

Set Yourself On Fire

Senior Thesis

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by  
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*Maddie*

The car ride was often a silent one: my father driving, my mother in the passenger seat, and my sister beside me in the back of the car, staring out the window. There was only the crinkling noise of the plastic sheath on the flower bouquet that my mother had cradled in her arms.

The car stopped. We got out. We walked over to a stone rectangle in the ground that read:

Madison Sophia Kim. March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1993 to June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1993. “Our sweet little baby.”

And at the very center was an engraving of a little pair of baby shoes.

We formed a circle around the stone, holding hands. Heads bowed.

I stood there with them, the grass prickling my feet through my sandals like the legs of tiny insects. I remember not understanding any of what was going on.

My mother’s new house is beautiful, wide open expansive spaces that are polished granite and vacuumed hardwood floors.

I have to go in through the backdoor in the garage when I visit. The front door is always locked and I don’t have a house key. I still know the passcode to the garage door though—it’s the same code we used back at our old house—and my mother leaves the backdoor unlocked.

The backdoor opens into the middle ground where the kitchen bleeds into the living room, a small dining table in between. There is never any clutter, any belongings at all. It looks like the interior of a house from a catalogue demonstrating the “modern home” aesthetic, with the furniture so neatly arranged it looks staged.

She is in the kitchen, wiping down the empty and already clean-looking granite countertops.

“Hey,” I say. I take a seat at the kitchen island, directly across from her.

She smiles at me. “Hello,” she says. “How’s it going?”

“Going fine. How about you?” I say.

“Pretty good. Are you hungry at all? We have some leftovers in the fridge.”

I lean on the counter; the granite is bitingly cold against my skin. “No, I’m okay.”

Her house is new to the point that the wood doesn’t creak and the air vents don’t hiss or rattle, so when the conversation peters out the silence is complete and all encompassing. There is no one else in the house but us; I always time my visits for when my mother’s boyfriend and his two daughters are out.

She clasps her hands together.

“So, we have some more things that we’re planning on getting rid of. Would you like to take a look at them as well?”

She’s been reading *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* by Marie Kondo. She and her boyfriend are still working on the “decluttering” part of the process, going through it in steps. Clothes, assorted papers, books. Now, her house looks like our old house did after we’d moved out of it. But it isn’t that everything’s been packed away, it’s just gone. Thrown out. Donated.

“Sure,” I say.

I’ve intervened a couple of times already, to rescue some things. My sister has jokingly called me a “pack rat.” I do not like to throw things away.

“We’re on ‘miscellaneous household items’ now,” she says. “The next step is the mementos. Which will be difficult.”

“Which mementos?” I say.

“You know,” she says, but then she stops. “Have I really not shown you?”

She probably showed my sister and just assumed that she’d shown me too. She tends to forget we’re different people.

Upstairs, in my mother’s closet, she pulls out an old cloth tote bag from the top shelf. We sit down on the floor as she takes out the contents of the bag, one by one, showing them to me: here is one of Maddie’s toys, here are some of Maddie’s clothes.

“And then there’s this,” she says as she hands me a large turquoise album.

The cover says, “Our Baby’s Album: The First Five Years.” The first page says, “This is the keepsake book of Madison Sophia.”

I flip through it, my mother’s neat handwriting from years ago records the landmark moments of Maddie’s early life, her “firsts.”

On the page titled “The Arrival Day” I learn that Maddie was born at 10:34AM and weighed six pounds and ten ounces.

On the page titled “First Thoughts About Baby” my mother wrote, “How beautiful she is. How tiny her nose is. She is so tiny. It was magical when she stopped crying at the sound of my voice for the first time.”

The page for “Baby’s First Birthday” is blank. As is the page for “Second Birthday.” And the third, fourth, and fifth.

My mother watches me turn through the empty pages, tracing a hand over the blank spaces where memories and photographs should be.

“No birthdays,” she says. Her voice is quiet, and the words are spoken in a soothing tone, like she has to say it gently or she won’t be able to say it at all.

I have no response.

My mother’s big new house is quiet and empty all around us.

My parents did not make a baby album for me. I’ve never asked why, but I think it’s because they couldn’t go through with all of that again.

On June 30<sup>th</sup>, my phone will ring.

I was at my father’s house, trying to reorganize some of his DVDs. Stacks of them had accumulated on the front of the TV stand, piling up high enough that they’d started to obscure the view of the TV screen.

My phone rang again, buzzing as it vibrated against the kitchen table.

I walked over to it. The living room bleeds over into the kitchen without a wall or partition to separate them, with the kitchen table in between. But the ceilings are not very high and my father’s house looks too “lived in” to be out of a catalogue.

I picked up my phone.

“Have you thought about Maddie today?” my mother said.

“Yeah,” I said.

I could hear her sighing from the other end of the line.

“I was just thinking,” she said. “If Madison hadn’t died, I never would have had you.”

And I said, “Yeah, I know.”

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, my phone will also ring. Anytime of the year when she is thinking about it, my phone will ring.

I suppose it's a more convenient ritual than driving to the grave. Both my mother's and father's houses are much farther away from the cemetery than our old house was.

My father plodded into the kitchen, his slippers clomping on the linoleum, empty coffee mug in hand. His salt and pepper—although he would call it “more pepper than salt”—hair was in the total disarray that he could only get away with when he worked from home. He waved at me silently as he passed by to get at the coffee pot. I watched him pour the last dregs out into his mug.

My mother said, “Well, I'll let you go then.”

I said, “Okay, I'll talk to you later.”

I hung up, setting my phone down before I went over to the cabinet to get another coffee filter and the bag of grounds.

“That was Mom,” I said as I dumped out the old soggy filter into the trash and replaced it with the fresh one.

He nodded, still sipping from his mug. “How is she?”

