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Streaks

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Streaks

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

By
Maximiano Janairo

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Thank you Sadie. Bark bark, grrrr, bark! Whine, whine, wiggle-leg. I'll be back to rub your belly soon.

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Prologue

From above I-94 the cars looked impossibly fast. Transforming from dots on the horizon to roaring beasts took them no time at all. The oasis that Liv sat in was a sturdy concrete structure, but still she imagined it shaking when the eighteen wheelers blew beneath it. She imagined the bricks flying away like handbills at the racetrack in the driver's wake.

She turned from the window back to the hustling crowd moving up and down the high ceilinged corridor. They all had a certain glisten to them, cultivated by hours of driving. One man led his family, wet and crinkled, from the eastern end of the oasis, scanning the signs frantically. For bathrooms? No, they had gone right past them. A restaurant, then, she realized. He must be looking for something for the kids. The Subway and Panda Express had not been sufficient so they had wandered out into the building's nave to search for something greasy and beloved.

"Where are the burgers?" the little boy cried, "Where are the buuuuurgerrrrrrrs-ah!?"

His father did not respond and passed Liv just as a semi rumbled beneath them all. She began writing down the things she noticed about them.

Father, Brother, Sister

Hungry, searching

Where are the burgers?

Where's Mom?

This was enough for the moment, she thought. The family would have to pass her again on the way back to their car and she would be able to conclude her note. Is it tragic? Comic? The burgers would decide. She put down her pen, sighed, and waited while her eyes lingered on the last bullet point. That's a little on the nose, she thought and tried to scratch it out of existence.

Liv's mother had not seen the cancer coming. She had planned her life intensely, beginning at age seven and lasting, in her mind, until one hundred and seven. Even in her youth she knew exactly what her life would be. She knew her teenage years would be dry and preparatory just as she knew her college ones would be frenzied and immediate. She knew that she would adopt her children, two girls, from those awful nuns, and that their skin would be a different shade than her own. And she knew that she would sculpt, no matter what. This work was often called a 'dream job' by her more naive friends to which she would say, "it was never a dream. I've always been certain."

She had sketched the layout of her studio eight years before she signed the lease and she'd had pages of ideas long before she ever bought the clay. She was, as her husband would often say, prophetic. His pet name for her was 'Clay-ssandra', which she laughed at but never corrected, enjoying the silly drama of the name.

Right up until the diagnosis she was preparing for the glorious moment where she could live off of art alone. She met a curator at a party and had instinctively known that his gallery would fit her work. The man couldn't help but agree considering the decade-spanning plan she laid at his feet. The curator was strange, like her sculptures, but he was delicate enough to see the emotion in her abstract shapes, seeing beyond the brash assurance of the artist. He

was only in town for a week to visit a cousin, but he gave Liv's mother a business card and a promise that his dealer in New York would get in touch. She came home brilliantly drunk that night, going on and on about fate, while her husband and daughters watched, in love.

Four months later she was gone.

Just before she died, the dealer had gotten in touch, but when he heard the news he said that a lack of new work would certainly put an end to all negotiations. They were looking to the future, diversifying, blah blah blah, and he apologized for wasting her time. It was good that he hung up the phone before she could respond because she wouldn't have known what to do except scream. Anyway, the drugs and her failing organs had diminished her voice and extinguished every prophecy that remained.

Liv found solace in this near miss, eventually. She found a sort of peace when she learned to let go of her plans. It was not out of despair that she gave up her certainty but a cold determination to never be surprised again. She would fail, yes, but it would be expected. So, in her own way, she too began to prophesize. She foresaw, for instance, that she'd spend her final year of high school slack jawed and listless and that the teachers who cared for her would sit at long tables and have even longer conversations about their concern. She saw that any plans for college would have to be shelved and traded in for an unending string of gig-economy jobs. She saw that her father would not be able to handle his grief and that she would have to carry him through.

The only time she was ever surprised anymore was beneath the high ceilings of the oasis. Flash mobs, fights and certain minor celebrities all passed through the fluorescent hall and she had foreseen none of it. She would sit in the exact center of the oasis and be surprised for a few hours each day before work.

She checked her phone. Only fifteen minutes left until she had to start the half mile trek to The Taverna, the restaurant where, she was certain, two sinks full of dishes would be waiting

for her. The cooks started their work three hours before she arrived and apparently none of them were capable of tending to their own mess.

Dishwashing was the latest and greatest gig she had secured. They paid her a fair amount more than any of her other ventures and in return she had sacrificed the health of the skin on her hands and the muscles in her neck.

Liv put her notebook, pen and water bottle back into her bag and readied herself to leave. She asked for a large, black coffee at the Starbucks just as the family passed her again, headed eastward back to the car. Liv smiled as she saw the boy prying his burger from its wrapper and guiding it gently to his face. Not a single drop of sauce landed on his shirt and not a single pickle fell to the floor. She pulled out her notebook again and wrote a new entry beneath the block of ink that used to ask, 'Where's Mom?'

A comic ending.

In the parking lot, in the fading late winter light, Liv saw a woman hobbling to a gray minivan, stained and scratched. Gingerly, she slid into the driver's seat and rolled down all the windows. Hanging from the ceiling above the backseats was a child-sized suit and an even smaller dress. The woman lit a cigarette and took a long drag. She released the coil of smoke out the window, sighed, pulled out of her spot and left the oasis behind.

Lake Forest, Illinois is not a large town and the walk from the oasis to The Taverna was only about twenty minutes. However, it is less than that if you choose to wade through the marshy section of polluted land that separates the street from the highway, which is what Liv did that evening. Her boots were caked in mud and her hair was wild from the wind, but she managed a cordial smile to Shelby, the bartender, when she arrived, two minutes early.

There were two sinks full of dishes, just as she had predicted, and the cooks seemed to be in a particularly loud mood, but nothing else seemed out of the ordinary. Her back ached, like always, her feet screamed in protest, like always, and Nick, the head line cook, was shouting something racist, as always.

“... And I’m sorry, ok, but that’s just how Asians are! Ope... but not you, Liv, you were raised white!”

The laughter that rang through the kitchen stung her ears and she felt acutely perceived, though her back was turned and she didn’t know which eyes were on her and which were meekly staring at the plates of food. It didn’t matter. Her heavy lidded eyes and every inch of her light brown skin were on these men’s minds. They had been shocked when she told them that she had been adopted by two white parents, but then they quickly folded it into their vision of her. “A fish out of water”, “a girl without a heritage”, “An oreo”, all hurtful, all untrue, and yet she had gotten in the habit of letting it slide. Some midwestern drive was at work, an impulse to keep conversation light and to have everyone like her. Besides, she was usually too tired to fight against the dishes and her coworkers. So she let the abuse crash over her and subside again and again, waiting for Nick’s shift to end and for him to be replaced by Frank. Frank was a grouch and a control freak, but at least he wasn’t racist. Well, she thought, backtracking, at least he didn’t display his racism like Nick. Like a whiteness participation trophy.

Frank came and Nick left and Liv finally took her break.

She walked to the bar with an empty quart container in hand and slipped it to Shelby without looking. Subtly, the bartender filled it with beer, left it on the counter beneath the bar and walked off. Liv went behind the bar under the pretense of throwing some scrap of paper away and grabbed her drink.

She sat in the basement, nursing the beer and snacking on peanuts with her mind blissfully empty. It was not quite meditation, though sometimes that is what she called it: it was rather an exhausted release where all she had to think about was the pain in her body. With that immediacy, who needs breath? Besides, the next half of her shift would be spent shuttling food from the assholes in the kitchen to the assholes in the dining room. She needed a rest. Even the liquid courage could not prepare her for the angry stares and the frantic, perpetually waving hands that seemed to be the customers' only mode of communication. They were forever unsatisfied and questioning and Liv had none of the answers. The bosses, however, let her dip into the servers' tip jar whenever she had to deal with customers so she forced herself to bear it.

Three hours into this task she lost her ability to smile. The complaints felt particularly unsolvable that night and the amount of incorrectly assembled meals began to weigh on her. The ever-present question became louder: *Why not quit?* It is possible she would have done it at that exact moment, bundled up her apron and thrown it onto the flat top, had it not been for the fulfillment of one of her mother's last prophecies.

Many of Liv's friends had visited her mother during her final days, but none had stayed as long as him. But only Andrew would sit and talk to her for hours, even if Liv wasn't there. He had quite an effect and one day, about two weeks before the end, the dying woman had called out for her daughter.

"Livvy, that boy is very nice, but he's troubled. I think he's going to need your help, dear. I think—I think he's going to need you."

At the time, Liv had folded this into the other ramblings that were increasingly escaping her mother, but that night, nine months after they had buried her, Liv saw his placid face across the sea of clamoring, petulant customers..

Part One

Chapter One

“Andrew!” she called.

He took off from his seat near the bar and nearly tackled Liv backwards into the ATM. Neither of them could remember the things they said during this embrace, but it didn't matter. By the time Andrew pulled away, with the smell of the kitchen on him, they were refreshed by the meditation of the hug.

“So fill me in!” he said, “Tell me everything that's happened since graduation!”

“Give me forty-five minutes, then I'm getting a pitcher of beer and we'll sit in that booth until this place closes.”

He agreed and she walked back to the kitchen to finish the shift.

Some of the cooks had seen her affection through the door's portholes. “So you aren't gay anymore?” Frank asked.

“Gayer than ever, Frankie! That's just a friend I haven't seen in a while.”

“A long while...” he mused, picking up a lump of falafel, “so long that you needed to give him a nice friendly hug.” He squeezed until green juice dripped out into a plastic tub.

She leaned over the table between them, grabbed the tub and said, “Hugs make the world go round, dearie,” and took a long swig from the green juice.

She always prided herself on being able to make Frank laugh. Every new employee would come in from waiting tables to try their hand at a joke, but he would dismiss them all with a note of discouragement like, “Is that the best you got?” or “So you’re trying to make a joke?” But Liv was always a few steps ahead of him, anticipating his cynicism and turning it back on him, which delighted Frank. He giggled so childishly when she drank the falafel juice that the rest of the kitchen turned to him with surprise and joined in.

“Ahh,” she exhaled, “your cocktails are just getting better and better.”

Usually Liv was wrapped in a cloak of shyness, but in the kitchen, especially with Nick gone, she felt fearless. The sweaty, portly bodies were a comfort, especially when they came swarming to her defense. If a customer decided that her service was worthy of berating, she would have to do no more than shout, “We’ve got a problem” through the swinging double-doors and a team of cooks would leave their stations, some still with handfuls of dripping vegetables or meat, and come to her defense. In the face of these men, no one would tangle with her. It was what she imagined it would be like to have older brothers. If only her parents had fulfilled the Catholic prophecy and given birth to countless Markies and Pauls and Michaels and Patricks before her, this might have been her life. But they were happy to adopt two sweet girls and so instead Liv had learned the gruff kindness of brothers at work.

She glided through the rest of her shift, sometimes going by Andrew’s booth just to make a silly face before rushing back to her tasks. The ‘forty-five minutes’ stretched to an hour and a half thanks to a misplaced plate of nachos. The vegan family who received the plate were kind to Liv’s face, but soon threatened the bartender with a 1-star review. Though it was definitely her fault, she didn’t admit it when Pauly, the bartender, came cussing into the kitchen. She let the words fall on all of them, saying nothing, and instead started prepping a little spinach dip as an offering and an apology. Finally, with the last plates delivered and the

vegan family satisfied, she threw off her apron and told the bartender to fill up a pitcher of the cheap stuff. Only the foam spilled when she dropped it onto Andrew's table.

Here we go with the pleasantries. How's your family? Oh, good. Mine? They're good. Not asking what I really want to. Talking about the weather.

"Where have you been?" Liv said. "I feel like you vanished a few years ago."

"Oh, well... you know... I tried. I mean, I liked college, but the stuffiness out there was gonna kill me! Seriously. I had some fun, you know, but I just felt so angry all the time. Disconnected, I guess."

She looked at him skeptically. He had always been angry. Once he had seen two boys pestering a disabled freshman and had made the scene famous. He took their picture and printed out flyers that read, "Here lies the earthly bodies of two assholes." It had riled up everyone. Faculty because of the profanity, students because of the cruelty, and even Cam, the bullied one, who walked up to Andrew between classes and said, with a hand on his shoulder, "I know you're trying to help but you just made those guys more angry. Just—just stop." Cam had walked back to his group of friends (a sizable group, more than Andrew had ever had) while his would-be protector stormed off, pissed, but unsure why.

As he carried on with his story, Liv wondered what their former classmates would say if they saw Angry Andrew back in town. She looked across the room, searching for familiar, disapproving faces, but the dinner crowd was thinning out and the late night drinkers had not stumbled in yet. All was at peace.

"They just didn't get me out there," Andrew continued, "Everything I said was either funny or wrong. I was a sideshow. I wasn't a person."

"How so?"

"I—I just didn't feel right. You know what I'm talking about, it's like working here. Nobody really cares about you, just whether you can do what you're told."

“And what about the classes? The professors?”

“Ugh, the professors. People treated them like prophets. They would be constantly surrounded by these groupies who just wanted to prove how clever they were. It made me sick.”

Liv nodded, but didn't fully trust his image. Andrew had rejected the entire notion of educators when their school had celebrated the retirement of their math teacher. “Whoop de doo,” he had said, “Another old fart getting closer to the grave! Who gives a shit.” His disdain spread from their celebration to their existence until Liv, who quite enjoyed the guidance of her teachers, ghosted him for a week. Later, she lied and said it was because of her period, knowing that at the mention of the P-word he would clam up.

“There was this one professor that everyone loved because he was, quote, *edgy*. ‘Ooo! He pushes you out of your comfort zone, he breaks the bubble, he’s so real!’ All because this fucker kept bringing Trumpy speakers into the classroom. And, the thing is this place is very proud of how liberal it is, but it’s a white school, a ‘Predominantly White Institution’ Aka, a white supremacist institution but without the self-awareness, you know what I mean? And so there’s all this liberal guilt that makes these white students want to be ‘well-rounded’ so badly that they treated this guy, this schmuck, like a king! Like the gatekeeper to ‘Real America.’”

“Oh my god.”

“Right? What a crock of shit. I had to keep reminding people that I was from ‘Real America’ but they wouldn’t listen.”

Liv cringed. She imagined Andrew waggling their hometown in people’s faces like a backstage pass. She was sure that not only had he used the term ‘Heartland’ but that he had weaponized it against any poor soul who happened to be born on a coast. Instinctively, her hand jumped to her chest to stem the tide of embarrassment, but he didn’t notice.

“He even brought in a real life nazi!”

“No...”

