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Lost Girls

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Lost Girls

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

by
Sienna Thompson

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018

To Geneva

“He had ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know; but he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be forever barred.”

—J.M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*

My roommate was not the girl in the photo I'd found online. I was relieved, though guilty for my relief— this girl was better looking. It's easier being friends with better-looking people, you know? It's awful, but— listen, when my friends ask me if I think they're pretty, it's just easier if I actually do. I'd been lucky so far, and I was relieved to find out I was lucky still.

“Hey,” she said with a smile. Her name was Petra. Until now I'd only seen it on paper— or rather, on a screen. Now I heard it from her own mouth. “I'm Petra.”

“Marsha,” I said.

“I hope you don't mind I've already started, kind of—” she gestured to her things, half-strewn, half-placed about the left side of the room.

“That's fine,” I said. “This side is good.”

I was relieved, again, to find that the room didn't smell, particularly, like anything. I'd been fighting fears that it might smell musty, or stuffy, in the way old buildings sometimes do. But it was scentless.

Petra's closet was open, I peeked at it as I started to unpack. There were rows of heels at the bottom. I raised a brow, half-impressed, half-baffled. The campus wasn't exactly stiletto-friendly, and winter would be settling in soon enough. But I admired her dedication to her look.

We walked to the cafeteria together for dinner. She wasn't wearing heels just then. Everyone on campus at the moment was either staff, parents, or other freshmen, so we received a lot of friendly smiles. I kind of felt like a kindergartener.

“We should join someone,” Petra said when we'd gotten food and met up again in the larger dining room. She pointed at a table of girls. They all looked equal levels of remarkably uncomfortable. “What do you think?”

I thought very little that was in any way positive, and kind of wished I could just take my food back to my room and still have any hope of making friends here before the upperclassmen returned and the period of come one, come all to the friendship faire came to an abrupt end. But I nodded, obviously, anyway, and so we approached them.

“Hi,” Petra said, smiling wide at the table. “I’m Petra, and this is my roommate, Marsha. Do you mind if we join you?”

“Not at all,” a tall girl in a not-so-apt Harvard sweatshirt said with an answering smile.

We took seats next to each other and I quietly appraised the group over my pizza and broccoli.

The girl across from me, wearing a slogan shirt folded just so that I couldn’t get the joke and a dark blue hijab, had yet to look up from her plate. She was sweating, whether from the heat — it was cooler in here than outside, but I considered the hijab must be something of a hindrance to an ideal body temperature— or from nerves, I couldn’t be sure. Beside her was the Harvard girl, and across from her, next to me, a girl with pig tail braids and nothing on her plate but a piece of cake. Across from Petra was a girl in a Thirty Seconds to Mars shirt. She was ignoring her food in favor of chewing on her nails.

I had a feeling sort of like I get sometimes in the middle of the night, when everything’s quiet, and everyone is asleep but me and the wind, if there’s wind. Like though I knew there were others around me, I was very alone.

Petra posed questions to the table like an elementary school teacher trying to get her students to make friends with each other. We answered, but of course missed everyone’s answers but our own, because we spent the time they were speaking thinking of what we would say. I

decided I wasn't interested in being friends with any of them besides the girl in the hijab, whose name I already couldn't remember. When I finally made out the joke on her shirt, it was funny.

Petra and I walked back to our dorm. It was called "The Treehouse," and you could see why. It was surrounded on all sides by trees—the front door looked like it had been carved out in a great struggle against nature; a battle won in a war lost.

We were immediately called into the common room. The hijabi girl—Jidah, as it turned out—was sitting on the couch. Petra and I scooted in beside her. I smiled at her. I also kind of fell while I was sitting down, so she laughed at me.

Our RAs went over the dorm rules and forced us to introduce ourselves. Then they gave us Oreos and juice pouches. The feeling of being in kindergarten continued, along with a burgeoning sense of summer camp. It was partially awful, but somehow, simultaneously, splendid.

Petra disappeared for a while to find cleaning supplies, so I started decorating my side of the room. I'd brought what felt, at the time I was packing, like a ridiculous amount of personal photos, drawings, and general mementos. But I looked at my wall after I'd hung everything I had, and it looked distressingly bare. It felt like a harsh evaluation of me, or my personality, or my accomplishments thus far: oh, is that all you have?

I unpacked my books, because at least there I had something solid, visible, that I could hinge my identity on. I tucked my bible in last, right next to *A People's History of the United States*.

I settled onto my bed with my laptop and checked my messages. Hunter had sent me around a hundred about his room. He was on the other side of campus, but he was still *on* campus with me, which felt at once bizarre and comforting.

you get dinner already?

yeah, what? isn't the dining hall closed

He took a moment to respond.

crap

lol. i have some snacks here if u want

im so lazy

but u were already going to go to the cafeteria??

ugh. fine

Hunter was wearing our high school sweatshirt when I let him into my dorm. He looked at my wall.

“Any of those of me?” he asked, leaning toward the photos. I pointed. He grinned. “I’m so good-looking.”

I fought the instinct to enthusiastically agree. By now, I imagined, it wouldn’t affect him, but at one point he had asked me to stop complimenting him. He said he couldn't quite take it—he said it wasn't helping. So I restrained myself, even now.

He leaned away from the photo and wandered toward my window. He raised his brows. “Nice view.”

All that was visible through the occasionally paint-streaked glass was tree branches, all stacked and intertwined and grabbing at each other like groupies in a mosh pit. I was surprised to

find that the sight didn't make me feel claustrophobic. Instead, it felt strangely, appropriately protective: like there was something specific they were keeping out.

Hunter turned toward me, leaning back with his palms on the window frame. He really was good-looking. Sometimes I wondered at myself.

"How's your roommate?" he asked.

"She's nice," I said, nodding, "prettier than I thought."

"What, she looks better in person?"

"No, I had the girl wrong, in the photo." I shook my head. "How's yours?"

Hunter's cheeks heated, and he shrugged. "Tall," he said.

I laughed. "Really giving me a vivid impression of him there, Hunt, thank you."

"Don't call me that, Marsh."

"I don't mind Marsh."

"Yeah, well."

He grabbed my visualize-Pompeii book and flipped through. It was essentially side by side of Pompeii today, and how it might have existed in the seventh century BC. It was my favorite thing I owned.

"Do you like it here?" he asked.

"I like it fine."

*

Emma existed first in my last novel, but I didn't understand her then. She was on the periphery, powerful in her stance and the blunt statements she sometimes made which made it very apparent to my then-narrator that she understood him completely, and liked him all the less

for it. But I didn't understand her, really. I thought she was sharp, and cutting, and wise, and unafraid to be rude. But in her own head, it became immediately clear, like fog moving off a translucent lake, that she was, first and foremost, sad. Sad in a way that would appear quiet to those who noticed it, but was screechingly loud from the interior of her consciousness.

Petra glanced over at me from her own laptop. "What are you writing?" she asked.

"Uh, I'm working on a novel," I said.

"No way!" she perked up, visibly interested. "What's it about?"

I half-shrugged. "I'm not really sure yet— I mean, I know it's a historical novel, but I'm not really sure of anything plot-wise, yet. I just know the main character, so far." I left out that I assumed it would be a love story, or at least have a love story in it somewhere. My novels always did.

"Huh, how interesting," Petra said. "So you can just, like, start writing, even though you don't know what's going to happen?"

I nodded. "I mean, for a while. Usually it kind of reveals itself." I groaned inwardly at my own cliché.

"That's so cool," Petra said. "I can't imagine writing a book, wow. I bet you're a great writer, though."

I laughed awkwardly. "I don't know about that," I said, but of course I thought I was. And of course part of what made me think I was was that I thought I was. I mean, some classics were written by insecure writers, sure. But at the very least the Lost Generation and the Beats were self-confident to the point of delusion. And I was eighteen years old, so obviously, I loved the Lost Generation and the Beats.

Petra got distracted by something on her laptop, her brow furrowing, so I turned back to Emma. She was situated as she often was, in a windowsill holding a novel. Her younger sister called her name three times before she heard her. Then she stood, her legs stiff, the muslin of her dress nearly tripping her as she took a deep breath before going to meet her sister.

I glanced out my own window, at the mess of branches there. I stood up. "I'm gonna go get some tea or something," I said. "Do you want anything?"

Petra looked up and gave me a polite smile. "I'm OK, thank you."

I walked down to the campus café, avoiding eye contact with any of my over-eager, friendless peers as I slotted into line.

As I slowly moved forward, I eyed the tables, surveying their occupants. By the far wall there were two guys with cuffed jeans. Closer to the door a girl with a high ponytail sat with what looked to be her parents, ignoring them as she scrolled on her phone and sipped at a huge, round mug. At a table in the middle of the room was a brown-skinned girl wearing men's slacks and drawing on her napkin. She glanced up just as I was looking at her, so I quickly turned away.

I got a cup of English breakfast tea to go, and immediately regretted the decision as I stepped out of the air-conditioned café and into the late-August New York sun. I scanned the visible campus for somewhere to hide out until I'd finished my tea, and my gaze landed on the chapel.

I felt a warm fondness as I entered the building. I didn't know yet whether it held regular worship services, or what sect it followed if it did, but I hoped I could spend my Sunday mornings here. It was cool and beautiful and just small enough that it felt like a good place to sit alone.

I sat in a pew by the back and drank my tea in slow pulls. Classes were still a few days away, and I dreaded returning to my dorm and being drawn into some inevitable bonding activity. I wondered if I was allowed to drink in here.

Leaning my head back against the pew, I let my eyes close, and I drew into myself, and beyond myself, to where I could speak to God. I thanked him for bringing me here. I thanked him for the trees outside my window, and for Hunter being nearby, and even for my roommate being pretty, though I apologized for caring about that. I asked him to help me be better about talking to strangers. I asked him if he'd mind making my classes interesting. I told him again how beautiful it was here, and thanked him.

Eventually I had to dart back into my body before I drifted off to sleep. I stretched and stood, and carried my empty cup out of the chapel.

In my room, Petra was on the floor beside Hunter and across from Jidah and two dark-haired girls who had to be twins. They were playing Cards Against Humanity. I squatted down beside Hunter.

“Hey,” I said. “Just made yourself right at home, I see.”

“Petra let me in,” he said.

I moved so I was sitting cross-legged beside him.

“Marsha,” Petra said, “this is Cameron and Pearl.” The short-haired twin gave me a smile and a nod, and the long-haired one waved shyly. Based on the order in which they were sitting in relation to Petra, I assumed Cameron was the short-haired girl, and Pearl the long-haired. But I also assumed it might be safe not to assume, so I just said hello, avoiding parroting their names back in the wrong order.

“Room for one more?” I asked, feeling entirely too much like Marlon Brando as the words left my mouth.

“Of course,” Petra said, and dealt me a hand.

The tension eased out of the room as we all assembled cards to make terribly crass jokes. Jidah blushed at almost every turn, but especially when she had to read the punchlines herself. Pearl didn’t laugh much, and hadn’t won a round yet— if I was guessing correctly which were hers, her card choices seemed bizarre— but she seemed perfectly at ease sitting next to her sister, and partway through the game she pulled a giant bag of Swedish Fish out of her bag and offered them to the group, so she was a real crowd-pleaser. Hunter and Cameron won almost every round, till the game started to feel more like a competition between them than the rest of us were watching than anything else. Petra and I exchanged knowing glances every now and then, and my chest felt warm for the growing familiarity between us.

I immediately took to Tumblr when everyone but Petra had left. I mostly followed dumb joke blogs, but I’d also started a blog dedicated to images that reminded me of Emma and her novel, and I scrolled through it now, settling into the comfort of her before Petra turned out the light.

“Good night,” she whispered.

“Night,” I said, turning on my side so she wouldn’t be blinded by the light from my phone.

that was fun, Hunter texted.

yeah

petras cool

right?

my roommates not home yet

party boy?

tbd. i hope he doesn't snore

I fell asleep before I could reply.

*

Cameron was in my first class. We sat next to each other. Our professor was ten minutes late, but so nonchalant about it that I thought maybe we were all, actually, ten minutes early. He handed out syllabi and asked us to say our names, where we were from, and why we were taking the class. I was relieved this was a class I was interested in so I didn't have to scramble for an answer beyond "for the distribution credit."

The professor explained what the class would be like in the way a sommelier might describe the multitudinous scents in a particular wine. I decided he was pretentious, but in a way that promised to be engaging rather than overwhelmingly annoying. Hopefully.

Cameron lived in the same building as me, so we walked back together, talking about class and what classes we had coming up. A large part of me wanted to go back to my own room and get horizontal with my laptop, but my reason reminded me that was a not a great way to make friends. I followed Cameron into the room she shared with Pearl, standing, unsure of myself, for a moment, before she said I could sit on the bed. I looked around me. Cameron's side of the room was pasted with band posters and weird, dark-colored art prints. Pearl's side was a lot of photographs— like, not even polaroids, proper photos— and pastels. On the wall above her

bed there was a giant poster of a horse. The fact that she was a horse girl made inexplicable sense.

“You wanna watch something?” Cameron asked.

“Sure,” I nodded as she grabbed her laptop.

I drew my legs up toward me, and Cameron sat with her legs in a butterfly. The little bit of space we left between us was like a third person in the room; a rude person whispering, *You’re not friends yet*. I tucked my fingers into the bend of my knees.

We were deep into a playlist of Cameron’s favorite America’s Funniest Home Videos clips when Pearl came in.

“I should shower,” I said, standing. I didn’t really need to, but I did need an excuse. Cameron was nice, and the videos were funny, but by now I *needed* to go home and lay down with my laptop between me and everything else.

“Hey,” Petra said when I closed our door behind me. “How was your day?”

“Good,” I said quickly. “You?”

Petra wrinkled her nose in distaste, and I raised my brows. She shook her head. “It was fine, I just think my first class was kind of a weird group, you know?”

“Sure,” I said.

I probably should have said something else, or asked what she meant, or what the class was. Instead I took off my bra and lay down.

*

I put my backpack down first so I wouldn't get my hair dirty, then sprawled out under a large oak. I'd slipped off my shoes already, so I dug my toes into the grass and turned my head toward Hunter.

"Don't you feel like we're at summer camp?"

He shook his head. "You forget, Christian girl, I didn't go to summer camp. Except once, with my school. But that wasn't during the summer. And it wasn't even really a camp."

"Ah," I said. "So it was a detention camp."

"Shut up."

"I wish I could just skip ahead to when I already have friends here, you know? Like everyone's really nice so far, but I want to just skip to the part where I actually feel comfortable with any of them, you know?"

"I'm feeling the love," Hunter said.

"Oh, I've never felt comfortable with you in my life."

Hunter rolled his eyes and then rolled his whole body, until he was laying on his stomach. He raised his head up to lean on his palms, his elbows digging into the grass.

"Yeah, I get it," he said. "I feel that way about my roommate. I wish I could get myself to just, like, talk like a normal person, you know? Like he makes an effort to ask me about my classes and everything and I just act like a moron. He probably thinks I'm off my rocker."

