as a full-time robot—that is, “Administrative Assistant,” as Kelly reminded me with an air of importance—was not where I saw myself after completing an arduously-won masters in Clinical Psychology. “You should have gotten your Ph.D., Nick. The job market is rough.” As is often the case, my father's words now bite me in the ass.

In the middle of hot July I unpacked my briefcase as usual. As I did, however, my thesis—my study of Nora—tumbled out and onto the ground.

Glancing around the office to be sure it was empty, I picked up the heavy, leather-bound text and brushed it off. Written in bold letters across the front was my wordy title: “A field study of derealization and delusion, as correlated to a failure to stay present due to past trauma: by Nicholas Otsuka.”

After the “Table of Contents,” on a blank white page were the words: “Nora, may light find you in all of your worlds.”

I set my thesis down on the desk and closed the cover. Heat gathered in my cheeks and I kicked myself over how sentimental the dedication sounded, which Nora would never even read nor approved, of course. In fact, nobody would read it, because in the pursuit of publication it had been rejected by my school’s Review Board. “Your study, while interesting, is just unconvincing to my colleagues and me.” That was Rachel Funke: the head of the Psychology Department. I could still hear her nasal voice in my head and I remembered every word: “My colleagues and I are certainly informed on the depths to which delusion can swim and, of course, Nora is a real person, but ultimately I feel that your study lacks something. I found myself unconvinced by the conceptual framework.” And meanwhile I sat there like an idiot, nodding along rather than defending it. She had continued, “A young woman living in the year 2016 and being so oblivious—to modernity, to attitudes, to her every move being monitored? It’s an odd assignment. And then there’s her aunt, well I suppose it isn’t really her aunt, is it? You were dealt a difficult hand, Nicholas. I think you showed real commitment to the project—you’ve dressed the part, made a relationship with whomever you needed to, interviewed her

family—it's just, it isn't lucid. I can't see how it would help us to understand the disorder.”

I left that meeting disappointed in myself; what professional confidence I had dissipated. Once again I'd let my ambition lead me into waters far over my head. And, once again, my nature had led me away from being the impartial scientist that I needed to become. Nora's beauty had sidetracked me.

I left my father a voicemail about the meeting and I didn't hear back for two months—until my Commencement Ceremony, where he greeted me with a cold handshake.

My mother excused him by rubbing the small of my back and saying, “Your father's just upset about the rain, my dear. We'll go and find our seats now.”

At our celebratory dinner I didn't tell him that only a handful of students in my department had their papers published in journals. Nor did I tell him how it was uncommon to receive honors. I told myself that I didn't need him to be proud—that ultimately it didn't matter. In the end it really didn't.

After some time had passed my reaction to my father's disappointment morphed into renewed motivation. I'd show him how successful I could be in spite of any what he called academic “setbacks”. Besides, could I be blamed if Nora had distracted me from an utterly perfect senior thesis?

Some nights, I wondered if she thought about me. I certainly thought about her. I thought about her hair, which reminded me of eating caramels as a boy. Her eyes, which were such a light green that they could have been gray.

Sometimes I could see her coming over the cliff with the dead girl. She had looked to me like a warrior. I remember how in that moment she had surprised me more than that body. The sea lay out rough behind her; the water frothy and wild; the birds dipping down and changing their minds before touching the waves. The setting sun was framing her face. It brought out the red tones in her hair and made her eyes even lighter than they already were.

If I were to stand very close to her, I would notice a cupid's bow in her upper lip, a scar under her left eye, and light freckles across her nose.

If I were to pay closer attention, I'd notice the bewildered look. The rapid blinking when an unwelcome memory tried to surface. The protective way that she crossed her arms. The gooseflesh on her skin when my palm brushed against her shoulder.

The way I felt was problematic and deeply unethical. Having read her file before meeting at the cliff, I already knew what had transpired between her and Professor Crest. It made my stomach turn.

The argument between "Aunt Abigail" and I had provided me with a necessary escape, for my fieldwork was to last only a few days. Its brevity was to be supplemented by boxes of files on Nora and by interviews with her sister

Hannah and her primary psychiatrist, “Aunt Abigail,” or as I knew her Cathleen.

“Nora is fragile.” Cathleen had warned me. “If you look at her the wrong way--if you slip up and speak about X, Y or Z you may set her off. She’s entered fugue states, even harmed herself. Please be advised.”

And so when she approached me by the cliff, a voice in my head repeated, “I’m a poet, I’m a poet, I’m a poet,” in an attempt to calm my nerves and to situate myself. Nora was my first subject, so to speak, so the thought of overstepping ethical boundaries let alone upsetting her had frightened me more than her delusions. Although I felt sympathy, it was enhanced—selfishly—by the trouble of dressing as if I lived in the 1800’s, by the effort of speaking like a Charleston gentleman, by the stress which accompanies inhibited language and behavior.

