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Suburban Panic

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Suburban Panic

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

by
Ella Baldwin

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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“It’s very easy, under conditions of artificial but continually escalating obligation, to find yourself organizing your life around practices you find ridiculous and possibly indefensible. Women have known this intimately for a long time.”

&

“The last few years have taught me to suspend my desire for a conclusion, to assume that nothing is static and that renegotiation will be perpetual, to hope primarily that little truths will keep emerging in time.”

-Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror*

1

(Here we are, welcome!)

In a medium-sized room. It's nothing too extreme, not gaudy or lavish. There are two relatively large windows on the west and south walls, framed with simple white cotton drapes. The bed is a queen, covered in blue-gray linens, with a plush blanket at one end. Above the bed, Polaroids that were definitely not taken on a Polaroid, but off an iPhone camera roll. They're printed and hung up with twine. There are three chairs; a beanbag, a futon, and an IKEA glossy white chair that sits alone in a corner. By the side of the bed, there is a clean white nightstand complete with a lamp that utterly lacks personality. The carpet at least is jovial, a bright blue like a puddle in the center of the space. It's the room of someone trying desperately to figure out how she wants to appear to others, and failing. It seems like she's decided on Pinterest-Basic With Bland Taste But At Least Everything Smells Good. Savannah is laying out snacks ceremoniously on the ground, in the center of a fluffy carpet. She's got the energy of a terrier; intelligent and frustrated. Her blonde hair is barely holding on in its pastel hair tie, but somehow it works.

(You know the type.)

Her frantic energy is almost endearing, and now and again she reaches up to her nose and rubs the bulb of it aggressively with the palm of her hand. She has a sensitivity to the beach-scented air freshener plugin, but has yet to find out. She lights more candles than necessary, since the room is also draped in an abundance of twinkling fairy lights. Salt and vinegar chips, snickerdoodles, gummy bears, all of the essentials. Nothing is ever placed quite right for her, it seems. She puts down a giant bottle of ginger ale, four water bottles, several cups, and then gets up to fiddle with her bedspread. Every so often she adjusts the bottles slightly, as though they are little soldiers in a war reenactment, laid out perfectly to battle plan. It's clear this setup will never be perfect for her. Her phone lights up on her bedside table, and she lunges for it.

Kate: Here!

Shit. Shit. Shit, she thinks. She scrambles around, not even touching anything, just panicking. She goes to rearrange the bottles on the floor one last time. *Shit*. There's a brushing of fabric against a doorframe, and Sav whips around to witness the arrival.

"Sav! Sorry I let myself in, I just figured you'd be up here," Kate says.

"Oh no," Sav replies. "You're fine, I mean, you're right." She looks down at her phone, praying for a new alert. "I wasn't expecting you—"

"—Oh did I get the time wrong?"

"No no you're fine, this is the right time. You're just like, *very* on time."

“Sorry.” Sav makes an effort to look just over Kate’s shoulder, in the hopes that she didn’t come alone.

“Don’t worry, uhm... what’s up?” Sav asks. “How are you, how was the—uh, drive?”

“The drive?”

“Yeah.”

“I live like, super close.”

“Right.” Sav lowers her gaze. *Don’t be stupid.*

“I mean you’ve, you’ve been to my house.”

“Uh, yeah.”

“These candles smell so good.”

“Thanks they’re um, just Target—”

“—I love—” Kate pivots.

“—Do you—”

(This interrupting dance goes on for a while. It’s annoying.)

“Do you know when Annie’s coming?” Sav asks.

“Oh, um,” Kate tilts her head. “No, I don’t.”

“Oh... okay.”

“Is your dad, uh, are your parents home?”

“No, why?”

“I just wondered.”

“They’re in the city tonight,” Sav says, her fingertips darting around anxiously, betraying her casual tone. *Did she talk to somebody?*

Kate contrasts with everything in the room. Her hair is slicked up in a taught ponytail, bobbing cheerfully in a measured way with each sentence. *Perfection*. Where Sav is frantic, Kate is almost impossibly controlled. Her posture is impeccable, as though she has been practicing for this moment. Her clothes fit close to her lithe, long body, and it’s clear that she has been told time and time again that in order to maintain her interest, she must maintain her physical form. She looks thinner. Her earrings are big fat fake diamonds, most likely purchased from a department store teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. Sav watches closely as Kate reaches up to twist them in her earlobes, fidgeting just slightly too long. Kate looks out the windows, and Sav has to remind herself that she’s staring. She pulls out her phone quickly and begins typing away, barely engaging. The air vibrates between them.

“So,” Kate says, “how’s everything going between you and your new boy—”

“—Uhm yeah everything is fine,” Sav responds too quickly.

“Oh okay I’m just checking because last time you were like—”

“—I just, I decided to forget about it. So let’s forget about it, ok? Let’s just have, like, a fun night.”

“Ohmygod,” Kate says. “Yes no I totally agree, absolutely. Fun night!”

“Woot woot! Oh amazing, Eve just texted. I just told her to come up.”

“Great!” Kate turns to the door slowly. “Yay!” The words don’t even finish on her lips before Eve pushes through the doorway. Where Kate is flawless, Eve is undone and effortless to the average onlooker. Except the average onlooker is not Sav, who has long been looped in on the process of crafting Eve’s “undone” look.

“What’s up, bitches!!” Eve squeals. Her teeth are almost shockingly white, which she has recently been attributing to the wonders of charcoal toothpaste, but Sav has her doubts. “Ohmygod Sav this is so cute, you even lit candles wowowowow. And Kate, hey girl!”

“Hey,” Kate says dryly.

“Okay, so I know like, nothing has officially started yet but I did bring a little light beverage just to get us ready,” Eve says as she pulls a bottle of Svedka from her purse.

“Oh no,” Kate says. “I didn’t bring anything.”

“You’re fine,” Sav waves her hand. “Eve always brings the vodka for our pregames.”

“Wait, what pregames?” *Don’t say anything.* Sav tries to communicate to Eve in that very direct, very secret eye contact language. Eve blinks in response.

“Oh, last weekend we went to the bar and I brought Svedka. I have a whole box of liquor under my bed, so I’m like, the pregame queen.” Eve announces this as she sets the plastic bottle ceremoniously down next to the ginger ale. *Goddamn it.* Sav thinks.

Nothing is secret, I guess.

“Oh Annie’s here, amazing,” Sav says. “So we can all start getting ready.” She’s determined to push past whatever lingering discomfort hangs in the air. Eve has a knack

for stirring up social anxiety when she's feeling bored, and there's no time for that tonight.

Annie glides into the room, her hair piled into a gigantic bun on the top of her head. She has always dressed like the height of fashion about two years ago. *Maybe there's some kind of a BumpIt in there?* Sav wonders. It's unclear.

"Hi!" she chirps. "Hey guys!"

"Annie!" Kate jumps up.

"Ohmygod Kate, I love your jeans, they look so good, are they new?"

"Yeah, I got them half off at J.C. Penney's just like you said. Honestly, I think they look better on you."

"No!" Annie playfully pushes Kate's arm, scoffing. She drops her bag right by the bed, a power move. Eve put hers by Kate's, but gets up now and goes to move it by Annie's.

"Oh, is this where we're putting our bags?" Eve innocently asks.

"I didn't really pick a place," Sav says. "You can put them wherever." Annie and Eve hold eye contact for a second past comfortability. Eve drops the bag. "I'll just put it here." There's a moment of silence, they just stare at each other. The doorbell rings, much to Sav's pleasant surprise.

"Oh, that's pizza!" She practically lunges for the door. "I ordered pizza!"

Eve calls after her, "I hope no pepperoni!"

"Booo, veggie slut!" Sav hollers back. "I got broccoli for you, don't worry." She runs down the stairs, pushes a tip into the delivery man's hand, and vaults herself back

up towards her room, pizza boxes teetering. “Back! I’m back! Everyone okay? Cool, cool, let’s have pizza. Pizza, pizza.”

“God,” Kate whispers.

Sav places the pizza boxes in the center of the room, and the girls gather. They’re feigning coyness, but are ultimately ravenous. In a flash, there is a frenzy of crusts and hands; Kate doesn’t want to overstep and Eve completely oversteps. *Classic*, Sav thinks. Ultimately, they all sit on their knees and devour the greasy slices. Once they’re through with the initial rush of hunger, their breath stuck in their throats, they start to move towards the reflective surface in the room. No time to waste. There’s one big wall mirror, opposite the bed. They twist themselves to look thinner, longer in front of it. The distance from childhood to womanhood is surprisingly short, and they have to be ready at any moment. It’s the in-between that’s dangerous, where they exist as a combination of the two. They’re still teetering a little on the ropes, unsure of how to cross the bridge. Sav reaches for some makeup, and pushes a pump of tan liquid into her palm. She begins smudging it onto her cheeks with her fingertips, applying it almost like spackle. *It needs to shine. Like, um, the top of the Chrysler Building.*

“Sav,” Annie says, “do you want me to do your hair?”

“Oh.” Sav looks up from her liquid foundation reverie. “I think I’m okay, actually, I was just gonna do like a half-up, half-down situation.”

(That stings.)

“Oh. Okay.”

“Could you curl mine?” Kate perks up.

“Of *course!* Ohmygod that’s gonna look so good on you,” Annie says, smiling. Eve reaches up and twists her bangs.

“Could you, could you maybe do mine after?” Annie doesn’t respond. “Like you don’t have to if that’s too much.” Backtracking. Sav watches the negotiation, and sees Eve’s eyes dart downwards, bashful.

“Oh, I...” Eve’s words fall away, and the awkwardness creeps back into the room.

There’s an instant of slippage, and Sav wishes that it would dissipate. Something unsettled moves through the air, and she begins to imagine. Eve’s eyes change, and a green mist falls over everything. Everyone is moving in slow motion except for Eve, who reaches for the curling wand herself. She burns her hand and yelps, but nobody can hear her. She is in a bubble all her own, unobserved, except by Sav. The mist settles around her body, shadowing her, and her developing burn keeps disappearing and reappearing. She shouts over and over again, there’s some kind of music that’s drowning her out now. Eve starts to breathe through the mist, the shouting, the music. Then she channels all three; she is full of venom and longing and inhaling the green. Sav imagines her covered in this green light, emanating it from every inch of her skin. Eve controls this moment, this music, and is completely herself here. A cycle of movement runs through her, but this isn’t possession. She is possessing this. And then something falls, and it’s gone.

