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## Incipient Adulthood: Fragments of Student Life

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Incipient Adulthood:  
Fragments of Student Life

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

by  
Natasha Cameron

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2022



## Dedication

To future Bard students. Enjoy your time here. Study, explore, and create memories.



### Acknowledgements

Thank you to my parents, for their unwavering love and support. To my mother, thank you for answering my phone calls and giving me the encouragement to keep persevering, and for always believing in me, even when I forget to believe in myself. Thank you to my teachers and advisors, especially in the Written Arts Department, for all your guidance, critiques, encouragement, and wonderful reading recommendations! Thank you, to my friends, these last four years, for dragging me out of the library on the weekends, for late night shenanigans, for cooking adventures, and for making me laugh through the rough times.



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## Breaking Out of Routine

One day we were shaking hands and carelessly sharing water bottles with each other and the next we were all alone locked inside our houses like animals at the zoo. Looking like bandits with masks over our faces, we now leave our homes once a week to go to the store and we feel no shame about haggling some stranger for the last package of toilet paper on the shelf. Maybe some higher being is sitting on their couch eating popcorn, getting a kick out of observing us go about our days of quarantine, and jotting down all our weird behaviors as if we are just some lab rats in a mad experiment. College kids were forced home, and for those of us who had relished in our new adult independence, it all felt like some cruel joke to be back in our childhood bedrooms. I moved back into to the adolescent room I left when I was nine, with the Winnie the Pooh wallpaper my father put up before I was born. Winnie the Pooh and I used to be the best of pals, now I just want to scratch out all his puerile faces, staring down at me. Note to self: buy some paint, and redo the walls in my room!

This morning I lie in bed, barely awake, drifting restlessly in and out of sleep. The elderly couple in the apartment below us are arguing again, or maybe they are just talking loudly and garrulously because they are both losing their hearing. I do not want to open my eyes and face another day that will be exactly the same as the day before.

I recall my dream vividly. My grandmother, reached out to hug me, and I ran back from her arms because neither of us was wearing masks. I shouted at her to stand back and protect herself but it was hopeless. Being hard of hearing, she drew closer to hear me. Across the distance I attempted to maintain between us, I smelled the scent of her perfume. As I wake up it lingers in my nose. Jasmine with hints of sandalwood.

With twice the usual willpower I force myself to sit up, reluctantly peel my bed covers off, and place my feet on the floor. I walk into the bathroom, turn on the light and squint at my face in the mirror. I've been sleeping, and yet the dark bags under my eyes refuse to go away, they sag like heavy ripened fruit. Pulling my lips up into a devilish grin, I stare at myself until I don't recognize myself anymore. When the stranger in the mirror begins to laugh I stop, momentarily unsettled. Then I notice that I'm breaking out again. A new pimple has emerged on my chin overnight. I rub it feeling the bump and consider pinching it, but restrain myself.

I've become nocturnal to limit contact with my father. He's being a tyrant like usual and won't let me go with him to the store because he believes it's risky enough that one of us has to be in proximity to other humans. To annoy my father I hide his belongings. The night before, I hid his shoes in the pantry and last night I put his car keys in the freezer (he will find it difficult to go to the store today!). In addition, I rearrange the furniture in the house every night while he's asleep. Moving the furniture around, besides irritating my dad, gives me the refreshing illusion that I'm constantly living in a new place.

My normal life at college has vanished along with any motivation I had to do anything productive. I've been watching TV sitcoms. So far I've plowed through *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *New Girl*. Remarkably none of the characters appear to have any qualms about spending their hours in the same apartments, episode after episode. Their lives are still exciting, filled with some new perplexing dilemma, and they have their roommates to hang out with, in some ways I think it's harder to lose your sense of reality when people are around to hold onto you. They can prevent you from drifting off into other realms of thought and imagination.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I was stressed about the state of the external world, but internally I was also glad for the opportunity I now had to be alone with seemingly no outside distractions in my life. I had so many plans. I would finally clear out and delete the 10,000 plus emails proliferating on my phone. I'd clear out my closet and get rid of the old clothes I'd kept from high school, but would never wear because they reminded me of that dreaded period in my life. I'd tackle my ever growing reading list, and finally crack open all those wonderful books my professors kept recommending to me. I'd finally sit down and attack, *The Whale* or *Moby Dick*. However I have not done any of these things yet. The number beside my email app keeps growing, my clothes gather in mountainous piles on the floor, I don't read, and I made it only a quarter of the way through Melville's magnum opus before giving up.

It's been months since I saw any friends. To combat loneliness, I've developed friendships with all the spiders in the house. We talk about food and the ever warming weather as summer approaches. The spiders are all excited, summer is when the insect population really flourishes. Today I ask Charlie, the large Daddy-Long Leg in the upper corner of the hallway, whether the constant human presence inside the house is affecting their hunting. Charlie tells me that since we've been at home the house has become messier and the insects have been proliferating. Sadly neither me nor my father has been motivated to clean. Random clothes and books are crowding up the corners of rooms, dirty dishes are piling up in the sink like Jenga blocks, and Amazon Prime boxes are filling up the living room, some unopened and some empty, needing to be recycled.

My father's quarantine hobby is purchasing random shit online. With each new package he receives a little rush of joy. He sits in the living room, coffee in hand on the couch, waiting

impatiently for the UPS delivery to come every afternoon. I know because the sound of the doorbell always wakes me. So far my father's bought a set of water colors, an ice cream maker, a Soda Stream, a first aid kit, an air fryer, a set of shot glasses with all the characters from of the Big Lebowski on them, and a large black exercising wheel for our cat Frances because my father noticed she was getting heavier. Frances has yet to step foot on it. Apparently she had been double-dipping on the cat treats by soliciting them from both my father and I. There are so many packages that he's forgotten what each of them contains.

I realized that the routine was eroding my sanity, and that if I tossed my schedule out the window I felt more free. Today I woke up at 8pm and had breakfast at 8:30pm. For breakfast I ate the same thing as always: scrambled eggs with coffee (a little routine is still necessary to maintain sanity!).

Waking up at night, without the sun, time seems to creep forward like a caterpillar, and the hours pass by inconsequentially. Time elongates and contracts. Time becomes elastic like a rubber band that will arbitrarily expand and contract back to its original shape, it's become unclear who is pulling the strings of reality now! Everything feels scrambled and the days feel interminable. The world has become chaotic, as if I'm on a roller coaster ride that will not end. Sometimes a wave of nausea will roll over me, and I will rush to the bathroom, on the verge of throwing up at any moment.

At night, I roam the streets. I steal trash from people's garbage cans and wrestle the racoons for leftover bits of chicken. Don't worry I don't actually eat anything and I hand sanitize afterwards! People throw away interesting things like receipts with little notes written to themselves on the back, "Remember to water the spider plant, and buy a bigger pot, it's

outgrowing its current one.” They also throw out scraps of paper with To-Do lists scrawled on the back (-feed the dog -buy ingredients for lasagna -buy face masks -pay the Wi-Fi bill), old National Geographic magazines, broken toasters, and half eaten Poptarts. I’ve learned that my neighbor across the street has begun baking obsessively. In his trash can, lie the remains of unsuccessful baking experiments or half-eaten moldy creations. Lemon Meringue pies that didn’t stiffen into firm peeks, burnt loaves of banana bread, or stale cakes with chalky layers of frosting.

The streets are usually clear at night, and sometimes I do imaginary snow angels in the middle of the street (I can hear an oncoming car from far away and run to safety). Walking through my neighborhood, I occasionally see a lighted window, or living rooms illuminated with the garish light from a TV screen inside where an insomniac sits on the couch. Sometimes, little dogs bark at me and I growl back at them through the windows.

I’ve always preferred night to day. I prefer the singing of crickets and frogs at night to the chirpy chorus of birds in the morning. I enjoy noting the changing cycles of the moon as it waxes and wanes. Under the cover of darkness anything is imaginable. At night my dull neighborhood is transformed. Colors recede into blacks and grays. Tonight my imagination runs rampant and when I see gleaming eyes emerging from trees, I picture a ginormous ghoul. My heart flutters, until the deer jumps out of the darkness and walks gingerly across the empty street.

Around 3 am, I return home and horse around with some homework. Mostly I stare at the white wall in front of me. After a long night out, I’m tired but I force myself to write something in the margins of a book: *The wind is whispering through the trees outside, while I stand inside whispering to the skeleton in my closet.*

Then I crack open my journal. I've been trying to write things down, to remember this strange time.

*Day 33*

*Even though the world is falling to pieces outside, the relative calm and silence of my house is eerie, so disproportionate to the chaotic voices in my head. Momentarily I understand how some people could believe the Covid-19 Pandemic is a hoax. However, when I turn on the news or read articles about personal accounts of people who have been ill, losing their sense of taste or smell, or those who have been in a coma for weeks, floating in and out of hallucinatory dreams, reality hits and it strikes terror in my chest. The death tolls are rising everyday. Hospitals do not have enough ventilators. Doctors and nurses do not have enough personal protective equipment. There is a shortage of nearly everything. My dad went to the store today, and there was no toilet paper. He had to buy paper towels instead! That pales in comparison to the real important shortages, which drastically affect peoples lives, but it provides an example of a subtle humorous twist to modern reality. The one thing that is not in shortage is time. These days I have all the time in the world to do nothing but sit in my house—*

Exhausted, I set my pencil down on the page. I position myself upside down, beside my bookshelf, and leaning against the wall I take down a random book to read. The letters look foreign like ancient Greek. I last about five minutes before my arms feel like giving out and my head begins to spin from all the blood rushing to my head. Maybe tomorrow I will teach myself ancient Greek. I have all the time in the world to do nothing and everything I never thought I had the time to do!

## An Act of Translation

### 1. Language and Time

My mother occasionally mixes up her tenses and our past, present, and futures get blurred. Time becomes fluid and meanders like a stream.

After watching Audrey Hepburn, in *My Fair Lady*, my mother and I took turns repeating, “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” except she struggled to pronounce the rhyming “ain.” After she repeated the phrase several times, the diphthong refusing to dislodge from her tongue, we both laughed, lightheartedly. Horses manes, flying planes, and sunlight lanes are a strain for my mother to pronounce.

A friend in middle school, came over after school one day, and before she left whispered in my ear: “How do you understand your mother when she’s speaking?” I was shocked. I always thought her English was so good. She didn’t speak with an accent. It pained me to hear this girl criticize my mother’s English. It strained our relationship. I never invited her over again.

Later now in college, as I struggle to learn Mandarin, my mother’s first language, I’m constantly mispronouncing my tones. From the textbook I read a sentence aloud to my mother on Facetime, “wo de ma shi lao shi.” I mean to say, *my mom is a teacher*. My mother laughs through the phone: “Remember when you say mom, “ma” needs to be pronounced with a first tone! You used the third tone instead and it sounded like you were saying *my horse is a teacher*.” She also tells me the pitch of my voice needs to reach higher on the ascent of the second tones and that my voice needs to reach deeper on the descent of the fourth tones. Then she tells me that characters with second tones are pronounced longer than characters with fourth tones, which are

shorter. I constantly curse my six-year-old self for refusing to speak Mandarin with my mother. Now I have to learn it the hard way, studying from a textbook and taking college classes.

