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The Romanian Goodbye

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The Romanian Goodbye

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

by
Andrei Dumitriu

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

For you, Vic.

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You Can't Force People to Care

A girl outside of the funeral home was crying so much that her mascara was dripping on her dress. She held a thick bottle of Crown Royal, wanting to pass it around “in honor.”

“I’m gonna roll up, this is for you, Vic,” she screamed to the people around her.

My cousin, Ana, was staring her down, ready to shove her fist into the girl’s face. “What the fuck does she know about him anyway? He never even talked about her, but she’s telling everyone she’s going to get his name tattooed on her arm,” she said.

I stepped back inside, seeing a few people sneaking in vape hits and blowing the clouds to the carpeted floor. Most of the adults came in with flowers, but the rest of us had only what was in our pockets. We lined up to say goodbye, some of us kneeling to get in some last words with him.

“I’ll make you proud,” I said, after whispering an entire speech to him. I hallucinated a bouquet of roses in his crossed arms.

The guy after me, Chris, threw in a chapstick along with a picture. “He needs that shit dude. He’d always hit the joint with his crusty ass lips, leaving skin crumbs on the end,” he told me, laughing a little, mostly crying.

We sat in the chairs, looking for people our age we could connect to, but most of them had already gone. Some had left to run to the liquor store for drinks at the post-wake “party.” Several pairs of adults passed by us, each taking their time to say sorry to me and to follow up with a hug that was welcoming and uncomfortable.

I got up to check out the bathrooms. Both were locked. Finally, one of the doors opened. X, one of Vic’s highschool friends, came out, leaving a cloud of smoke I could barely see the blue walls through. He was always messing around with his nose piercing, popping it in and out

of its hole, sometimes dropping it and losing it. He kept a bag of spare studs in his pocket at all times; he knew himself too well. The soap smelled like that cheap kind you get in gas stations, family restaurants, or the supermarket: artificial almonds. I dabbed a few tears with a paper towel, then reused it to touch the door handle before leaving the bathroom. I stuffed some toilet paper in my coat, knowing someone would need it later.

Outside, the girl was still sobbing, though she had barely known Vic. She must have taken more swigs, or passed the bottle around, since I could actually see some sunlight through the top. Ana was talking to her friends, passing around a silver vape covered in stickers. Someone bragged about having a bong in their car; the joint the girl was rolling was almost done. One of the men dressed in gray and black from the funeral home passed by them silently.

“There’s no fucking reason for half of these people to be here,” Ana said. “They were barely around and now all of a sudden they show up?”

Her boyfriend, Drew, rubbed her back and offered her a puff from his vape while she waited for hers to come back around. He looked at me and gestured to his car.

The inside of their car was less stuffed than usual, leaving enough room for me in the back seat. We drove to the nearest gas station so they could grab energy drinks and a pack of cigarettes. I left the store with an ice cream bar in my hand. I didn’t even know I’d bought it until someone pointed out to be careful and avoid staining the seats. We got back to the funeral home minutes later to find that many more people had shown up. There was a puddle of whisky left under the entrance bench, along with a sticky spot nobody wanted to sit on or even wipe up. I caught a glimpse of someone around the side of the building smoking a j. The air grew thicker and the person’s coughs louder.

When Ana, Drew, and I finally got back to the house, the roof was already half-full with people leaning over the railing. They looked like they were trying to see if it would hold them back. We went to the front porch and sat on an old, sturdy couch. I looked out into the distance, trying to see if I could make out the hill where Vic's parents originally planned to bury him. I remember biking up it during the summer a few years before his passing, while the same heaviness appeared in my knees. The newer cemetery in the opposite direction was much prettier. It was only a few more minutes away, and there were more trees and hills. His plot faced the forest and had a perfect view for sunsets. I leaned against another rail, this one far older than the roof's, and heard it sharply creak, warning me that it wouldn't hesitate to release me onto the dirt and rocks below.

"We brought some wine, right?" Ana asked.

"Yeah, it should be in the fridge with all the other alcohol, or most of it at least," Drew responded.

I darted inside, looking for some glasses to get them, finding nothing but the short ones we would use for gin and tonics. I filled them up with ice, then wine anyways, since it was better than drinking straight from the bottle. It was always a Barefoot Sauvignon Blanc: 1.5 liters of happiness?

"Thanks," they both said as I passed the chilled glasses.

"Fuck off," Ana said a second later, as two girls pulled into the driveway.

Sarah was always fake to the majority of people in the house. She would show up in places having no respect for anything or really anyone. This time around she brought a homemade drinking game. It was like the game of Life except that each space had some kind of alcohol-related consequence or reversal of fortune. There was more variety in the game since we

had access to several types of drinks. I don't think anybody would have played if the only drink of choice was shitty vodka that couldn't even freeze. The idea was to spin a wheel, which replaced the familiar element of rolling a dice. Thankfully, she hadn't made any extra cards, so the game was relatively simple to play: try to get to the end before everyone else or before you pass out drunk. She acted as if it was their party. She insisted that anyone who passed by should join, but Ana kept refusing no matter how many times she was asked. She looked like she was ready to tear the board in half and burn it in the backyard. I stayed with a few others, trying to get as far as I could on the board's path, but it quickly got boring. There was no real risk to the player aside from getting drunker with each turn. But, of course, we could've been doing this outside of the game, with people we actually liked.

I spun the arrow, landing on a three. Take a shot of rum. I was already feeling sick from the little alcohol I had drank. "No. I'm done." Why did she think alcohol would magically remove all of our pain?

"Awwww why? Don't ruin the fun!" Sarah said, crossing her arms.

"Don't act like you fucking know me. We've barely talked to each other, so don't say it like I'm ruining the game. Losing one person isn't gonna change anything," I said, thinking about Vic.

"Fine. Have fun with all the boring people," she said, waving her arm quickly as if she was shooing me away.

Ana came back around to the table as I was leaving. "Why the hell are you guys playing this? It's a waste of time."

"I was starting to ask myself the same thing," I said.

On the deck, a few adults were smoking cigarettes, while the people my age were smoking joints and a skull-shaped bong on the balcony. There were several tables stretched out along the back wall of the house, blocking the entrance to the basement. They were covered in trays of Romanian food.

“Yo, can I grab some sausages?” X asked me from the balcony.

Of course he could, why ask?

“Yeah, come here,” I said, waving downward towards the table.

He rushed down the inside steps, then onto the porch. He almost tripped, but caught himself. He stood up straight and pulled the cigarette from his mouth and slotted it behind his ear. He took a giant spoonful of food from each tray and plopped each scoop carefully onto the flimsy paper plate in his hand.

“Can you crush some pepper on this, bro?” he asked.

“Yeah. One sec,” I told him, moving a glass away from the edge of the corner table.

Somewhere behind the steps into the backyard, someone dropped a glass, making up for the one I had just saved. A stack of logs was ready to be thrown into the outdoor fireplace, but the sun wasn't even close to setting, so we decided to wait until it got dark. I opened the door for X and we went upstairs to look at the emptiness of Vic's room. The bed was still in its place, with loads of random shit underneath it: wii games, forgotten clothes, a phone charger, and a giant, dusty box that held some nerf guns. An ashtray was spilled on the round table, and a pillow had gone missing from the comfy chair someone used to always claim. We walked out onto the roof, where the others kept toking off of the remains of a joint. No one wanted to let it fall onto the damp, wooden balcony floor.

“Bro, chill you’re gonna get all the spit in the world on it if you keep hitting it like that,” Chris exclaimed.

“Relax, you act like I’ve never done this before. Jesus Christ,” X said.

I noticed that the white paint outside of the balcony door had worn down, curling into itself and forming greenish marks of a mossy consistency.

Ana and Drew passed through the door. “Fuck man, and I thought I was loud,” she said to X.

People had been stacking plates on the balcony’s white table, which had been missing its umbrella since the summer, and now appeared just as worn as the wall.

“Yo, throw me a lighter,” Chris said.

X pulled one out and chucked it, but his underhand form made it fall right onto the top of the pile of plates.

“Dude, did you even try!?” Chris yelled at him.

“Yeah, of course I fucking did! Calm down, just wipe it off, it’s not like I dropped it on the ground,” X said.

“Doesn’t mean you’re not a dumbass,” Chris said.

“Fuck you bro. I’m not here for this shit,” X said.

“Relax, man, I’m just fucking with you,” Chris said.

“Anyone want more wine?” Ana asked.

“YES!” Sarah screamed from downstairs.

“Ugh, not that bitch,” she said.

I went downstairs with Ana because we couldn't find an even partially full bottle of wine. We looked in the three coolers outside, hoping someone had bought extra. Finally, we grabbed four light, canned drinks and went back up.

"I miss the smell of him in the room, and hearing those loud ass footsteps stomping on the stairs," Ana said.

"Yeah, he was the loudest in the family. Nobody's ever gonna top that," I told her, looking at the missing trees in the backyard.

X came up next to me, holding four vapes in his mouth. He took them out and spread them like a hand of cards. "You wanna hit one of these? Two of them taste the same since they're getting burnt, but the others are good."

"No thanks," I said. He had already started puffing on one of them again and blew a cloud in my face.

"I get it, bro. Sometimes you don't want anything. I think if you disconnect from objects, you feel more detached from the world. It's funny how this shit constantly hurts and helps me," he said, pulling out a fifth vape from his pocket and unboxing it. He tore the wrapper off and spat it onto the balcony floor. "I don't think Vic would care. He was messier than any of us."

"I don't know if that's true. You guys can be slobs. So can I. It depends on the day, you know? There's times where I feel like everything's perfect. But there's days like today that make me want to leave a mess everywhere, because it feels like what does it matter?" I said.

X laughed for a second and immediately started to cry. "It's not fair. Honestly, there's nothing left for me here. I'm gonna get out of this shithole. I've lived here all my life, and I wanna start living it for real."

Am Rămas La Fel (I've stayed the same)

The driveway was empty, so I stuck my arm in the mail slot, realizing the door was already open. Cairo was wandering around in the living room. He let out a silent meow and immediately charged for the kitchen. I could still smell the cigarettes from when the exhaust fan wasn't strong enough to filter their smoke. The big trees in the yard stood calmly like they had for decades. I walked to the trampoline with missing nets, seeing it had a few new holes. Maybe it's from that time that a giant circle of people smoked during the graduation party. Even the good swing, round like a frisbee, was gone. The swingset's wooden frame was still holding up but it looked centuries old. I ran back to the patio, forgetting about the oven, thinking of all the dinners we ever ate. The balcony in your room overlooked the playground in the leafy void. I saw your badminton net next to the fire pit.

I climbed up to your room and sat in the only chair; the thrown away pew you took in was in the garden, not up here. I saw you smoking and blowing the ball up to the clouds. The flimsy table next to me had lost its violet umbrella, but it wasn't raining anyway.

I'm sorry I busted your headlight. But you don't care, not now at least.

I remember visiting you at school, when I stayed late one time. You stacked a can of tuna, a box of tissues, and a giant box of flavor blasted goldfish on your roommate's head. You were jealous I could grow a beard. I wish I had that power, man, you said. I remember blowing smoke out your window, how the parking lot looked like an architectural model. I can't remember how long I stayed. Your sink was a fucking mess.

I should've done the dishes that night. You told me about the boat you wanted to buy again. I wanted to live out on the water together.

Not Man Enough

I walked outside of the nearest Kaufland. I was holding a semi-fresh pretzel and a can of coffee. I should've gotten the Chupa Chups drink instead. I saw at least seven cooling towers in the nearby landscape. There were also factory towers, one of which was blue, and they made the others look even more intimidating. The claim the bushy willow trees had on the land made it seem like a post-apocalypse landscape in which nature had finally regained the upper hand. Even with my fear of heights, I imagined myself climbing to the top of the first cooling tower and jumping into it, waiting for it to spit me out like a pinball.