“Sure. Eve. Sure,” Annie says.

“Cool. Thanks.”

There is a deep sense of ceremony around all of this. They know exactly where to stand or sit, exactly how the curling wand has to be. The hair process becomes occult; something we are only allowed to witness by chance.

“Should we be, like, worried about this rain?” Sav looks to the windows. She wishes that the house would get struck by lightning, but only enough to terrify everyone into staying in. *Is that a terrible thing to wish for?* There’s the slap of rain against glass, and the weight is that rich August kind of wetness. It’s unmistakably violent. Funny, nobody else noticed it before. The girls perk up to the sound, they’re used to a storm this time of year.

(But not on this night. Fuck, no.)

Sav sighs.

“No, it’s fine,” Annie says. “We haven’t been OUT out in forever!”

“Yeah we can just wear coats,” Kate says. “You have coats, right Sav?” Kate gestures to the massive rack of coats in Sav’s closet. It is pretty undeniable.

“I mean... sure I have coats but this seems pretty intense. I just don’t want to be looking like—”

“—A drowned rat?” Eve and Annie speak in tandem; an inside joke. Sav notices the little laugh they share, and inhales deeply.

“Yes,” Sav rolls her eyes. *God, the one time they agree.* “Thank you. A rat.”

Annie has pulled a leather jacket from Sav’s closet, and puts it on tentatively. Sav watches her decide that Eve would look better in it.

“—I just don’t want to be out if it’s a thunderstorm.” Sav’s voice rises.

“Right,” Annie says. “But it’s not a thunderstorm.”

(It is a thunderstorm.)

“Okay but we need this,” Annie says, following Eve around the room with a denim jacket. The chase reminds Sav of a mother asking a child to put on an extra sweater, even though it’s eighty degrees out. The child turns their nose up. Sav watches everyone move around, shadows of their younger selves still seem to inhabit parts of their bodies. She can see it in the bends of their elbows, and the coiled spring behind their knees that used to launch them above fire hydrants or onto curbs at the mall. They had been so unsteady then on their growing limbs, and that precariousness has yet to evaporate completely. She thinks how they have become *stunning and brilliant and terrifying in their fullness.*

“We could have such a cute night in though!” Sav jumps around, brimming with nostalgia. “C’mon, it’ll be like sixth grade again. But without the hormones. Or grody ass boys.” *The boys.*

“Isn’t that the point?” Eve asks.

“Of course it’s not,” Annie responds. Kate looks around.

“I wasn’t friends with you guys in sixth grade.”

(Oof.)

Eve quickly pulls the jacket on as Annie pushes it over her shoulders.

“Well I think we should stay in,” Sav says, desperate to pivot. “I think we can have just as much fun here.” *Imagine a world where we could be content with small things?*

The little springs behind our knees?

“It’s just such an aesthetic bar,” Kate says. “For pictures.”

“What aesthetic are you thinking of? Applebee’s chic?” Eve laughs.

“Guys seriously, we have all the makings of a bar here,” Sav insists. The girls begin to talk over her, but she continues. “Just minus the creepy men that paw at you!”

“Creepy men do bring that certain zest, though,” Eve says offhandedly. And suddenly nobody looks at each other or breathes, as though they’re waiting for the thing, the unspoken shadow, to leave. Sav watches Annie fidget a little on the bed, tracing a line in the comforter like a line in one’s palm, as though it could provide a cosmic answer. Annie only told Sav the details of that day, and now when they both are swept up in the memory their focus drifts down, as though the answer is hidden in those electric cerulean fibers. There are some things you don’t repeat. *Don’t think about it.* Sav tries to communicate to her through the brainwaves. *Don’t think about it.*

“Uh, an-anyway,” Eve stumbles over her words, “staying in is fine with me. Cheaper, anyway, right? All those Irish Car Bombs add up to tuition, I bet. Also like why

are they called Irish Car Bombs?” She goes to get another drink, and begins to tell a long-winded story about the etymology of the Irish Car Bomb and its problematic consequences. Sav is lost in thought, her mind processing at a slightly slower speed than the one at which Eve is speaking. *Eve tends to spin herself into these kinds of webs.*

“I guess you’re right... that is kind of suspicious,” she agrees, eager to put an end to the rant.

“Ohmygod,” Annie says. “Now we’re saying cocktail names are problematic?”

“I really doubt you’d get in trouble over ordering an Irish, uh,” Kate fidgets with the carpet. “You know.”

(Kate has this habit of balancing on the precipice of an opinion, it’s incredibly
aggravating.)

“Irish Car Bomb,” Eve says.

“Yeah,” Kate looks up from the carpet.

“Well just because nobody would find out doesn’t mean it’s not politically incorrect.”

“I just doubt that anyone at the bar cares about political correctness. They’re normally doing trivia about shitty old sitcoms.”

“They should care,” Eve says. Her confidence used to draw Sav in, even mesmerize her. Now it grates on her ears. Annie emerges from the bathroom. Sav didn’t even realize she had left.

“Guys does anyone have a napkin? I need one,” Annie says, unnecessarily loudly.

“There are paper towels right here, Annie,” Sav gestures to the paper towel roll by the pizza boxes.

“No, like, a sanitary napkin.”

“Sorry, what? Is this 1983?” Eve laughs.

“A pad,” Kate looks solemnly at Eve.

“Oh you’re fine,” Sav says, waving away the miscommunication. She wishes that the others could see the beautiful and honest parts of Annie the way she does, woven with delicate compassion. She wishes that they didn’t have to resort to these kinds of jokes. “There are tampons under the sink.”

“I don’t. Do that,” Annie says. Eve takes a slow sip of her drink.

“This is an amazing party.”

“Nobody? Really?” Annie’s face is reddening. Sav looks around the room, willing one to materialize.

“Sorry, I didn’t bring anything,” Kate says. “Again.”

“We can talk you through it if it helps,” Sav shrugs. *Can this be over, please?*

“Um, no, that’s too...” Annie trails off. “Look, I’m not, like, squeamish. I just think it’s gross.”

“But aren’t you having sex with Dylan?” Kate says.

“What? Yes, I mean—”

“Really?” Eve interrupts. “I thought that was a whole—”

“–But that has nothing to–I’m not, I mean, I’m not. Not that–” Annie goes to her bag and rummages through it, her hands slipping on the clasp. “You guys can talk about whatever you want, I just won’t. And I would really love it if everyone would stop giving me the third fucking degree.”

“You brought it up.”

“That’s like, very much internalized misogyny.”

“I just asked for a pad.”

“C’mon, though,” Sav says playfully. “Is it about seeing it? I have a little mirror.”

“I–I don’t know. Because there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Yeah, but maybe looking at it would be, like, spiritually healing,” Eve says through a mouthful of chips.

“Stop!” Annie finally shouts.

Slowly, cautiously, Eve walks to her bag. She digs around for a moment, and pulls out a maxi pad. Nobody breathes as she wordlessly passes it to Annie. The walk across the room takes forever. Annie turns to Sav with a face full of fear. Something in Sav starts to crumble a little, as she realizes *I shouldn’t have done that*.

“Jesus,” Eve says. “You’d think we told her to get sexual reassignment surgery.”

“That’s not funny.” Kate’s voice cuts through, but she’s holding in a chuckle, Sav can tell.

“Not you too. Can we all chill the fuck out?” Eve sighs. Sav pulls at her shirt. Something that has been bubbling up in her gut suddenly pushes to the roof of her mouth. Without Annie in the room, it feels as though there is space to exhale. If she

stops and thinks about it, Sav has always known that she relishes the resentment that builds between the two of them. They go a while without a fight, just building tension. Then they let it explode over text and don't speak for two days. It means that eventually a break will appear, where she is granted the power of uninhibited speech. Sav never looks for more reasons to build up this tension, but it is a key tenet of the love she and Annie share, and so she lets it simmer. Until now. She feels the words tumble out of her, the things she has been folding inside her until they beg to be opened, and can barely track where her brain is going. Her voice becomes richer, her gestures wilder, and all of a sudden she is standing up, performing an aria of spite and release.

“Why can't she just shut up. Sorry I'm not a saint—” Sav stops as soon as she sees the look on Kate's face. Shock, dread, even a sprinkle of pity. Kate's eyes are fixed on a spot just over Sav's left shoulder. *Annie. She must be out of the bathroom. Fuck.*

(How long has she been there?)

“—Annie!” Kate exclaims. Sav grabs her phone from the nightstand and hurriedly opens Instagram, hoping to avoid the conflict.

“I love this song,” Annie says. “Turn it up.”

Sav lunges for the speaker, nearly dropping her phone in the process, and cranks the volume. The song is deep and forceful, something with a heavy bassline. She feels spared, at least for the time being, by the intensity of the beat. The girls start swinging their bodies back and forth, rocking their shoulders and bopping around, pretending

themselves into a state of ease. There's a simple synchronicity to their movements.

Annie is an exceptional dancer, Sav thinks. Kate is awful, but it's sweet.

(Anyway.)

Sav begins to imagine again. The lights shift, and a heaviness falls. It's purple all around the room and full of smog, almost choking her. Annie pulls a microphone close to her chest, a microphone that has descended smoothly down on a cord. Sav watches Annie sing a distorted version of the song playing on the speaker. The tempo is off and the key is lower but the vibration of noise has intensified. She looks straight at Sav, challenging her to something and also making it clear that Sav would lose. Annie is in a trancelike state, her voice swirling like incense around the room. In this syncopated, mesmerizing place, Sav sees her pour out this deep pain and desire for control. It's heartbreaking. It reverberates through the walls and around the ceiling. She's wailing, crying into the microphone, as though somebody has doused her wounds with rubbing alcohol. And then it's gone, as quickly as last time.