During the summer, when I was little, we would fly over and visit my mother's family in Yunnan, China. Back then I could speak well enough to get by playing with the neighborhood kids in the streets until around midnight. Running through the neighborhoods playing tag or playing jump rope on a deserted side street near the neighborhood dump. In the summertime, temperatures average around 90 degrees Fahrenheit, but the tropical humidity always made it feel unbearably hotter. Everyone prefers to go out at night when it's cooler. The night life in my mother's hometown is exuberant and vibrant. The air filled with wafting smells from street food stalls selling BBQ skewers and cold rice noodle dishes. My older cousin would sometimes take me out on her motorcycle to little street fairs along the promenade, where I could play games and fish for prizes with a little fishing rod out of inflatable swimming pools. There I'd win a goldfish in a small plastic bag that would die almost immediately when I got back to my grandmother's house.

In China, when I was six, I remember after taking turns riding my friend's scooter, I needed to go to the bathroom. I was trying to explain to her that I needed toilet paper to use at the communal bathroom, but I didn't know the word for poop. I kept repeating that I needed a big bathroom, 我需要一个大厕所 (wo xu yao yi ge da cesuo). She eventually caught on, but she couldn't help doubling over in laughter.

When I came back to America I missed the late night adventures and freedom I had roaming the streets with the neighborhood kids in China, who immediately took me under their wing. I also missed the open sense of community, neighbors who would gather in circles outside



their homes with bowls of rice, everyone sitting around on stools or squatting on the ground, talking together and eating. When my parents and I returned back home to our small town in Oregon, the quiet empty streets of our neighborhood, the cold rainy weather, and the lack of kids my age to play with, oppressed me, even at age six and eight. All the kids on my street stayed secluded in their own houses and backyards, and no one could play on the street because cars were always driving around the corner at alarming speeds. One summer before I was born, my parents had left their old orange Honda parked on the street in front of the house while they were away in China, and when they came back they found it lying in the front yard. Someone had crashed into it, speeding around the corner of the street, and it had flown down the hill into the front yard, only a few feet from the front porch. None of the neighbors said anything when my parents returned. Everyone lived in their own private domain, divided from each other as if by vast stretches of mountainous green hedges and impenetrable tall forbidding fences.

Since there were hardly any children to play with in my neighborhood, I spent my time indoors playing with stuffed animals and watching TV. Normally if I wanted to watch TV on a Saturday morning, even if we were in America, I still had to make the request in Mandarin to my mother, 妈妈我可以看电视吗? (*mama wo ke yi kan dian shi ma?*).

When I started first-grade my parents mentioned to the elementary school that they were worried about my English proficiency level since I spent the entire summer in China, barely speaking any English. Therefore, everyday I was sent out of the classroom for thirty minutes upstairs to work with an old man in spectacles and plaid button up shirts, a volunteer, who asked me to pronounce English words, over and over again from flash cards, along with practicing vowel sounds aloud. As one of three Asian students in the entire grade, I felt the pressure to

conform and fit in. Once when I went to the bathroom, an older girl I didn't know approached me, pulling up the corner of their eyes in an offensive slant and said, "ching chang chong" and asked if I understood what she was saying.

My father always says that my mother was diligent about learning English. When she first arrived in the U.S. she put sticky notes all over the house, labeling everything with its English name. I remember the smooth gray electronic Chinese-English translator my mother carried around everywhere. I enjoyed typing on the tiny buttons and tapping the gray pixelated screen with the stylus, stored in the side, because it reminded me of a Nintendo DS. My mother took learning English seriously, it was no game to her. One early morning as she was going to an English class at the local community college, she drove over black ice, the car flew off the road and into a ditch. The new white Ford was wrecked, and my mother was carried out to the ambulance on a stretcher. They said it was a good thing I wasn't in the car. A tree had smashed the entire backseat. At the hospital my grandmother, who would babysit me while my mom was at classes, held me back as I saw my mom rolled away for minor surgery. I wanted to accompany her, and was upset that I couldn't go in the room with her. For several weeks afterwards, my mother had to wear a white eye patch over her left eye like a pirate. My mother the pirate, did not go on to finish her degree, she decided to stay home with me.

Eventually I responded less and less with my mother in Mandarin, and eventually she gave up trying to speak with me. Maybe because my mother had spent years straining to learn English on her own, she wanted me to fit in easily and be an American girl, born and raised. Maybe that's why she didn't force me to speak Mandarin with her, and for the rest of my life we spoke like Americans at home, even if my father wasn't around and it was only the two of us.

## 2. Hair and Recognition

In our interactions, my mother and I oscillate between heated states of truculence and periods of cool silence where we will retreat to our separate rooms with the insouciance of neighboring trees, not caring if the other gets felled.

One summer, after my Freshman year in college, we had one of these heated arguments. Our neighbor in the apartment downstairs used his broom to knock on the ceiling. I had let it slip out to my mother that I wanted to shave my head. She stormed out the door saying, “It’s your hair. Do whatever you want, I just hope you don’t regret it. Just know, you won’t look like a woman anymore.” I’d been a little nervous to do it, but the argument with my mother had upset me enough that my inhibitions were down. It was now or never. I went directly to my friend Shannon’s house, and we’d lopped off my long hair with scissors until it was shoulder length. Then she went to get her buzz cutter from the bathroom. I felt giddy and excited like when I was twelve and got my ears pierced for the first time. I shut my eyes when Shannon brought out her buzz cutter and ran it down along my scalp. It hummed loudly like a bee. I was afraid she might nick my ears. I flinched slightly when bits of hair fell on my shoulders.

“You’re all done. Look!” Shannon said.

I opened my eyes and saw a Buddhist monk in the mirror. We both giggled. My head felt lighter now without my long hair. It felt liberating, letting go of my hair. Hair that always ended up classifying woman as being “pretty” by society’s standards. I also enjoyed touching my scalp, smooth like a polished stone. The next day I bleached. A week later I dyed it all purple.

Unlike my mother, my father thought it was cool I had shaved my head. He'd been urging me to do it for years. He shaved his head once a year when he went back to his Buddhist monastery in Thailand, even shaving off his eyebrows too.

At first, I didn't recognize myself immediately in the mirror. It was a bit disconcerting since previously my hair had been long, mid-chest length. In the beginning, I wanted to keep appearing feminine, but after shaving my head I didn't look feminine, at least according to societal standards. Gradually my clothing style changed and became more androgynous to include baggier pants, more hoodies and less dresses and skirts.

Later, back at college, random students and teachers in class noting my short dyed hair would refer to me as "they" or as being "non-binary." I hadn't made a public decision to change my pronouns or gender identity, and I didn't mind it, but I found it confusing at first. Eventually, I decided that I didn't mind whether people called me "she" or "they." But I wasn't always confident in expressing my preferences out loud.

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Our hometown, in Oregon is known for hosting a large music festival during the summer, bringing musicians, singers, and orchestras from around the country and internationally. Later that night, after shaving my head, from across the street I saw a couple emerge from the Liberty Theater, having just attended a performance of the Phantom of the Opera. It was late around nine pm, and the streets were only dimly lit by street lamps. The woman was dressed up in high heels and a blue silky dress with a black shawl wrap, the man wore navy blue slacks and a gray dress shirt. I could have been mistaken, but the woman moved the same way my mother moved and walked, and she had my mother's voice when she turned to the man and said, "Do you want to

walk on the Riverwalk a bit before heading back?” They waited for the pedestrian light to go on, then crossed the street, heading towards me and my friends, smoking in front of a closed cafe. Out of the corner of my eye I watched the woman step onto the sidewalk. Her purse slipped out of her hand. I quickly bent to pick it up and handed it back to her. We locked eyes for a second, but my face was half hidden in the darkness. This woman looked like my mother, but was prettier, she wore her hair down, whereas my mother always wore ugly sweat stained headbands because they were more practical and kept her hair out of her face while she was cooking or working. I thought she was my mother but when she said “thank you” there was no sign of recognition in her eyes or voice.

### 3. Voices over the Phone

My mother and I have a solid relationship over the phone. We are close in this way, talking once or twice a week, but in person our relationship can become strained instantaneously switching from amiable to vehemently raised voices in seconds.

My mother called me while I was driving, and I put her on speaker, propping up my phone on the front console. The phone was blocking the temperature control buttons and I kept having to move my mother to readjust the airconditioning, so I was a bit distracted when she said, "I've just arrived back from North Carolina, I'm at PDX airport. I loved it there. I'm going to move there soon."

I always happen to be in the car whenever my mother tells me important news. I was nine when my mother, driving me home from school, without looking at me she said, "I'm divorcing your father." The news did not shock me: they were always arguing and throwing dishes at each other. Maybe she thought the car was a good place to break the news, because I couldn't run away if I got upset, though in reality I took the news calmly. You get to cheat, a bit, telling news in the car, like breaking up with someone over text. A boy in my middle school once jumped out of the car when his parents told him they were moving to Wyoming. He broke his arm. On his last day of school we all signed our names on his blue cast, covering it with sad smiley faces and writing "We will miss you!" and "Come back and visit!" We never did see him again.

"Wait, you just went to North Carolina?" I asked. I was also not that surprised. My mother has a tendency to be secretive. It's a trait I have pilfered from her at a young age, along with other memorabilia: scarves, earrings, and furtive sprays from her Chanel perfume. We don't like telling people our plans because we know they will often try to prevent us from doing what

we want. They will ask questions, try to be kind, but the hesitant tone in their voices will always betray their disapproval. My mother and I are both selfish and private in this way.

“Yes, I just went for a week,” she replies.

“Wow, I’m surprised, you didn’t tell me?”

“Sorry, I guess I’ve been busy and forgot.”

“That’s alright. When are you planning to move?”

“In a month, I think. If I can find a job.”

I was trying to get the temperature right in my car. It was the beginning of June in upstate New York, and even though I only had on a damp bathing suit, from teaching swim lessons, and a towel wrapped around my waist, I still had to crank up the air conditioning. My hair hung around my face in wet separate strands, but it was already beginning to dry. I taught swim lessons twice a week to several three year olds who did not know how to swim and who did not seem to be improving. They each wore a dinosaur, unicorn, and Finding Nemo floating vest, respectively. I would try to start each lesson by having them sit at the edge of the pool, dangle their feet in the water, and kick their legs, churning up white water. However, most times they would refuse to sit down and just go straight for the toys, overspilling in my bag at the side of the pool, so eventually I learned to hide the toys until they got in the water. Then I would try to lure them across the sixteen-yard pool with colorful toy boats and animated chug-a-chug-a steam boat sounds. Once they got in the pool, the dinosaur boy and unicorn girl were fairly good swimmers, with their floating vests on.

However, the boy with the Finding Nemo floating vest, always refused to get into the water, and only his nanny, a middle-aged black woman, could sometimes coax him into the pool,

about twenty minutes into our lesson. Occasionally, the nanny would gently pull him into the water. He would cry and protest, while she cajoled him gently saying, “Baba, doesn’t the water feel nice!” until he grew accustomed to it, becoming serene and silent, while his nanny held him in the shallow end. He didn’t like getting into the pool, but we discovered that sometimes he enjoyed jumping in from the side. It was the only thing that could make him smile, otherwise he had a perpetual scowl on his face. He was the only kid that came to our swim lesson twice a week, the entire summer, without a parent.