“She's fine,” I said as I started measuring out the coffee grounds, still trying to decide how much coffee I wanted to make. The usual eight cups sounded like a bit much. “Just wanted to call to have the whole ‘we wouldn't have had you if Maddie hadn't died’ conversation.”

“What?” Surprise made his voice sound sharp.

I looked up. His brow was furrowed as he looked at me and his face was doing a lot of things at once that made it difficult to tell what he was thinking.

“Your mother shouldn't be telling you things like that,” he said.

I could hear the washing machine churning away downstairs as I tried to think of what to say to that. I ended up just shrugging my shoulders and we let the topic drop.

At the back of Madison's keepsake album are all the photos of her that my parents have.

She's a tiny baby, pink in the face with a tuft of down feathery hair. She's smiling in this one, sleeping in that one, and often looking in confusion at the world around her.

Here is a picture of my father holding her, with round glasses and not a trace of silver in his jet black hair.

My sister sits next to her in this one as a tiny child, laughing at something off-camera.

And then I see a photo of my mother holding Maddie, and I'm struck with just how young she looks here. Cheeks fuller, less angular. Eye glasses with rounder frames, bigger on her face. Her hair is a silky jet black, spilling over her shoulders.

I do the math: she's thirty three years old in this photo, but she looks younger than me. Everything about her is softer, her face, her eyes, her smile.

I have only known her face with its hollowed out cheeks, the streaks of gray through her hair.

*Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is the abrupt and unexplainable death of a seemingly healthy baby between one month and one year of age. SIDS typically occurs during sleep, due to a spontaneous cessation of breathing. There is usually no noise or sign of a struggle.*

Sometime after my older sister was born, my mother became pregnant again and decided to have an abortion because she wasn't ready to have another child yet.

Later, when she and my father decided to try again, she had a miscarriage.

And then after that, she had Maddie. But Maddie died.

She told me that she thought God might have been punishing her.

I found the idea of God detestable.

In Maddie's album, there is a section of collected documentation of her funeral, on July 4<sup>th</sup>. In this section, there is a transcription of what my sister said that day:

“Madison,

I love you and I'm sorry you can't come to us.

God is a good man. He takes care of good babies. That's why you shouldn't go with us.

I miss you. I really miss you. I really really love you.

Goodnight hug and goodnight kiss.”

*When an infant dies unexpectedly, the family structure becomes drastically altered. The loss and the resulting changes to the family unit affect remaining older siblings.*

My mother told me once about how, when I was a baby, she watched my sister cover my face with a sheet of plastic wrap while I was sleeping in my crib, while she thought no one was looking. Then she walked away. And naturally, my mother came over and took the plastic off of me.



My sister came “home” for summer break for the first time in three years. She was staying with me at our father’s house, so I asked her about it.

She said, “No, it wasn’t plastic wrap, it was a plastic bag.”

I asked her why she did it.

She said, “I don’t remember.”

But then, after a moment, she said, “I think I might have thought that you took Maddie away from us.”

That made sense.

So I nodded my head and I said, “Okay.” And we stopped talking about it.

*Parents of a child that dies of SIDS do not receive a medical explanation for their loss, which can deprive them of an important part of the grieving/healing process. As a result, SIDS deaths place a great deal of strain on marriage.*

*Parents’ individual ways of coping with grief may become a source of conflict and cause an emotional distance to develop.*

The day after my seventeenth birthday was Father’s Day. My father took my mother and me out for a movie and dinner at a restaurant we’d never been to before. My sister was not there; she was living in New York for the summer.

I don’t remember what we ate, but I do remember when the band began to play and the woman who had been waiting on our table went up to the mic and began singing in the most sultry, beautifully fit-for-jazz voice.

My mother laughed, delighted.

My father said to her, “I love your smile.”

And then my mother began to cry.

That was when she said that she needed to have a divorce.

This did not come as a surprise to me since she had told me that she would do this eventually, maybe after I went to college.

This was not after I went to college, and the timing left some things to be desired.

So I remember sitting on the stairs of our house, listening to my father trying to talk to my mother, asking her “what happened” and I listened to him crying. And I tried not to make any noise as tears were streaming down my face and I felt like I was choking on a knot inside my diaphragm.

In that moment, I imagined how things could have gone differently, if Maddie hadn’t died. Maybe the family would have stayed together. Maybe my mother and father would have continued to love and care for each other if they’d been *her* parents instead of mine. Maybe everything would have been better.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Sometimes I daydream about a version of my world where everything is beautiful and no babies ever died silently in their cribs because of the supposed whims of some ridiculous god.

This world does not have me in it.

It seems nice.

Maddie’s cemetery is not that far away from my apartment.

I'm the closest of all my family—my mother who lives a longer drive away, my father who lives on airplanes, and my sister who has spent the last couple years abroad.

So one day I went there alone. Not on any of the important dates. Several weeks too late for her birthday but I doubted that it mattered.

The car ride was filled with the sounds of radio music, GPS directions, and the crunching of the plastic sheath of the bouquet that rolled around on the passenger seat, jostled by each turn of the car. I didn't know what kind of flowers to get, so I chose some blue ones that I thought looked nice.

I took at least two wrong turns on the way, and then I got lost in the winding pathways of the cemetery grounds. But eventually I found it.

And I had to stop for a moment. To look. To realize that I couldn't remember exactly how long it had been since our family's last visit.

The way I remembered it, the grave marker was a pale bleached gray, pristine. Now, it was darker, more rain cloud colored. The clover and grass had grown out to obscure the crisp corners and the carved lettering looked discolored. The stone itself looked so small. Smaller than it should be.

I couldn't find the in-ground vase at first; a layer of grass had grown over it. I had to take an educated guess at where it was and dig around for it with my hands, dirt collecting under my fingernails and turning them black. Eventually I found the vase; it was full of worms.