The music shifts into something pulsating, something by Beyoncé in her early years. *B-Day is such a good fucking album. Wait, am I drunk?* Sav focuses on her palms for a moment, a trick from dance classes in the past, and decides that yes, she is in fact, remarkably dizzy. The palm trick has never worked for her. She abandons it, and starts spinning around the room, transforming her body into a maple tree seed, the kind that

descends every autumn like a tiny chartreuse helicopter. The others follow, and begin swirling too. They bob their heads, pulsing with an undercurrent of chaos. Eve grabs a pillow and throws it at Sav on a particularly emotive lyric. *Got me looking so crazy right now*. The pillow knocks over a bag of gummy bears, and they pepper the floor, little gemstones. The girls are playing imaginary drums, throwing their bodies across the room. Sav swings her hair back and forth, imagining it's a giant river of shining light. She is the pole dancer. The winner of every competition, the star of the show. And then, just as quickly, she feels a sharp jab to her side. Her foot kicks a bottle of something in order to keep her body balanced, and then her socks are damp.

“Ow! Shit.” *What the hell?* She whips around to see Annie. “You hit me?”

“Sorry, I—”

“—It's fine,” Sav says. “It'll just.” Annie looks up. *Venomous*.

“Bruise.”

2

“Okay, who wants what color?” Sav is holding a massive makeup box, nearly overflowing with nail polish bottles. Every color under the sun seems to live there. Some are dried up from slumber parties past, just flecks of chalk that she has never had the heart to throw out. “Childhood revisited!”

“Your childhood was seriously full of acetone, I guess,” Eve says. “Watch out for those brain cells.”

“Who wants what color?” Sav asks. *Why are all my friends reincarnations of my mother?*

“I’ll take pink.”

“What kind of pink?” Kate stares blankly at Sav. Everyone waits for something. Sav leans in and watches Kate inhale. Exhale.

“Any pink.” She tears a paper towel, and places it delicately onto the carpet. Sav begins opening a bottle and watches as Kate slowly, deliberately paints each fingernail. Sav thinks about if the color would sink in like a tattoo, preserving the look and feel of this sublime Girl World. She knows Kate would love to live here, and that Annie has never ventured outside. The bit she can’t quite figure out is if she likes it in Girl World. She carefully examines the red, then the orange. Her indecisiveness, as her mother has never failed to point out, is a trait Sav has clung to from her middle school days of self-consciousness and need for approval. The biggest gag of middle school is that those traits never leave you, they just reappear in secret, unattractive places.

“You know what we should do?” Eve asks the group.

“What?” Sav relents and faces Eve completely. She knows how the girl yearns for attention, and finds it in all the wrong places. *Might as well give it to her, maybe a game would change things.*

“The pizza box game. I played it when I stayed in LA.”

“At the mansion?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t call it a mansion.”

(I would.)

“The pics looked pretty deluxe,” Annie says.

“It was just like a normal Airbnb. Normal, Jesus. Anyway, let’s play.” Eve scrambles around the room, finding a Sharpie on the bedside table. She hunkers down over the pizza box as the others watch. Sav reaches for cups and vodka.

“I really only drink white rum,” Annie declares.

“Annie!” Sav says, trying to catch her in the lie. Eve shrugs.

“Do whatever you want.” Kate reaches for Annie’s cup and splits the contents between everyone else. Her expression is smooth and cold like slate, but her hand betrays her as she spills the vodka a little. Sav has always wondered how she keeps herself cool like that, and what is going on beneath it. Kate is a mystery. *Shit, Eve’s explaining the rules. Focus.* Eve has written superlatives on the pizza box, there’s a coin

involved. Whatever the coin lands on, the girls must choose who best fits the superlative. If no consensus can be reached, or it lands on blank space...

“Then you make one up,” she says.

“Sounds... tenuous,” Sav says.

“Sounds fun.” Kate smiles.

“I guess I’ll just do ginger ale,” Annie says. The other girls pretend they don’t hear her.

“I’ll go first,” Eve says, going to her pocket and pulling out a quarter.

(As though she pays for things with quarters—ha! She clearly planned ahead for this.)

“To show you how it’s done.” She flips it dramatically. *It’s actually a terrible toss, Sav thinks, but somehow it lands on a bit of text.*

MOST LIKELY TO DINE AND DASH

“Okay,” Eve says. “Kind of lame but I feel like I had to put that one in. Like to start us out. Whatever.” They all pick Eve. She smiles a little at the suggestion, and Sav knows that she must have written it for this exact response from the group. There’s always an ulterior motive to everything she does. Kate asks Eve if she dined and dashed because she couldn’t pay for the meal, and Sav almost snorts in her drink. *As though*

Eve has ever been unable to pay. You can smell the money on her, it's like rotting flesh.
Or Tata Harper moisturizer.

“No, like, we did it for the rush.” Eve shrugs loosely. Sav wonders who the “we” is that she is referring to. Eve’s friend group has always been broad and undefined, full of acquaintances who are often mentioned in stories as background actors, none of them particularly daring enough to steal. *She always chooses people who make her look dangerous*, Sav thinks. *Like me, I’m safe. And boring.* “It was Taco Bell,” Eve says, “that’s a corporation that doesn’t need any more money. The toxic work culture, the labor—”

“—Wait,” Annie says. “Did you say Taco Bell?”

“Yeah,” Kate nods slowly. “You can’t dine and dash at Taco Bell, that’s not a thing.”

“Oh, um—”

“—Right, yeah, no, you can’t...” Annie says. She tilts her head. “How did you even manage that?”

“Exactly. It’s not a thing,” Kate says.

“No, it’s a thing—” Eve says tentatively.

“—Definitely not a thing—” Annie says.

“—Drink!” Sav says, desperate to squash the tension. Annie, emboldened by Eve’s embarrassment because *isn’t she always?*, leans in closer to the pizza box.

“Okay, can I go?” she says, grabbing the quarter and tossing it boldly. It wasn’t a question. The coin lands squarely on

MOST LIKELY TO HOOK UP WITH SOMEONE HERE

Sav squirms around. *Finally!*

“Well,” Annie says. “I’m out of the running.”

“It’s a hypothetical, Annie, that’s the point,” Eve says, rolling her eyes. “We get it, you’re dating a man. You’re super straight.”

“Aren’t you?” Sav asks, turning the dreaded threat of heterosexuality back onto Eve. She knows exactly what she’s doing.

“Yeah, but I’m adventurous.”

“I think it’s Kate, honestly,” Annie says. “Because you’re such a good friend, I feel like you would be so attentive—”

“—It didn’t ask who would be the *best* hookup,” Eve laughs. “You’re sure you’re straight? Seems like you’ve thought about this.”

“Yes, I just don’t parade my sex life out in front of everyone,” Annie says. The words get stuck a little, and Sav can tell it’s painful for her to speak. As much as she’s been pissing her off tonight, Sav can tell that the mention of sex triggers a bristle on Annie’s body.

“I thought you and Dylan had a whole religious pact or whatever, my bad,” Eve throws her hands up. The thing about Eve is that while she’s not particularly vindictive, her loyalty is comparable to a salad colander. Secrets tend to drip out.

“You would be attentive, Kate,” Sav says. “I’d hook up with you.” The bag of

chips crackle for what seems an eternity, until Kate finally pulls a single chip out.

“You would?”

“Sure!” Sav says. “I can be *adventurous!* Contrary to popular belief.”

“So we all agree?” Annie asks.

“I guess,” Kate says softly, munching.

“Drink!” Sav pushes the bottle towards Kate. Kate takes a gulp, and tosses the coin.

MOST LIKELY TO STRIP

“Like, professionally?” Sav asks eagerly.

“Eve,” Kate says. “Hands-down.”

“Um, I’m the one who did that hip-hop class,” Sav reminds the group. She does not include the part where she specifically bought large gold hoop earrings to wear to the class, only to get her hair tangled in them during a body roll. The other girls in the class had looked on in horror, as the instructor helped her take them out. “I honestly think it’s me. Like, I’ve had the most experience—”

“—You want to be the most likely to be a hooker?” Annie scoffs.

“You think I’m a hooker?” Eve asks. *No, of course not*, Sav thinks. *It’s just that... well...* Sav genuinely can’t remember the last time Eve was with someone longer than three months. Her interest always seems to drop off around the six week mark.

“You say potato, I say pot-ah-to,” Annie sighs.

“Stripping is an art form,” Sav hurriedly pulls a video up on her phone of a woman dancing elegantly on a pole. Annie shrugs. “A feminist art form. I think it’s me.”

“Why are you so hung up on this? Let Eve be the stripper, Jesus.”

“Because I’m trying to... feel better about myself. I want to feel good in my body, I want control like they have. And also, I want another drink.” Sav can’t believe she’s revealing so much tonight. She’s normally not like this, but *tonight feels different*, as though she may not get a chance again to speak.

“Are you drunk already?” Annie asks. “You know you can’t handle liquor.”

“No. I just want to be a stripper and... I’m just gonna... drink.” She drinks. The sting of the vodka takes on a different meaning for her. There is a deep pit, beginning in her throat, that aches for something. She wishes her body could be a holy place for herself, beautiful and cherished enough to spin on a pole, creating endless shapes. She has all of the imagination, but none of the practice for this kind of self-love. Like a beginner, those muscles are weak. Vodka works for now.

She flips the coin, but it doesn’t land on a phrase, just empty space.

“So I make one up?”

“Yup,” Eve burps.

“Most likely to...” she looks at Annie. “Sell their soul.”

“I’m sorry,” Annie laughs freely. “You think I’d sell my soul?”

“You might,” Eve says. “Right price.”

“Okay, I’ll play along. What’s the price for my soul? And it has to be better than money, that’s too basic.”

“What’s better than money?”