I even put on an accent.

It struck me while I was doing this that I was doing a very similar thing to what Nora seemed to do, although I was aware of myself in a way that I wished she could be.

I think I fell for her file, first.

She’d had a hard life. It provoked a protective instinct in me that I couldn’t suppress, although I did try. And it didn’t help that my mentor suggested I flirt with her, in an effort to access her mind and to gain her trust.

It was all fucked up.

After I graduated, my theories on Nora's reversion to the 1800's became an obsession. Although I had been dissuaded from theoretical tangents in my thesis, the university no longer had control over my ideas. Now I could try to make sense of it all. Sometimes I'd repeat these theories to random people in bars, to anyone willing to listen, really. "The way I see it," I'd begin to say. "The 1800's was a place of civility and order, at least according to my patient: people addressed each other as 'Miss' or 'Sir,' gentlemen tipped their hats at ladies, and sleeping around was rarely heard of—at least if you belonged to the class that Nora would have." By now I'd make sure that they were paying attention, but if they weren't it was never a huge deterrence. "You see," I continued, "to my patient, entering this world means that she has control over her life—and, of course, the traumatic incident probably occurred because of a lack of control. To me, the really interesting point of intersection is that Nora now lives in a world which Professor Crest introduced to her, and in which he actually specialized. I wonder if she knows how close to him she is, even though she's traveled back a century in order to escape. I also wonder if she knew just how little control women had back in that time..." At this point, their back was usually turned towards me. One time, however, a young woman, probably in her early twenties, had listened to my entire spiel. Her jaw had been slackened slightly, but her eyes showed just enough interest to keep me talking. After I'd finished, she looked around us before leaning in and whispering, like a conspirator, "I wonder if you realize you're in love with a mental patient."

It was on a Sunday that the phone rang. Life outside was still and muggy. The suburban hamlet of Valhalla sang with crickets and, occasionally a child's shrieks. Far from its Scandinavian origin, life here was dull.

I recognized her voice before she told me who was calling.

"Nicholas," she said, "Hi. Listen, Nora's run away."

The apartment suddenly felt very small. I stared across the room at the wall before sitting down and asking, "When?"

She explained the strange events leading up to Nora's escape. She was brief, though, and when I asked her for specifics she kept brushing me off. "Look," she said, "obviously she couldn't contact you—for Christ's sake, she doesn't even know what a phone is. I've been speaking with a colleague, though. He said you may have spoken to each other, you know, about a place she'd go if she ever ran off. Maybe on one of your walks—"

"We only spent a couple of days with each other."

"I told Theodore it was a silly idea. I shouldn't have called."

"Hang on a minute." I put the phone down and quickly went into my bedroom.

Returning to the table a moment later, I set down what I had been looking for: A light grey notebook, which had fallen on the grass when I'd first met Nora, and contained some of my trivial field notes about her.

I suddenly remembered talking to Nora the night before I left. While Cathleen rocked in her chair, knitting something green and sipping her tea, Nora had rested her head on my shoulder and whispered, "If I ever ran away

it would be to you. We would meet in a meadow; one with so many flowers in it that we could not see the grass.” I smiled down at her and she met my eyes with a look in them that worried me. For only a moment, her eyes darkened. It was as if she were willing me to say no.

I made a note of it later on:

When comfortable, the patient’s obsessive and romantic nature is heightened, e.g. making long term plans with man she met days prior

Conversation shows an inclination to fantasize

Fugue state compels patient to control actions of others

Fear of rejection? How does this relate to patient’s trauma?

I wonder, did she really expect me to come find her? Was I that important to her?

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Cathleen,” I said. “I don’t know anything about it.” I hung up the phone.

I couldn’t tell why I chose to lie. My instincts were telling me to, or perhaps it was a trace of my father who was.

My father was a balding Japanese man with a bad temper and an obsession for optics. He’d moved to South Carolina with my mom, after meeting her during her year abroad in Tokyo. When I was twelve, he told me that it didn’t matter if you lied, as long as your intentions were good. My father’s intentions were always related to two things: how much money you had and whether what you were doing in that moment would lead you to

success. “You can be selfish,” he would tell me again and again. “You can lie, cheat, whatever. You are always number one.”

My mother was the sensitive one of the two and it eventually got the better of her. Life with my father got to be too much. At the age of forty-six her predisposition for early onset Alzheimer's was triggered. Luckily, my father's occupation as a banker gave him the means to manage it. He was never around, but she was “managed.”