I put it back in the ground after emptying it out and arranged the flowers inside.

I was left holding the packet of flower food that came with the bouquet and realized I didn't think to bring any water.

The weather did not make it a beautiful day by any means, too muggy and uncommitted to rain, instead carrying the moisture in the air that clung to everything like a gross film. I crouched there for what felt like a while, aware of how it was beginning to grow dark.

Then I remembered my water bottle in my backpack that I'd left in the car. It was only half full but it was sufficient. I brought it over, pouring the remaining contents into the vase. Mission accomplished. I tried to brush the dirt off my hands with limited success. I wondered whether it was still considered "grave dirt" or if it turned back into "regular dirt" after so many years.

I stood there for a while in front of her tombstone, maybe two hours or so, just thinking.

On one of our many family visits to the grave, I remember my sister wandering over to the big tree nearby. It was in full bloom, already shedding little white flowers onto the ground below.

I trailed after her, like I always did, and looked on as she stooped to collect a handful of the flowers. I copied her, picking one up. I watched as she hurled one of the flowers skywards.

"I'm sending them to Maddie," she told me. "Up to heaven." She threw another straight up into the air.

I craned my neck back and followed it with my eyes, although I had to squint a little through the sunlight.

I watched as it went floating up, and then came fluttering back down, landing in the grass half a dozen steps away.

I have never talked to Maddie.

In the perfect world that I imagine where nothing bad happened and everyone in my family got to be happy, there is a twenty-two year-old woman named Madison that exists alive and well. I do not know what she looks like. I do not know what kind of a person she is. In this way she can be nothing and everything all at once.

But I have never prayed to her. Or to anyone, really.

My sister and I have been close for most of our lives, without any of the animosity between siblings or the derision from the older child towards the younger one. Even with five years between us, she often acts a little bit younger than her age. She even looks it, with her softer and rounder facial features and sweet disposition. I've been told that I act a little older, prickly, like a cantankerous old man, so I suppose this allows us to meet somewhere in the middle.

One summer, she came back home for the first time in years.

Spending my summer break with her was a nice change. Our father was often away, which meant that I mostly lived in his house by myself. I was happy for the company.

We were sitting on the living room couch, a blanket stretched between us, late at night. We'd watched several films in a row, laughing about something, talking about something.

Then she told me, "You grew up to be kind of a shitty person."

And I laughed. Mostly as a reflex. Because I didn't know what else to do. She laughed with me. I'm not sure what we were laughing about exactly. Maybe we were laughing about two entirely different things. I asked her what she meant by that.

She explained several pieces of evidence to support her claim.

Things like:

“You feel free to act like your ‘real self’ around family but that ‘real self’ is really mean.”

“You hate doing favors for other people.”

“You don’t like spending time with Mom and you’re not very nice to her.”

I nodded, saying things like, “Yeah that’s fair,” or “Yeah that makes sense.” Because it was all true.

I don’t remember what brought it up, why she decided to tell me this.

It was just the kind of honest detail that only came out at 3AM.

I went to visit Maddie’s grave alone again

This time, I knew my way around the cemetery a little better. I didn’t stay at her grave for as long before. I just stood there and wondered for a little while. Maybe half an hour.

I wondered about my many mistakes and issues as I ran my fingers over the rows upon rows of scars along the insides of my wrists.

I wondered if maybe, if she’d been given the chance, she wouldn’t have grown up to be like me. “Kind of a shitty person.” At times, a total fuck up.

I wondered why it was that I sometimes felt like I had the right to think about committing suicide. Because how could that possibly be fair, when there was a baby in the ground who never got to live even one year, let alone twenty two.

Maybe she would have done a better job at being alive.

*The degree to which the risk of SIDS is increased in subsequent siblings of a prior SIDS victim has been a subject of active discussion in medical circles.*

*Expecting parents that have experienced the death of a previous baby may consider the use of a monitor that will alert them to any potential cessation in breathing.*

*There are four main types of monitoring systems: audio, movement monitors, heart and breathing monitors, and oxygen measurement monitors.*

My father told me that he and my mother were very concerned that I was going to die at any moment for about the first year of my life. So for a while, I was hooked up to every monitor that they could conceive of.

Apparently, most of the time, no one could really pick me up to hold me. Because of all of the wires.

Bryan, a close friend of mine, told me that he also had an older sibling who died as an infant before he was born. He said this whilst heavily drunk and sobbing into his sleeve.

I found it funny, in that way that things are not funny at all.

And yet, here was a mirror image of the ever-present history that I'd never really known what to do with.

Bryan said that he compared himself to his dead brother all the time. That he had this image of his brother as a grown-up who was perfect and better than him in every way. Bryan said that he often felt like it would have been better if his brother had lived and Bryan hadn't been born at all.

And instead of agreeing with him I said:

“But your parents love you.”

They love you.

Words that came from the bottom of my stomach, the back of my hand.

Your mother loves you and has always loved you. She loves you.

At some point, while I am reading my mother's keepsake album of Maddie, I start to cry.

And I'm a little surprised, because this is the first time I've ever cried about Maddie. Or maybe I'm crying about my family that's been in mourning since before I was born. Maybe I'm crying about how I will never to meet any of these people in these photographs: my happy smiling mother with soft eyes, father and sister before their world was torn apart.

My mother is still sitting beside me and she reaches out to trace a finger over one of the photos. A picture of Maddie, sleeping on her stomach, deceptively peaceful.

She says, "I know."

And then she says, "But if she hadn't died, you wouldn't have been born."



*Ugly cat*

She shows you to your room, ushering you inside like it's the most exciting thing.

"Make yourself at home," she says, and then she looks at you like she expects you to do or say something.