“You think I’m obsessed with money? That’s what you think?” Annie’s tone is just a hair sharper than usual, Sav notices. She can’t tell if it’s anger or not yet, since they’re all laughing giddily, but feels the room tilt in that direction. *Tread lightly, Sav.*

“I think you should drink,” she says. She considers for a moment that maybe she does see Annie as money-obsessed. *But it’s not her fault that she strives for perfection, or deep down wants everything to be luxury. It’s not her fault. She just wants to win, I can’t fault her for that. It looks stupid and desperate. I want to win too.*

A memory catches Sav and pulls her down. *I always feel like I’m so close to this pinnacle, the big win, but it’s just my boyfriend in tenth grade laughing at me. Jonah, who thought that my body was a great joke. Reaching for my ass and in the same breath being surprised by my weight. Like I should be a unicorn, impossibly curvy and only ninety pounds. That contradiction feels so heavy, like you’re eating a huge fucking hamburger and afterwards you forget you’ve even eaten anything at all, so you grill another. And another. And another. To be the unicorn, to get the win that everyone said you could, but they were lying to you. By the end you’re stuffed with this... horrific dish, dripping red white and blue blood from your maw. You eat the dream so that you can be it, you want it to pump within your organs and fuel your heart. But it just tastes bitter and rotten, so you take a pill that makes you throw up. And then you’re ready for dinner again two hours later.*

A text lights up her phone, distracting her.

Mom: Staying in the city. Have fun with the girls!

Sav stares at the phone blankly for a minute. *Is this fun?* Did she want her mom to come home? *Fun with the girls. Sure.*

“This song!” Eve yells, crunching a bag of chips as she jumps to her feet. “Fuck the game!”

The song is fast, dripping with sweat like a whole club dance floor, except they’ve never been to a club. The Wendy’s parking lot after eleven o’clock doesn’t count. As they bounce around, makeup smudging with perspiration and limbs jiggling what little fat deposits they have privately obsessed over, Sav considers that she has no idea how to be sexy without all the trappings and decorations. Her mother, and honestly all her female relatives, have always told her that those little fixes are only meant to emphasize the natural state of being. However, at a certain point it becomes difficult, even excruciating, to distinguish between the two. Kate has clearly mastered it. Sav watches as Kate’s clumsiness transforms into allure. Sav is just drunk enough to push the limits at this point, she begins to peel that artifice like warped, molding wallpaper. *Is Eve taking off her top? And her pants? Oh shit, skinny jeans are the worst.*

“Now who’s the stripper?” Eve calls.

“God, Eve,” Annie says. She’s feigning shock. “Do you have to make a whole thing?”

“What? Do you have a problem with my body? I’m hot. Like, temperature.”

“No. Just...”

“It’s okay if you do,” Eve dances over to Annie and whispers something in her ear. Annie hands her a shirt, and Sav watches the game of cat and mouse until finally Eve relents.

“Stay in your panties, bitch!” Sav shouts playfully. *Maybe this could be fun? Should I take my top off? Is Kate taking her top off?* She watches Kate bounce around, arms flailing awkwardly, hips tucked close to her body, like at any moment they could betray her. Kate’s cotton, close-fitted shirt rides up a bit, and Sav sees the dark brown mole on her white stomach, a punctuation mark that emphasizes the velvet quality of her skin. Sav thinks of her own stomach, which has recently begun to develop light purple striations, the kind that you love seeing in the clouds at sunset, but not on your body. She has been concerned about them, especially since she’s well past puberty, and already has a collection of similar marks between her thighs. Stretching, growing. “Um, do you guys want kids?”

(Leave it to Sav to break up a moment.)

The truth is that she has wanted to ask them this for months, and has skirted around the topic on various occasions in order to gauge interest. The thought of the marks reminded her of it. It’s not that she wants to get pregnant. *Absolutely-the-hell-not.* However, in the last two weeks she has had four dreams about pregnancy, all swimming in the deep and unknowable river between nightmare and

dream. In one, she gave birth to a lizard who began tap dancing once it was pulled from her womb with pliers. A twitch reverberates across her spine when she recalls it now.

“What if there’s, like, not even a planet for you to get pregnant on?” Eve says, alternating the hand that has been in the chip bag.

“Ohmygod,” Sav gasps a little. She genuinely has not considered this. *Planet death*. “You’re right.”

“There will be a planet when you want to get pregnant,” Annie says, tossing her hair over her shoulder. *I wish I had her hair*. “The planet isn’t going anywhere.”

“No, but it’s definitely dying. Everything is dying. We’re dying.”

When asked about her dream job in second grade, Sav panicked and broke down in the bathroom after writing “florist.” She wasn’t lying. She did want to be a florist, but seeing it on the page made her doubt everything in her second-grade brain, especially when her teacher seemed so deeply disappointed. (“*You’re so good at math, Savannah. You should be an engineer! Or a doctor! Dream big!*”) *This is why I can’t have a baby. I don’t have a greater purpose. I don’t want to be a doctor. I don’t want to be a mother.* Maybe that’s why she selected Environmental Science in the majors section of her college applications. It was as close to that green, forest-like, uncomplicated feeling as things could get, but still carried an air of importance that everyone else thought was so crucial. *I don’t think I care about saving the planet. I don’t know if I even care about dying myself.* Now when she tries to trace her repulsion and fear back, it probably began with her career breakdown in the second grade, and her realization that she has never

desired a higher calling in life, and has been content in the present and past much more than the future.

“Do you think the planet wants you to be childless?” Annie asks Sav. “Because I think motherhood is the most, like, divine thing that could ever happen to me. I would be the most heightened version of myself, like nobody could touch me because I just accomplished a damn miracle. I wouldn’t shut down or stop talking to my kids or tell them that their body wasn’t quite right or... Maybe I’d bake things all the time for the kids to bring to school, and they would bake with me. And I’d give them everything, I wouldn’t care about anything else. I wouldn’t want to.”

“What if one of your kids was gay? Or black?” Eve asks.

“I don’t have a problem with gay people,” Annie says. “They can be gay. I was friends with that guy in tenth grade, he was gay. Why would you say that?”

“What about the black baby?”

“I’m white... so I wouldn’t...”

“Not how that works. Also, very telling.”

Sav has had enough. She can tell that their voices are reaching the precipice of an argument, so she slinks away to the bathroom. She feels Eve’s eyes on her, and the vodka beginning to churn in her stomach. Tugging at her rings; a tic that she has come to rely upon as of late, she slams the bathroom door behind her.

She runs her hands through her hair, which lacks the vibrant shine that Annie’s has. *Even in summer, with the chlorine. Annie’s blonde stays golden, like a glittering painted portrait adorned with gold leaf, going all the way down her back. If I had a*

portrait, the painter would have to include all the stress bacne that's popped up over the last three months. Nobody would pause to look at it in a museum. The docents would actively avoid discussing my portrait. Suddenly, the bathroom door opens, and Kate rushes in, ponytail slightly askew. Sav's entire body inhales.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Weird vibes?"

"The weirdest."

Sav turns on the cold water sink faucet. The water rushes over the conversation on the other side of the door, so the jabs are slightly softer.

"I hate hearing them argue," Sav sighs.

"Me too," Kate's eyes are glued to the floor tiles.

"Eve always—"

"—Did you mean what you said? I know it's ridiculous, I'm just still thinking about it."

Sav doesn't look up from the sink. *If I say yes, she may tell.* She watches her fingers under the running water, altering the shape of the stream.

"What did I say?"

Kate sits on top of the fluffy toilet seat lid and is quiet. Sav's leg starts twitching.

"About hooking up with me," Kate finally says.

The running water running crescendos until it's louder than anything else. Both faucets are on now.

“I mean it was a hypothetical, but...”

“I’M LOCKING YOU GUYS IN BECAUSE I FEEL LIKE YOU’VE GOT A LOT TO TALK ABOUT,” Eve yells from the other side of the door. Sav fumbles for the doorknob, annoyed that Eve thinks she can just take charge of any room. *She must’ve put a chair behind the doorknob. Very horror movie. Jesus, Eve. This isn’t middle school, you can’t just lock people in a bathroom.*

“Eve, MOVE THE CHAIR! YOU CAN’T JUST LOCK PEOPLE IN BATHROOMS!”

“I CAN! And I DID!”

“I know it was hypothetical. But...” Kate traces the edge of the bathtub with her finger. She pulls her knees in closer to her body. It’s all getting a bit too treacherous now.

“I mean, I, we’re friends so it’s not like anything could actually happen or...” Sav trails off. “I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna make things. Let’s just—”

Sav waits for a response from Kate, whose attention is fixated on the bathtub and its brass hardware. *I shouldn’t have said that. I should not have said that. She’s tensing up. Why did I say that, now I have to think of some bullshit small talk? I can hear them outside going on and on about the intricacies of greenhouse gas emissions or whatever. God, could she look up from the bathtub for one second?!*

In the silence, Sav begins to imagine. Imagine her and Kate beneath the lights, which melt into a deep purple. They are incredibly warm, it feels as though Sav is a tropical plant being coaxed to bloom in a greenhouse. The music begins, it is a low duet,

voices winding around each other, choosing harmonies. The gap between them closes, and they're singing into a singular gleaming silver microphone, passing a breath back and forth until Sav feels dizzy. The percussion builds, but they don't need to shout to be heard, the resonance in the space is enough. The purple light turns off.

“Do you think it would make things weird? I would make it weird?” Kate finally asks.

“What? No, no you wouldn't... It wouldn't be weird.”

“So you would, is what you're saying.”

“I..”

“I know you can open that door from the inside,” Kate says.

“What?”

“The door. You pull it towards you to open it. The chair isn't doing anything.”

Sav doesn't acknowledge this, and instead decides to reach for the brass tub faucets and turn them on. The sound of water fills the room, crashes against the bathroom tile and the mirror on the wall. There's no place for it to go, so it decides to stay. Sav inhales slowly, and forces the exhale to dart around her mouth before letting it go. She's pictured this whole thing before, in the parts of her brain she would never directly address. But in her imagination she was always incredibly nervous; marbles rolling in her stomach, hands twitching, bra strap too tight. There is none of that in her body here in the bathroom. There's just a rush of air running through her, demanding that she answer. *Right now, Sav!*

“I would,” Sav says. The gap between them closes. This time it is not in her imagination.

There’s a voice, a voice that’s too close for comfort. It cuts past the running water. *Wait, who? Oh, Eve. Eve.* Sav jumps away and takes a quick breath. She looks to Kate, and they wordlessly agree. Sav pulls the door towards her quickly, and the chair propped against the door falls into the bathroom with a clang. *Fuck.* Kate stifles a laugh.