"He wouldn't be wrong." I squinted against the sunlight, then closed my eyes entirely. Still the sun shone through my lids. I piled my hair over my face.

Hunter put his head down in his arms. "It's hot here," he said.

I groaned in agreement.

“I wish I had iced tea,” I said.

“What kind?”

“Peach.”

He groaned in agreement.

Footsteps approached us. I parted my hair and opened my eyes.

“Hey.”

It was the girl from the coffee shop. She was wearing a short-sleeved button down, but no men’s slacks today. She was also wearing sunglasses, so for a moment, I thought she was looking at me. I didn’t say anything in response to her greeting. I suddenly felt like I didn’t know how to speak at all.

“Hi, Minnie!” Hunter sat up.

I looked down, embarrassed at my mistake.

“Marsha, this is Minnie. Minnie, Marsha.”

“Hey,” she said again.

“Hi,” I said. Two things about her were immediately apparent, based on looks alone: she was hot, and she was gay.

“Minnie’s a writer too,” Hunter said to me, “and an artist.”

“Well, I write and I draw,” Minnie said, “I don’t know if I’d go so far as to call myself an actual ‘writer’ or an actual ‘artist.’”

Then she pushed her sunglasses down a bit and winked at me as she said, “I’m just kidding, I’m both, and I’m also narcissistic, hi, nice to meet you.”

She put a hand out toward me as she pushed up her sunglasses, grinning smugly. I took it, though shaking hands was incredibly weird from this position, and laughed.

She sank down next to me. “What’re you guys doing out here?” she asked. “Just trying to get Lyme disease, or?”

“Yeah, that’s the objective,” I said.

“Oh, well, so far so good, I’d say.”

“You’re an expert, then?”

“I’m unparalleled in my field, yes, thank you for noticing.”

I grinned at her.

“So Hunter’s from California, I know,” she said. “How about you?”

“Oh,” I said, “we’re from the same place, we came here together.”

“We used to date,” Hunter chimed in, laying on his back now. I bit my lower lip.

“Wow, that is extremely weird,” Minnie said.

“Thank you,” I said, “we know.”

The three of us stayed like that for a while, switching between us so that two were always laying down while one sat up. We talked about classes and the weather and our dorms. Objectively it was all somewhat dull, but in the moment I was laughing and smiling like I’d yet to with anyone here besides Hunter. Objectively this girl knew how to make first impressions; knew how to make strangers feel comfortable around her— so well that maybe it wasn’t all genuine. But in the moment, it was just working.

I looked over at Minnie as she was talking about the mountains. I looked at the hair on her arms, dark and thick, just as a ladybug crawled up from the grass onto her. She picked it up

on the tip of her finger and brought it up near my face. I put my own hand up to take it from her, but it flew away before I could. We both laughed.

Hunter and I parted ways with her eventually as he followed me back to my dorm. “She’s nice, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “She’s funny,” I said.

“I thought you two would get along,” he said.

“Why?”

He shrugged.

*

Emma was reluctantly trailing a butterfly in the garden of the family manor when I heard a peal of laughter like that singular laugh that makes a standup comedian go, “someone really liked that one” from the common room. I waited a moment, and then, with similar reluctance to Emma’s, opened my door to peek.

A group was situated around the common room table, all leaning in to watch as a select few members of the group played a board game— what appeared to be Mouse Trap.

Jidah grinned at me, so I made my way over to her, sinking on the thin wooden arm of the couch and leaning toward her. “What’s happening right now?” I asked.

“Mouse Trap,” she said.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “I’ve never even been able to set that game up properly. Did they actually figure out the rules?”

“I think they’re making them up as they go along.”

Petra was in the select few. She tipped the little plastic bucket over, and we all watched in perfect silence as the little metal ball slid down the plastic steps. Eventually something was knocked over, and when it was, everyone screamed.

I laughed and leaned back against the wall. Jidah nudged me and indicated the girl on her other side. She was small and chubby and had blonde ringlets like a toddler in a Victorian painting. She kind of looked like a grown-up, real-human-version of an American Girl doll.

“This is Kate,” Jidah said.

Kate smiled at me and offered her hand. I shook it, smiling back. She seemed like the kind of sweet that on different days would either be comforting or irritating.

The game went on for a while, and I stayed for part of it, but eventually I returned to my room, waving at Jidah and Kate as I went. Emma resumed her dispassionate pursuit of the butterfly. It paused in the air a moment, just flapping its wings— I wasn’t entirely sure butterflies did that, to be honest, but this one did— and Emma put out her hand. It landed on her finger, and she brought it up to her face, studying its spots for a moment before it flew away.

*

Her full name was Mrinalika Petit. She told me this when I ran into, and sat across from her, at the campus café. She was Maltese-Indian-American. “Don’t send me pictures of small dogs in Native American head dresses,” she said, “and this could be a beautiful friendship.”

She wrote and drew comics. “They’re called graphic novels, actually,” she said, tilting her head up and placing her palm flat on the table. “They’re works of serious literary merit and I don’t appreciate you devaluing them with your crass language.”

“You said it!” I said.

“We’ve met twice and already she’s trashing my art form. Women are so cruel.”

I laughed, shaking my head and rolling my eyes.

“Nah,” she said, “I’ve never finished anything long enough to be called a graphic novel in my life, anyway. They’re comics. They’re very bad comics.”

“I’m sure your in-progress graphic novels are worthy of the Louvre *and* the Penguin Classics Library.”

“Those are on equal footing?”

“I don’t know,” I said, laughing. “Should I have said a library? Is there a particularly respectable library where your graphic novels should be?”

“The Library of Alexandria,” she said, grinning. It wasn’t even that good of a joke. I doubled over giggling.

She smiled at me as she picked up her mug, blowing softly before taking a drink of her coffee. I looked down at my hands.

“So you write historical fiction,” she said. “Anything I might have heard of?”

“Oh, um, yeah,” I played bashful as I slipped my fingers through the handle of my own mug. “I wrote a novel called *Jane Eyre*?”

“Huh!” she said. “You know, I could have sworn that book was contemporary to its time — I guess that’s a testament to your skills?”

“Actually, that’s a common misconception,” I said. “*Jane Eyre* takes place around the 1810s or so, but was actually published in 1847, so—” I cut myself off as Minnie smirked. I sighed and took a sip of my tea. “I ruined it,” I said.

She laughed. “Nah,” she said. “You’re cute.”

I accidentally swallowed an incredible pull of tea. I coughed as it burned my mouth.

“Are you OK?” Minnie asked.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m good.”

*

I woke up late Sunday morning and groaned when I saw the time. I knew I should have set an alarm, but I was so exhausted the night before. I hadn’t even brushed my teeth.

I’d check out one of the local churches another time. Come to think of it, even if I’d gotten up early, I hadn’t bothered to look up what time services were at any of the churches in town. And from what I’d gathered, the school chapel was fairly non-functional.

I sat up and put my hair in a pony tail. My kettle was empty, so I stepped out to the bathroom to refill it. I had a small collection of mugs set up on my desk. I chose the largest of them and dropped in a tea bag.

Petra was out. She probably woke up at a reasonable hour— although not for any religious purposes, most likely.

I lay on my back on my bed listening to the water boil. It occurred to me that I should call my family, and then I felt bad that it was only now occurring to me. I pulled out my phone. I had several missed calls from yesterday— two from home and one from my dad’s cell. I sighed. Occasionally it was apparent that there were reasons some people didn't keep their phone on silent 24/7.

The water boiled. I stood and poured it. Then, with my mug cradled in my hands, I climbed back onto the bed and called home.

“Hello?”

“Hi, mom.”

“Hi!” I could hear her smile. “Marsha, I’m so sorry sweetie, we’re actually about to head out to church— oh, did you go to a service this morning? Oh, how was it? Oh, you’ll have to tell me about it later— I’m so sorry, it’s so good to hear from you! I hate to leave—”

“Mom,” I said with a laugh. “It’s fine, go ahead. I’m sorry, I forgot about the time difference. I’ll call you back later.”

“OK, honey. We love you!”

“Love you too, have a nice time.” And she hung up.

I grabbed my bible off my shelf, careful not to spill my tea in the process. I was reading Galatians when Hunter texted.

you wanna get milkshakes?

*

The diner was tiny, campy, and playing some very happy blues. I felt like I was in *Twin Peaks*.

“Every single thing on this menu looks good,” I said.

“OK, but you have to get a milkshake,” he said.

“Why, are they good here?”

“No, I don’t know— but we came here for milkshakes, so you have to get a milkshake.”

I laughed. “OK,” I said. “Can I get fries, too?”

“Sure, you can get whatever you want. As long as you also get a milkshake.”

Hunter got peanut butter chocolate and I got Oreo. I debated getting seasoned fries, but for dipping purposes, I went with regular instead. “Smart choice,” Hunter said.

“So,” I said, “some of the girls in my dorm are starting this club-thing. Petra started it, actually.”

“What kind of club?”

“I’m not really sure, some kind of, like, wilderness club, or something? I think it’s about, like, hiking, or like, foraging for wild mushrooms, or something.”

Hunter raised a brow. “Are you gonna join?”

“I’m not sure. I mean, it sounds like physical exertion will be involved.” He snickered.

“But Petra’s really excited about it, and I think she had Jidah on board.”

“Jidah seems cool.”

“Yeah. I don’t know.”

I tapped my glass on the table a few times, chewing on my lip. “It’s probably a good idea to join stuff, right? That’s what people always say about college— like, ‘get involved’, or whatever.”

Hunter nodded, sucking hard on his straw. I chuckled. He wagged his eyebrows at me. I sucked on my own straw, waggling back. We both laughed and choked simultaneously, causing us to laugh and choke harder. A waitress smirked at us as she walked by.

“Yeah,” Hunter said. “That sounds cool. You should do it.” He grinned, “Can I join?”

“Sorry,” I said, tossing my hair over my shoulder. “No boys allowed.”

He pouted and laughed. We ordered another basket of fries.

“So how’re things with the roommate?” I asked. “What’s his name again?”

“Sebastian,” Hunter said, looking down. “He’s OK. He invited me to a party tomorrow night.”

“Look at you!” I said. “All grown up, getting invited to college parties!”

“Mom, you’re embarrassing me.”

The waitress brought our fries. This time they were seasoned.

“So are you gonna go?”

“I don’t know, are you gonna join that club?”

“Touché, sir. Touché.”

*

Petra had a mushroom guidebook. I wasn’t sure if she had bought it here or brought it from home. Either way, she was fascinated by it. She lay on her back on my bed, holding it up over herself. “Look at this one,” she said.

I scooted down until I was on my back beside her. “Gross,” I said.

“It looks like a little man.”

“A little mushroom man.”

“A fun guy.” She grinned.

“No,” I groaned. “That was so bad. And not even grammatically correct.”

“We get it, you’re a writer.” She smirked as she flipped a page. “Look at this one.”

I paused a moment, narrowing my eyes. “That looks like a vagina.”

“Really?” Petra held the book closer to her face. “I think it looks like a penis.”

She held the book up over us.

“It looks like Freud,” I said.

Petra laughed and I sat up. Petra continued to page through the mushrooms.

“Will the club be limited to people in this dorm?” I asked, studying the Pollock print over Petra’s bed. The longer I studied it the less I understood.

“No, no,” Petra said, resting the book on her chest. “Any girl can join.”

*

“Minnie!”

She turned at the sound of my voice and smiled. I sidled up beside her. Looking at her, I remembered the first concert I’d gone to. I remembered being crowded in and overwhelmed, my body like a fire alarm blaring insistently. I was over-sensitized but smiling so wide, like I had fish hooks in both cheeks. Looking at her, the back of my neck prickled with sweat.

“Where are you heading to?” I asked.

“Just back to my room. What’s up?”

A bead of sweat like a slow, dragging fingertip dragged down my spine.

“You wanna do homework together?”

She grinned. “Sure.”

I turned and she walked half-beside, half-behind me. I glanced at her as we walked. She had a freckle right below the right corner of her mouth.

The dorm smelled strongly of weed when we entered. “I think there’s a skunk in here,” she said. I snorted.

Minnie settled onto my bed easily, leaning her head against the wall. I dropped my bag at the foot of the bed and sat.

The window was open a crack. Petra must have opened it. A breeze somehow forced its way through the tangle of branches. With a sigh, I settled back against the wall beside Minnie.

“Was this school your first choice?”

I nodded.

She grinned. “That’s nice.” She craned her neck to look at my bookshelf. “Big Austen fan, I guess?”

I nodded.

She ran a hand through her hair.

“I like your nail polish,” I said.

“Thanks,” she brushed her thumb over her forefinger. “I’m always picking at it.”

“I’m always picking at my actual nails.” I drew my leg up to my chest.

“What do you like about Austen?” she asked.

“Um,” I said, “I think asking what I *don’t* like about her might be more useful.”

“OK,” she said. “What don’t you like about her?”

I smirked. “Nothing.”

She laughed. “Why regency, though?”

I leaned further back, until my head was on the mattress. “The language, mostly. And something about the manners, I guess? Something about how much has to be unspoken.”

She put her hand on the mattress.

“Plus the setting is idyllic, you know. The untainted nature, the tea.”

She laughed. “The tea?”

I nodded.

“She likes Austen for the tea,” she mused. “Fair enough.”

For a while, we actually did homework. But then she made a *Scott Pilgrim* reference, and all was lost. She picked at her nail polish as I rambled out Ramona Flowers's tea flavors.

“Do you like mushrooms?” I asked.

Pixie's Interlude One

The jumble of species nearest the tree house always did love to complain, ever since the building was erected. I suppose being in such close quarters with so many other trees would drive anyone half-mad, but not one of them, that I can recall, ever admitted that it was one another's company that was driving them to the edge. "It's that building," they'd say. "It's those lousy kids and their ugly building."

I always thought it was funny of them to complain to me, of all trees. To complain to any hollow-trunk about having one's space intruded upon— but me, particularly! Whom the fairies dubbed the only suitable tree for occupation, no matter how I tried to make myself inhospitable!

Of course the fairies and I are on good enough terms, now. You never can stay bitter with a fairy for too long— let alone some thousand of the little sparkling things. I liked to imagine they just grew on me. Probably the pixie dust had something to do with it, the willow was always telling me. But she's such a whiner, I don't listen to her.

I never saw the children much. I gathered most of the gossip from the tree house trees, or those in the 'quad,' as the kids called it. Them that sat just at the tree line before the lagoon had good things to say from time to time. But mostly they just droned on and on about the mermaids. Lovesick weeds.

The first time I saw the girl was a warm day, towards the end of summer. I was enjoying the warmth on my leaves, trying not to think about the months to come when the sunlight would dwindle; when my leaves would fall to the ground and it would just be my bare branches forced again to brave the cold. But, for now— the sunlight.

The girl parted the leaves of a maple a few rows over from me. He grumbled, put off, but of course she didn't hear him. I was surprised at her presence and I anticipated her approach with quaking limbs— although, that may have been just the breeze.

She was following a fairy. The little creature darted into me, up, up, up until she could peer down at the girl from the tip of my tallest branches. I tsked at her, but she ignored me.