“Swear to God, a legit MAGA nazi. We had a white supremacist in our classroom!”

“That’s awful!”

“Mmm,”

“Why did he do that?”

“To be ‘well-rounded’ I guess. To expose our privileged minds to the, ‘Real World.’”

“Did this nazi teach you about the ‘Real World?’”

“He ranted about free speech and cancel culture. Does that count?” Andrew paused, apparently wrapped in thought, drumming his fingers on the table to the rhythm of the bar’s music.

Blue canary in the outlet by the light switch, who watches over you! Make a little birdhouse in your soul.

“Did he make you angry?”

Andrew sighed, “Yes, yes he did.”

Liv waited for more but it was clear he was done talking.

Strange.

Rarely, if ever, had he described someone so briefly. It was never just ‘Bob’ or even ‘Bob-the-Asshole’. Andrew would say ‘Bob-the-asshole-who-probably-steals-from-his-adult-children-and-voted-for-Trump.’ His assessments could be wordy, cruel, even untrue, but Liv was always there for it, hooked by the details, the avalanche of descriptions.

There was no avalanche now and it unnerved her.

“So how was the drive back home?” she asked him.

It wasn't her favorite piece of small talk (she much preferred 'So how's your Mom?' or 'You got any plans for the weekend?') but evidently it was the question Andrew had been waiting for because he perked up with renewed life.

"It was absolutely amazing! I get a real thrill from driving around all day. Part of it is that I can cover so much ground in so little time, you know? I could make it anywhere if I stay awake long enough. And it's also—well... this might be a little bit selfish but it feels so good not to have responsibilities. All you gotta do is fill up the gas and stop for snacks. That's it! Forget beds, you can sleep in the car! And fuck toilets, you can go by the side of the road! No bills, no rent, no enemies..."

"No friends."

"Yes, well... that's true. But you can see friends along the way. Like, I saw my buddy up in Milwaukee before I drove down here. That was fun."

"Did he give you a bed and a toilet?"

"Yes..."

"And it was nice, yeah?"

"Yeah yeah, even though I didn't need them, it was nice... I don't need them, I promise! Please!" He slipped into fake desperation, "You've gotta believe me!" She laughed. "Anyway, yeah, it's not that lonely. I mean, look at this," he gestured around, "I couldn't possibly be lonely in your lovely company! You find your people along the way, and even if you don't, at least you're free."

Liv snorted. He looked at her, puzzled, and snorted back, "Snrrr?"

"Yeah, Snrrr." Liv took up a character of her own "Yea man, I'm so freagin' free dude! Everything's groovy out there on the rooooad myan, you've got everything you need! It's how you escape The Man, myan, you get out of his cities and onto his open roads. That'll show em!"

Andrew collapsed, laughing, onto the table, bringing the pitcher dangerously close to the edge.

“Hey myan! Careful myan!” Liv continued, “There’s a beverage present!”

“C’mon, it’s fine! And I’m not The Dude, ok? Do not Lebowski me!”

“Dunno what yer talkin about, myan, my words are my own! They’re given to me by the spirit of freedom!”

“Then they aren’t your own.”

“Huh, myan?”

“They were given to you. By the spirit of—”

“By the freagin’ spirit of freedom, myan! She contains multitudes, my guy, I’m just breakin’ off a piece.”

“Hahaha, fine.”

A pause.

“I’m just saying.... You sound like you’re on tour with the Grateful Dead.”

“The Dead, myan?” Andrew shouted, “Now that was a band, myan! That! Was! A! Band!”

“Where’d the Sixties go, myan? It’s like they were stolen! Like a freagin’ conspiracy, myan!”

“For surally,”

“For sur—pffff! Ok, I’m gonna go to the bathroom but when I get back, I want to hear some tales from the road, myan.”

“Tales from the road, got it!”

She felt the full weight of her good mood in the bathroom. Between the muffled booming of the music (*If you’ll be my bodyguard, I can be your long lost pal*) and her

drunkenness, which had become pleasantly dizzy, there was a simple feeling that was hard to recognize at first, but smiling at her grimy, sweaty face in the mirror brought it to the surface.

I am alive, she thought. Then, as she kept looking into her own eyes she started to laugh at the melodrama on her face. It didn't suit her. So, finding her balance against the sink, she blew a kiss to herself and swaggered back to the main room. The late night crowd had been slowly filling in around them, parents, friends and coworkers, but she no longer cared. She plopped down across from him and said, "Tales from the road!"

"Tales from the road!" he replied, "So, I was coming into Chicago, right? And the snow was pretty soft and nice for a few hours when I was on country roads, but it sucked by the time I got to the city. I missed my exit and got stuck in the traffic."

"Oof."

"I know! I had to white-knuckle my way through it until the next exit."

"Which one was it?"

"Touhy."

"Touhy! I've always loved that one. So nice to say, Touhy."

"Yeah, well, it may be fun to say but it sucked that night. The shops closed early to beat the storm, and, I mean, these people have decades of midwestern winter under their belts, a storm isn't the end of the world for them, but literally every place was closed! And I had to piss like a grace-horse!"

"Race horse."

"Hmm?"

"You said 'grace horse', it's race horse."

"Oh, sorry. Race horse. *Race* horse! Anyway, I finally got to this gas station."

"Mmm."

“It was covered with, like, six inches of snow and I was churning it up! Those poor little Toyota wheels weren’t meant for that kind of work, you know. So I hobbled, not walked, hobbled, over to the front doors. I hadn’t stopped driving since Green Bay so I was crazy stiff. I should’ve put a coat on because the temperature had dropped to five degrees, according to my car thermometer thingy, but I threw my coat into the back somewhere around Sheboygan because it was making me sweat like a grace horse!”

She laughed.

“The only soul in the place was this pimply cashier with his eyes in his laptop. He had on these noise-cancelling headphones so he hardly looked at me while I waddled to the bathroom.”

“And how was the bathroom? Clean?”

“It could have been much worse. There were other oases along the way whose bathrooms had been Pollock-ed by whole families, but this one was neat and looked pretty clean, yeah. No obvious stains, and the only dirt in there was the stuff I tracked in, so...” He took a long drink, “Ok, so, I got out of the bathroom, trying not to slip on the mess I tracked in, and grabbed a few bags of chips and a damp looking muffin. The cashier finally looks up at me when I get to the counter, but before I say anything, this uncontrollable shiver runs from my chest to my head!” He reenacted it for Liv, shaking the whole booth, “I think I really scared the guy, like I was having a seizure or something! I felt like I had to explain but I didn’t want to be awkward, you know?”

“So what did you do?”

“Well, I just went ‘brrr!’ I didn’t know what else to do! I couldn’t be like, ‘Oh, that wasn’t a seizure, I’m just cold!’ so I put on a little show! I rubbed my arms and faked a more normal shiver. And it worked! The guy just laughed.”

“Attaboy, Andrew. Always helping your fellow man—”

“But wait, there’s more. This is why I’m telling you the story, dude, so don’t cut me off now.” She put her hand up in deference and squinted over at him with tight lips. “He gives me my change and then looks me in the eye and says, ‘The heat’s not too bad, it’s the humidity that’ll getcha.’”

Andrew looked at her expectantly, but the best that she could offer was a little giggle, “Hehe, humidity, that’s a good one.”

Andrew leaned back in his seat and Liv felt sorry for him. “So then what happened?”

“Well, I trekked back out to the submerged car, all the while thinking to myself ‘mind-over-body-mind-over-body...’ to keep from freezing.”

“Did it work?”

“Hell no!”

She laughed and Andrew began to build steam again, this time with a softer look in his eyes, less expectant than encouraged. “But it was ok, because that cashier totally brought me up, ya know?”

“Totally.”

“And it’s good to be back home, especially in a snowstorm. Midwesterners are so weird that way. They don’t just complain about the weather (though of course they do) they make it this game. We all know the rules,” he counted them out on his fingers, “1) Stay warm, 2) Shovel often, but not excessively, 3) Don’t drive if you don’t have to, and 4) Go sledding!”

“Don’t forget number five!” she added, “Storm windows!”

“Ugh, storm windows, what a chore.”

“The worst part of winter.”

“Cheers!”

They clinked glasses and drank to storm windows.

“Ahh! But you know I love it here. The weather brings the best out of people. It gives you endless amounts of small talk! In a snowstorm there’s always something to talk about.”

“Damn right.”

Liv cast her gaze around the room and saw a familiar face. Suddenly she pressed her body against the booth, and slid down where no one could see her. *This warm mood was not meant to last.*

Positioned next to the late-night regulars, Anna looked more beautiful than Liv had remembered. She had changed her hair slightly and had gotten her right eyebrow pierced so that when she turned her head, speckles of light seemed to dance around the room. She was being led by her friends and her eyes were downcast as she put her I.D. back into her purse.

Andrew rattled the empty pitcher. “What is it? Is all this finally getting to you?”

“No, it’s just that... It’s just that Anna’s here.”

She’d thought the name would catch in her throat or send her immediately into despair, but she had already sunk so low that the pain of the word hardly registered.

Anna.

She had spent so many years saying the name that it fit comfortably in her mouth.

Anna.

All the times she had rattled it off in passing, all the chiding, every whisper into her sleeping ears.

Anna.

Though Liv had avoided the name for eight months, it still felt present on her tongue. The ‘A’s’ slipped gracefully out, even with her nasal accent, and the softness of her tongue against her front teeth was as simple as ever. It wasn’t the name that hurt her; it was everything around the name, the laughter that preceded it, the embraces that engulfed it. She stared at the security camera above her as it scanned the room.

Andrew looked around wildly, “You broke up?”

“Yeah. We did,” This was a misdirection, she thought. WE didn’t do anything, SHE did it and I just sat there.

The weight in her chest had a familiar grieving quality but with the sloshing beer beneath it she found herself experiencing something new. The sadness was dampened, somewhat, but the fear, the unnerving reptilian fear was breaking her down. She watched the camera in its small, reflective dome as she played out several scenes in her head, all of which ended with Anna up on the bar, shouting Liv’s sins to the late night crowd. They would converge on her, push Andrew aside and tear into her body with angry hands. She looked around but could no longer find Anna in the mass of drunks. She looked at Andrew cautiously, praying that he wouldn’t ask more questions.

He looked back at her and said, “Let’s go.”

“Oh thank god!”

“Hmm?”

“I just—yeah, I need to go.” She sat up slowly before hustling to the back exit marked ‘Staff Only’. Andrew followed without question.

The cooks were sharing a joint in the parking lot, shivering in their sweat-soaked clothes. Liv waved briefly then moved past them without direction.

“Have fun tonight!” Frank’s coarse voice echoed across the parking lot, “Use protection!”

“Oh no, we’re not—” Andrew said before Liv cut him off.

“Ignore!” Drunk and determined, she staggered to the last row of cars before realizing she didn’t know what Andrew’s looked like. Turning back, she asked, “Where you parked?”

Andrew pointed to a RAV4 next to the circle of cooks.

“Ok. You walk in front of me.”

Andrew took up his bodyguard role with panache, widening his shoulders and straightening up to his full height. He moved towards the car with unnatural precision.

Frank watched him with a smirk, “Whaddaya got back problems?” Andrew, still in character, didn’t laugh.

Only half listening to her coworkers, Liv heard “(something something) blow her back out...” but could hardly find the energy to be offended. All she could do was collapse into her lap. Wrapping her arms around her knees, she compressed her body until she could feel her heartbeat in her head.

“Please,” she growled, “Take me home.”

They drove in silence for eight blocks.

“Are you ok?”

“Mmm, yes I think so. I’m sorry about that, I just got scared.”

“I know what you mean... I mean, I don’t know... I mean, it's just so sad and I understand. And I want you to know I understand.”

“Mmm.”

“It’s so so valid to be scared of that sadness.”

“I—what?”

“I’m just saying you shouldn’t be afraid of the sadne—”

“I’m not afraid of the sadness! Pfff, the sadness, no. I know the sadness. I know Anna will make me sad when I see her. What I’m afraid of is the happiness. I’m afraid of what’ll happen when she makes me smile.”

“Oh, I, uh, I just thought because she’s your ex...”

“My ex...”

“That you’d be, you know, sad.”

“I am sad.”

“But you... You’re afraid of being happy?”

“I—”

“You’re afraid of your ex making you happy?”

“Yeah! I am! I’m afraid, ok? Jesus...”

“I’m sorry.”

“And I don’t like that term. ‘My ex’. It’s just weird you know? Like there’s still some belonging going on.”

“Ok, I... Ok.”

“She’s not my anything anymore.”

Liv still had not unclenched by the time they pulled up outside her house. As long as she was in that hidden position she could change the world around her into phantoms. Demons and angels replaced all the boring people and the world was no longer the beige cacophony. The world was exciting, all of a sudden, and she was hiding from it. Good, she thought, better to believe and hide. If she still really believed in God she would never go to church, but as it was she sometimes brought her disbelief into St. Francis’ just to remind herself how bad it felt.

Andrew parked in front of her house and grabbed her phone, “Do you want to take my number? Not gonna lie, you’re making me a bit nervous, so check in tomorrow. Just a little text,” He was going to ask for her password but there was none. After entering his number, he lingered on Liv’s contacts. “Just... just try to be kind to yourself tonight.”

She grumbled out some words of assent and unclenched. Taking her phone from Andrew’s palm, she climbed out of the car and made her way to the front door. She looked at her phone to see what he’d been looking at, but it was just her contacts, all fifteen of them. As

his car hummed to life and creaked back onto the road, she wondered how many contacts he had.

Door open.

Door closed.

Immediately, she knew that something was wrong. The living room was in a state of chaos that she had never seen before. Hanging her keys beside her father's thick metal ones, she waded through the torn down posters and photographs. She found her sister first, asleep in a pile of multicolored blocks. She looked perfectly satisfied, oblivious to the scene of broken glass and cables that surrounded her..

She picked up her sister and knocked lightly on her father's door. There was no reply except for a small whimpering noise that she only noticed with her ear up against it. Slowly, she turned the knob and leaned into the wood, trying to be silent.

Her father was awake, sitting cross-legged under his covers with headphones pushing his glasses slightly askew, watching something on his computer and weeping. *Fogged glasses over stony eyes.* She put her sister down in the hall and closed the door. With one hand laid gently on the edge of the bed, she sat down. The low wailing had gotten more distinct, but he didn't open his mouth to cry. Lightly touching his arm, she got his attention away from the screen.

"What's wrong, Dad?" she asked softly.

"Hoss got shot."

"Who's Hoss? Is he a friend of yours?"

He grimaced and turned away to let another round of tears break over his cheeks. He said nothing and turned his laptop toward Liv. The screen was darkened, slightly, but she could make out the bold words superimposed over the image.