“Oh, uh—”

“Save it, you’re not slick. What did you guys *talk* about? Because we were being very mature out here,” Annie asks. *Absolutely not. I will not be telling you what just happened. Vodka, don’t do anything crazy right now.*

“Well, not that anybody cares, but I am indeed peak-drunk at this moment. And I love each and every one of you very intensely,” Eve says, breaking the silence. She flops down on the bean bag chair and pats the spot next to her for Sav to sit. Sav stands.

“You nearly bit my head off a minute ago,” Annie says.

“And it was a bite full of love. I am full of love. For most of you in this room.”

Kate sighs loudly, rolling her head back against the wall. Sav catches Kate’s eyes, and begins shimmying her shoulders playfully to the music, asking Kate to join. The song is some early 2000s hip-hop, and nobody knows the lyrics. Kate starts to sing along a little with a tentative smile, except it’s clear that she doesn’t know the words. *It’s kind of embarrassing, but in a cute way. We could never be this embarrassing at a bar, we could never be ourselves at a bar. Here we can just drink and be happy, before*

everything dissolves. God, why is Eve tugging at my sleeve? I'm the only one here who is trying to do the right thing and be friends with everybody, and everyone else would rather fight or... not fight.

“I’m so annoyed with all of you, can I just say, for not telling me that you love me back—” Eve paws at Sav’s still-shimmying shoulders. Sav reaches for Kate’s hand instead, spinning her in a circle to the rhythm of the music. Eve pulls her hands away from Sav’s back sharply.

“—I think we all need to do shots!” Sav reaches for the bottle of vodka.

“I won’t say no,” Eve practically trips over herself.

“Me neither,” Kate says, practically lunging for the bottle. Eve yanks her torso backwards to avoid touching Kate.

“Oh we all know you’re a yes-man. Especially Sav,” Eve says. *Wait, does she know?* Sav’s shoulders tense. “So did you just come here tonight to watch us again, Kate?” Eve continues. “You know like how in elementary school you’d like, crawl around on the ground and wait for one of us to come say hi? But it was honestly pretty fucking weird because, like, how often was that floor cleaned?” She’s laughing.

“Eve!” Sav half-laughs.

“I mean obviously that Spanish woman would like, come and clean but.”

“Hispanic. She was Hispanic,” Kate corrects, her cheeks beginning to blush. The tentative smile has faded away.

“Right, Hispanic, of course. Anyway. It’s a joke, obviously. Ohmygod, just because you guys are fucking now we all have to be on our best behavior?” Eve looks to Sav, as

though to confirm that the bathroom meant nothing. That it was just a break from reality, and reality is Eve and Sav and Kate was just an interruption.

“What are you talking about?” Annie asks.

“She’s just really drunk,” Kate says quickly. She heads towards the bathroom with an empty cup. “Eve, here, have some water.”

“I’m actually not *really drunk*, Kate. I’m fine. I have an excellent tolerance, because my dad is half-Russian, so I know how to handle my vodka. I’m just trying to figure out this whole dynamic going on here.”

“Honestly, you’re being really dramatic Eve, and it’s not an attractive quality,” Annie chimes in again.

“Oh God forbid I not be *attractive*. Don’t tell me what I am.”

“Guys, please. Let’s just have a chill night,” Sav begs. She feels her hands twitching, breath uneven in her throat, and the back of her knees are suddenly unbearably warm. Eve looks at Sav, then at Kate, and Sav sees it. The regret for putting the chair behind the door has collected in her eyes and around the corners of her mouth.

“What is it Kate, did I hurt your feelings?” Eve asks, slurring her words. She hovers around Kate, prodding her a little. Sav feels a droplet of sweat eek out of the crease of her knee, daring to roll down her calf.

“You should be careful, Eve,” Kate whispers.

“You think you’re above it all but actually you’re still crawling on the ground in that classroom, begging for attention. Doesn’t matter if you and Sav hook up or not.”

Sav sees something dangerous pass between them, and she watches Kate's eyes get wide and sad. She wishes that Eve would stop, *stop already*, but knows that once Eve has zoned in on a threat and bitten down, it's unlikely she'll unclamp her jaws. One time, in tenth grade, a boy grabbed Sav's ass on the way out of gym class. In all honesty, Sav did not even register the touch until about five seconds later, when the entire class made a collective "oooh" sound. (The sound that haunts every gymnasium, cafeteria, or classroom which teenage boys may inhabit.) Eve saw the whole thing happen, and immediately launched into action. She had flown through the air, as though possessed by an otherworldly force of vengeance and elegance. Her shoelace was undone at the time, which imprinted into Sav's memory for some reason. Eve had cursed him out, eviscerated him, his immediate family and his extended family, kicked him in the groin, and made him apologize to Sav while holding him by the literal scruff of his neck. At the time Sav had hated the whole scene, she had felt the same way as right now, but in retrospect she knew that Eve's devotion to her was real and true. To know someone is on your side and willing to kick a short boy with a pedo mustache hard in the balls, it means something. There's a sacredness to that, a genuine treasure behind every thread of loyalty that Eve has spun over the years.

"Why are we even friends?" Eve suddenly whips around, directing her fury at Annie. The drunken laziness behind her eyes would normally be endearing, but as the room tilts farther into fury this possibility falls away.

“I don’t know, why are we even friends?” Annie responds, her voice as calm as ever. *Weren’t we all going to go out for drinks three hours ago? What the hell happened?*

“You’re fu-ucking right,” Eve slurs her words. “Tell everybody what you think about this house. Go ahead.” Sav tilts her head, wondering if she missed something. *Annie would never have told, right?* Perhaps there was a secret exchange that she didn’t catch while she was with Kate.

“I’ve been telling you what I think all night!”

“Tell them, then. The truth. So we can all decide.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Annie says.

“Go ahead. Open floor.”

“I don’t want to do this, Eve.”

“They should know, everyone should know.”

“Everything is fine.”

“You love to just push push push people to the edge,” Kate’s voice cuts through. She looks up at Eve. “You have nothing new to say. You’re not smarter than anyone here. So why do you think you get control over everyone? You don’t get to control me. YOU DON’T GET TO CONTROL ME.”

“Kate, just don’t get involved,” Sav says. She moves towards Kate tentatively, acutely aware that if she makes one wrong move she’ll be caught in whatever energy might erupt. Then she sees a glimmer of disaster in Kate’s body, rippling across her immaculate, luminous skin. “It’s not worth it.” Kate isn’t listening. “Kate. Kate!”

It's too late. Before Sav has time to de-escalate, Kate reaches for Eve with a guttural vengeance. Eve screams, a wild and piercing noise that Sav never expected to hear come out of her mouth. There's an awkward scuffle of limbs and then Sav sees an opening between everyone. The moment is reminiscent of fight choreography in a play gone awry. She shoves herself in front of Eve. *Go go go*. At first there is nothing, and then there's the feeling of Kate's fist smashing against Sav's cheekbone. Oh. Kate instantly recoils, doubling over on her hand, but Sav feels as though they are still touching. Fist to face, face to fist. There's a heat between them that Sav thought she had already identified, but clearly she misread it. Except now it feels kind of the same. The seconds turn into forever before she lifts her hand slowly to her eye, and turns her gaze upwards. She searches desperately for Kate's eyes, but can't find them.

3

Sav breathes deeply, clutching at her face now. She whimpers, and immediately regrets it. *If you start crying right now, you can't come back from that*. There's a rush of activity around her, but all she can pay attention to is the pulsating behind her eye. Her skin is becoming hot, and a little damp around her nose. *Did I get a nosebleed?* Kate's soft voice winds its way around to her ears. She's making some excuse,

apologizing profusely, but the words barely register for Sav. It's all a blur of sibilants and wide open vowel sounds. All she can really understand right now are the colors surrounding everyone, the air currents between them.

"--Seemed pretty fucking intentional, Kate!" Eve yells. "No, no, stay back there! You tried to fucking hit me and you missed. What are you on? Seriously tell me what you're high on right now, I would love some."

"I'm not high. Jesus, I think I broke my hand." Something in Sav's gut lights up. She starts to feel a sliver of nausea creep into the backs of her eyes.

"Sav?" Annie's hand is suddenly on her back, rubbing lightly in circles. "Are you okay?"

"You really. You did that," Eve shouts. "Wow, you are actually fucking psychotic. And I'm a pacifist so otherwise I would literally beat you up."

"You're not a pacifist, Eve," Annie says. Out of her peripheral vision Sav catches an intense eye roll worthy of a close-up. "You drive a Lexus." Annie leans in and reaches for Sav's face tenderly, but Sav jerks away. "Okay, you're only bleeding a little but your nose might be broken, we should get it x-rayed, or, like arnica? Do we put steak on it?"

"What?" Eve laughs.

"I don't know. Someone fucking Google it!"

"No," Sav finally croaks. It's like she forgot how to use her voice. She feels Annie paw around her, trying to see the extent of the injury. The carpet swirls in her vision, a churning sea of crumbs and fibers. Annie places a hand on her shoulder, pushing Sav's hair out of her face delicately.

“I’m literally fine. Fine.”

“You’re not. This isn’t fine,” Annie nudges at Sav. Sav jerks away, and mumbles something about just needing to rinse her face. The bathroom door slams, and she looks up. *Wait, what just happened? Only Kate is missing, she deduces. Kate. Bathroom. Jesus, isn’t this how everything started?*

“Oh I know you didn’t lock me out. I know you didn’t just lock me the fuck out, bitch,” Eve calls.

“Kate, come out,” Annie chimes in. “We need to put a wet cloth on it. Kate! We won’t be mad.”

“How’s your hand, Kate?” Sav calls out earnestly.

“I will be mad!” Eve bangs on the door again. “Also, I want to make it known that my next car is going to be a hybrid.”

There is silence on the other side of the door. Then a few sharp bangs. Sav reaches for the knob, her hand trembling. *Is she hurting herself? Did she fall? How drunk is she again? I can’t even remember how many shots she did.* Sav’s brain plays out at least three different versions of reality, until it gets a little too fuzzy to tell reality from daydream. She withdraws, pulling her sternum into itself, clutching at the hems of her sleeves.

