
Senior Projects Spring 2022

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2022

The Smell of Small Towns

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Recommended Citation

Cava, Isa Rae, "The Smell of Small Towns" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 117.
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A photograph of a street intersection at dusk. The sky is a mix of light blue and soft pink, indicating sunset. In the foreground, there's a crosswalk with white stripes on a dark asphalt road. To the left, a street sign on a tall pole is visible. In the background, there are trees, a white house, and a few parked cars. The overall mood is calm and quiet.

The Smell of Small Towns

Isa Rae Cava

The Smell of Small Towns

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

By Isa Rae Cava

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2022

This is dedicated to my family and friends.

I love you all, and I wouldn't be here without you.

I will be forever grateful to have the support that you've given me,
and I hope that you never forget that.

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A Nightmare Bathed in Oak and Granite

There are no more pictures of me on the walls anymore, and all of the old height markings on the door jamb in the kitchen have been scraped away, a visible indent left in their wake.

How the fuck is that even done? What tools does something like that require? How do you ask the hardware store guy how to do that? It doesn't really matter, I know it doesn't. At this point it's like my body is moving of its own volition, taking me down the second floor hallway. The creaks and groans of the wooden floorboards underneath the pinkish-beige carpet are uncomfortably familiar, and so's the bible verse framed at the top of the staircase, "By wisdom a house is built and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with precious and pleasant riches." Proverbs 24:3-4". I wonder if I can still recite it by heart.

I know I shouldn't be wearing my shoes up here, but I didn't stay by the front door long enough to take them off. As I approached and saw the house through my car window, all the time I had spent preparing for the last week made no difference. When Sophie opened the door everyone was looking at me. Understandably, of course, I was staring right back. It's one of those split level houses, so, being in the entryway everyone else was looking down at me, literally. After a moment of silence, I pushed past them, walked through the kitchen and walked up the stairs two steps at a time.

Now I'm face to face with my old bedroom door. I push it open, and lean against the doorway.

Boxes labeled "Clint's" now seem to fill the space, I can't have one fucking thing to myself, and my old doodles have been furiously scrubbed off the wall, only streaks of sharpie left behind. I wonder which one of them did that, and how long they waited until after I left to do so. What is the customary amount of time to wait to erase all evidence that your daughter ever existed?

I flip the switch and the light flickers on. I can now see the spider webs in the corners and the paint chips peeling off, a small pile on the floor of the right side of the room. I walk over and bend down to collect the chips and fish them out of the carpet fibers, purposefully keeping my back to the boxes on the other side of the room. I feel nauseous and dizzy, but I just keep picking up paint chips until Sophie calls up the stairs and says we're heading to the funeral home.

Most places on the north east side of the country look the same in the middle of November; the trees mostly bare and the grass a very dull green. As I'm driving, I spot the pizza place and see the first difference since I'd last been here. They must've changed ownership, it

used to say “LOUIS’ PIZZA” in big, red, blocky lettering, and has been replaced with “Pizza Bella” in somewhat legible script. I think that just means beautiful pizza, but Italian wasn’t an elective in my high school, so I can’t be sure. A few doors down from that, the strip mall is bookended by the ever present and popular, “HOBBY LOBBY”. I wonder if I’m still banned.

I realize with a smile that my parents never found out about that. Then I stop smiling. Some dandelions can still be seen on their last legs in front of the post office. Last time I was here I wasn’t able to drive yet, and walking and biking everywhere wasn’t really an issue. I can’t tell if these potholes got worse or if I’m just noticing it because I’m behind the wheel. Oh shit, the Blockbuster video. Would anything I rent right now be appropriate? Is ‘Weekend at Bernie’s’ out of the question? Is buying some candy right by the register out, too?

I pass my old high school, and it seems they’ve actually done some renovations since I’ve left. When I was younger I always kinda wanted to be one of those people that graduated and then came back in years after to say hi to their old teachers and seem cool to the freshmen. I ended up packing my bags and leaving town three days after I graduated. God knows where my previous classmates think I went. I’d have to guess they probably thought I went and got “fixed” and that now I’m in some neighboring rural town, married to a man, and living a life not too dissimilar to theirs. What a fucking joke.

My therapist says I shouldn’t but I still think I should be over this by now. Or, rather, I think everything would be easier if I was. Why should I care what those other teenagers thought, Or, hell, what they think now? Fuck them,. Their loss. I take a deep breath and unclench the steering wheel. I make a note to talk to her about it at our appointment on tuesday. I think back and remember, for the eleventh time that day, the gentle pressure of Amy’s reassuring hand on my shoulder.

Almost all of the signs here are the same, as all of the chains and small businesses that would want to move here already have, but the lettering has faded just a bit more. On more coastal towns they'd have the excuse to say that the abrasive nature of salt air had worn away the paint and the first layers of wood, but rural Pennsylvania has no such excuse, it was just lack of maintenance.

When we pull up to the funeral home, I realize it looks just as drab as I'd imagined. The dark red and black brick facade and the tall, steep shingle roof make it all seem much more medieval than I think they were probably going for. I park, lock my car, and stare at it for a second. If I could find it in myself to leave early, this is certainly my last chance. No going back after I step through the heavy, intimidating wooden front double doors. I look down and see a worm struggling on the wet sidewalk. I kneel down to pick it up and throw it back in the grass, and when I look back up I see Sophie at the front door. Our eyes meet, and I realize it's the first time we've really looked at each other in over nine years.

I stand up, reflexively wipe my hands off on my dress, and walk inside.

These are the ugliest chairs I've ever seen. It seems like a hard thing to mess up, but the beige and blue argyle seem to suck the life out of this place. Granted, I probably shouldn't be thinking this during Clint's funeral, but I have a feeling he wouldn't have liked them either. I bet he didn't expect our reunion after nine years as father and daughter would look like this, but to be fair I didn't expect to see him ever again. He's just thirty feet away, but they chose to have an open casket, so—

“You gonna go see him? Say your goodbyes?”

I look up; Sophie looks older, that was my first thought when I walked into the old house for the reception and saw her greeting guests. I was late. It took a while to let go of the steering wheel and go inside. She had me when she was young, but the years are wearing on her. This doesn't even seem like a question worth answering, but she's still looking at me.

"I don't...why is it open casket? Why'd you guys decide that?"

She sits down next to me, "He wanted it."

I look back to the wall with a beige flower print wallpaper on it and the coffin in front of it. "Why would he choose that?"

"I don't—"

"He thought putting elbows on the table was too inappropriate—"

"Please—"

"—but choosing to make it so that everyone who comes to your funeral has to—"

"Maxine, please."

"I still prefer Max," I look again, she's closer now, trying to hold my hand. Ugh, she looks so much like me. "If that matters."

"Of course it matters. I..." She sighs. "Max, sorry. Some people like seeing the person they're saying goodbye to. And he looks the same so why don't you—"

"He does not look the same. I remember grandma's funeral, she didn't look like herself, she looked like some...something imitating her, with all the parts and stuff but not her. I know he doesn't look right." I can see her in my peripheral vision, she's furrowing her brow. I used to hate it when she did that, but now...well now she looks even more like me. "I'm sorry for your loss. I realized I didn't say that when I came into the reception or here and I'm sorry."

"I forgive you."

There's quiet after that. Is she waiting? She's looking at me again. Does she want me to say it back? I'm not gonna. "Besides, he'd look a bit different since the last time I saw him no matter what. I'd suspect he looks a bit older. A decade does that."

"Nine years, not a decade." She's still looking at me. "I'm sorry for your loss, too."

He lost me first. I can't stop myself from thinking about it. Don't cry. Don't cry. Do not do it. "Thanks. I think I'm gonna—" I wave my hand vaguely gesturing to the room. "—talk to the "guests"."

I'm getting up and trying to shuffle past her and she asks; "So you'll say goodbye?"

"I can say goodbye from here, okay?" I hear her sigh as I turn away.

I do walk a bit closer to that side of the room. I'm surrounded by family members I haven't seen in so long. I wonder what they were told about what happened. If I seem like the villain of the story. I adjust the edge of my dress and try to figure out which family member I can deal with right now. There are only a few to choose from. Sophie's family is mostly dead. Clint only had one sister, who had one husband, and had one daughter. I have no idea who this other man is, or who the two kids swinging their feet sitting in the third row are.

I catch my cousin Maggie eyeing me, and she approaches me before I can make up my mind.

"Maxine?"

I swallow my objections, it's not worth the trouble. "Hey, Maggie."

She smiles for a moment before her face settles into something more somber. "I'm so sorry for your loss." She puts a hand on my shoulder. "I can't even begin to understand what you're going through." Neither can I.

“Thanks,” I shrug off her hand, “I’m sorry for your loss as well.” As well? God I never know how to talk about these things. She seems a bit confused. “I mean, you lost your uncle so I’m sure that’s sad.”

“Oh, right well, I mean he's your dad, though.”

I guess so. “I don’t see how that, I mean, you were the one around when he was sick. How...” I’m gonna regret asking this, “How was he? Then, I mean.”

Her face flickers through dozens of emotions, but I can’t pin any of them down. “Oh you know, same guy just paler, I suppose.”

I regret asking that. She’s trying to make me feel better for not being there. I wonder what she thinks about that. I don’t know if I would’ve visited had I known if he was sick so it doesn’t really matter what she thinks. I know it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t ma—

“Hey, do you remember when I would come over for sleepovers? We’d set up all the pillows on the floor, talk for hours?” She huffs out a small laugh. “And we would turn up the music on your cassette deck and just sing as loud as we could?”

I remember her singing as loud as she could. “Yeah.”

“As he would come up and bang on your door and yell at us to stop?”

I remember how scared I was to sing along, and how he’d yell at me after she left, scream at me. “Yeah,” she didn’t know how much he hated that I ‘let’ her do that. I muster a smile. “I remember.”

She sighs, “He was a funny guy, ya know? Like, I dunno I guess I sort of expected a guy his age would lose his sense of humor.” Her face pinches. “Wow, that sounded really stupid when I said it, I just meant like, he was always had something snippy to say, something that was just walking the line, ya know?”

I know he used to tell jokes that weren't jokes, the offensive things he'd say that pass off as jokes because he laughed after every one. I remember the "jokes" he'd make about her when she wasn't around. The ones he'd make about me. I nod.

She looks at me, expectantly. Oh god, I'm supposed to say something now, aren't I? I try to look like I'm building up to something as I glance past her shoulder. Standing, now, I can see him. A bit of his face peeking out of the velvet lining. His blue eyes, hidden behind glued shut eyelids, face the ceiling. He looks dead. I reach as far back as I can in the depths of my memory to finally respond.

"My dad and I, I guess we were both the type to check the temperature of the pot on the stove by touching it." I bring up my right hand, many tiny faded scars adorning the dry skin. "Neither of us ever really learned from it." I stare at the scars now. "Maybe when I was younger, things were less complicated, ya know?" She nods. "Sometimes we were so similar that we could finish thoughts that the other hadn't said out loud. As I got older though, we'd just repel each other, like magnets that are the same, what's it called? Polarity?" I probably shouldn't have said that, but the words are spilling out of me. "He was too loud for me, I was too loud for him. Seemed almost like he sensed something in me that made him—" I stop.

Her eyes are wide, mouth slightly open. It was a mistake to come here. I wanted closure, but I look at Maggie's face now and I see the girl I knew in high school.