The girl got on her hands and knees and settled on my roots, as smaller animals are wont to do, from time to time. But it had been ages since I'd had a human near me— it'd been so long that I felt like a new sprout. Nervous, vulnerable. Like I didn't know where to put my branches.

She turned over, abruptly, and stuck her head in my hollow trunk.

A few fairies darted out of the way, nearly crushed by her skull. Her eyes widened in marvel as she gazed up at the fairies' settlement. Her mouth was open so wide a number of little teasing pixie teens joked they could dive right in if they so desired. Their mothers smacked them upside the head.

For a while she just lay there, staring up at them. Everyone was silent, waiting, watching, wondering what she might do. Eventually something buzzed on her leg— in her pocket— and she stood up, and walked away, glancing back once before disappearing, brushing past the maple again, who was silent this time.

The silence remained for a moment, and then chaos broke out. I felt the fairies darting around madly in me, their tiny, tinny voices all screaming as loud as they were able, so a great buzzing poured out of me as if a beehive had been knocked down.

They surrounded the fairy the girl had followed.

“How did she see you! What did you do!”

“I don’t know!” the poor creature cried, “I saw her notice me and darted away— they always lose interest after a moment, I only assumed she would think I was just a dragonfly or, or — but she cornered me! There was nothing I could do!”

“You could have refrained from leading her back here!”

The fairy huffed.

“They’ll all come after us now!” a fairy screeched. “They’ll pull us apart!”

“They’ll cut Pixie Hollow down!”

I blanched at that.

“They’ll do no such thing,” an elder fairy cut in. “Don’t you go scaring the younglings like that.”

The fairy darted up out of me, hovering in the air before me, looking into the woods, after the girl. “She’s a good girl,” she said. “She won’t harm us.”

“Well, maybe not her, but the others—”

“Hush.”

“Do you think she’ll come back?”

I hoped so.

“Kate,” Petra said. “There you are. Where’d you disappear to?”

Kate shrugged, glancing behind her. “I thought I saw something.”

“What’d you see?” Minnie asked. “Or think you saw.”

Kate shrugged again.

Minnie raised an eyebrow at me. I, too, shrugged.

“OK,” Petra said. “Here’s something.”

She crouched down. I didn’t see anything at first, but the four of us gathered around her, and I spotted something dark and apparently fungal in the tangles of some roots.

“What is it?” Jidah asked.

Petra pulled out the mushroom guidebook and searched the codex.

Minnie leaned towards the mushroom, resting her palms on her knees. “So,” she said.

“Are we gonna get high off this, or?”

Petra snorted.

I narrowed my eyes at the forest floor. “Do you... smoke mushrooms?”

Minnie laughed. “No.” She grinned at me when she stood. “But you can make tea with them.”

I rolled my eyes with a smile.

“Not big on hallucinogens?” she asked.

“Not big on any mind-altering substances.”

“Huh,” she said. “You don’t drink or anything?”

I shook my head.

“Is that, like... a vegan thing, or?”

I laughed. "I'm not vegan."

"The girl invites me to a mushroom club, what am I supposed to think?"

I shook my head, grinning. Jidah and Kate were crowded around Petra, pointing at the book as she turned pages with a furrowed brow. I said, "I just don't really like the idea of not being in control of myself, or my faculties, or whatever. Plus it's kind of a moral thing for me. Or a religious thing."

She looked away from me, at the mushroom. "Oh? What religion are you?"

"Christian."

She looked at me. "Like, Catholic or Quaker or?"

"Non-denominational."

"Huh." She brushed imaginary dirt off on her pants. "That's cool."

I felt my hair starting to rise from awkwardness. "Are you religious?" I asked.

She tipped her head side to side. "Kind of. My mom was raised Hindu and my dad was raised Catholic, but they're both kind of lazy about it. We, like, have the iconography around here and there, and sometimes pray, or whatever, when there's like, a crisis or something. But we don't really go to mass or temple or anything." She smirked. "My mom makes us do yoga sometimes, but I think that's mostly because she knows we're all lazy and wouldn't do any exercise otherwise."

I laughed, nodded. "That's cool."

"It's this one," Petra said, standing, pointing at a picture. "It's definitely this one."

Minnie leaned toward the page. "Panaeolus," she read.

"So should we... write it down?" Jidah asked.

“Yeah!” Petra looked at me. I pulled the little notebook we’d brought out of the pocket of my dress— which had been a poor clothing choice, as I had to hold it up the whole time we walked.

“Spell it?” I asked. She did. I wrote it down.

“Excellent,” Petra said.

“Thus, we have ourselves a mushroom club,” Minnie said. We all smiled.

*

Minnie’s shoulder was pressed up against mine on the common room couch. I was extremely aware of it, and extremely aware of my awareness. I’d felt this before— this feeling, when touching someone, this fear that if I moved in the slightest the contact might cease, and I might cease as well. This strange loss of interest in my corporeal existence save for the small part of my body that was touching hers. As if everything but my shoulder could disappear and it wouldn’t matter. I knew this feeling, I’d felt it before. Only there was one crucial difference between the person I was touching now and the people I had touched before. This person was a ‘she’. ‘Her.’ ‘Girl.’

I was biting my lip so hard I thought I might split it.

The common room was warm from the oven, where a tall boy in an apron that said ‘salad tosser’ was baking brownies— it was as yet unclear whether they were ‘special’ or not. Minnie had her feet up on the cheap, wobbly dining room table. I was kind of grossed out by the hygiene of it, to be honest, but the position was also incredibly charming, so I didn’t say anything.

Petra hummed as she stirred spaghetti in her purple-handled pot. A group of boys were loudly playing fantasy football on the communal TV— which I think someone had brought from

home. The window was open, a thin branch just barely poking through, like a thief stealing in as quietly as possible.

I leaned my head against the couch and closed my eyes. I listened. I listened to the voices, the clinking of the spoon in the pot, the clicking of the controllers. I listened to the wind coming in, and the music streaming down the hall from the showers. I listened to a memory being made. I thought, *This is what they talk about when they talk about youth.*

Minnie tugged on my hair. “What’re you thinking about?” she asked.

I opened my eyes and grinned at her instead of responding. She looked me over the way someone about to do something looks at the thing they’re going to do it to. I tensed. But seconds passed, and she didn’t move.

“OK,” Petra said. “Where’s your bowls?”

Minnie got up and brought our bowls over to the stove top. Petra spooned pasta into our bowls. “Sauce is right there,” she said, tilting her head.

Minnie handed me my pasta and I scrambled into a more upright position to accept it. A moment later, when Minnie had reseated herself, I felt her knee bump mine. I glanced over at her, and she glanced at me. I didn’t move my knee. She slurped a long noodle into her mouth. I laughed.

“You wanna be Lady,” she asked, “or the tramp?”

*

I tapped out a pattern on Hunter’s arm with the hand he wasn’t painting.

“Can you stop?” he said. “You’re going to mess me up.”

I continued to tap.

“Fine,” he said. “Your smeared nails, not mine.”

I withdrew my tapping hand with a sigh.

Hunter glanced at my face again after a minute of silence. “Are you praying?” he asked.

“What?”

“You’re all concentrated on something, like you get when you’re praying.”

“I wasn’t praying.”

“Just taking a dump in the middle of your common room, then?”

I smacked him. “Mature.”

“What were you thinking about?”

I looked at my nails, six of which were now dark green. Hunter always complained that the color was boring, but I loved it.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You don’t know, or you won’t tell me?”

“I don’t know.”

“OK,” he said. “I’m here, though. If you ever need to talk about anything.”

I leaned forward so my forehead was resting on his shoulder.

He carded the hand that wasn't holding the nail polish through my hair. I opened my eyes, staring at his side, blurry from its closeness. Then I started tapping his arm again.

“Did I or did I not tell you to cut that out,” he said. I laughed.

*

Minnie groaned and pushed her books off my bed. They landed on the floor with several loud thumps.

“I’m so tired,” she said, dropping onto her back, pushing her dark hair back from her face. I looked at her from the corner of my eye, still typing. “Stop,” she moaned, elongating the word. “Let’s take a nap.”

I stilled and looked over at her, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth. Someone on the floor was playing the B-52s. The sound of it, dim, in the background, pulsed in my chest. “OK,” I said.

Minnie scooted toward the wall to make room for me to lay beside her. I set my laptop on the floor and did just that.

We lay on our backs for a moment. Then Minnie turned on her side, facing the wall. I hesitated a moment, wondering whether I should stay on my back, or turn away from her, or— and then she reached behind her, taking my hand, and pulling me so that I faced her, and my arm draped over her hip.

“Is this OK?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

She yawned.

I had never felt farther from sleep in my life.

*

I would’ve missed the call if I hadn’t happened to glance down at my phone at precisely the right moment. I knew I would never stop missing calls until I turned off silent mode. But I hated talking on the phone anyway, so I wasn’t exactly convinced that was a bad thing.

“Hi, pappy,” I said.

“Hey, stinkerpot. How’s it going?”

“Well,” I said. “I’m just reading.”

“How’s the weather there?”

“Still hot,” I said. “Everything is such bright green here. It’s surreal.”

“Snot green or Shrek green?” my dad asked.

I snorted. “Shut up.”

Petra came in. I smiled at her before tucking my phone between my head and my shoulder, going to refill my kettle.

“I joined a club,” I informed my dad.

“Great!” he said. “What club?”

“It doesn’t have an official name yet,” I said. “But it’s kind of like a hiking, mushroom-hunting, nature club.”

“Mushroom-hunting?”

“Uh huh.”

“Do you shoot the mushrooms?”

I rolled my eyes, smirking. “Mushroom scavenging, then.”

“Sounds fun. Watch out for ticks, though.”

I shuddered. “Do I ever.”

Coming back into the room, I set the kettle down and turned it on, then avoided meeting gazes with Petra as I moved back to my bed.

I didn’t much like being on the phone with someone else in the room— the awareness that they could only hear my end of the conversation put on a strange pressure to make my side entertaining, the same way I might start cracking jokes in line at the grocery store, trying to

convince the cashier, in the brief moments they'd know me, that I was funny, interesting—I don't know.

At the same time, I liked people my age hearing how casual my conversation was with my parents, especially my dad. For some reason it made me feel special, or unique, or something, that I was so close with my dad—that he was my friend. I knew a lot of people my age probably couldn't or wouldn't say the same. But my dad was kind, and funny, and supportive, and intelligent. And I'd never had any sort of teenage rebellion phase. I'd never wanted to. It wasn't even that I liked obeying—I just liked the rules. I agreed with them. My dad and I agreed on most things. Except the line between quality humor and crassness, or just bad puns. But I suppose dad jokes are a small price to pay for a dad who actually acts like a dad.

“I love you more than cheese left out in the sun for two days,” my dad said, in place of a goodbye.

“Gross,” I said, as always. “Love you too.”

*

“Emma,” a voice startled her out of her reverie. “Where is your mind these days?”

Emma set the teapot down before recalling she hadn't yet poured any tea. She picked it up again and did so. When she sat down, her brother was looking at her with something between concern and irritation.

“Do you think it will rain?” she said.

“You haven't heard a word I've said these past ten minutes, have you?”

Emma pursed her lips.

“You are a strange girl,” he said. “Sometimes I really think you are caught between this world and some other. I only wonder what you see there.”

Emma sipped her tea.

I looked up at the knock at the door. “Come in,” I said.

Minnie peeked her head in the door before coming in entirely, as if afraid I might’ve spoken prematurely and would need a moment to make myself decent.

She pulled herself onto my bed. “Petra’s out there talking about serial killer Wiki pages like some people talk about the Kardashians,” she said.

I laughed. “They do have a similar addictive quality, I think.”

“So you keep up with the Kardashians?”

I shook my head. “I keep up with serial killer wiki pages, though.”

She grinned, shaking her head at me. “And you seem like such a nice girl.” I smirked.

“So what’s a good one?” she asked.

“Lizzie Borden,” I said.

“Who’s she?”

“She’s this woman from the 1800s who *definitely* killed her parents, but, like, she basically got away with it because people were like, ‘oh, she’s a lady, she couldn’t have done such a thing.’”

“Of course.”

“There’s even a children’s rhyme about her,” I said. “It’s pretty wild. The obsession over her, it’s like— I don’t know, it seems like people still can’t quite wrap their heads around it. Or like, they try to justify it by making up wild theories about her, you know— so she’s more than

just a woman who killed people.” I looked down and picked at a fingernail. “There’s one theory,” I said, “that she was a lesbian.”

Minnie glanced at me.

Petra slammed the door open. “The rain’s stopped,” she said. “Let’s go save some worms.”

We recruited Jidah and Kate before heading outside. Cameron was MIA, and Pearl was asleep, so we left her be.

The dirt was soft underneath my shoes. I didn’t have proper footwear for this kind of weather. I had Converse and snow boots, but nothing in between. It hadn’t been a necessity at home, and I didn’t really want to spend more money on seasonal clothing after how absurdly expensive my pea coat was.

Kate was wearing proper galoshes— green, like Georgie Denbrough's. I pointed out the likeness. She looked startled and uncomfortable, giving me a tight smile. I was confused by her response, but I didn’t push the issue.

True to her word, Petra walked a bit ahead of us, picking up worms as she went and moving them further from the path. Jidah seemed to be intentionally stepping in every puddle she encountered. I sent her a teasing look when I caught her in the act, and she trapped a smile in her mouth, avoiding my gaze and adjusting her hood over her hijab. Minnie was walking close to me. I was extremely aware of how neither of us had our hands in our pockets.

“My mom used to say rain was God crying,” I said. “And thunder was him moving his furniture.”

Minnie smirked. “What does God have to cry about?”

“Plenty.”

“Disappointment over all us sinners?”

I frowned, opening my mouth to respond, but Jidah beat me to it, ““Jesus wept.””

I looked at her, surprised.

“That’s the shortest verse in the bible, right?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “How’d you know that?”

“I want to be a Religion major,” she said. “I believe it is important to doubt, and fully consider my faith, rather than just blindly following the path of my parents, you know?”

I nodded slowly.

Minnie laughed. “I couldn’t blindly follow *my* parents’ faiths even if I tried. Neither of them have any idea what they’re doing anymore. My mom got the Ganesha sculpture in our living room from a crystal shop owned by two white guys that smoke a lot of weed.”

“Look who *I* found,” Petra called to us. We surrounded her, staring down at the mushroom she was squatted in front of.

“Speaking of weed,” I said. “That looks like it should have the caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland* sitting on it.”

“He was actually smoking a hookah,” Minnie said.

“Excuse me,” I said. “You can smoke weed with a hookah.”

“Oh pardon me,” she grinned, “forgot I was talking to the world’s top drug user.”

“*This*,” Petra said, “is not a drugs club. This is a nature club.”

“I had a pot brownie once,” Kate said.

“How was it?” Minnie asked.

Kate scrunched up her nose. “Gluten free.”

Minnie and I laughed until we couldn’t breathe, and the rest of them walked ahead of us.

“So why’d you come over here, anyway?” Minnie asked. “Why cross the country for school? It’s not like California is lacking in quality higher education.”