“Kate,” Sav pleads. “Come on.” There’s a small noise from within the bathroom, a shifting of fabric or maybe something terrible, Sav isn’t able to tell and it’s beginning to drive her crazy.

Then the lights shift again, a lush cobalt this time. Sav is imagining. She's imagining behind the bathroom door, a vision of Kate draped in glittering fabric, singing a luminous ballad. The bathroom is a tiny stage, elevated on a platform. Kate fills everything with her sound, she's full of pain and promise and deep, unconditional love. Her voice holds the capacity for all things. She swings her arms, and her sleeves catch fire with that blue light. There's an untethered tumultuousness in her body, and it makes perfect sense to see her this way. Envisioning her as a wave, crashing and reforming every few breaths. The bathroom fades and distorts, but she remains in the center of space, sharply in focus, begging for help with her voice until the song abruptly stops.

"It's okay," she promises Kate from the other side of the door. "I'm okay, everything's fine. I'm not mad." She traces little doodles with her index finger against the door. A daisy, a swirling snail shell. "Nobody is. Eve is a little mad, but it's okay. It's not even that bad, I promise." Annie gently pushes Sav's body out of the way.

"Stop. This isn't helping. Kate, seriously you need to come out," Annie insists. She stops cold, then laughs a little. "Of the bathroom, I mean."

Sav wonders about what Annie would do if it were her inside the bathroom. If she had trapped herself with her thoughts, her guilt, her overwhelming grief. *There's a reason Annie avoids the bathroom, there's a reason she wanted to go out so desperately tonight. She can't be alone with her thoughts, because they blossom into*

grotesque tendrils that wrap themselves around her. I've watched it happen all night, she's suffocating slowly. And I keep trying to help but it's like my touch is poison to her now. It's Dylan, it's her mom, it's me deciding I don't want to go to college with her, it's all of it.

"Kate, come out. Bring a washcloth," Annie says softly. She seems to care.

There's a long pause, and Sav worries that things could go in any direction. The lock clicks, and the noise reverberates down her spine and across the back of her skull. Kate's face appears, *so sweet and lovely and full*. It is completely drained of its color.

"See?" Sav takes her hand away from her face, a game of peekaboo. *I'm here!* "It's fine." She goes to sit on the edge of the bed, and motions for Kate to join. She inspects Kate's hand, joint by joint, and resists the temptation to press along her palm lines. *Why am I like this tonight?*

"Remember when that guy punched a Nazi in the face?" Eve asks casually from her new spot, perched artistically on the windowsill. Upon reflection, she has always looked to Sav like a girl trying to be Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but failing at it miserably. *It's like she ticks all the right boxes, but there is definitely some quality out of place.*

"Ohmygod, you're so full of it," Annie sighs. "He wasn't a Nazi."

"He definitely was."

"What was his name?"

"I don't remember, why would I remember his name?"

“Well, his name was Richard Spencer and he wasn’t a Nazi, he was just a far right guy.” Annie stops herself when she sees everyone else’s expression. “I mean, I’m sure he’s awful, but I don’t think a Nazi.”

“This is such a weird hill to die on.”

“He probably deserved to get punched! I just think when we start throwing around the word “Nazi” then we’re missing the point,” Annie says. By now Sav is tending to the bruises on Kate’s hand with a small blue washcloth, tenderly cooling the reddened knuckles. There’s a sliver of space between them, like a crescent moon. It glows with possibility. “There are layers.”

“Mmm. White supremacy?” Eve tilts her head. “Yeah, it’s a real onion situation.” Eve laughs at her own joke, a tendency that would suit most people terribly, but seems perfect for Eve.

Sav ignores it, deciding to focus on the present for once in her life. She is delicate and solemn, like a surgeon, except without the blood.

“Why are you helping her right now?” Annie asks Sav.

“She hurt her hand,” Sav says. She does not remove her focus from Kate’s skin. *If you make eye contact it’ll definitely be worse. Don’t give Annie what she wants, she’s just in a punishing mood tonight.*

“If you choose Kate, I swear to God. I will walk out,” Annie says. “You’re being so stupid. You’re just like your dad, it’s incredible.” All the air leaves Sav’s lungs, and she whips her body around to face Annie. This is worse than being punched in the face.

“What?” She asks softly. *I told you that on a quiet evening at the beach, made you promise me that you would never tell. The little patchwork bits of awfulness that I had sewn together into a quilt. Phone conversations I overheard, emails I found, my mom crying at the Starbucks drive-thru when the employee told her to have a beautiful day. I tried to give it to you and you let me. Tears gathering in the corners of my eyes and you said, you really said that nothing would ever make you tell. And then you held my hand and let me just cry out into the sea for a good five minutes because that’s the kind of person you are. But who is this tonight? You’re full of some terrible vengeance and bitterness that I don’t entirely recognize. God, now Eve is going to think I’m terrible and Kate is going to think...I don’t even know.*

“A good thing,” Annie says, her body beginning to shake like a leaf on a windy day. “A good *friend* is looking you in the face, and instead you want to explore or whatever.”

“Stop.” Sav moves closer to Annie. *Shut up. Please shut up.* She looks to Eve, and sees the expression she has been dreading. Pity, wrapped up in shock and intrigue. Like looking at a forest fire or a tidal wave. *I’m a natural disaster.* She can’t bring herself to look at Kate.

“You don’t care about how it could affect us, just like he doesn’t care about how his ‘finding himself’ sexually or whatever could affect you. Or your mom. That’s what this feels like.” The sting intensifies, and Sav can barely breathe.

“Why are you doing this? I asked you not to--” Sav alternates between a whisper and a shout. The vodka is in her throat.

“--So you know what you’re doing! You’re breaking up this family! Just like he is...with that guy, or guys?...God, I guess it's, like, hereditary--”

“ANNIE!”

“He’s ruining your life!”

Rihanna’s voice breaks through the cacophony, backed by electronic pulsing. Sav’s ringtone. She pulls herself together, noticing that her weight is uneven in the balls of her feet.

It's a thief in the night

To come and grab you

It can creep up inside you

And consume you

A disease of the mind

It can control you

It's too close for comfort

“Stop, stop,” Sav gestures wildly to everyone and no one. “I have to answer. Hi, Mom. Yeah, yeah everything’s fine. Oh. Oh, okay. Are you sure? No, I just mean I thought that. Yeah, I know. No, that makes sense. Don’t worry about it. Mom, I...okay. Okay. I...bye.” *Is this what slowly suffocating feels like?* Sav presses END.

“What did she say?” Annie asks, leaning in.

“She’s coming home early. My dad and her...she’s coming home now. Driving back.” She’s not going to include the part about her dad staying in the city indefinitely, or the abundance of false cheer in her mother’s voice.

“And you have a lovely gift to give her,” Eve gestures to Sav’s face. Sav reaches up to touch it, and the skin is tender. It seems like a distant memory now.

“I’m gonna fix it, I can fix it. I’ll make breakfast in the morning, everything will be fine,” Sav insists. She’s telling herself, mostly.

“It is morning, Sav,” Kate says.

“Then I’ll make breakfast! Just give me, give me a fucking minute.” *Escape.*

Escape now.

The others rarely see this side of her; the side that unravels in the deepest parts of the night and chews on her conscience. As Sav runs into the bathroom, locking the door behind her, she wonders what exact animal is pounding in her chest. Besides adrenaline, or whatever hormones are released when your body is in crisis. She would love to tell the girls all the intricacies of her heart if it wouldn’t destroy their friendship, but that would be a mistake. To tell Eve that her father has been seeing an old college friend of his, a roommate, a man, and that her mother kept pretending it was all still working. Then she would watch Eve eviscerate her mom and put her father on a pedestal for embracing his identity, as though it didn’t mean that her entire world was disintegrating. To tell Kate that she didn’t understand any part of what happened tonight, and that she felt *grateful* for the pain beneath her brow bone, as though it counteracted the guilt and erased everything beforehand. And finally, to tell Annie that she hates her now. Which doesn’t

make any sense, *right?* Except that it's true. These three worlds play out in Sav's head and her chest tightens up.

"Sav I will break this door. Come out," Annie calls with a sharp knock.

"I'm just finishing up!"

"Finishing up what?" Eve yells.

Sav pushes everything down, and reaches up to touch her bruise. The ache it gives tells her that her body is still reactive, she can't just curl up on the tiled floor. She slowly opens the door of the bathroom, feeling the alcohol reach her head.

"I don't need ice. It's gonna be fine." She moves her hand to indicate just how fine she is, but it's too floppy. *Dang it.* Annie laughs an empty laugh and turns away from Sav. Kate quips something but Sav doesn't quite catch it. She starts to stumble a bit towards the bean bag, hoping that if she sits the subtle tilting of her vision might stop. *They're definitely all looking at me, but that's okay. Because I am super fine. I probably don't even look punched anymore. I am so fine, I just need a little breather. Then I will ask if we can all just go to sleep. I really think we just need sleep.* She hears Annie's voice, stern and concrete on her left.

"This room is a mess. We should clean. And you need to promise not to tell." Sav glances around the room, which isn't messy. Maybe some spilled things and a few upended red cups, but it's *fine*.

"Wait, do you think we would get in trouble?" Eve says. "Kate's the one who started it. And it's not like we did anything illegal."

“You’re rich, Eve,” Kate says. “You wouldn’t get in trouble even if you killed someone!”

“Fuck you.”

“Eve!” Sav chides her, drawing out Eve’s name into three syllables.

“She’s right,” Annie says. “But I can’t have any association with violence on my record. I’m going to Columbia.” Annie’s spine lengthens as she makes direct eye contact with Eve. “I don’t care if that’s selfish. Are you going to clean up or what?”

“Are you kidding? This has nothing to do with you!” Kate shouts.

“It has everything to do with me.”

“This is incredible.”

“I don’t want...” Sav interjects, only to trail off. She doesn’t want a fight, but even Drunk Sav is aware that the girls are past the point of return. The olive branch she normally extends for everyone else shrivels up in her brain and molds, and she feels Annie’s eyes move to her. *Ugh man, go for the carpet, it’s probably a little wet but that’s okay.* Sav rolls sloppily off the bean bag and onto the floor, preparing herself for Annie’s worst.