"Sorry I—it's just been a long time since I've been around you um, family." I clear my throat, trying to make it seem like the outburst was spur of the moment, as if I haven't been wanting to say that for years. "It's getting to me, ya know?"

She lets out a breath that's half sigh, half awkward laugh. Good, she'll let it go. "It has been a while, hasn't it?" She shuffles her feet. "How old are you now?"

She always liked to remind me. “Twenty-seven, a year older than you. I know you liked to bother me but it still just makes you seem like you can’t do simple math.”

“Yeah, but it’s worth it.”

“Is it really, though?”

“Heh, yes!” She seems less sure, though. “...So what have you been up to?”

“Working at an arts & crafts supply store in Philadelphia. Really living it up. You?”

“That sounds so cute!” It’s really not. “Well I got Denny—”

“Like the restaurant?”

“No, what? Like, my husband, Dennis.” Oh my god I’m an idiot. She points to the man I noticed earlier. He’s closer to Clint, and lost in conversation with Maggie’s mother, Linda.

“Oh.”

“Did you really think I would refer to the restaurant chain like that?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know you were married.”

“You didn’t?” She points to the other side of the room where the two children I noticed earlier seem to be trading prayer cards. “I have two kids too.”

“Oh. I had no idea. How old are they?”

“Four and six.”

“I was wondering who thought this would be a fun place for kids to hang.”

“Yeah, I mean, what’s more fun than a funeral, right?”

“Hm, so, two kids huh?”

“Yeah, well, we always talked about becoming moms.”

She always talked about becoming a mom. “Yeah, I guess. Is he uhh, nice?” I point to Dennis.

“Heh, yeah, he’s nice. He’s good.” She looks happy, actually happy. I’m glad. “He just took me to see that new movie, um, what is it, ‘Love Actually’? He didn’t even care that it was a chick flick”

‘Chick flick’? Really? Ugh. “He sounds great!”

“So what about you?” Oh no. “Any nice boyfriends in your life?”

Why is she doing this? “Ummm.” Why does she have to hear me say it? “Well, I don’t,” just say it. “You know I’m not gonna have a boyfriend.” Wait, shit, I didn’t mean to say it like that.

“Oh? So, you’re really, um—”

“Gay, yeah.”

“So, in high school, when Lily Ostovo said—”

“Ostrovov.”

“—that you kissed her during the formal—”

“Oh my god, just call it a dance, this isn’t the 50s.”

“—she wasn’t lying?”

“No, she wasn’t.”

“Wow, aiming high—”

“Okay, I maintain that I thought she liked me too.”

“She was the head cheerleader.”

“Yeah she was also my friend, my best friend. And there was literally already a movie about a cheerleading lesbian like, three years ago, so.”

“Okay, still.”

“Fine. I was wrong, and I looked stupid.” I can’t stop myself from looking over her shoulder, to Clint. “She was still a bitch for telling everyone.”

She’s quiet now. She must remember it. The names, the following, the isolation. I remember how the last time she talked to me face to face was before the dance. I remember how much she didn’t want to be seen with her cousin. I remember...

“Maggie, I know you’re the one that brought it up with your mom, okay, no need to fess up to it or anything.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you knew—”

“Well, when my parents brought it up to me I kinda had to ask who told them, right? I figured aunt Linda wasn’t in the right circles to hear high school rumors.”

“Listen, I never meant...I mean, I did, I, fuck.”

She can’t even say sorry.

“I thought your parents knew.”

Liar.

“I didn’t know what to do.”

I believe that.

“I was scared.”

I have to ask. “Of me?”

“No, no I wasn’t. I shouldn’t have done that.”

No, she shouldn’t have. “I probably shouldn’t have tried to kiss the head cheerleader.”
Why am I saying this? “We all make mistakes.” I should be demanding an apology.

She smiles. She shouldn’t be smiling. “Thanks for saying that.”

I shouldn't have. "Yeah, well." Say something, ask for an apology, anything! "Ya know what song played on the radio during the drive?"

"What song?"

"'Tears in Heaven'."

"Oh, that song always used to make me cry."

"Yeah, that's why I brought it up. You always sang and cried at the same time, it was kinda gross."

"Did you cry hearing it?"

When I heard it I gripped the steering wheel hard enough for my knuckles to turn white. I couldn't bear to sing even if I wanted to. I could barely hear Eric Clapton's voice over Clint's, loud and demanding as it rang in my head. "No, he's still not really my style."

"Hm, well, you've always been the more stoic one."

In front of her I was. "Yeah."

"Anyway, I think I gotta, uh..." She motions toward her husband, who's even closer to Clint now. She turns to leave.

Clint's here. Clint's dead. Say something. Stop her. Make her stop leaving. She's moving further away. She's so close to Clint. We're going to the cemetery soon, and I never want to see her again. Say it. Stop her. Stop her. Stop her. Please. "Wait."

She turns. Her big eyes bore into mine, wide and innocent.

She's the seventeen-year old girl I knew who sang in my room.

She's the twenty-six year old mother of two who helped to make what could've been a clean break a jagged edge, brittle and sharp.

"Are you sorry?"

She turns back to me. “What?”

“Are you really sorry?”

“I—” She says. Her voice wobbles. “I really am.”

I shouldn’t push this, but I feel like I’m eighteen again. “You’re “really” what?”

Her mouth’s a hard line. “I’m really sorry, Maxine.”

“Max.”

She doesn’t say anything to that. She just turns back towards Dennis, and when she’s next to him he puts his arm around her and gives her shoulder a comforting squeeze. He does seem like a nice guy. Good for her.

I almost shit myself when I feel a tug on the back of my dress. A little voice, “Miss?” I turn around. It’s Maggie’s kids. I don’t even know their names. The older one (or, at least, the taller one) is wearing a black, faux velvet dress, standing almost protectively in front of the other, who’s wearing a little suit, grey with a black tie. “Uh, hi.”

“Why were you talking to our mom?” Says the one in the dress.

“Oh.” Right. To them, I’m a complete stranger who showed up to their granduncle’s funeral. I look at Maggie, but her back’s to me. “Um, I’m your mom’s cousin.” They stare at me, wide eyes quizzical. “Do you kids know what a cousin is?”

“Yes!” They both reply defensively.

“Oh, right, of course.”

The taller one stares for a few more seconds before saying “Mom said she had a cousin.”

“Um, yeah, well...here I am.” I suck at talking to kids.

The smaller one pipes up, “We’re sorry for your loss.” He says it in a stilted, but practiced kinda way. Like he was reading off a script. Could he even read?

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” I say, equally stilted and practiced. “You probably know my name, what are your guys’ names?” I bend my knees a little to get closer to their level.

The shorter one speaks again. “My name’s Michael.” he points to the girl still protectively positioned in front of him. “She’s Hannah.”

“Well, it’s nice to finally meet you guys.” Why’d I say ‘finally’? “You seem...polite.” Really? “I’m also sorry for your loss.”

They seemed surprised at this. I’m not positive, but it seems like no one’s said this to them yet. It’s a small funeral, mostly close family, maybe none of them thought to say it to them.

I hate to even think it, but part of me hopes they weren’t that close to Clint. For their sake. Or maybe he was the best granduncle one could ask for. I’ll never truly know.

After an awkward silence, Hannah mumbles “Thanks” And pulls Michael with her to reunite with their Mom. Maggie.

I turn toward Clint, at the far end of the room. I walk towards him until I’m a few feet away. I can fully see his face now. He’s older. I think back to what I was saying to Maggie about him. I didn’t let myself finish the thought at the time, but at some point in my life it seemed like he knew something was wrong with me. Like he could smell it on me.. Like he knew he would never get past any transgressions I had yet to commit.

One day, when I was twelve, an argument about something small spiraled out of control, and he called me “evil.” I can’t even remember why he said that. That argument was long before I accepted the feelings I had for my sixth grade math teacher, and even further removed from when I had a name for it. It was far from what you’d call our worst argument, and I’d like to say I didn’t think much of the comment at the time, but that’d be a lie. I heard his voice saying that to me a thousand times before I fell asleep every night for years.

I didn't remember the origin of that recurring thought until a therapy session a few months ago. And now he's here. Or, rather, not here. I'm the one who's here, when he's not.

I step closer to Clint, kneel down on the stuffed velvet of the kneeler, and put my palms together, closing my eyes. Nobody needs to know that at this moment, I am thanking god. If that makes me the evil thing he saw so many years ago, then so be it.

No weather could really make a burial nice, but the oppressive clouds certainly aren't making it any better. They're like a blanket over us, despite it just having rained this morning. The wind's picked up, and the last few leaves left in town tumble across the frostbitten grass. The gravestone is more his style than the chairs, all sharp angles and commanding attention. The epitaph mentions being a loving husband, no mention of being a father. Even in death, he's disowned me, it's literally written in stone. Figures. The priest's words slip in one ear out the other, I'm losing myself thinking about how long it took for the engraver to carve out the name.

I still have his last name.

I am once again reminded that he was my age when he had me.

A year younger when he got married.

He and Sophie probably thought I'd be married by now. Then they voted for people who would make sure I couldn't. Whoops.

Sophie's next to me. Her hand finds mine. She's wearing the mittens she knitted when I was still home.

Home.

Why'd I call it that?

She squeezes my hand a bit tighter and I realize they're lowering him into the plot. I hear her crying. I don't want to look. I wonder if I should be crying. I wonder if she thinks I should be. He's my dad. He's dead.

I'll never have to worry about hearing his voice again.

I feel myself breathe easier than I have in over a decade.

I look around; Linda's face has crumbled and the children are huddled together in between Maggie and Dennis, their faces red from the cold. Maggie's father is his usual quiet self, dutifully holding his wife close to him. He looks up from the plot to me, and gives me a manly nod of...sympathy? I don't know.

At least Maggie got to have a different last name. Or maybe now she even has her husband's name, even more far removed. The kids won't have an uncle on their mom's side. Just an aunt.

An aunt who, now that I look, is covering her mouth and nose with a tissue clenched in the hand not holding mine. She's breathing in heavily and coughing when she breathes out, eyes squinting and nose running. I don't like thinking about how Sophie and I knew a different man. She looks at this gravestone and sees something completely different than what I see. Which makes looking at her right now like looking directly at the sun. I was wrong earlier. She still looks so young.

Maggie hugs me before I can say anything. Her grip is strong and unyielding. I try to—

“Nope, no way of gettin' out of this one. Haven't seen you, this is long overdue.”

I give in and wrap my arms around her back. She's taller than me now.

She pulls away. “You have to call me one of these days.” No I don’t. “Your mom has my number.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll think about it.”

“I want to see you again, soon.”

“Okay.” She’s looking at me. She wants me to say it, too, but I don’t want to lie.

“Right, well, I better get going,” she points over my shoulder. “I already said bye to her, but tell your mom again, that I am so sorry for her loss.”

I turn around; she’s sitting on the curb, her back to me. Ew, her jacket’s gonna get all wet like that. “Yeah, I’ll go talk to her. I got a favor to ask of you though.”

“Hm?”

“Your kids...they seem sweet.”

She smiles, a big, blinding smile, all teeth. “Thanks, I think so, too.” She huffs out a small laugh. “That’s not a favor though.”

“If one of your kids ends up gay or whatever, can you just...Be nice? Please?”

Her face becomes blank, not surprised, and she stares at me for a moment before nodding. “And you, just, take care of yourself, okay?”

And here she is, at the end of our reunion, genuinely surprising me for the first time all day. She doesn’t wait for me to respond before turning and walking away. I turn to Sophie.