Bonanza, Season 13, Episode 20, "Shanklin"

"Is Hoss a character in this show?" she asked as calmly as she could.

Her father nodded without looking at her. She turned the brightness up on the screen. A large cowboy was lying in the back of a covered wagon, doused in sweat and being attended to by an old-timey doctor. She pointed to the cowboy and asked, "Hoss?" Again, her father nodded.

She looked around the room, dreading what she knew she would find. And there, on his bedside table was the little orange bottle with her mother's name on it. She looked back at her father and saw that his eyes were not only filled with tears but dilated and wild.

Looking into them, she suddenly had the urge to run, to pack as little as possible and sprint as far away as she could. But a sobering image flashed through her head: her sister lying in the hallway, outside of a room that their father would never leave. She sighed, hugged him and went to clean up the mess in the front room.

Chapter Two

Liv woke up at ten the next morning but didn't leave bed until four. The previous night existed in her memory not as moments but as sudden emotional swings. She could not entirely recall what she was wearing or what she had said, just the rush of seeing Andrew, the fall of seeing Anna. So much energy had gone into pushing those sensations away and yet, now, with great ease, they returned.

Oh, Andrew.

She was never attracted to the way he looked but there was an inevitable force that pulled her to him each time they met. He was thrilling, blessed with the ecstatic energy that only simple hearts possess. And he was definitely simple.

For all of his posturing in high school, trying to be complicated, inscrutable, she always saw that there was something childlike in him. All it would take was one little point of similarity, a song, a movie, a shared hatred of a politician, and the roller coaster would take off. By just looking at him, you could almost believe that he was quiet, but once he started talking you knew just how loud he could get. He was like a priest improvising a sermon: he didn't have extraordinarily thoughtful things to say but he enjoyed saying them immensely.

From the beginning, Liv could see right down to the bottom of him. So why, she asked herself, was she so frightened? What scared her about last night? The breakdown? The escape? Or the little smile that Andrew wore as he drove her home? Had he figured her out at that moment? From the way Andrew looked at her toward the end of the drive, she could tell that he knew something about her. It wasn't compassion or pity in his eyes; it was knowledge. A raw look of understanding that was mixed, if she could trust her memory, with pleasure.

That glint of pleasure was what made Liv finally pick up her phone and send the text he'd asked for. The 'Check-In'. His face hung in her memory and she was forced to fire something at it. To remind him that she was a person, complicated, unknowable. She feared that she had lost all her mystery. Cautiously, she drafted a text in her notes app.

"Hi Andrew"

Too formal.

"Yo Dawg"

Just wrong.

"Hey"

She paused, finding the word nicely inoffensive.

"Just checking in to say that I'm doing ok this morning. Sorry last night was rough..."

What was she apologizing for? She deleted "sorry" but rewrote it almost immediately.

It's always good to be polite.

"Thanks for sticking with me!"

This didn't convey any of the panic that she felt, but still she copied the words and brought them to her conversation with Andrew, sending the message before she had a chance to think. She sat in a scared silence that was mercifully short. Andrew was always quick to reply.

“Yo Dawg! I’m glad I could be there for you! It’s always hard seeing your ex but at least you were strong enough to break up with her in the first place!”

Relief.

He didn’t know her; he couldn’t possibly. The gleam in his eyes was just the pleasure of knowing something, anything at all. It could have happened to anyone.

As her anxiety melted away, Liv tossed her phone to the far corner of the bed and tried to pay attention to her breathing. A counselor had given her a breathing technique to use in her “direst moments of grief,” but her memory was cloudy and she couldn’t remember much besides the “one loving hand across your heart” part. She set her hand on her chest and curled the other around her belly, comforted by the pillow of fat. The breathing thing never did work in her “direst moments of grief.” It felt like trying to move traffic by fixing a pothole. The only times she could actually calm herself through breath was when she was already stable, then she could really get down to breathing. Then it was fun.

One shuddering breath.

The counselor had tried to give her a mantra as well, but she preferred her mother’s “Breathe in Jesus, breathe out the devil!” She didn’t always use the same words though. Some days it was, “Breathe in coffee, breathe out steam,” or, “Breathe in Lilies of the Valley, breathe out ginkgo.” Something secular, but lovely. When she was at the height of her Beatles craze it had become, “Breathe in George, breathe out John,” and sitting in the cold light of the afternoon that one felt right.

“Breathe in George...”

The phone buzzed from across the bed.

“...breathe out John,”

She tried to stay away from whatever Andrew was saying, but with her eyes closed this became increasingly difficult. Despite how kind he had been, she could see many possibilities in

the backs of her eyelids and the longer she avoided him, the more intense her fantasies became. Texts of disappointment, or injury, or asking for money all seemed possible. She leaned over to look at her phone. Andrew had written a paragraph that stretched beyond the length of the screen.

The itching of sweaty palms.

“Ok so I know this might be totally out of left field since we JUST reconnected but I had such a great night with you and I trust you and yeah. It was really nice to hang! I wanna hang out more but I can’t keep sleeping at my parents place so I’m thinking of going back on the rooooooad myan! I’m driving up to Milwaukee in a few days to stay with my buddy Mike who is super fun and cool. Do you wanna come? Totally cool if not! Don’t wanna pressure ya or anything at all! Just figured you might like a little escape.”

Liv had heard better invitations from barking dogs, but still there was something charming in his bumbling way of texting. She was sure that he was feeling the same text-anxiety as her, *no cool-headed person writes like this*, and she smiled, rereading it. To lessen his pain a bit, she sent a quick reply.

“Andrew! This is so sweet! I’ll have to check with work first, could I get back to you?”

She smirked at her own text. ‘Check with work’ meant sending her boss a message that said “I’m gonna be gone next week.” Her absence only meant that he’d have to rotate the next exploitable young person into the sink. But she needed to delay Andrew a bit.

There were still some nagging feelings that made her doubt his good will. Did he want a friend or an audience? Last night there were a few times when she had felt him entertaining rather than conversing. She could feel him waiting his turn instead of listening, coming back to life when she stopped to sip her beer or paused to look around. It was only when she made him laugh that this feeling finally broke. For one drunken evening this rudeness was manageable,

but for a whole trip? She jotted down a possible response in her notes app, “Hey I’m so sorry but we have a ton of reservations this weekend. I can’t come.”

“O-Olivia? Hello?” Her father’s voice through the wall. “Are you awake? I need—I need your help with something... Olivia?” He gave the door a few cursory taps with his fist and she heard the soft creaking as he turned the handle, allowing a sliver of light into the room. “Good afternoon, sweetie.”

“Dad!”

“I know, I know, it’s just kind of an emergency. I need some help with the washer again.”

“Oh my god... is it leaking?”

“I don’t—I mean, maybe. It just isn’t closing and the dryer isn’t drying and I’m just not sure what to do, sweetheart.”

The last word burned on her ears. She was only his ‘sweetheart’ when something was broken. Her desperate little father, with his face only partially visible through the door, would never, and possibly could never, fix anything of his own accord. He was perpetually caught in a cycle of breaking things, panicking, and then despairingly going to his daughter for help. Violently, she started sweeping the cups, bowls, notebooks, devices and headphones off her bed. “Ok, ok, I’m coming,” she told him.

They had bought the washer and dryer years ago when Liv’s mom had been promoted and their dream of clean clothes seemed suddenly achievable. Of course, they were not dreams for Mom, but certainties that had not yet come to pass. The main certainty was that the washer would be a tall, white beast that you loaded from the top. She did not foresee that it would bang around so much that the room would turn thunderously loud, but, with the help of innumerable rags and slabs of wood, they managed to reduce the noise to a shudder. The dryer

was front-loading and untroubled, the well-behaved sibling. Its sounds were muffled and rhythmic and echoed through the house like a dance. It was the sound of a party at the neighbor's house, or the booming call of an emu. She and her sister had heard emus once on a trip to the zoo and would imitate them whenever the dryer rumbled to a particularly loud beat. "GOOM! GOOM! GOOM!" They pressed the backs of their tongues to the roofs of their mouths and then pulled away, humming the lowest notes they could find. "GOOM! GOOM! GOOM!" At the dinner table, in the bathroom, hiding under the bed, "GOOM! GOOM! GOOM!" But there was no gooming that morning, no sounds coming from the basement.

Liv stepped past the hamper full of clothing to get to the machines, but stopped when she caught sight of the washer.

"Something about it isn't working, can you see?" her father called from the top of the stairs.

"Yeah!" she yelled back, trying to keep the rage out of her voice.

The washer was horrifically overfilled. The lid wouldn't close because a mountain of her father's clothing refused to be compressed any further. She could imagine the column of fabric pressing against the inner walls of the machine, straining to expand.

She had warned him so many times...

"Dad! You put too much in this, This is too much!"

"No, because..."

He was really going to argue with her?

"... I've put this much in before and it worked."

"No it didn't! You put too much in and then I came down and had to fix it!"

"Well, I don't know about that..."

He reminded her of an orphaned animal, meekly hunched over, eyes wide, scared, searching for safety, and for a moment, looking at him, she almost didn't scream. Almost.

“Ok then! OK! Then why don’t you use your big memory to remember how I fixed it last time! You’re a big boy, you can do that, can’t you?” She stormed up the stairs, “Or maybe you can’t, maybe there’s something wrong with your brain, maybe you just don’t have one anymore! I mean, come on, why don’t you go figure it out, Dad?”

She blew past him, not waiting for a response, and rushed to her room. Gathering up her things, she rushed out of the house without seeing the effect of her words. It was only when she got to the bus stop that she started to cry.

Tuesday, February 26th

Go to the lake. Carried by some impulse, always back to the lake. Streaming golden sun, held out in the day's palm, doesn't taste anywhere near as good as it does by the lake. Dead leaves crumpled beneath the snow for months are poking out, all the way to the shore. I hold one between my fingers and twist until it is only a stem. Flick it away. Pick up another.

Andrew's text glows and says something new. Over and over. No matter how many readings, there is something new in it. Escape, for now. Blue bubble, extended, palm up. I wonder if it's a trap, if I am worth trapping. But I am just a body and I will smell the same no matter where I am.

I will respond. I will be strong enough to be courteous, to accept with grace. I will make him feel glad to have invited me. I will ask for details, for how many days, when are we leaving, what should I bring. I will be glad when he responds that everything is loose and not much is planned. I will, I promise.

Chapter Three

She didn't pack much. One bag of clothing for both seasons (you never could trust the Lake Effect), some books for reading, notebooks for writing and her satchel of toiletries. This contained the medication that she was prescribed, but never took, and the various pills and remedies that she relied on. The liquids gulped and the pill bottles turned to maracas as she heaved the bag over her shoulder.

No one was out on the street that morning though the sun cast an easy light through the trees. The neighbors, she thought, must not trust all this warm light after months of shivering, must be a fluke. But they would not be tricked into having a lovely day; they had indoor things to do. Liv knew that the light wouldn't last but, as she walked to the back of the car, she allowed herself a reverie:

The warmth is meaningful, a sign of good fortune. Each shaft of light, needling through the trees, a miracle that aches with energy. Desire for summer. All that was dead will return, all things broken will heal. I am fine.

Andrew popped the trunk and walked around to help pack her stuff.

A dense bug.

“How're you feeling? Ready?”

“Yes!”

He watched her for a moment but when she gave him nothing but a smile he danced his way to the driver’s side.

Moving to close the trunk, she took a moment to see the treasures that Andrew had packed. A suitcase with sewn initials, two Trader Joe’s bags filled with snacks, and something that was obviously hidden. There were too many blankets on top of it and they were too self-consciously placed. The edges were crumpled and folded back to give a casual, accidental air but the object beneath them was completely obscured. Liv was curious, but the day was just beginning; she would have plenty of time to ask him about it later. She shut the door and hopped to the passenger’s side.

Andrew threw some trash into a long, white garbage bag that was taped to the center console, “Alrighty! Clean as a whistle!” The sound of the car starting echoed down the block, past her house, so bland and silent now. The music had started as well, picking up midway through a song. Liv recognized Gillian Welch’s voice.

“—been in the lowlands too long”

The house loomed in her eyes one last time. Even as she felt the first acceleration and heard the wheels crackling against the asphalt, the grief started to settle in.

It’s funny that grief loves to attach itself to the happy moments. It shows up to the party completely naked. You can give it a drink, offer it clothes, chat for a while, but nothing will make it fit in. It will remain, stubborn and nude, in the foyer while other emotions hustle around it. You can ask it why it’s there and it will stare cold streaks into your eyes. It does not speak, so you must speak for it, trying to make sense of its presence. Maybe it’s here to balance out the fun. But this can not be, because there’s no balance when the grief is new, just a waterlogged soul. But when you’ve done your time with its naked arms against your chest it stops being novel. Then you can go

find your balance. You can go around the party to chat with your excitement, gossip with your curiosity, even get drunk with your thrill, but grief will still be standing there in the corner, waiting for you. Its eyes will never leave you and when it is time to go it will be there to escort you out. You may look back at the party's glowing lights but the grief will already have gotten to you and the joy will be blurred through its lens. As a fleeting, ephemeral illusion.

Her mother's face, or rather the face painted on her corpse, hung over the road. Liv was sure of it. Streaks of it may have been wiped away by the trees as they blurred across the window, but nothing cut through the eyes; they remained intact.

Andrew drove north up highway 41, past the golf course. Liv realized that going this way would take them through Rondout, completely missing the oasis and knew she had to intervene quickly.

"Hey Andrew, let's turn around."

"Hmm?"

"I want to start the trip at the oasis."

"Oh, well, I've got snacks in the back here..."

"Yeah, I know, I just want to start there."

"... I don't understand... but alright."

This is a real beginning. I am flying beneath them. Beneath an oasis full of bodies, some hungry, some nauseous. Someone watches me, lets me pass without judgement. We are indiscernible, we are loud and invisible streaks. I waved to whoever was watching from above.

Whoosh! I'm gone.

From Illinois To Wisconsin

“How about a podcast?” Andrew asked.

“Sure! Something about music, maybe?”

“Actually, I was thinking of a news podcast. Michael Cohen is testifying today!”

She had heard that name before, but couldn't match it to a face. Who testifies? A politician? A criminal? It seemed to Liv that anyone called to testify anywhere was important, but a stream of other Michaels filled her brain, none of them Cohen. “Who is he again?”

“Who is he? He's the man who's gonna take down the president, Liv! He was Trumpito's lawyer! His fixer!”

Now she remembered the man, his deflated face, his defensive posture, a voice made for screaming; he was all the news could talk about. She had heard the name coming from the TV in the corner of the bar, from her father's radio, and she heard it now as Andrew started the podcast, one hand on the wheel, one on his phone.