This is how I remember my parents. They managed me until I didn't need it anymore and, when that time came, dad managed mom. As if we were packages marked “Fragile: handle with care.”

I knew that my dad needed to do this. He was the branch manager at his bank so he was used to it; it made him feel like a man. To him, managing us meant that he cared.

Over the past eight years I've seen them twice. Once when I was given my master's degree and, four years before then, at a stiff Christmas dinner where my mother had asked, “Do you have a girlfriend yet, Nick?” five times in an hour. Eventually, she caused my grandfather to stand up abruptly and drop a soup spoon on his lap. As one of our maids, Rachel, rushed over to help, my father had said, “She's better when you're not around.” He stared across the long, marble table at me and said, “I think that your aimlessness confuses her.”

Trying not to lose face in front of my family—who had paused eating to glance between us—I laughed; “Mom doesn't even know I'm trying to become

a psychotherapist, dad. She barely even recognizes me.” The silence that followed spiked my anxiety. I began to shovel sweet potatoes and roast chicken, hoping that my family would look away.

I was always the unlucky one and they did not.

Sensing my father’s anger, my aunt Christine looked at me with sympathy. Her hair was tightly wrapped in a clip and she wore a ruffled black dress in an effort to, according to my cousin Jaclyn, “Hide incoming holiday curves.” But when she saw the look in my father’s eyes, her expression changed. She pursed her lips and looked down at her plate.

“You will address me as sir while you are in my home.”

Michio Otsuka had a certain reputation and so that was the end to that.

My mother used to stand up for me when he got this way, but in that moment she just looked around the room and smiled.

And every now and then my mother turned to my twelve-year-old cousin Grey and asked, “Now, then, did you found yourself a girlfriend?”

And, in turn, he’d look around the table before saying, “No, auntie Jean. I didn’t.”

V.

Alone in the woods, I dreamt in unfamiliar worlds.

I could not tell what inspired the dreams—it could have just been the rain or perhaps a deeper sense of misplacement—but as I lay, I saw my body as it floated through different parallels.

In these worlds, Professor Crest sat at his desk writing something—perhaps it was the next day’s lecture; he was so reserved that I could never be sure.

His hair, which was grey, had fallen from the top of his head like butter melting in a lopsided pan. His spectacles struck me as outdated: they were round, thin, and slid constantly to the tip of his nose. His hands were withered by years of writing and his eyes strained by decades of study. He would pause while he spoke, frown lines appearing when deep in consideration. He had a quiet and deliberate voice; the low tones would echo through our lecture halls and ring with material confidence.

Professor Crest never spoke unless it was to say something remarkable. He believed, after so many years, that the clearest form of communication occurred during silence.

He was kind, I thought. Having taken a liking to me, he assigned me the role of Teaching Assistant within my first week in his class: “English

Literature II.” I would sit in his study while he read the lesson plan I had drafted or went over my notes from a class or my edits on a student paper.

His study had a grandiose, mahogany grandfather clock in one corner. To me, it symbolized a traditional, literary spirit; to others, archaic entitlement, for it had taken a team of men to carry it up the winding staircase to the third floor of the tower, where Crest’s office was tucked away.

“I’m eighty-two years old.” I seem to remember him grumbling. “If I can walk up those stairs every morning, I have a hard time believing a couple of young Turks can’t.” Crest was out of touch with the younger generation—a quality which had previously gotten him into trouble with the University. “It’s just a symptom of age,” I’d had to uncomfortably tell his class one morning after he had “slipped up” and excused himself. “I hope you won’t take it personally.”

These scenes came drifting into me as I slept. They were strangely formed, that is to say set in a period that was unfamiliar. Women wore pants and swore openly. Students walked around with their eyes glued to glowing machines. Automobiles sped past.

I slept through the rain, without noticing the shivers as they ran down my spine. I slept until I saw something else. Something dark and then, at once, blindingly white.

This scene was at night: sometime in the middle of September amidst a violent rainstorm. It was the start of my senior year at the University of

Oxford and I ought to have been in the library beginning work on my senior thesis.

At this time, I had known Professor Crest for one and a half years and the formality in our relationship was beginning to evaporate. Over the summer, he had lost his younger wife, Mary, to breast cancer. Mary had been in her mid-forties—around my mother’s age—and had been a friend to me, one who nearly fulfilled a maternal absence. I had attended the funeral in July and, from there, Crest began to email me more frequently. He began to rely on me to perform personal tasks, such as taking his suit to the laundromat or walking his German Shepherd—once he had me stay at his home whilst away in America. I even slept on his monstrously wooden canopy bed. And as well as attending to his scholarly and personal needs he started leaning on me emotionally.