As I walk up I can hear Maggie call out, “Dennis! Start the car, already, the kids are freezing!”

I plop down next to her. Ugh, it’s so cold and damp. “Your jacket’s on the concrete and grass, it’s gonna get all wet.”

“Is that really the first thing you’re saying to me after that?”

“...Also, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“You already said that.”

“Well, what do you want me to say?”

“How about you tell me why you agreed to come?”

“Sophie, why do we have to—”

“See, you call me by my first name, since when was that a thing?”

“Since I left!” She looks at me, and god, her makeup is all messed up. “I came because you asked me to.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s been so long since you tried to talk to me. I don’t even think you’ve tried to see me in real life since I left. It didn’t really feel like I had a choice.”

“You felt like you had to come?”

“A little. And I didn’t have that many plans to cancel, so.”

“You had plans for this weekend?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I have a friend who just saw the movie version of “The Cat in the Hat” and really wanted to see it a second time in the theater with friends and “discuss it”, so, yeah. I’m kind of a big deal.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“Well, I guess he also wanted to a reason to hang out with his friends—”

“No, I meant is that the only reason you came?”

No, no it’s not. I’ll start with the first reason. “Oh, uh, there was a part of me that had a hard time believing it, like, that he was dead.”

“You thought I lied?” She sounds so broken up about it.

“No, no no that’s not what I meant. It’s been so long, and I’ve always just known he was around, somewhere. And now he’s not.”

“...Yeah. He isn’t.”

“So it was difficult to imagine. I didn’t think you lied, I think I thought I just needed to see it for myself.”

“Did it help?” I think about the day. Having to see the old living room, the same as I remember save for the photos on the wall that were carefully rearranged with some choice omissions. Having to see the funeral home, the same funeral home where my grandmother’s pale and lifeless face once rested. Having to see the family, seeing the looks they gave me that I couldn’t parse out.

“Yes.”

She sighs. “That’s good.”

I guess so. “Now for the real question: why did you invite me?”

“I mean, it’s a big deal.”

“No no, I mean why now? I don’t know if you noticed, but there are a lot of opportunities to call someone in a nine year time span. You didn’t even tell me when he was sick.”

“Honey—”

“Don’t.”

“Max, listen, your father, he...”

“What, did he prevent you from calling me?”

“Well, no, he just...wasn’t really into the idea.”

“And all those times I called you? Did your phone just happen to hang up before it let me leave a message?”

“Your father i—was a stubborn man.”

“I’m stubborn! I’m a stubborn person, I learned that from him, but I’m not an asshole about it!”

“Don’t talk about him like that.”

“Really?”

“You were the one that left, you know that.”

“What, do ya think I left home for fun?”

She’s getting angry. “Listen, I know we didn’t handle you being a...lesbian that well-”

“Understatement.”

“But we could’ve talked it out!”

“Oh really? Okay, first of all you know that wasn’t the only reason I left, right?”

“What?”

“I mean, I don’t know what the years have done to your memory of the situation but we weren’t a big happy family before that. Me and dad were always at each other’s throats, and you stood by him every time. It wasn’t like everything would’ve been fine even if you didn’t find out I was gay.”

“Well, we don’t know how it would’ve turned out—”

“I had a plan for it, Sophie. I was going to go to college and try to move on. Maybe call you every once in a while, but definitely not him.”

“Max—”

“Maggie sorta ruined that plan though.”

“I had no idea.”

“Yeah, of course, ‘cause I didn’t tell you. And I wasn’t just going to tell you that the man you loved was my worst nightmare.”

“I still think we could have talked it through, instead of just giving up.”

“Do you not remember the long conversations before I left? The really long ones that would end in tears? That was me trying to “talk it through”, I don’t know how that implies I gave up.”

“You—”

“No, no mom.” Fuck, I’m crying. “You were talking about Love in Action, mom. Leaving was a choice, yes, but it was a choice between being distant from you or being distant and hating myself even more than I already did. It wasn’t even an easy choice. I had to take all my savings, sell my shit, sleep on my one friend’s basement floor, fuckin’—” Stop fucking crying. “I thought of going back to you guys at least a million times before getting out.”

She looks to the ground. “I, I didn’t...”

“I know, you don’t like to think about mistakes that you’ve made, but even you have to admit I didn’t just go crazy one day and leave for absolutely no reason.” God, I can feel the snot freezing on my face. “So I’m sorry if I still hold a little grudge, if I’m a little stubborn, and if I don’t feel like forgiving you and saying I shouldn’t have left. Because the truth is, if there was any chance, any at all that you would’ve sent me to that place, then I don’t regret it one bit.”

She looks up at me. She’s broken open.

“Was there a chance?”

She’s quiet. She keeps blinking.

“Was there?”

“Yes.”

“Yes’ what?”

“Yes, there was a chance.”

I feel like I could crack the concrete with the force of my grip. “Then that’s settled.”

“We didn’t, um, it was—”

“Don’t, please.” I wipe my face on my jacket, get up, and groan. “I know I said shit earlier, but I think you contacted me too early.”

She looks even smaller now. “What do you mean?”

“You called me so soon after dad died. The first time you felt like you could. But this shit just happened. I think we should both take some time. Think about all of this, ya know?”

“...Yeah, makes sense.”

“And I should say that I can’t do this if you don’t meet me halfway, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I know I left, and you don’t have to fully understand why, but you can’t try to forget about it. I have to live with what happened and so do you.”

“Okay.”

“Are you sorry?”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

I just can’t leave it alone. “Sorry for what?”

She smiles sadly. “Everything.”

“Thanks. At least, for saying that. Do you have a ride home?”

“Yeah, my car’s parked close, I think I’m gonna stay here for a while, though.” She takes out a cigarette.

“Still smoke?”

“Warms me up.” The lighter she takes out only sparks. I take mine out of my purse and do it for her. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Ya know, I was wondering; how’d you get my number?”

“You didn’t move far, Max, used the phone book.”

“Ah, yeah makes sense. I think I should get goin’, I got work tomorrow.”

“Where you work?”

“Arts & crafts supply store.”

“Wow, really livin’ it up.”

“Yeah...Ya know, there was another reason I wanted to come.”

She looks at me inquisitively, raising one eyebrow.

“My girlfriend, Amy, thought I should come. Ever since your phone call I couldn’t stop thinking about you and Clint. She thought it’d be good for me to come.”

Her gaze turns to the trees on the other side of the road, mouth slightly open. “Huh.” I don’t know what that means.

“Yeah, it’s kinda thanks to her that we’re even talking right now.”

To this she says nothing. I can tell she’s just processing everything. Whether it’s the fact that I am still very gay and have a girlfriend or the fact that my coming here was more or less decided on the flip of a coin that she’s processing is unclear. Could be both. Maybe I should just leave her be with this.

“So I’m gonna—”

“Don’t change your number, okay? For when I call you again?”

I'm taking steps toward my car when I realize that she does want to talk to me again. "Sure. I'll, uh, I'll try not to." I turn, looking at her right now is overwhelming. "Sorry for your loss."

"And to you, my deepest sympathies." I don't look back.

When I drive home, my hands are relaxed on the wheel. "Hey Ya!" comes on the radio. I sing along to the parts I know.

An Act of God in Missouri (In Progress)

In the early evening, the last dredges of warmth slipping away into the reaches of night, a thirty pound stone hurtled from the sky at seven miles per second, striking and immediately killing a cow. Up until this point she had been referred to by the name Buttercup, but afterwards the town had taken to calling her “the most unlucky cow ever”, being the only one in the vicinity at the time. The owners of the cattle farm didn’t find her mutilated body until early the next morning, suddenly struck with a question neither thought they’d ever have to consider; where does one go to ask about a meteorite?

Rakesh Chandra of the Bollinger County Museum of Natural History and a team of geologists arrived the next morning.

“Cowvinity” is a lot noisier than Rakesh would’ve expected. Most of what he’d heard about farms or farming as a career in his life had had an emphasis on the quiet, the mundanity, and routine of everything. Despite what the name suggested, the cattle farm had more than just cattle, as the incessant clucking no doubt made clear. The sounds and smells were only familiar to him in the abstract, or in the petting zoos he went to as a kid. Still, being out there is a welcome change from the stuffy motel room Rakesh shared with two of his colleagues, and that room most definitely doesn’t have the same view of the sunset.

His thoughts are interrupted by the whining of an old door.

Amelia Young didn’t really think about what she expected a geologist to look like, but when she looks through the screen door and sees, about a hundred feet away, a bearded man in a button up, khaki pants, and well-worn sneakers, she feels surprised. Her and Henry have been preparing for the last few hours to make a great showing of their grief over Buttercup. They decided early on that if this meteorite was going to be worth anything, that they’d get as much as possible out of it. She takes a deep breath, smelling the food Henry’s been cooking in the kitchen, remembers all her lessons in community theater from ages eight to twelve, and prepares to perform. She presses one hand against the cool wood of the screen door as it creaks open and pulls her coat over her chest with the other. She sees him now, having just turned in her direction, eyes squinting.

Their gazes meet. They only talked briefly when the geologists first arrived and had to be shown where to find poor Buttercup. That conversation consisted of commenting on the weather, and Amelia asking about his pager. She said she didn’t come across those often, and Rakesh said he was just used to it by now he barely noticed it, really. She said that was how she felt about

being on the farm, referencing the uneasy way he stepped from foot to foot on top of the frostbitten grass, but he didn't understand what she was referring to, so he smiled, nodded, and that was the end of the conversation. Now they're here, a few days later, standing in the light of the setting sun, and they simultaneously recalibrate for their inevitable interaction.

Amelia speaks up first, raising her voice to make up for the distance. "You cold out there?"

He hadn't even noticed he was shivering until she said that, arms crossed tightly over his chest. "A bit, yeah. Thought it would be warmer out." He yells back.

"Why didn't you just knock? We would've let you in."

"I knew I was early—" He brings his left wrist up to look at his watch. "Well, I—I was early. Didn't—didn't wanna bother—"

She shakes her head. "Nonsense!" She waves an arm, signaling for him to come.

As he makes his way closer he looks at the house, for really the first time. It's a light blue, with white trim, with a white porch out front, all much newer looking than anything else in the area. To Rakesh it felt like the kind of house his parents probably hoped to get when they first moved to the U.S.

Amelia notices him looking. "You like the color? Our son became a siding contractor, so we got all this at a discount."

"It looks really nice." He says, climbing the last few steps to the porch.

She places a hand on his shoulder, ushering him inside. "Yeah, I think he's about your age, how old are you?"

"Uh, thirty-two."

The door creaks as it closes behind him. She takes her coat off and puts it on the coat rack to her right. “Oh, yeah, see my son just turned thirty.”

“Hm.” Rakesh bends down to untie his shoes then gets back up. “Um, is this a ‘shoes off’ household?”

Amelia walks past him, further into the house and into the dining with the table already set. “It’s a whatever-you-wanna-do household.”

He takes note of her slippers, but he doesn’t want to idle by the doorway any longer than he already has, so he follows her. Without her coat on he’s able to get a good look at what she’s wearing; overalls with a plaid button-up underneath, the sleeves rolled up. Pretty much exactly the outfit he’d describe a farmer wearing if asked to conjure one up in his mind.

Through an archway is a kitchen; all ranch style cabinets and old hardware, with a man about his father’s age over the stove.

“Hun?”

He looks up. “Huh? Oh, of course.” He smiles, walks over and holds his hand out to shake. “Rakesh, right?”