“Do you want me to...” she said, holding a hand out.

“No, no, don't worry, I'm good at multitasking.”

There were a few bars of opening music, an ad for website design and then Cohen's voice. "I am ashamed because I know what Mr. Trump is. He is a racist. He is a con man. He is a cheat..."

Andrew scoffed, "No shit."

A high, soft voice faded in. "There you have it. Now, in sworn testimony before Congress, we have the truth that everyone already knows."

Then a second voice, coarse and low. "We got him! We finally got him!"

Both voices laughed and the first man began to introduce the show, "What's up, guys? Welcome back to 'Outraged!' I'm your host, Tom Chalmers."

"And I'm your host, Chad Singer."

"Now, let's get serious for a second here; it's good to hear the truth out in the open. I've been getting really burnt out on lies. In fact, I spiraled this week! POTUS tweeting and Fox News backing him up got to be way too much for me."

"Really?" Chad asked, "I'm sorta getting used to it! I feed off that energy, you know? Get a little jolt of anger. It helps with the pod!"

"I mean, yeah, we are 'Outraged' and all, but I gotta say, it really hurts to wake up every morning to some new lie or atrocity or scandal. It just hurts."

"Huh, so what are you saying? Are you coming out as a pussy?"

Pussy?

The hosts laughed at each other. "Who are these guys?" Liv asked. "Are they, like, journalists?"

"Hmm," Andrew said, "I mean, they don't work for any of the lamestream news sources, but they cover the news so, yeah, they're journalists. Citizen journalists maybe."

"Citizen journalists?"

“Yeah, you know, like the way that they engage with the news technically makes them—”

“I understand what you mean, it’s just...you know... that’s not a real thing. They’re just two dudes with a podcast.”

“What isn’t real about that? I mean, if conservatives are getting their news from dudes with podcasts, then why shouldn’t we? It cuts the corporations out of our lives.”

“But they have ads for corporations every fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah, but they’ve gotta pay the bills somehow.”

“But I... What about standards? Do they fact check stuff?”

“They wouldn’t say anything that wasn’t true.”

“Hmm.” Liv went quiet and turned her attention back to the podcast.

“... and I’m going to be serious for a sec,” Chad was saying, “Is this the end for The Donald? I mean, it looks like the feds are at his doorstep! His buddy is spilling the beans and Stormy Daniels is on every show talking about their affair. Folks, I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw him in handcuffs by the end of the week!”

“Can we just... can we just listen to NPR or something?”

“Oh, you want ‘real’ journalism, do you?”

She was surprised by his disdain, “I just don’t want to hear all this speculating.”

“But it could be true! I bet they are totally right about this! Listen!”

Tom Chalmers spoke in a serious tone, “Cohen has given Congress evidence that directly ties the president to hush money payments to Stormy Daniels. He literally gave them a smoking gun. Several checks, signed by the president himself—”

“With his chicken scratch signature,” Chad added.

“Yes, with his zigzag writing—”

“Probably with a sharpie.”

“Or maybe one of those smelly markers, the licorice kind.”

“Only if they ran out of crayons down at Mar-A-Lago. He might’ve eaten them all.”

“Which he is known to do.”

“Oh yes.”

Liv couldn’t hold her silence anymore, “See! What are they even talking about?”

“It’s funny!” Andrew said, “You don’t like that?”

“Look, I hate him too, but this... this doesn’t seem like they’re getting anywhere. And they’re wasting so much energy on him! It’s just making me more mad!”

“Outraged?”

“Yes!”

“Well, if you want to actually be mad we can listen to this other podcast. It’s this style but for the other side. I use it to keep tabs on what the MAGA heads are thinking,”

“No, Andrew! I don’t want to listen to a podcast for fascists! I just want to know what happened today and then move on!”

“Fine! I’ll put on NPR.” He grabbed his phone and navigated to NPR’s page, swerving out of the lane and onto the rumble strips in the process. The calm, familiar voices came on. Their coverage was concise, focusing on the evidence that Cohen brought to Congress and a few key soundbites including, “He is a racist.”

“The question of the president’s racism,” the anchor concluded, “has long been a topic of discussion. From the controversial muslim ban to his refusal to condemn the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville—”

At this, Andrew lunged at his phone and yanked it to his body, popping the AUX cord out of its socket, “No nazi’s today,” he said sternly, a little breathless even. *Suddenly so sensitive.*

“Can we just listen to music?” she asked.

“Yes, of course.” He tried to DJ one-handed, with his phone clutched to his palm and the cord pinched between ring finger and pinky, but Liv snatched the phone away. Instinctively, he hit the brakes and sent the car behind them into a rage. The driver flashed their lights and honked two short notes, the maximum amount of anger that a car with Wisconsin plates can express. They pulled up alongside them, rolled down the window and shouted, “FIB!” at Andrew before speeding ahead.

“FIB?” Andrew asked.

“Fucking Illinois Bastards.”

As they crossed the state line, the sunshine made what would have been an uninteresting, dead landscape into a hopeful vista. Yes, the trees were leafless, but the sun shining through their fractal branches brought its own pleasure.

“I love sitting under that kind of tree,” Liv said, gesturing to one with bone colored bark, “If you put your back up against it and stare straight up it looks like blood vessels stretching into the sky.”

Andrew grimaced.

“What? You don’t like that?”

“No, no... it’s pretty... it’s just...”

“What?”

“Do we have to talk about blood?”

Chapter Four

When you pass into Milwaukee from the south, I-94 seems to rise dramatically into the sky. Part of this is an optical illusion; in reality, the ground is falling away beneath you, forming the Menomonee Valley. This place was once the home of the Potawatomi tribe, but the valley is now overrun by chimneys that churn the sky with black smoke above the unswimmable river. It is an aesthetically displeasing part of the city, yet every visitor knows it thanks to the sights and smells from the highway.

“Roll up your window!” Andrew said, a little too late.

This was Liv’s first time in the city. Usually she preferred to go south into Chicago for her weekend getaways so it took her a while to register and react to the smell. But before long the sulphur and exhaust started to enter the car and she quickly shut her window. “Oh my god! What is that?”

“Capitalism, baby.”

“No, I mean, like, literally, what is that?”

He gestured to the smokestack to their left and repeated himself. Liv looked over and noticed a few rows of a plexiglass barrier on the edge of the highway.

“Look at that! Those barriers aren’t even eight feet tall, how are they supposed to protect us from that thing?”

“I think they put them there to protect the thing from us.”

“What?”

“The factory. I think they put those up to protect the factory.”

They flew past and Liv craned her neck to look down into the valley. She noticed a huge structure that looked like an unlit torch.

“Did they ever have the olympics here?”

“No... No, I don’t think so.”

“Then what’s up with that torch?”

“Oh! That’s part of the casino.”

“Oh...”

“Capitalism, baby!”

Mike Shultz was waiting for them on the stone stairs in front of his building. He approached with arms spread open, a beer in each hand.

“Yes! Beer!” Andrew said, “I knew it!” He rushed out of the car and into Mike’s bearhug. Rocking from side to side in this embrace, they barked their hellos directly into the other’s ear.

Like seals.

“Mike! I’d like you to meet my friend Liv! Liv, Mike, there! Now you’re friends!”

Liv shook the beer in Mike’s outstretched hand and he blushed, “Ope! Sorry, I’m a little absentminded. Here...” He tucked the beer into his armpit and shook her hand with a surprisingly gentle grip.

He was a large man with large features. His cheeks, chin, mouth, and ears were bloated and rosy, and his belly protruded at least six inches above his belt. He truly looked like a seal.

Say something nice about his body later on. That should keep you in karmic neutral.

“Here! These are for you,” Mike said, handing out the beers, “They’re from a Wisconsin brewery,”

“Oh cool! Which one?” Andrew asked.

“New Glarus, do you know them?”

“Cool, very cool, yeah I love them.”

From the way that Andrew was tapping his feet and moving his body, Liv suspected that he had never heard of New Glarus. She, on the other hand, had watched many customers guzzle them down at work “Do you have any Moonman?” she asked, “That’s my favorite,”

Mike’s eyes, which had been welcoming but glossy, suddenly came alive. “Yes! Yes I do!” he told her, “C’mon up, they’re in the fridge.”

Mike’s place seemed spotless. It was as if each thing had been dusted smooth so that every surface shined in the sunlight. It was a modest apartment, with one large living room, a kitchen space and a bedroom at the back. The centerpiece was Mike’s “Ginormous baby,, a television almost the size of the wall it was mounted on. Beneath it was a bookshelf overflowing with DVDs and Blu-rays.

“You’re still using these things?” Andrew asked, “Ever heard of streaming?”

“Streaming doesn’t have Bonus Features. These guys do.”

Liv could remember what seemed like thousands of Fridays when her family would walk to Blockbuster to pick out a movie. These were magical, pre-streaming nights but the following mornings were even better, spent searching the DVD menu for ‘Bonus Features.’ If the DVD was any good there would be at least two hours of music, interviews and behind-the-scenes footage that was mostly someone’s nephew shoving a camcorder into the

star's face. This was the true test of an actor for Liv. Could they quip their way through a few moments of behind-the-scenes nonsense or would they retreat to their trailer? It turned out that most actors sucked.

"Hell yes!" she shouted, making Mike jump out of his slippers, "I am with you, dude."

They high-fived, their first true greeting.

"Oh! But I forgot the beer," he headed to the fridge and pulled out a little orange and yellow can. Carrying it like a relic, he walked back to Liv with measured steps. "For the lady..." he bowed his head, "Moonman."

Andrew beamed from the couch, "Well, what should we do?"

"I'm feeling a little restless," Liv said, "Can we walk around?"

"Yeah, let's do it! Mike, can you show us some good spots?"

"For sure! Let me just grab some canteens."

He went to his room and returned with three large metal bottles covered in stickers. Liv got the one that read 'MASTURBORTION' across the top in sharp lettering. "That's my band," he said.

"Sick."

They poured the beers into their canteens, about three cans per bottle, and wandered out into the sunlight

Every family in the neighborhood was outside that day. The crinkling of plastic stroller wheels against the pavement was the loudest sound on the block. No construction, no honking, no shouting, just families and the faraway sound of music.

"Pfew!" Liv whistled, "It's so nice out here! It's like, uh... it's like..."

"A bowl full of jelly!" Andrew offered, "Or wait, no, that's a Christmas thing."

Mike looked over at him curiously, "like a..." he grabbed his belly and jostled it softly.

“Exactly!”

“Yes!” Liv saw her chance. “That actually works! This day is beautiful and so is your belly, Michael!”

“Aww, c’mon...”

Back to karmic neutral.

Every person that they passed on the street smiled generously and said hello with some variation of “What a day!” or “Love this weather!” After they moved on, a knowing look would pass between Andrew and Liv.

Endless Midwestern small talk.

“Oh no,” Mike grumbled, “take a look at that.”

A car had turned onto their street and was cruising slowly. Its exterior was plastered with flyers, posters, stickers, and drawings.

“Whoa! That’s pretty cool! Is that an artist or something?” Andrew lifted a hand to shield his eyes.

“Nope, look closer.”

A lot of the older, yellowed pieces of paper had Bible verses and images of Jesus printed on them, but the newer, more colorful pieces of the collage were devoted to a new god.

“Oh wow...”

“Maga, maga, maga...” said Mike, shaking his head.

Images of the president, slogans from his rallies and even some drawings of Democrats in gallows were visible on the passenger side door.

“I—I just... I.... Wow...”

Liv was slightly more coherent than Andrew, “I thought Milwaukee was a liberal island.”

“I mean, it is, but if you’re a troll, like this guy, it wouldn’t do any good to drive around in a place that already loves Trump. If you’re gonna cuck the libs, you’ve gotta do it where we live!” Mike said.

“Yeah... so what’s his deal?”

“Well, he was just a Jesus freak at first, but, you know, his mind was already susceptible to being—Hey!”

A rock sailed over their heads and nearly hit the Maga-mobile, coming within a foot of a rearview mirror. They turned and saw Andrew with another rock in his hand. Mike moved quickly, ready to restrain him until the anger passed, but Andrew was faster and ducked away. As he dropped the rock, Liv could see how badly he was shaking.

“Hey you punks!” The man had stopped the car and leaned out to look at them. “I’m calling the cops!”

Andrew took off down the street, in the opposite direction of Mike’s house. Mike and Liv shared a glance then went after him. As they ran, they could hear the man’s voice behind them overtaking the sounds of the street.

“Fuck Antifa! Fuck Antifa!”

Andrew didn’t stop for six blocks and when he finally did, it seemed like his body panicked. He collapsed, wide-eyes, and pressed tight against the ground, grass in his fists. “Andrew!” Liv tried to speak through her gasping, “You... you...” she wanted to say, ‘You’re insane’ but before she could Mike held out the bottle.

“You forgot your beer.”

Andrew grabbed it and suckled like a child, gulping and gasping without taking his mouth off the lip. They all sat there for a minute, catching their breath, before Mike finally said, “We should go home,”

Andrew's feet veered on and off the path, yet he kept his eyes fixed them. He didn't speak so neither did the others, not until they reached the apartment. Mike let out a long, whistling breath, "Home sweet home,"

They climbed the stairs and collapsed into the two long, leather couches. The day was lovely outside and Liv stood to breathe it in. Looking out the window, she squinted in the sunlight.

"What do you see!?" Andrew spoke for the first time.

"Well, they haven't got riot gear on, but there's three cruisers and one of those paddy wagon things out there..."

"Really!?"

"No," She turned to him, smiling, but her face went slack when she saw that he was wracked with fear, "Andrew... no, of course not, I'm kidding."

The blood started to return to his face and he sank back into the couch with hands on head, "Mike do you have a joint or something?"

"I was just gonna say... How does some weed, some beer, some pizza and a movie sound?"

"Sounds like heaven."

"Alright, I'll go order it. Do you like mac n' cheese pizza?"

"Hmm?"

"Mac n' cheese... on your pizza... do you like it?"

"I've never had it."

"What!" he looked at Liv, "What about you?"

She shook her head.

"Oh wow, you two are in for a treat."

The day passed and Andrew was already returning to normal when Mike came back with the pizza. A movie and a joint seemed to lull them into forgetting, though Andrew's constant "Ooh"ing and "Ouch"ing whenever he moved his arm reminded them at least of the force behind the throw. Soon Andrew and Liv passed out on the couch, face first, lost in anxious sleep. They dreamed of other times and places. Childhood bedrooms, soft breezes off the lake. When Liv opened her eyes at midnight, all she saw was a man's apartment and a ceiling fan tossing dust bunnies to the corners of the room. There was very little rest that night, though they slept past noon.