“Oh you’d like for people to find out? But which thing exactly, Sav? Because it’s so hard to keep track. There are so many secrets to choose from. That you’re cheating on your perfectly nice boyfriend with a crazy bitch? That your parents left for the weekend because they’re trying to minimize the fallout of their marriage? That you’re not going to college this fall? Which is fine, by the way, nobody actually gives a fuck. Go test soil samples on the side of the road, whatever.”

(There it all is, out in the open.)

“You’re a cunt,” Kate says. Annie’s entire speech fades into the past. Sav perks up at this word, which they have never said to each other. Ever. Clearly, Kate surprised herself, because her hands fly up to her mouth like a caricature of shock. Annie’s face broadens with rage, and she moves towards Kate. Eve shoves herself between them.

“Why don’t we just say she fell?” Eve pleads. Sav would have intervened instead but is glued to the ground. *Sorry my legs don’t work super well right now.*

“I don’t think you’re hearing me. I can’t risk being involved in this at all. And I don’t trust any of you,” Annie shrugs. She takes a sip of vodka, and Sav stops cold. *She only drinks when something’s wrong.*

“What is it you’re so afraid of?” Sav asks. She forces the cloudiness in her head to begin evaporating. If Annie is drinking, then something is deeply incorrect and she can’t be drunk for that. *I have to be here.* Kate runs into the bathroom, and Sav hears a scramble to the toilet. The tapping of rain on the windows has stopped.

“Bulimia,” Eve mutters.

“Don’t be so insecure, Eve,” Annie spits back.

“I’m not, I’m not insecure.”

“Of course not,” Sav says. She’s so tired. “You’re perfect and you save things and you’re the interesting one.” Her voice is full of elided consonants and smooshed diphthongs. She rubs the tip of her nose in circles with her palm.

“I’m not fucking perfect. I can tell when you want me to shut up.”

“Did I say shut up?”

“You don’t have to. I can read between the lines, what do you think only your mom taught you how to be passive aggressive? We all got that gene. The one to make other people, no, fuck, other *women* feel small. Especially women that don’t look like you.”

“You look exactly like me,” Sav groans. *Can we all go to sleep? Maybe if I move to the bed they’ll get the idea.*

“Right. Ever wonder why that is? Why we all look the same?” Eve asks.

“Ohmygod since when do we hate women? We’re *all* women.” Annie says, sinking onto the futon.

“You hate yourself, right?” Eve snaps at Annie. Then she turns back to Sav. “God, I’ve cared about you forever, you’re the only person I would do any of this circus for. But why are you pretending that any of this is normal? I wanted to have a good fucking time. This is crazy.”

“Everything’s fine, Eve,” Sav practically whispers.

“Who even are you? You don’t care about anything but your... your image.” She lowers her voice and crouches down to meet Sav. “Why didn’t you tell me about your dad? You just want everything to be packaged and neat and shiny.” She paws at the twinkling lights along the wall. “You want perfection, but that doesn’t even exist. Ugh god, these stupid Polaroids. I know you took them with an iPhone and had them printed. These basic ass lights? Really, who do you think you’re fooling? It’s straight out

of an IKEA catalogue. And I'm sorry you got punched in the face, but at least now I know you're not a robot."

Eve begins to tear the lights off the wall. She runs around the room, pulling from corner to corner. At first Sav thinks *she's just too drunk*. But then it seems like the destruction is actually sobering Eve up. There's a focus to the chaos, and Sav springs up from the bed, trying to lightly push Eve away from anything dangly. *She's not drunk, just jealous*. Sav thinks.

(Is it a waltz? God, what timing.)

"Okay, enough," Annie says.

"I can't believe you did that," Sav whines at Eve. "You're the one who told me about Polaroids in the first place."

"C'mon, Sav. Sit. Right next to me. Take it easy," Annie says. She pats the spot next to her on the mattress.

"You're not my mom. I..." Sav stutters. "I hate you." She means it.

"Oh honey, you're still drunk. Let me get you some water. I can't believe you really had that much. Moderation next time, right?" Annie gets up, there's an undeniable pep in her step as she moves towards the drinks, her hair swinging behind her. It makes Sav flush with anger, she can feel her face redden.

“Don’t patronize me, I’m a full person. I can make choices.” She grabs another cup out of spite. *And I’ve seen you pee in that Wendy’s parking lot. Those in glass houses.*

“Good luck convincing her of that,” Kate scoffs. Annie spins around.

“Shut up, bitch.”

“Like that, right there,” Sav points to the space between Annie and Kate. “The way you treat her. And then me. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Oh so we’re forgetting the bit where she attacked you”

“*You* attacked me. Telling everyone my shit.”

“It’s fine that you’re staying home from college. I honestly forgive you. It’s even fine that... It doesn’t matter. I’m just doing something different than you. Calm down. I’m getting you water, okay?”

“I’m not.... I, my dad,” Sav’s words get stuck at the top of her throat. “I can’t believe you said that. You promised me.”

“She knows exactly what to say. Always,” Kate says, her hand warm on Sav’s back.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” Annie screams. Sav drops her cup, and its contents begin spreading across the rug. She leaves it there.

For the first time in a long time tonight, there’s real silence. It lasts as long as the look shifts on Annie’s face, as long as the depth of her shout allows. And when it has reached a point of frightening tension, a new song begins. Sav doesn’t know this one, she can’t predict its tempo or instrumentation. It is quiet and shocking, something

simple that we haven't heard yet either. The melody is joyful, performing in complete contrast to the air in the room. There's a delicate pattern to it, it doesn't do any heavy lifting, just playfully tosses us all awake in a way that only Annie's control can.

The most dangerous parts of Annie's femininity, her identity, her soul activate, and all together start to sing, Sav envisions.

"I do everything right, I go out of my way to be nice," Annie says. "When everything goes bad I'm there to help. Like I always do. I'm so *chill* about you and... But no, it's all the assumptions you make about the things you *think* I believe. What I say doesn't matter, right? God, has it ever occurred to you that maybe I don't have time to make things up? I can only be who I am. Eve's right, you know. This is bullshit."

"I want to go," Kate says.

"THEN GO!"

"I..."

"You should go, Kate," Eve nudges.

"I... my sister dropped me off. I don't have a ride." Kate looks to Sav for support, but Sav avoids the glance.

"Watch this, I'll get you an Uber. Magical thing called a phone."

"Is that the sun?" Eve turns towards the sliver of light reaching across the room.

"Yeah, it must be," Sav says. They should be sleeping. But instead, they're tearing each other apart like rabid wolves. *Remember that one time Kate and Annie were getting milkshakes, but I was busy? They made all these inside jokes and Eve and I*

were so pissed for the next few weeks, because they would bring them up every night.

Annie taps swiftly on her phone, fingernails clacking.

“My account is locked for some reason, it won’t let me pay.” She clips her words.

“I can login,” Eve offers, standing up from the carpet.

“No, no, you don’t have to do that. I can do it.”

“Just let me,” Eve sighs, reaching for the phone. There’s a sweetness between them, a genuine saving. Eve comes to the rescue once again, and Annie relents, leaning into it. The remnants of those inside jokes shade in the areas of them that an outsider may not see or care about. They remind Sav of those crystals her mother used to hang in the kitchen window when she was little, reflecting rainbows that seemed almost edible

“Done. Seven minutes.” The focus of the room shifts to Kate.

“It really was an accident,” she offers.

(It’s very clear that nobody cares if it was an accident or not.)

“It was.”

(Not even Sav.)

“Just go. It’s kind of pathetic to hear you speak,” Annie says.

“I... I still have seven minutes,” Kate says meekly, gesturing to the phone.

“Jesus,” Eve sighs.

“I’ll go if Sav tells me to.”

“Kate...” Sav closes her eyes. She racks her brain for the right things to say and do to keep it all happy and intact. But all she can remember right now is the matching T-shirts they made for a school event, the bracelet that Kate gave her two summers ago when Sav’s uncle died, the time that all four of them had gone to Florida for two weeks and swam in the Everglades, only to be bitten to oblivion by mosquitoes. She remembers the bathroom.

“Please.”

“Obviously I don’t have any... resentment. This really, really isn’t about you,” Sav lies. Sometimes you have to lie.

“Are you kidding?” Eve says. “She started this mess.”

“Tell me,” Kate begs.

“My mom will be back soon anyway and...” Sav avoids Kate’s gaze. “And, and you should get some rest, I mean you’re probably exhausted.

“I’m not, I—”

“—it’s been a long night, and you clearly aren’t in a great place and I want to be there for you, but—”

“—I’m sorry that I hurt you, let me just—”

“—but I know that I can’t help you in the ways you need. I don’t want to make things harder so I think it’s best if—”

“—Sav, I’m really—”

“—Please go,” Sav’s voice stops shaking. She steels herself in her gut, knowing *this is what has to happen*. Then maybe equilibrium, whatever that means anymore, can be restored.

“... Okay.” Kate goes. Eve pushes Kate’s shoes into her hands, perhaps to speed up the process. Sav doesn’t watch the rest.

“Finally, God,” Eve says. “She took forever.”

“That was painful,” Sav says quietly. “She took forever.” She pulls her knees closer to her body, as though she would like to fold away into a piece of paper.

“She can’t go through life being sensitive. Girls fight. That’s how it works,” Annie cuts through.

“I don’t think that’s true.” Sav sulks, and wonders. *Actually, I know that’s not true. God, why am I so small in my own fucking room? This feels terrible.* She takes some slow breaths, and pushes herself into a meditative space. She begins visualizing a warm summer day, something that she learned from a free therapy video on Youtube. Yes, a warm summer day like today was before the thunderstorm but different, completely different. She loves summer, always has. The field beneath her pushes up against the soles of her feet, and the sun turns her hair into a sleek, glowing river that falls along her shoulders. There’s a soft breeze rippling across the edges of her sleeves, toying with the gaps in the fabric. *Is this an antidepressant commercial? Activia?* She’s weightless here, completely open and simple. What an incredible place, this field that she’s never been in. It’s a pristine screensaver, a saturated image.

(Like her.)

“This has been truly crazy,” Eve says, sitting up.

“Earlier, what did you mean?” Annie asks.