That day we’d had a semi-productive lesson, until the dinosaur boy refused to share his dog figurine with the other unicorn girl. He threw a tantrum when we gave the toy to the unicorn girl, and tried to grab it back. When his mother took the toy away, for good, he then turned his attention to the unicorn girl, grabbed a hold of her and wouldn’t let go. His mother told him that it wasn’t nice to grab other people and gave him a time out. Three-year-olds, could be monstrous. When they looked at you, there was barely any recognition in their eyes.

“Why do you want to move?” I asked my mother.

“I need to get away from people, and start somewhere new,” she replied.

“Where in North Carolina are you going to move to?”

I was curious, I wanted her to continue talking. I didn’t reveal that I had my own reservations about her decision.

“It’s a small town, but the people are very nice, and I found a church there that I like. Don’t tell your father. I don’t need him or the Mobergs calling me up and bothering me about it.”



My grandmother still tries to visit my mom when she's in town bearing flowers and pie, as if my mother and my father have not been divorced for over a decade now. Occasionally, my mother will forget to call my grandma by her first name and still call her "mom."

"Okay, I won't. I don't think my dad would care anyways. But can you tell me where you're planning to move to?"

Sometimes my mother's private nature can be annoying because I'll have to pry information out of her like a parent trying to drag sentences out of their rebellious teenager who only comes home to eat and sleep. Sometimes my mother would do that, leave for whole days at a time without telling me where she was going. I never asked, because sometimes I liked to disappear too.

#### 4. Moravian Falls

“Do not tell your father about my plans to move. I’m serious,” my mother said.

I was pulling into the parking lot behind my apartment. My hair was almost completely dry. “Alright, I won’t say anything, but being secretive will only make them that much more interested in knowing your plans,” I said getting out of the car, holding the phone in one hand while holding my towel, wrapped around my waist, in place with the other.

“I’ll tell them later, right before I leave.”

“Fine. What is this place called anyways?”

“Moravian Falls.”

When I got back to my apartment, after showering and putting on some fresh clothes, I looked it up online. A picture of the falls that the town was named after was included in its Wikipedia page. The picture had been taken in late fall, and the atmosphere was bleak. There was a pump house, beside the falls, whose paint was so old and weather beaten that it was virtually impossible to determine what it’s original color had been. The falls itself was not that impressive, probably only twenty feet high with only a trickle of water traveling down its brown rocky slope. While most waterfalls have a vertical drop where the water falls off, Moravian Falls was leaned back on the hillside, like a brown La-Z-Boy reclining chair. The water never actually fell off it.

The town itself was so small that once I cleared its name from google maps, I had to keep zooming in and in on the spot to find it secluded off the freeway, tucked away like an afterthought. It had a population of 1,400 and was about an hour and twenty minutes away from Charlotte, North Carolina. Not completely in the middle of no where, but close.

## **5. Moving Away and Coming Back Home**

My mother had mentioned in passing that she wanted to move, but I had not taken her words seriously. Although our hometown in Oregon paled in comparison to a metropolitan city, with endless shops, attractions, and restaurants, as far as small towns go it was better than most in terms of culture, scenery and things to do.

Our town is rainy and overcast ninety-percent of the year. When you grow up there your whole life you don't realize how oppressive the weather is, but as soon as you leave and live anywhere else for an extensive period of time, you notice the weather's draining force on your mood, and it becomes unbearable to continue living there. My whole life I claimed to love the slightly overcast weather, the cool atmosphere, but when I left for boarding school in California and came back, I could never again love the rainy skies in the same way. I don't know how my mother had handled the change, moving from a subtropical region in Yunnan, China on the border, near Thailand, to one of the dreariest locations on the West Coast of the United States.

The Corps of Discovery had spent three months nearby our town on the Oregon Coast, at Fort Clatsop where it had rained all but twelve days out of the three months they stayed there. On foggy days the town, situated on a peninsula, seemed to be an island out at sea. The town is situated on a hill overlooking the mouth of the Columbia River, and in the past had been nicknamed "Little San Francisco." Sometimes on a blue cloudless sky, it was beautiful, though those days were few and far between. Sunsets however, were were dazzling like vibrant watercolors the sky had painted just for us. There were many brightly painted old Victorian houses situated on the hill of the town with vast views of the river and Washington state on the

other side. Although small, the town had a well developed downtown with many restaurants, bars, cafes, art galleries, bookstores and shops. In the summer time when the weather was nice, tourists came from Portland and Seattle. Many came to visit the “Goonie House” and other film locations associated with Spielberg’s 1980s cult movie. There were several historical museums. The Maritime museum, depicting the town’s fishing industry, was designed with the arching curl of a wave for a roof, where Seagulls perched like sentinels. The Astor Column at the top of the town’s hill was covered with murals of the Corps of Discovery, including Lewis and Clark, Sacagawea, and the Clatsop Indians who had inhabited the region originally. People climb the winding staircase to the top and take pictures of the town, Saddle Mountain, and the Columbia River. Children throw wooden airplanes from the top, that their parents buy for them in the visitor center, and the children trace the planes descent with wide eyes, watching as some crash down at the foot of the column, smashed to pieces, while other, luckier planes get picked up by a draft of wind, disappearing into the treetops below.

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During breaks, when I return home from school, my ear is attuned to picking out the errors in my mother’s English, and I have to make a conscious effort not to correct her outloud.

Returning home and seeing family after months or years away, is a shock not only because I notice the character flaws or signs of their aging, the physical marks of times’s artistry: the gray hairs and the wrinkles on their faces like the dog eared creases on a beloved book. However, I also get carried back in time to my past self, who I was as a child when I lived with my parents, whether I were subordinate or rebellious, at certain times, this old self returns to me regardless, and within a few minutes the old frictions, the tears in the relationship that were filled

in by time and space, open up like fresh wounds. Once again we peirce each other mercilessly with words and blood is spilled. Maybe now that I've grown a bit older and wiser, I hold back my tongue more and let my parents wound me a little, letting them take a splash of blood as a sacrifice, a due of respect paid for by the young to the old. They are not greedy, and we don't see each other enough to enjoy wasting time arguing about trivial matters anymore. We've learned the value of time, even though we can't stop it from constantly spilling through our fingers like running water. Even spilt drops, are not entirely wasted and will water the Earth, allowing something to grow once we are gone.

## 6. A Solid Rock

Eventually, before she had made a public announcement, my father's family found out about her plans. She stored some of my things at my great uncle's house, and I guess that's how the word got out. My father's family already believed that my mother was unhinged. You could say part of her unstableness comes from her unwavering relationship to God. Her devout faith is both a marvel and horror to witness.

One fall weekend, my mother had been visiting my grandma, who attends church every Sunday and whose father was a minister, and gone on a rampage tearing down all her Halloween decorations, denouncing them as devil worship.

My mother, grew closer to Jesus, after her divorce, and after I went to boarding school, leaving her alone. In a country where she has no blood relations, the church congregation became my mother's extended family, and I could not blame her for wanting some solid rock to cling to in a country that was not originally her own.

Through the years my mother went from being a Lutheran, to a Protestant Disciple of Christ, to observing Shabbat, eating Kosher, and baking Challah bread. I never asked about the inexplicable shifts in her faith. I was unsure how to classify my mother's extreme evangelism, I never tried to understand the deeper complexities of it, until I watched a Curb Your Enthusiasm episode where Larry David was joking about Jews for Jesus, and Eureka! I realized my mother was following Messianic Judaism.

My father's sister tried to do an intervention, which consisted of her calling my mother on the phone, shouting and saying my mother was a complete idiot for not getting vaccinated. She acted impetuously, of course, you don't get someone to stop doing drugs by just telling them

they are an idiot and should stop using. It totally ruined my plans to subtly unravel the compelling conspiracies that my mother had consumed as truth, and which infiltrated her beliefs, preying on her fear of authority and liberal ideas. I had been reading up on articles online about how to gently pull your QAnon friends and family out from the conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

My mother's religious beliefs are unorthodox, in their extremity and intensity. She follows her religion like a blind person being guided on a stranger's arm, placing complete trust in it. I never could. Attending Sunday school, even from a young age, when they asked if any of us wanted to take the Lord Jesus Christ into our hearts, I would ask for my sins to be forgiven, and never felt any different afterwards.

For me to have faith in something, I must also see its contradictions and failings. If I ever decided to return to the religion of my youth, which I highly doubt, I'd have to do it like Dostoevsky who wrote his highly polemical "Grand Inquisitor" chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov*, voicing all his misgivings about the Christian faith and God, listing them off, so convincingly and thoroughly that many who read it, doubted if he was a Christian at all.

My mother has complete faith in the Bible, takes its words literally. It is the only thing she read. Almost every line in her Bible is underlined or highlighted. She wakes up at 5 am to pray and consumes the Bible voraciously like a famished person who has not touched food for days.

During the Covid Pandemic, my mother fasted for forty days and nights, steadfastly like Jesus in the desert, with a church she followed online, as a means to show solidarity with the state of fear and uncertainty enveloping the world. Throughout this time she continued to work at the post office, and cook food for me at home. She even joined me at the table and talked with

me while I ate. She was already a small woman, so it was jarring to see her becoming thinner. I remember hugging her once, and I felt her body give out slightly as if she was on the verge of losing consciousness.

When my father heard the news, about my mother's move, he didn't seem to care. He had divorced the woman over ten years ago. His only words were, "I don't know who this woman is, but she is not the same woman I married."

My grandma, on the other hand, was completely baffled and aghast when she heard the news. She kept pestering me to give her my mother's new address, even though I honestly didn't know it. She was relentless, kept calling me and saying: "Should I send your mother a bit of money?" My grandma did not understand, and while I would never move to a small town, in North Carolina, I could understand my mother's need to do so. The need to get away from people even the well-meaning friends, who hand out life advice and judgment like those people trying to hand out sales catalogs to every passerby on the street.

At a certain point you feel the urge to move, like an incessant itch. It can become unbearable to leave the house and constantly run into someone you know at the store, Starbucks, or in the car beside you while stopped momentarily at an intersection waiting for the light to change. There is no anonymity in small towns, and the state of always being seen can be exhausting. Eventually like a young person who has gone to school from kindergarten to twelve grade with the same kids, everyone feels the need to graduate and get away from the people who remember all of their embarrassing adolescent moments. Ironically, my mother was moving from one small town to another. Moravian Falls was about six times smaller than the town we had lived in on the Oregon coast, but the plus side was that nobody knew her there.



## **7. Reinventing the Self**

My mother and I are the same in that we like to reinvent ourselves. After a few years of living in one place we feel restless, tied down by our friends and acquaintances, and then we know it is time to leave. My mother works at the post office reception desk, so she's constantly seeing people all day long, greeting them, and having to make polite small talk. My mother's escape from the mundanity of daily life was when twice a week, she would go to the Performing Arts Center for theater rehearsals. She loved being on the stage and transforming herself into someone unrecognizable.