There was a classic, abandoned-looking building next to me and the towers. Some small section of the gravelly space was designated as an unmarked parking lot: two slightly rusty Volkswagen Beetles (one blue and one mustard yellow), an orange Renault van that looked like a milk truck, a white-topped beige Volkswagen Transporter resembling an ice cream cone, and two black vans, one of which was filled with decorations on the dashboard had been left there. They felt like the only living things in the area. A cat broke the trance by going through my line of sight and climbing onto a pipe that led into the jungle before the remnants of the plant.

I dropped the pretzel on the ground, right into the dustiest part of the gravel. I wondered if the pigeons would come, wherever they were. But I couldn't leave it there.

Later, I walked back to our apartment. I thought about what I was going to wear, knowing that I was in no way prepared for a wedding.

I searched through my baggage and old closets with my mom for something elegant. I made two coffees and went out to the balcony, watching the busy street. People went in and out of a restaurant below us while others did the same at the grocery store across the road.

My mom came out for a smoke, holding her coffee and looking at the sky. “You know, Vuca went to college with your dad, and went into the architecture business right after,” she said “he wasn’t loving the work he had, so he opened up a shawarma place, which did surprisingly well. It was better than the one down the street from here. I tried going as often as I could because it was cheap and tasty.” She took a long, final drag on her cigarette and dropped it in the empty coffee mug.

“I remember when your dad and I would have small parties with him while he was closing up shop. After the restaurant stopped working out, he went to Italy and designed villas for awfully rich people. Every day of his life sounded like a vacation at that point. He gave up on that too and went to Tanzania to transport gold, eventually meeting Ashley and falling in love with her. Now he’s got two adorable kids and a life that seems too good to be true, but he made it.”

The wedding venue was like a giant fish tank, sitting on the edge of a lake in a park. Beige took up most of the colors for decorations and the building’s structure. We had just relocated from a small brick church, resembling an upright shoebox. Vuca was shorter than I remembered, but his face looked younger and happier. He definitely found love. His wife of two hours ago, Elisabeth, though he liked to call her Ashley, was like a goddess compared to him. He deserved to be happy and they seemed to be good for each other. We gave them their gift and went to our table. Our old friend Iulia grabbed a seat right next to us. My mom’s known her longer than I’ve been alive, and she was renting out our small apartment. Iulia went to the college of architecture in Bucharest with my mom, but she ended up finding a career at Orange. She always wore insanely eye-catching jewelry, something that she might have made herself. Some rings looked like spikes, while others were abstract shapes. She had warm, brown eyes but

could easily make them tear someone's smugness apart if she was angry. She was also a veterinarian, so she was always working. Her favorite hobby was to go ice fishing when she could. She showed us pictures of the animals he had been working with recently.

"How do you have the courage to operate on them?" my mom asked.

"I guess it's just practice, but also telling myself that they're always going to be okay. Even if I might not always be able to save them," she replied.

Emil, another one of my parents' old friends, came and sat with us since there weren't many other open tables. He was bald with wide-framed glasses and a clean-shaven face. We talked about what movies we had recently watched.

"I just saw *Inception* for the first time last weekend. It was confusing but really great," Iulia said.

"Yeah, I watched it a few years ago, but it made no sense to me. It looked cool though. The visuals were..." I started to add.

"It's not confusing, you just have to pay extra attention to the characters and their movements. Everything has a purpose. You have to learn to be as clever as Christopher Nolan to really get it. It's a masterpiece! He'll never be able to outdo himself. Even now, he continues to prove it," Emil said, taking his glasses off of his face, breathing on them, and using his shirt as a dust cloth.

I got up and went to the bathroom, knowing my haircut was going to keep me stressed for the rest of the evening. I looked like a bowling pin, and my tie was the red stripe around the neck. Marble was the foundation for the sinks. I stared at myself in the four large mirrors placed next to one another. My suit jacket didn't match my pants and my shoes were too informal; I readjusted as much as I could.

A few minutes after I came back to the table, another friend sat down with us, bringing his wife along with him. His name was Mihi and he looked like his Bernese Mountain Dog. His hair went past his shoulders, wavy but not curly, and his face was sharp from his jaw and eyebrows. He and my dad used to be really close when they were younger, but my dad grew distant from him. Bursuc, my grandpa on my mom's side, offered my dad a job at his architectural firm, but he was unsure if Mihi should come along with him. Eventually, my dad left by himself and took up the job, but Mihi felt completely betrayed; he was less productive in the office and often tried flirting with his colleagues, so it was better without him.

We talked during the dinner and enjoyed ourselves, Mihi occasionally jumping in and reminiscing on the past.

"I remember being in Bucharest during the revolution with your father," he said, pointing to me. "We were in one of the main squares, I forget which one, and these assholes started shooting at us. We ducked under a car as the bullets flew over our heads. I was laughing like an idiot, telling them to aim better."

"He never told me that story," I said.

"I guess you're not man enough to know about it, eh?" he said, grinning, then sipping his drink.

"It's not like it was important anyway," my mom said to me. She turned to Mihi. "You couldn't help yourself from going into the middle of the action, could you?" she said. "What matters is he didn't die, and you should be glad he wasn't even hurt, or I would've killed you myself."

The sun had set, so it was now pitch black outside and we were getting blinded by all of the lights inside the building. By then, we all had some drinks, so we loosened up. Nobody knew how many Mihi had drunk, but he was starting to lose it.

“Why the fuck are these two stupid bitches here with us?” he asked his wife, whispering just loudly enough for me to hear, pointing towards Iulia and my mom. “They don’t know Vuca like I do. What’s their problem?”

I think everyone else at the table heard him too, though nobody said anything in response to him.

“And this kid, why is he here when his dad couldn’t even make it?” he added.

I was frozen in my seat, trying to avoid looking at him. He started grinning, his eyes getting sharper until they were alien. I wanted to get up and smash a plate or a bouquet of flowers from the middle of the table into his face, but he was tall and way stronger than anyone at the reception. Iulia often looked relaxed, even if she was probably pissed off, but this time it was clear that she was ready to beat the shit out of Mihi for talking like that about us.

“You know, you can always get to know someone better. But you have to give them that chance. It’s the same with architecture—a client doesn’t like the look of something, but they give you more chances to fix it up...” Emil said.

Nobody wanted to hear it.

“What’re you getting outta this, hmm? Do you like treating a kid and two women who did nothing to you like shit? Are you that sad you fucking prick?” Iulia asked him.

Mihi had no response, though the way his eyebrows furrowed he said yes to Iulia. Mihi drank another gin and tonic, then stood up and went to the bathroom; he was barely able to stand up straight. His wife acted as if nothing happened, as if she had never even met us. I went into

the bathroom, peeking through the crack of the door first to see if he was in a stall; thankfully, he was, so I spat on the ground, hoping he would slip on it.

Mihu came back out, holding his hand against the wall for support. “You don’t know me. So stay the fuck out of my business,” he grumbled, before sitting back down.

“No, I don’t. But I used to. And you weren’t such a piece of shit. In the end, that’s your own problem to deal with. Go ahead and keep acting like everyone else is the issue. We don’t care,” Iulia said bluntly.

Mihu tried saying something else, then paused as if his mouth refused to speak. He slammed his chair into the table and walked to the bathroom again, looking as if he was ready to puke. His wife had been tapping her leg constantly, fidgeting with a half-empty pack of cigarettes. Now she got up to smoke one on the outer deck when he got up.

Vuca was sitting at the farthest end of the room, at a giant table with Ashley’s family, grinning hard. He was too enthralled with his new step in his life to hear anything outside of his table’s range. The tall cake stood by them. I watched them all eat at different paces, betting on who would finish their plate first.

Three Ashtrays

There were at least three ashtrays in my grandparents' apartment. It wasn't a big place, but the boxiness of each room made it feel spacious. There weren't too many things, except for the books. I left an unfinished pizza on the living room table. A sweet ketchup container was next to the box; they go well together, before you say it's gross. My grandpa, Bursuc, smoked so much that we nicknamed him balaurul (literally "the dragon"). He didn't care if it came in the house; it had been that way since he picked up the habit. My grandma, Vava, smoked in her youth, but gave it up quickly. Her preferred vice was beer, regardless of how shitty it was.

I leaned against the windowsill, trying to count how many apartment complexes there were. Vava brought me one of her favorite snacks: bread with salt and a little pepper. She always said it was good to have if you were starving and couldn't wait until the next meal.

She took the spot next to me, holding a vibrant blue, ceramic cup. "Did I ever tell you about the time your mom came home from school with a little black ball in her hands?" She seemed happy to tell the story again so I listened. "Bursuc didn't want to keep him, but when he got out of the shower and the kitten climbed onto his chest, he changed his mind even though that little devil pissed on books, tore the couch up, and hissed at everyone 99% of the time. His only redeeming quality was that he wasn't a picky eater." She paused and took the last sip of her cooled tea.

"The vet came to our apartment because they couldn't get him out from underneath the couch. Even the vet wasn't able to do anything, so we let him be. One time—when he was older—though, he was on the windowsill, looking outside, and the window was open. I tried to shoo him away to close it, but he got scared. I can still picture him backing up until he slipped and fell. I ran to the window, watching him go down the height of six stories. I screamed as I froze from the

shock. I saw him land, somehow surviving the fall. But all of a sudden, six spots surrounded him. I realized it was a pack of stray dogs, ready to pounce on him. So I ran down the slippery, faded stairs, screaming even louder. Some people opened their doors as I descended, yelling at me, saying I was insane. I jumped into the fight and the cat scratched me everywhere, but all I could think about was that somehow I got to him in time. He left marks on my skin, and hid for weeks after, but I think he knew that I had saved him.”

The next night I got stuck in their tiny bathroom. There was a pole with rolls of toilet paper stacked on top of one another. A hint of something peachy was floating in the air, either coming from the tub or the toilet paper itself. I picked up Bursuc’s electric razor and inspected the top section with three circular motors. It resembled an alien, telling me that it would eventually come back with its colony and conquer the world. I couldn’t bang on the door since my grandparents were asleep. I considered falling asleep there until someone eventually came. I thought about the sewing machine in their room, the sturdy and almost pristine Singer. We have three paintings of sewing machines at home, all of which must have been inspired by this. A toothbrush wouldn’t quite fit in the keyhole, so I tried sticking my finger in there and nicked it on a blunt edge. No blood. The white walls and the occasionally flickering light made the bathroom feel like I’d been put into solitary confinement; there was no food, bed, though at least I had a toilet. I took the razor in my hand again and pretended to shave my nonexistent beard. I brushed my teeth next, flicking small specks of toothpaste foam onto the mirror. I was proud of my little painting, as if it was the first work of art I had ever made. Then the boredom came back. The door seemed different, so I tried jiggling the handle and pulling upwards and towards me. Voila!

Bursuc was in the kitchen smoking a cigarette while I grabbed some well-earned *Almette* from the fridge and ate it directly off of the knife. I lost track of how long I had been trapped.

“I love listening to the dogs outside when I can’t sleep,” he said.

I stood in silence, observing him. If anyone could make smoking look cool, it was definitely him.

“Me too. I stare at the red lamp in mama’s room and count how many times they bark to help me go to bed,” I said. My mouth was full of cheese and bread that was fluffy as a cloud.

I put the cheese back in the fridge, taking out a two-liter bottle of orange Fanta, and then a sip of milk. I closed the door and stared at the magnet we had of a cow, whose legs were made of tiny strings with solid hooves at the ends. A pot on the stove started to boil, and my grandpa dropped his cigarette out of the window, rushing to turn the heat off. After draining it, he put two hard-boiled eggs into his palms, then placed them under freezing cold water. He didn’t even wince.

“You know the old ladies who always hang out on the benches outside of the apartment complex are asking about you,” he told me.

“They’re like a secret mafia, where do they get the info when we’re not even here? I know you and Vava aren’t stopping to chat with them,” I said.

“Who knows? I go out for a smoke out there sometimes, but I always walk to the market across the street to buy some prunes.”

“Why do you smoke? I’ve asked my parents this so many times, and they never really have an answer. I thought maybe you would since you’re older and you might have had more time to think about it,” I added.