Alongside my school and work obligations, it all conspired to take over my life. That is why I was irritated to be called to his house that night. It was raining—violently, as I said, heavily, and it was already past midnight. Furthermore, I’d had to cancel plans with two good friends: Brianne and Fionnuala. But he had emailed me with the subject line reading: “Urgent. Come to the house.” And, frustratingly, the email betrayed nothing further. In fact, it was entirely blank. Silent. Much like conversations with him tended to be. So I went, although looking back I desperately wish I had not.

Crest’s house loomed over us students from the outskirts of the Oxford din. Just like the grandfather clock, the house struck one as relentlessly

traditional. A stone wall led me up the hill and separated us from his late wife's garden, which had sadly been neglected since her death.

Crest lived fittingly at the crest of a hill. His house was made from stone and invaded by bushels of English Ivy— “You know about the Norman Invasion of Ireland, Nora,” he had once accused me rather than asked. “In the Twelfth Century, we English crawled over your homeland just like this damned ivy on my house.” He had looked at me, following my eyes into my lap as they fell down in silence.

And suddenly, as if it were happening in this world, I felt bile rise up my throat. It choked me like the wretched ivy suffocating his house. As I stumbled out the door I had to lean against the stone wall to support myself. I felt a burning sensation in my chest and on my cheeks, and how it seemed to sizzle against the rain and tears: themselves indistinguishable entities. I felt the pain between my thighs. Bruises on my arms and legs. Then, just as suddenly as it began, it dissipated and a searing light was brought on slowly, alongside the racing tempo of my heartbeat, and everything fell silent.

When I awoke from these spells, I was bewildered. It was as if a cloud had swooped down from the sky and perched on my retinae. Were they memories or dreams? The details felt familiar for I knew Crest to be a living person, and yet when I thought of the events they felt foreign, distant yet permanent like sedimented history. Again I wondered, how could something so important have happened yet not be important enough to remember?

I felt ashamed because, after only three days in the woods, the worry had already set in.

I thought of returning to the cottage to apologize for being so impulsive. I imagined the kind look in Aunt Abigail's eyes, how she might wrap me in her arms and forgive me for what I had done. Yet all the while, I knew I could never return. There was no going back, now, only forward or nowhere.

I thought I might take a position as a teacher. I thought of Jane Eyre once again, and her contented solitude in the cabin near St. John Reed's home. I thought of how she had regained a sort of independent strength in those months. I might forget Nicholas, the unreachable itch in my brain and that pain around my sternum.

I believe now that I may have marched into the nearest town and introduced myself to the schoolmistress had Ivy not sidetracked me.

I saw her looking at me from behind the leaves of a fern. At first, I only saw her eyes, for the sun was beginning to fall and I was tired from walking. She spooked me.

She had large, green eyes above dark circles and a field of freckles. She must have been about seven years younger than I, yet she stared at me directly. Her mouth was small, set, and if she ever laughed while I knew her, I must have missed it.

Her eyes fixed on me and, when she spoke, her voice struck me as overly solemn for her age. "Hello." There was an eager edge to the tone, which cut through the solemnity as if struggling to surface.

“Hello.” I mirrored.

We stood and took each other in. She was crouched behind the tall fern and her eyes were darting all around. Would she run? I wondered.

After a moment, I asked, “Are you alright down there? Where are you from?”

She hesitated shyly, but eventually whispered, “A little bit South from here. A little town called Dundalk.”

“I know it.” I expected her to stand but she seemed nervous, so I sat down in front of her and smiled. “I remember visiting Blackrock Cove when—Oh, I must have been about your age. I remember lovely stone castles and looking at the seals on the beach...My name’s Nora.”

Her lips turned up for a moment, revealing small teeth and wide, pink gums. “It’s very nice there.” She looked down into her lap. “Maybe you could help me, Miss Nora, see, my house burnt down and I have nobody left. A man gave me a ride in his carriage, dropping me off in Ballymena. Ever since then I’ve been walking and walking, and it must have been about two weeks since he left. I’m not sure what to do...”

“Why, you poor thing. It’s over a hundred miles from Dundalk, what are you doing all the way up here?” I felt worried for the girl, her cheeks were stained by mud and you could see from the tears in her skirt that she had been traveling many miles. I imagined we might have looked like sisters to anyone passing by.

After a moment she said, “I lost my home, you see, and it is sad. But, at the same time, now I’m free, with nothing to keep me from traveling wherever I please. I’ve always wanted to see Ballycastle and so I found a map and made my way up North. My father used to talk about vacations—fishing with my grandfather and the like—but we never had the chance to go together.”