Rakesh shakes his hand, firm and unyielding in the older man’s grip. “Yes, Mr. Young, it’s nice to formally meet you.”

“Please, call me Henry.” He pulls away and heads back to the stove. “Hope ya like steak, son.”

“Oh, yeah, sounds great.”

“Yep, we had to figure out a way to put poor Buttercup to good use.”

What follows is what Amelia would call, deafening silence. Henry's face is still serious, eyes trained on the skillet, and Rakesh's eyes are wide as dinner plates, obviously holding his breath.

Then a smile breaks across Henry's face and he looks back at the young man with a smirk. Rakesh finally breathes out and makes a noise somewhat like a laugh. "I'm just kidding. We got this from the store."

Amelia knew he was kidding from the moment the words left his mouth; they'd decided to bury the cow shortly after the meteorite was removed. She resolves to have a talk with him later, 'cause to her, that introduction was a bad first step to this night.

Henry knows that they were supposed to be somewhat exaggerating their grief over Buttercup, because really, they will miss her, but that joke was just too good to pass up.

It's 2017 and I Hate it Here

“And then he tapped me and, like, looked at me and said, verbatim.” I pause, urging myself to get over the embarrassment. “‘You suck at this...but not in the good way’ and he asked me to leave.”

Sarah practically cackles on the other end of the line. “Okay, okay, I know that this is like, a sad story or whatever, but that is the best thing to say to someone who’s sucking your dick.”

Yeah, okay, ready to bury myself in the ground now. “Sarah, please.”

She quiets down after a few long moments. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. For real though, that’s a...weird situation to be in.”

“Yeah, I know, I was there.”

“And you left after he asked you to?”

“Wha—yeah, of course I did! He asked me to. Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“No, no, I was just making sure.”

“Ugh, Sarah, after my life falls apart I can’t even say I’m good at sucking dick.”

“Well—”

“I, and I quote, “suck” at sucking dick!”

“Nick—”

“I know, I should lower my voice, I’m just—I thought I at least had that going for me, and I don’t. I don’t—”

“Hey, shut up, listen.” I do so. “You’re spiraling, I’d say you were catastrophizing if you weren’t already in a bad situation.”

“Yeah.”

“Just breathe. One, you know that was never the only thing you’re good at. Two, as much as I’m sure you’ll find this funny in a few years, in the spirit of being serious, there’s a chance that’s not the reason he kinda kicked you out.”

“He didn’t “kinda”, he did, and why would he say that if that wasn’t the reason.”

“Maybe he just wasn’t feeling up to it, or like he changed his mind, but felt too awkward to say that.”

“Or maybe I’m just bad at it and guys for the past like six years have just been being nice.”

“I’m trying to be optimistic, and not that I’m very knowledgeable about the subject, but with something like this wouldn’t you have, like, physical proof of exactly how good you are at blowjobs?”

“...Okay, fair point, but I never want to hear you talk about “physical proof” ever again.”

“And I don’t want to talk about it either, so that’s fine. Look, I hate to say it, but this is what you get for calling your old boyfriend to, and I quote, “hang out” on the first day you come back to your hometown when I specifically told you not to.”

“Hey, you’re not the boss of me.” I know she’s right, though, and she knows I know that.

“Just asking, what was the best outcome to you guys “hanging out”?” I can practically feel her exaggerated air quotes.

“I mean, I dunno, we’d hang out, like, actually just hang out. We’d talk, realize we still have a lot in common, maybe also realize 16 year-old us had it right all along, then we’d, I dunno, get back together? Maybe?” Wow, I’m really grasping at straws now, aren’t I.

“Dude, you know that high school sweetheart stuff only really happens for straight people, right? I mean, do you really wanna be another couple on house hunters buying a place in Paris, Texas that’s near his work and your knitting group.”

“Hey, don’t act like they haven’t had at least one gay couple on that show. Remember the guy with the two-toned-goatee?”

“Heh, oh yeah. Still, though, did you really want to suck some flat-Earther’s dick after you made small talk in a diner for ten minutes?”

“Hey, that’s probably previous flat-Earther, when I stalked him on Facebook I saw that he made a post, like, ten months ago mentioning he had some “false scientific beliefs” in the past, and there’s like a 99% chance he was talking about that.”

“Oh my gosh, you stalked him on Facebook? You really have hit a new low.”

“You’re tellin’ me, I’m in the middle of nowhere and my career in sucking dick ended only years after it began.”

“Stop harping on that, you’re just going to make yourself feel worse. Ugh, I wish you were still here so I could just come over and hang out.” She pauses, and I can almost guess what she’s about to say. “Besides, would we call it a career if you always did it for free?”

“I hate you. Talk to you later.”

“Love you too.”

I hang up. I let my arms fall against my bed. I look around my room, my periodic table poster staring back at me on the opposite wall, one given by an aunt for Hanukkah when I was twelve, and I had nothing else taking up that spot on my wall so it stayed. My bookcase to my left filled only with lord of the rings box-set, my old baseball participatory awards, and some of my mom’s pastel sets. All my actual books are in storage, collecting dust. God knows when I’ll be able to get those. The floor is taken up by my suitcases and my dad’s dumbbells in boxes. I already sent a picture to Hannah asking if she thinks Dad did that as a challenge. I look at the end of my bed, of which my feet hang off the end of. It’s not even that I grew since the end of high school, this bed frame just hasn’t been big enough for me since I grew half a foot in sophomore year. Shit, that was over ten years ago.

I look outside the window above my bed, facing the street. It’s dark already, ‘cause winter’s an asshole and it looks like midnight in the early evening. There are sparse streetlights, but I can still see a few houses near us, and think of the houses I passed earlier today.

Each house is different, each built years apart. Some embody the mid-20th century habit of being low to the ground, with multiple small staircases on the inside while only technically being a one story house, like ours. Enabled someone like Hannah to be able to sneak out of her window while I covered for her. She would’ve done the same for me if I’d ever asked, but I didn’t.

Other houses are two stories, just as wide as they are tall, with a small window in the middle of the second floor on the side that's facing the street. Those, a majority of the time, are covered in those cheap shingles that just come in various shades of light brown, like the house Sarah grew up in that we tried having a sleepover in before her new stepdad realized that Nick was not, in fact, short for Nicole despite the fact that he'd heard about me doing "feminine" things with Sarah all the time, like shopping, and talked with Sarah's mom. Then my mom had to get up in the late hours of the night to open the door to thirteen-year-old me, still in my pajamas, cold from walking home. We told my dad I decided to come home because I realized I needed to study and she got me a copy of the house key later that week.

There are of course houses that don't fit either of those descriptions, but the ones I hate are the new builds. The ones that are made of that faux-granite, smooth and ugly, with columns and a huge foyer and a giant window facing out to show the tall ceilings. I don't even know why they keep tearing down old houses and building these new ugly ones, not many new people are moving in. They usually just sit there, empty and cold. McMansions; one of the few things my dad and I bonded over our mutual hatred for. There were many times my father would be driving me somewhere and we'd pass one of those houses and our previously quiet drive turned into just ranting about, as my dad called it, "the decline of architecture". It was always funny to see my dad ranting about something that wasn't me, seeing him laugh and getting red in the face over something that didn't even matter. These are the kinds of things that I tell other people when they ask about him, like 'look at how funny my dad is!', despite that being years ago.

Is this what life is gonna be now? Far from the independence I spent so long waiting for, stuck in a place where I can't blend in. Can't even say I'm good at sucking dick. According to Tom, the previous flat-Earther, I suck at it.

“Nick, time for dinner!” My mom yells, as though the walls aren’t paper thin. I slowly slide off my bed to the floor; head, neck, then the rest of my body. It’s cold and laminate. After a moment, I get up and walk to the kitchen. The hall still has the same framed photos up, packed a bit closer to fit some of the newer ones like my and Hannah’s graduation photos. I can comfortably trace my right and left pointer finger across the drywall on either side, it can’t be more than a few inches wider than my shoulders.

Past the front door, past the kitchen, and there’s my dad, still in his suit for work, sitting and waiting at the dining room table, his suit jacket draped over the back of his chair. I sit next to him, and the feeling I’ve had since coming back here is amplified: of being back in High School. A boring Friday night, Dad just got home from work, Mom’s at the stove, they’re about to ask me about my day, I tell them about my trig test, then Hannah would interrupt with how her day is going, etc. etc. But no, it’s been eight years since I moved out, four years since I was sure I’d never need to move back, and yet here I am, silently fighting my dad under the table for leg room.

My dad’s white button up shirt spans across his barrel-like chest, and only serves to make him seem larger than life, and contrasted with my narrow, or as he once described it, “bony” frame. Now that I don’t hunch anymore it’s become obvious that I’m an inch or two taller than him, and I’d like to think it eats away at him. It probably doesn’t.

“Hey Dad.”

He looks at me and gives me some sort of nod of acknowledgement. Alright. Never really one for conversation. He looks away and then back, gaze locking on my right ear. Oh, right. I lean my elbow on the table and rest my head in my hand, covering it.

“No elbows on the table, Nick.”

“You need any help, Mom?”

“Elbows, Nick—”

“No, hun, I’m good.”

“Nick.” He takes his hand out from his lap and pushes my elbow back.

“Dad, seriously?” I move it to my lap.

“It’s rude.”

“It’s not—”

“Here you guys go!” Mom comes around the counter and lays plates with steak and rice in front of me, Dad, and across from me where she sits down. “I know this isn’t the most ideal situation, but can I just say that it’s nice to have my two favorite guys with me.”

I see a flicker of a smile on my Dad’s face. “Smells amazing.”

“Yeah, thanks for the food, Mom.”

“It’s the least I could do considering you came all the way here last night and missed dinner, I know how much you’ve been missing homemade food.” She pauses, perhaps expecting me to come clean about the fact that I’ve been eating mostly Kraft mac and cheeses for the last few months, but I don’t say anything. “Even worse after you missed every night of Hanukkah this year. How was hanging out with old friends today?”

“Huh?”

“Hanging out with friends?” She leans a little closer this time, and I remember that that’s what I told her what I was doing this afternoon.

“Oh, yeah, it was really fun.”

“Ooohhh, I’m so glad, did you guys have anything in common?”

“Yeah, a ton in common.”

“That’s great.” She turns to my father. “How was work?”

“Not bad.” He replies, mouth full of food. “Ron was giving me shit about not finishing the report last night, but he didn’t even give me the information I needed to finish it until this morning, so it’s his fault.” He sighs, and his frown softens. He puts the fork down and loosens his tie. “Other than that, though, it wasn’t bad.” He smiles at her. “How was your day?”

“Oh, it was pretty good. I talked to Karen today, she’s doing okay, says Mary’s still struggling a bit but it’s getting better.” I can’t remember who Mary is, but I don’t want to interrupt. “And I told her that you were back in town and she wants to come over and see you!”

“What? Mom, you told her I’m back at home again? Why?”

She can’t seem to see the issue with this. “Well, it’s the truth! And you remember Karen, she’s always been so nice. And is it really that embarrassing to be back at home?”

“Yes.” Shit. She actually stops for a second. “No, wait, I don’t mean it like that. I just mean, like...it’s never a good thing to have to live at home again when you didn’t want to.” Can I stop talking.

“Oh.”

Fuck.

“Well, I guess that makes sense.”

“Honey.” My father cuts in before I can respond. “You should’ve just asked him.” He gestures to me with his fork. “Before you told Karen about the situation. He’s right, it’s not good to have to move back home.”