“Hmm, I guess I do it because I started so many years ago. I don’t remember what it’s like to not smoke. There’s always something you can pair a cigarette with, you know? Coffee, tea, a beer, even most foods. I’d like to say that it helps with stress, but I normally don’t worry about much, but maybe that’s the cigarette talking for me.”

He lit another and began eating one of the eggs, sometimes pouring salt on the tip to add some flavor. He grabbed a Heineken from the fridge and asked me to pick up my leftover Fanta in the bottle.

“Cheers,” he said to me.

Reunited

We stood in front of a busy roundabout, looking for a white car. As if it's easy to find that when everything is either silver, black, white, or gray on the road. A yellow gas station was a block away, so we bolted over there to get picked up. I grabbed an ice-cream, which instantly melted as I opened the wrapper. Radu pulled in next to a pump, slammed on the brakes, and hurled forward. He stepped out of the car, waddling over to us. He looked like he once volunteered as Santa in a mall, but constantly went out for cigarette breaks whenever he could. He gave my dad a strong handshake and the typical Romanian kiss, once on each cheek. He gave me a firmer handshake, ready to lift me off of the ground, and grinned widely, showing pearly teeth.

We stopped on the side of a local highway, parking in a lot with nothing but abandoned cars and signs that said NO TRESPASSING.

Radu turned around swiftly, head at an angle where he was able to face my dad and I. "It's my wife's birthday, so let's go get something nice for her," he said, rummaging through the console for his wallet. "Her name's Claudia," he told me.

We all walked out and headed for a flower shop. It was the only thing on the side of the road as we were getting closer to Bucharest's outskirts. We got her purple flowers, while Radu picked out some reds, yellows, and pinks.

"Okay let's hurry, the rush is already here," he said.

We waited in traffic for an hour just to go three kilometers. Once we reached the outskirts, a giant empty and half-demolished factory loomed over us.

"Remember when we used to go here and explore Yul?" Radu asked my dad.

"I remember finding a couple of new loose car parts," he said.

“These fuckers are supposed to be building a metro station all the way out here for the commuters, can you imagine? Maybe we can get rid of all this bottlenecked mess. I hate waiting on this road. These idiots couldn’t make it wider than one lane, so now everyone has to wait for dumbasses to merge,” Radu said.

We pulled into a steep side road shaped like a pizza slice.

“Last stop before my place, but this is where the good shit is,” Radu boasted.

A butcher shop was tucked between a shadowy staircase and a row of giant open-window fridges that was parallel to the front door. Radu walked in and made a couple of jokes to the women working there, and brought us to the middle of the meat display cases.

“You ever had these? They’re cow pussies. It’s so tender and soft, and cooks so easily on the grill,” he said, grinning.

I felt a knot form in my throat, felt for a moment like I might vomit. I went to look at what else they sold, finding Kinder eggs and shitty flashlights hanging from a netted bundle. Radu ordered a ridiculous amount of meat, the vaginas, mici, sausages, pork and beef slabs, and a little bit of fried stomach.

We drove out to the suburbs; all of the houses looked the same, purely copy and paste. They were painted like beach sand, contrasting nicely with the reddish dirt roads. Some houses stood out because of their lights or the various clutter on the balconies. Radu’s was orderly and the garden was the centerpiece. Claudia came out and hugged each of us, and started taking the meats inside. She had long, blonde hair, wore glasses, and was almost always smiling.

“Let’s give them a tour!” she said to Radu, waving to all of us to follow her.

We went upstairs, and my dad stopped to look at what Radu had done with the attic, as he pulled down a self-made ladder to go up into the darkness. Claudia showed me her room; it was

covered in blue, beige, and white, but mostly navy. Everything was seaside-themed, like an Airbnb solely meant for the summer. She took me out onto the balcony and I could see into the neighbor's yard across the road. They had a dog running around, with a couple of bushes and some tomatoes, but it would have taken them years to catch up to Claudia's progress. Radu then took me into a bedroom across the hall, and Claudia followed us in.

“Don't show them this! It's just piles of clothes, we don't even have dressers for fuck's sake!” she yelled after him.

He chuckled and closed the door discreetly. “Don't worry, we've all been there. There's always gotta be one spot of the house that's a wreck.”

We went back downstairs and settled in the kitchen, Radu rushing to get the meats out onto the grill so we could chow down. Claudia offered me some wine, and pointed to some țuica for later. I politely declined. It's weird getting drunk with people you've only just met. I helped bring the plates and silverware out; I went to the front steps of the house and started having a panic attack. My lungs felt enshrouded in stone, and my limbs were numb as if there was no blood in them. During the car ride over to Radu's house, I had been talking to my girlfriend, Erin. It had now been two hours since she last responded. I scrolled through my phone, unsure of what I was looking for, and called her sister as a last resort:

“Hi, I know we haven't met yet, but I'm freaking out and I don't know what to do. It's the first time something like this is happening, so I guess I'm picturing the worst case scenario.”

“What's wrong? Are you okay?” she asked.

“I can't get in touch with Erin. I've tried calling her a few times and I already sent her too many messages asking if she's fine. Have you ever had this happen?” I asked.

“Haha yeah. She’s probably just asleep. Sometimes she knocks out and almost nothing can wake her up. I’ve been there before. Let me ping her phone, she’ll have to wake up from the noise,” she said.

“Okay. Sorry to bother you, it’s just that our conversation was going so smoothly and out of nowhere it stopped, so I started spiraling,” I said.

“Don’t apologize! You’ll be fine,” she said.

She hung up and I stared up at the sky, seeing a few stars as dusk approached.

I walked back into the house and took out some cheeses and cold cuts. Claudia and I sat at the table and started to turn on the ultraviolet lamps to kill bugs, especially the mosquitoes. I prepared a humble charcuterie board as Radu and my dad kept talking at the grill for what felt like months. They finally came back and tried to find places for each pot on the table, like people trying to avoid walking into each other in a hallway. Claudia shifted everything with mechanical precision, as if she already calculated the perfect landing spot for each object. She went to grab more wine and Radu ran in for the liquor.

The food tasted like what we would make at a cookout in our backyard. There was almost no room on the table for anything else besides silverware. Radu served us extra mici, insisting that I should have some of the other meats. “Come on. Try some of this,” he said, holding out a cow vagina with the tongs towards me.

“No. I’m fine living without ever trying that,” I said.

“Where else are you gonna try something like this, huh?” he asked.

“Leave him alone. He said he doesn’t want any. Drop it,” Claudia said.

“I don’t see why it’s such a big deal,” he said.

“I don’t care if it’s a big deal or not. It’s my birthday and I’ve prepared everything besides the meat, so let go of it,” she said, pulling her glasses down and glaring at Radu.

“Fine. More for me. You gotta learn to try new things,” he said, plopping the meat on his oily plate.

My dad and I stayed silent, letting out an occasional sound to emphasize how good the food was, at least the things we wanted to try ourselves.

After a while, Radu had consumed enough beers and some shots to loosen up. He started telling this story about the house during the first two weeks after he and Claudia bought it:

“So. I come downstairs one day and the bathroom’s flooding with an inch of water all over the floor, about to spill into the living room. This happened around Easter, so most people were off work or out of town. I called up my guy and he wouldn’t come, but I argued with him and told him he’ll get double. He still wouldn’t come and we had been waiting for so long that I had the guy who sold me the house come. He came with a plumber and they looked at what was going on. The toilet spat some shit onto the plumber’s chest and I started laughing so hard I fell onto my knees. The water went down, but there was clearly something else in there. The guy’s snake wasn’t able to go far enough, so the house seller called up another guy. He came with a nine foot long snake that had a propeller at the end, and told the other guy “you call yourself a plumber with that tiny ass thing?” The other plumber replied “I’m just the repairman dude, not a shitter like you.”

We started laughing and drowned out the noise of the bugs that kept burning up and exploding in the lamps.

“Anyways, the guy pulled out the snake and a chunk of concrete with rebar came out, and the rest was fixed. The thing is though, the guy who I bought the house from told me that he had

seen something like this before, with another house he helped to build. He explained that one of the builders had sabotaged the toilet because he was fed up with the people who were going to buy the house: “Fuck these people and their goddamn house money, they don't deserve it.”

“Can you believe the nerve this guy had?” my dad asked.

“I understand their anger, but it's being put in the wrong place,” I said.

“I don't know, it seemed like being angry at us would solve his problems. Sometimes you need to let people indulge in their delusions,” Radu said.

“Really? What do you mean by that?” I asked.

He looked at me and scoffed. “We don't need to get into this,” he said, looking at Claudia.

“I don't care. Do what you want. It's past twelve so I've lost my birthday powers,” she said.

“Well... If you really think about it, man, what do you think the pandemic was about? It's just a plot for all of the rich assholes in the world to find their own way out of their mess, leaving the rest of us behind,” he said, putting his hands together.

“Yeah...,” I said.

“I know what's going through your head. You think I'm crazy. But let's discuss for the sake of it. Don't you think it's strange how the division between the public was so driven by people in charge? Everyone picks their side, regardless of who their beliefs align with. We're all equally crazy. And that's the whole point. Don't you see? They want us to split apart, while they do this shit in the shadows and all of a sudden we're in a dystopia like 1984. We're going to be reduced to animals, except for the greedy shitheads who'll laugh at us from their towers of wealth,” he said.

Radu continued spilling out the same details for a while. Our food had started to settle down and the drinks were gone too.

“Let’s have some cake! Can you get it out of the fridge honey?” Radu asked Claudia.

She stared at him, sipped on a remaining drop of wine, and threw her glass into the garden. “Are you fucking serious? Why can’t you do it? You’ve been sitting around, having the time of your life, while I’ve been going back and forth cleaning dishes and putting things in the fridge. But you didn’t notice, did you? Had too much to drink again?” she berated him.

“Okay okay. I’m sorry, you’re absolutely right,” he said, getting up and sliding the screen door open. “Jesus christ,” he whispered under his breath.

“Come say that to my face!” Claudia screamed towards him, ashing a newly lit cigarette.

He came back out, holding a cake in one hand and plates topped with silverware in his other. “Can you open the door for me, love?”

“Open it yourself.”

Where Are You From?

Monday

The halls were bright, light shining through the giant windows. Cinder block sized bricks were slotted into the blue walls. I watched three people running in the courtyard, around the stone playground we called our vacation home. Someone in math class was screaming over the others, throwing erasers and trying to be funny. He didn't deserve to get yelled at by our teacher though. As I was coming back from the bathroom, holding my binder that had everything for each class in it, a kid stopped me in the middle of the hallway. He seemed like he could have been a hall monitor, if we had any.

"Yo I heard you're Romanian! Does that mean you speak Roman?" he asked.

I stared at him blankly.

"No. It's the same name for the people and the language," I responded.

He grinned widely and went to wait in line at the school store. I never really thought about it. Nobody asked who I really was, I would only respond with my name. And there was the occasional question of where my parents are from because of their accents.

My mom couldn't pick me up from school until much later, so I tried calling our house phone, not that anyone was there. The receptionist in the front of the school pulled out a heavy collection of the yellow pages. I searched for their architecture firm, but couldn't find what their exact numbers were. I was always forgetting the last four digits. That's why I couldn't even dial the landline correctly.

Tuesday

The cafeteria smelled like spilled milk and splattered ketchup, but my seat smelled like home, like Vava's apartment. I unzipped my red, worn lunchbox and took out the weakest tupperware we had. I recognized the orange sauce swirling around in the tub, and began smiling. I made sure to take the lid off carefully enough so no drops would fly onto me or someone else. Taking out my spoon, I noticed an apple blending in with the lunchbox's fading color. I was ready to chow down.

"That looks disgusting, what is it!?"

"Is there vomit in there?"

"How can you possibly eat that crap?"

"It's mazare! Kind of like a stew made from potatoes, peas, tomato sauce, which mix together into this beautiful orange mess," I said back, feeling the horrible knot in my throat, retightening and climbing into my mouth. "You guys should try some! It's one of my favorite things to eat."