As a child, she would drag me along to every theater practice, and I would sit down in the seats below the stage playing with my little horse figurines. At first she had only side parts, but eventually after a few years and dozen of plays, my mother's skill and confidence grew and she began taking on lead roles. My mother had initially joined the local theater group to improve her English when she first moved to the US. My summer vacations growing up, after my parents divorced and my mother could no longer afford flights to China, had consisted of taking long road trips down to Ashland, Oregon to watch Shakespeare plays and modern play renditions of Jane Austen novels. Sometimes my mother would have me read lines with her, and we would stand in the living room acting out scenes together. It got to be that by the time I would go see the live performances, I knew a large portion of the script by heart and could whisper the lines under my breath while I sat in the audience alone in the dark.

She would even direct the Christmas plays at church, and I would act in them with the other children, as a Shepherd, the virgin Mary, or one of the Three Kings. She would start rehearsal practices two months before, and get all the little kids to stay an extra hour on Sundays

to practice. She would usually write the scripts herself, incorporating lines from the Gospel of Luke.

## **8. The Visit**

The cost of living was lower in North Carolina. My mother could rent a three bedroom house for almost the same price as our two bedroom apartment in Oregon. There she would finally achieve the anonymity she desired, far from the probing fingers of my grandmother and my dad's other relatives; there she would finally be surrounded by religious minded people like her, some who believed that there should be no demarcation between the church and public life, so that just as God is said to ubiquitous, his name should be praised everywhere, at schools, YMCAs, restaurants, and even gas stations.

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The first day I got to North Carolina, I drove twelve hours straight, down from upstate New York. It was supposed to only take ten, but the trip was prolonged due to a severe rainstorm. Everyone driving on the road had to slow down. Visibility was poor because with the relentless downpour none of the windshield wipers could keep up with the rain. I've driven across country numerous times with my father, and have learned that the best way to travel is with minimal amounts of food or liquids in your system; your body kicks into survival mode and you can just drive. I only stopped twice. Once to inspect the damage after I was drove over a chair in the middle of the road, and then once to get coffee and pee.

An hour into my drive on the freeway, the car in front of me quickly changed lanes, and there in front was a wooden chair lying in the middle of the road. There were cars on both sides of me, so I had no choice but to drive straight over it. The chair made horrific scrapping sounds smashing under the car; afterwards I pulled over to investigate the damage; miraculously there was only one small dent in the paint on the front hood, right above the grille.

I had left New York at 9 am and when I got to my mother's house around 9 pm, my head and eyes hurt as if I had spent the entire day on my computer staring at a garish electronic screen. When it began raining, driving on the narrow winding roads had become dangerous with semi-trucks and impatient drives on all sides. I had to focus intently, and avoid playing music. At some point I lost track of how many wrecks I passed by on the road.

From the way my mother had described things on the phone, I thought she was living idyllically in a small house in the countryside, and yet in reality I found her house to be directly off of the main road through a small run-down town.

My mother met me at the door and helped me carry my things inside. Even though I wasn't hungry and hadn't eaten anything all day except some stale pieces of banana bread, I ate all the leftovers my mom had saved for me. Shredded carrot sauteed in sesame oil, and chopped up liver cooked in ginger, garlic, and spices, served with white rice. When I was a kid I hated the mushy texture and pungent taste of liver, but I didn't care now, and was stuffing it in my mouth. It was good just to taste my mother's food again. It had been over a year since I had last seen her. Due to teaching swim lessons all summer, to children too young to be vaccinated for Covid-19, I had told my mother that she couldn't visit me in New York. She wasn't vaccinated herself.

That night I fell asleep almost immediately, but I had restless dreams. I awoke the next morning to loud voices emanating from the floor below. Later, I discovered the old landlord lived downstairs in the basement, and he must have been hard of hearing, because he had the volume cranked up too high on his TV. Over the phone, my mother had failed to mention this detail with the landlord, only made creepier by that fact that he had a house twenty minutes away, and yet preferred to sleep in the basement below her!

After breakfast and coffee my mom offered some possible suggestions for things to do during my two week visit. We planned a trip to visit Boone Mountain about forty minutes away, where we could eat lunch at a mountain resort, and visit some of her friends from Church. I checked online to see if I could schedule a Covid-19 booster shot and was surprised to find I could schedule an appointment for that day, two hours later. In New York, everybody was trying to get vaccinated, and it had been impossible for me to schedule one at the local CVS near Bradley College. My mother was skeptical, “I thought you already got two shots? After this third shot, you shouldn’t get another one. This is way too much already!”

As I headed out to get my vaccine, walking down the steps of the house, the neighbor’s dog came barking up to me, and I quickly backed up the stairs. Instead of calling his dog away, the neighbor, dressed in basketball shorts and flip flops, was adamant that his dog and I become best friends. “She doesn’t bite” he said reassuringly. I walked hesitantly towards his dog, and she came charging up to me, jumping up onto my jeans. Finally, he realized his dog would not get down, and he grabbed the dog’s collar, to pull her away.

Being polite, I replied, “It’s okay,” smiled, relented and petted the dog’s head. “You must be Faith’s daughter,” he said. I gave him a quizzical look and replied, “I think you have me confused with someone else, I’m Li Jing’s daughter.”

He came to the realization sooner than I. “Oh, I only know her by Faith. You sure do look a lot like her...I’m Nick, by the way. By girlfriend and I live in the house next door!” He stretched out a hand, and instinctively I shook it. Afterwards I realized it was the first time I had shook anyone’s hand since the pandemic had started.

“I’m Amelia. Nice to meet you,” I added walking slowly towards my car. He waved goodbye, and headed back to his yard with his dog. It is bad to make broad generalizations about people, but I realized that since only about half of the population in North Carolina was vaccinated, my mother not included, it was likely he was not vaccinated. I had felt a bit uncomfortable when he had walked up so close to me, but I didn’t have the guts to ask him to step back when he was talking.

When I sat down in my car, rubbing my hands together vigorously with sanitizer, it hit me that my mother had taken a new name. I recalled the waterbottle I had seen standing on the kitchen counter with the name “Faith” written vertically down the side, in black Sharpie, in my mother’s handwriting. I could understand why she did it. Whenever anybody at college asked me where I was from instead of saying I was from my small town in Oregon, I just said I was from the Bay Area, California. Not a complete lie. I had gone to boarding school there for four years, sometimes even staying there for entire summers instead of going home, jumping around from one friend’s house to another.

At CVS, I had to wait while the pharmacist tried calling my insurance company in New York. It was almost Christmas and someone with an artistic inclination had decorated the pharmacy with orange plastic pill bottles, converted to look like Christmas ornaments, along with paper cut-out snowflakes, which they hung down from the ceiling with string. I was shocked when the pharmacist spoke with a thick Southern drawl. The accent caught me off guard. Just yesterday I’d been at college in New York, where kids from the West coast spoke like people on TV and those from New England and the surrounding states, spoke with East coast accents that were barely perceptible. Bradley was a very liberal, liberal arts college. Lots of the

students there had Bernie Sanders stickers on the bumpers of their cars, or had stickers of him from that meme where Bernie is sitting aloof from crowds at the presidential inauguration with his legs and mittened hands criss-crossed, wearing a blue mask, slightly askew, on his face. I'd only come across one or two Republicans at Bradley, they were an extremely rare species to find. We didn't attract many students from the midwest or South, and those who did usually came from big cities. Funnily enough, my friend from England said he'd known right away I was Oregon, explaining I had a Pacific Northwest accent, though only a few of my other friends from the US could hear it.

While one pharmacist stayed on the phone trying to call my insurance company, another started assisting the older woman behind me who was also there to get her Covid-19 booster shot. I noticed too, while this other pharmacist was helping this older woman, asking her preliminary medical questions, that people spoke more slowly in the South. However, I had to say the people were friendly. The older woman made small talk with the pharmacist, explaining how she had been fastidious with her Covid vaccines because of her Diabetes, and the doctor seemed genuinely engaged in the conversation. When the pharmacist came out to give me the shot he asked about my school in New York. I'd explained earlier that my insurance was through my college there. He asked me what my major was, and I told him I was studying literature, and that I wanted to become a professor in the future. He told me that his niece was a professor, teaching political science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He said his niece found teaching to be a rewarding job, although she was finding it difficult to obtain a tenureship.

When I got home from CVS, I jokingly told my mother that she would probably develop a Southern accent. She wasn't amused: *No, there are some things that don't change!* But I knew

better. I recalled how the first year when my cousin had moved with her family to Texas she didn't have an accent, but three years later when I saw her it was pronounced and noticeable. I knew that some day soon, I'd visit my mother and I'd discern a slight Southern drawl in her voice or notice how her vowels were stretching and elongating themselves. The thought unsettled me, like the thought of growing old, imagining wrinkles lining my face, getting gray hairs, and having aching joints. It would inevitably occur, I just didn't want to imagine it yet. Eventually, my mother's voice would become unrecognizable to me. I'd hear her voice one day, on the phone, or see her in person, after being gone for several years, and it would sound foreign to me like a stranger's voice.

I didn't ask my mother to explain her new name. I knew she had been waitressing long hours at Olive Garden, struggling to make ends meet, while only being paid \$2.50 an hour. She told me herself that she had to rely primarily on tips. I could hardly believe it, but I looked online, and saw that the minimum wage for tip earning employees was \$2.13 per hour, with the expectation that workers could make up to \$7.25 per hour with tips, which is the state's minimum wage. I assumed she had adopted a new name because the restaurant manager or some co-worker suggested she would obtain more tips if she took on an English name, one that was easier for people to pronounce. Even though my mother's name, Li Jing, literally translates to "clear crystal" I could imagine all the customers garbling her name on her first day waitressing, or wrinkling their foreheads trying to read her nametag, so that by the next day she did away with it entirely. Then maybe my mother decided to just stick with "Faith" since then, less people would ask questions on her background. There would be less annoying questions such as, "No, like, besides Oregon, where are you actually from?" People would have more faith in believing she



was an American, and not a Chinese citizen. For so long, my mother had been considered a “foreigner,” one of “them,” clearly evident in the condescending or patronizing tones in which some people used to address her, even after years of knowing her. But now, it must have felt satisfying that with the switch of a name, she was starting to be considered one of “us.”

My mother is creating her own American identity, and soon she will become the author of her own story. It’s up to her whether to write the rest of her life in Chinese or English or a mixture of both.

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When I was a child, my mother spoke Chinese with me, but as I grew older I spoke it less and less, until my tongue could barely remember the traces of it, recalling it only as a familiar taste, one I knew but couldn’t identify. Eventually I struggled to say even simple phrases on the phone to my relatives when my mother called them during holidays, or I’d shake my head and expressing that I was too busy to talk, when I was merely too embarrassed to speak. Our Chinese heritage always took a backseat, as if it were an afterthought to our American identity. My best friend, whose parents were both Chinese, even once said to me years ago, “You know you’re not really Chinese” and in some sense she was right. I had been raised almost entirely American.