You just stand there in the middle of the room, still holding your duffel bag of belongings, still wearing your coat, and you do nothing at all. It's a nice room. You have your own bed, a dresser, a desk, a chair, a closet. You also have a window, with what looks like a fire escape just outside it. The walls are painted the sort of pastel blue that you'd expect to see in the nursery of a newborn baby boy.

She clasps her hands together. "Okay," she says. "I'll just, let you get to it then."

She smiles, but her mouth is wavering a little at the corners. You've seen that kind of smile before. You suppose your silence stretched out for a little too long. Not enough eye contact maybe. You've been told that it's off-putting. It makes you feel like breaking something.

She walks down the hall. You shut the door behind her. You go over to the bed and drop your bag on top of it.

Their surname is Fischer. Mrs. Fischer and Mr. Fischer, with their color coordinated decor and self-satisfied benevolence. They seem like the sort of vanilla married couple from the movies that extends a hand out to the "poor foster children," rescuing them from "the awful system." It takes people like that to agree to take in a seventeen-year-old.

But you are not in a movie. And they are very likely to be disappointed. You can see the strain already in her eyes, sabotaging her careful smiles with uncertainty.

You don't expect them to keep you for very long.

You walk over to the window. There is indeed a fire escape outside of it. You wonder why they would give the safest room in the apartment to a total stranger. You could block the front door, set the whole place on fire, barricade your bedroom door to trap them inside, and then escape on your own, leaving them to die.

You open the window and climb out.

The fire escape is iced over and rusted. You lean against the railing, looking around and assessing. From here, you have access to both the roof and the garbage-filled alley below. You could even make the jump from this fire escape to the one for the apartment building on the other side of alley, if you wanted.

You look down and catch sight of two stray cats foraging through some of the toppled trash cans in the alley.

The first looks like a moving bundle of gray rags. With the shredded ear, crooked tail, and missing eye, you think it might be the ugliest cat you've ever seen in your life.

The second one, orange and looking a bit less worse for wear, drifts over, trying to inspect the garbage the gray cat is picking through.

The gray cat goes rigid, hissing before it smacks the orange cat in the face, sending it running.

You let out a huff of laughter. Your breath freezes in the air, looking like plumes of smoke.

"Someday, I'll be like you," you say to the ugly gray cat as it returns to poking around in the trash. "Living alone."

You're going to be eighteen very soon. You've known for a while that you were probably going to age out of the system.

The Fischers are your last chance.

You try not to care.

(But they did give you the safest room in the apartment-.)

Later that night, you lie awake in bed. You stare up at the newest unfamiliar ceiling and can't fall asleep.

When you were with the Bennett family, you had a little brother. He was eight. The Bennetts called him "a little bundle of joy." You shared a room with him, shared a bunkbed. Steven claimed the top bunk even though he was half your height and needed help clambering up the ladder most nights.

He was always dragging his little blue toy car over every surface he could find, making a variety of sound effects that never sounded like a car engine. He would do this in the middle of the night sometimes. You would lie on the bottom bunk, listening to the scraping sound of plastic wheels against the wood of the bedframe and Steven's soft humming noises. The Bennetts hadn't given it to him. He'd brought it with him. You wondered if he'd gotten it from a previous home or if it was from his real family. You never asked. Mostly you just ignored him.

The Bennetts loved Steven. Even when he spilled that glass of orange juice all over the carpet. Even when he broke the TV remote.

It was you they didn't want.

You can imagine how the phone call to the social worker went: "It just isn't working out with the older one," "we tried our best but it's difficult with teenagers, you know?"

The night before you were scheduled to be taken to the next place, you were staring up at the bottom of Steven's bed, listening to him roll his toy car back and forth on the bed railing.

"Why're you leaving?" he said. It was unusual. Normally he didn't try to talk to you either.

You said, "Because they don't want me."

"Why?"

That startled a laugh out of you. You didn't have an answer for him though. Maybe it was because you didn't try to pretend to be happy. Maybe it was because you didn't like to talk, or sometimes broke their things on purpose for no reason.

Your lack of an answer seemed to make him lose interest. He fell silent.

You lay there for a while longer.

After an hour or so, when you were certain that he was asleep, you crept out of your bed and up the ladder.

He was curled up on his side, his blue car held loosely in one hand.

You reached out, gently sliding it out from his fingers.

He didn't even twitch.

You just stayed there a moment, holding the car, staring at his sleeping face. You didn't think it would be that easy. You thought he would hold onto it harder. He must not have known what it was like, to have something ripped away.

In the morning, he noticed. He cried about it incessantly, throwing a massive tantrum and wailing nonstop. Even when the Bennetts tried to offer him a replacement, he refused to calm down.

You wondered if the Bennetts still loved their "little bundle of joy" now.

Eventually, the social worker came to pick you up to take you to the next house. You walked out the door with the little blue car clenched in your fist so tightly you thought it might crack. You could feel its plastic frame straining under the pressure.

You hated them. You hated Steven. You hated them all. (You wanted to curl up on their doorstep and wait there forever until they opened the door and let you back inside.)

You have no siblings now. You just lie awake at night in this new place, staring up at the ceiling instead of the bottom of Steven's bed, turning his little blue toy car over and over in your hands. You wonder if he still misses it. He's ten years old now. You wonder if the Bennetts adopted any other children.

You've stopped caring. You're tired of letting people hurt you.

Sometime after the two week mark of living in their apartment, you come out of your room to refill your glass of water and find Mrs. Fischer in the kitchen, doing the dishes.

"Oh," she says, looking over her shoulder at you. "Are you done with that?" she says, nodding at the cup in your hand. "I can wash it for you."

You watch as she gently sponges off a plate before placing it into the dishwasher.

You look at the cup. You look back at her. She's watching you, waiting for your response.