“It is a lovely area,” I agreed. I could see myself in Ivy. Like her my family had been lost to a fire. I related to her sense of adventure: her independence. If I had been blessed with a younger sibling, I would have wanted her to be like Ivy. And because of this, I changed my course and decided to accompany her. Besides, I had a feeling she would lead me to something interesting. “It isn’t wise for a young girl to travel alone. Let me accompany you, I have a reliable map and we can help each other if, God forbid, anything unpleasant should happen.”

The girl looked reluctant. After all, we had only met moments ago. Besides, her parents must have warned her never to talk to strangers.

“You can trust me, ” I whispered, before smiling and reaching out my hand.

She stared hesitantly at it and then grasped it, thus allowing me to help her stand. “I suppose it’s my only option.”

“I think it is a stroke of luck that we found each other! Luck o’ the Irish, as they say. I shall take you to Ballycastle, my friend, and perhaps, once we arrive, even find some work as a schoolmistress.”

“My name is Ivy.” She looked at and nodded with a determined air. “It’s very nice to meet you, and thanks.”

We walked together for the next couple of hours and, to pass the time, I asked her questions.

“How old are you, Ivy?”

“Fourteen.”

“And you said there was an accident after which you lost your family. Did you lose your parents?”

“That’s right, it happened four months ago now.” She looked down again.

“What a long time to be all alone...what do you do to distract yourself?”

“Well, you may think I’m odd, but in the winter I like going to school. There’s an old tree by the swingsets where I sit and read my books. My favorites are all set in the olden days.”

I told her that I liked books like these as well and we talked about them for awhile. I was surprised by how well she could hold a conversation. One poem, in particular, “The Lady of Shalott,” by the great Alfred, Lord Tennyson, interested Ivy. She spoke about a passage that read:

She knows not what the curse may be;

Therefore she weaveth steadily,

Therefore no other care hath she,

The Lady of Shalott.

“It’s so lovely,” she sighed. “I think it’s so nice how the lady can simply weave another world for herself if she does not care for her own. You see, the

lady is 'sick of shadows' and the curse that's on her so she weaves images onto her loom, continuously, without ever looking out at the real world. Instead, she looks into a mirror, which reflects the busy world outside. On an island, all alone. Can you imagine how lonely it must have been? And how lost she might have felt, never knowing what the real world looked like?"

I could imagine it very well. "Yes, and it is similar to Plato's allegory of the cave. I assume you are familiar with Plato?"

"Of course," said Ivy, smiling.

"Or Shirley, by Brontë. I remember one passage that reads:

'The whole world is not very large compared with creation: I must see the outside of our own round planet at least.'

'How much of its outside?'

'First this hemisphere where we live; then the other. I am resolved that my life shall be a life: not a black trance like the toad's buried in marble; nor a long, slow death like yours in Briarcliff Rectory.'

"It seems to me that there was much more room for the imagination to grow. The Lady of Shalott was clearly disturbed—after all, wasn't her reality fragmented? And yet, it could be explained away by curses. She remained beautiful, even after death. Nobody tried to shut her away or change her. Love tempted her to see reality, but it also caused her death. Oh, it's all so romantic!"

"So romantic," laughed Ivy. "My mother used to say: magic gives our imagination the freedom that it craves."

After a moment, I murmured, half to myself, “I suppose the Lady of Shalott was better off living in the world that she had weaved. At the very least I suppose she was safer.”

From then on, we walked in silence for awhile until we passed an old gentleman walking his dog.

He tipped his cap at us but gave me an odd look. “Good evening, miss. It’s a bit late to be walking alone, ain’t it?”

I looked into his eyes as I walked past. “But I am not alone.” And he looked around me before I disappeared.

His eyes followed Ivy and I as we walked on, weaving our way around the bend in the path.

VI: Nicholas

Two weeks after I had received the call from Cathleen I was stuffed onto a plane, my spidery legs tucked into themselves as I headed to Northern Ireland.

Without a plan, armed with nothing except a feeling in my gut, I'd used a sizable chunk of my rent money and booked the soonest flight I could afford. One week after, as I boarded the Aer-Lingus Boeing 757, I began to regret the decision.

One question, in particular, caused me to doubt: What will you say when you see Nora, that is, if you find her?

I had an image in my mind of what I'd like to happen. Me, nuzzling into her caramel hair, her little hands wrapped around my back as she smiled, peacefully cured. Yet, still I couldn't think of what to say.

It didn't help that the image seemed more and more ridiculous the closer that I got to Ireland. It started to embarrass me. By turning normal fantasies into cliched movie scenes, Nora had done what no girl before her could-- though if I'm being honest, there had been only two girls before her--and I soon realized that the more likely scenario was one filled with confusion. I would have to speak, unscripted. God, what would I say?

I arrived to a rainy Belfast.