My mother told me that she always knew she would move to the US. From a young age, she was drawn to American music, movies, and culture. Sometimes, I wonder if the real reason she married my father was just so she could get a Green card, although that’s probably not entirely true either, they were married for fourteen years, and that’s a long time to live a lie. As my mother’s daughter, raised with the privileges of being born and raised in the US, I knew my role was to try and understand, and not to judge her harshly like the rest of the world.

In North Carolina, things weren't perfect, but she finally had a house for herself in America, even if it was a rental. *Eventually, I'll buy my own house*, she'll say with conviction, and I believe her words, noting the guest bedroom, still filled with unemptied boxes, as if she has just moved in, or is about to move out. In North Carolina, my mother is able to reinvent herself on her own standards, among new people, with a new English name. Although at times, I couldn't comprehend her need to do so, I could understand her yearning for a fresh, new beginning, like when she first moved to the US over twenty-five years ago.

Although sometimes I worry my mother is effacing her Chinese heritage, probably because I have, who am I to judge her actions? Maybe my mother is right when she says there are things that never change and things that one never forgets. I don't know her inner thoughts, maybe they're in both Mandarin and English. Maybe her whole life has been a process of translation, moving from China to the US, moving from a daughter, to a wife, and to a mother, moving from Chinese to English, moving from the west coast to the east coast, changing her name from Li Jing to Faith. Maybe, in some ways, her whole life has been an act of translation, in which the spirit of the original mother tongue has always been retained.

### A Collection of College Students

1. Ruby, the girl who rolled me a cigarette in the library had slender fingers, which moved deftly like the limbs of a spider wrapping up dead insects. Her pink tongue flicked out of her lips for a second to seal the rolling paper, and then she twirled the cigarette out to me delicately. Her fingernails were painted a slate blue. When we stepped outside the library, she asked me if I could light her cigarette, she said she had some trouble with her shoulder. I fiddled with the lighter, but I had to try several times before I got it because of the gust of wind, and because I wasn't used to using one. Finally I was able to light the cigarette. Then I asked her about her bum shoulder. "Oh, it's nothing!" she said much too forcefully. I realized it was a sensitive topic, and didn't push it further. I kept glancing at her nails, they were the same color as the car I was saving up to buy. I smoked my first cigarette with her outside of the double doors of the library.

The previous night, there had been freezing rain, which had clung to the bare tree branches, wrapping everything in a crystalline layer. Icicle stalactites hung down from the eaves of buildings, and everything under the streetlamps glistened in the light. We spoke briefly, shivering in the cold, then headed back inside. I noticed, and that when we headed inside she used her left arm to push open the door, although she had used her right hand earlier to roll the cigarette, probably because of her bum shoulder.

I continued to run into Ruby in the library. We both hid out from crowds, preferring to study amidst the quiet solitude of the fourth floor like monks cloistered in a medieval monastery, pouring over musty manuscripts, staying up late into the night, reading, and not stopping until their candles had burned out. The ticking of the clock on the library wall, even resembled the

sound of viscous wax oozing down onto a wooden table and then dripping down in thick globs onto the floor.

Ruby was unremarkably pretty with short blond hair, stopping severely at her shoulders. However a scintillating glint shone in her dark eyes, hinting that there was something remarkable about her which wasn't easily discernible on the surface. She was of average height, neither tall or short, and of a slim build. She moved her limbs deftly like every action were premeditated with the precision of a master chess player. But there was something restrained in her character, also, evident in the way she moved her left arm in short swift movements like an energetic music conductor or as if it was too painful to move.

I discovered she was a Sophomore, when we took a literature seminar together my Freshman year on the Ukrainian-born Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector. I admired Ruby's confidence, she always spoke up in class with a clear authoritative voice. She had an instinct for latching onto the most intriguing sections in the reading, and weaving a brilliant strand of interpretation that carried a compelling argument. When the professor called on her to read aloud, she captivated us with her mellifluous voice. The entire class felt mesmerized by her voice that carried with it the spell of Lispector's words.

2. He was my boyfriend's best friend. A writer, a fan of Roberto Bolaño and Julio Cortazar, and the one who introduced me to Carmen Maria Machado's writing. In conversations we always went on and on about our favorite authors, books, and short stories. He had attractive dark eyes, a pierced nose, and dressed well in jeans, t-shirts, and layered corduroy shirts. He had a beautiful rope string necklace that he had bought at a street shop while studying abroad in

Mexico. Strung on the necklace was an obsidian pendant wrapped with silver wiring, a black star hanging from his neck.

One sunny day, him, and the girl who would become his girlfriend, were trying to do bridges in the grass in front of the library. The soon-to-be girlfriend was doing a bridge, her belly facing the sky, her shirt sliding down, revealing her pale stomach, her gaze in the opposite direction. I had paused on my way to the library, and was talking to him about relationship troubles, obliquely referring to his best friend, who I wasn't yet dating. He made some suggestion and then looked me in the eyes and said, "I know, I fall in love easily too, with everyone."

I had read several of his short stories and been impressed. He was a decent writer: he had an instinct for creating good metaphors, his descriptions were succinct and emphatic, his characters appeared as real people flawed and cowardly, and he put them through excruciating circumstances. However, later while reading a short story by David Foster Wallace, I noted that the first sentence sounded similar. I realized I had read Wallace's sentence before, as the initial sentence in one of his short stories. The sentence had stuck in my mind because it was odd. The boy had plagiarized it, along with the initial theme and setting from Wallace's story. I felt misled, I had thought highly of his writing. Why is it that we allow ourselves to be deceived by the exterior beauty of things? Beauty that will fade away like vibrant colors dissipating on cut flowers.

3. Leaving my yoga class one day, I saw a crowd gathered at the gym window, facing the pool. I was curious to see what had caused these gym rats to abandon their squat racks and dumbbells. Drawing closer, I realized they were staring at a girl who stood on the edge of the high dive

board in the swimming pool. She stood at the edge, staring into the water as if a group of sharks were swirling below. The diving board must have only been 10 feet high, but her facial expression was as if she were standing at the edge of a fifty-foot precipice. Her teammates were standing on deck, some gathered at the far end of the pool, some around at the base of the diving board, all shouting encouragement, waving for her to jump in. I turned, asking someone how long she had been standing there. “At least ten minutes,” someone replied.

Some dude: I can’t believe this chick can’t jump in. Like what’s her problem?

Another dude: She’s probably just afraid of heights.

Some dude: Then why would she get up on the diving board in the first place?

Me: We always want to believe we are braver than we actually are.

The girl took a few tentative steps back on the board and gripped the handrails for a few seconds, deliberating on the drop, but her teammates only shouted all the louder. She could not climb down the ladder without the shame of letting everyone down. She walked back to the edge of the diving board and peered into the pool. She took off her swim cap and tossed it into the water like a cliff jumper tossing down a stone to break the surface tension. The girl stood as if on the edge of a precipice or like a lone penguin perched on a slowly melting iceberg out at sea. Another ten minutes went by and more people gathered at the window, none of us could look away. The girl looked up towards us and seeing everyone through the window watching her, she cringed like a bug about to be squashed, then quickly looked away. I recognized her face. It was Ruby! I had never seen her like this so cowardly, so scared, all her confidence deflated. I felt like I was seeing something I wasn’t supposed to see like the incipient drafts of a writer’s first stories before the story’s essence had solidified in their mind, something other people might diminish as

insignificant. An ugly naked draft. Then standing erect, steeling herself with a deep breath, Ruby leaped into the water like a suicide jumper flinging themselves from a building.

4. The boy on his hands and knees reaching under the front of his car with a sharp knife to cut the loose piece of plastic that was hanging down like a painful hangnail. The front bumper cover had been ripped out of place several weeks ago when he had pulled too far into a parking space and the bottom of the bumper had scraped against the curb. The car looked wrecked, but surprisingly it was driveable. Then it had snowed and he had backed the car out too quickly over a tiny hill of snow behind the car, ripping down a piece of plastic covering, underneath the bumper. The plastic had dragged on the road when he drove out of the parking lot. He had to drive back and cut it off. Kneeling down on the ground he looked like a farrier, fixing the shoe on a horse, using a hoof pick to clean out the dirt, then using clippers to trim the rough edges.

This was his first car and he had prided himself on taking good care of it, washing it once a month, vacuuming the floor inside, and taking it into the shop every so often for a check up at the auto shop. He had lost his virginity in that car, and when he was dispirited he would go on car rides late at night, blasting music with the moon roof down. It was a white Audi and had been his father's old car, the first major purchase his father had made when he had gotten promoted and started making money at work. His father had gifted him the car after he got accepted into Bradley College. His own father had never gone to college. However, when his father first handed him the keys he had jokingly remarked, "I bet you fifty bucks, you're gonna wreck this car within the next year!" After the parking incident, the son took the car to auto repair shop for a cost analysis. The entire front bumper would have to be replaced and, including labor, the repairs would cost around fifteen hundred dollars.

The boy had decided not to drive home for spring break, he couldn't let his father see the state the car was in now. Unlike the father of the prodigal son, who embraced his son with open arms and prepared a feast in celebration of his return, the boy's own father would just look away with disgust and mutter something about how his son couldn't even park a car properly. His useless son, with his head up his ass, studying all the time. The boy would try to explain that he hadn't crashed into anyone else, that the car was still driveable, but his father would make fun of him for getting into a single-vehicle accident, as if it would have been better if the son had at least crashed into another car.

It reminded him of his father's other teasings about him being a cross country runner, and refusing to try out for football his freshman year of high school, and instead opting for what his father called, a safer and less intimidating sport. He father would then sometimes say half-seriously, "My son can't take a punch, he shies away from a raised fist!" It didn't matter if he was a star runner or that he got recruited to run at Bradley, in his father's eyes he would never amount to a real athlete.

If his father saw the car, he would make some offensive comment and then retreat with a scowl on his face to the garage, where he would sit with a can of cold beer in hand, more empty cans gathering at his feet, watching football on the flat screen TV. Back in the day, his father had been the star quarterback in high school. But due to insufficient funds his father was unable to attend college, his parents wouldn't co-sign on the student loans, and even though he had gotten a scholarship for Football at a prestigious liberal arts college, he was never able to achieve his athletic aspirations. Later his father would remark, "It's okay, my friend Robert, who ended up playing football for that team, quit after his first year because everyone was doing steroids and



were all bulked up. Robert was afraid of getting his knee blown out, so he quit! His father had always been slightly condescending towards him for running cross country, even though he was now team captain in college. His father never acted impressed. He didn't consider it to be a real sport, because it "wasn't a game" and there wasn't any physical contact. With the TV on the garage was impenetrable to sound, and there father would sit, distant and unreachable like a king on his beach chair throne.

The boy decided it would be better to spend spring break alone in his room on campus. His girlfriend had invited him to come stay with her family, but he wanted to stay on campus so he could have access to the art studio and work on his paintings. Browsing books on the fourth floor he ran into a girl, reading intently. He thought he was one of the only people on campus. He asked her what she was reading, *Night Skies With Exit Wounds*, by Ocean Vuong. Since they were one of the few on campus, he ran into her again, carrying the same poetry book. This time she was basically through with it, and he asked if he could borrow it for the rest of break. He read it and was left astounded. When he gave the girl back the book, they ended up talking about the poems in it for a long time, then she had lent him another poetry book, which he devoured. He wasn't even initially attracted to this girl, which was why he didn't feel guilty spending time so much time with her in the beginning, when he still had a girlfriend.