“I know I want to end up there,” I said. “Like, I want to live there my whole life. So I wanted to try out something else for college.”

“Huh.”

Kate glanced back at us as she walked. I wondered if she could see us... thinking about it.

As we walked with our eyelids drooped down and our hands unpocketed.

If she could see us considering it.

The air was strange. The weather was strange. I could feel the sun on my skin— on the nape of the neck, on the curve of my calves. But the clouds above us and the temperament of the surrounding air promised more rain.

I took in a slow, shaky breath.

Think about something else. Think about anything else.

I felt raindrops. Neck. Calves. Wind passed through the overbearing trees like an uncle’s hand through a nephew’s hair.

We— I— thought about it.

The grass looked more alive than grass really is, with all the insects shuffling through its locks... like city lights from a plane window, which blink as if organisms. The sun ignored the wheezing clouds. I ignored the fact that I was— we were— thinking about it.

The insects— for the most part— ignored us.

I leaped from a bee. Minnie laughed.

Plants didn't care if we were thinking about it.

*

“Hunter.”

“Yeah?”

We were FaceTiming even though he was within walking distance. I could tell from his eyes that he was scrolling on Facebook or Tumblr or something, not actually looking at me.

When I'd opened my mouth I had the kind of conviction you have right before you cliff-dive.

Like OK, go. Or what I'd imagine would be that conviction, at least— I'd never actually cliff-dived.

“You know Minnie.”

He looked at me, then.

“Yeah?” he said. He grinned.

“What's that face for?”

“What face?” He grinned wider.

“Do I even have to say it, then?”

“Say it,” he said.

“I think I like her.”

“Don't think,” he said immediately, “*feel.*”

“I hate you. I literally hate you.”

I'd said it. It was out there. The words existed in the universe. The fact of it had corporeal proof— or, I don't know. I guess sound isn't corporeal. But I'd *said* it. Out loud.

"I'm proud of you," Hunter said.

I laughed, surprised. "You're proud of me for having a crush on a girl?"

"No, dummy. I'm proud of for being able to admit you have a crush on a girl."

"Oh," I said. "I mean... to be honest, I think it's less like I'm admitting and more like I just..." I leaned my head back against the wall, probably putting my face out of the frame. "I just can't stop thinking about her and I had to tell someone because I feel like I'm going to explode."

"You're so cute," he said, and it wasn't like I'd forgotten, exactly, but— this was my ex-boyfriend I was talking to. Sometimes it slipped my mind.

Maybe he read my silence, because he quickly added, "I'm glad you told me this, Marsha. I'm really happy for you."

I smiled. "Thanks. But it's not like I know if she feels the same way."

"Oh, she feels *something*."

"Shut up," I smiled wider.

Hunter fidgeted for a moment. Then, "I like someone too."

"Who? Oh my gosh, tell me!"

He spluttered a laugh. "I— it's— Sebastian."

I must've looked like a cartoon character, my eyes went so wide. "Sebastian, like, your roommate Sebastian? Like— who's a boy?"

He buried his face in his hands and nodded.

"Are we actually having simultaneous sexuality crises? Crises?"

He dropped his hands and shook his head. “No, actually, um. I’ve known for a while.”

“What? What do you mean? You never said—”

“It’s just that I knew you were religious when we first met, so I didn’t know whether I should tell you, and then, like, eventually we were closer and I trusted you and everything and like I was going to but then I started having a crush on you obviously and I just thought you— that if you knew you wouldn’t ever— you know.”

I had absolutely nothing I could say to that.

He laughed, “But as it turned out you didn’t feel that way about me regardless, so. I don’t know. Maybe I should have told you at some point.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I wasn’t quite sure what I was apologizing for, or which parts, or if I should say more. The only thing I’d ever experienced that had shocked me more than this moment was... her.

“Don’t be,” he said.

“So you’re— but you’re not gay,” I said. That much I knew with certainty.

“Neither are you,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve liked guys.”

“Just not me,” he grinned.

I groaned. “Please shut up.”

He laughed.

“Do you know what you are?” I asked.

“I’m bisexual,” he said.

“Oh.”

“Do you?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

He nodded.

“So Sebastian,” I said, grinning.

“So Minnie.”

*

Minnie frowned at her phone. I glanced at it and restrained myself from reading the messages I saw there. “Who’s texting you?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“My ex,” she said after a pause.

My shoulders tensed. “What about?”

She rolled her eyes and shook out her short hair. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter. She just...” She wrinkled her nose before continuing, “I don’t know, she just contacts me out of the blue every once in a while, like, trying to get together or hook up or something, I don’t know. She’s... she just sucks. Like, fundamentally.”

“That’s terrible,” I said.

She chewed on her bottom lip. “She like... when she broke up with me, she was like, basically, ‘I could be with you if you were Indian, or if you were a girl, but not both.’”

“She said that to you? In real life? Out loud?”

“In so many words, yeah.” She shrugged. “Her parents are like racist and homophobic, and we were in high school at the time, obviously, so she lived with them, and— like, I get it, but I just feel like she didn’t— she could’ve handled that better, you know?”

“Um, yeah, you think?”

“It was like it was my fault, you know what I mean? Like the way she dumped me, it was like ‘it’s not me, it’s you.’ But like what could I have done differently?”

“That’s disgusting,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry I’m just like...” she made a face. “Word-vomiting my feelings at you. I’m so annoying, geez.”

“You’re not,” I said. “I’m glad— um, I’m glad you felt comfortable enough to share that with me.”

She smiled at me, the soft kind with no teeth, and little tug. “What about you?” she asked. “Got any awful exes?”

I half-laughed, half-groaned. “Just Hunter, really. And I think I’m the more awful one in that situation.”

“Did you break up with him?”

I nodded.

“That’s pretty crazy that you guys are still such good friends.”

I nodded again.

We were quiet for a moment. We were outside, sitting in Adirondack chairs. I let a ladybug crawl onto me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I just... couldn’t like... get him to be what he wanted to be, you know? Like, in my head. Like he was this, like, clay bowl I had and I was trying to reshape it but it had already set, you know what I mean?”

“Why’d you try?” she asked.

It was a good question. I could’ve just turned him down.

It had rained the day he'd asked me out— a fairly uncommon occurrence for where we lived. I'd been in PE, running the cross-country trail. The rain had started suddenly, soaking us through before we could get back to the locker rooms. When we did get there, the doors were locked, and coach was nowhere in sight. Loud complaints of twenty girls on one side and twenty boys on the other battled the beating of the water on the pavement in volume. I'd been laughing, watching the rain splash on the pool, leaning against the chain-link fence. My friend Jane— an in-school friend, the kind you didn't talk to, really, after you went home for the day— was laughing with me.

“It's like a free wet T-shirt contest,” she said, looking around.

“Oh my gosh,” I laughed. “Stop.”

“I know,” she smirked, “I'm the predatory lesbian your parents warn you about.”

I'd doubled over laughing. When I straightened again, leaning my head back, she grinned at me, just for a moment. She wasn't into me— she had a girlfriend, and she really only fell for sporty girls, anyway. So I knew she wasn't into me. But there was this second where she looked at me, and I just thought— If I kissed her. I think she'd let me.

“I don't know,” I said to Minnie.

“Mushrooms!” Petra called. Minnie and I turned towards the sound of her voice. She waved, some distance away, and ran over to us— really ran, like there was a matter of some urgency.

“Was that a greeting or a call to action?” Minnie asked.

“Greeting,” Petra said. “How're you guys?”

“Good,” we said. I looked over at Minnie as I said it. She had her sunglasses tucked into the collar of her tank top, but she took them out and put them on. I watched her hands as she did it, and followed one as it ran through her hair. She leaned her head back against her chair, her gaze hidden by the shades. I mean, she was unreal. Listen— I don’t swear. But she was unfuckingreal.

“You want to get ice cream?” Petra asked.

“Um, more than anything?” I said, swiveling around.

We caught the next shuttle off campus. The ice cream place was just alongside the lake— Mermaid’s Lagoon, so-called. I think it was a sexual innuendo of some kind, like, a lot of water hanky-panky happened there, or something. I’d never understood the logistics of having sex in a body of water. But maybe it was just for really fit people. One of whom I was not.

“We should go swimming here some time,” Minnie said.

My first instinct was to recoil in repulsion— the *bodily fluids* that this lake must hold— but then I pictured Minnie in a bathing suit, the visible dip of her curves; her thick thighs, no inch of space between them, exposed; water dripping down her chin, to her neck, and—

“Yeah, absolutely,” I said.

Petra got a proper ice cream sundae, with a banana and all. Minnie and I got one those popsicles that’s really two popsicles, with two sticks, and we split it carefully. Petra walked down to the water’s edge as we sat down in the grass. I let out a high-pitched shriek as I tried to keep pace with the melting popsicle, licking it up before it could drip onto my hand. Minnie laughed at me, and I gave her a look of desperate pleading, sticky red liquid all over my chin.

She leaned forward in a quick motion, and she licked it off of me.

I wasn't breathing when Petra was abruptly by us again, dropping down, horizontal in front of us. "What a wonderful day," she said.

Minnie looked at me. Her sunglasses were on her head now— I met her eyes.

"Yes," I said.

*

It was finally starting to get colder. Jidah and I got tea at the café and sat by a window, intending to do homework, but mostly looking out at the trees— the leaves were just changing— and talking. She had a soft smile, thoughtful and slow. I could never tell if there was really something guarded in her expression, or if I was simply over-reading the facts that she had excellent posture and didn't make a lot of direct eye contact. A few strands of hair had escaped her hijab, and I glanced away as she tucked them back in. I didn't know the etiquette with these things— I was pretty sure it was only men who weren't meant to see a Muslim girl's hair, but that was probably a matter of propriety to do with attraction, right? And as of late, with Minnie— well, anyway, I thought I'd better look away.

"Have you experienced a winter before?" I asked.

Jidah shook her head. "Not unless watching *Home Alone* counts."

I smiled. "Me neither."

"My mom keeps asking me if I'm saving up food stores," she said. "I think she thinks the campus closes down as soon as snow falls."

I laughed. "It's Y2K all over again." She grinned.

Jidah liked to make little figurines out of clay, and she was rubbing her thumb along one of them now— a tiny tulip bulb. She was taking botany, and was always getting in trouble for having clay out during labs.

I studied her face as she spaced out. It occurred to me that maybe a whole new world was open to me now, and I looked at her mouth. Could I feel for her as I did for Minnie? Could I want her? Could I fall for her?

She took a sip of her tea, obscuring her mouth. I frowned and looked out the window. No. It was just Minnie.

Giving up on my class reading, I pushed my book aside and took out my notebook, taking a long pull of tea and sighing as it warmed me from the inside out before setting my pen to the paper.

“They say she really is quite good with her hands,” Miss Halperin stated after a long pause.

“It would be pitiable in a wealthier family,” Miss Morris said. “Her prospects are so poor, though! It is almost logical that she should act as she does. If she cannot hope to find much of a husband, why should she not assist her family as she can, like her brothers?”

“She has a pretty face,” Miss Halperin said.

“To be sure, but what good is it with no dowry to speak of, and such poor manners?”

“Oh! She is not rude, at least.”

“Well, maybe not, but neither is she pleasant.”

“She is shy,” Miss Pacat said. “Only shy. I would not say she is unpleasant.”

“I find shyness perfectly unpleasant,” Miss Morris said. “It forces one to make all the conversation, and then one feels so self-centered.”

“Emma is shy,” Miss Halperin said.

They all looked over at Emma then. Emma was quiet, as she had been.

“Well,” Miss Morris said. “Maybe she and Emma would get along.”

“I’m going to get a pastry,” Jidah said. I startled, looking up at her. “Do you want anything?”

I shook my head. Jidah walked off just as the door chimed, and Cameron and Pearl came in. They came over, greeting me and abandoning their coats before going to the counter with Jidah.

I picked up my pen to keep writing, but I seemed to have lost the plot. Closing my notebook, I took a sip of my tea— it was cold, now, and nearly empty, anyway. I stood to join the others at the counter.

Pixie's Interlude Two

I had all but given up hope that the girl would return. Not that I had been thinking of her persistently— my changing leaves preoccupied me, of course— but still, I had firmly decided she would not be back. And then she was.

She was alone— all of us breathed a sigh of relief at that. She approached me hesitantly. She looked up at me— appraising me, or so it felt, but really she must have been searching for the fairies. They stayed hidden away, every one of them. Mothers held their children back, wrapped in their tiny arms, so they could not flit out to the girl. As if by staying hidden they might erase her memory of them.

I was very aware of the opening in my base— of how she might stick her head in again at any moment. Were she to do that, the fairies could not hide from her, not even in perfect stillness.

But she didn't. She looked up at me, silent, and after some time, she sat down, and leaned back against me.

I startled at the sensation and prematurely shed a few of my leaves. I wondered if this was what it was like to be one of those proud, social trees on the 'quad,' always surrounded by human life, always being leaned on and climbed in, roots passed over consistently whenever the weather was warm.

It was terribly pleasant. She began to hum.

"What's she doing?" some fairies were whispering to each other.

"Nothing," said those who could see out.

After a while, she fell asleep.

Immediately, she was surrounded by fairies, so dense around her I could barely make her out.

“I don’t like it,” the old beech beside me grumbled.

“I think she’s harmless,” a black gum tree said.

“Oh, I’m sure. Harmless! Harmless as rot! Harmless as a dogwood borer! Harmless as fire blight!”

“Would you be quiet about fire blight, already,” a young sugar maple said. “It doesn’t even affect you, you old geezer.”

“There’s a thing called empathy! You may have heard of it!”

“Be quiet, you.”

“She’s waking up!” a fairy cried, and a frenzy broke out as they all darted back into me.

The girl yawned and stretched, leaning back against me for another moment. Then she stood, brushed off her dress, and walked away.

“Hm,” the beech said after a time.

“She’ll be back,” said the black gum. I felt certain that was true.

“I’ll see you guys later,” Petra said, wrapping herself in a thin scarf as she stepped into her heeled boots. “I’ve got a group project meeting.” She made a face, sticking out her tongue, and Minnie and I made it back before saying goodbye.

Minnie was on her stomach, tapping her pen along to the music coming from my laptop speakers instead of using it to do the homework set before her. I turned my eyes away from said laptop, looking out the window for a moment. It was the coldest it had been so far, that day, and as I looked at the twisting branches, I wondered if they’d ice over, looking like scarab beetles in amber. If the ice would reach out farther, onto the window itself, freeze the whole thing and start to slowly crack it, so that I could hear the glass crackling in the night like a wood fire.

Minnie made a disgruntled sound, her pen on the paper again. I looked down at her, from where I was sitting up beside her, my whole body turned toward her, rather than leaning back against the wall or the bed frame, or anything that might make sitting up more comfortable. I thought about the thing I’d been told once, about how people cross their legs toward whoever in the room they’re more comfortable with. But it was just the two of us here.