Andrew was gone when Liv woke up the next morning. Alone in the dimness, the windows still covered by blankets, she found a moment to cry. It was soft, nothing like the wails that followed her mother's death. Those had been forced out of her by some greater power, something beyond her. These new tears were of her own accord. She had to do little more than focus on the discomfort in her body before they brought heat into her eyes and she cried until tears dripped off the end of her nose.

When Mike came out of his room, her face had dried, but the skin around her eyes was still swollen. "Good morning," she managed.

"Mornin', how'd you sleep?"

"Good! I slept good... the leather feels... interesting against your skin. Very plush though."

"Ah good, that's good... I, um..."

"I'm sorry about Andrew," she burst out, "He was acting really weird yesterday."

"I was gonna say! I'm sorry too! I know that he has a lot of anger in him, but that was just stupid!"

“Kids in high school used to call him ‘Angry Andrew’.”

“Hmm, not very creative. He had a nickname in college too, W.S.A.”

“W.S.A.?”

“White Savior Andrew.”

“Uh oh.”

“I know, but it was pretty well deserved. He’d always try to insert himself anywhere people were talking about race. He had to be at the center of the discussion. He’d sit there and affirm every last thing that everyone said, he was like,” Mike screwed up his face in concern, crossed his arms, and nodded his head aggressively, “Uh huh... oh yeah... absolu—I completely agree... so valid, yaaas,”

“He said ‘yas’?”

“Well maybe not yas, but he had that vibe, you know? He’d slip into this other voice when he got excited and just took up so much room. And you know,” Mike paused, “it wasn’t like he was making any points that were aggressively wrong or anything, but the way he said it... and how often he said it...”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“It went beyond panels and discussions too, he desperately wanted to be accepted by people of color in, like, social situations. He would—oh god, it’s cringey. He would go up to P.O.C. with his acoustic guitar and sing these Billy Joel songs in their face.”

“Oh no.”

“And on MLK day he tried to get everyone to sing ‘We Shall Overcome’, and the dining hall emptied out faster than a fire drill.”

“Oh, Andrew...”

“Yeah, but I can also see where the ‘Angry Andrew’ thing came from. He was just up in arms after that Charlottesville rally. He kinda flipped a switch. We were in a class about

Russian Literature, Dostoevsky and shit, and all he could talk about after that day was white supremacy, which, you know, all good, that's important to talk about, but when you're trying to say that *The Brothers Karamazov* would've been Proud Boys... it just wasn't right. He even became a, oh what are they called... a twitter warrior or something? I dunno, but he started doxxing nazis."

"Really? He never told me about that."

"He hasn't told you? That's weird. He was so proud of himself. He got a few of them fired from their jobs and had a party to celebrate. You should ask him about it, it was actually pretty cool."

"I just might."

Thursday, February 28th

Andrew still doesn't want to move his arm. I don't make him move. It's cloudy so we're staying in and watching movies.

Friday, March 1st

Art museum today. Building shaped like a swan. Mike says it flaps its wings once a day in a long, imperceivable arc. It was hard to believe the water beyond the windows is my same lake. Framed by the crystalline windows I didn't recognize the greenish glow or the heaving tide. It all seemed so staged. I liked the art, though. I can't remember it. It is a clear night so we're staying in and watching movies again.

Saturday, March 2nd

Mike left us a note this morning, "I'm at work. Do whatever. Be back at six." Last night there were fireworks in the alley. Three men, one boy. Somewhere around fifteen sharp pops. I was sure it was gunfire, but they laughed at me. Called me Karen. Feeling disgust.

“Would you indulge me just this once?” Andrew asked, remote in hand, “Can we just get a little outraged?”

“What do you wanna watch?”

“Well, you know how we have that asshole as a president?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, he’s giving a speech at CPAC tonight, and I just know he’s going to say some crazy stuff.”

“CPAC?”

“It’s like comic-con for white supremacists,”

“I don’t know, Andrew. Shouldn’t we see what Mike says?”

“Mike will go along with it! We used to roast Trump all the time! It’s surprisingly fun.”

That night they spent more than two hours listening to the president ramble. Andrew was right; the man seemed perfectly unhinged. He went from talking about his big, beautiful wall to mocking renewable energy in a matter of minutes, “When the wind stops blowing, that’s the end of your electric,” he said. “Let’s hurry up. Darling—Darling, is the wind blowing today? I’d like to watch television, darling.”

Andrew lit up and started speaking in Trump’s voice, “Darling... This is a Yuge deal darling... a lot of people are saying, they say, ‘Sir,’ they say, ‘Thank you for making fun of the wind,’ and they do!” Both Liv and Mike laughed at this, but it was hard to get any joy from it. The onslaught was too much and by the end of the speech everyone but Andrew retreated to the comfort of his phone.

Sunday, March 3rd

I don't see why you have to love a place to enjoy it. I can not get a grasp on what the deal is here. It is a city, it is small, it is friendly, it is frightening. I hadn't seen a single person darker than me until we crossed a bridge and Mike rolled up the windows. I am thinking of escaping again, but not back home. Andrew keeps talking about all the places he wants to go, but I don't know anyone there. It's a night of soft rain so we're staying in.

Sunday morning, Liv began texting.

“Hi Sara! I'm so sorry I haven't called or sent an email or anything in a while, it's been hard to reach out because I've been driving around. That's why I want to talk to you, actually, I want to know if we (me and my friend Andrew) could come see you on our way through Michigan!”

Rereading it carefully, Liv took out all the commas and capitalizations, then she sent it.

Monday, March 4th

I want to turn this into a road trip, man. I don't think I'm ready to head back home. I asked Andrew through a joke and he joked back yes. I think he could keep driving as long as there are people to see. Sara responded, in her way. Lots of exclamation points, carefully chosen emojis, she seems excited. She offered a place to sleep. It is a windy night so we're going out to a bar.

They went to several bars that night, snaking up and down the rows of neon signs until they arrived right back where they started, behind Mike's building. In her pocket for the whole night there was a text from Sara that Liv had decided not to answer until the next morning: “When will you be here??? I have to make sure I'm not doing anything.”

Tuesday, March 5th

I don't know when to leave and I don't think Mike will make it easy. He loves to host. We must have walked by four churches last night but I didn't see any of them. They are awake now, sending songs back and forth. Maybe to show off. I told Sara we'd come tomorrow. It is a far too sunny day so we're covering the windows and getting high.

Another week passed in precisely the same way and Liv and Andrew still had no intention of moving on. Something in the rolling comfort of Mike's life, soaked in beer and wrapped in blankets in front of the TV, was impossible to leave. Periodically Liv would have to send a text to Sara to postpone their arrival and Sara would send back kind, but progressively more concerned messages. But Liv made a conscious decision not to register the concern. Once she saw another "that's fine" or "ok, I can work with that," she felt absolved and allowed herself another beer, another joint, another movie.

From Wisconsin To Michigan

When the day finally came, Mike didn't realize what was happening until the car was packed and they came back up the stairs for a last hug. The apartment was unrecognizable from when they first arrived. They had made more than clutter; it was as if they had brought the garbage of fifteen people with them. Mike waded through it to give out his last hugs then returned to his stained and stinking couch.

Liv had expressed a desire to travel around the top of Lake Michigan, through the Upper Peninsula, which would have added hours to their drive, Beautiful hours, but too many of them. Andrew was not swayed and insisted on taking the ferry across the Lake to Muskegon, a mere two and a half hours. Since it was his car, after all, Liv acquiesced and settled in for a stormy ride. Usually, motion sickness was not a problem for her, but as their fellow passengers succumbed to the tilting horizon she joined them in their vomiting. She filled two paper bags before the ferry came to its port and began their drive to Ann Arbor with the sensation of the waves still within her.

"I'm gonna lie down in the back for a while," she said.

Andrew parked the car so that Liv could stumble into the back, then slid into the driver's seat. He adopted what he imagined to be a Russian accent. "Good evenink, vere are you headed tonight?"

She smiled and joined the bit, "It should just say in the app."

"I do not see it, I'll have to plug eet een myself."

"Ugh, Driver can't you just—"

"Hey leesten mees, I don't need yourr crrap, I vant to—"

"Just drive and I'll stop you when we get there."

"Ees not how dees voorks, but ok, this ees your funeral."

She poked him a little further, "What, no water?"

"I just rrran out, mees"

"Well, I never..." she sneered, dropping invisible sunglasses down over her eyes and tossed her head off to the side.

He returned to himself and sped back onto the highway. She lay her head in the crook of the window and stared up into the muted sky, listening to the wind. Her head cut through the wintry air and she imagined her hair flowing out behind them like an endless ribbon.

Chapter Five

Wednesday, March 13th

Brilliant paint, brilliant garden. The trees around the house are a little shaggy and wild. I like that. I wonder if Sara does. Andrew wanted to honk, but she's already sitting on the lawn.

“Livvy!”

Sara ushered them into her arms before they could even stretch out from the drive.

Their bags were left in the foyer while she corralled them from room to room.

“Here’s where you’ll be sleeping,” Sara said, gesturing at the living room vaguely, “but it’s so boring in here, let’s go where the magic happens.”

Andrew let out a soft, suggestive whistle.

“Stop! You’re evil!” She slapped his arm with a smile.

The tour continued with all the prerequisites. The bathroom warnings (“the fan isn’t working so just light this candle when... you know,”), the selective details (one about her Mom’s room and thirty about her own), and that final decrescendo when everything had been seen and the host has nothing more to do than wrap up the excitement with a slightly defeated, “And, um, yeah.”

Sara looked expectantly at her guests, “Welp, shall we drink?”

Simultaneously, Andrew and Liv chirped “Yeah!” not remembering that all they had eaten was granola bars and Arby’s.

“Let’s bust out something nice. I’ll check the wine cellar.”

As she walked down the stairs, Andrew turned to Liv and mouthed the words “Wine cellar?!”

“Ugh, move,” Liv said, “I don’t have time for your disdain.”

“Disdain?” he said, giggling. “I’m just saying! They could’ve donated the money that it took to build a wine—”

“Shh!”

“Or they could build their own! You just need a dry hole right?”

“Shh!”

“I’ll dig one right now! See which is better!”

“Shh!”

The cellar was a closet in the basement, not the pristine, industrial place she had envisioned, and it smelled like cedar.

“One time the shelves fell and my Mom lost like a hundred bottles of wine!” Sara said as she searched through the bottles.

Andrew grunted with a grim smile.

“It was a red pool! So tragic!” she continued, “Probably lost so much money...”

“Karma,” Andrew grumbled.

Liv cringed and waited to see if Sara would pick up on the insult, on the implied ‘she got what she deserved.’ But Sara did not seem to care and was intent upon finding the perfect bottle for the evening.

“Welp,” she said, straightening up, “It’s between these two.” She held the bottles at arm’s length with a frown, “but you know what, why not both, huh?”

She smiled at Andrew and he returned it with no trace of irony, but as she walked past him towards the stairs, his face took on a look of disdain.

Sara flipped on the lights, coloring the living room in pastels. She sat in the largest chair and activated the space. Sitting on soft velvet in this sweetly colored room made Liv feel like she was riding a carousel.

“I need some filling in, Livvy, what has life been like?”

“Oh, well, you know,” Sara’s glass of wine was perched precariously on her knee, kept upright by one lazily drifting hand.

Liv watched it carefully, “I’ve been doing my best, you know...” Try to think, she thought, try try try. But the trying was all she could think of, beyond it there was nothing interesting or funny, just Mom. Try. Try. Try.

Andrew chimed in, “You’ve been doing great! It seems that way, at least. You know, I only ran into Liv a little while ago and the first thing she did when she saw me was run up and give me this bone-crushing hug! I hadn’t been hugged like that in forever!”

“How cute!” Sara’s glass nearly toppled over, “She’s always been that way, such a good friend.”

“Really? So how long have you known each other?”

“Oh gosh, a long time! How many years has it been, Livvy?”

“Since we met?”

“Since we has our love-at-first-sight-moment, yes,”

“Well, since second grade so—”

“Ten years!”

“—maybe twelve.”

“Right you are, darling, twelve years! Of course, I was stuck out here for a lot of that. My mother moved when I was fifteen, Andrew, and so we were torn apart for a bit, but this one—Aw, this one over here... oh dear!” Wrapping her wine-glass hand around Liv’s shoulders, she squeezed carelessly. Liv returned the hug, “Careful,” she said, but Sara didn’t acknowledge it.

“I just love you so much, Livvy. You would—she would send me these long emails about how her life was going and... oh honey... I needed them so much. It was hard making friends out here and I absolutely *lived* for those emails. I can’t remember if I sent many back... But they just lit me up! It made it so easy to come down and visit, even when your mom was sick...”

Thank god, Liv thought, someone else said it.

“...I had another home!”

“Oh wow, Liv, that’s so sweet! I didn’t know about that,” Andrew said.

“Well that’s the thing, isn’t it, darling,” Sara said, “she isn’t nice out in the open where people can see it. She doesn’t advertise it! You don’t! You could never make a career out of it!”

“Out of being nice?”

“Yes! You just don’t put yourself out there! I remember you wrote this beautiful little poem, what was it called... anyway it was amazing! And only in seventh grade! And the teachers, oh my god, they absolutely loved it! Do you remember? Don’t shrink away, silly, this is a good story. You remember? They said you had such an easy talent, so natural. And unique too! They were like, ‘Submit it to a contest! It’ll win!’ They said they’d never seen anyone like you!”

“They say that a lot.”

“Shut—no they do not, stop that.”

“They do! It’s like ‘a pleasure to have in class.’”

“Ok, you were also that.”

“But they don’t really mean it, it’s just something nice for the parents. We were all ‘pleasures to have in class’ and we were all ‘unique’ too!”

“Nope! No! I will not let you talk yourself down like that. This is what I’m talking about, you can’t handle the fact that You. Are. Great.”

“Hmphf,”

“You need to believe it, baby! And then let the world know!”

“Oh god...”

“I’ll be your agent! We’ll go out and I’ll tell people about how great you are and then they’ll come up to you and hug and kiss and hire you.”

“Nightmare.”

“Night—what? C’mon Liv!”

“That sounds awful.”

“Ugh, you’re hopeless, just—just let your agent talk,” she turned back to Andrew, “She’s fucking great,”

The wine flushed their cheeks and Liv could almost hear the carousel creaking beneath them. The spinning must be there, beneath the floor, she thought. Andrew started to tell the story of the gas station again, but Sara would interrupt with stories of her own whenever a detail struck her and he would be forced out of entertainment and into silence. It was from this silence that he said, “So, about tomorrow...”