You let go of it. It falls from your hand and shatters on the kitchen floor like candy glass. The broken pieces go skittering outwards, sliding across the linoleum, clustering around your feet.

She shrieks. Your skin tingles.

For a moment, she just stands there, looking at you. Then she takes a step towards you. Your shoulders are rigid. You can make yourself into stone at will. You wouldn't be able to run anyway, not without stepping on the glass shards.

But there is nothing but concern in her eyes.

"Are you all right?" she says. "Did you get cut anywhere?"

She goes over to the sink, pulling open the cabinet underneath it and bringing out a dustpan.

"Don't move," she says. "There's glass all around you."

You don't think you could have moved even if you wanted to. Every part of you feels locked into place by something other than terror.

She carefully collects the bigger glass pieces before vacuuming up the rest. She cleans up the entire mess that you made. There is a knot in your stomach.

You actually did get cut. It's just a tiny nick on your left foot but she frets over it, bringing out the first aid kit. She actually puts anti-biotic cream on it before covering it with a bandaid that is larger than necessary.

She looks up at you once she's done, and she says, "There. All better?"

Without even thinking, you say, "I'm sorry."

And she just smiles. She strokes your hair and says, "It's okay."

One time, when you were with the Jordan family, you dropped a plate while you were doing the dishes.

(It was soapy, slippery. You didn't *mean* to-).

It broke into three pieces on the floor.

Mr. Jordan locked you in the basement as punishment and didn't let you out for five days.

The basement was furnished to some extent, thankfully with a bathroom. You tried to fill up on water as much as you could, but by the third day you were throwing up water and stomach acid into the toilet from hunger turned to nausea.

For the rest of the time, when you were able, you curled up at the top of the stairs, desperate for the slivers of light that leaked through the crack under the door during the daytime. When it was nighttime and the Jordan's turned out all the lights, you cried.

You were eleven and stupid and still afraid of the dark.

You're curled up on your bed, staring at your foot, at the unnecessarily large bandaid. With a cut this small, you probably didn't need one at all.

You run your fingers over it.

She saw you. She could tell that you dropped it on purpose.

But she didn't even yell at you.

You know that it's impossible. She barely knows you, but-

(This feels like being *loved*).

One night, the dinner table is set for three as usual, dishware and silverware all impeccably arranged, nothing crooked or out of place. A meatloaf serves as the centerpiece, with some kind of casserole beside it and a bowl full of shredded zucchini.

Mr. Bennett is not home yet.

Mrs. Fischer sits across from you with her hands clasped together, not touching the food at all. “No one eats until the whole family is together,” one of the most important rules of the house. You thought it was stupid at first, but you don’t really mind it anymore.

“So,” she says. “How do you like it here?”

“It’s good,” you say.

She looks happy. There is no disapproval—she’s okay with short responses like that from you. It makes you want to give her more of your words.

“Looking forward to school starting up?” She adjusts one of her utensils, as if it wasn’t already straight. The table looks so pristine you find it hard to even imagine messing any of it up in order to actually eat.

“Not really,” you say, wrinkling your nose.

She laughs. You duck your head a little, feeling shy and pleased all at once.

But small talk only lasts for so long and the clock’s second hand continues to tick and click away. You’ve both been sitting here like this for fifteen minutes.

“Well,” she says, standing up from her seat. “This must be very boring for you. Why don’t we go watch some TV while we wait?”

Her smile has grown a bit pained. You want to say something else, something reassuring, but she is already walking over to the living room. You get up and trail after her.

She sits down at one end of the couch but doesn’t lean back. She just sits with her back ramrod straight, shoulders back, feet forward. One hand rests in her lap while she holds the remote in the other, pointing it at the screen as she turns on the television.



You sit down at the opposite end. The couch cushions feel stiff. You find yourself imitating her posture because you don't know what else to do and it would feel wrong to slouch and curl up when she looks so proper. You are not the slightest bit comfortable.

The channel she chooses is some kind of a nature program about the reproduction process of spiders. She watches the program in total silence, eyes fixed on the screen. You feel like you're not supposed to say anything either, so you don't. You wish you could just go back to sitting at the table.

Almost two hours later, the door opens.

Her head snaps around, looking at Mr. Fischer as he comes inside. She smiles with her lips and teeth but her eyes don't quite follow.

"Welcome home," she says pleasantly, getting up from the couch. Something about her tone makes him pause.

"Hey." He sets his bag down, looking at her carefully. He says with the air of someone that is about to tell a funny joke, "You would not believe-."

She cuts him off.

"How is Ellen doing?" she says, the corners of her mouth still curved upwards.

He freezes in place.

You don't know what to do, so you stay very quiet. You would stop breathing if you could.

The clock ticks.

Then, she claps her hands together. The sharp sound makes you flinch a little.

"We can talk about this later. You must be hungry," she says. "Let's eat."

He glances at you. Then he smiles brightly, “Please. I’ve been dreaming about your cooking all day.” He walks over to the table to take his seat.

She sits down, laughing. “Oh, I sincerely doubt that.”

You grip the edge of your seat with your hands and try not to fidget.

She slices the meat loaf with neat precision. Mr. Fischer passes her the plates and she serves out the portions. Wordless and efficient coordination that looks mechanical.

Everything is cold, but even though there is a microwave right there across the room, no one gets up to heat up their plate so you don’t either.

You notice that he winces a little every time he takes a bite of the room temperature casserole. You can tell that she notices it too, because her lips keep twitching into a little half smile that looks equal parts satisfied and vindictive.

You are suddenly not hungry.

Later that night, you sit with your back against the wall, listening to them shouting at each other on the other side.

“You said this would be a fresh start. ‘We’ll be a proper family.’ You *agreed*-.”

You were both right and wrong about them. They aren’t the vanilla married couple from Hollywood cinema, but they were trying to play the part.