"Hell no, I'm not putting that in my mouth."

I don't think any one of them took a bite.

I packed up, to make sure they wouldn't throw away everything I had in the trash. I waited in the long line against the evergreen wall. As I turned the corner the "Got Milk?" sign looked down on me, just like the guys. I grabbed a tray which was definitely still dirty, and got my slice of pizza and a scoop of pasta. Two chocolate milks for dessert.

Wednesday

“Would anyone like to read the quote of the day?”

“Wow, what a surprise, the quote and the fact are about sports that only people who are obsessed with football or baseball would know,” my friend whispered to me.

However, nobody answered in record time, so Mr. G got up and unscrewed his giant thermos. “Wake up and smell the coffee,” he said.

He passed it around to everyone, making sure that we each got a good whiff. His stroll around the room ended when he plopped down into his comfy chair, and he began staring at us as if we were all there to do an interview. We covered some of the homework, rambled about Ancient Greece, and then he began scanning. Who was he going to choose today to be put on the spot? A few people had already answered what seemed to be the big quiz-like questions, so now he would randomly pry.

“Nice shoes Andrei!” he exclaimed. I knew it was over. He continued: “You seem like you could be hiding a toe ring under there.”

How was that the first thing that came to mind for him?

“You like living at home? What’s it like? You must have a house of course! Everyone else does! Where exactly do you live?” he bombarded me with questions.

My mouth wouldn’t open. “It’s good, not sure what else I can say. I live in an apartment though.”

“Sooooo detailed. Where *exactly* are you living?” he asked.

“87 Olive Street, right next to the park.”

It’s not like he even knew where it was, but the glint in his eyes when I fully disclosed my address showed me how happy he was to hear it. Everyone kept staring at me as I sunk

further into a void of static and questions. After a few minutes, we returned to Greece and shifted into the topic of architecture. Someone in the corner pointed out that his coffee was spilling, so they got an extra credit point, the ones he loved giving out at random. As soon as I thought my notes were going somewhere, the bell rang.

Thursday

The ride to Vinny's house was boring, except for the very end when we pulled around a bend and saw cliffs that dropped to the sea. I knew he flew out his drone there, taking pictures of the waves and the sun while others in the neighborhood were stuck inside, absorbing the air conditioning. There was a Mexican restaurant, a seafood place, and a pizza shop, all in the same triangle before the scenic route to his house. We normally went to Vinny's and tried doing as much as we could, to really enjoy our time. The stone driveway, new shingles, and granite countertops dazzled my eyes everytime. He had every snack imaginable, some of the bags were months old and forgotten.

"Remember when we came back from prom and chugged a shit ton of chocolate milk?" I asked.

"Dude, we had way too much going on that night," Sam responded.

"No man, last year was better when we actually got to go out somewhere," I added.

We ran out of conversation and ended up just sitting on the couch, having some pizza, and watching a movie. Gia, the little orange-brown dog chased us around, snorting and recognizing us when we came in. Vinny's dad talked about how they bought the house and it used to be only the size of the garage, though now it was like an entire villa. It seemed so easy to have a house on the shore, next to your friends and close enough to other family members. There

was virtually no clutter, except for the entrance's table that had a bunch of keys and a wedding picture on it.

The gray, white, and oak accents of the house didn't match the water or the yellow house next door. It was the modern atomic family; make a family, then a business, then... what?

Friday

A slate reception desk was bathed in the light of a display that filled the entire back wall. It showed over a hundred ways to say "hello" in other languages. I looked a little harder at that wall and read "Buna ziua." I felt like I was *home*. Then the sound of the automatic entrance door shutting woke me. I was never a patriot, but something about being acknowledged in the smallest of ways made me feel as if I was really being seen.

My parents had been studying for their tests, between meetings and deadlines. I waited in a stiff, metal chair that was strapped with black leather. My book was in the car, so I kept staring at the magical wall. The greetings faded in and out, until they all were there together. I saw them walking back towards me, with three blue booklets. It was almost a dark jean color, and with that emblem with the eagle, who wouldn't know it was the United States of America in all of its glory? My wine-red passport from Romania was ripped in half in my mind, and I grabbed my new one, unable to look away from it. Uncle Sam patted me on the back and I was treated to a bottled lemonade and half of a random sandwich. By the time we were out it was dusk, and the sun waved goodbye.

Did I really wait for five hours with my grandpa in the sickly summer heat, slapping mosquitoes every few seconds, for nothing? Why bother going home if it would be under this new label? I could picture the guy working at the passport control booth: "Wowwww what a

nice color. For a nice country, I guess.” I thought maybe the customs lines on the way back into America would be shorter, but nothing mattered there, except the pace of those stuck in their beefy cubicles. I might as well have changed my legal name to Andrew.

Saturday

Whenever a fair popped up somewhere, it was worth going to. You could see sketchy rides that might come apart if a bolt slipped out of its socket at the wrong time. The one that came every year was right next to the giant metal drums that held gasoline on the shoreline. Emissions from this fair didn’t make a difference on the general air quality and odor, which was too far gone for the salty water to save it.

I got invited to a fair in one of the more well off towns, the ones which took at least forty minutes to get to. A couple of highschool friends walked me in, and we wandered through the flocks of people. Another classmate jumped out in front of me, his parents behind him like wings.

“Nice to meet you, where are you from?” his mom asked.

“I’m from Romania, but right now I live downtown,” I responded.

“Oh that’s nice...” is what appeared to come out of everyone’s mouth, as if I was speaking a different language.

“Working hard to take our jobs, aren’t ya?” the dad asked.

They couldn’t pick out our home if it was on a map right in front of their faces. The condescending rich person tone echoed in my head, as if I had just been given a quarter from a snobby penny-pincher who said “don’t spend it all in one place!” I ran off to see the animals,

wishing a llama would spit on me, hiding me away. I bought fried dough from a truck nearby, ripping each piece off like flower petals. *They hate us. They hate us not.*

Sunday

My dad drove in the exhausting heat coming off of the asphalt on our way to the airport without any problems. His sunglasses made him look like a member of Depeche Mode, which was playing as we rode underneath the sun. We arrived at the airport, pulling into the front of the first floor's entrance point. My dad lit up a cigarette as he turned on the car's hazard lights. He stepped out and leaned against it, tapping his foot and raising his sunglasses onto his forehead. I hopped out next to him, but kept my distance so I would avoid the smoke. My mom eventually came running, holding a small, blue suitcase. Her favorite purse, a green canvas one, dangled from her shoulder. She switched her sunglasses out for her normal pair.

"What the hell did you do?" she asked my dad.

"You don't like the new look?" he asked.

"You look like a rejected extra for a pirate movie," she said, pointing to his scruffy, thick goatee. She took his new cigarette out of his mouth and toked on it.

"I'll shave it if you hate it so much," he said, stroking his remaining facial hair.

"Please do. Our son can barely recognize you," she said, scrunching her eyebrows.

"That's not true! He looks different, sure, but you have to admit it's funny. How's Bursuc?" I asked.

My mother put her sunglasses back on. "He's gone. I know you would have liked to come, but he wasn't the same man you knew. I'm sorry."

Embrace the Flaws

Half of the kitchen was taken up by an awkward ring of people surrounding a table with a polished, granite countertop. Purses were lined up behind one another on top of a radiator. My mom had been friends with Daria since my early childhood. She was like everyone's mom-in-law, or soacră, a concept that was stereotypical but mostly fit her. She came to the United States and worked her way up the job chain. I couldn't discredit her determination and work ethic, but she imposed this part of herself on everyone through all of her presentation. If you weren't meeting her where she wanted you to, then she'd be paying extra attention to you. It was never easy and felt like a chore to come to her house.

A warm smell filled the air of the living room and the kitchen. It was those mushroom pastries, of course, the same ones Daria used to shove into my mouth when I was younger, because it would have been an insult to her to refuse them. It was an impossible task to be the perfect host, yet she always undertook the responsibility in hopes of... I don't know what. Regardless, any imperfections were seemingly trimmed from the party, as to maintain this air of divinity. Until someone eventually got drunk.

A humble television displayed the skiing segment of the Olympic games, adding some extra entertainment. It felt slightly better to see snow, even if we weren't getting any. The feeling of Christmas came only from the fresh pine tree in the living room and a few festive sweaters. I walked through there to leave my coat on the already overburdened hanger. I shifted through the dining room to reach the kitchen, but paused. Two perfectly parallel rows of plates and silverware formed a loop like a Nascar track. Napkins were placed upright in front of each person's plate. There was already a mistake: the two tables stuck together differed in height. I walked slowly past them, staring at every little detail. Not all of the chairs were the same.

Different types of cups, some made of crystal and others glass, didn't match their intricate shapes. When I finally broke out of my trance, I stepped into the bathroom to reorient myself. Noise seemed to be coming at me from every direction, whether it was from people talking, clinking glasses, or the tv which had been turned up even more. The soap smelled like roses, and the sink was shaped like a shell. I came back out into the short, connecting hallway between the dining room and kitchen. The door in front made me think of going into the basement. Never again.

“Come here, dear, we must get you a drink at once!” said Daria as she approached me.

“I'm alright, we haven't started eating yet,” I said, discreetly rolling my eyes as she checked the room and took inventory of the guests.

“No, no, I insist,” she said, grabbing my arm and dragging me to the countertop near the oven.

She snagged the first bottle of alcohol she could find on the table encircled by people, some of which had left. She poured a consistent stream of smoked whiskey into a beautiful tumbler, thin on the edges and extremely heavy on the bottom.

“On the rocks? Or neat?” she asked.

“I can get my own ice,” I answered.

“Don't be ridiculous, I'm getting it. Let me just go get more from the cooler outside,” she said, dragging her feet to the door and accidentally swinging it open. I looked around, trying to find someone to talk to, but she was already back. “Here you go.” She filled the glass with small ice cubes and put it down. She quickly wandered off as she looked for someone else who seemed to not be mingling enough with the others.

Among the group were my parents, aunt, uncle, Ana, Daria's boyfriend Cliff, and some of Daria's friends that we would generally only see whenever we visited her.

Ana came up to me, holding a can of seltzer in her hand and a cigarette behind her ear. She was wearing her favorite ring, a long silver frame with an oval and polished chunk of amethyst. "Do you remember when she would lock us in the basement?" she asked.

"Yeah. Those were the days. We'd get in the way of the party is what she'd always say. Clearly things haven't changed much. We're tolerated but monitored. Not that everyone else isn't, but it feels like she's more focused on us. Honestly, that might be worse. A decade ago we could just hang out on our own terms," I said.

"Well, at least we can eat earlier and don't have to be cooped up in that musty ass basement. And I can always go out for a smoke if things here are too overwhelming," she said.

"I could use some air," I said.

As we stepped outside, a violent gust of wind pierced through our clothing. I felt it forming tiny cuts underneath my shirt, as if I was scratched by a paranormal cat.

"Did I tell you? It finally came!" Ana exclaimed, holding out her necklace towards me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Remember after the wake? Our aunt said we could order some jewelry that has Vic's ashes in it. I remember one of his friends got a necklace like this one, but for her dad. It's also got his fingerprint wrapped around it! I'm gonna wear it all the time now," she said.

I looked at it, imagining him pressing his thumb into a burning piece of metal to transfer the imprint. "Ah damn. Some of the boys from highschool said they wanted to get a vial with his ashes. I think Chris wanted to just keep it, and X was thinking about going somewhere nice to spread his ashes. My mom told me that our aunt wanted to bring one of the two urns they have to

Romania to bury it there. It'd be nice to have him buried in both of his homes." I paused. "I never thought about buying a chain, maybe because I was scared of constantly being reminded, but it might not be too late to get one too," I said.

"It was worth buying, so you should do it. I don't feel sad looking at it and feeling it around my neck. It'd be worse if we started to forget him. But sometimes it feels like that's the better option because the pain might vanish. Don't overthink it, though. I'm glad some of the boys want mementos. But I guess the others have taken stuff from his room to remember him," she said.