The song changed to something faster, more adamant, and Minnie nodded her head along. I stared at her, and as I did I felt the possibilities of myself, my body, my free will. Because there were things I wanted, looking at her. And my heart had begun to slam with some rapidity against my chest, aware of the fact that I could do it. I could do anything. It was right there: the possibility.

I leaned forward, because I wanted to, because it was all I could think about, because it seemed right, it seemed good, because I could. I *could*.

Minnie looked up at me, and I kissed her.

It was awkward. She had to crane her neck up, and I felt kind of like I couldn't quite fit my body under me, somehow, in the position it took to lean down to her. It was short, and then I sat back up again, and she looked up at me— she had to open her eyes. Mine had closed, too.

“That what you want?” she asked.

I wasn't quite sure what she meant, but at the same time, I didn't quite care. Whatever *that* was— yes.

I nodded.

“You sure?”

I nodded again.

She pushed her notebook aside and pulled herself up. She was in front of me abruptly, resting on her calves, and she pressed her mouth to mine. I hadn't kissed anyone in a very long time. I hadn't *ever* kissed anyone I'd wanted to so much.

My heart was beating violently, but somehow, everywhere else— I didn't quite— feel anything.

I furrowed my brow, pushing into the kiss. She was rushed, as if in a panic, and tilted her head one way, then the other, like she couldn't figure it out, couldn't sit still.

Hesitantly, I raised a hand and pressed it into the middle of her chest, thinking, *why am I not feeling anything?* It felt like I'd been wanting this for years. Like my entire life had led up to this. And now— nothing?

She stopped, drew back, took in a breath. “I—” she said, her eyes still closed. Then she pressed her forehead to my chest. We just sat there a for a moment. When she came back up, she looked at me for a second before leaning back in.

Ah, I thought. There it is.

I opened my mouth, she bit my bottom lip. She had one hand on my waist, one on the back of my neck. She brushed her finger along my hairline there, and I shuddered into her mouth, feeling her smile just before her tongue.

I had both hands fisted in her hair, and I gave a light tug as I pulled back slightly, and ran my tongue along the seam of her upper lip and her gums. She shuddered violently, dropping the hand on my neck so both hands gripped my waist, squeezing hard, pulling me closer. She pushed me back, and I went down, pulling her on top of me as I went. Her mouth fitted against mine again, and we moved, moved our mouths, our hands, our legs. I tugged on her hair again as I sucked her bottom lip so hard I worried for a moment it might hurt. She brushed my hip where my shirt had ridden up as our tongues touched, and I let out a shuddering breath, tilting my head back involuntarily so her teeth scraped lightly against my chin. She swore, apologizing, and I laughed and pulled her back in.

We made out for what felt like— what might actually have been— hours. We were laying, wrapped around each other, half-asleep when Petra came back.

She met my eye— Minnie's were closed— and raised a brow. I grinned.

*

I blinked awake slowly. Minnie was looking at me— this soft smile on her mouth— maybe the most beautiful mouth on anyone, ever. She parted her lips, like she might say something, but was quiet.

This close, her skin looked so soft, this orange-brown, like the darker parts of a sepia photograph— I wanted to run the palm of my hand over her cheek, her neck, I wanted to touch

her everywhere, and just feel what she felt like, as you might wrap yourself in velvet, or run your thumb along a rose petal.

She put her hand over her mouth. “I have morning breath,” she said.

“Kiss me anyway,” I said immediately. She dropped her hand, grinned wide, and kissed me.

When she pulled away, she curled into my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her, tucking my chin in over her head and running a hand through her hair. *Yes*, I thought. *Yes*.

After a while— a long, blissful while— we got ready, she borrowing my toothbrush, and I didn’t even mind, because I pulled her in for a kiss as soon as she’d rinsed her mouth out. Then we walked down to the café. A mid-2000s song came on, and we both started sort of dancing, sort of just shimmying, moving, laughing with locked eyes, as we waited in line. She kissed me just before I stepped up to order, and I felt the heat in my cheeks like I’d already had my first pull of the drink I was ordering. We sat down with our drinks, and she held my hand on the table, and I was shaking a bit— not from the caffeine, not from cold, but from happiness. I’d never felt so much of it all at once. Normally happiness was less condensed for me, either stretched out, a low-to-mid-level over a period time, or a burst of excitement at one time, maybe: but this was something else, something entirely new. It was excitement and contentment and giddiness and comfort and joy, all at once. It felt, perhaps more than anything else, right.

“OK,” Minnie said. “So you know how people used to step on grapes to make wine?”

“Did they actually?” I set my mug down. “Or was that just in *Fantasia*?”

“No, they absolutely did, I’m very knowledgeable about these things.” I grinned. “So, do you think there are people who make coffee by stepping on coffee beans?”

I folded over in my seat laughing, nearly knocking my mug off the table, catching it at the last moment, still laughing as I pushed it back.

“You liked that one, huh?” she said, smirking.

Around noon, we joined Petra and the twins to hunt for mushrooms. Petra was insistent that we take advantage of the time we had before winter set in and there were no mushrooms left to be found. Cameron seemed fairly bored by the whole thing, but Pearl showed more enthusiasm than I’d ever seen from her as she followed closely behind Petra. I imagined Petra with a magnifying glass, turning to Pearl to say, “Elementary.” Although I’d heard somewhere that that quote was actually a misquote.

Minnie and I weren’t holding hands. I’d thought about it, almost gone in for it, when we first left the café; after all we’d held hands on the table, hadn’t we? But then she didn’t do it first, so I thought maybe I should hold off, and then I thought no, I should’ve just done it, but it was too late by then. So we walked side by side, still not holding hands. But there was a buzzing between us, like the low-level sound from above when one walks under a hornets’ nest.

Minnie waited until the others had gathered around a cluster of fungi— it was unclear whether Cameron was gaining interest or appeasing her sister, but she huddled regardless— and then said to me, quietly, “I really thought you were straight.”

I laughed. “So did I,” I said.

“This isn’t a gay until graduation thing, is it?”

I somehow frowned and chuckled at the same time. “Is that a thing?”

“Oh, is it.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t know anything.”

She was quiet for a while. A burst of wind came through the trees. I nearly fell over.

“OK,” she said.

“I like you,” I said. She looked at me. “A lot,” I said.

She smiled, looking down. “OK,” she said.

Cameron turned to us, her eyebrows high on her forehead. “This is very disgusting,” she said.

I laughed, and Minnie nodded in agreement.

“Don’t be rude,” Petra said.

“Why?” Cameron asked. “Will I hurt its feelings?”

“It’s good to be nice, anyway, Cam,” Pearl said.

Cameron smiled and shook her head.

*

“You’ve been gay five minutes and already you have a same-gender make-out partner,”

Hunter sighed, collapsing on my bed and crossing his arms across his chest in a very childish pout. “Meanwhile my ancient gay lips remain chapped, crusty, and untouched.”

“I seem to remember touching them,” I said. “And I’m not gay.”

“Well, neither am I,” he said. “And yes, you touched them, but you’re not a boy, so it wasn’t a gay touch. And we’re talking about gay touching right now.”

“A subject worthy of discussion.”

“I’m happy for you,” Hunter said. “But I’m miserable for myself.”

I laughed.

“Are you dating, then?”

I bit my lower lip, then loosened the bite and simply gnawed on it. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Do you want to date her?”

“I think so. I mean,” I shrugged my shoulders, left them up for a long while before dropping them again. “Like, yeah, I do. Like, I want to be around her all the time, and hold her hand, and kiss her face, and fall sleep with my arms around her, you know? So yeah. I want to date her.”

“But it’s kind of scary.”

“It’s kind of... yeah. I don’t know. It’s kind of something.”

“That makes sense,” he said. “That’s normal.”

“Sure,” I said.

“I’m happy for you,” he said again.

“How’s Sebastian?”

“*Oh* man,” he said. “He has been in the room a *lot* lately.”

“That’s good, right? So have you been talking to him?”

“No, I mean— like, all the time.”

“OK?”

“Like, I have to go to the showers to J.O., all the time,” he said.

I smacked him, laughing. “Your struggles are insurmountable,” I said.

“Don’t I know it,” he said, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead.

“I can’t believe I thought you were straight,” I said.

“I can’t believe you thought *you* were straight.”

I smacked him again. “Lay off.”

“Well! Don’t pigeonhole me.”

“You pigeonhole yourself.”

“Only in the shower.”

I smacked him again, but his proud grin was unassuageable.

I finally pulled out my laptop to work on an essay for Intro to Philosophy. We’d read a piece called “Why I Am Not a Christian” and were meant to write a response. My response was titled, “Why I Am a Christian.” I felt silly and clever about it simultaneously.

“What are you working on?” Hunter asked. He’d mentioned doing homework when he texted me before coming over, but he hadn’t brought anything with him.

I told him about my essay. He was quiet for a while as I typed.

“So how—” he started, and then cut himself off. I kept typing, distracted. Eventually, he went on, “How are you feeling about all that?”

“All what?” I asked, not looking over at him.

“Like... your religion. And... Minnie.”

I stopped typing. Then I continued tapping like I had on the keys, but on my thigh.

He started again, “It’s... you know... I know it’s cliché. But love is love. I mean not that you love her, I don’t know, maybe it’s a crush, whatever, but like— emotions can’t, to a point, be tamed. Love is love.”

“Right,” I said, “I mean, absolutely. It’s like... and I’m not, like— because you’re— my qualms or confusion or whatever aren’t about love, you know? It’s not that I think your— any—

love isn't valid or is in any way lesser or anything, it's really more just about, like, sexual acts? And also the sort of gender roles... but I don't—I have complicated, confused, not-set-in-stone feelings on the whole subject. And I want you to know that I don't think that any love is lesser than other love.”

“I don't think that,” he said. “I mean, it does kind of hurt that you think being gay or bi or anything is sinful at all, but I understand that is part of your religion, which is something you hold dear to your heart. But I—the point is, I don't want you to put yourself in a situation that makes you uncomfortable or hurts you.”

“I've been praying about it,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And I don't... like, you know— or I guess you don't know, but like, it's similar even if you don't believe, like, to conscience, you know, but, like... like, when I know I'm doing something wrong? I have this feeling. And it's not just like, oh, I'm doing something wrong. Like I feel disappointed on... God's behalf, you know? Like I let him down. Sorry, I know you don't believe—”

“Go on,” he said.

“Right,” I took my hair out of its ponytail and put it back into a new, tighter ponytail. “It's just, like. I don't feel that. About how I feel about Minnie. I never feel wrong, or bad, or judged— or maybe— just... not by God.”

“Huh,” he said.

“I don't know,” I said. “I haven't thought about it that much.”

“Sure,” he said, like he didn't believe me.

“No, I mean— like, I have thought about it, obviously. But it’s just like— like if it were something that I really did think was wrong, if it were something God really didn’t want from me, I don’t think I’d be able to stop thinking about it, you know? But I’m just... I keep thinking about her. And it feels right.”

I thought, but didn’t say: it feels like me. Me, realized.

*

Time seemed to pass differently after we’d kissed. There wasn’t morning, noon, afternoon, evening, night. There was kissing, and cuddling, and long, horrible stretches of separation, and then hands on thighs, and more kissing. There was her knee digging into my leg, hurting me, but my refusing to move because of the need to maintain contact. There was her finger— and then her tongue— in my ear. There was the moment I kissed the freckle below the right corner of her mouth.

I went to bed at some time past four one night. Or morning, I guess. It was dark but not pitch-black. The wind was loud and rain was pounding down. I thought the building might blow away. There was a lunar eclipse outside. For a while she was crying in my arms. She kept telling me I was pretty. She turned the light off because she called me too pretty. It was cold. But her skin was boiling, and I was wrapped around her.

Once when I was a child I got a fever, and my temperature was a single degree below the temperature they call fatal. I don’t remember much about it, because I was so young, and perhaps because I’ve successfully suppressed the misery of it, but I remember one thing, which was how confusingly hot and cold I was simultaneously. I’d never felt anything like it, and I hadn’t since. Well, up ’til now, that was.

She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear and smiled at me. Her front teeth were crooked. Turned in almost towards each other. Me from a few months ago would have found that particular trait something of a deal breaker, however much she'd deny it. But now it's my favorite thing about her. It's my favorite thing in the world.

I was so afraid. There are a lot of kinds of fear in the world, and depending on the type, I could usually explain myself so well, relate it to you in a way that you'd really understand, really empathize with. But this fear was so terrifying I didn't have the power of mind to distinguish it from its counterparts. I didn't have the strength.

I was so miserable. Every time something truly terrible happened in my life, I'd tell myself, all right, this is it, this is the moment. This is my before-and-after. Everything, every possible tragedy that follows this moment, won't have a chance at comparing to the pain I am feeling right now. But then life continues, and of course, I'm proven wrong. So the reasonable, evidential part of my brain knew, right now, that this wasn't the worst moment of my life. That worse pain was still come. That likely I'd felt worse pain before. But when you're in this much pain, you don't really care about comparisons. You just want it to stop before you die.

And yet I was so ready. I'd never felt so prepared for anything in my life as I was for this girl. It was like that one singular speech you had to give, or paper you had to read aloud in high school, the one and only one that didn't make you quiver and shake, that, as you stood, you only felt confidence to present. She looked at me and I thought *right*, I thought, *yes*, I thought, *let's go*.

I was so happy. I talked to someone once, I don't remember anything about him besides what he said. He told me, as if he were revealing some great truth, "Your capacity for

happiness decreases as you age. In all your life, you'll never again be able to be as happy as you were in the happiest moment of your childhood."

At the time I thought he was a genius. I thought he was letting me in on some huge, life-altering fact. I felt enlightened.

Now I know he was full of it.

I was never as happy as a child, not once— not when my parents took me to Disneyland, not when my dad told me he was proud of me when I learned how to ride a bike, not when I was getting my cast signed at school and every kid in class was staring at me with eyes wide with admiration— as I was now.

She smiled at me. I was so happy.

I was so happy. I was so afraid. I was so ready. I was so miserable. I was so alive.

She said "I love you" first. She said it so frankly, so soon. I stared at her, I just stared. I thought, isn't it too soon for that? I thought, all those movies were right.

I thought to myself one night, *Don't say it. It's so cheesy. Don't you dare say it.*

"I think I'm getting close."

A moment of quiet.

"To what?"

I could hear the smirk in her voice, "To orgasming?"

I rolled my eyes. Then remembered how dumb what I was about to say was.

"No."

"To what?"

"To loving you."

She groaned. Ecstasy and frustration.

“You're so mathematic. 'Close'. Like it's a thing you can measure.”

“...How do you know?”

“You can just tell.”

“I can tell I'm getting close.”

“I love you,” she said.

I flinched. My pulse catapulted.

“You're delusional,” I said.

“No,” she said, “I think it a lot.”

I thought about it, thought about it, thought about it. Opened my mouth. Said it.

“Did you say you speak sign language?”

She turned her head slightly, trying to see me through the dark, over her shoulder.

“Morse code,” she said.

My nervousness and excitement collapsed together. So much for that corny idea.

“Why?”

“Nothing. It just popped into my head.”

She gave me a look.

“Someone told me they spoke sign language.”