“I know, and I haven’t-. There isn’t anything-.”

She laughs.

“Don’t insult me.”

Maybe taking you in was supposed to bring the two of them closer. A shared responsibility to tie them together. Just another part of the set.

Like a movie prop.

“I’m sorry-,” he says.

“Just stop it,” she says. “You can’t keep it in your pants for even a fucking month you don’t get to talk to me and say you’re *sorry*-.”

There is a vague feeling of “something” inside your ribs. You don’t know exactly where or how deep. You press a hand to your sternum.

It just...hurts.

An ache, a non-specific pain that radiates from some undisclosed point deep in your chest.

There are worse things to be than a prop, you suppose. You’ve been treated as worse things.

Your birth mother was the sort of person who would come and go. Sometimes she would go out at night and only turn up again a couple days later. Not extremely often. Just sometimes.

Then one time, she just didn’t come back.

The first day was routine. You made yourself macaroni and cheese for dinner and did your homework before going to sleep.

By the fifth day it was starting to seem a little unusual that she hadn’t returned yet. But it wasn’t anything you couldn’t handle. You were eleven after all. There was still food in the apartment, and walking to the school bus stop alone was something everyone did.

On the tenth day, you went to your school’s main office and asked to use their office phone to try calling your mother’s cell.

“We’re sorry. You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service,” the automated voice message said.

Your teacher asked you what your mother said, and you don’t remember what you told her, but it must have been convincing because he just nodded his head, patted you on the shoulder and sent you on your way.

On the twentieth day you finally realized that your mother was gone. She’d left you. Like a dog, when the owner has to move away and doesn’t want to bother. You’ve always been a bit slow on the uptake.

But, you thought, she might come back. Maybe she’ll change her mind about leaving you here and come back. So you waited around a bit longer. Just in case.

A week later, the landlord came by to remind your mother to pay her rent and realized that you’d been living there alone without a guardian. By then you’d eaten all the food in the fridge, pantry, and freezer so you figure it was just as well.

You wonder if maybe she never wanted you in the first place. Maybe she put up with you for as long as she could but eventually she just couldn’t stand it anymore.

Or maybe she did want you, at first, but then she changed her mind once you grew up and you didn’t turn out like she wanted. People do that with puppies and kittens all the time.

You gather all of your things into your duffel bag, and bundle up in your coat.

You’re tired of letting people hurt you.

You climb out your window, down the fire escape, dropping down to the alley below. The frozen air ensures that the smell is negligible, thankfully. As you walk through, you see a bundle of gray lying on top of one of the trash cans.

It's the same ugly cat from before, curled up on its side. You take a step closer, trying to tread as lightly as possible in order to not to wake her up. There's little point, the pavement is well seasoned with salt and sand, every step makes crunching sounds.

But even with all the noise you make, you are able to get within a couple feet of the cat without it waking up and bolting.

You stand there for a while. Looking. The cat is very still.

"Hey," you say.

The cat doesn't move at all.

You get closer, right in front of it. So close you could pick it up.

"Hey," you say again. "What happened?" You reach out and rest a hand on the cat's back. The cat's body is rigid and cold. You can feel bone through the skin and ragged fur.

"Was it too cold out here?" you hear yourself ask. "Or were you just tired?"

You stand there for a while. And then, for some reason, you find yourself crying.

It's nothing cathartic. Nothing that makes any sense. Just some inexplicable bone deep ache that isn't in your bones. Leaking from your eyes. A movie would diagnose this as "heart break." The very idea makes you want to laugh yourself sick. Nothing is broken. This is something generalized and inaccessible in that way that means there is nothing to be done about it.

You almost wish you were stupid enough to think “I’m going to die from this.” Maybe the feeling would settle inside of you just a little bit better. Right now, it just hurts; enough to make you want to say “this is unbearable,” but not enough for that to actually be true.

You think the worst part about it is that you know that this is fine, just like everything else in your life has been.

It’s just another thing.

You turn around and walk back the way you came, up the ladder, back through your window. You close it behind you, dropping your bag back on the floor.

You can’t hear the Fischers shouting through the wall anymore. Maybe they’ve made up. Maybe they’ve gone to sleep. It doesn’t really matter either way.

Everything will just continue on as usual. On and on.

You lie down, staring up at the ceiling. The ceiling of this room that is now yours.

*The end of the line*

She is standing on a subway platform.

There are no stairs in sight, no exit or entranceway. There is just the platform, with tracks on both sides of it continuing off into two separate tunnels. The platform and the walls of the tunnels are spotless. Not a speck of garbage or graffiti in sight. No distinguishing markings at all.

Her sweat jacket is damp and her feet are wet inside her shoes. Her hair also feels wet, even inside the hood. She doesn't remember it raining. She has no idea how she could have been out in the rain when she is down here.

She doesn't remember coming here.

There's a sound of a distant mechanical howling, the echoes of metal roaring on the rails growing closer and closer from one of the tunnels. The stagnant air moves in response, tugging at her hair as it flows around her body.

She watches as a light pierces the darkness and a train comes into view, like it materializes out of nothing. The windows are tinted and it's unmarked, the exterior stripped to the bare metal like it's been sandblasted.

It stutters to a stop, with a set of doors aligned perfectly in front of her. After a moment, they hiss open. The car inside seems to be empty. An incoherent voice crackles out from the train's loudspeaker, some kind of announcement that just sounds like static.

She doesn't know where else she would go, so she takes a step forward.

All at once, the movement makes her aware that something is horribly wrong with her insides.

Sharp needles pierce deep in her flesh—like splinters of bone grinding together inside ruined meat. Her head has been cracked open, blood seeping out. She tries to suck in a breath, but it gets caught in her crushed throat. She doesn't know how she's still standing. Her spine should be broken. Her ribs have made holes in her lungs.