“Yes... Yes it’s an appointment and it’s... well. It’s good luck that you two are here because I need a ride. They say you can’t drive yourself there. It’s an operation. It’s, uh... yeah,”

“That’s fine, we can take my car,”

“Yeah... I think that would, um, be best,”

“Be Best! Just like Melania’s bullying thing! Be Best! Donald, please, Be Best!”

No longer concerned with the spinning, Liv leaned over to Sara and put a hand on her knee. Andrew’s raving was like static in the room and did not hold her attention, “Sara, what kind of an operation is it?”

“Oh it’s just a normal sort of thing, something a lot of people do. You know, I was actually just reading about how beneficial it is to...”

Liv let her talk her way to the truth, not interrupting, not rushing and not taking her hands off Sara’s knees, “So Sara, what are you telling us?”

“Well... ugh this is so embarrassing. I—I just wish you had come a few days sooner and I wouldn’t have to bother you with this, but... Tomorrow I’m going to go and, um, to get an... it’s not too far. Just south across the river. Near the Target.”

“The doctor’s office is near a Target? That’s fun!” he said as Liv tried to put the full force of the words ‘shut up’ into her eyes.

“No...”

When Liv turned back, Sara’s hands were in her hair, pulling at the silky strands coming from behind her temples.

“It’s Planned Parenthood. I’m going to Planned Parenthood. I went and got an initial consult a few days ago, and I thought I wouldn’t have to do this with you guys but there’s this stupid waiting period. The laws... they’re cruel, you know. And, um, yeah.”

For once, Andrew was silent and the gay, nineties music that Sara had queued seemed restless. Liv watched as her friend shrunk into her seat, eyes down, and felt the fear in her body.

Fear is not like grief; it is not inescapable, just very loud. Like a screaming animal at the fore of your mind, clawing desperately, fighting to be seen, maybe because it knows that once you turn your attention away it will sputter out. It needs you to fight it, to solve its problems. It dreads being allowed to exist. So I allow it to exist and the shout turns to a whimper.

“Ok, that’s doable. We’ll leave at around noon and be back before dark.”

Sara nodded, but did not respond.

“And after that maybe we could go out to dinner, what’s your favorite place to eat?”

“Um, I guess, like, some sort of pasta would be good... I don’t know, that’s not really what I’m thinking about right now.”

“Yeah, I understand, but this is a very normal thing, it’s just a medical—”

“It’s an abortion, Liv! I’m sorry, but why aren’t you freaked out about this?”

“I’m just not.”

“If my mom knew that I was... not only pregnant but that I was... getting rid of it, she would blow up! I’d be out of the house, you know? Because it’s a sin!”

“Sara, you know it’s not a sin.”

“Then why does everyone say it is?”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone at church! They’re all pretty sure! And I’m the goddamn head of the choir so I should be sure too!”

“Then why’d you make the appointment?”

“Because I can’t take care of anything right now! I’ve been killing my plants all winter and between school and work and church, I’m just worn out!”

Liv could feel Andrew’s eyes rolling behind her at the suburbanness of it all, but when she turned to him, his face was nothing but compassionate concern, “So you know this is the right choice,” he said, “This is what you want.”

“Yes. This is what I want.”

“Good, that’s good.”

Sara whimpered, or maybe laughed, as Liv scooped over and hugged her with all the strength she could find. She spoke through the hair in her face and squeezed Sara a little harder when she felt it was necessary.

“Listen to me, my sweet sweet Sara, this is going to be ok. Trust me, you won’t be cursed by God for doing something that is right for you,” *squeeze*, “You are so brave for doing this and I am so proud that you are taking care of yourself. So proud!” *squeeze*, “Tomorrow will be hard, but it’ll pass and the day after will be just a little bit brighter, and the day after that it’ll be the same. All of your feelings are real,” *squeeze*, “but the fear isn’t something I want you to focus on right now. You need to thank it for trying to protect you and then let,” *squeeze*, “it,” *squeeze*, “go!” *a long squeeze that gently tapered out into a firm embrace*, “Can you try to do that for me?”

“Oh, Liv... you’re so good to me.”

“It’s because I love you, honey.”

“Eee!” Sara gave a squeeze of her own, “I love you too.”

Liv walked Sara upstairs, got her a glass of water and gave one final hug. Watching her sheepishly walk down the stairs, Andrew got ready for bed by fluffing a cushion and nestling against the soft fabric. She collapsed into the couch opposite him and they both fell asleep without noticing that there was one last pastel light glowing in the corner of the room.

The house was unrecognizably still when Liv woke up. Last night’s mess was still there, but the mood that created it had vanished. Her eyes and nostrils felt swollen, nearly sealed, while her mouth felt frighteningly slack. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Liv looked around the living room.

Andrew had repositioned himself in the night. His head, which had been draped over the arm of the couch, was buried in a crack between the cushions. His neck was bent at an awkward angle and Liv could already hear two days worth of “Ugh”s and “Ay yay yay”s and “Oy vey”s from him. Two days of asking her to do things that he simply couldn’t attempt with a sore neck.

She straightened up to look into the kitchen. Though the food she’d seen last night was only a few feet away, she felt an apprehension.

What if I’m not allowed?

The thought came sleepily patrolling through her mind.

What if she wakes up and I’m rifling through her stuff?

The thought walked like a cop, with far more confidence than it deserved.

What if I eat the only food she has? What kind of guest does that?

It was swinging its billy club now, like a British bobby.

It wouldn’t be proper.

It twiddled its mustache, puffed out its chest and rocked back and forth on the balls of its feet.

It wouldn’t be polite.

So she laid back down, grabbed an open bag of corn pops off the table and waited for Sara to wake up.

It was only fifteen minutes before she started to throw corn pops at Andrew’s open mouth. At first it was only to wake him up so she could have a partner in waiting, but as her aim improved and he remained asleep it became purely a game. Soon four kernels were nestled in his mouth with the rest scattered around his head and in his hair.

Sara didn’t emerge from her room until 10:30. She made her way downstairs cautiously, trying not to wake her guests, but once she met Liv’s eyes Sara returned to her loudness.

“Oh my god, hello!” she chirped in a voice that did not match her demeanor, “How long have you been up?”

“Not long, how are you holding up?”

“Oh just fine!” Sara said as she made her way to the kitchen. From there, Liv heard a cry of recognition as Sara caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror. Dark circles of mascara haunted her eyes and the tear trails worked their way along her cheeks so that she looked like a suburban tiger ready to scream, “Leave Britney alone!” Sara hesitated in the kitchen and Liv pictured her checking herself with her phone. Then, the sound of a digital shutter.

“Oh wow,” Sara breathed, “You can really tell.” She walked back into the living room, “Could you hear...” she gestured at her face, “this?”

“Not really,”

“You’re sweet,” said Sara. She crossed the room theatrically, wiping at her face with one hand and readying the other for a ‘good morning’ spank. It hovered above Andrew’s curled form and for a moment the two women looked at each other in giddy conspiracy.

When her hand came down on the lump of blankets and body, the sound was somewhere between a pop and a thump.

“Good morning, sugar!”

The drive from Barton Hills took them across the Huron River at the base of what they called “Barton Pond”. It was wider than any other portion of the river in town but it flowed to its conclusion through a small canal in the nature preserve. Andrew had thought this would be the best route though they had to go thirty minutes out of their way. Sara didn’t seem bothered by this decision and, in fact, exhibited a calm that Liv had never seen in her before. That morning she had slipped a red tube top and wide bell bottom jeans over her frame, giving her already commanding presence more power.

“I wanna look like someone Joanie would write about,” she had said, pressing two fingers against the tall portrait of Didion on her wall. “Not in the ‘Play It As It Lays’ way but like ‘Bethlehem’, you know?”

“Mmhmm!” Liv nodded, not knowing what kind of bookish dialect Sara was speaking. She had heard of Didion but these references were foreign. “Totally!”

In her stark red and blue outfit Sara looked like the girl her mother wanted, every bit the valedictorian that she had once been. Now her days were pulled taut by events and errands and her calendar was a patchwork of names and times, stars and hearts, all signifying something important. Usually she spackled the cracks in her days with impeccable smalltalk, but now riding shotgun, she was a completely different person. Or so it seemed to Liv. Her vision of her friend had remained rosy through the years, a beacon of possibility. When Sara and her mother moved away, it was like suddenly stepping on glass after walking peacefully for so long.

The drive took them through the nature preserve and into the city.

“Turn right at the Hands-On Museum,” Sara said. Andrew jumped at her sudden speech and pulled the car into the right lane.

“Here?” he asked with stupefied eyes. Liv glared at his stupidity but Sara, unaccustomed to him, gave a practiced, well-meaning laugh and repeated herself. Eventually, he made the correct turn and Sara resumed her silence, watching the storefronts turn to homes.

“What a perfect street!” Andrew said, seeing that Planned Parenthood shared the block with a Subway and a Planet Fitness, “you could grab a sandwich, get your abortion, and then work the sandwich calories off!” He looked to Sara with a scared grin. She gave a short scoff and turned away. Liv could see Sara grimacing in the rearview mirror and snuck her hand around the seat where Andrew couldn’t see to touch her shoulder. Sara’s hand shot up and took Liv’s in a desperate grasp. Suddenly, Sara ducked, taking Liv’s hand with her. “Shit.” She growled.

“What?” Andrew jangled the car to the side of the road.

“I—I know them. We go to the same church...”

Liv massaged her wrist and looked out the window at the mass of colorful signs and colorless faces, protesting on behalf of God.

“Can you please just keep going?” Sara said from between her knees.

“Of course! Of course!” chirped Andrew.

They went around the block and headed back the way they came. Sara was still huddled in the passenger seat, and, from the soft heaving of her back, Liv could tell she was crying. Still, she didn't make a sound.

Chapter Six

Andrew grumbled a continuous mantra of rage behind his tight lips as he drove aimlessly, turning at seemingly random times. One road ended in construction and Liv watched the frustration overtake his face in a hot, red movement. All the while Sara cried silently and watched the streets whiz by.

“What the fuck...” he grumbled, “Oh God. God God God. God really ruins everything, huh?”

Sara shrugged without looking at him, “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Well, he sure is fucking up everything today. What are we going to do?”

She shrugged again. “I don’t know. I just— I have to be there at three. I just—”

“Maybe I can distract them while you sneak in!” he said, “Run up to the Jesus freaks and shove my fist in their faces.” His wild eyes drank in the road, “...for your sake.”

Sara shrugged again but her eyes had moved from the road to her lap. Liv wanted to hold her delicate head and, somehow, vacuum up the pain with her softly tracing fingertips. Damn the awkward angles of this car, she thought.

There was a banner hanging across a storefront beside them now and it read “Thank You for 25 Years” under a larger, redder “Store Closing Sale” sign. The faded paint on the window, read “Adore Me Boutique and Bead Shop.”

“Park the car real quick up here!” Liv shouted from the back seat.

She hummed the chorus to ‘O Come All Ye Faithful’ as the tinkling bells announced her arrival. The smiling woman at the counter looked up in surprise. She seemed out of place among the dusty, spare shelves. Liv thought her smile was better placed in a field of lilacs.

“How ya doin, dearie?” the woman called, “You’ve come at a great time, everything is super duper cheap! I’ll even throw in some earrings if ya’d like. These, right here, have Petoskey stones set in em from up there near the U.P. Not quite Petoskey though, I think a little outside. You ever go up there?”

Liv’s smile had grown since the first words came flying across the counter. By the word “Petoskey” she was beaming. “No, I can’t say I have,” she responded in the same bouncing tone, “I think my Dad used to go up there a lot. That’s where the Sleeping Bear, uh, beaches are, right?”

“The dunes! Yes!” The woman, (Trish, according to her name tag,) rolled on, “Yes, yes, lots of beauty up there. It just takes your breath away! You know, there’s this one poem by Mary Oliver, you know her? Ugh she is just, mm, she gets me. Anyways she has a poem where...”

They continued oversharing and wrapping themselves in vagaries. Sometimes the point of the conversation emerged but often enough it sank back beneath family stories, wishes, and well meaning questions before Liv asked, “Do you sell rosaries?”

Trish rolled her head to the shelf behind her and said, “Aw sure! Right here, whatcha looking for?”

“Something sentimental. Something that looks like there’s a story behind it.”

Trish nodded and reached into a drawer beside her. She pulled out a rosary she said was made from the ashes of rose petals. “Usually these pieces are made from funeral flowers or maybe flowers from a wedding or something. I’m pretty sure this one is a factory product, but still, just look at it! Looks pretty sentimental, huh?”

Liv held the beads close to her eyes and tried to see the shape of petals in the ashen lumps. She found tiny ridges spider-webbing across each bead. “It’s perfect.”

Liv noticed that though the protester’s clothes were profoundly drab and gray, their choice of sign color was bombastic. All shades of neon announced their presence, stealing attention from the Planet Fitness. Perhaps this had had some effect on the Subaru that was lodged in a snow bank across the street. Two older lesbians were assessing the damage while throwing furtive, angry glances at the protestors. Poor butches, Liv thought, what a place to be stranded.

Andrew pulled past the action and into a parking lot, hidden from view by the A&L Wine Castle. He shut off the car and turned to Sara and Liv, “If this goes well, you guys wanna storm the castle?”

“Definitely.”

“Mm-Hmm.”

“Ok then,” Andrew turned to Liv, “You got this?”

She wasn’t exactly sure but, in an effort to appear strong, said, “Absolutely.”

“Wait a sec before you go!” he said, grabbing his phone. He typed for a moment, grinned, then said, “Repeat after me. ‘I need a box of biscuits, a box of mixed biscuits and a biscuit mixer.’”

“What’s that?”

“It’s an acting warm up!”

She laughed and did as he said.

“Alright, now give em hell.”

There was a streak of blue in the cloud cover, like the angels had gone water skiing and left a crisp, blue wake. It split the sky into two parts, the mass of gray above Liv’s head and the short line of white along the horizon. As she walked toward the protestors, the sun began to peek through the streak.

The light of God, she thought.

Her approach was difficult because it required subtlety. Liv couldn’t just burst into hysterics; that would be too suspicious. The trick, she figured, was all in the eyes, so as she moved past Subway and the smell of corporate bread she began madly scanning the street. This was the pattern: ground, pro-lifers, ground, building, sky, ground, repeat. Sure enough, this attracted just the right kind of attention.

“Hey! Hey You!” screamed a man in all Patagonia, “Do you have doubt? Any doubt at all about what you’re doing?”

Liv made sure to keep her voice shaky and sleepless, “Are you talking to me?”

“The Lord is talking to you!” he said, “These are his words not mine!”