Well, I guess technically he’s supporting my argument, but...“Thanks. I mean, I don’t think it should be, like, a blanket statement, like for some people—”

“Watch it, I don’t feel like havin’ a whole conversation about it.”

I sigh. “Right.”

“You still need to get a job, preferably by tomorrow.”

“I literally got here less than 24 hours ago—I mean, Seriously? We’re doing that right now?”

He shrugs.

Mom gives him a look and then looks back at me. “He’s just trying to make sure you’re on top of things. But we know that you will be.”

“Oh, ‘we’, huh?” I look at him. “I lose my dream job and you feel the need to remind me I have to get a new job as if I don’t know?”

My dad talks this time. “You were a substitute teacher, is that really your dream job?”

“You know that it is. I can be sad about it.”

“‘Substitute’ is in the name, son, you always knew it was temporary—”

“Dad—”

“—that you were replaceable—”

“Honey, stop.” My mom grabs his arm when she says it.

I start furiously cutting into my steak while looking at him. “You do know I had a full time job and my own apartment before this. Don’t act like I don’t know things.”

He cuts even further into his steak, already down to the bone. “Oh, yes, a low-paying job and a tiny apartment; both of which you lost. Why do you think you’re here?”

I’ll admit it, I asked for that one. Still hurt though. I think he knows it too, he won’t look me in the face anymore. “Okay.” Did I keep my tone notably curt to try and make him feel bad? Yes. Should I have? Probably not. He won’t apologize, but I’m going to imagine all the ways I could respond if he did.

Mom's looking at me now, eyebrows pinched, nervously biting her lip. I give her a bit of a smile before eating more.

"So is there anything you want to do now that you're back home?"

"Ya know what, I haven't really thought about it. I guess... I could go to the park?"

My dad chews, then swallows. "In the freezing cold?"

"Uhh, huh, I could go to, um... Oh, mom, what was that place that, um." I snap my fingers a few times. "God, what was the name, um, the place that would have those little shows with the art?"

"The community arts center?"

"Yes, yes, that! It's been a while."

"Oh, hun, they don't do those anymore."

"Oh, okay. Then I guess I really don't know what I'm gonna do. Other than look for jobs."

"And hang out with your old friends."

Nope. "Yeah. Except Sarah."

Her smile drops a little. "Yeah. She still in that apartment with the roaches?"

My dad hums and quickly finishes chewing. "Did she try that boric acid thing I told her about?" My mom makes a face. "Hun, I know you think it's gross, but it works."

"She did, and it works, but she doesn't have to worry about it as much in the winter; the apartment gets so cold it slows them down, or just straight up kills them."

They're quiet for a second. "Well, thank god for small victories." My dad goes back to cutting his steak. "You can look for jobs online, I'm pretty sure. I heard that's a thing now." He gets a slight smile on his face now, a total reset from the tone of the rest of his remarks. He must

be kidding, he has a job in technology. I don't think he's as funny as he thinks he is, but I chuckle anyway. More for his sake than anything else.

“Yeah, I'll do that.”

“You should get that started in the morning.”

“Dad, I'm twenty-six, I can figure out that part myself.”

“And you're acting like a sixteen year old.”

I know he's at least partly right (even if he doesn't know exactly how), and I also know that if I don't back down it'll only lead to me proving his point even further. I stare at the table, past my plate; these are the same place mats that were here when I left.

“And these.” He gestures to my ear. “You gotta take 'em out.”

“I know.”

It must be past midnight when I get up to get a glass of water. I trace my fingers on either side of the hallway, nails catching on the slight irregularities every few seconds, as I make my way through the dark. I never liked turning on the lights at night here, worried I might wake up one of my parents or forget to turn it off and get berated in the morning, but I see the dining room light is already on. In the space between the floating cabinets and the counter, I can see my mother sitting at the table, glasses in hand with the left temple tip of them set steadily on her mouth, brows furrowed in concentration as she stares at yesterday's puzzle. The single light above her makes the scene seem much more dramatic.

I stay there looking for a moment, before I pad further into the kitchen and one of my socks snags on the chipped tile. I slap my hand on the counter to keep me steady.

She lets out a small gasp before turning to me, suddenly relieved. “Oh, honey, you scared the crap out of me.”

I’m still sort of out of it, the words taking a second to register. “Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to.”

“It’s alright.” She sets her glasses on top of her head before turning back to the puzzle. ““Actor who appeared completely nude in "Trainspotting" and "Velvet Goldmine": 2 words.””

“What—”

“I know you know it. I was planning on asking you in the morning, but I have a feeling you know the answer.”

“Oh, I don’t, uh—”

“You know you didn’t hide your rentals from blockbuster very well, right?” She points to the living room. “Our room also shares a wall with the TV.”

“...Ewan McGregor.”

She clicks her tongue like she’s pissed that she didn’t get it herself and fills in the squares. It’s almost done. “Thanks, hun.”

“What are you doing up?” I look at the oven clock; a few minutes past midnight.

She looks back up at me and points her pen toward her bedroom, and whispers in a conspiratorial way. “Your father still snores like it’s nobody’s business.

“I got ear plugs I think, if you want them.”

“Thanks, I’ve tried those, they either fall out or get really uncomfortable. He usually settles down and stops at some point around one.”

“Damn, sorry.” I grab a glass and open the refrigerator.

“If you’re getting water, can you also fill up the brita?”

“Yeah, sure, mom.”

I pour myself some, put it in the sink, and turn on the faucet.

I wait a couple seconds, then speak up again. “So you guys’ knew I watched those movies?”

“Oh, no.” I feel relieved for a moment before she continues. “Your father can sleep through everything, but his snoring kept me up then, too.” I can feel her looking at me now, but I’m staring at the water filling up the brita. “The movies you’d put on late at night when you thought we wouldn’t notice were the only other things I could listen to, so.”

“God...” I meet her gaze. “So did you know?”

She looks perplexed.

“I mean, about me. That I was, am...gay.” I don’t know why I’m still so hesitant to say it around them.

Her mouth twists and she scrunches up her nose before answering. “No, I can’t say I did. Though, I did find your newfound interest in the England drug-scene odd. Is that bad? That I didn’t know?”

“What? No—”

“Hun, the water.”

“Shit.” I shut off the water that’d been overflowing and watch it start to sink in. “No, it’s not bad. I mean, there was a reason I chose those movies to rent and not something like ‘Brokeback Mountain’. It was by design.”

Her eyebrows knot together once more. “Were you afraid? That afraid that you had to choose movies that—”

“Well it was multiple things, there were only so many things that the cashier guy at Blockbuster would let slide—”

“Were you afraid?”

I look her in the eyes, then turn to grab my glass to take a sip, my mouth suddenly drier than before.

“It’s just you and me here, and I want you to be honest.”

“I mean, yeah.” The water is low enough that I can turn on the faucet again, so I do.

“I’m sorry.”

“You really don’t have to be, it’s not even...it wasn’t you guys.” I look at her again, so she knows I mean it. “It really wasn’t.” It was everything else.

She doesn’t seem fully satisfied with the answer, but seems content enough to drop it when she continues. “How have you been sleeping?”

I shrug. “Fine enough”

“I’m sorry you still have that twin bed.”

“I can deal with it. My feet only hang off the end of it.” It actually bothers me a whole lot, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“I know it’s not the most optimal bed, even for one person.”

“Even for? ...What?”

“I just mean, if you ever wanted to have someone over—”

“Oh my god, Mom.”

“If you ever wanted to have a guy over—”

“You really don’t have to do this.”

“No, you’re an adult, and I don’t want you to feel like you can’t—”

“Can we please—”

“—Bring someone over just because you’re—”

“—Not do this right now, it’s not—”

“—Living with your parents again. I’m serious, Nick.”

“Cool, I get that, and I’m happy, I just really don’t want to have this conversation.”

“Okay, but while we’re having it, I should say there are condoms in the guest bathroom—”

“Oh my god! Okay, multiple things. One, um, thank you for being a good...ally? Two, I can buy my own condoms. Three, oh my god can we never talk about this again? You’re really not going to have to worry about me ‘bringing anyone home’.”

She narrows her eyes, and it seems like she’s about to say something about me having low self-esteem.

I think back to earlier in the day (the day before technically?), and what Tom said to me. “You really won’t.”

She seems doubtful.

I take another sip of water before turning. “Goodnight, again, hope Dad stops snoring for the rest of time after tonight.”

She quietly chuckles. “If he does, next thing I’m gonna expect is the messiah showing up next door.”

I walk back down the dark hallway and quietly close my door behind me.

In the morning I text Hannah telling her that Mom could hear all the movies we rented as kids and watched late at night. Once she realizes that they could hear her watching ‘The Iron

Giant' over and over well into her senior year of High School, my work is done. I'm looking for some jobs online, mostly minimum wage stuff like waiting tables. Most places near here aren't online, or maybe they just aren't looking for anyone. Sarah already suggested looking at schools nearby that would be looking for a substitute teacher, but I already told her I think I'd have to wait until the new year when the new semester starts, and I need shit to do now before I lose my mind. There's a knock on my door. "Come in!"

My Mom opens the door halfway and leans on the doorframe. "Hey honey, I'm guessing you don't know your Father left a note on your door?"

Of course I don't, I haven't left my room all morning. Oh shit, I haven't left my room all morning. "No, what's it say?"

She holds a crumpled piece of looseleaf close to her face. "Try looking for a job at the local strip mall, they need 20-somethings who like sitting on their butts all day'."

"Wow, even in his notes he still manages to be just as grating as normal."

"Oh, hun, you know he's just joking. Besides, he's right about some of the stores at the mall needing employees."

"Alright. Did that place get any less depressing since I left?"

"Not at all. Oh, speaking of, the Sears there is closing down. I'm not sure if anything good will be left, but at this point they're practically givin' the stuff away. You should stop by."

"Yeah, maybe I can manage to grab the last jeans from the Adam Levine collection."

She rolls her eyes. "Ha ha, you're so funny."

"Funnier than dad at least."

"Are you? Besides, if that collection exists, I'm sure they're out already."

"Fair enough."

“You should probably leave soon, this is the warmest today is gonna get.”

“Ugh, is it at least twenty degrees out?”

“...Hun, do you want me to lie to you?”

I sigh and get up from the bed, setting my laptop aside. I throw open my suitcase in search of layers.

“You want some fuzzy socks?”

I look up at her. “You have some I can borrow? I don’t want to, like, stretch yours out.” She raises a brow. “You think I threw out the large ones you left here when you moved out? I kept them just in case you wanted them.”

“...Yeah.”

“I’ll go grab them.” She starts down the hallway then stops again, looking back at what I was wearing; an old college t-shirt and a ratty pair of Addidas shorts from high school. “Maybe if you spot any newer pajamas at Sears you can grab those, too.” She turns back around and leaves.

I’m stuck standing there, staring at the space she left, and I don’t know why. After a few seconds I snap out of it and get dressed, then head into the hallway. I see Hannah’s room across the hall, door cracked open, and remember that I have to text her back. Gotta give an update as to how it is being home again. I’ll call her sometime later. I go to the bathroom.

While brushing my teeth I see for sure that my mom was not kidding about the condoms; in the medicine cabinet are multiple small boxes of them, different brands even. I see them and I picture my mom buying these herself from the pharmacy we used to go to. I think about Tom. I close the cabinet and look in my eyes staring back.