Being the middle of the week, the airport was filled with businessmen and women, hurriedly walking to catch connecting flights. For some reason, my brain conjured up a suave gentleman stirring a mixed drink in one hand, leaning towards a lady to say, “Business or pleasure?” I hurried along, thinking that my interests were kind of a mix of the two.

Hours later, I was on an air-conditioned bus as it comfortably (perhaps too much so) zipped through narrow, shrub-lined roads, heading towards Torr Head and, I hoped, towards Nora.

I arrived at an unexpected scene.

Cathleen flew around the old cottage like a spinning top, carelessly throwing props from the nineteenth century into boxes. Her wig—a curly, red braid wrapped around her head—was askew; midway down her forehead by then.

I stood in the doorway for a few moments, as if in a shock-induced trance, and watched her. She must have seen me in her periphery because she muttered something incoherent.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She came right up to my face and said, “I’m getting out of here.”

I looked around the room at the boxes, hoping to find something that would contradict what she said. My eyes met hers. “You can’t leave. I came all this way. You—you have to help me find Nora.”

She exasperatedly cast her hands toward the sky. “That girl is no longer my responsibility. Her sister hired me to look after her but guess what, the money

stopped coming in two weeks ago.” She looked at me, presumably to see if I comprehended what this meant. “If her own sister doesn’t care, why should I be expected to? I’m fifty-eight years old, Nicholas, and I’m not about to go traipsing across the Irish seaside, looking for some girl who thinks she’s in a Jane Austen novel! Does that sound like something in my job description?” She turned around before saying, with tremendous emphasis: “Besides, I wouldn’t know where to start. I wish Thomas and you and all the others would just get off my back about it.”

“Well, you called me, so I’m not sure what you expected.” She ignored me. She seemed to become increasingly frenetic, so I tried a different angle, hoping a nice guilt trip might slow her down. “I think you’re being pretty insensitive. You’ve been her caseworker for years and you know her better than anyone alive, even her sister, so if you don’t know where she is then who would? Aren’t you worried about her? This isn’t exactly the safest area.” I looked behind me to indicate the steep cliffs in the distance.

But she kept on ignoring me and went back to packing up boxes.

As she piled embroidered cushions and quilts on top of each other, I noticed framed portraits of the Donnelly family. In spite of my irritation, I felt impressed by how elaborate of a scheme this had turned out to be.

I remember first meeting Cathleen. I remember her telling me how, before Nora, she’d been a full-time researcher at the Psychological Society of Ireland; constantly coming up with innovative training procedures for psychiatrists in the field. She’d been passionate about educating the Irish public to take their

own and their family's mental health seriously, but primarily about finding alternative treatment methods for disorders.

In spite of her interest, I often wondered why she would take on such a challenging case. She was highly qualified and occupied a senior position in her department. She had made it clear to me that her opinions were respected in multiple scholarly circles across Western Europe. Though I, too, loved challenging myself, I wondered if I would have made the same decision, had I been in her position.

After being contacted, by her friend and my advisor, and then by me, she had flown out to see me. She'd wanted to explain the situation in person. She had done so slowly, knowing it was experimental and predicting that I'd find it odd. After processing for a while, it began to make sense more or less. In the same way that a short story by Kafka makes sense. You bend the rules and the laws and voilà society works for the ones it shouldn't.

The way I understood it was that Cathleen had been tempted by a generous sum and a professional challenge into providing an asylum for Nora far from the pressures of the modern world. Here, Nora could live quietly—without relapsing into a depressive or anxious psychosis. Up until a couple of months ago, the department and Cathleen had been paid a large, monthly sum by Nora's older sister, Hannah—who'd been described to me as a successful stockbroker living in London—to firstly keep Nora from affecting the Donnelly reputation; and secondly to keep her "managed" while the Psychological Society came up with a more viable treatment plan. The lengths

that the society had gone to were unconventional, but I suppose people would try just about anything for the right price.

Aside from the price, poor Hannah had to provide all of the portraits and family heirlooms as well, which Cathleen now threw into boxes.

The hair, the name, even the personality that Cathleen adopted for this experiment were fictional, at least according to us. Nora never had an aunt named Abigail, she had been convinced by a combination of hypnosis and the claim that “Abigail” had been living in Spain, estranged from the Donnelly’s until recently.

Cathleen became an actress as well as a psychologist.

I began to feel strange for standing in the doorway, so I broke the silence. “Look, I know you must be flustered—” Stepping into the foyer, I closed the door behind me. “But Nora isn’t safe by herself and that really should worry you. I don’t think she would have run away unless she was going through something. She’s had some sort of guardian up until now, even if it was just Mickey. And she trusts you—” I stopped, as a thought jumped to mind. “Unless something happened before she left.” I let the sentence hang in the air like a question.