"Haha, I'm one of them. I took his zippo but the wick's dead. I think something that helps is bringing stuff to his room too. Chris brought his legos and mixed them with Vic's, making the space a little less empty. I also got a super cute pair of socks with crossed axes in all colors of the rainbow. They'd be even better if I was a lumberjack," I said.

Ana laughed. "Are you doing okay though?" she asked.

"I don't think I know what that even feels like anymore. Maybe sometimes yeah, but mostly I'm just getting by and not really thinking about anything. Sometimes I see him in my dreams but it's so inconsistent. Other times I'll start crying randomly, or I'll act as if it never happened. But I never forget him. I'll walk into his house, expecting him to be there, but you know," I said.

"Yeah," Ana said, pausing. "It helps to be together whenever we get invited to his house. Doesn't change the fact that there's this void taking his place. It's hit or miss for me. I think it depends on how busy I am. Sometimes you get so lost in work that you forget everyone else exists, even the most important people." she finished the rest of her cigarette and spat into the large, untrimmed bush next to us.

We walked back inside, and I took another look in the dining room. There had been some new adjustments made to the table. In front of each plate stood tiny folded tents of paper, bearing every guest's name. Next to those were small, silver bells ready to be used at any time. I had left my whiskey near the fridge and the ice had melted. I dumped the rest as the little bit I drank was enough to give me a pounding headache. I splashed refreshing, cold water into the glass and threw more ice into it.

Daria came up to me again, having kept an eye out for us ever since she realized we were gone. "Did you like your drink? What are you having now? How are the appetizers?"

"It was good. I've got some vodka here. Thanks for checking in. The appetizers are great!" I lied, not yet getting a chance to try them, but feeling I should be less blunt.

"We'll be eating soon, so don't fill up too much!" she exclaimed. "Have some more," she said, handing a small plate with a pastry and slices of cheese to someone else.

I went over to the dining tables, searching for my seat, which ended up being in the middle of the back row. Perfect. Right in between everyone as well as far too close to the wall. I wouldn't be able to get up without disturbing at least five people from their meals. Daria came in with two vases, followed by a third, to set the mood even more. There was barely room for any bread baskets, let alone the dishes we'd be getting food from.

"So how's college going?" Daria asked, reaching for a piece of bread.

"Kind of the same. Getting through classes and trying to see my friends when I can. There's not that much to say," I answered.

"Oh come on! I'm sure something interesting's going on there? Any parties?" she asked.

"Well everyday seems the exact same, so I don't think about it too much. Most parties are off campus, so I can't get to them. I just hang out with my group," I said.

“Isn’t that sooo boring though? You should be meeting people while you can. Soon enough it’ll be over,” she said.

“Stop giving me this *life-changing* advice. Just say that you want to be in college again, but don’t make me feel bad for doing things my own way. Why are you acting like I’m never going to meet anyone else in my life?” I asked.

“You should be thanking me! Take my advice instead of being disrespectful,” she said.

Daria got up abruptly and ran to the kitchen as she heard the over beeping. The others grew silent and a crash in the kitchen made everyone at the tables jump.

“I can’t believe this. You piece of shit!” Daria screamed as a ceramic pan fresh from the oven broke in half. She was lucky enough to have placed it near the sink, avoiding a bigger mess. The duck was ruined now, by her standards. Her boyfriend, Cliff, appeared next to her, and told her to not worry about anything else as he would fix it all up.

He casually transferred everything he could salvage from the ceramic pan into an unchipped, glass one.

“No, no, no, you have to make sure there’s no tiny pieces left in there,” Daria said, snatching the new pan from him, carefully sifting through the duck with a spoon. “Ugh, see? I told you. You need to be more thorough,” she said, pointing at three little shards on the spoon.

“Well, you’ve saved the day! You shouldn’t worry so much,” Cliff joked to her.

She scoffed and downed the rest of her wine.

Then, he walked over to us, proudly holding the rescued pan with both hands, using mitts covered with flowers and bunnies.

“Dinner is served!” Daria said, sipping on a cosmopolitan, her go-to strong drink. “If you want anything else, just ring your bells and one of us will come running over.”

“Oh Daria, this cheese platter is just so divine! I can’t imagine how lovely the rest will be!” one of Daria’s friends added.

“Oh stop it! You’re too kind!” Daria said, smiling.

“It’s just cheese,” I whispered over to Ana, who was luckily one of the people next to me.

“Seriously. Who gives a shit. What a surprise that all cheese is good,” she said.

Daria scanned the room, double checking that everyone had the correct silverware and if any drinks needed to be refilled. Cliff pulled her aside into the living room, taking off his mitts, and pouring himself a glass of the same tar-tasting whiskey. “Honey, you need to just sit down. We can help around, and I want you to enjoy what you’ve prepared. You’ve done more than enough.”

“You don’t get it. I don’t want them to have to serve themselves. There has to be a certain level of luxury here,” she said.

“There’s more than enough of that already. You made duck, salată de boeuf, mashed potatoes, sarmale, and beef stew! Please, give yourself a break. You’ve earned it,” he said, trying to reason with her.

“Fine. We should’ve done this at yours instead. Speaking of... we should let the guests know. We’ve waited long enough” she said.

“We should wait a little longer. We haven’t confirmed if somebody’s going to buy my house, so let’s give it more time,” he said.

“What more is there to figure out? The house is beautiful and gigantic! Don’t tell me you think people wouldn’t be interested in the riverbank. You said there were a few offers. Did they magically disappear? I don’t think so,” she argued.

“Please. Now’s really not the best time. I just want to be sure someone is actually interested in it. I don’t want to sell it to some jerk who’ll just resell it for even more money after they remodel it. I’m really thankful to have met you, but my house still has memories attached to my wife. I don’t want to betray her. I need someone as caring as she was to own it,” he gently argued back.

We ate quietly as the argument seemed to never end. Now, it was hard to hear them since Daria noticed people could overhear them. Everyone’s formerly radiant napkins were now flattened in their laps, or thrown lazily onto the tables like a common rag. Someone had spilled wine on theirs, too scared to ring their bell and call Daria over. A trail of breadcrumbs led to almost every plate, the baskets emptied long ago.

The duck was simple, cooked in its own fat and garnished with rosemary and bay leaves for taste. The salată de boeuf was a pale-yellow mix of potatoes, diced carrots, pickles, and eggs that were all held together by mayonnaise. Bits of leftover skins were in the mashed potatoes which were topped with sliced green onions and loads of cracked pepper. Not enough salt though. There were over a hundred sarmale, these small rolls made from ground pork and rice, all wrapped in pickled cabbage. It seemed that no matter how many Daria would make, she would always give some to each person to take home so “they wouldn’t go to waste.” The stew had the most pleasant smell, spreading an aroma of mixed vegetables and beef that was more tender than butter.

Some of the adults got up and began bringing the dishes and large plates to the kitchen, like robots stuck in routine. They knew desert and coffee were coming next. Daria threw parties like this at least twice a year, preparing in advance and sending everyone a formal invitation. It was always the same: arrive, eat appetizers, stuff yourself with the main courses, then dessert and

coffee, with alcohol spread in between each of the steps. Daria and Cliff eventually sat while we ate, making jokes here and there, becoming more talkative as the cosmopolitan came and went.

“We’ve got chocolate mousse and a beautiful cheesecake for tonight!” Daria said, starting to slur her words. She had reached her third cosmopolitan, on top of whatever else she had earlier besides wine.

She placed both desserts on opposite ends of the table, letting people cut their own slices, and finally taking some of the stress off her back. She went to her coffee machine, but walked away as she looked at the few drops of alcohol left in her glass. Even with most of the cutlery and plates gone, the tables felt full, the empty spaces now filled by the cakes, napkins, metal sugar pots, and coffee cups.

Daria came up to me, squeezing past the others on her way. “Would you be a dear and grab us some more bottles from the basement?” she hiccuped in my ear. I had no intention of setting foot in that hellhole again, but considering that she had stressed herself out enough for the day, I agreed.

The basement smelled of fine wood, but a carpet in the downstairs bedroom reeked of dustiness and humidity. I remembered being stuck in that room and looking through the closet for any board games, something we could do to pass the time while we were locked in there as kids. One time we found a bag with loads of legos, and took turns picking through which ones were our favorites. I went to the closet to check if that bag was still there, but it had disappeared. Maybe Daria had sold it, thinking nobody would want that “garbage.” I turned around and walked into the cellar-like section of the basement. Most of the time when we were down there as kids, we stayed in the bedroom because the rest of it was too dark and seemed like we wouldn’t come back if we left the room. We thought that it would be safer if the washing

machine was on, making some noise to scare away our imaginary monsters. If anything, the clunking only made our fears grow.

It wasn't so dark that I couldn't see, but when I opened the fridge it was like getting beamed by the sun. Of course. Three bottles of champagne were the only things left. I carried them in a bundle, and as soon as I got upstairs she spotted me.

"What in the world are you doing? Don't carry them like that. You'll break one for all I know. Give one of them to me at least," she scolded me, shaking her finger. She burped in my face, even though her mouth was closed, and stared into my eyes. She put her finger up to her lips and shushed me, knowing that this slip up would cost her her reputation.

"If you're so good at carrying them, then don't ask me to do it for you next time. I've got my own way of doing things. I'm sorry if it doesn't fit into your set of rules," I said. I left the remaining two bottles in the fridge and went back outside. She stayed still, recovering from the ripple of shame the burp sent throughout her body.

I found Ana, smoking a cigarette.

"What now? Did she break you again? I always lose my patience with her," she said.

"Yeah, I guess. I wanna be polite but if I'm just gonna get criticized for doing things my way, why bother?" I said, kicking the porch lightly.

She puffed out an absurd amount of smoke, causing my asthma to immediately kick in. "I know how you feel. I don't put up with that kind of shit anymore. It's childish. If she wants help and gets it, then she should be saying thanks instead of complaining."

"Even when it's not her party, she still bosses everyone around. The worst part is she's so busy focusing on other people that she forgets what she's doing. Then she gets annoyed that nobody is helping or doing things the wrong way. The last time she came over to our aunt's she

left her portable bar and that nice mixer. Every time I try to sympathize with her, just for this to happen,” I said.

“Yeah but also you gotta consider she’s been drinking. She’s finally a little more loose, but that way of thinking—of being perfect—is still nagging her. You can’t just unlearn shit like that, you know?” she said.

“You’re right. We’ll just have to live with it. I’m used to that at this point, so adding something else to the pile isn’t gonna make much of a difference. I’m gonna have some cake. You should come along. I’ll make you another drink,” I said.

Before going in, I took one last look at the night sky, looking for The North Star. Ana’s smoke clouded my eyes and the darkness. The only thing I could do was cough until my lungs had no air left in them. Then I sat back down, defeated by the food, the drinks, and eventually the cake.

Mountain Air

The car ride to the cabin was like going home from the airport, where delirium set in because of the coming dark and the exhaustion. My eyes opened and closed, moving between naps and being jolted awake. Just before we turned into the driveway, the first snow of the year began falling. I stepped on a cigarette butt as I got out of the car. Already. Who came out for a smoke in this temperature? I quickly grabbed my bags, along with Erin's, and headed into the house.

“Salutari, salutari!” boomed the voices of everyone who had already made it inside and gotten cozy. I waved in return, out of breath from avoiding the muddy spots on the stairs leading into the kitchen. It was weird seeing most of the extended family in a house that we were just renting. We hadn't done something like this since our last skiing trip in Vermont, back in the days when Winter was still a consistent season. Erin and I looked through the rooms to the right of the kitchen, finding the only one that wasn't occupied. A flimsy lamp with shelves took up a corner, while the rest of the space was filled by a bunk bed with hard mattresses. I opened the window to get some of the fresh, cold air.

“You okay?” she asked me.

“Yeah. I think the drive just wore me out. Like I just woke up and got blinded by the sun. I wanna go on a walk, but there's not much around here besides houses,” I said.