I see a loser who just lost the job he loved and couldn't afford the apartment he really liked and had to move out of the city he liked and got rejected by the guy he used to really like. I don't think anyone else sees that, though. The first thing they'll notice is probably the big birthmark on the side of my nose that my mom refused to let me consider getting surgically removed. Then they'll see the loser who lost his job and who can't suck dick.

Back when I had a therapist, I remember expressing to him my want to graduate college, but my fear of change. He said something along the lines of 'people need time to adjust to big change, even if they want it to happen. They need time to realize that it won't be like it was, time to really think about it.' I haven't followed his advice. I wonder, idly, if he'd be disappointed to see me now.

There's a knock on the door. I open it, it's my mom, holding striped fuzzy socks. "Oh, good, I thought maybe you'd already left." She hands me the socks. "Your father made a bagel for you before he left, you need to eat with your pills."

It's as if she can tell I've been taking them dry and giving myself indigestion for the last few years. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Where's dad gone?"

"He said he's getting some stuff for the evergreens in the back. You wanna hear what I think he's really doing?"

"Of course."

"I think he might've forgotten to get me something for my birthday, and noticed the very subtle circled lamp in the piers 1 catalog."

"Ooh, a whole few weeks in advance. That's pretty good for him."

"I know! I can tell 'cause he always gets sort of nervous and fidgety when he does things like this."

“Heh, right.”

She’s smiling, then she isn’t really anymore. She reaches out and touches my ear, my piercing. Oh, right. “Honey, I don’t think—”

“Right, yeah.” I reach up, put my socks in her free hand and push her other hand away. I take out my earrings.

“I just—people in our neighborhood—”

“Don’t worry.” I lay them out on the counter next to the sink. “I remember.” She looks at me in that sad but complicated way I think only moms can. “Okay, well, good luck out there.”

“Question: do you think it’s too late for me to just marry rich?”

She looks a little less sad. “If you run into someone like that on the way to the mall, promise to tell him to buy the rest of the circled items in the catalog?”

I smile at her, only a bit fake. “Yeah, promise.”

She pats me on the shoulder and turns around for a moment then turns back. “Here.” She hands me a \$20 bill from her back pocket. “Buy yourself some lunch.”

It’s only after I eat a bagel, take my pill, and walk a block down towards the mall that I let myself think about that moment earlier, with the fuzzy socks. Something about it made me almost tear up.

While I was gone I forgot how many little things parents could do that just stop you in your tracks. Most of the moments like those I do remember were times when my dad made some horribly scathing comment, or when my mom defended him for it. But I forgot moments like these, when one of them would do something touching, or surprisingly sentimental. Or,

particularly with my dad, when he would say something so overwhelmingly sad about his view on things in life or things that happened in his life with the most stoic expression.

Even earlier today, when he thought to make a bagel for me before he left. Sometimes I think I know him, like yesterday when he told me right before I went to bed that I couldn't drive his car 'cause he didn't trust me in it and that 'walking builds character' with a cruel laugh, I thought "yeah, that seems like exactly the kind of guy my dad is". Then the fucking bagel.

At least there's no snow on the ground right now, just frozen blades of grass and washed out skies. It's only December and I'm already dreaming about spring.

When there is sidewalk, and not just a narrow patch of dirt parallel to the road, it's cracked and made of inconsistent materials. I pass by the house of that lady that, back in high school, yelled at me and called me a psycho for almost drawing my initials in wet cement ten yards from her house. I maintained that I was only thinking about it, and that it wasn't at all "psychotic" to feel the temptation, but my dad still grounded me for the weekend after the lady knocked on our door and told him all about it. I had Hannah cancel my date with Tom that night, as using the landline was too much of a privilege. He'd never had to ground me before, I think my dad was just making stuff up as he went along.

Just a little longer to the mall and I feel some eyes on me as I walk and I look over. Across the street is the father of some kid I knew from before. Aaron-something. One of the kids that threw coins at me in middle school. He was an asshole. The way his dad's looking at me now I can see where he might have gotten it from. I see that he's specifically looking at the scarf I'm wearing, one with a rainbow stripe down the length of it that my parents (read: my mom) gave to me for Hanukkah a few years ago shortly after I came out to them. Shit, I should've left

this at home. I give a courteous nod and a wave, better for him to think I'm doing great and don't hold a grudge towards his son at all, and continue on my way.

I'm glad my Mom was truthful. The beige plaster buildings, the suburban decay, it especially doesn't help that all the places are closing down. Sears is just the next in a long line of stores now "out of commission" at the county mall.

I take off my scarf and stuff it into my backpack before heading to "Wake Up Cafe". I always thought they could have a more creative name, but at least they have sandwiches.

While I'm eating, the barista keeps staring at me in between orders. Someone from high school? I think maybe she was in my art class in senior year, but I can't be sure. I don't think she's sure either, it seems like if she knew my name and fully remembered me she would've come up to me at this point. Probably. Maybe she knew me and hated me and never expected to see me again. Now I'm wondering how many people from high school stayed here. Who knows how many people came to the city and just ran in different circles, or how many of those people ended up right back here after running. Now she has dyed streaks in her hair, which I definitely would've remembered if she had them in high school, it's the only reason I started talking to Sarah in middle school. Maybe I'll ask her about it later.

This train of thought leads me to sit in that exact spot and space out for too long, still and unphased, and now the barista girl is looking at me weird. I gotta go. Time to get a fucking job. A few doors down is Save-A-Lot, as it seems the perfect use of my degree is to be working minimum wage as a cashier.

There's a "Help Wanted" sign on the window, just as my Mom told me as I closed the front door behind me. The automatic doors slide open, and I'm greeted by rows and rows of

colorful products and harsh fluorescent lighting. I've worked here before, so I know where the manager's office is, and I head to the back. As I walk through the aisles I start to notice all the cheap christmas decorations, and new christmas items. I take a picture of the Elf on the shelf cereal to send to my "teacher" group chat, which they luckily haven't kicked me out of yet.

As I approach the door to the office I see a handwritten note taped on it that said 'If here about the job opening, please knock'. Huh, the management's just as disorganized as it was last time I was here. I knock. The door opens and a familiar face appears.

"Nick! Oh my god, I haven't seen you in forever!"

"Siobahn, wow, it's been—" She comes up to me and throws her arms around me. I go stiff and she backs away.

"Sorry, it's been so long, maybe I shouldn't have done that."

"No no it's just that it's been, well, uh, yeah."

"Yeah, oh." She turns and points to the sign on the door, "You interested in a job? It's as a cashier."

"Yeah."

"Scanning the stuff, bagging it, getting their money, all that stuff. You'd be starting as soon as possible."

"Yeah."

"I'll give you an application, and you can fill it out."

"Right, thanks, is the manager here?"

"Oh, Nick, I'm the manager."

"What? Oh, nice."

"Yeah, really livin' it large here. You got a resumé?"

“Yup.” I reach into my backpack, and she can see my scarf as I reach past it and take out one of the five copies I printed this morning. “Sorry it’s kinda crumpled.”

“Oh, nah, don’t worry about it.” She gestures to the desk, and there’s a pile of empty applications and a pen.

I walk in, sit down, and start scribbling in the answers, omitting information when necessary.

“So the positions as a cashier, which I remember and can see here you’ve done before.”

“Yup.”

“Well it would be pretty much the same as before, except we got a touchscreen now instead of all the buttons.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Yeah, it cost a lot more than any of us would like to admit. Speaking of cost, you’ll start by making eleven an hour, though by the beginning of next year it should be thirteen.”

By next year I’ll be making the same amount here that I was in the city. “Yeah, sounds good.” I hand her the application.

She skims it, blank faced, almost bored looking. “Okay, yeah, you pretty much got the job. Let’s talk schedule.”

“What?”

“What?”

“Well, I, I thought I was gonna have to wait a day or two to hear back or something.”

“Oh, no, well I know you, we’re friends.” She says, and points to the sign on the door. “That sign’s been up for a month, and you bet your ass no one else is gonna come in to work over this long break, especially not this close to Christmas.” She looks back at my name on the

application. “You willin’ to work on Christmas?” I nod. “Good, we need more Jews here.” Mm, okay. “And hey, I’m the boss around here, and I’ve decided that you can work here if you’d like to.”

By the time I’m walking back through the aisles she has my number, my application, and I have the assurance that unless she calls and says otherwise, I should be coming in on Monday to start, the day after tomorrow. I take out the folded grocery list my mom slipped into my pocket before I left and get to work. I’m proud that the only extra thing not on the list that I put in the cart was the Elf on the Shelf cereal. I have to know what the fuck it tastes like.

It doesn’t take me long in line to realize the guy ahead of the person in front of me in line is Tom. Thank god this bob-haired mom is separating us. As if she can sense my thoughts, she looks at her cart, then at me.

“Hey, could you move back a little, I gotta go grab something.”

Fuck! “Sure!” I move, she smiles, then her and her cart are back in the multi-colored aisles. Tom is scanning his things, and the cashier looks at me. I have no choice but to move up. Tom moves the divider further up on the conveyor belt and turns to look at the cereal at the top of my cart, then looks up at me. We lock eyes for a wretched moment. I feel like the air in the whole store just disappeared.

“Hey Nick.”

“Hey, uh, Tom.”

“About yesterday...”

Maybe if I focus hard enough on the beeping of the scanner and the clatter of the cashier’s nails against the items it’ll be the only things I remember about this interaction as soon as it’s over. “It’s really okay, you don’t have to, let’s just...not talk about it.”

“No, I should say, I’m sorry dude, I shouldn’t have told you to leave like that.”

I’m hyper aware of the cashier near us. “You don’t have to be sorry.” It comes out like a whisper.

He looks slightly relieved, and I wonder if he meant it or just felt like he had to say it. The cashier speaks up and tells him the total. As he’s paying he turns back to me. “Well, I’ll see you around, dude.”

God, it feels like the equivalent of a hardy pat on the shoulder for “trying your best”. I smile, nod, and resolve to scream in my pillow later. Did I really have to be buying Elf on the Shelf cereal when I saw him?

I move up in the line.

“I saw you head to the back. You gonna be the new cashier here?”

I look up, and meet her gaze. Her eyeshadow and nails match. “Yeah. Starting monday.”

“Cool, I’ll see you then...”

“Nick.”

“Ashley, or, Ash I guess.” She grabs the cereal first, and narrows her eyes. “No one’s tried buying this yet, I don’t think.”

I don’t know what to say to that, really. “Yeah, I’m a real risk taker.”

“Well, okay Mr. risk-taker, whatever that thing with that guy was, you’re gonna have to deal with it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, he only ever buys enough to last a few days, for some reason, so he’s back here a lot.”

I rock on my heels. “Heh, yeah, he’s never really been the best with foresight.”

“If that was some boyfriend or something, I wouldn’t recommend using your break to make out with him.”

I blanch, and look to see her expression is not mocking, more conspiratorial. I release a held breath. “Yeah, well, he just called me “dude” twice so, I think whatever was there is over with.”

She smirks. She’s younger than me, by a few years maybe.

I smile back, a real one. “And what things would you recommend doing over my break that would be a better use of my time?”

She scans the last of my items and thinks for a moment. “I recommend something that doesn’t make you feel like smashing your head against a wall.”

“I can tell you embarrassing stories about Siobahn from high school.”

The smile reaches her eyes this time. “That, that is good.”