“I took German in the sign language classroom.”

“Oh,” I said. “Right.”

She showed me a random assortment of words she knew in sign language. I showed her the name of my Deaf second-cousin-twice-removed, or whatever she was.

My heart shoved against my chest like an earthquake victim pushing against collapsed debris. Desperate for escape.

I held it up. "Do you know this one?"

She didn't pause. "I love you."

I dropped my hand. She held hers close to us, making that phrase with her fingers. Was she hesitant? Enthusiastic? I didn't care. I held it up back.

She got so sick. A coughing fit came over her. We crawled out of the bed and into the common room. I rubbed her back and felt helpless as everyone else helped her. She pressed her face into my stomach. I thought about our hands.

In bed again. Her face over mine. Her lips near my ear. She whispered. "I love you."

I smiled. Laughed. "I love you too."

I saw her mouth tug up at the edge when I brushed past her singing "I Wanna Hold Your Hand".

"Do you remember when we were laying in Cameron's bed? When 'Hallelujah' came on, and you sang along?"

I nodded, because I remembered few things as much as I remembered that.

"I was so in love with you."

Walking across campus one night, she climbed up on the fence posts, walked along them like balance beams.

I said, "I didn't realize we were in *Footloose*."

She said, "We can be whatever romantic comedy you want."

We laid out on the soccer field. Laughed at the clouds over the stars as I rested my head on her chest, and she put her hand in my hair.

"You can't have sex in the soccer field!" someone shouted at us. She ran away, I strolled.

"You're like a painting," I said to her.

"You're clay."

"You're like a Marilyn Monroe co-star."

"You're so beautiful."

I thought, *Am I falling in love or writing?*

I never used to write nonfiction.

"What did you think about?" she asked.

"I was wondering if I meant it. And wondering why I didn't wonder if you did."

"It was brave of you to kiss me."

I held her hand in public.

"You're not afraid of anything," she said. "It's weird. I don't know. It's just ingrained in me— don't do that. It's not in you."

But it was.

She. Her.

I wouldn't kiss her on the sabbath.

*

The first time we got close, I put my hand on her hand, stopping her short. She pulled her hand away hurriedly. "Sorry," she said.

“No!” I said. “No, it’s OK. I just wanted to... before we... I thought I should tell you, um. That I’ve never... you know.”

“Had sex?” she asked.

“No, I’ve, like— with Hunter, we didn’t exactly, but. You know. But I haven’t, um.”

She waited, looking at me. Her shirt was unbuttoned but still on. Every time I glanced at her breasts I felt like I’d stepped into some alternate dimension. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I couldn’t believe she was giving me this.

I chewed on my lower lip and canted my head back and forth. I didn’t want to say it. It felt almost childish.

“You’ve never had an orgasm?” she asked.

I nodded.

“OK,” she said. “Right! OK. We can go slow?”

“We’ve been going slow,” I laughed.

“I just— knew you hadn’t been with a girl before, so I—”

“No, no. I’m not complaining. I know. I really appreciate it.”

“So, slow, or?”

I put my head in my hands, laughing. With my face still covered, I said, “I’m going to kiss you in a minute. You can touch me, if you want?”

“I want,” she said.

I kissed her.

A week or so later, I approached Cameron. I don’t know why I went to her. She just seemed like she’d know. And like she wouldn’t mind me asking.

“Come in!” she called when I knocked. Pearl was MIA. “Hey!” Cameron said. “What’s up?”

“How do you know when you’ve had an orgasm?” I asked, because there didn’t seem to be a good way to lead up to that.

She laughed. “Oh,” she said. “Trust me. You’ll know.”

I sat down on her bed and leaned my head back against the wall, groaning. “I just feel like I’ve— you know, *felt* things, but I don’t know how to— like, how can you tell?”

“If you’re not sure if you’ve had one,” she said, “you haven’t had one.”

“OK,” I said. “OK.”

The first time it happened, I was fully clothed. It was almost embarrassing. It would have been, if it hadn’t already happened for her, also fully clothed. Or maybe if I’d had room to feel embarrassed. But I didn’t.

The second was better, though. She, before me, her brown skin, all of it, and I could touch anywhere I wanted. I could kiss her everywhere. My fingers intertwined in hers looked even paler than usual. My name on her mouth was like an incantation, and I’d touched her before, but never when I could see everything, all of it, and yet I couldn’t keep my eyes off her face for long. She pawed at the air, and when I kissed her with my fingers inside, I felt like I’d opened a door to a place I’d seen in dreams, or in some other life— like I’d been let in to a place I’d nearly forgotten, but that I’d been missing for years. I was on fire, and calm. I was Vesuvius, and a gentle stream.

I tried to eat her, but I'd never done it before, and I didn't last long, gagging and apologizing, my eyes wild as I coughed and wiped my mouth with my thumb. "It's OK!" she said. "You're perfect. You're perfect. You don't need to be there yet."

But she was there, and when her tongue touched me, I gasped, and felt like I'd never gasped before, not really, not like this. It was a slow build, like bread rising, and there were moments I felt like an untied balloon that'd been let loose, but then it started up again, and I gaped, my eyelids squeezed tight and trembling. I thought I must look like I was having some kind of episode. But I couldn't bring myself to care.

I looked down at her, and she up at me. She reached up, and I thought she might squeeze my breast, but she stretched her arm out, like she was trying to get at my face. She settled for my shoulder, just stroking there, and I stared at her, even as I felt the orgasm building up, and I said, "I love you." She might have said it back; I didn't hear her, or anything but the noises I was making as my legs seized and trembled and my back shot up, involuntarily, so I was sitting up, staring down at her, panting and in love.

The Catholic phrase *forgive me, Father*, lent itself to me, because the sentiment was sacrilegious, but there was no other way to phrase it, than to say that being with her felt holy.

*

She plodded along before me in the snow, and I looked around us, as one might look around the Sistine Chapel— slow, full of marvel, unsure where to look first, and how much time one should allot to each individual sight, given the scope of the scene.

She came back toward me, and took off her glove to hold my hand. I took off mine too. We only lasted a few minutes of the cold— giggling as we gave in, me pulling on each finger 'til

my glove was snug again, her flexing her hands in her mittens. “You look like a Beatrix Potter character,” I said.

“I get that a lot,” she said.

We walked slowly. I felt outside of time, here. Outside of everything. Like we’d stepped into another plane, into a snowy world all its own, not so harsh as Narnia, maybe, but not so kind as a snow world might be in the dream of a child. It was painfully cold, after all. The beauty of it couldn’t distract from that— even as I stared, wide-eyed like a snowy owl, around me, I couldn’t stop the chattering of my teeth, or the regretful thoughts regarding my failure to bring along a beanie. The tips of my ears stung worse than any bee sting ever had.

We paused by a tall tree, stillness brought over us by the sight of a fox. We stared at it, a bit of a ways off, trying to be like statues. Eventually it scurried off, whether from fear of us or simply because it had places to be.

I leaned my head back against the trunk of the tree and sighed, watching the sigh as it drifted in the air.

“I love you,” Minnie said, and it tickled the back of my neck, it warmed the cold tips of my ears. You didn’t get used to it. You didn’t go numb.

“I love you,” I said. I didn’t say ‘too’— it seemed almost to take away from it, somehow. Like the phrase itself was enough, and I didn’t want to distract from it.

She put her mittened hand into my gloved one and squeezed. We kissed, cold and chapped lips, brief, and as I closed my eyes I wondered if my lids might freeze shut; eyelashes like little icicles, and I pictured Minnie’s gloved hand leading me home.

*

The mushroom club had ceased activities around mid-November, but by then we were more of a squad than a club, anyway. We went to the diner we frequented on one of the last days before the break. I sat between Minnie and Kate. Kate was wearing pink. She was always wearing pink.

Cameron sang One Direction and tapped her fork on the table, out of time with her singing. Minnie rubbed my thigh under the table. Petra leaned her head back against the booth, nodding her head along to Cameron's singing. Jidah asked, "Usuals?" and we all nodded, and when the waiter came, she ordered for all of us. She included a hot chocolate on the order, and Kate, who'd considered getting one on the shuttle, but had decided to save her funds, cut in, "Oh, no, I don't think I should—"

"I got it," Jidah said, and Kate looked down at her lap. She must have been embarrassed, because she was blushing.

The conversation wound from what classes we were planning on taking next semester to how bad on a scale from Nirvana to Nickelback the local band— "The Pirates"— that kept performing on campus was, and then on to whether or not Cameron and Pearl's dorm was haunted, and from there, to whether we believed in an afterlife at all. Jidah and I answered in the affirmative. No one was surprised.

On the shuttle, Minnie put her head on my shoulder. She'd shown me a mini-comic she'd drawn of us as we walked out of the diner, and I ran my thumb over the corner of the paper as I told her about my book; about Emma. "She loves words ending in 'some.' I'm lonesome. It's tiresome. How gruesome." Then, as we walked back to my dorm, hand in hand, "I'm going to tell my parents about you."

She froze. “Are you sure?”

“I hate lying to them.”

“But you’re not really lying— just not telling them.”

“Even lying by omission. I never lie to them, Minnie.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “I’m just not sure it’s a good idea. But it’s your decision, obviously.”

“Yeah, it is,” I said.

She laughed, shaking her head. “You’re so stubborn.”

“That’s why you love me,” I said.

“Just make sure you’re sure this is what you want,” she said. “You can’t take it back once it’s out there.”

It was immediately warm in the tunnel from the plane to the airport. When I'd met my mom and stepped outside with my luggage, I closed my eyes for a moment, tilting my head back, breathing in.

Being here, I wasn't sure that the last four months hadn't been a dream. That the reaching branches, the blanket of white over everything, whether Jihad, and Kate, and all the friends I'd made and all the things we'd done, weren't a dream.

That she wasn't a dream.

There, I was a lover. I wrote bad romantic poetry in the middle of the night and I had sex with a girl I loved and I put my hand in her hair whenever I liked.

Here I was just a hopeless romantic who'd never been in love. Here I was the girl who, in the romantic fantasies she'd put herself to sleep with, always pictured fictional couples, because inserting herself into a relationship with whatever boy she had a crush on at the time felt invasive of his privacy. Here I only liked boys. Well, and Kristen Stewart.

"So, how was school?" my mom asked. "Tell me everything!"

I grimaced.

Almost as soon as I'd dropped my suitcase off in my room, I announced I was going to Hunter's. My mom laughed. "Don't you see enough of him at school?"

Hunter's mom hugged me tight when I arrived. "He's upstairs, just got back ourselves," she said.

Hunter raised a brow at me. "Marsh, I know you love me, but really, this is excessive."

I flopped down on his bed. I'd missed real beds.

"I don't know how to tell them," I said.

“Again,” Hunter said, “you do *not* have to tell them if you don’t feel ready.”

“No, I want to,” I said.

Hunter grunted. It wasn’t a particularly approving noise.

“I know they’re not going to kick me out or anything,” I said. “I just don’t know... what they will do.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I just... I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I can’t keep this from them anymore, though. It’s like, you know. Eating me up.”

He lay down next to me and took my hair in his hands, winding his fingers with it. “I love you, Marsha,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “I love you too.”

*

The house was warm; dad had lit a fire in the fireplace and mom had the Christmas decorations out. Besides everything green and red and my extensive collection of nutcrackers—the first of which they’d bought me when I’d performed in the Nutcracker ballet at our local college when I was six— there was a wooden nativity scene, a porcelain nativity scene, a candelabra that was a nativity scene, a plush nativity scene that I’d played with when I was small.

It was warm and comfortable, and my mom put the kettle on for me. She always put a little too much sugar in my tea. It was sweet.

My little sister Tanya was in our shared room, doing her hair with a friend. She was going out that night. As she did most nights.

We'd eaten dinner and were seated on the couches, pondering movie choices when I decided to tell them. Tanya had wanted to be there for it. But I wanted to do it alone. I don't know. It felt like I needed to.

I knew they wouldn't kick me out. I didn't really know what to expect at all. But one scenario I hadn't imagined: that they'd try to talk me out of it.

“How is how you feel about her any different than how you feel about Jessica?”

Jessica was one of my closest friends from high school. We'd been keeping up a bit at college via text and FaceTime, but not all that much. I'd seen her since coming home, though, and it was like no time had passed at all. She was one of those types. She was good, and I loved her. But not like that.

Here's one way it's different, I thought: I don't want to have sex with Jessica.

They went on, mostly my dad; he had this tone like, listen, let's be reasonable. Like I was a child who needed an explanation for why she couldn't cross the street without looking both ways. Like I was being silly; childish; ridiculous.

I tried to stay calm, I tried to be slow, thoughtful, deliberate in what I was saying. I tried to be honest.

“Listen to yourself, Marsha,” he said. “You sound so cliché.”

I stared at him. I remembered him catching me, when I was seven or so, up reading at 2 AM. I remembered the lecture.

Why was he talking to me like he talked to that little girl?

I thought: please.

I thought: *cliché*?

I thought: has he never been in love?

*

“It could’ve gone much worse,” I said.

“But it could’ve gone better,” Hunter said.

I nodded, but shrugged. “It wasn’t that bad. But it’s pretty clear I’m not gonna be able to, like, openly talk about her with them, or anything. Which sucks.”

“I’m so sorry, Marsh,” he said. “If I could give your parents all the love and support my mom gives me, I would.”

I looked out Hunter’s bedroom window. I remembered the night I’d lain here, my head feeling like it weighed a thousand pounds on his pillows. I was looking out the window then, too.

My chest ached, not for the first time, with longing— with the wish that I could’ve been happy, like that. And it wasn’t that I thought I couldn’t want a boy like that, now. I had before, I knew I could again. But if I’d wanted *him, then*, I’d still be with him today, I would’ve been with him when we arrived at school. I never would have fallen for her.

But I didn’t... really want that.

And maybe I would have anyway.

It felt inevitable, the draw between us. I felt her, across the country. I loved her over that distance, as I loved her in her arms.

From outside my body this was all we were: just a couple of children on a bus. Just a couple of kids convinced they knew everything there was to know about love, though they hardly had the years to prove it.

But from inside my body it was different. I had always scoffed at Capulet and Montague, but from inside, it's different.

I had no misconceptions. I knew the truth of the things people would warn me. But from inside you just can't care. It's not that you won't. You *can't*.

From outside my body, nothing lasts. From inside my body, nothing ends.

“Marsha,” Hunter said. I looked up at him. “There’s nothing wrong with you. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

I crumpled, like an autumn leaf left un-raked, in on myself. He pulled me into his arms.

“I know,” I said. “I know.”

*

I waited until the house was quiet to FaceTime her. “I’m proud of you,” she said right away.

“I miss you,” I said, laying on my side, looking at her face, also on its side.

“I miss you too,” she said. “I love you.”

It had been a week and a half. My house was different. My parents and I moved differently around each other. Like claymation. I’d taken to scouring the gay and lesbian part of Netflix; but only with headphones in; only when my laptop was facing the wall, or my parents were in bed.

When I wasn’t watching Netflix, I was texting Minnie, or writing Emma.