“Let's go out the back! I remember looking at the pictures and seeing a hot tub!” she said excitedly.

We walked back down the stairs into the basement. It was split into an extra living space and was directly to the garage. We saw a ping pong and a pool table. The garage had been painted over and looked more welcoming than I would have expected.

“Oh my god. Can we play some pool? It’s been so long since I’ve picked up a cue,” I said. “Ping pong’s also fun, but it tires me out quickly.”

“I’ve never played pool. But if you can teach me, then gladly. I’ll pick it up and beat your ass,” she said, smiling.

“You wish! Let’s come back to it later. I want to keep exploring,” I said.

The backyard door led to a fresh staircase which hadn’t even been painted, leaving behind some of that lumber smell. Conveniently, for the rest of the group, there was an ashtray right at the top of the staircase. A light turned on behind us as we climbed, startling me.

“Ugh. All of these bright white lights are gonna give me a migraine. As if the ones from cars weren’t enough,” I said.

“I’ll smack it away and hide it in a bush,” Erin said.

“I’ll reinstall it before we leave!” I said happily.

“We *have* to go in the hot tub, please! It would be so nice to be in the cold air and not be freezing” Erin said.

“As soon as I figure out how it works, it’s all yours,” I said.

I turned to the left and saw a patio area, where someone was smoking in the dark, blowing clouds into the light. He got up and I saw the glint in his glasses, recognizing him immediately.

“Andrei! Why are you here when it’s so cold?” I asked.

He got up slowly and walked over to us, standing tall and grinning. “I needed to cool off. It’s too hot in that house. I can’t wait to have sausages and beans for dinner! Is this your girlfriend, Erin? I’ve heard a lot of good things about you. It’s nice to meet you!” he said.

“Wait, another Andrei? How many of you are there? I’ve already met one of the others the first time I visited,” Erin said.

“I’m not sure! I’ve known him for a while though,” he said, pointing to me. “His mom was like an older sister to me and now look where we are. It’s crazy where the time goes.”

“Hmm... I think at this point we’ve reached at least four. But he and I are the only two here. It’s a common name in Romania, but it’s always fun to reconnect. It’s like we get stronger together,” I said, chuckling.

“Just wait until you meet my wife, Andrea, then you’ll see how confusing it gets! Sometimes I’ll hear my name, but it’s actually hers!” he said.

“Whenever there’s too many of us, we have to add titles, like “little, middle, or big” to tell us apart easily,” I said laughing.

“Hehe I’ll always know it’s you though,” she said to me. “It’s nice to meet you too, middle Andrei!”

Our noses started to get runny, so we went back inside. The kitchen was warming the entire house up with all of the pots and pans hard at work. Andrei went to find Andrea and brought her to us. Erin and her introduced themselves and quickly began bonding over their pets.

Andrea showed her phone to both of us. “We just got the cutest bulldog last year! Her name is Bertha!” She scrolled through several pictures, happy to be talking about something besides work.

“I wonder how my cat would react to her. She’s always afraid of dogs, even if they’re not hyper and loud,” Erin said.

“She’d probably get along with a dog before another cat, though,” I said. “But I think she’s happy when she spends time with us. Especially when she comes out of nowhere and scares us!” I said.

The smell of food and wine filled the kitchen and the living room, which were both parts of one giant space. Erin put a kettle on, waiting for it to whistle.

“It’s never too late for tea time!” she said to me.

“Agreed. Two spoons of sugar?” I asked.

“Yes please!” she said.

“Hey, could you stock the fridge downstairs please?” my dad asked.

“Sure,” I said. I grabbed two six packs of carbonated water to pack away. I looked around the remaining drinks on the countertop, trying to calculate how many more trips it would take me to bring everything downstairs. I opened the door and was greeted with an empty, odorless space. The drinks awkwardly stayed with their duplicates, like individual groups at a party that only interact with themselves. A rebel can of beer rolled out of the side door, after getting pushed over by another. It crashed and began fizzing on the ground, leaving a small, foamy puddle.

“Fuck.”

I took it out through the back door and dumped the rest in a trashcan. I thought about taking a sip to save some of it, but it was the last type of alcohol I wanted to drink. Erin came downstairs, looking for me, and I saw her wandering the garage. I waved to her through the window for a few seconds before she saw me. She drew a smiley face on the door’s window, but didn’t come outside. I rushed back in, hugging her and thinking about what I could have done to avoid the spill.

“I wish a bottle of water fell, not this. Now there’s a sticky spot, even though I wiped it down,” I said.

“Don’t worry. Nobody’s gonna notice anyway. Everyone’s just hanging out upstairs so this is between you and me,” she said.

The smell from the kitchen had finally reached into the basement.

“You’re right. It happens, let’s get some dinner before it’s gone!” I said.

We joined the others and were left to sit at a countertop with two high seats. My mother clinked glasses with my aunt and uncle, making a toast to our gathering, and wished each other the best health and futures. After what felt like minutes, the house was dark and snores emerged and overlapped from each of the bed rooms, finding their way back into the kitchen for a midnight snack.

When I woke up the next morning, I could hear a few snores still and the kettle working overtime again. Coffee was now the kitchen’s smell, with ten mugs spread around the tables. Grumbles and good mornings bounced against the walls, flying out of a window after getting exhausted. My aunt and uncle were cooking eggs and making coffee. The others waited at a high table, slouching because they were still half asleep.

I kept looking around and saw Andrei climbing the stairs from the basement. “Morning sleepyhead!”

“Good morning! Did you get some sleep? I checked your bed out before you came last night. It’s like concrete,” I said.

“I’m used to it. Sure it’s not as soft as back home, but I’ve gone on so many trips to Detroit for work, and the hotel beds are worse than this. They’re bigger but the only soft things are the pillows and blankets,” he said.

“Do you have any plans for today? I don’t wanna be stuck in the house all day,” I said.

“We haven’t looked much, but Andrea saw that there’s a lot of shops to explore downtown! We like going on walks, so just wandering is good enough for us. I’m sure we’ll come across something,” he said.

“Okay, that sounds perfect for us. I’ll go wake Erin up so we can start getting ready,” I said.

I walked back into our bedroom, the top bunk covered in our jackets and random objects from our backpacks, and started to look at what we might need. Camera, sweater, scarf, gloves, maybe a water bottle. I nudged Erin lightly while she was curled towards the wall.

I nudged her lightly until she woke up. “Shit. It’s so late, I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay. But yeah let’s get going,” I said, grabbing my jacket.

I walked away, going back into the kitchen for some tea and whatever I could find in the fridge for breakfast. The fridge held leftover sausages, cooked and uncooked, two cartons of orange juice, one carton of milk, a block of Bulgarian sheep’s cheese, jars with pickled tomatoes and peppers, and a flimsy carton of eggs. Perfect for a Romanian breakfast, where you have a little bit of everything. I grabbed two eggs and cut some cheese to mix in as I scrambled them. I switched my tea out for a glass of orange juice, hoping it would give me some semblance of being a kid again. The sourness was perfect, just enough to make me want to take another sip until it was all gone.

In the distance, I could hear the sound of people playing pool. Who was playing so early? I went downstairs and saw that Andrei and Andrea had been ready for at least a while, waiting on us.

“Are we going out?” Andrea asked.

“Yeah, soon!” I said.

“Look! My mom sent us a video of Bertha,” Andrea said, passing me her phone. “I bet she misses us. I’m glad she’s got someone to take care of her. I can’t wait to take her out on a walk.”

I went back up into the bedroom, but it was empty. Erin appeared from around the fridge, holding a mug of tea and eating some cheese.

“I’m starved. Let’s get something nice for breakfast! I could really use a coffee. The tea isn’t gonna do much,” she said.

My parents drove us all together, four of us squeezing in the back seat and looking at the bits of nature surrounding us. We stopped on the side of the road once the commercial buildings became more common. My parents left like a taxi driver who had just gotten a hefty tip. Andrei and Andrea split away from us, starting their walk throughout town.

“Look at this tea shop! It’s so cute! Can we go in?” Erin asked.

“Yeah! It looks cozy. Let’s see what they’ve got,” I said.

The interior design’s main accents were made of a polished maple wood, shined to perfection. All of the lights were a warm yellow with orange hues, adding to the cabin feel. Jars of honey and tins of tea were lined up along the right side of the store. Once in a while some of

these products were placed on a little display, showing us that they were the bestsellers. Halfway down the display wall, there were some chocolate bars from a local company.

“Andrei, come look at this!” Erin said.

“Ooooooh matcha chocolate! That sounds so good!” I said. I picked one up, wanting to check the ingredients, but I got distracted by the glaring price tag of sixteen dollars. “No way. It can’t be worth that much,” I said, squinting to double check.

“Let’s get one next time. It might be a lot better than we’re expecting,” she said.

The other half of the store was a large cafe section, partly seating and kitchen. People ran around with pots of tea as I looked to the ceiling, following the path of some copper pipes. In the back of the store there were beeswax candles and beauty products. Of course, they had similar eyebrow-raising price tags. I went up to the biggest candle and stared. Three hundred dollars. It’s a lifetime supply I guess.

“I’m thinking of ordering some Jasmine tea. Do you want some?” Erin asked.

“I’m okay for now. Hopefully, we’ll come across some brunch places soon,” I said, looking at the menu just to make sure I made the right decision.

We walked back out onto the cold street, passing a store that was heavily themed around horse racing. There were bibs, shirts, pins, and postcards in the windows. We kept walking and stopped at a cafe that had one table open outside.

“This looks nice! I think we could grab a bite here,” I said, pointing to the corner table.

“Yeah! I don’t wanna wait much longer to eat, so let’s stay here,” she said.

We sat down for a second, while checking an online menu to see what options we had. A guy a few feet away, at a crosswalk, kept taking puffs out of his vape, then spitting a puddle onto

the ground, and repeating. As I tried to talk to Erin I would occasionally hear a new splat on the asphalt.

“I’ll be right back. Bagel, right?” I asked her as I stood up.

As soon as Erin started getting up I saw someone further down the street waving to us.

“Hey! Funny seeing you here!” Andrei said. Andrea and my parents followed behind him.

“You’re already done with your walk?” I asked.

“Well we passed by this place at first and decided to come back to it. There were a few things down the road, but most of them were full restaurants,” he said.

“This is perfect! Do you guys mind waiting here while we go order?” I asked.

“Yeah! No problem,” Andrea said.

I walked in, seeing that this place was half the size of a supermarket and far too understaffed. I don’t know how the employees moved through all of the chaos, though, thankfully, most people coming in were leaving with their drinks right after. There was a clock on the wall, staring at me, shaped like a black, Scottish terrier. In some comical way, it resembled Trufa, Andrei and Andrea’s old dog.

I got back outside, the guy still spitting and wandering around the pole with the crosswalk sign flickering from the pedestrian to the orange hand.

“Let’s trade spots,” I said to Andrei.

They went in to grab their own stuff, coming back faster than we did. He ordered for Andrea, who was distant from the conversation and looking at her phone.

Andrei came back out. “¿Qué pasa mi amor?” he said to her.

“My mom just texted me Bertha’s results from her appointment. She has a tumor. Again,” she said shakily.

He stayed silent, putting the coffees and pastries down, and wrapping his arms around her. “If it’s not that, it’s her vision, or her stomach, or her legs. She’s had problems since we got her, but we thought we reached the end of it. What can we do?” he asked.

“My mom said we can try chemo again, but I don’t want her to suffer. The other options are putting her to sleep before we come back or after,” she said, crying.

“I don’t want her to be in any more pain. She doesn’t deserve it. It would be selfish to make her suffer and wait for us. Even if it’s only a few days,” he said.

“I didn’t think our last time seeing her would have been right before we left,” she said. They both started sobbing.

I hugged them, knowing that there was no amount of comfort we could give that would entirely help.

“You guys should keep walking around. We don’t want to ruin your fun,” Andrei said to Erin and me.

“You’re not. We want to be with you,” I said.