“What?” Eve rubs around her eyes.

“About me hating myself. Where did you get that? Do you hate yourself?”

“No, no, not at all. I love myself, which is radical, really—”

“You said ‘we all hate ourselves’. That’s what you said.” Sav can’t keep up with this tennis match, but she does her best. She pushes the last of the vodka clouds out of her brain, and inhales sharply.

“I was mad, I guess. I shouldn’t have—”

“—No I think you may actually be onto something—”

“—Oh, then sure!”

“You do hate yourself.”

“Wait, what?”

“I mean you talk all this big talk. Like BIG TALK, looks excellent on paper. And sometimes it works. I know you’re smart, I know you know what you’re saying. But if you actually think about it. Think about it. How do you live any differently than me?”

“That’s not—”

“—See it’s fine, but you don’t see me making excuses. And I’m not going to attack you or make you feel like you’re the problem. You can stop being on the defense. You’re the same as me, we’re not any different.”

“We’re not the same.”

“Yeah, we are.”

“All that shit you gave Sav about her dad?”

“I only say anything because I care about her, and it’s clear you don’t. You know them less, but they’re my family too. Look, it’s fine if that’s the way he wants to live, but involving Sav and her mom in the whole mess is—”

Sav can’t handle the parallels any longer. She wants to cover her ears. Her dad. Kate. Her. Her dad. She cannot shake the feeling that Annie would never want to hear about the bathroom, would rather try ear candling or get Swimmer’s ear or pull a Van Gogh. She sees her father crumble beneath Annie’s words, performing like perfectly directed bullets, and then sees herself crumble too.

“No, we—”

“—I think you hate that you’re so, so lucky, you would rather be a minority or something. But keep all your beautiful things.” Annie reaches confidently for the bottle of vodka, and Sav would normally smack it out of her hand, but not tonight. She racks her brain for how to fix this. How to fix Annie.

“That’s,” Sav stumbles a bit on her words. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“I thought we made up, I thought we were cool,” Eve says.

“Well, we had to when everything went to shit and Sav’s perfect face was on the line. God, you have fully rationalized your way out of answering for anything. You can just say you’re woke and nothing is your fault. “

“That’s not true. Stop.” Eve pleads. But Annie keeps going.

“No, I think it’s starting to make sense to me. I mean obviously we’re so similar, so it’s hard to tell, but I see you trying so hard and not knowing if any of it is even relevant. Maybe it’s not! So that’s why you hate yourself, because you’re not actually willing to risk anything. You would never sacrifice.”

“Like you do?”

“Yeah, I do. I risk everything all the time. I risk losing people’s respect when I say I got a gun for my birthday.” There’s a pause. Sav coughs on some saliva she didn’t even know was in her mouth. She has always left this part of Annie alone, because she was afraid of what she would find. Like a log with a bunch of maggots eating away at something underneath. Eve’s voice cuts through.

“You own a gun? What the FUCK? You live in a gated community?!!”

“I’m not loud and aggressive like you for no reason. I’m aggressive because I have to fight. You don’t. You get to sleep with whoever, you don’t get the nasty parts of relationships. You’re too empowered and above it all, except you’re not. So if I own a gun, it is what it is. It’s my control... nobody else will keep me safe or care at all.”

Got me looking so crazy right now, your love's

Got me looking so crazy right now (your love)

Eve falls down onto the beanbag, face-first.

“Look, you wanted to talk, don’t give up now. Or do, I don’t care.” Annie continues. “And I’m tired of this need of yours...to be on higher moral ground. You’re not better than me.”

“I never said that.”

“You think it. It’s so clear in the way you talk to me.”

“I—”

“—You look bad with a tan. At least I tell people I went tanning. You expect us to all believe it’s just because you’re the ‘outdoorsy’ type?” Eve begins tracing the chaos of the room, walking along the path of torn down fairy lights. Sav watches her inhale, gather her ammunition, and exhale.

“I’m sorry about everything that happened to you. About your ex and...but you’re just mean now.” Sav knows this time it’s too far. Eve has mentioned the unthinkable.

“Don’t talk to me about Dylan. Ever.” Annie pushes herself against the wall.

“I...I know he hurt you but—”

“—No you don’t know, actually.” Then, to Sav’s surprise, Annie softens, suddenly incredibly tender and careful. “And I could tell you but I wouldn’t wish that on you.” Eve and Annie look at each other, and Sav sees the shadow of their deep love for one another. She remembers introducing Eve to Annie, and that first conversation they’d had about low-rise jeans, eyes full of excitement, where Sav could barely get a word in. *Something about Levi’s always coming through with the right cuts, but Forever 21 having a surprisingly good selection too.* “Sav and I can come up with a story about everything, I think we’re done here. But you promise, right?” As quickly as the

tenderness came, it's gone. "I know sometimes it's hard for you to think for yourself, so I just need you to nod."

"I think you're right. Good thing I drove. Feel. Feel better. Maybe get it checked out, or—"

"—Promise."

"Bye." There's very little ceremony about this exit, but it's abundantly clear that Eve is never setting foot in this house again. Sav will be lucky if Eve ever speaks to her again.

Now it's just Sav and Annie. *This is my room. And if I tell her to leave, she would have to. This is my room. She ruined tonight, she broke the promise. She can say sorry. She owes me.* For a moment the girls look at each other, and Sav silently dares Annie to own up to everything. Instead, we watch as Annie breaks eye contact and goes into the bathroom, head down. A car door slams in the distance. Sav examines the carpet, covered in crumbs, nail polish, general detritus. Then she shifts her gaze to the bathroom door, willing Annie to speak. She does not want to be alone, but maybe that's what this is going to be. Maybe that's the choice here.

"What haven't you told me?" Sav asks.

"Huh? I can't hear you," Annie calls back from the bathroom.

"WHAT HAVEN'T YOU TOLD ME?" Sav repeats. Annie slowly opens the door, bottle of cleaner in hand. Sav tears a paper towel, but forgets to use it.

“This organic stuff? It’s not actually going to get rid of any stains. Like it smells amazing but that’s about it. What you really need is that chemical stain remover, the kind that people sniff or whatever.”

“I think you’ve been a bad friend. I feel worse now,” Sav says, ripping a paper towel over and over.

“Okay, Jesus. Always so dramatic.”

“You were so mean to Eve and Kate. I really can’t get over it. And your logic, God, it’s so twisted.” She looks to Annie for something, anything, to prove that this entire night was a fluke. She scans her eyes for traces of drunk, but doesn’t notice any.

“I’ll run out to CVS after breakfast and get some supplies, we should probably get some good concealer, maybe a color-corrector,” Annie says. She moves frantically around the room, avoiding eye contact and honing in on imaginary stains instead. “Do you want any Advil? It’ll probably hurt more tomorrow. Maybe you should get a gun. Then we wouldn’t be in this position. It’s not like it’s a big gun. It’s small.” Sav scoffs.

“Tell me the truth,” Sav says. She lets the paper towel shreds fall.

“Okay, fine. I don’t have a gun. But you all believed it, so that says something. Also, I think maybe we should roll up the carpet, at least until I buy some better cleaner. This organic shit isn’t going to do anything.”

“Alright. Forget the gun—”

“—Well there is no gun, so—”

“—Look at me!” Sav yells, desperate. Annie looks at her.

“I know we’re so different, but I think that’s why we work. I would do anything for you, you know that.”

“I do, but...this just feels so hard now. I’m walking on eggshells, I can’t...” Sav trails off. Annie inhales deeply. She’s ready to give her pitch, Sav can tell. The wind-up.

“I am always going to be here for you. I will get down on my hands and knees and scrub the hell out of that carpet. I don’t care that we don’t agree! And you never did, either.”

“It doesn’t feel healthy to keep doing this.”

“Everything outside of this room is unhealthy. Your family, my family. Men. It’s all sick. This works, though.”

“But the things you said. About my dad, and about me.”

“Look around you. Everyone left.”

“Because you pushed them away!”

“I love you. That’s never going to change.”

Sav wishes she didn’t feel the same way. She desperately wants to be better than this, but there’s that indecisiveness again. *God damn middle school.* She watches as Annie continues cleaning, spraying every surface where vodka or nail polish has spilled, and some where they haven’t. The veins in her dainty elbows articulate themselves, her brow gathers in the center, shaping a tiny river delta. It’s the unobserved parts of her that contribute to her beauty, and the way she captivates a space. She is a thistle flower, exquisite and complex and incredibly painful. She looks the way she does when she’s writing a massive paper, and they would be studying together in the library, neatly

tucked between the shelves of oddly specific encyclopedias in dust jackets that nobody has consulted for several years. *Encyclopedia of Gerontology*, *The Soap Opera Encyclopedia*, *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers Who Were At Work in England, Scotland and Ireland From 1726-1775*. Sav would alternate pretending to work with taking peeks across the room at Annie, noticing the artful way her hair frames her face, or the funny twist of her neck when she hones in on an idea. Annie would always leave the library with a complete, if relatively uninspired essay, and Sav would leave with dozens of Google Chrome tabs open and the satisfaction of knowing that her best friend did not always look flawless.

Annie scrubs with a frightening intensity, as though trying to erase the presence of the other girls from the bedroom. Sav notices a tickle in her nostrils, but can't quite pinpoint if it's the scent of the cleaner or the impulse to hold Annie close to her. Her mind swarms with memories of unfathomable joy that made her forget herself. It is the kind of swarm that never finds a branch to settle on. She wishes she could say right now: *You need to go. I can't be friends with somebody who thinks these hateful things, who must despise me by extension*. But now, looking at Annie, she sees the one person who always found her to be perfect, the one person who loves her unconditionally. *Why should I give that up?*

The light shifts, and a steady, perky beat fills the room. She sees herself reflected in Annie's big blue eyes. She will always love this version of herself, beautiful and worthwhile, she is addicted to it. So instead of saying anything, she grabs a spray bottle.

It's going to be okay. She tears a paper towel. *I need her.* The beat makes her dance, sway slightly back and forth. Sav bops along, blissfully settling into reality.

(This is reality too. Songspace and real life are one and the same. Sorry.)

“I love you too,” she says.