It turned out Emma was gay.

I went to Barnes & Noble with my mom. I’d gotten gift cards to the store for Christmas, as always. She went to the crafts section, I went upstairs. I searched the graphic novels, looking

for *Blue is the Warmest Color*. They had one copy. I read a third of the book standing there, until I heard my mom's voice calling out to me. I stuffed it back on the shelf and hurried to the young adult section.

*

It wasn't my first time at church since coming home. But it was my first time since I'd told them.

We weren't Catholics, or orthodox, or fundamentalist, or any of those sects of Christianity that are all about rules, and rites, and traditions and aesthetics and literal interpretations and *blood*. (The first things that came to my mind when I thought of Catholicism were Mary; heavy, red curtains; and blood.) We— myself, my family, our church— believed in salvation by faith alone; faith over works; faith, faith, faith. Our services, while focused largely on reading and interpreting the bible for the purpose of applying it to your life, “living like Jesus,” et cetera, weren't all fire and brimstone and damnation and *repent, ye sinners*. They were about love, and generosity, spreading the “word” and living in faith in a way that honors God. We did talk about sin, of course. We understood that we were all sinners, and it was by grace alone— as it was always phrased— that we were granted salvation by faith.

This never bothered me. I never thought I was a perfect person. I prayed for forgiveness often, and for wisdom and help in being better. I told God about things I'd done wrong, specific things and more general things, and asked him to help me do better. I always had.

That day was different.

I thought, *These people sit here and they nod along. They just nod. They all sin in the eyes of the church, in the eyes of God, in the eyes of themselves. But they can try harder, they can do better. They can be forgiven.*

“So you sinned,” they seemed to say to me. “Do better. Try harder. You can be forgiven.”

I haven't SINNED. I AM a sin. In your eyes. In the eyes of the church.

No— not in the eyes of God.

“Hosanna,” my pastor said. “The great I Am.”

The great I am.

*

My dad took me to coffee. I felt hope like a spot on my lungs. This was a gesture— a thing we'd always done, something we shared, a place where it was just the two of us. Sometimes it felt like I was an odd creation, a sub-species, almost one of a kind, but for him. And getting coffee together, it was just the two of us, sharing our strangeness, safe away from the others, the rest of the world, who might love us or loathe us, but would never quite understand what it was that we were.

Then he started in on me.

I'd seen all these teen movies where best friends “stabbed each other in the back.” The theatrics, the strength of the heartache and sense of betrayal, that those girls showed, always seemed exaggerated, absurd, tinged by the same neon lens which overexposed the rest of the film. But in that moment, sitting across from my dad, my coffee gripped in both hands, those movies felt like documentaries.

He kept telling me how much he loved me. I couldn't quite tell if it was making it better or worse.

He said to me, "This isn't the dream you had for your life."

Suddenly I felt maybe I *was* the only one of my kind. That he could so fundamentally misunderstand me was unsettling. It tore me apart. I had dreams, it was true, I always had. I wanted an absurd number of kids. Mostly adopted. But I wanted to give birth, too. I wanted to be loved, and love, and I wanted to write. To write books, and be a mother, and be in love, and worship God in everything I did. That's what I wanted. What I'd always wanted.

I wanted to lay this all out for him, because I knew he knew it, and ask him to point to where, in this dream for my life, I'd made any indication that I needed to be with a man to be happy.

"You can be her friend," he said. "I know how caring you are. I know how you take care of people. And I am not saying you shouldn't be there for her, or be her friend. But you can't do this, Marsha."

But it's not something I'm doing, I wanted to tell him. It's who I am. You think it is a sinful action— but it's me.

I am not a sin.

I didn't say anything. Over the last few weeks, I'd found that silence was an amazing disguise. I'd worn it before, in anger. I hated conflict, so I frequently said nothing rather than lashing out in annoyance or rage. But this was a new style on me, the silence of fear. The silence you wear when you are being kicked, and you think speaking might make them kick you more.

The anger silence was frustrating. Sometimes it led me to violent fantasies, which maybe

wasn't great. But I preferred it to the alternative. There were few things I hated quite as much as fighting. And having fights end unsettled— having someone mad at me.

This silence was different. Every minute I sat there, taking it, acting unhurt, not standing up for myself, I felt like a part of me withered. Like there was a child in me, still, and I was suffocating her.

We went home and I went to my room and I watched *But I'm a Cheerleader* with headphones for maybe the twentieth time. I'd started birth control that year, the summer before school, because the strength of my menstrual cramps was so overwhelming it debilitated me for a whole week a month. I'd missed school, had to retake tests, stayed home from plans I'd been looking forward to— I'd thrown up in the shower once. And once the pain had been so intense I physically could not move. Not a finger. I was paralyzed with pain.

When cramps overcame me, the more manageable kind, when I'd taken pills early enough to catch them before they got too bad, or when I'd woken up in the middle of the night from the pain and gotten into the bath, and I'd been soaking there for an hour, I would try to distract myself from the pain. I would tell myself: pain is in your head. It's not real. Destroy one little region in your brain, and you wouldn't feel it. It's not a physical thing. So don't feel it. Just don't.

I tried to do that then, as I watched Graham kiss Megan and swallowed tea in great gulps, trying to get the taste of coffee out of my mouth. I told myself: just don't feel it.

*

Taylor Swift came on the radio. My mom turned it up excitedly. "Your favorite!" she said.

I thought about the number of times I'd watched Taylor's "Back To December" music video in high school. The way I'd looked at her shoulders; her legs. I'd watched a lot of music videos a lot of times. Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez. The same videos over and over and over. I could never pinpoint why. Often I didn't like the songs that much, or even the aesthetics of the music videos, or the costumes, or anything. But I kept watching them. I felt like a psychologically scarred teenager in a film about therapy. I could pinpoint my motives now as I never could before, and it was stunningly clear, in hindsight.

"Yeah," I said, "I love her."

I looked at my mom, she smiled and sang along. She didn't notice, of course. Why would she? Or maybe she just didn't want to see. She was good at that; at missing what was right in front of her when it wasn't to her liking.

"What's a better insult," Hunter said from the back seat, "'you couldn't be *more useless*' or 'you couldn't be *less useful*?'"

"More useless," Tanya said. She was sitting beside him, helplessly trying to untangle at least three pairs of headphones.

I glanced back at Hunter. He was staring at his phone with a pinched brow. "Who's useless?" I asked.

"Oh," he said. "Sebastian."

I jutted my chin back, surprised. "I didn't know you guys were on an insults basis."

"Yeah..."

"I didn't even know you guys were talking while we've been home."

“Well, he *is* my roommate,” he said, pulling on his seatbelt, not meeting my gaze, even as I twisted in my seat to face him. “Haven’t you been talking to Petra?”

“Sure,” I said. “But we’re friends.”

Hunter bit his lip.

“I think it’s very nice Hunter’s made friends with his roommate!” my mom said. “You girls always keep him to yourself! He could use a boy friend.”

“You’re right, mom,” I said, smirking at Hunter in the rear view mirror, now. “He *could* use a boyfriend.”

My mom and I started in on a very enthusiastic conversation about the importance of male friendship and intimacy. I made faces at Hunter in the mirror throughout. He was red as a rose by the time we reached our destination.

*

I stared at the trees outside my window, not sleeping, the night before I left. I’d need to be awake in just a few hours, I really needed to go to sleep. But all I could do was stare at the shadows, the branches moving subtly in the evening breeze. I listened to the ocean sounds in the semi-distance— a calming noise. But I wasn’t calm.

“I’m not sure we should send you back there,” my dad had said.

I don’t know why I hadn’t considered this. Sure, they wouldn’t kick me out of the house. But they could make me come back to it.

I’d been skittish like a stray cat since he said it, not just because it seemed anything I said or did might tip him over, make up his mind for him, but because it hurt. It hurt to look at my parents, to talk to them, to be around them. To know that the same people I’d always known and

loved would do this. Sure, there's an implication that a college education is conditional, to a certain degree. But I'd never been the kid who needed to worry about that. I was trusted. Because I was trustworthy. Well, I was. Apparently falling in love with a rose of the wrong name changed things.

I looked at the backs of their heads as we drove to the airport. I wondered if they knew, if they could feel it. I pictured Moses raising his staff, and the parted waves, the clear path, falling back into the Red Sea. I wanted to send a distress signal— but I didn't think they'd hear it. Or understand what it was.

I looked down. We were lowering. I wished we wouldn't. I didn't really want to land. I just wanted to stay in the sky. It's easier in the sky. What did it matter if I was gay in the sky? Would the birds mind? It's the people that mind. And most of them were down there.

In the shower, I'd ask her, "How do you feel about bird migration?" and she'd groan long and loud, aggravated and endeared. When she got shampoo in her eyes, she'd stick her head out and wipe her eyes with a towel instead of just putting her face under the water. At lunch, my sandwich would come with a pickle, and I'd give it to her. "Stop playing Tetris and come cuddle me!" she'd yell at me from the opposite end of the bed. She complained that I left dirty tea mugs everywhere. I wouldn't let her onto the bed after eating until she'd washed her hands. Sometimes I thought: *It hurts. Her absence. And she's still here.*

"It smells like vagina in here," Petra said.

"Yeah," I said, looking up from my laptop, "that's because we have vaginas and we've been having sex in here."

She nodded in understanding and dropped onto my bed. "Do you think if I hang out in here long enough I'll catch some pheromones and be able to get laid some time in the next century?"

"I can't make any promises, but if you want me to get my dirty sheets out of the washer for you, I've only just put them in—"

"That's OK, thanks."

My dad had been texting me bible verses. The occasional uplifting or motivating verse sent to me by a relative was hardly a brand new occurrence. But this was different than that. They came almost every day, and they weren't the same as the kind my mom or grandma sent me every once in a while with a "thinking of you" or a "miss you, hope you're doing well!" I read the first line, occasionally, but after the, "Have mercy on me, O God," I put my phone down. But they kept coming. Day after day. I sent vague replies. And I felt, as time went on, less and less

inclined to take my bible off my shelf. I hadn't been reading it here as much as I had at home, for a while, anyway— self-regulating was harder when I didn't have the rigid schedule of high school. But now it wasn't laziness or forgetfulness that was keeping the bible shut.

I remembered being in middle school, and loving *Twilight* more than anything else in the world. I usually ignored the way people would mock it and tease me for liking it. I still loved it. But it was impossible to deny that they'd changed it for me. They'd tainted it. They'd taken this safe, happy place and made me wary of venturing there. It was just easier to stay away.

My classes were going well. I was finally in a history-heavy class. Reading primary texts made me feel as I did sometimes while visiting historical landmarks— at one with those before me, like the present was history and the past now. Like humanity was all at once, and I just as huge and just as small a part of it as anyone who had stood there before. I'd become, in particular, obsessed with reading about queer women in 1920s Paris. I'd always loved the 1920s because of the Lost Generation, and this— this new access, this new connection, to people of that time— Minnie called me a nerd for the way I talked about it. But it was elating.

When my parents asked, "How are your classes going?" I said, "Well."

Pixie's Interlude Three

The girls came almost every day now, despite the winter cold. The blonde one had first brought the one who wore headscarves just before all the children left for a time. We could never understand why they all came back while it was still winter. Surely this migration pattern was not entirely logical?

The other trees, and the fairies too, had been all in a frenzy when the girl first brought another human here. I had watched with interest. In the dead of winter, bare as a mammal straight from the womb, I appreciated any distractions.

The fairies had hidden to no avail, that first day, and as the two humans came by more and more, no one bothered about discretion. The girl usually in pink— Kate, as the other called her— beamed wide as the fairies darted around her, landing on her shoulders, braiding individual hairs. The other stiffened if any fairy tried to touch her, but didn't seem to mind if they peered and jabbered at her from a safe distance. She avoided their gazes, as if they might see something in her eyes she didn't want to share. The two girls appeared to be mates, as they frequently nuzzled and kissed. Any fear that they might bring other humans, humans that would cut me down or pull the wings off a fairy like a lizard's tail, ebbed over time, as the two of them became comfortable with us, and we comfortable with them.

“They're different than the others,” the beech said. “That's why they're safe.”

“Difference is danger,” argued a sapling.

“Yes,” the beech said. “Precisely. For those who are different. They aren't safe among the others. They come here to get away from them. That's why we're safe with them.”

“They're beautiful,” a fairy said.

“Oh, haven’t you said that enough?” the beech complained. Fairies can be quite vain. But I didn’t disagree. They were beautiful, and warm. Their heat seeped into my roots. The heat of lovers couldn’t be beat in the dead of winter. I hoped they would never leave.

We were discussing which Disney princesses were tops, bottoms, or vers. We'd agreed Kida was a top. Debate was getting heated over whether Belle was a top or vers.

Minnie had to get to class. She kissed me. My upper lip was wet with her spit when she pulled away. I left it wet, I wanted to feel her longer. After she'd left, and my lip had dried, I licked over the spot. But the taste of her was gone.

When she was there, and we were awake, it was good. I was happy—I was the first dive in the ocean on a hot day kind of happy; the six-year-old on a sugar high kind of happy; the most blissful, peaceful, somehow frenzied and calm, simultaneously, kind of happy. But when she left, or when she fell asleep, it was like the world darkened. The music pitched down, the shadows loomed larger, and my tongue felt swollen, huge and painful in my mouth. I kept swallowing and swallowing, but it didn't go down.

A big part of me wanted to talk to her. Not that I never did— but not enough. I wanted to be honest and say, “Minnie. My parents. My parents. It's like I can read all these gay books and watch all these gay films and listen to all these gay musicians singing gay songs. I can buy gay comics and admire gay art and binge gay television. I can surround myself with gay friends. I can do all of that, and more. But I still don't know if my parents will come to my wedding.”

Minnie had told me once— no, a few times— about wearing sari. How she hated it. How she dreaded it, how she avoided it. How her mom never looked happier than when she had it on.

She'd told me about her dowry chest, joked how maybe I would get it someday. When I asked if that was really an option, she shook her head, “My mom keeps it, but she wouldn't want me to give it to a girl.”

So I was quiet about it. I don't think I ever woke her up. I got silent crying down to an art. And by morning, the tear trails just looked like the marks of sleep.

*

On Easter, Cameron slammed my door open and held up a Ziplock baggie of cookies. "Hey mushrooms," she said. "Anyone want to get high and watch *The Passion of the Christ*?"

I laughed and looked back down at my phone. Hunter had sent me a link.

Hunter: *Watch this video*

Her name is Halsey she's a s singer she's bisexual and she's hot and I think you will appreciate her

Me:

I have watched the video

.....

You know who else is bisexual

Hunter: Me?

Me: Yes but guess again

Hunter: You?

Me: ME

Hunter: WELCOME. WE HAVE BEEN AWAITING YOUR ARRIVAL

Cameron handed Petra a cookie. She offered the bag to Jidah, then me, and we both shook our heads. Minnie hesitated, glancing at me.

"Go ahead," I said.

She shrugged. "Nah. I'm good."

Kate ate half of a cookie and immediately started coughing.

Cameron laughed, “Only you would have a coughing fit eating an edible.”