The train doors stay open as she struggles to process all of this. Like they are waiting for her.

Eventually, she forces her crooked legs to move her forward and carry her inside.

The doors of the train fold shut behind her.

She sits down in the nearest seat. For a moment, this feels like it hurts more than it helps. Eventually she is able to settle into the new position, arms wrapped tightly around her torso.

The distorted voice says something else over the loudspeaker that is just as unintelligible as before. And then the train starts to move again.

She tries to keep herself stabilized, her eyes stay fixed on the tops of her sneakers as she puts everything she has into trying to keep all of her insides in approximate order.

“Hey,” says a man's voice across from her.

She looks up.

His age is hard to place; he's wearing a t-shirt and sweat pants that make him look younger than her, but his face is all bony angles and cheekbones, with hollowed eyes that stare back at her. He leans forward a little. His grin is all teeth with eyes open a bit too wide for it to look right on his face.

“I think we're dead,” he stage whispers.

When she just stares blankly back at him, he lets out a snort. He straightens his posture, sweeps his hair back with a hand, and all of a sudden he's smiling like a businessman.



“Hello, my name is Jake Barkley. I worked with Eversource Energy as their litigation attorney, here’s my card if you’re ever in need of a consultation-.” He mimes pulling out a card holder from his pocket. He cranks the smile up a notch. “I had lung cancer. Nice to meet you. How’d you die?”

She tries to respond. Her throat convulses, but her crushed windpipe and ruined vocal chords refuse to produce any semblance of a voice.

She had carefully planned everything.

There was already a load of clean laundry that she’d dumped onto her bed and never folded as well as at least a dozen worn and discarded sweaters and pairs of jeans. She went through her drawers and collected her remaining clean clothes and dumped those onto the bed as well. Then she went over to her laundry basket and carried the whole thing over, putting that on top of the pile.

She went through her bookshelves next, taking all of her textbooks from school, her hardcover novels, notebooks, folders of class readings, and piled them onto the bed. Then she went over to her desk, unplugged her printer, and moved that onto the bed as well. She dragged over her desk chair and set it in amongst the growing pile, tilted awkwardly on its side. She pulled everything she had from her closet that weighed anything significant, collecting everything even remotely heavy. Her rug was the last thing. She rolled it up and set in top of the whole mess and then stood back, appraising it.

She knelt down beside the best, and heaved against the bed with all of her might.

It didn’t budge.

She stood back up, satisfied. She tied her rope to one of the bed posts and slipped the noose around her neck.

Jake Barkeley looks at her, his eyes focusing on her throat and the deep furrow that's been engraved in it, and he gets the idea.

“In a hurry to get here, were you?” he says.

He also says, “How the fuck do you hang yourself and come out of it looking like you've been through a trash compactor.”

She remembers reading a statistic about suicide somewhere:

“While more females than males attempt suicide, male suicides are more likely to succeed. This is because females often rely on methods such as drug overdose, which is a less immediate process that is often interrupted before proper death can occur.”

It was probably more of a difference in priorities, though.

She thought that the worst thing would have been to survive the attempt. Because then she would've had to deal with other people looking at her with those eyes. Judging her. Telling her things like “but you have so much to live for,” and “think about the people who love you.”

Jake asks things like: “Why'd you kill yourself,” “What did it feel like,” or “Do you know how such-and-such TV show ended because I didn't make it to the series finale.”

He doesn't seem to really care about her answers, just firing off the questions like someone bouncing a rubber ball off a wall, so he doesn't persist when she refuses to answer or when she says “Sorry I never watched that show.”

He's probably been dead for long enough that he doesn't give a shit about things like boundaries or "general politeness." She suspects that he goes very long stretches of time without anyone to talk to at all. She also is almost certain that the reason this car is empty is that the other passengers have learned to avoid him.

But she stays. It doesn't take her any effort to just sit there and listen, and she's too tired to get up anyway.

He pulled himself out of a shitty neighborhood, he says. Got into a decent college and managed to score a scholarship to Columbia where he got his Law degree. Passed the bar, got a well-paying job, and "hated every fucking second of it."

"Always figured I'd get all my time in, for a couple decades," he says. "And then I'd get to retire and do whatever I actually wanted." Laughter comes out of his chest like a choked wheezing.

He'd started smoking when he was fourteen. Kept at it for sixteen years. And then his lungs gave out.

In her case, she just slowly rotted away on the inside as the years went by until she was only held together by her skin, like a piece of rotten fruit. She thought, even a lobotomy wouldn't help her now, since there was nothing left of her brains to fix.

So one day she woke up and an empty space inside her ribs said,

"What's the fucking point?"

Eventually, the train comes to a stop again.

The voice of the loudspeaker makes another white noise announcement as the doors open.

She peers out.

On the other side of the platform is another train. It looks exactly the same as the one she is already on.

When she looks down the length of the train, she sees that there are indeed people riding in the other cars. She watches as some people exit the train, walking across the platform to the other unmarked train at the same time people from the other train come shuffling over to this one. She wonders why.

She wonders if it's that everyone else just understands what's going on here a lot better than she does or if it's that no one has any particular idea of what to do and they're just wandering around, hoping to end up where they're supposed to go eventually. Or maybe they actually understand what the loudspeaker announcements are saying.

She remembers standing there in the middle of her room, the rope around her neck, the sound of rain pattering against her window. She thought about calling home, to hear the voice of someone familiar. She thought about writing a note. But she decided that she didn't feel like trying to explain anything.

She knew that they would eventually hear about her death and they would be distraught. Her mother would probably cry. She didn't really care though, not enough. She supposed that made her a bad person. She was too tired to be anything else.

So she went over to the window and opened it, swinging her legs out.

She looked down at the distant pavement below. The rain dripped onto her shoes. She lived on the fourteenth floor. It was a high enough drop.