5. The star swimmer on the swim team had developed a bad shoulder injury and could only kick during swim practices, her legs churning up waves of white water, while her arms gripped the board tensely, as she enviously watched her teammates swimming, getting faster, as she regressed. She had a good coach who had told her to stop before she caused herself permanent damage. He said it wasn't worth pushing through the pain, for another school record or even a

chance at qualifying for the NCAA championships. He had seen several athletes with the same injury and the ones that had not quit could barely lift their arms above their shoulder and it took months of rehab before they could lift even a backpack with that arm. She had not wanted to quit, she had already been swimming with the injury for over a year and had become used to the pain, but her coach had talked to her parents and they had convinced her to stop swimming. For weeks after leaving the team she felt anxious and restless.

She met with her swim coach, explaining that she wanted to do something even if she couldn't swim. He suggested she try out for the cross country team. After her first practice she threw up. She had tried to keep up with the other girls, and had overexerted herself even though it was only supposed to be a light run. But she was competitive and had wanted to keep up with them.

After her fifth practice she went into the bathroom, shut the stall, collapsed on the toilet and cried. Her legs were so sore she could barely walk down the stairs from class. She had started developing blisters on her pinky toes, a teammate had mentioned that she probably needed a better pair of running shoes, and she had shin splints. She would have to go to the athletic trainer now before every practice to get her arches wrapped, and would have to rub ice-filled Dixie cups over her shins after each run. Today the athletic trainer had taken out a metal stick and using an ointment had scraped down her calves. It was called the Graston technique, and worked by breaking up the hard knots in her muscles, but she had to grip the sides of her seat and clench her teeth from the pain. She missed swimming, the feeling of weightlessness she felt in the cool water, and the confidence she always felt when she got up on the blocks to race. Running made her lungs and legs ache. The continual impact of her feet on

hard ground was not a sensation she was used to, she missed the ease and comfort of water. She didn't know what she was doing on the cross country team, she was like a fish floundering on land.

When she left the bathroom, she ran into Clay, the boy she had lent her poetry books to during spring break. She felt a bit uneasy it must have been obvious, from her face that she had been crying, she had forgotten to wash her face and her cheeks must have been stained. He had a Bradley Cross Country jersey on, and so did she. His eyes lit up, and he remarked that he didn't know she was on the team. She explained that it was only her first week. She rubbed her hurt shoulder and explained that her swim coach had recommended she try running instead, since swimming was killing her shoulder. Clay appeared genuinely sympathetic, and asked how she was handling the transition. "Honestly," she said, "It's sort of miserable. My shins are on fire, constantly when I run, but I want to keep going. I know it will get better if I can just pull through these first initial weeks." She surprised herself by her own tenacity, she hadn't felt, entirely as confident as the words she had expressed, but somehow saying them outloud made her feel more motivated and sure of herself..

"I'm sure you'll get to the other side. Running is hard at first, but eventually your body adapts and it becomes fun. Though it does take a lot of time and patience to get there," Clay said.

"Okay, I'll take your word for it," Ruby sighed.

Later that night she ran into Clay at dinner and he invited her to sit with him and a couple of other men and women on the Bradley Cross Country Team. It was nice to talk to them outside of practice. She realized that she had been so stressed while running that she had hardly even spoken to any of the women on the team. During dinner, she realized they were not that different

from her old swim teammates. They were passionate about running, but like most athletes at Bradley, they definitely had other interests, and placed priorities on their work in the classroom. Talking to everyone she learned they were talented painters, photographers, musicians, writers, dancers, and actors. She explained that she herself, enjoyed writing poetry. Clay asked if he could read some of her work, she said she would read him a poem of hers if he took her to see his art studio after diner. As they left the dining hall, Clay explained a painting he was working on, of a portrait of another boy on the team, then they went to see it. “Wow,” she said, looking at all the portraits, covering every inch of white space on the wall, he explained they were mainly his friends and family, done in a multitude of various colors.

6. The boy who is short with dark curly hair and a black palm tree tattoo on his pointer finger. I met him once sitting outside of the campus dining hall. He was a film major and musician. That day he wore a leopard print shirt and a pretty necklace, of several wrapped pearl necklaces wound tightly together, and I wore a black denim dress. The second time we saw each other, at a party, we were both wearing the same clothes we had worn the first time we met. I couldn't remember his name, and he reminded me saying, “It rhymes with sky.” When a girl came up to speak with him I drew spiraling circles on his shoulder, writing an unspoken message to him. We danced late into the night, until we were two of the last people at the party.

The third time we met he told me he was from the Hamptons. He used to play lacrosse, it was hard to believe. We were standing in the garden, it was a bright day and dozens of monarch butterflies were lounging among the lavender. He was barefoot, wearing loose cargo pants, and his hair hung in luxuriant curls. Under the sun, his necklace of pearls dazzled on his tan skin, as if he were some half-divine son of Poseidon. I asked if he wanted to hang out sometime, but he

look away, saying he was spending time on himself that semester, and didn't want to get involved with anyone.

The fourth time I saw him studying in the library with a pretty girl from the soccer team. I have haven't seen him since, but I always see this girl around, wearing his pearl necklace.

7. The boy who is tall, with long hair, and beautiful facial features. I met him at a friend's birthday dinner. We talked briefly and I gathered that he was obsessed with mushrooms, and was planning on using fungi to decompose his trailer. He explained how learning about mushrooms had changed his ideas of gender and sexuality, claiming that some species of mushrooms have over thousands of different gender identities. It was clear he could go on talking about mushrooms forever, but luckily more people walked into the room and he got pulled into another conversation.

Later during dinner, he told everyone a story about how once when he was selling edibles at a park in NYC, he noticed one of his professors walking by, and they made eye contact. The next day he went to a different park and saw a woman rolling on the ground kissing an attractive man with long dreads. The woman turned his way, they made eye contact, and he recognized her as the same professor he had encountered the previous day. At school they both never acknowledged what they saw each other doing in the city.

Realizing he could talk about more than mushrooms, I began talking to him again, and he spoke about how during Covid he hiked all over with the Catskills with his ex-girlfriend. Apparently they were still close friends. Later during dinner, he got up to take a call, and returned, explaining it was his ex. She had been driving when a bird hit her windshield and died. She had been distraught and called him. He explained that she had gone to Bradley as well. I

asked what her name was and learned she had my mother's name. The only other woman I've known to share this name was a female writer from China in the early 1920s who has been overlooked for years but whose writing is now beginning to be recognized.

8. It's inexorable avoiding exes at Bradley College, even without meaning to, you will overhear gossip about them and their new partners. Before dinners, after my ex and I had just broken up, I'd fuss over my outfit, knowing that there was a high probability of running into him (God I hate small colleges sometimes). I'd be equally dreading to see him and eager to show off how good I looked without him. Then I'd scrutinize myself in the mirror for minutes, picking at my faults, like ubiquitous lint on a black dress. Where was my lint roller? Of course, I lent it to him and he never returned it! Along with all the poetry books I lent him. From him, I'd learned how to be a lepidopterist, and now like Nabokov pinning up his butterflies for study, I was obsessed with capturing and killing all the beautiful innocent things.

9. I see Clay all over campus with Ruby. Now the tips of her short blonde hair are dyed slate blue. He would never touch a cigarette in the past, but now I see them together, smoking outside the library. When he is with her, he might glance at me, nod his head silently, but never say hello. They go everywhere together. They are inseparable like conjoined twins. It's funny, he had ended things, saying he wanted to be free, meet different people, enjoy being single, and not tied down to anyone. He doesn't seem so free anymore.

I swear they are even starting to look alike, him and this girl. It's funny how that works, similarly to how pets begin to take on their owner's idiosyncrasies. He has started adopting her clothing style. He's begun wearing grungier clothes, letting his hair grow out long, trading in his expensive Patagonia fleeces for thrifted plaid flannels, and swapping his preppy khakis for

distressed jeans. He pierced his nose! He's even gotten a tattoo, which he'd swear he'd never do since his wealthy grandparents would exclude him from their will. His tattoo is on his left forearm, a black widow spider, with a ruby red stripe on its belly.

When he's alone, rarely, he will shoot me a smile, make small talk, even ask me how my classes are going. We ran into each other at a party once, about a year after we had already ended things and being slightly intoxicated I asked him, "Why Ruby?" the music was too loud for him to hear me the first time so, I repeated it again, almost yelling. He grew quiet for a moment, looked away saying, "Something inside of me changed when I first met Ruby. I don't know, she was strong and vulnerable, and comfortable being both at the same time. She made me realize I didn't have to put up a front all of the time, that I didn't have to choose to be one person or the other."

Although I was still bitter, I thought I understood what he meant, but he was also partly speaking out of his ass. He had hurt me, both of them had, but I tended to blow things out of proportion in my head, taking every action against me so personally. I was constantly creating stories about people in my head, when really I had no idea what they were thinking. Moreover, I was always judging people, all the time based off these criterias. I myself was always trying to put on tough facades, trying to present as one person one day and another the next. Trying on different faces and personas like putting on a new style of clothes everyday. It was exhausting, and only made me more uncomfortable and insecure with myself. Then I remembered what I wanted to ask him.

"Hey, do you think I could get my poetry books back?"

"Yeah, for sure! I keep meaning to return them to you, but I kept forgetting to!"

### **A Meaningful, Non-Official Thing**

At 1:15 pm, Samantha's professor finally excused the class, five minutes late. Professor Andreeva's class always went overtime, but no one minded because she was a brilliant teacher. She gave lectures on occasion, but they were never pedantic. Instead she tried to spend classes facilitating critical discussions. She had a reputation for being one of the best literature professors in the department. Often, students who had not taken a class with her before were nonplussed at the start of the semester, since she would learn everyone's names by the first week and arbitrarily call on students to speak in class. She responded to student's remarks with praise, thoughtful questions, or non-condescending critiques. However, some students would drop out of her classes within the first week, realizing that they couldn't BS their way through by skimming the readings, but for students who enjoyed socratic seminars or were die-hard literature majors, taking a course with her was a rite of passage before graduating Bradley College.

Professor Andreeva was in her seventies, but she spoke vivaciously and charismatically in class, which gave her a youthful demeanor. However, outside of class, she sometimes looked a bit gloomy and her energy seemed a bit depleted. When Samantha would run into her walking to another class, she would say hello, but then it would take Professor Andreeva a moment to respond, as if her mind was stuck back in some other time and place. Students who lifeguarded at the pool, could attest to seeing her swimming everyday at 8 am sharp, she never missed a day. She had shoulder length silver hair, wore bespoke blazers, red lipstick and brown tortoise shell glasses. She was the sort of professor that seemed intimidating at first, but who gradually warmed up to her students. Professor Andreeva taught Russian literature. Her students adored her for the stories she told in class, especially the one about Dostoevsky being saved just minutes



from death by execution, similarly to the story of a man described by Dostoevsky's character Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*.