I put my mom’s credit card in the slot. “And in return can you not tell her I’m gay?” Her face gets serious. “It’s just, I don’t think she knows and she might be, ya know, weird, and I need this job—”

“Oh, yeah, no, of course—”

“No I know, I just wanna be sure—”

“Yeah, ‘course, I don’t really care. I, I mean I’m not, like—”

“Yeah I get it. I got it.” The machine is beeping at me aggressively to take the card out, so I do and grab the bags. “See you monday.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

I immediately text Sarah about seeing Tom, and wishing she were here. She says she’ll call and we’ll talk later when she’s not at work.

Since the ‘getting a job’ part of my schedule didn’t take as long as I thought, I decide to actually stop by Sears. All of the windows are covered with “Everything Must Go!” and 85% off signs. As I walk in there’s a smattering of people throughout the store, which is empty. Racks are being rolled away, there are boxes being packed, and shelves being taken apart. The whole place is bright white, I hear the sound of squeaking rubber wheels moving across the tile floor, and I smell various cheap perfumes as I walk around.

I end up leaving without buying anything.

I close the front door behind me just loud enough to alert my mom that I’m home.

“Honey! Oh, I’m glad you’re finally home.” She appears from the corridor to greet me. “I need your help for an art project.” She grabs my arm and starts to lead me down the hall towards my room.

“An art project?”

“Yeah, remember that class I started at the community arts center?” I nod. “Well, this week we have to do a portrait of someone and show emotions with the colors.” She grabs a pack of pastels off my shelf. “I have the seat and lighting set up in my room.”

“I know you didn’t ask, but I’d be happy to model for you.” She scoffs. “I do wanna say though, this project is kinda childish, don’t you think?”

We enter her room and she turns to me. “Well most of the people didn’t get to do art when they were younger. I mean I’d seriously bet none of them got the amazing chance to take an art class once they were in college.” She pokes me in the chest with her free hand. “So yes, some of the projects are a bit ‘childish’. But I think it’s nice, having something to work on that

isn't so taxing on the brain." She motions for me to sit on a stool with a lamp facing towards it, and I do.

"And I know you like to show off your skills to the rest of the class."

She feigns offense. "I do not like to show off!"

I can tell she definitely does, though.

She sits across from me on her bed with a large pad of paper on an easel sitting in front. She's set it up so that she looks just past the easel to see me. She opens up her pastels, "So, whatcha wanna talk about?"

When I was in High School I would model for her too, her own little projects at the time, and she'd treat these sessions like little therapy sessions for me. She'd help me figure out a way through my little plights as she struggled to get the messiness of my hair just so. From that I got pretty good at staying still while still having a conversation. "I thought you would've asked by now how my job search went."

I see her start to outline my shoulders and neck, I missed which color she picked up though. "Oh, of course. How'd it go?"

"I'm lucky. Siobahn is the general manager at Save-A-Lot."

"Siobahn..." I can sense her furrowed brow.

"In my Physics class, we did that one kinda big project together. Both worked there in high school."

"Oh, right, go on."

"She practically handed me a job on a silver platter."

"That's great. Are you excited?"

"I mean, should I be?"

Her hand stops for a second. “What do you mean?”

“I mean like, I’m going from a job in the field I’m interested in to a minimum wage job. Shouldn’t I have done it the other way around?”

“Well, to be fair, you weren’t earning much more than minimum wage at your last job, were you.”

I know she’s right, but she’s more understanding than my dad, so I continue. “I know it wasn’t the best paying job, but it was a job I liked. I don’t care what dad says, being a substitute teacher is not useless!”

“Okay, now, when has your father ever said it was useless?”

“Ummmm, he’s implied it.”

“Honey, please, try and understand where he’s coming from. He doesn’t think it’s useless, he just wants you to have a job that pays well. He wants you to be able to live well.”

“He doesn’t think I can be happy just making a living wage?”

“Were you making a living wage? I mean, you’ve already told me you were behind on rent even before you got fired—”

“Let go.”

She sighs. “Before you got let go from your job. With the economy the way it is, sometimes you just have to shut up and do a job that might not have been your dream job. In most cases you have to put your dreams to the side.”

“Do you really believe that?”

She sighs again, and her hand stops moving again. “Sometimes, some nights. But your father definitely thinks so.”

“Of course he does, he’s a dream killer.” I’m only kinda kidding.

Her hand starts moving again, “He’s been a software development manager since before you were born, the only reason I’m able to have hobbies like this one is because of that job.

He’s seen so many of his friends lose the jobs that they had wanted so badly, can you really blame him for being a bit harsh about it?”

“I mean, yeah...?”

She makes a face. “Shut up, I’m drawing your mouth.”

After a minute or so I can tell she’s moved on from that part of my face so I start up again. “I bet you guys are real happy Hannah is going into the medical field.”

“We are happy, but you don’t think we give your sister a hard time, too?”

I think for a second. “Well I never heard it.”

“And are we really harsh about your job choices when she’s around?”

I think for a second more. “I guess not.”

“Exactly.” She’s silent for a few moments, like she’s trying to let what she just said sink in. “He’s always trying his very best to get through to you one of the only ways he knows how, trying to take complete control of your life.”

We both laugh, I try hard not to move my position too much.

She continues. “Really, he is trying.”

“I know. I just wish he wouldn’t give advice I didn’t ask for.”

“I think that’s the only way he knows how to show he cares.”

“I wish he would just say it out loud like a normal person.”

I can see the edge of her knowing smile past the easel. “What did you like about the city?”

“I like it ‘cause it smells real bad.” She sighs, but still waits for a real answer. I think about it. “There were so many people, nobody cared, I could just look around and realize how many people would pass me and never think twice. And it’s hard to feel bad when I can go and get takeout and to my best friend’s place all within half a mile of where I lived.”

“Was the city better with your sort of thing?”

“What sort of thing?”

“With being more accepting?”

“...Why do you ask?”

“You only came out after you moved away. But you knew for much longer than that.”

I don’t really know what to say. “I think you guys are doing great.”

“That’s not what I asked. You think I don’t see you walking on eggshells here?”

My breathing quickens. “I think people here are doing the best they can. It’s my fault being scared.”

“Do you actually believe that? Or do you just say that?”

She’s rendered me speechless. Again.

I think she feels the tension. “You want me to give you an itemized list of how everyone voted last year?”

“Heh, yeah, if you could give me a list of every person who doesn't support my right to get married, that’d be great.”

She smiles, but it’s still sad. “So you mentioned that you liked your job.” She’s decided to change the subject. “I’ve been thinking about it, and I don’t think you ever told me very much about your job.”

“Well I’ve been wanting to be a substitute teacher for a long time.”

“Why?” I look at her. I’m not sure she’s ever asked me that.

“Besides the fact that substitute teachers are needed and valuable in schools?”

She doesn’t take her eyes off the canvas but raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, yeah, uh, I guess...I guess being there for them on an off day. Like, it was always a fun thing when you’re younger, you got a substitute that day, don’t have to do your homework or worry about any sort of quiz, you got one day off from that class. And I have the chance to make it, like, fun, or at least not shitty, ya know?”

She nods.

“I wouldn’t have to get too involved, like I’ll see a lot of the same kids and I’d remember them, but no need to get a special degree and know all about some kid’s parents’ divorce; I just have to know if that kid's gonna need some special attention.”

I can tell by the way her arm’s moving that she’s moved on to shading at this point.

“I was also a library monitor when no substitute was really needed.” She nodded. “The library had a librarian of course, but I like, helped the kids find the books they were looking for, and talk to them about whatever topic they were covering. It gave the kids some subjective sort of view for their work and it gave the teachers a well-deserved break.” She chuckled. “I was, of course, with the kids, who were all great. Sometimes there were small breakdowns or fighting over a book, but they were nice kids. Other than that, I mostly worked with the librarian, who was quiet so I didn’t get to know much about her. I got to see other teachers during my lunch break, and they were all nice and stuff but sometimes talking to them was depressing.”

“Why?”

“Well because a lot of them were around my age. Sure, there were some older outliers, but a lot of them were full-blown teachers by my age. And, I dunno, I know I’m young, but it made me feel old.” She nods. “And, well, there was one teacher...”

Her eyebrows raise. “Another teacher?”

“Well, most teachers just sorta left their class in the library for me to take care of, went to the break room or out for a smoke. One teacher, Mr. Hayes, or Oliver, he would stick around. He would of course help the kids, but mostly he’d find me when I wasn’t busy and we’d talk.”

“About what?”

“About, like, anything. These conversations never got too personal or deep or anything, but we’d talk about our days and our hobbies and stuff. He’s got a cat, so sometimes he’d show me pictures of her. And it was just... nice, ya know, to have someone who was around my age who I could see on a regular basis without having to worry about schedules clashing or anything. I could talk to him about other teachers or the shitty snacks in the vending machine and he’d know exactly what I was talking about. It was easy to talk to him.”

“Is he cute?”

“Mom, come on.” He is, though.

“Oh, well, I’m sorry for showing an interest in my son’s love life. Or, rather, lack thereof.”

If she weren’t right, I’d tell her, but I just laugh. And it’s now I realize she can never find out about what happened with Tom yesterday. Never.

“There, I’m done.” She puts her pastel down, and from observing the pack it looks like she used at least half the colors on just this one piece. She picks up the pad of paper and turns it around to me. I see my face, or at least, a pretty good interpretation of it. She always had a knack

for this sort of stuff. “See the red,” She traces a finger down from my chin to my collarbone.
“That represents all the mean stuff that you decide to say out loud.”

“Ha ha, sooo funny”

“And the blue and grey,” She traces my forehead and the area around my eyes, “All of the anxieties you have that you’re unwilling to face at the moment ‘cause you’re too weak.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.”

“And the dark grey,” She traces the tips of my ears, “Represents the void that you feel is always creeping up on you.”

“Okay you’re deadpan delivery is making this less and less funny.”

“Who said I was kidding?”

There’s a pregnant pause, and then we both start to laugh. I still don’t know if she was fully kidding.

The next morning I’m at the table eating the new cereal. I’m disappointed. There’s nothing remotely elf-like about the flavor, unless they taste like hot chocolate. I suppose that’s an option.

“Your mom already left to help Martha move in to her apartment?”

I look up at my dad, having swapped his suit for his much more casual college sweatshirt that somehow hangs loosely on his frame. “Yep, like, a half an hour ago.”

“Hm.”

“Did something happen with her husband uhh...what's-his-name?” I take another bite.

He sits down on the chair next to me, the legs making a scraping sound against the tile.
“Yeah, nasty divorce.” He takes a sip from his coffee, the mug is the one I got him for father’s

day when I was fourteen; 'For father's day I bought you a nice mug with your money'. "Really messy."

"Oh yeah?"

He sucks in a breath through his teeth. "About a month ago your mother and Martha had what they called a—" He clears his throat. "A 'Fuck Him' party."

I almost spit out my cereal. "Woah, what's served at a party like that?"

"Lot's of vodka." He shakes his head. "Martha took up the couch until it was time for dinner the next day."

"Damn."

"Yeah." He places the mug on the table. "It's actually kind of good your mother isn't here, I wanted to talk to you about something."

I stop chewing. "Yeah?" He nods, so I put the spoon down.

"So I already bought your mother a birthday present—"

"I know."

"...Huh?"

"Mom guessed you were going to pier 1 yesterday."

"Damn."

"Yeah, you gotta get better at hiding stuff like that."

"Okay, well, this isn't, um, anyway—I got an idea for another present that I think you could help me with."

"Oh yeah?"