We stayed at the table as the air got colder and our breaths fogged up the windows. The silence wasn’t broken until Andrei and Andrea got up, wondering about where to go next. The crosswalks got busier. People switched sides to go explore new stores.

We kept going down the main road, looking for the car, unable to easily point it out because it was no longer our old orange one. We started driving down the main road; I crashed from caffeine and closed my eyes. I opened them back up and the house appeared. We were the only car in the pitch black driveway. The engine had just stopped rumbling.

I walked up the stairs, creaking the door open, revealing the messy kitchen, as if we owned the house. My mom got a call once we got settled back in.

“Alo? What’re you guys up to?” she asked. “Okay,” she said, quietly.

The rest of us took a break from building a puzzle that the others had been working on.

“This always happens,” she said, flinging her phone onto a countertop. There’s too many of us and then we split off into groups. It’s too complicated to enjoy everyone’s company. Why couldn’t they just tell us they wanted to visit a bar?” she asked.

“We probably aren’t missing out on much. What’s the difference really if you get drunk at home or out?” I asked.

“Agreed. It doesn’t matter that much to me,” Andrei said.

“Yeah, but they could have at least told us. I don’t think it takes that much effort to let people know what the plans are,” she said.

Andrei had gotten up to make another gin and tonic for himself and Andrea, then realized that he should probably make one for my mom too. “Cheers!” he said, as he handed it to her.

“Cheers. Here’s to spending time with the people I want to see the most,” she said.

“We have this entire house to ourselves. There’s no worrying that someone will accidentally swap drinks with you or that you can’t play games in the basement,” Andrei said.

“It’s so stupid. Why can’t we communicate more easily? I mean, is it really that much to ask!? I want to know where everyone’s going. Sorry, if that’s so selfish,” my mom said.

The rest of us agreed, quietly. I walked out to the backyard, thinking now would be the perfect time for the hot tub. No chance of someone else getting in there and making things slightly awkward. I grabbed Erin by the hand. “Do you want to go out and warm up? It’s pretty cold here.”

“It’d be great! Let’s get some air,” she said.

I slid the covering of the hot tub to the side. Every surface near us was frosty. Erin went in with no problem. I submerged my foot and was already crying out how hot it was, feeling like my skin was permanently softening. I sat until the water reached my shoulders, and tilted my head backwards. We looked at the stars together, talking about how we should go on more winter walks.

After we came out of the shower, we felt like new people. My mom, Andrei, and Andrea had drunk an unknown amount of gin. The puzzle had seven pieces left to be placed.

“Hello!” yelled someone as they opened the door, making way for the rest of the group to pass through.

“Let’s play some ping pong,” my mom said to us. She looked at my dad coming up the stairs as she went down them. “Have a nice night out?”

He scoffed, then headed towards the fridge.

My mom stopped in the basement living room. Lately, my parents had been sleeping on the couch. He came downstairs, taking off his jacket and sweater.

“Did you have a nice night?” he asked.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Firstly, how dare you scoff at me. You don’t have the decency to call me, at least text me! I wanted to have a nice night out somewhere. Why couldn’t you of all people say something?” she asked.

“I didn’t really think about it. I heard what the plan was and thought “nice.” You guys said you were tired from walking around earlier. We didn’t want to bother you to drive back,” he said.

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” she said.

“It was getting late. I didn’t know what to do, so I just followed the others,” he said.

“Oh and what? Getting a beer with the guys was more important than anything else?” she asked.

He was silent, knowing there was nothing else he could say.

She tried to stomp out but the rug silenced her noisy steps.

“Next year, we might as well rent our own place,” she said to us later, when she met us in the garage.

“Let’s just stay at your house then!” Andrei said.

“We’ll have the cat and enough things to do. And more money saved for dinners!” she said.

Erin and Andrea had been concentrating on a game of ping pong, occasionally agreeing with them. The ball fell on the floor and rolled behind the fridge. There was only one extra left, and they used it until that one joined another in the corner.

I woke up sneezing and congested as if spring allergies had already arrived. The window was still open from last night, allowing room for a cold enough breeze to come in throughout the night. I rolled over to the end of the bed, squeezing through an opening between the bottom and top bunks. I almost tripped over our backpacks as I began the new morning routine at the cabin:

wash up, say hello to anyone awake, go outside for some air, make English Breakfast tea, and start scrambling eggs.

I ran into my mom on the way out. “How’re you feeling?”

“Better. Last night was nothing like the fights we used to have. I bet you’d agree,” she said, rubbing her eyes.

“Yeah I don’t think they’ll ever be like that. Unless one of you does something truly insane,” I said.

She hugged me and went up the stairs for some Turkish-style coffee. I moved through the garage, nobody in sight. The sun blinded me as soon as I opened the basement door. I sat down on the bench next to the inactive hot tub.

“Andrei!”

I looked around, confused as to where Erin’s voice was coming from. Nobody was in the backyard except for me.

“Andrei! You goof!”

I turned, feeling the voice coming from somewhere behind me. Erin was waving from the bathroom window. She turned around and came outside.

“What’re we doing today?” she asked.

“Saratoga’s springs are famous, and I know most of the group wanted to visit them. I’m hoping we aren’t all there because of last night,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter if they are. Don’t let it ruin your time here. We need to enjoy what we can,” she said, sitting down next to me.

All of a sudden, Andrei, Andrea, and my parents were ready to leave, so we didn’t even have time to eat breakfast. Thankfully, Erin hates eggs.

We drove on a local highway to get to the state park. It was busier than expected, but as soon as we turned into the parking lot, the commotion died out. Only a few other cars were parked, and nobody was around. The air was colder and filled with the scent of pine needles. My dad quickly found a park map and planned out the route we should take to see each of the springs. He had brought five bottles for them. We walked up a short hill, finding the first spring, slowly pouring out of a rock. My dad filled his first bottle, and passed it around. My mom tried it and immediately spat it out.

“That’s disgusting. It already tastes like rotten eggs,” she said.

“Haha, that’s the sulfur. Be more open to new tastes,” he said.

“It’s not a new taste, it’s just gross,” she said.

Erin and I tried it, having a similar reaction to my mom. Andrei and Andrea were more open to the taste, saying that they’ve had worse.

We walked over to the area of the park that was filled with trees, even if they were sparse. There was ice in some spots, glinting from the sun. I tried smashing some of it with my boot, but only made my ankle feel twisted, so I gave up. We walked to a bridge covered in snow, aside from some boot prints. I followed the river that ran under it with my eyes, seeing if it ended somewhere in the distance. It was too far away to tell.

The second spring was sheltered by a gazebo. There was a small monument-like fountain. A cake of ice lounged in the sun while we approached it. Water came out through a worn pipe, sputtering every few minutes. The smell was already much stronger, coming from the pool the excess water fell into and up into our noses. My dad quickly put his second bottle under the stream, excited to try water populated with more minerals.

He took a swig. “Try some of this.” He passed me the bottle.

“No thanks. Even the whiff from the fountain was enough,” I said.

He insisted, but moved on after I declined again. My mom had no interest in trying it either.

Erin took a sip. “This one’s not that bad! It’s got a lot more flavor, but I kind of like it. Why don’t you try it?”

“Fine.” I took a gulp and felt my throat burning. “Actually, it tastes nicer than the first one but the carbonation is terrible.”

“Can we pour some of your bottle into one at home?” Andrei asked my dad.

“Yeah. I definitely won’t finish all of them, so you should have some too,” he said.

We continued walking, feeling lost, until we hit the midpoint of the main road that we drove in on. The third spring was across it, where a larger fountain in the open was surrounded by a few people. We didn’t know any of them, but as soon as we started crossing, my aunt and uncle drove by, waving to us.

The third spring splashed onto us when we got too close, leaving mineral stains on our pants and shoes. I grabbed a handful of water and put it up to my mouth, dropping it as soon as the smell crawled its way into my nose. I started sneezing, wishing I had some allergy medicine.

“What the fuck, man?” I said.

Erin patted me on the back as if I was choking on a piece of food. “You’ll be okay! It can’t be worse than a shot of that vodka from Albany.”

“Try some for yourself and see if you still believe that,” I said, coughing the rest out.

Erin tried it, and we both were left to recover from the taste. “I don’t even want to imagine the last two,” she said.

My dad filled his next bottle, like clockwork, pulling his sleeve up, extending his hand, and wiping the bottle after. He smiled after trying it. “This one’s my favorite.”

The fourth spring was halfway up a long hill, on a slight incline. My boots stabbed my heels and ankles as I kept going. A bump like a small hill stood in the distance. A pipe was placed in the middle of it, shooting out water like a geyser. We weren’t allowed to go directly to it, so there was another pipe redirecting some of the water to the heightened riverbank. There was a lot more ice along the wide path, seemingly easy to avoid, but the farther up we got the fewer empty spots to step in there were. When we got to the secondary pipe, all of us only smelled the water, while my dad gladly tried it.

His face puckered as if he took too long of a drag on a cigarette. “Hmm... Yeah this one is pretty intense. I don’t hate it but there’s no way I could even drink a quarter of this bottle. I hope the last one’s better.”

We passed four people who were coming back down the hill, trying to avoid the ice as much as we were. One of them smiled, as if he knew we weren’t ready for the last spring. There was a highway bridge in the distance, while the river continued on our right and a wooden cabin to our left. The fifth fountain was near the cabin though much lower on the side hill that extended up to the building. There was a smell like an invisible fog, entering our noses and mouths. I tried using my sleeve as a mask, but it slipped right through the fabric. My dad held the tip of his final bottle in his side pocket, like a cowboy ready to draw his gun. Luckily, this one was the smallest, so it wouldn’t hold much of the water. He rushed to the pipe, uncapping the bottle, and filled it almost to the top. He swirled it around, a water sommelier, and sniffed it to see what minerals could be inside. His eyes teared up but he still drank enough for a taste test.

He turned from the fountain and spat all of it out, trying to remove any trace of the water by lighting a cigarette.

“Ugh, I couldn’t even enjoy this one. I need something with extra hot sauce so I can burn the taste out of my mouth,” he said.

“Smoke closer to me,” my mom said, “I want to get this smell out of my nose. It’s almost rotten.”

“Try some,” he said, passing the bottle towards her.

“NO. Get that out of my face,” she said as she smacked the bottle onto the ground. It would’ve shattered but was only flimsy plastic.

My dad picked it up off the ground, emptying the rest. “Yeah, we can do without this one. I can’t say I care about remembering it.”

It was surprising that this was one of the very first times I saw my dad have a bad reaction to some kind of food or drink. The entire bottom level of our fridge back home was filled with jars of random items, mostly pickled vegetables and jams. Whenever something was old and getting stale, ready to be thrown out, he would tell us to save it because he would gladly have it. Yet water’s what did him in?

We turned around and descended the hill. I walked along, staring down so I could follow the river. I saw the fourth spring in the distance spewing out water confidently. A new group of people was passing us, and I wish I could have warned them in some way about what they would find. Still, it was worth the temporary pain to recognize that this place was beautiful, regardless of some water. Pine trees towered over us, forming a vague arch that led us to where we began. My aunt and uncle had just gotten to the third spring. My dad talked with my uncle, comparing their experiences with the tastes and smells of the water.

My aunt joined the rest of us. “How’s the visit been?” she asked.

I grumbled, getting some of the leftover sulfur out.

“I thought it was lovely,” Erin said. “I really want to come back in the summer. It’ll be hot and maybe then the water will taste better. It doesn’t help to drink something so cold when it’s already super cold outside.”

“I want to get my brother to try some of this stuff,” Andrea said. “He’d laugh at how strong the water is, but I think he’d like it.”

Andrei stayed silent, checking his work phone, making sure that nothing urgent was coming up. “We should find more springs to visit the next time we come to the States and compare them to these,” he said suddenly.

Eventually, we made our way to the parking lot where the amount of cars had doubled. We drove home and split our group. The adults got some rest while Erin and I went to a small town nearby and visited a tea shop. It was getting dark quickly, so we came back home. Everyone was surprisingly there, aside from my dad and uncle who were grocery shopping for our last dinner at the cabin.