Kate gasped for breath, “Went down the wrong pipe.”

I watched her Adam’s apple bob as she swallowed again for good measure. I’d only found out she was trans when her alarm went off one day to take her hormone blockers. I’d said, “I didn’t know,” and she’d said, “Did you need to?”

Minnie and Jidah were deep into a conversation about their mixed feelings on *The Little Princess*. They were both in a campus Facebook group called “Just Desi Things,” and they frequently debated the finer points of memes they’d seen there.

My parents FaceTimed and I stepped out of the room to accept the call.

“Happy Easter!” my mom all but shouted.

“Happy Easter,” I said.

“Did you go to church?” my dad asked.

“Mhm.”

“What are you up to?” my mom asked.

“Just have some friends over.”

“They didn’t go home for the break?”

“Our break actually already happened.”

“Oh. Well, who’s all there?”

I listed them off. I almost left Minnie off, as I sometimes did. But I don’t know. It was Easter. So I told the truth.

“Hm,” my mom said. Everyone was quiet for a moment.

I wanted to say, *Don’t you want to know me? I’m your daughter. You love me, you say.*

Don’t you want to know who I am? Isn’t it better that I don’t lie?

This is who I am. Don't you love her? Don't you want to know?

Tanya stuck her face into the frame. "Check out my bunny ears," she said.

"You look like a Playboy bunny," I said.

"That's what mom said."

"Karen!" my dad said. "Don't call your daughter a Playboy bunny!"

"I didn't mean it like that!" my mom said.

I laughed. "Are you guys at grandma's?"

"Yeah," Tanya said. "We're about to do the egg hunt."

"Have fun."

"We miss you," dad said.

"Miss you too."

"Wish you were here."

"Yeah." No, not really. Not just then.

"OK, have a fun day, honey," my mom said. "We love you."

"Love you too."

*

"You have to drink cranberry juice," Cameron said, picking the M&Ms out of a bag of trail mix before handing it back to Pearl.

"What about Craisins?" Petra asked. "Would that work?"

Cameron laughed. "I don't think so, dude."

Minnie and I had a theory that Jidah and Kate were into each other. I nudged her and tilted my head toward them as Jidah ran a finger along the lace at the bottom of Kate's sleeve.

Minnie turned to me with raised eyebrows and mouthed, "Canon."

I nodded and pulled my laptop closer toward me. Emma and the girl who wore trousers— Dorothy, commonly called Dolly— were meeting in secret again, in the woods which marked the end of Emma’s family’s property. They had met for tea a fair number of times, not bothering for secrecy where it seemed propriety would assume nothing was amiss, but Dolly’s strangeness alone had drawn attention to their meetings, so now they really had to sneak around, like the forbidden lovers they were.

“I am not discouraged,” Emma insisted, as she had many times already. “Nothing could persuade me that I am doing wrong, or to leave you.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Petra said.

I shook my head without looking up. “I’m not trying to get Lyme.”

“Would you shut up about Lyme already?” Petra swung her legs down from her bed and searched for her shoes. “Come on, let’s go. Stop being lazy, let’s go.”

“I’m not being lazy,” I said. “I’m taking a wise precaution against a very dangerous disease.”

Petra opened the door. Cameron and Pearl went into the common room; Jidah waited while Kate struggled with tying up her shoes. The ribbon wrapped all the way up her calf.

“We’re going,” Petra said. “Are you coming?”

Minnie grinned at me. I groaned and slid off the bed.

We followed Petra out of the dorm and into the sun. I felt the unfortunate promise of sweat on my skin, and I tilted my head up to appreciate the heat before I could become bitter toward it.

Winter was well and truly gone. I found seasons unsettling. Like someone who comes into your life, being cruel to you for months on end, and then abruptly leaves.

Petra pointed out a mushroom for the first time in many months, and Pearl catalogued it. There was something about the full circle nature of this moment, something I'd never experienced before, living in southern California. It felt vaguely mythic; like a fable or a bible story in real time. Minnie put her hand in mine and I thought of David and Jonathan.

Standing here, away from the buildings, the cars, even the buzzing sound of general technology drowned out by buzzing and chirping and the distant sound of a stream, there was a sense of something. Something beyond having a plant in a pot on your shelf, or a bird in a cage in your living room. Something else.

A strong wind came through the trees just then, and I heard a strange sound like wind chimes or like the clinking of a knife against a glass. Jidah and Kate turned their heads almost as one, looking deeper into the woods, as if at something in particular, as if they knew the source of the sound. Kate's gaze met mine and she looked at the ground. I opened my mouth to say something, but Minnie put her head on my shoulder, and then, of course, there was only her. As we walked back out of the trees, I sang to her, quietly. *She loves you yeah yeah yeah. And with a love like that...*

*

"Check it out," Petra said, showing me her phone. There was an image of a tiny troll sculpture. "And it's only eighty-two dollars," she said.

"What a steal," I said, nodding.

My phone rang. Of course it was on silent, so really it didn't ring, but I had it in my hand, so I saw the incoming call. It was my dad.

Minnie was in class, but I stepped out of my room to take the call anyway. We exchanged greetings. He asked me how my week was going, and I told him in vague terms. I asked how his

week was going, and he told me in vague terms. We talked about the weather, how strange seasons are. After a while, he sighed. We were both silent for a moment. Then he said, “I don’t know, Marsha. I want to trust you, I want to let you make the right decision yourself. But sometimes I think I’m making the wrong choice. Maybe sending you back there wasn’t what you needed.”

One day during winter break, my mom had said to me, “Maybe dad’s right. Maybe I didn’t hug you enough as a child.”

During those moments when I could briefly divorce myself from the situation, it was kind of bizarrely fascinating how my dad really seemed to think this whole thing was a result of bad parenting. Like if they’d just made me eat healthier, or walk the dog more, or if they hadn’t let me quit ballet, I’d be straight. (If anything, staying in ballet would have made me gay.)

I stared at the hallway carpet. I felt like I could see everything in it; every speck of dirt or feces, every spilled drink, every crushed crumb. I could see the carpet as it was made, as if it was a rug on a loom before me.

I’d missed some of what he was saying. The sounds had filtered into static in my brain. Maybe a self-defense mechanism, that. But I tuned back in, like driving out of a radio dead zone. He said, “You’re breaking your mom’s heart.”

I don’t know if it would be right to call it a breaking point, exactly. Or why it was the breaking point, if that’s what you’d call it. I had about a million thoughts at once. I thought how accusatory that sounded, as if I’d done something, taken an action, in the knowledge that it would break my mom’s heart. I thought what a strange, indirect attack those words were—coming from my dad, not from her. I thought how stunned and frustrated I was by how hard that hit me— I felt like an old building, abruptly wrecking balled. I thought how although it was my

dad saying it— even though I'd always been closer to him— it was the fact that it was my *mom* whose heart I'd apparently broken— it was that which made it hard to breathe. I couldn't understand that. I felt like my head was full of water. I thought: what have I done, though? I'm just being who I am. Does her heart really break at— at *me*?

I thought: how fucking dare you talk to your child like that.

I hung up. I went back into the room. Petra must have stepped out to pee or something. I hadn't noticed her pass me in the hall, but she wasn't there. I hurled my phone at the wall and grabbed my jacket.

I saw them through my blurred vision, a silk screen of salt water between me and the world. Jidah and Kate, walking into the woods. I followed them, a safe distance between us so they wouldn't notice. My sandals caught on sticks and dug up mud. I kept going.

I watched them from behind an oak tree. They sat down in the dirt and from a gaping hole in the trunk of a large maple there came something— some many things— large lightning bugs?

Being as quiet as I could, I moved closer. I stayed hidden, lowering myself. I looked again at the things flying around Jidah and landing on Kate, who didn't cringe or swat them away. I squinted, still some distance from them. I squinted even more, as if that might make my vision clearer, or make sense of what it seemed I was seeing. Fairies.

I moved quietly out of the girls' path when they left. Then I approached their spot cautiously, afraid— of what? That I might get bit? Stung? Afraid of the simple truth that this was real?

I sat down just where they had. I'd seen the fairies retreat back into the tree when my friends had walked away, so I didn't look around to see if there were any hiding, still out and

around me. I just lay down. I closed my eyes. It was perfectly still. Almost silent. And even as I felt something brush me— like tiny feet— I didn't open my eyes.

Pixie's Interlude Four

“She’s crying,” a fairy said, perched on her cheek. The little creature actually put her hand in a tear and held it up as evidence.

“Yes,” another fairy said, hovering in the air above the girl. “I think that’s perfectly clear to everyone.”

“How did she find us?”

“She followed the others, of course.”

“But why? What is she doing here? Did she come just to cry?”

“Have we upset her?” a very young fairy asked, sitting cross-legged on her nose.

“No,” a mother said— not the child’s mother, but an elder. “We haven’t.”

“Well who has?”

No one had an answer. We watched her and waited, but she did not stir. Night began to fall. Even the old beech ruffled its branches in the evening breeze.

“Hadn’t she better get inside?” the black gum asked.

I agreed. “Spring hasn’t quite caught up to nights, yet,” I said. “She must be very cold.”

The girl lay motionless but for the rise and fall of her stomach and the occasional darting of her eyes behind her lids. No fairies hovered above or around her now. They’d either settled on her or gone back inside me.

In some ways, she looked right, lying there on the forest floor. As natural as a passing deer or rabbit, as quiet as a fox. She seemed not so different from us, as the other two girls sometimes did— almost like very large, wingless fairies themselves, only sitting on the ground because I wasn’t large enough for them to take cover within me.

In other ways, she looked wrong. She was beginning to shiver. Her tear-stained cheeks were red from cold, and her hair would doubtless be dirty and tangled when— if— she sat up.

There was a distant sound. A rumbling. The quietest of thunder— as if it were trying to sneak up on us. The fairies that remained on the girl darted inside, unwilling to get wet just to keep up their inspection of the girl.

“She will get soaked!” a young fairy cried.

“Let’s build a house around her!” another chimed in.

“Impossible,” an adolescent fairy said. “We haven’t the time nor the strength.”

“Well we must do *something*.”

“Pixie Hollow,” the black gum addressed me. “You must tell the fairies that they must use magic.”

“To build a house?”

“No. To get help.”

I hesitated. That they made me their home was the only real connection I had with the fairies. Whether they would listen to me was highly unlikely.

“You must try,” the beech agreed.

Surprised, I agreed with a sigh— just as it began to rain. We all looked, but still, the girl did not move. It was unclear if she was stubborn or just numb.

The fairies buzzed around in me when I finally spoke. “She needs help.”

“Of course she does,” an elder fairy said, shoulders stiff, defensive. “What would you have us do about it?”

“Your magic. You must know who can help her.”

“We do,” a young fairy agreed. Her mother shushed her.

“And what do you suggest? That we march up to her lover and speak in human tongues?

Too many humans already know of us! You ask us to endanger ourselves!”

“Melodramatic little sprites,” the old beech muttered.

“Revealing yourselves endangers me just as much as you. If you know another way, I am happy to hear it,” I said.

Everyone was quiet for a while. The girl looked like she might drown right here on land.

“All right,” another elder said. “We will reach the lover in a dream.”

Their shouts repeated in Emma's mind, the most torturous echoes, as if she had found herself deep in a cave and did not know which direction would lead her out again. Shouts of shock, confusion, disgust. She could barely make out what had actually been said; only the need to escape had been legible in her mind— it was if the world had gone white, and nothing but blinding fear, and the action of flight which accompanied that fear, was left. Now she lay on the forest floor where Dolly had always met her, but she had left Dolly, she had run without looking back. The rumors about Dolly had always existed, and more than one source claimed to have seen something with their own eyes. Still, Emma did not think herself blameless for leaving her behind.

What had overcome her— what overcame her now? She could not move. She lay like a corpse, and imagined that the forest might swallow her up, take her in; that crows and worms and any of those little creatures from which came dogs would consume her. There was nothing violent about the image, it seemed only inevitable, the course of things as they were, as they would be, as she had set them up to occur. A distant part of her mind knew, and repeated, that she could still change these things, that this destiny was not a prophecy but a decision. But what could she do?

Her life was calm, and still, and quiet. She was a restless but muted creature. She was not always understood, but she was left alone. She was not always satisfied, but she loved things as they were. And lying there, she could not move, because it was clear, it was utterly plain, that nothing would ever be the same.

And yet to have acted differently— to have avoided the course of things which had led her here— would have been impossible. It was worse than her body being swallowed by the forest— to have silenced her desires, and intentionally thwarted her own heart before it could

grow the love which owned it now... it would have been more than death. It would have been mocking God, and the gift of existence: living without a chance at life.

There was nothing now but to wait. But— but then she heard—

“Emma,” the voice cried. Yet it was not heard from outside of herself— it was a desperate call, delivered directly to her mind. “Emma! Emma!”

“Marsh! Marsha! Marsha!” — nothing more.

“What is it?” I sat up, looking around, suddenly heaving with frantic breath, like I had not breathed in hours— “Where is it?”

It was the voice of a human being — a familiar, a known, an adored voice. Mrinalika. It ached; gnawed; it came as if forced through dying lips.

“I’m coming!” I cried. “Wait for me! Where are you? I will come!”

The wind sighed low in the oaks; I followed the voice out of the forest.

*

She opened the door on my first knock. Maybe it had not really been that long since we had seen each other. But that’s not how it felt.

She made no comment about my soaking clothes. She didn’t ask where I’d been. We sat down on her bed in silence, and she was patient. She waited.

After a time: “Minnie?” She nodded. Waited again. Then: “I’m not doing so well.”

She pulled me into a hug. I turned my face toward her and waited a moment before kissing her. She let me. She put her hands on either side of my face, rubbing her thumbs on my cheeks. When I pulled away, she tucked my head down onto her chest.

“Tell me,” she said.

So I started at the beginning, and I told her.

*

The pillow fort we'd made was extremely unsteady, so none of us moved much. Petra's shoulder pressed into my right side, Hunter's head leaned on my left. I could feel the back of Sebastian's hand, as his arm was wrapped around Hunter's waist. Minnie was sliding down where she lay in my lap. She didn't bother to fix it— only slid lower as the movie progressed.

Moments like these were never recalled in history books. But they showed up in the primary texts. The memories immortalized in the official record of things were never quite the same as the ones those who were living wanted to recall.

My phone lit up with a call from my dad. I turned it off. I'd call him back later. And maybe I'd talk to him. Maybe I'd tell him how it was. Maybe not. Maybe another time.

I watched the film in silence, my hand raking through Minnie's hair, and I wrote down in my mind what I would say to him— to both of them— someday. I'd say: I hate to say that your opinion doesn't matter. Because of course it does. It matters to me. But it doesn't change anything. It doesn't change who I am. It could change what I do— but it won't change who I am.

And even if it could— even if it really could— I wouldn't change who I am for you. I am me for me. And for God. And you open your mouth, ready to protest, ready to object: but you aren't God. And you don't speak for him. And you haven't spoken to him as me. I asked God: do you love me? God said: I love you. I asked God: As I am? God said: As you are.