"You know how your mom loves seeing the birds come in in the spring?" I nod. "I was thinking you and I could make some birdhouses and bird feeders, personalized and everything."

“...Huh.”

“I would do the woodwork stuff, unless you’re better at working wood—” He stops and makes a face at that sentence. “Actually, forget I said it like that—”

“Forgotten, and I think you’re better with that sort of thing.”

“Then you can do the painting.” He looks at the table. “You got your mom’s eye for it.”

“...Thank you.”

“So if you’re still here in the spring, we can do that.”

“You don’t have to be nice, we both know I’ll probably still be here in the spring.”

“Heh.”

“And even if I wasn’t, I could always come back and help.”

He picks up the mug, takes another sip, longer this time. “You didn’t before.”

We’re both quiet now. He looks at the cereal box on the table.

“‘Elf on the Shelf’...cereal?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“...What’s it even taste like?”

“I think it’s supposed to taste like hot chocolate? But it doesn’t really, like, it tastes like fake hot chocolate? And it’s also not even hot, so...yeah.”

“So you bought it just because it was branded ‘Elf on the Shelf’?”

“Yeah.”

“Fair enough.”

“Well, technically you guys bought it, ‘cause mom gave me her credit card, so...”

He frowns. “Mhm.” He gestures to his mug. “You think you’re real funny, don’t you.”

My first day at the new job starts tomorrow, so after this morning I've been taking most of today to prepare myself for having to work with other people, convincing myself that it's worth \$11 an hour. Okay, I don't actually have to spend all day doing that, but it's the only thing on my schedule. I've spent over 5 hours doing fuck all when my phone rings.

'Oliver Hayes (guy from work with the glasses)'

I almost forgot that that was his contact name. I answer. "Hello?"

"Hey, Nick."

"Uh, hey."

"It's Oliver, from work."

"No, no, I know."

"Oh right, well, uh, happy christmas eve eve!"

Oh shit, it is Christmas eve eve, isn't it? "Oh, uh, yeah, thanks." There's a long pause.
"Uh, you too!"

"Thanks, I don't really celebrate it...actually I'm not even sure if you do...actually now that I'm thinking about it, I have no idea why I started the call like that."

This makes me laugh. "So, was that all you called me for? To wish me a happy two-days-before-a-holiday-I-don't-celebrate?"

"Heh, no actually. So ya know how you told the kids about how you were going to be leaving and not coming back after the break?"

That was my not-so-subtle way of saying I'd been let go. "Yeah?"

"Well, I mentioned to my class that maybe we should give you something before you go, and they ran with it. They made this card with all these little things about what they liked about their "favorite library monitor"."

I was their only library monitor, and also their substitute a few times, but I'll take it.

“Really?”

“Yeah, they finished it like the day before you left but I, being a big dumb idiot, forgot to give it to you. And only now, half a week since you left, did I remember.”

“Hey, don't be too harsh on yourself, I almost forgot to tell them I wasn't going to be coming back after the break. Believe me when I say that I'm the last person who can judge you for something like that.”

He laughs. “Yeah well, do you want it?”

“...What?”

“Want the card, I mean. I just have it at my place and it just feels kinda weird cause it was legit made for you. I was thinking since you live in the city I could probably just like, drop it off or something.”

Oh, no. “Huh. See, that's very nice of you, like, really nice. But, um, I don't live in the city anymore.”

He pauses, “What? Didn't you say you lived, like, not too far from the school?”

“I did. And I didn't live too far. Now I do, though.”

“What happened?”

“‘What happened?’ What do you think happened?”

“Oh, right.”

“All those days, like two weeks before I left that I had to leave work early?”

“Yeah?”

“Packing my stuff up and putting other stuff in storage.”

“Oh, well, where are you living now?”

“It’s upstate. I’m uh, I’m living with my parents.” I regret that last bit the moment I say it.

“Shit, really? That sucks, man.”

I gasp. “Mr. Hayes! Did you just curse?! I’ll have to talk to the school board about this.”

He laughs. “Shut up. Anyway, I could like, mail it to you.”

“Wait, really?”

“Well, yeah. Like I said, I feel weird just having it here with me. The kids wanted you to have it, and even if you didn’t want it I’d feel like I was letting them down if I didn’t give it to you.”

“Oh, well, in that case, I’ll text you the address. I can pay you back for the stamps or whatever.”

“I think I can make it without the dollar I’d be losing, thanks though.”

“Yeah, no problem. Oh, and, when you go back, can you tell the kids I say ‘Hi’, and not mention my living situation.”

“Got it. I won’t tell them you say ‘hi’, and I’ll tell them you’re living in your parents’ closet.”

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t. Anyway, you text me the address and I’ll try to send it as soon as I can.”

“Will do. I’ll keep it as a memory of the best job I ever had.”

“...Ya know, it’s kind of sad, but I’m not sure I’ve met someone that said what they really wanted to be was a substitute teacher.”

“That is pretty sad.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you ever asked if one wanted to be one in the first place, though? Or what made them want to be one?”

“No, I don’t think I have. Nick?”

“Hm.”

“What made you want to be a substitute teacher?”

I lay down on my bed, staring up at the ceiling, counting the particles. “It’s kinda a funny story.”

“Is it?”

“Well, not really, actually, now that I think about it, no.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, so um, I grew up here, upstate, and my elementary, middle, and high school were all relatively near each other, so some substitute teachers spanned all grades and you’d see them a bunch.”

“Right.”

“And one of the most well known around kids my age was one Mr. Gringus.”

“‘Gringus’?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow, that is a horrible last name.”

“I know.”

“And was he well known because of his name?”

“No, actually, the unusual-ness of his name was never actually discussed. That’s how much everyone liked him. No one thought of his name as an ugly one, it was just him.”

“And what made everyone like him so much?”

“He was just really cool. He was probably my dad’s age, this big guy, but he never seemed intimidating. He’d talk to us about books that we might know that were coming out, ones that were fantasy, or even scary ones. New movies, too, like he studied up before he came to each class.”

“Huh.”

“And since he knew he wouldn’t really teach us anything, he would bring us these coloring book pages, or shade-by-number pages, even in high school. He’d even have little trivia games and you could win little prizes like one of those comically large pencils or erasers, ya know those?”

“Yeah yeah. Would he bring the pencils that were like, scented, too? The ones that smelled like chocolate or fruit?”

“Yes! Yeah, he would.”

“Damn, nice.”

“Yeah, if you had him as your substitute, you knew you were going to have a fun time—”

“Wait, one sec.” I hear fabric rustling on his end. “Sorry, just had to get into bed.”

“Oh shit, it’s late. It is—should I—I should—”

“Nah, no, it’s fine.” More rustling. “Go on, I wanna hear why.”

I lower my voice down to a whisper. I don’t think I’ve told people this part.

“Sometimes...sometimes with cool adults, you didn’t know if they actually cared, or were just pretending. Like, he was such a cool guy, like the kind that gave full candy bars at halloween, but I never really thought about if he meant it though. Truly. Until one day. I was in my senior year of high school, so at this point most of the cool stuff he’d do was let us be on our own for

forty-five minutes, maybe some coloring book pages. That morning, before classes started, my boyfriend of two years, Tom, broke up with me.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, we had been planning on it ‘cause we were goin’ to different colleges, but he decided he wanted it to end even earlier since our parents didn’t know about us and he didn’t want to be sad he couldn’t spend his graduation with his boyfriend—”

“Bullshit—oh—”

“Heh—”

“I’m so sorry—”

“No, it’s okay—”

“—that just slipped out—”

“No, no, really, it’s fine. I thought it was B-S, too, at the time, and I still think now he just thought it would hurt less if he did it himself, or something. Anyway, he broke up with me in the morning, which is the worst—”

“Worst time.”

“Yeah, yeah, ‘cause I had my whole school day after that.”

“Yeah.”

“So after that I manage to keep it together most of the school day, even explain it to my friend Sarah at lunch without tearing up. But somewhere around seventh period I lost it. I wasn’t even out at school, and the last thing I needed was to be the guy who sobbed in the hallway a week before he turned eighteen. So I went into the classroom, sat down and prayed that I could just not cry in front of everyone”

More rustling. I turn on my side, and stare at the space between my bed and the wall.

“Mr. Gringus is there that day, and I can feel him, like, look at me, right? And right before he gets to his little spiel-update-on-his-life-thing to make us feel like we know him, he looks directly in my eyes, and I’m in the back of the class, he looks at me. He says, “You wanna go to the bathroom?” and he points out the door or whatever. I nodded, and he just said “go ahead.” No questions asked, no interrogation, no getting up close and bringing attention to me. Just simply letting me, the guy who’s obviously about to cry, cry on his own. And that was all I wanted. I got a good ten minute cry in the bathroom stall before I headed back and got to color in those damn pictures.”

“Of course, as any sensible person would love to do after they cry.”

At this, I laugh at myself. I really was excited to do that. “Since I wasn’t fully out at the time, this was the closest thing to comfort from an adult over the breakup, and it was all I needed in that moment. He knew he didn’t know me well enough to talk to me about something, knew I probably just wanted a moment to myself, hell, he had so many students he probably didn’t even remember my name, but that...that little favor I don’t think I’ll ever forget, really.”

He’s quiet.

“I’d considered becoming a substitute before that, an option, mostly because of Mr. Gringus anyway, but after that I guess I just thought that if I could do something like that for one kid, that’s all I would need.”

He’s still quiet.

“You still awake?”

“Yeah, yeah I’m here. I just...that was very sweet.”

“Didn’t expect that to be my answer?”

“I didn’t say that, I just said it was sweet.”

“Pfft, it’s pathetic.”

“It’s not.”

“I’m not sure I’ve told anyone else that story.”

“Well, thanks for telling me that very sweet little story.”

“Stop saying it’s sweet.”

“Oh, okay, tough guy.”

“Shut up.”

“I should say…” More rustling, then a small sigh. “I should say, the fact that the kids even wanted to make you a card shows that you probably are that guy to a lot of them. The guy who would give them that moment alone, who cares. A very well done and sweet card, at that.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I know I don’t.”

“Thanks.”

He laughs quietly, and I can picture him with his eyes already partly closed. “And this is when you say I’m a good teacher, too.”

“The amount of cards and drawings you get from kids on a semi-regular-basis says that fine enough. You are a good teacher, though.”

“Hmm.” He’s probably falling asleep. “Send me that address and I’ll mail you the card tomorrow. Maybe if you could, like, text me when it gets there, so I know that it didn’t get lost in the mail or something.”

“Of course.”

“And, if you want, you could text me other than that. Just, if you wanted to talk or something.”

I smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

He pauses. "You're looking for another job as a substitute, right?"

"Hmm yeah, one day, for right now I'm just trying to make money to save up, which, on a teacher salary, I will need."

"They really don't pay us enough."

"Definitely not. I mean, we'll see if anyone even wants to hire me anywhere as anything but a cashier."

"Hey, shut up. You'll be okay, you'll find something."

"I'll um, I'll try and believe you."

"Do that." He yawns. "Okay, I gotta go. I'll talk to you soon."

"Yeah, bye."

"Bye." He hangs up.

I get my pajamas on and get ready for bed. Once I'm laying down all I can think about is what Oliver said. My instinct was to dismiss him, but now that I'm in bed, my thoughts are quieter than they've been in a while. I think I can make it. I'm young, really young, I have enough time to un-fuck my life. That's what I would say to someone in my situation if it weren't me.