Liv replied, meekly, “The—the Lord?”

The chorus of suburbanites responded with various versions of ‘yes’. Some were sympathetic, some possessed, but Liv was a professional and did not engage. Instead, she cowered under their words and looked into the angel’s wake with bright, innocent eyes.

“Let her through, enough, enough!”

A firm voice was shoving its way through the crowd though Liv could only see the commotion surrounding it. There was a ripple across the well-made-up faces in the crowd as they moved from frustrated to indignant.

The clinic escort was shorter than most of the surrounding screamers, but Liv could see that they had a towering spirit. The slurs and verses broke over the escort, but their eyes were fixed on Liv and they seemed not to notice. They wore an orange construction vest over a jean jacket, covered with patches: “Pro-Choice”, “Bernie Bro”, “They/Them”, and about fifteen of what must have been bands but were so obscure that Liv couldn’t be certain.

“Can I hold your hand?” they asked.

“I—um,” Liv stammered, struggling to improvise, “Yes?”

“Alrighty then,” they said, taking her hand and wading through the signs and bodies. She made sure to look conflicted as she was ushered to safety, but once inside the clinic she took a breath and found herself again.

While the escort patted her arm softly, the words ‘thank you’ and ‘so much’ came out of Liv’s mouth a few too many times. “This work that you do is so important and I love and respect it,” *Get to the point*, “but... I don’t have an appointment, my friend does,”

“Your friend?”

“Yes.”

They looked at the crowd through the window, “Is your friend still outside?”

“Yes, around the corner with another friend. Here’s the thing, though, she doesn’t want anyone to see her. She goes to the same church as all of them,” she gestured outside, then stood quietly for a moment with her arms crossed and torso swaying slightly.

“So why are you in here?”

Liv grimaced, “I’m the, uh...”

“Bait?”

“Distraction, yes.”

“So, what, you’re going to go out there and make a big scene? Shout at them or something?”

“Well,” Liv pulled the rosary out of her pocket, “I was thinking of using this.”

The escort’s laugh started as a small shot of wind through their nose, but as they looked back and forth between Liv and the beads in her hand the laugh grew. “Oh my god, I don’t think I’ve ever seen this before! You’re gonna—you’re gonna make them—”

“I’m about to be saved.”

“Oh lordy, are you sure you can pull it off?”

“Well, I think so. I went to Catholic school when I was a kid. I know what they want to hear.”

“Jeez Louise... How are you going to keep it up for long enough?”

“Well, Sara’s just getting a pill from the doctor so I figured that one run through the rosary would do it.”

“You’ll be cutting it close.” The escort shook her head, “This is what my mom would call ‘a hoot n’ a holler.’”

“It might just be.”

“Oh man... want me to sing “On Eagles’ Wings” while you’re walking out?”

“The Eagles? I don’t, um...”

“It’s a hymn! You never sang that?”

“I know some hymns, just not that one.”

“Mm hmm, well why don’t I give you a little more training so they don’t eat you alive out there? If they ask you for your favorite Pope, what do you say?”

“Wait, are you Catholic?”

“Raised Catholic, dear, raised Catholic.”

“But you work here.”

“Honey, this place would be so understaffed if it weren't for agnostics. Now who's your favorite Pope?”

Liv tried to remember who won the last Pope election, or christening, or whatever it was called. She had been in middle school and her class had taken the afternoon off to watch a smokestack and an empty balcony. By the time the Pope had shown up, 3:00 had passed and she was on her way home. Still, she remembered her mom cheering at the TV, elated that he had chosen the name of her favorite saint. “Francis, the current one.”

“No no no,” the escort replied, “He's like the Obama Pope, they don't like him at all. They like the Reagan Pope, John Paul II.”

“John Paul...”

“The Second, yes.”

“Huh, and what did he do?”

“Bad shit, and lots of it, but they don't see him that way so neither should you. Just think of him kindly, like a Grandpa. Now, which prayers do you know?”

Liv recited the Our Father and the Hail Mary, but this was apparently not enough. There was also the Glory Be, which seemed easy enough, and The Apostle's Creed which was so long that the words jumbled in Liv's brain and refused to stick. “Well, maybe it's good you don't know that one,” the escort said, “It'll give them something to be superior about.”

“Ok,”

“You should probably memorize the Sorrowful Mysteries, though.”

“Sorrowful Mysteries?”

“Yeah, they're these little stories you tell at each one of these,” they held one of the larger beads between their thumb and forefinger, “to help you meditate on how you owe Jesus something since he suffered so badly. There's all sorts of mysteries. My Mom would say the

Glorious Mysteries on car trips. They're a little more fun. She would read it through the CB radio to the truckers. But these protester folks definitely want to hear the sorrowful ones."

"Ok, how long are they?"

"Mmm, they're kinda long, but you just need to know the names. I'm sure somebody will take it from there."

Ten minutes later, Liv was ready to start the show. The escort stood by, ready to let Sara and Andrew in at the most opportune moment. They would send a signal via text, then hold the door slightly open so they could hustle through. Standing with one hand on the door, Liv practiced what the escort had told her.

The Agony in the Garden. The Scourging at the Pillar. The Crowning With Thorns. The Carrying of the Cross. The Crucifixion.

The escort winked at her, "The Lord be with you,"

"And also with—"

"Mmm!"

"And with your spirit!"

"There you go."

Deep in the mask. They struggle to scream over each other from behind the rope. Bold faces. If I enter meekly will they know? You can see through anger but can you see through a shrinking violet?

"Honey! Honey! John, look!" one of the protesters said, "She's back!"

"How does it feel?" another shouted in Liv's face, "Doing what you've done?"

"The Lord is sad, girlie," yet another added, "that's all you need to know. He's crying right now because of you."

Breathe through the mask. Be.

“Actually,” Liv said quietly, “I couldn’t do it...”

“What? What’d she say?”

“You—honey, you didn’t—She didn’t do it!” There were cheers, high fives and a few voices rising over the rest saying, “We did it!”

You’d think they would accept victory a little better. Just a few high fives for God?

“I was wondering,” Liv said, raising her voice a little, “I was wondering if you all would pray with me.” She pulled out the rosary and cradled it in her hand.

“Oh you sweet sweet thing,” a voice at the front of the crowd said, “look at you, you’ve already got the rosary and everything.”

“I tried to pray with it a little before I came here, but I didn’t really feel anything.”

“Well, don’t you worry about that, baby. We are gonna make sure that you feel it right now. My husband—John!—he leads us in prayer all the time—John! Get over here!—and believe me, he has the power to move you.”

“The power belongs to the Lord alone, Molly” John said as he jostled to the front of the group, “I’m just following orders.”

“You know the Glorious Mysteries, don’t you, baby? Why don’t we do those to celebrate this, you brave girl.”

“Actually,” Liv interjected, “I was hoping to do the Sorrowful Mysteries, you know... for my sins.”

“Right you are,” said Molly, “We can’t forget that this child has entered you immorally. You aren’t married are you?”

Liv lowered her head, “No...”

“Well, then we need to remind you who you’ve sinned against. The one who died for your sins and then rose again, who ascended to heaven and then rose again!”

“I think that’s one too many risings, dear,” John put a hand on her arm then turned to the crowd, “Everybody with a rosary to the front, everyone else just count along in your head!”

Liv heard the clattering of rosaries being drawn out of pockets and handbags. They came in many styles, some metal, some wood, but most were made of lightweight plastic in the pastel colors of Easter. Molly pulled her own out of her pocket and eyed Liv’s ashen beads with envy. Then, turning to the crowd and speaking as if they were a rowdy tour group, she said, “Alright everyone, we’re going to do the Sorrowful Mysteries, ok? That means no praising, no H-word-ing. It’s Lent after all so you shouldn’t be saying it anyway, now bow your heads in prayer!”

Hallelujah!

“Before we start,” Liv said to Molly’s back, “Could I join you? This rope is making me feel very disconnected from your spirit.”

“Please do!” Molly held the rope up above Liv’s head and she ducked under it.

Like Daniel going into the lion’s den. Or at least like the VeggieTales episode. The bodies are intense. I can hear the screaming even when they’re silent. The threats even as they smile. But they know nothing. They can not see me.

“In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...” John recited, head tilted back, staring at the sky. He continued, professing his belief in the story of Jesus in language that Liv found stilted, yet the congregation seemed to be mesmerized. She lowered her head and held her hands against her mouth, mumbling along in half words and sounds. It was surprisingly easy, since she already had many of the buzzwords locked in her memory, and she emphasized them so that the people around her could hear them.

“...I believe in a *Holy Spirit*, the roly bafric burs, the muhunion a *Saints*, the business of *Sins*, the messumexon on the *Body*, and *Life Everlasting, Amen.*”

John leapt into the first “Our Father” and the crowd closed their eyes in prayer. Liv looked over her shoulder and saw Sara rush into the doors of the clinic with Andrew close behind her. He walked like a spy, crouching and backing through the door with a wary eye on the congregation. Liv turned back to her prayers, knowing that she had about twenty minutes before her friends would reemerge.

John led the crowd through an Our Father, three Hail Marys, a Glory Be and then one last prayer that she didn’t recognize, though she followed as best she could, “*O My Jesus, Forgive Us nar Sins an shava fom de Fires of Hell, eat all oles doo Heaven, ineshally hoes indeed a try Mercy,*”

“The First Sorrowful Mystery...” John began.

“The Agony in the Garden!” she cried out.

He looked down at her, impressed, “The Agony of *Our Lord* in the Garden, yes. A very good attempt.”

She kept staring at her feet, perhaps too much in character, because the embarrassment that seeped into her was not entirely performed. John told the story of Jesus trying to get out of the crucifixion in one sentence before Molly hopped in to say, “Jesus Christ endured all of this pain for us. Let us, by true contrition for our sins, pray that we too are accepting of our father’s will.”

Too short! Where’s the actual story. Endured all of this pain? We hardly heard about the pain!

John moved on to the next set of prayers without leaving much time for true contrition and a vibrating worry appeared in Liv’s stomach.

What if the doctor wants to talk through the side effects? Or, more likely, what if Sara starts her small talk? What if a poster catches her eye? What if she starts sharing her story? What if she needs to pee? I can’t keep this up forever.

She kept stumbling through the prayers, mostly praying not to be caught reciting in half-sensible words. Her body swayed from side to side in a way that she hoped looked prayerful, but was actually a release for her worries.

The Mysteries passed quickly and by The Carrying of the Cross (or, as John called it, “Our Lord Carries the Cross to Calvary”) she was beginning to sweat. She could not check her phone to see how much time had elapsed, but it seemed that it was too little, no more than ten minutes.

You need to buy time! You need to buy time! How do you buy time! You need to! You need to! You’re going to get caught! You’re going to get caught!

With panic beginning to seize her, she hardly got through the last five Hail Marys and just managed a broken version of the Glory Be. She turned her head to glance through the wall of bodies and saw a silhouette in the front door of the building. Though she couldn’t see the person’s face, she acted on instinct and assumed that it was Sara, hesitating there for a moment, waiting to leave the building. The power of Liv’s distraction seemed to be wavering, however and eyes were beginning to wander away from their beads.

John began to read the final Mystery, “The Fifth Sorrowful Mystery, The Crucifixion of Our Lord,”

“Aieeee!” she cried out, falling to her knees, “No no no! Lord, no! Please!” All eyes immediately locked onto Liv and she tried to think of the most salient words to keep them there. “My child! My child! Lord, forgive me! Forgive me!” Several pairs of hands came to rest on her back as she hunched over, trying to force tears, and the voices came down on her, at once judging and soothing.

“Shhh, don’t cry, child, you will be forgiven,” one voice said.

“Be at peace! Be at peace, sinner! The Lord has not forsaken you!” said another.

“You poor poor thing. You poor creature.”

“Look to salvation!”

“Be at peace!”

John continued the prayers while the crowd huddled around her meek form and out of the corner of her eye Liv saw a figure dash out of Planned Parenthood and into Subway. She kept up her wailing, but gave it a new force, a bit of celebration, so that, when she finally arose, the smile on her face was genuine even though the tears were not.

Andrew raved while Sara sat in the back seat with Liv, holding her hand and resting on her shoulder.

“How the hell did you hold it together?” he asked, drumming his fingers on the wheel, “How’d you stand the bullshit?”

Liv gestured at the back of his head and said, “I’ve had a lot of practice listening to bullshit.”

Sara tried to stifle her laugh but it rumbled up her throat and out her nose.

“But what did you say? What did you even say?” Andrew continued.

“I just asked them for a box of mixed biscuits and a biscuit mixer.”

It was the first time all day that the three of them were able to share a laugh. They went out for pasta that night and Liv unfolded the story, adding heroic details here and there while leaving out the worries. They slept soundly that night and spent the rest of their week with Sara in relative peace.

From Michigan To Indiana

It was nearly noon by the time they were ready to leave Sara's house. Her farewell was just as graceful as her greeting had been and before they left she handed them each an envelope where she had written out her thanks again. They shared final embraces and packed the last few things into the car. Dirty clothes and medicine were tossed onto the ever-growing pile in the trunk. A granola bar had melted on the passenger seat, one of the expensive, superfluous kinds that Andrew loved to buy in bulk, with carefully crafted logos and stark colors that he called 'modernist,' as if it was artists and not a company making these bars.

That wasn't how she tasted them. To her, the melted shmush of chocolate and nuts on her seat was a much more fitting presentation of the bar. This is its natural environment, she thought. Before Andrew could see his treasure all wilted and dead on the felt, she tossed it back into the pile.

He slid into the front seat with an "oofda." He smiled at her, "Ready to go home?"

She neither nodded nor shook her head, "Could we stop and pick up some cigarettes before we get on the highway?"

His face soured and he turned away, asking, "Why?"

"I just want some. Can we stop?"

“I mean... yes we can... but like, I really don't like those things.”

“Oh, well. I won't smoke them around you, I just want to have them for when I need them.”

At the word 'need' his shoulders tensed. “I just... I care about you, right? And those things... they killed my grandmother and I don't want to see you go down the same road.”

She tried her best to keep the incredulity out of her face in case he turned to look at her, but he kept his eyes forward. The same boy who had challenged her to smoke an eighth of Mike's weed in ten minutes suddenly cared about her lungs? Suddenly turned her into his grandmother? Grief, it must be grief, she thought.

“I'm sorry. When did she die?”

“When I was in second grade.”

This time she couldn't stop the long exhale from escaping her nose. But why argue? There would be more gas stations and more chances to call him out, she thought. So she sat back in the seat and watched the concrete divider whizz by before saying, “Sorry.”

“It's ok,” he replied, “Just a me thing.”

An hour passed before Andrew spoke again, “I'm a little concerned.”