Cathleen paused to swipe a sleeve across her forehead, taking the wig off in the process. I had forgotten about her spiky gray hair underneath.

She sat down.

“I have something to tell you.”

“Alright.”

“I’ve called someone else about Nora. Now, he’s not someone you’ll approve of, necessarily, but I’ve known Nora a long time. I think it’s the right thing to do. Often a patient will return to the source of her trauma, following a traumatic bonding.”

“Quit stalling.”

“And that’s why I’ve called Professor Crest to if she returned to him.”

A moment of silence passed between us. My jaw hung open.

“Have you gone crazy as well? Have you been spending too much time in the woods?”

“Before you say anything else, Nicholas, remember that I’ve known Nora for two years, whereas you’ve spent a few days with her.”

“Sometimes that’s all the time you need.”

“If you’re implying that she’s a pain in the ass, I agree.” Cathleen sat down. “Look, frankly, we haven’t a clue whether Crest did anything inappropriate. I for one find it hard to believe that a man in his eighties could overpower such a—” she paused, before saying, “vivacious young woman.”

“Hannah showed me pictures of the bruises.”

“Really? Well did she tell you about her own father's behavior, towards Nora in particular? I have cause to believe it was sexual.” Her accent became stronger as she became more agitated

Muttering to herself, she said, “I haven’t the faintest clue why I’m telling you any of this. Some graduate student from America.”

“It may help me to find her. Is Crest on his way?”

“I can’t say, but I will say I contacted him around the same time as I did you.”

“That’s just great. And very professional, I might add.”

“None of this has been professional, Nicholas. It’s an experiment. All under the table—why d’ya think your fine university wouldn’t publish that paper?”

“My father would be glad to hear you say that.”

“In any event, I have plenty of work back in Dublin. The country’s full of feekin’ loonies, no need to focus all of my energy on one.”

She meant this to be a dismissal so I turned around, leaving the cottage feeling more confused than when I had entered.

It now seemed likely that Nora had never been attacked by Professor Crest. She could have been transferring memories of her father’s abuse onto Crest. This entire case had become more elaborate than I expected. Though I had studied TTS (Trauma Transference Syndrome) in undergrad, I had seen little to nothing of it in the field

Once again, I questioned being here. I felt inexperienced.

Nonetheless, I decided to retrace Nora’s steps through the fields and forests behind the cottage. Having taken a week-long leave from the office I figured I might as well for, besides my feelings towards Nora and the fact that nobody else was looking for her, it had stopped raining.

The task was not as hard as I imagined it would be. It was as if she had wanted me to follow her because every mile or so I found a piece of fabric from her dress or something that had fallen out of her bag.

It wasn't until an hour or so that I found the map. It lay in the grass, next to a large fern, showing everything on the coastline between Torr Head and Castlerock. And right in the middle, with an X marked on its name, was the town of Ballycastle.

This could be hers!

I became excited and, picking it up, began following the trail leading to the X like a boy on a treasure hunt.

I arrived a few hours later. Not being an expert at reading old maps, nor at knowing North from South, I had taken a few detours.

Though the X landed on the town's quieter perimeter, I wondered if Nora had failed to see the cars that sped by, or the girls running around texting photos to their boyfriends. In many ways, Nora reminded me of a modern day Don Quixote, or even Sally Field's iconic Sybil. It seemed that her blinders could activate at a moment's notice.

The area was known for its natural beauty and was flocked by tourists in the summertime. Everywhere, white mansions flanked sloping, green hills, while the sails of boats were visible, docked and ready to search for a fresh catch. I knew that if you walked several hours down the coastline you could see the Carrick-a-Rede, or several miles further and the Giant's Causeway. As I strolled through the outskirts and then the town, I heard a myriad of

different accents. People taking photos of the area and remarking on its beauty. Mostly, though, people got in my way. Times like these made me wish that I were in a different time period as well.

I was stupid to think that Nora would be there waiting when I arrived.

I decided to call Jared for advice and headed for a pub called “Mahoney & Sons,” searching for a payphone to call New York.

He laughed at me on the phone after I explained the situation. “I don’t know, man, I told you this was nuts. Did you check the coastline? She seems to like cliff’s a whole bunch.”

Feeling stupid, I hung up and headed down Clare Road towards the ocean.

Midway between the town and Carrick-a-Rede, I spotted Nora.

Her back was to the road and her skirts whipped in the breeze. As I got closer, I could hear her soft Irish voice as she spoke into the wind about a novel she had read in school.

Who is she talking to? I wondered. Leaving myself little time to find out, I cleared my throat and said, “Nora?”