Professor Andreeva upheld stringent deadlines and expected a lot from her students; class participation and attendance were mandatory, but quickly her students would realize that she was tough on them because she cared and wanted to see them succeed.

Rumor had it that she had been a premier dancer in her youth with the famous Bolshoi Ballet company in Moscow, but was forced to retire due to a severe leg injury. Some said she had been a spy in Soviet Russia, during the Cold War, clandestinely sending information to the US, until the KGB found out and had purposely caused a stage accident to occur during one of her performances, which led to a ceiling prop falling on her leg, shattering her dance career forever. Another rumor claimed that she had had a great love affair with the son of one of Russia's foremost writers while studying abroad in college, which had inexplicably ended tragically, the two lovers torn apart by logistical forces, different career choices, rather than a fading affair.

As Samantha gathered her notebook and headed out the door, she stopped Professor Andreeva to talk briefly. She was taking Professor Andreeva's course on Great Russian Stories, and for her midterm paper she had written about tragic female characters in *Anna Karenina* and *The Idiot*, specifically Ana and Nastasya. Samantha had been slightly dejected when she had received her midterm paper back from Professor Andreeva's class with a rather unsatisfying grade, but it was true she hadn't revised it enough, she had been focusing on another midterm paper for her history class, and had left the revisions for it until last minute.

"Professor Andreeva, I wanted to talk to you about my midterm paper."

“Oh yes, I wanted to let you know how impressed I was with it. But I’m guessing you were still a little disappointed eh?”

“Thanks professor, and yes, I guess I was...But I know there were mistakes in it.”

Professor Andreeva motioned that they continue walking and head down the stairs.

“You see, while your paper delved into the tragedy of these female characters I was surprised you did not also discuss the liberating moments in these women’s experiences, like how Nastasya denounces all of her suitors from Totsky, to Ganya and Prince Myshkin because she realizes that they do not understand her, and want to marry her for the wrong reasons, such as money and pity, not love. We always think Nastasya is so tragic, since Rogozhin kills her at the end, but you have to admit, she chose to live her own way!”

“Oh, yes, I see your point,” Samantha said looking down at the ground.

Professor Andreeva, patted her shoulder reassuringly and encouragingly replied, “How about you come in during my office hours before the final paper and I can take a look at your thesis and outline? You offer great observations in class and are an astute writer, so I don’t want you to get discouraged. I’m confident you can write a great final paper!”

Samantha nodded her head and offered up a weak, but gradually expanding smile.

They exited the building and parted ways. Professor Andreeva went off to the right towards her office, and Samantha went straight ahead along the narrow path towards the dining hall. She felt a bit better now, and had regained her appetite. Although most classes had been let out already, many students were still outside milling around layered up in winter coats, scarves, and hats. It was the first day of classes following spring break and many students were animatedly talking in small groups, eager to share stories and highlights from their breaks.

Professors hurried back to their offices, carrying papers and books under their arms. The sound of youthful voices could be heard in the air, and Samantha let herself be carried along with the wave of students walking with a rejuvenated sense of purpose. Everyone seemed in good spirits, well rested and excited to be back, the weight of midterms lifted from everyone's shoulders, even the cold weather failed to diminish everyone's bright spirits.

It was a bitterly cold day in spite of the sun, and Samantha pulled out her gloves from her jacket pocket, putting them on, even though she wasn't walking far outside. A white blockade stood in front of the cement path that led directly to the dining hall entrance, with a dark green sign next to it which read, "Seasonal Path Closed for the Winter." It was already Spring, but Winter had failed to let up, and snow still covered the ground, from the snow storm the previous night, but apparently they still had to use the outdated signs. Sure enough a large patch of glittering ice covered a portion of the path, so she took the round-a-bout route, and continued on towards the library then took a detour down the path of stairs leading down to the parking lot, and then walked back up the path towards the dining hall. Normally a few students would be standing outside smoking cigarettes, but it was too cold. When Samantha had first come to Bradley, she would hold her breath when she walked through the clouds of cigarette smoke, but now she inhaled deep breaths of it.

Entering the dining hall, smells of food wafted through the air and students passed to and fro carrying heaping plates of food. It was loud and crowded. Already a long line of students had gathered along the wall, waiting to swipe their college ID cards and enter the cafeteria. As Samantha took her spot in line, she pulled out her iPhone and began scrolling through Instagram.

The first photo was of her friend Isabelle from high school, who now went to Barnard College in New York City. Isabelle had celebrated her 21st birthday yesterday, and had posted a photo of her with her friends, dressed up at some fancy club in the Lower East Side, called Hotel Chantelle. Samantha commented “Happy Birthday” with the pink heart emoji. Isabelle had invited her to come down and celebrate for her birthday. It was only a two and a half hour train ride away, but Samantha made up some excuse saying she was busy with classes starting up. She wasn’t sure why exactly she had decided not to go. Maybe she didn’t want to meet Isabelle’s new friends. Isabelle had changed drastically from the quiet studious girl she had been in high school. Now she was always posting pictures and videos of the parties she got invited to, and whenever they talked she was always going on about some new guy from Columbia she was seeing.

Samantha kept scrolling and stopped when she got to a post by Isaac. It showed his girlfriend and him, outside of Bradley’s campus library. The caption read “So happy you came to visit me during your spring break.” It had been posted fifteen minutes ago. Samantha’s chest tightened and she chewed the inside of her cheek. Suddenly she did not feel hungry at all. The air felt stuffy and she felt too hot in her winter jacket. Although she was nearly at the front of the line, she gave up her spot and headed towards the exit. She heard a familiar laugh. To her left, Isaac was standing beside a girl, and reaching to grab napkins with one hand, while his other hand rested on the girl’s back. The girl was turned away from Samantha, but she was wearing the same clothes as the girlfriend in the post she had seen a minute ago. She locked eyes with Isaac for a moment. The expression of laughter disappeared from his face and his gray eyes widened and then he immediately turned away. He was wearing the same light blue Black Dog T-shirt,

Samantha, had given him for his birthday last year. Samantha pushed open the door with enough force that it hit the wall on the side, causing a couple of students outside to look up in surprise.

Outside she felt better. Although minutes before she had found the cold unbearable, now she welcomed the chill. Without having a destination in mind she let her legs carry her away past the bus stop, past the chapel, and away from Isaac and his girlfriend. She took the path along the main road, heading towards the campus center and past the empty plot of ground where a wooden windup swing used to stand until some local kids had wrecked it one summer. Samantha and her friends used to go on it all the time. She didn't like getting dizzy and was always the one pushing, winding up the swing clockwise and then letting go, watching as her friends spun around, their faces blurring.

Up ahead her friend Christina was coming her way wearing white platform Buffalo brand boots, black tights, a pleated skirt and a crop top under her black puffy jacket. Her jacket was open despite the cold. Christina was holding a cardboard package the size of a wine bottle, and with her free arm she waved at Samantha.

“Love the fit, but aren't you cold?”

“One has to make sacrifices for fashion, darling,” Christina said.

“Fair enough. What's in the package?”

“Remember the NYU kid I was seeing during winter break?”

“Yeah, the one who you agreed to have a two week fling with?”

“Yes, that one. Well we saw each other for the last time on Friday, and he sent me this in the mail as a goodbye present.”

She shook it up and down for emphasis.

“I’m pretty sure I know what’s inside,” she said laughing.

“Not a vibrator.”

Christina nodded her head. “God, I have to stop giving out my P.O. box to people. The other day Claire asked me if she could ship her Xanax to my mailbox!”

“What did you say?”

“I was like, I’m not letting you order addictive substances to my P.O. box when you're vaping out of your bootstraps. Although I was tempted to say yes and take a portion as taxation and sell it off to the Freshman in my dorm.”

Samantha was curious how a person vaped out of their bootstraps, but decided not to ask.

“Where are you headed?”

“I don’t know. I just saw Isaac and his girlfriend.”

“Oh, I’m sorry babe, that sucks. Yeah, I just saw his post on Instagram. Honestly you should really take the vibrator. Maybe it will cheer you up,” she said offering the package.

“No, no keep it. It’s your souvenir from the NYU guy. Thanks though.”

“Let me know if you want to come over tonight. I’m free. We could watch *Seinfeld* and get drunk on cheap Sunoco wine.”

“Thanks for the offer. I don’t know, right now I just feel like being alone, and I have homework to do.”

“Alright, understandable. Just don’t mope around on your own for too long. You know where I live if you need anything, okay!”

Christina gave Samantha a hug and then went on her way. Samantha continued walking past the dormitories, past the music conservatory, and headed towards Rosedale, the giant white mansion that stood overlooking the Hudson River.

Whenever Samantha was feeling down as a kid, her father would drive her to the ocean, thirty miles away in their old navy blue Buick. They would buy a bag of bubblegum from a small corner store and park the car at the Seaside Cove, and sit in the car chewing bubblegum and watching the surfers in their black wetsuits paddle out for waves and occasionally catch a few. They never said anything, but somehow it was okay, just to sit there with her dad in silence looking at the ocean. Sometimes her father would take a disk out and play music from one of his numerous CDs stashed in the glove compartment. Once she had asked her father why he, who was an avid skier and loved the outdoors, never surfed. I'm a fisherman, he replied. I know what's in the water.

The previous summer Samantha had read an article about a man who got bitten in the leg by a shark at the Seaside Cove. Luckily he was surfing with a friend who was a lifeguard, and the friend saved his leg by tying it in a tourniquet. The man said he hadn't gotten a look at the shark, but the lifeguard friend had said she saw it, and swore it had been big, at least 8-10 feet long. The reporter had asked the man if he would ever go surfing again. The man said that he'd get back in the water as soon as his leg healed.

The Hudson reminded her of the Columbia River back home, they were both similarly wide, expansive rivers, however the Hudson was polluted with PCBs and the fish in it were inedible. The Columbia river, though, never froze over in winter. Where she lived on the coast, it would snow at most three to four inches, hardly enough to even build a snow man. Across the

Hudson the Catskill Mountains loomed large and blue in the distance. She could sit out at Rosedale for hours. Often on a warm day, she would go there after classes, sprawled out on a beach blanket and do readings for class, while gradually watch the sky transform from red to orange, pink to purple, blue, then black.

Today no one was out. She walked towards the middle of the frozen grass field, hearing the crunch of her boots breaking through the icy layer of snow covering the grass. Overhead a flock of geese could be heard. She didn't look up to see them. She hadn't bothered to put her gloves back on and her hands were getting cold, she stuffed them into her coat pockets.

She stared out at the river, half frozen over. She stood there for a long time, until she wasn't sure how much time had passed. Her next class was at 2:30 pm. It was a French literature seminar class, but Isaac was taking it also and she didn't want to see him and hear him speak about Emma Bovary's unhappy love affairs and tragic life, especially because he always had the most to say in class, and would sometimes dominate class discussions. Isaac was an annoyingly good student, and he was so proud of it too. He had even said once, "It makes me feel good, knowing that I'm doing better work than other people." He was a real jerk sometimes. Isaac often stayed after class a few minutes to talk to the professor about some extra reading he was doing in conjunction to the required readings for class. The professor had even lent Issac his own French copy of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, when Issac had explained his interest in French poetry, and mentioned he was studying abroad in Paris next Fall. He was a joint French and Literature major.