Andrei came up to me, towering over me. “Do you want to play pool?”

“Yeah! That’d be great. Erin and I haven’t gotten much of a chance to. It’s always more fun playing two on two. Bring Andrea!” I said.

We surrounded the pool table, each of us holding a cue and a drink. A glass I filled with wine stood on a table behind me. I aimed my shot and pulled back, making sure to avoid smacking the glass’s stem.

“Close call! You need to be more careful,” Erin said.

“Yeah. Nice shot but you almost missed and broke it,” Andrea said.

“Don’t worry, I’m aware enough of my surroundings,” I said, straightening out my cue, and somehow flicking the glass right off its table.

CRACK!

“Goddamn it,” I said, immediately grabbing a spare roll of paper towels and wiping up the wine, which thankfully wasn’t red. I turned on my flashlight to make sure I was getting each little shard. I was always afraid that somehow I’d end up scratching my eye and making it bleed even after washing my hands thoroughly.

“It’s okay! Take a sip from mine,” Erin said, offering her gin and tonic.

“Here’s to breaking things we don’t care about because everything is temporary,” Andrea said.

“Cheers to that,” I said, raising Erin’s glass.

“Can you bring a speaker down here? Let’s make things more fun and add some music,” Andrea said after taking a long swig.

I ran up the stairs, avoiding the others, and searched in my bag.

“Here,” I said to Andrea, out of breath from speeding around the house.

“Perfect. Add a song if you guys want to,” she said, handing Erin her phone.

“Wish You Were Here” started playing, the guitar riff filling in some of the empty space.

Andrea held Andrei’s hand. In the other, she held her glass, ready to let it slip.

The Romanian Goodbye

Rain pours over our heads, stripping away leaves in the driveway beneath our feet. The porch light was on, flickering. I knock on the door, knowing that everyone is likely in the kitchen. I open it, holding it for my parents to shuffle through. I notice the bar was moved from its corner that was the same throughout my life. All of Vic's ceramics he made with me when we were young had been gathered onto the fireplace's mantle.

I head over to the long dining table in the next room, around the staircase. It's already covered with bowls of mashed beans with onions, pink fish roe, a board prepped with seemingly each type of cold cut there is, and of course, the bread baskets. Surprisingly, nobody's smoking in the kitchen, and there's a calming scent in the air. Something cooks in the oven. A couple more plates with snacks to accompany our drinks sit on the high table. I open the fridge and look for something to mix with my empty cup of ice. Any white wine will do. I look around and find Cairo outside, beyond the window, blocked off by his own cat door. I open the door for him and step outside for a second, to grab some air, but I'm bombarded by smoke and laughter. Ana steps out from the end of the driveway, waving to me.

"Hey. Drew's on his way, he's just grabbing a few more things from the car," she says, "How've you been lately?"

"I'm doing okay. It's kind of dead tonight. I'm not sure what to expect, but I'm glad you guys are here," I say.

I take a new, unopened bottle of wine from her hands and load it into the fridge, then take the other one out and pour two more glasses of wine for them. We stand around the dining table, occasionally refilling our plates with slices of *salam de Sibiu* or bread to soak up the leftover sauces. Ana points to the staircase and we follow her up. The emptiness in Vic's room is almost a

relief. There no longer is a worry about *who* will sleep there, because we know he can't anymore. The television is gone as well, but the essentials are left over.

"I can't believe he kept that ugly thing," Ana laughs, pointing out the empty bottle of Hennessy that had been sitting there for at least four years.

"Look at all of his Legos!" I say, caught in a brief moment of happiness.

"The Ferrari poster was always sick," Drew adds.

A few chairs are scattered around the room, the tall office one, the colorful and wooden one, and a regular one from downstairs. I open the door to the balcony and look out into the woods, unable to see much, but enough to make out the playground in the distance. The trampoline next to it still stands, but without its net. The yellow slide has faded into a more mustard shade. I remember standing on top of the playground, thinking I was a pirate looking out into the distance for land and treasure. Ana lights up a cigarette and starts telling us about the times we used to run outside and play hide and seek. After so many times inside, we all knew the best hiding spots and it wasn't as fun as it used to be.

"Remember when you somehow fit behind the couch Andrei?" she asks me.

"Of course! That's probably the dustiest part of the house. Didn't you hide in the closet in Vic's room? I remember when the seeker was in one of the rooms and you slipped into the other" I say, grinning.

"Hmm... That might have been his sister actually, but I definitely remember hiding in the bathroom behind the shower curtain. Nobody thought to look there for the longest time. You guys were easy to fool," she says, smiling.

The rest of the party comes along as we look to the patio from above. I keep my distance from the railing, unable to trust it even though it must be secure.

“Food’s ready! Come get some!” my uncle says, noticing us up on the balcony.

By the time we get downstairs, most of Vic’s friends are now here, hanging out with one another, separate from the adults. It’s practically tradition for us to be split into the two groups, occasionally breaking the imaginary wall when stopping in the kitchen for a drink, more ice, or food. The line around the pots and the cutting board hasn’t thinned out, so we wait a little longer. Ana sees Sarah in the distance and laughs bitterly.

“She’s got some fucking nerve being here. How can you show up and punch someone when everyone is still grieving a year later?” she says to Drew and me.

“Man, I wish I was there for that,” he says.

“Trust me you’re a lot better off,” I say to him.

I go around the house, looking at who else has come in, and run into Chris. He gives me a big hug as I ask him if he’s gotten any new tattoos.

“I’m still looking around for other artists, but I have a couple of pieces in mind that I can’t wait to get put on me. There’s this guy I know who makes these nightmarish characters, with sick backgrounds, like in anime when they fight” he says.

“I’ve got a few in mind, but I can’t decide where they should go,” I said, pulling up three, blurry screenshots on my phone.

“These are sick, dude. Go with whatever your gut tells you, but if you really aren’t sure, don’t ask your artist where to place it because they get pissed off about things like that,” he said.

There’s a feeling of weight in the living room, condensing itself around everyone’s heads as we finish eating. Someone asks if anyone wants to smoke and half of the group runs upstairs. I go out with Ana and Drew to the front porch:

“I miss him so fucking much,” she says.

“I know,” Drew and I say in sync.

She starts laughing as I lean against one of the pillars, avoiding the weakened railing that almost broke during the day of the wake.

“How has it been two years already? Are we just forgetting him?” I ask.

“I don’t think that’s the case. Think about it. You’ve got a polaroid in the back of your phone case, and I see him every time I open up my phone,” she says.

“Even if you’re not actively thinking about him, I think he’s always in your heart and mind,” Drew offers.

I start laughing and crying because it must be true: “I feel him around me, especially in the weirdest moments. One time we were here in the living room and the lamp flickered. Call me crazy, but I think it was him.” I pause and breathe heavily from crying. “Do you guys wanna go upstairs and join the others?” I ask.

We talk a little more and run up the stairs. They’ve already begun smoking and playing the worst game of truth or dare. The only spots left for us are to stand against the wall and the balcony door. The others must have been on the same page, because they’re also reminiscing about Vic, recalling moments from highschool.

“I remember taking physics with this guy and he would speed through all the tests, acting like it was the easiest shit ever. I’d ask him after each one how he did it, and all he ever did was shrug. Man was humble,” Drew says.

“I was at lunch with him most days, and one time he tried snorting chocolate milk through a straw. All of the lunch came right back up. Ugh. It’s still gross to think about. But he liked making people laugh,” X says.

“You know at the end of the day, we just gotta remember that we were really lucky to experience our time with Vic. That gives me a little more peace,” Chris says.

Ana starts crying and begins smoking a cigarette, looking up to the stars with her blurry eyes. “Yeah I guess so.”

Chris leaves after the rest have filtered through the door. It’s just Ana and me.

“What if I just wanna be fucking sad? This “be present” bullshit isn’t helping the fact that it feels like part of me is permanently gone,” she says to me.

I stay in silence, nodding. “You know, originally he told me, dead serious, that he wished I was dead instead of Vic.”

“Seriously? I’m sorry,” she says.

“It’s whatever. I’ve been there unfortunately. It won’t change a thing,” I said, looking at the trees. I step towards the balcony railing. The night sky stares down on me.

“Come on, let’s go. I’m getting cold,” Ana says.

I go back into the kitchen for more food and another glass of wine, but there’s nothing left in the pots and bottles.

Half of the adults have already gathered on the couches surrounding the television, waiting for the silly interviews in Times Square to end. The pristine cinema chair stays empty, unable to lure anyone to it. Footsteps begin banging down the stairs, the rest of the gang looking for dessert. Some sift through napkins, searching for cigarettes or a dying vape. The strings of conversations that I hear sound like people are getting interviewed. Some talk about literature, others about art, design, or what will come tomorrow. I slide next to a dresser by the door, and begin watching the mind numbing crowd in New York City. They cheer like everything’s okay and pain is nonexistent. Confetti showers them in a stream of silver and gold. Ana and the others

show up in a huddle on the other side of the room, squeezing past some adults. My uncle and dad start passing out thin glasses for champagne, some colorful though mostly clear and dull.

TEN! NINE! EIGHT! SEVEN! SIX! FIVE! FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE! HAPPY
NEW YEAR!

Glasses clink together and leave a ringing echoing in my ears. Drops of champagne fly onto the floor and people's clothes. The ball shines through its rainbow colors, having reached its destination. The commotion on the streets is drowned out by everyone congratulating each other on making it into the next year. I go to sit in one of the chairs in the room near the stairs, while couples begin blasting music and dancing in front of me. Ana comes up to me and hands me a piece of bread.

"I know it's your favorite. The cheap but good stuff from Price Chopper right?" she asks kindly.

"Yeah. It was Vic's favorite too. It soaks up leftover sauces on a plate well," I say, after eating half of it slowly.

"Papapapapapapapapapa," my uncle says as he's hugging and kissing everyone on the cheek as they start leaving. He gives me a firm handshake and then a hug, telling me to take care of myself. He goes out for a cigarette with my dad.

By now, the exhaustion has hit; the countdown into the new year is past us, and all we can do is sleep. Most of the adults are still around, and I go searching for my dad. In the living room, he's walking around looking for his glasses as I ask him if we can leave.

"Yeah, let me just make a coffee first," he says.

Here we go again. First it's the coffee, then a quick cigarette to pair with it, then primary goodbyes, then another *final* cigarette, then secondary goodbyes, the occasional shot of țuică, then putting on the coats and bags, then cheek kisses, then hugs or handshakes, and finally the last goodbyes. This is the Romanian goodbye that happens at each family gathering, regardless of how many people are there or what time of the night it is. It must be encoded into our DNA. There's always a spare pack of cigarettes somewhere in the kitchen, or on the back porch table, so my dad goes out and enjoys the last few moments of the night as it winds down.

I see him, still outside, looking into the distance.

"What're you doing?" I ask him as I close the door.

"Nothing. I was thinking about how I wanted to quit smoking as my resolution. But I've already broken it," he says.

"So what? That doesn't mean you can't still try," I say. "Let's go."

"Yeah, soon."

My mom talks to my aunt, both staring at art on the walls. My uncle slides past me, equipped with a vape and a lighter in the same hand. I don't bother going out again.

My dad smokes three more cigarettes for all I know. I hear the coffee machine rumbling against the butcher block countertop. Each dirty glass is unemptied and the plates from dinner and dessert are greasy. I wave to my dad through the window and he gently waves back.

I've been sitting on the couch for thirty minutes. I go around the house, shaking hands and exchanging hugs with the remaining people. My mom's asleep on one of the new couches, drained from dancing earlier. I don't remember how long it's been since Ana and Drew left. It must have been a while because he has to go into work at seven in the morning to prepare

brunch. He'll have to deal with those assholes who get wasted and then think "let's go day drinking bottomless mimosas because last night wasn't enough."

I walk out onto the front porch. Cairo meows at me, letting me pet him. I lie down on a bench in the garden, waiting to get woken up and bombarded with questions about where I went.