She turned around slowly, with the strangest expression on her face, as if I had interrupted something very important.

But she smiled, after a moment, and so I approached her.

VII.

Nicholas Otsuka stood in front of Ivy and me, as real as the town behind us.

His height, an effect produced by long thin legs supporting a not-much-broader torso, surprised me—I had forgotten his height and also his eyes, which were grey and slanted upwards over a symmetrical, not overly handsome face.

His smile welcomed me but his eyes held me at a distance.

He did not yet know Ivy so I clasped my hands together and said, “Nicholas, how good to see you. This is my friend, Ivy.”

Looking straight through her, he muttered, “I don’t know where to look.” I found this ungracious but, not wanting to quarrel so soon to being reunited, I laid it to rest.

Ivy shook her choppy hair and said, “We were in the middle of something, Nora.” Her eyes, large and imploring, looked over the cliff’s edge.

I turned to her and said, under my breath as I could sense the tension between her and Nicholas. “Nicholas and I have catching up to do. Give me time, Ivy.”

She protested but I insisted. And she walked away with her chin in the air, as if I were an admonishing relative rather than an acquaintance.

I smiled after her for a moment.

“Have you been well, Nora?” I was touched by the concern in Nicholas’s voice. “Your aunt is looking for you. She sent me a—er, a telegram about it.”

“Oh, forget my aunt. Besides those awful dreams, all’s well. Though I missed my confidante. What kept you away all of these months? You forgot to say goodbye when you left.”

He looked down at me and smiled.

“Nothing important.”

This pleased me. “Well, that is good news. Come, take my arm. Shall we walk for awhile?”

We did walk and, for a moment, it felt like when we had first met.

I breathed in the sea’s saltiness and the sweet smell of rotting fish.

As Nicholas explained everything he had been doing—how his poor mother's health was declining, how Aunt Abigail had left the cottage—I listened patiently. I had news for him, yet I bit my tongue.

Finally he paused long enough for me to blurt out, “I’m free, Nick. Do you know what this means...for us?”

He stopped and stared straight ahead. As he did, I realized what I had said. An immediate current ran through me, where our arms met, and sent gooseflesh up and down my legs. He looked down at me with an expression on his face that looked as much affectionate as conflicted, and my heart felt like it would leap through my throat and off of the cliff.

Suddenly, taking ahold of my waist, he bent down and kissed me: roughly at first, and then very, very softly.

My heart became overjoyed and I smiled into his lips, but he pulled away after a short moment and muttered, “I shouldn’t be doing this.” Taking a step backward, the concern in his eyes deepened. “This is so wrong.” Yet he kissed me again, and he smirked after a moment, saying, “Is this immoral, since you live in the nineteenth century and all?” Suddenly his expression changed. He cursed.

I felt something inside of me slip. Unsure of his tone, I spoke deliberately at first. “Why, whatever do you mean, Nicholas? Are you a time-traveling magician? I was under the impression that we lived in the same year but perhaps you have come from the stars, to teach me how to write poems by the sea.”

He watched me goad him and yet, as I skipped around and laughed, he looked more worried than amused.

“I—I can’t do this anymore.” He broke away. “God, this is too much to ask of someone.” Bewildered, I stopped and asked him what he meant. He grabbed hold of my palm, “Nora, please tell me, do you really think you’re in a different world than me?” Here we go again with that different world nonsense. “Here, can you see this?” He held something in front of my eyes. I blinked but all I could see was a dimly-lit rectangle. His hopelessness, however, was plain. “There’s no way that I can help you, is there?”

He began to pace in front of me. Muttering, “I shouldn’t be saying any of this. Nora, sweet Nora, please forget I said any of this.”

But he had said it, and I could not forget. In fact, I finally felt myself remember.

Right then, in the corner of my eye, I saw a shape. Turning, I could see a dark blue Aston Martin become clearer and clearer as it made its way down the road towards us—the very same car that Crest drove. I felt a plummeting in my gut as if I were sinking, very slowly, through quicksand--hesitant to emerge underground.

A moment later, I saw Ivy evaporate into the breeze. Walking along the cliff, another young couple took pictures together and laughed. They had not been there a moment ago.

Suddenly my footing slipped, my world shifted, and I succumbed to the quicksand. I emerged underground, crawling through dark tunnels where, at the other end, I saw my father's face contorted by lust.

I saw Professor Crest, on top of me.

I saw myself allowing it.

I was a child playing in the waves.

I was at the bottom of the cliff: dead, bloated, and green.

Finally, I saw myself. Turning from Nicholas, I hurled myself from the cliff. I fell for what felt like a lifetime and then everything evaporated. And the voices ended.

And so did I.