“Hmm?” She had been on the brink of sleep.

“We're spending so much time in this car, right? And if anything went wrong I don't know if there's anything I could do about it, you know? Like what if one of the spark plugs stops, uh, sparking or whatever it does. I don't know how to fix that! We'd have to call someone to come save us! How lame is that? Like shouldn't we know this shit?”

“Mm, well,” she said sleepily, “You could google it.”

“But that'll be even worse! What if I misread something really important or someone fucking changed the instructions? I mean, anybody can hack anything right? Emails, elections,

whatever, I don't feel safe learning from Google. They might track our data and see that we're googling it and then send advertisements at us for new spark plugs."

"Who's they?"

"Whoever they are! It's fucking crazy because we don't know who 'they' are. We don't even know enough to be scared in an informed way. Like, everything should be scaring us because we don't know what's going on. I mean, the president..."

This kept happening, him spiraling off into a land of worries that was completely foreign to her. A land where concerns are global and weighty and unsolvable. Whatever immediate problems you might have could be easily spun into a larger narrative of global domination and conspiracy and the president. Always the president.

"As if he was smart enough to come up with something that complicated," she interrupted.

"But that's the problem!" he barked, "He's so stupid that these things just happen around him. All the evils in America flow right through his stupid hands and he doesn't even realize it because he's too busy being evil elsewhere! It's like that philosophy thing, the—uh, the thing where it's like evil is quiet?"

"The Banality of Evil?"

"No, no, no that sounds too pretentious. It's something to do with the nazis, which is what he is! I mean he said there were 'good people...'"

On both sides. She'd heard him spit this quote out over and over again, like a mantra to sustain his anger. As he went on about it, she tuned him out and thought about her mother's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the picture of Hannah Arendt on the back, with a cigarette held loosely between her fingers, giving a knowing glance to the photographer. It was *The Banality of Evil*, alright, and she wanted a cigarette.

Wednesday, March 20th

Six miles to the Indiana border. Naked trees against the sky, seems wrong to ogle them like this. A length of rubber in the center lane off the side of some vanished big rig. Do their tires pop or do they tear? Feels like making roadkill when we drive over it.

Five miles to the border. Rocks piled on the side of the road. Construction lights ahead. The fines are double here. No one is working the machines. Double no one. The highway shifts; the lines become a corridor and the sheen of the new blacktop feels sweet against the wheels, against the axel, against air and fuel, as his foot pivots and throttles. And then we shift back. "End Road Work".

Four miles to the border. Watch every marker as it flits by. There are helpful decimals on them. 3.9, 3.8, 3.7, exit to New Buffalo, there are no new buffalo, 3.6... The sliver of Indiana and the bloat of Chicago ahead. We've made a circle around the bottom of the lake. A hard turn into Lake Michigan to avoid all this, to catch a current home. Are the windows watertight?

Two miles left. 'Home is where the heart is', 'home sweet home', 'home on the range', 'Prairie Home Companion'. Homely, homebody, homestead, homey, homie, home. 0.8 miles. If it feels like this, why go back? The border feels like nothing when we pass over it. The land looks the same, but the overpasses aren't painted. Is an Indiana night smoggier? Or just Indianee-er? More midwestern, meaning stillness, cold.

Meaning home.

"How many friends do you have between here and New York?" she asked.

"I have a few."

"I have a cousin."

"Wait, what do you mean?"

"I don't want to go home."

"Your Dad probably wants you home."

The washer is full to the top.

“He’ll get by.”

“Ok...”

“Get off at the next exit so we can get some sleep. In the morning we’re turning around.”

Chapter Seven

Driving through the empty roundabouts that littered the small Indiana town, they passed hotels, motels, and inns all connected by streaks of concrete and separated by strange grass boulevards, marking where one property ended and the other began.

“This place is one big parking lot,” he said under his breath, “Where do the people live?”

She grunted in agreement and slid a hand into her hair, grabbing it slightly and pulling with a small, indeterminate force. The people who staffed these hotels, motels, and inns, needed to sleep somewhere. Not to mention those who staffed the gas stations and fast food restaurants, working in grease all day for the pleasure of transients.

Outside, a line of trees, winding streets, teenagers mowing the lawn; Inside, parents changing sheets and smoking cigarettes.

In the hotel room, the beige fabric on the beds was vaguely the same tone as the carpet and the stucco ceiling. The only prominent feature was the television, which was not housed in a cabinet, but instead hung from a metal arm that could extend into the middle of the room. Andrew pulled to see how far it would go, but the squeaking of the un-oiled hinges scared his hands away and he started unpacking instead. Suddenly, a sound came through the wall, the

beeping and roaring of machines. Andrew threw open the curtain and discovered that the hotel was surrounded by construction. The sound of jackhammers and crunched earth filled the air.

Liv went to the bathroom but found that neither the tap nor the shower was working. There were a few precious seconds of slowly dripping water, but it soon turned brown and then stopped flowing altogether.

“Hey!” she yelled, “There’s no water!”

Andrew rushed in, turned the tap and shower handle again, and said “What’s going on?”

When Liv ventured out in search of water, she learned from the receptionist that a pipe had burst in the parking lot. The construction workers didn’t say what exactly caused the break but she said they had pledged to, “work all night if we have to!”

Liv tried to hide her irritation. The receptionist smiled, “All this work will be done before you know it, but they might still be going a little into the night. If you’d like, there are earplugs in the minifridge for only four dollars each.”

“Four dollars per pair,” Liv asked, “Or per plug?”

Laughing in that cordial, service industry way, she replied, “Per pair, silly!”

She gave Liv four gallons of distilled water and told her to conserve as much as she could. “If it’s yellow let it mellow, if it’s brown flush it down, ya know?”

When she got back to the room, Liv found Andrew huddled in a nest of bedspreads and pillows, hunching over his phone, “What’s going on?” he asked her. She relayed the news and watched his body sink deeper into the covers. “So no shower?” he asked.

“I was just going to use this,” she held up a gallon of water, “but I’m gonna wait a bit, just in case they fix the pipes soon.” She handed him one which he held close to his body, unopened.

The noises of construction had changed from digging to a frenzied conversation. The workers seemed to disagree about how to fix their mistake. One voice would overtake the other and then recede, but neither Liv nor Andrew could make out any words, just the tone of the workers who sounded tired and pissed.

“Wanna watch some TV?” Liv asked.

“Sure.”

She turned on the TV and they cracked their gallons open. Major channels, cable news, sports, cooking competitions. Out of all of these, Liv settled on the Food Network, hoping that Guy Fieri would give Andrew enough material to shake this mood and get back to joking around. *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* ran endlessly on the network so there would be no shortage of episodes, but even as they joined Guy halfway through one, Andrew remained withdrawn. Liv tried to spur him on, commenting on the chefs that Guy was so rudely interrupting, (“She doesn’t want him in the kitchen,” “This dude is trying too many jokes,” “He doesn’t like to be upstaged”) but Andrew kept quiet, occasionally taking sips of his water. The next episode started and Guy announced he was visiting a diner in upstate New York

“Hey! Liv said, “Is that anywhere near your school?”

Andrew tightened the grip of blankets around him and took a deep breath, “Yeah, I’ve, uh, actually been to that place before.”

She had hoped for a little more excitement from him, maybe a story or two about the place. He had told her next to nothing about his school, except for the angrier details, and her curiosity was starting to get the better of her, “Is the food good?”

He shrugged, “I mean, you know, it’s a diner,”

No stories, no complaints, just apathy. Intolerable.

“How about we watch something a little more interesting,” she said, finally, “something to get outraged at.”

Andrew perked up slightly, “Are you sure?”

“Why not?” She flipped over to Fox News. The coverage that night was of a murder that had been committed in New York. The local police had arrested a suspect, Ronny Jackson, 35, who they claimed had a history of robbery and drug related arrests. They showed a blurry photograph of a black man with a split lip, surrounded by police. Whoever was directing the show zoomed in slowly on the man’s scared eyes while the anchor speculated that mental illness might have been involved. The murder victim, according to Fox, was a conservative academic who taught at Liberty University and...

Andrew shook free from his nest, grabbed the remote and turned off the TV.

Liv waited. His eyes moved in her direction, but did not settle on her; instead they fell on the door, flicking back and forth between the handle and the crack of light on the floor. Her mind scrambled for a joke, something soothing, something well-meaning, something to open him up. However, everything that came to mind was a jab, a kick, a mark on his character, so she stayed silent. He looked in her direction a few times but she did not release him. Finally, he coughed, jammed his fists into his eyes and began to speak.

His speech was warbling and scattered. “That’s the guy.”

“What guy?”

“The neo-nazi that my professor brought in.”

“No, really?”

“Yes, really.”

“And he’s... he’s dead?”

“Yeah. And that man... he didn’t do it...”

“I was thinking the same thing! I mean, what kind of probable cause is there? He had a few drug arrests so now suddenly he’s a murderer?”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

“And how dare that anchor throw in that mental illness part! It’s ridiculous! Anyone who kills a nazi is doing it for a real reason, not just because they’re bipolar or whatever. They definitely did it on purpose! And now the cops are gonna pin it on the first black man they could find? What else do we expect from—”

“No! Liv, I *know* that he’s not the guy. I *know* who did it.”

She paused, taken aback.

The sounds from the parking lot rattled through the room. The workers must have decided on a plan of action because the trucks roared back to life and the sound of digging started up again.

“I have a story that I haven’t told you. I have... I had this friend back at college and... and he was just... he was just a real asshole sometimes. To be honest, I kind of liked that about him. He was always certain he was right. He’d always say he just wanted to help people. But people didn’t want the help because, you know, he was such a pain in the ass..

“He thought he knew the right things to say, but when he said them everyone just scowled, or, well, sometimes they smiled, but they didn’t mean it. He kept seeing these things happening around him, you know, unjust things, people being cruel, that kind of thing over and over again... And he got really scared. I don’t know. Something awful always seemed to be coming around the corner... Like he’d see some douchebag out at night, trying to pressure some girl or starting a fight for no reason. That kind of thing. At one point my friend and I thought about marking those people somehow just so everyone knew to stay away, but we couldn’t agree how. I said stickers, he said brands. So I started getting a little worried.”

“Brands? Like with cattle?”

“Yeah. Hot metal on skin.”

“Jesus.”

“Then... then when that nazi came.... He just showed up on campus and all of a sudden it was all right there in front of us. We went to this guy’s talk to figure out what his deal was, and he was... god, he was just despicable. It’s easy to be smug when you’re that kind of person. When you feel the hate that’s coming your way, but you choose to hunker down and embrace the evil. Your grin starts getting a little more fixed and your face stops listening, it just screws up into this condescension. My friend couldn’t handle it. After a few minutes he bolted out of there, but right before he left the room, he shouted ‘Fuck you!’”

“And this guy, he was a bonafide nazi?”

“Yeah, everyone thought so. Except him, I guess. He kept saying that he was an academic, just theorizing about race, but the only people who really read his work are white supremacists, so... yeah, I consider that a nazi.”

“Jesus!”

“The worst part was that politicians kept citing him. They started building their platform on his white-genocide bullshit. And they got away with it because he never completely admitted what he was. Plausible deniability. They’re all about that.

“That’s what drove my friend so crazy. There was this chill in him after that talk. He acted like everything had gone to hell and no one else could see it. So he... he did something about it. It was extreme, I know that, but he didn’t think anything else would have worked. So he, uh, he went to Walmart and got a gun.”

Liv could barely feel her own heart. Moonlight streamed through the curtain onto Andrew’s face and his shadow against the ground fractured and rippled.

“It went against so many impulses, you know? All those liberal feelings about guns. But it’s weird...you do feel something when you pick up a gun, hate or whatever. That’s just what I felt when I touched it—when he let me touch it. Anyway, his idea was to scare the shit out of this nazi, or something like that.”

“He didn’t have a plan?” Liv asked.

“Well, he must have had a plan. He just never told it to me.”

“But he let you hold the gun.”

“Yes, yes he did.”

“And you didn’t stop him, you didn’t say anything?”

“I thought he was just going to scare him, and I didn’t know whether he’d actually do anything at all. He was like a kid, you know, he’d get excited about things in public but, in his head, he was never sure they were right. So I thought this would be like that. Another half-assed idea. But then he found out where this guy lived and... all of a sudden it was so easy to do it.”

“How’d he even find this guy? Isn’t that kind of person really secretive?”

“He just found out, googled it or something.”

“Google? There’s no way! It’s impossible to find out where a—”

“—it’s not impossible! It’s not! And he did it, ok? He found a way. Maybe he had help or something. I don’t know.”

“Wait, did he ask you for help? Don’t you know how to dox?”

His lips tightened and he took a sloppy drink from his gallon. Most of the water missed its mark, coating his chin, seeping into the comforter. “He didn’t need my help. He could have figured it out himself.” Andrew seemed to be measuring his breaths, with one hand tight over his heart.

“He waited on the road that led to the house until he saw the man leave, then he walked up the driveway. He took a stick—almost a log, really—and jammed it into the garage door so that it wouldn’t and then went looking for a place to hide. Next to the porch there was some sort of meadow, I guess and so my friend just waited there for hours. Tall grass, ticks everywhere.

“Then, just around dark, he saw headlights coming up the driveway. And there was a moment—” he slipped a hand into his hair, his eyes shut tightly, “this awful moment... he told me that the garage opened anyway, despite the log, and he thought he’d lost his chance to catch the guy. He had so many things he wanted to say to him first, you know, to make sure he knew why...”

Liv held her breath. Outside, the sound of a truck emptying gravel.

“...But he panicked when the garage door opened and ran to the car before it got to it and then he shot through the windshield, sort of wild, a wild shot, and the man stamped on the accelerator and tried to run him down. He dodged it but the car crashed into the garage wall and so he rushed up to the driver’s side. He figured he had to move quickly because maybe this guy had a gun in the glovebox or something, so he just started firing before he could even see him. He put two bullets through the window before checking to see if the man had a gun. Turned out there was just a bag of groceries in the passenger seat. He didn’t have anything.”

“Was he dead?”

“Yeah. He was dead. My friend ran but it took him a long time to find his car. Finally, he did and then he just took off.” Andrew stopped himself, putting two fingers against his lips, “and, um,” he drummed them against his chin, “so yeah, that’s the story, I guess..”

Later, Liv couldn’t remember if Andrew kept talking after this point. Her memory was of his frantic energy softly waning into exhaustion and then of the spring water shower she took in the grimy bathroom.. She remembered that her arm ached from holding the gallon above her head, that the floor of the bathroom was freezing and that, after stubbing her toe, the pain seemed to travel, reverberating through her cold feet.