Samantha was not so eager to speak up in class. If she did, she usually had to write down her comment verbatim in her notebook, going over the validity and accuracy of her comment, before she would feel confident enough to speak up.

Even though Samantha and Isaac were in the same class this semester, they had not spoken to each other beyond a few curt “heys.” They sat at opposite sides of the class, but not directly across from each other, so they wouldn’t have to make awkward eye contact. During the break halfway through class, if they passed each other in the hallway, Samantha would not say anything to him and Isaac would not say anything to her, even if they were standing right next to each other, even talking to separate people. This silence between them almost seemed like a game of chicken, to see who could go the longest, without trying to speak to the other.

The first time they had actually had a conversation in over six months, despite running into each other twice a week during class, was when they were forced to sit beside each other on the shuttle into Greenbrook. Samantha had sat down, and just as the shuttle was pulling away, Isaac had ran up the steps of the bus, and since there were no other available seats beside the one next to her, he was forced to sit there.

They had politely said their hellos, then fallen silent, and Samantha had reinserted her headphones into her ears. Then halfway through her song, Samantha’s phone died. She let out a long sigh, and it must have been louder than she thought, because Isaac turned to her and commented, “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. My phone just died on me,” Samantha said taking out her earbuds. She sighed again, realizing now she couldn’t keep her earbuds in and pretend she was listening to music.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” he said turning to look at her and putting his phone face down on his lap. He didn’t have his earbuds in either. She noticed his copy of *Madame Bovary* sticking out of his backpack, down by his feet, pointed to it and asked how he was enjoying it.

“I love it. It’s crazy to think that Flaubert began writing it with the idea to write a book about nothing!”

“Yeah, he wanted the style of the writing to speak for itself, more so than the content. It’s probably not true, but have you heard the story where some of Flaubert’s friends drop by his house and invited him to go partying and carousing with them for a night, but he declined saying that he needed to stay in and do some writing. The next day, late in the afternoon, his friends came back, and asked him how his writing went the night before. Flaubert told him that he had been really productive! He decided to keep a semicolon in a sentence, instead of taking it out!”

Isaac smiles says, “Yeah, I think I’ve heard that before. It’s probably not true, but he was a painstakingly slow writer, maniacally rewriting a scene over and over again until it was perfect.”

Samantha nodded. The shuttle had stopped. They had arrived in Greenbrook, and everyone started exiting the bus. Isaac stood up, grabbed his backpack, and walked down the aisle. She followed behind him, and as they walked down the steps, Isaac turned to her and said, “In addition to the translation we’re reading in class, I’ve been reading Lydia Davis’s translation too. If you want I could lend it to you once I’m done. I know you like her writing.”

“Thank you! Yeah I’ve heard she’s done a good translation. I’d be down to read it once your through with it!”

“Yeah, I’m going to finish it over break. Then I can give it to you in class.”

They were both headed to Hannafords, so they continued talking. Isaac asked what her plans were for Spring Break, the following week, and she replied that she was going to Boston to visit her grandparents. She asked him what his plans were. He said he was going to stay with his girlfriend at Sarah Lawrence. She lived off campus and rented a house with some friends.

“Oh, well I hope you have a good time!” Sarah said, grabbing a red shopping basket from the entrance.

“Thanks you too!” he said, waving and heading towards the fruit section without a basket.

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It had been a pleasant conversation. Maybe it would be possible for them to go on and be friends, Samantha thought staring out at the Hudson River. They had a lot of similar interests, and they were taking a class together after all.

Samantha knew she should head back soon, go to the library, do something productive, maybe complete some reading for her classes tomorrow, but she didn't move.

As long as Isaac's girlfriend had merely been a girl at Sarah Lawrence, a distant and hazy figure, merely another pretty face on social media, if she ever saw Isaac's girlfriend on one of his rare posts, she didn't feel too bad and wasn't terribly jealous. But now, after almost running into her in person at the dining hall, she realized she was not as over Isaac as she thought she was. She had thought she was so mature, for withholding any urge to speak to him, not even making casual small talk, but she realized her silence towards him was actually worse because it conveyed that she was too upset to even engage in normal conversation. If she had truly moved on she would not have left the dining hall, she would have eaten her lunch, gone to class, said

hello to him, even borrowed his copy of Lydia Davis's translation of *Madame Bovary* that he would have lent to her. But no, she was not over him, which was why she was here standing out at Rosedale staring out at the Hudson River, freezing in the cold, and yet unable to move an inch.

Where had things gone wrong with them anyways? They had been good friends all last year. They had taken a literature class together both semesters last year, first a Proust seminar and then a Dostoevsky seminar. After class, they always got lunch together, continuing some conversation that they had been having in class over the reading. They were both literature majors and would go on and on discussing their favorite books and authors. Samantha had misjudged his interest in their conversations, and had mistakenly thought he had liked her. But then, they had drunkenly kissed at a party a couple times. Yeah, they had hooked up too several times. It had been so confusing. It had been hard to keep her feelings in check. They had spent so much time together talking, eating together, and studying in the library that his friends had even asked him if they were dating. Yes, she remembered Isaac jokingly mentioning that. Finally, Samantha had confessed her feelings to him, and he had awkwardly said he was flattered, but that he just thought of her as a friend. She had been so hurt. Then she had gone and given him the silent treatment for months!

Eventually a group of friends passed by, carrying two sleds, and began sliding down the long hill. At the bottom of the hill was a garden, its flower bushes carefully covered with protective tarp for winter. The friends laughed loudly, disturbing the serene silence. Samantha watched them taking a group photo together with the Hudson river in the background. She checked her iPhone. It was 2:40 pm. *Too late to bother going to class now.*

Walking back, she recalled the first time she had met Isaac. He had been exiting the campus bookstore humming along to a song that her father used to play on long car drives, a song that she didn't expect anyone in college to know and that she'd forgotten all about. The next day, on the first day of Literature 101, Isaac had sat down next to her and asked to borrow a pen. After class they started talking and went to the dining hall to eat together, and kept talking, they had a lot in common, in terms of books, movies, and music taste.

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One day, after they had gone out to get brunch together on the weekend and were playing chess outside on a bench, Samantha asked him if he would date anyone in college. He made a face and said, "No, I don't think so. I dated a lot in high school, and I don't want to fall into the same pattern now in college. Besides, I want to focus on my classes, and not get distracted" Before once, he had mentioned about how traumatized he had been after his last relationship, his ex had cheated on him, and he had said he was afraid to get into a relationship again, and possibly get his feelings hurt.

"Yeah, that's smart," Samantha replied, making a stupid move on the board, leaving her king wide open and defenseless.

"Checkmate!" Isaac announced, beaming. He was competitive, and loved winning games.

Samantha told herself that she didn't mind if they were dating or not, that she enjoyed spending time with him, that it didn't matter if they were not in a serious relationship.

The next day at dinner, her friend, Christina said it was weird how Samantha was doing everything that a girlfriend was doing without the label of one. "I feel like he's using you. He

texts you 24/7 and expects you to give him advice on all his problems, when you guys aren't even dating! Also you guys spend so much time together. It doesn't make any sense!"

"No, it's not like that. I text him a lot too. It's mutual. We're both not interested in getting into a serious relationship. So we're both using each other. It's symbiotic!"

"Okay, whatever you say. I just don't want to see you get hurt, that's all."

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The last time Samantha had hung out with Isaac, the previous year, they had been laying out on a blanket in the quad. It was a sunny day at the end of Spring, the cherry trees were in blossom, and students were out tossing frisbees and sunbathing. Samantha and Isaac talked about their summer plans. He was going home to California to take summer classes at UC Berkeley and Samantha was going to stay with her sister in NYC while she worked at a summer internship with a literary magazine. They planned to stay in touch. In the beginning, they had Facetimed once a week, and texted everyday but then Isaac took longer and longer to reply to her texts, and then he stopped responding all together, and she'd gotten the hint. In July while scrolling through her Instagram feed, she saw a photo of Isaac and some pretty blond girl standing by the waterfront in Sausalito. She learned from a mutual friend that Isaac had met this girl in one of his summer classes at Berkeley. Then in August she saw him post another picture of the blond girl captioned, "Happy Birthday Baby!" [red heart emoji].

Samantha recalled how when she had come back to college in the fall, Isaac and her had class at the same time every Tuesday in the same building. She would occasionally run into him in the hallway after class, but he would only say "hey" and look away. He never asked her about her summer internship or even politely asked how her classes were going. He acted as if they

were total strangers, so she had done the same and decided to resist the urge to try and speak with him. Once she was in the bathroom talking to a friend when Isaac came up to the sink beside her to wash his hands. She paused for a moment midconversation and turned her head to look his way, opened her mouth and was about to say something, but he didn't look at her, only washed his hands quickly, and then promptly left before she had even finished her conversation with her friend.

It was not as if they had never been in an official relationship, but she had been hurt when he had stopped talking to her over the summer. He had always sworn he wasn't interested in dating anyone in college, but then he had went and gotten a girlfriend. She had thought they would maybe reconnect again during the fall, but no he had completely ignored her. She would have been fine just being friends, but *Oh how stupid she had been to think that!* Finally Samantha, tore her gaze from the Hudson River, and headed back towards campus. She would text Christina, ask her if she wanted to get dinner and study together in the library afterwards. As she walked, Samantha let herself feel hurt again, acknowledging for the first time that, yes, she had felt used, and then tossed aside. A few tears rolled down her cheek but she quickly brushed them aside. *He's just an asshole, he's not worth crying over*, she thought, taking a deep breath and wiping her face with her scarf.

Samantha would be fine. She tried to distract herself by contemplating what sort of a thesis she would write for her final, fifteen page, essay in Professor Andreeva's Great Russian Stories class. She had a few incipient ideas, but she kept oscillating between two topics that was both equally intriguing. However, they would be reading *Dead Souls* starting next week, which could spark an new idea that could potentially change the direction of her paper, so maybe it was

better to leave her options open for now. But she would definitely figure it out soon. Oh, she would write a wonderful paper! It wouldn't be a disappointment like the last one. This time she would spend so much time outlining it, writing it, and revising it that she would get a good grade for sure! She would go in and discuss her paper with Professor Andreeva and ask for feedback. She might even go to the Writing Center, once she finished a final draft, and ask for some critiques, from her friend Emmanuel, they had a poetry class together, he was a good writer and he had offered to help in the past, but she had never taken up his offer. For her next class with Professor Andreeva, they were supposed to read, "The Lady with the Dog" She loved dogs and Chekhov! She had read some of his stories in *The Undiscovered Chekhov: Forty-Three New Stories*, and had burst out aloud while reading it in the library, people had given her annoyed looks, but it had been too hard to stifle her giggles. She couldn't remember the last time she had read anything so funny! They were hilarious stories! She hoped this one about the lady and her dog wasn't another morbidly depressing Russian story with suicide, death, or tragic romance. She just couldn't handle reading another one of those stories!