She shifted her weight forward.

She dropped down.

The rope snapped taut.

At some point, Jake stops talking. Stops mid-sentence to just stare at her, surprise coming over his face.

“You’re looking down on me,” he says. Marveling. He laughs. It looks more like a convulsion. He looks wounded.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” he says. “Just because you came here on purpose. You have no problem with being dead at all. You fucking wanted to be here. Don’t patronize me.”

He says, “I was going to quit smoking, you know.”

And then he says, “You know what. At the next stop? Get out.”

She stares at him. Incredulous.

“I was here first,” he says. “Get your own train.”

So she does. The next time the train comes to a stop and the doors open, she walks out and doesn’t look back. Even though she has no idea where she’s going.

The nonsensical white noise gibberish of the loudspeaker announcements still tells her nothing. Each platform still looks the same as all the previous platforms and the train on the opposite side always looks exactly like the train she’s just come from. But she keeps going,

from to train to train to train. Wandering aimlessly across platforms that might all be the same exact platform for all she knows.

She meets various other passengers along the way. Heather Jones, an old lady who is almost positive she died of a brain aneurysm but isn't entirely sure. Leo, who'd been shot in the back seven times by a police officer. Andy, from Huntington's disease. Little Jessie, who'd been hit by a car. She feels guilty, at times, for being here when her life wasn't even that hard. She just hadn't been very good at it.

She settles onto a train that could very well be one she's ridden before but doesn't recognize—she has no way of knowing. She keeps asking people, “Do you know what the loudspeaker is saying?” but no one seems to be able to understand it.

The view through the train's window is always nothing at all. The darkness of the outside and the electric lights of the inside turn the window glass into mirrors. All she can see is her own bloodied face.

The worst part of it is that everything still hurts. It didn't end. She's still in pain and she's still remembering.

She remembers telling her therapist, “I think I'm going to kill myself within the next ten years.”

And he laughed.

So she laughed too.

And he said, “Well I guess you have nothing to worry about then.”

She'd felt something break, in that moment. She's still not sure what it was. But it still hurts. Everything still hurts. She's still bleeding.

She'd just wanted everything to stop. It's like there was no point in dying at all.

She gets on the next train and is surprised to find Jake sitting there.

He looks up at her as if he is just as surprised as she is.

She stands there in the doorway for a moment, uncertain. But she doesn't know where else she would go, so she sits down and doesn't say anything.

He doesn't say anything either.

The drop was supposed to snap her neck. She measured it. Researched it. The rope was the right length. The drop was the right height.

But something went wrong.

She remembers being conscious still, at the very end. Alive. A fire burning from inside her face as she wheezed and her mouth gaped open, her lungs begging for air and her throat unable to open back up and comply. Her pulse roaring and her blood screaming as gravity wrenched down on her feet that kicked and danced and her fingers scrabbling at the band strapped around her neck.

Her body didn't want to be dead. It fought like something possessed, thrashing around with a kind of desperation that seemed completely alien to her and it refused to stop. Fingernails bending backwards as they tried to scratch away at the rope.

And then the rope snapped.

So she fell the rest of the way down.

It wasn't a big enough distance. She felt her body hitting the rain-soaked pavement. Felt her bones breaking. And she lived for another two minutes after that.

And all the while her pulse screamed and screamed.

Eventually, Jake says,

“I’m sorry.”

She looks up. Stares at him.

“For what?” she says.

He laughs, breath hissing in and out. He shrugs his shoulders.

“I don’t know. I just am.”

More silence.

She says, “Me too.”

The next time the train pulls to a stop, the doors open and the loudspeaker hisses and spits static.

But then it says, in a tone so pure and clear, “*Next stop-*.”



*Set yourself on fire*

The chrysanthemums still look like they're dying.

You prod at one of the wilting blooms with a finger. The petals look almost ragged. You can't tell if the pigment is any better than before since yellow has always looked like a sickly color to you. The leaves are curling like burnt paper.

Your store manager, Shannon, had told you to throw them away, saying they were "too depressing to look at" and couldn't be displayed on the main desk anymore. On an impulse, you decided to take them home with you instead. You're not sure why.

When Adam came to the store to pick you up in his car as usual, he took one look at them and said, "Are we decorating the apartment with dead flowers now?" To which you replied, "They're not dead yet." But they look like they're definitely getting there. No matter how carefully you water them and no matter how much direct sunlight they get.

You heave a sigh, feeling the need to do something useful.

You write a note saying: "Going to start a load of laundry. Be back soon," and post it on the refrigerator before heading over to the bathroom to collect the laundry basket.

You hover for a moment in the hallway in front of the closed bedroom door—you can hear Adam talking on the phone with his mother inside. It'd be a good time for you to clean the sheets as well, but you're afraid to interrupt him.

You're considering whether to chance a very quiet knock on the door when Adam slams his fist against the wall. It's a familiar sound, one that you feel as much as hear as it seems to reverberate through the entire apartment.

"That's bullshit and you know it," he snaps.

You make as little noise as possible as move away from the door, sock covered feet treading softly on the fake hardwood floor.

The apartment building elevator has been broken for almost a month now and the laundry machines are on the ground floor. You shift the laundry basket, bracing it against your hip before beginning the trek down the stairs.

Exactly one flight down, you find someone unfamiliar standing there.

She's leaning over the railing of the stairwell, long dark hair spilling over her shoulders. There's a lighter in her hand, and a tissue box tucked under her arm.

She pulls a tissue out and lights it at the corner. The fire eats away at the edges of the feather-soft paper, slowly devouring it with glowing orange tongues. Then she lets it go, sending it floating down the empty space of the stairwell's center, towards the distant ground. It doesn't make it very far, disintegrating midair into nothing. She pulls out another tissue and repeats the process.

It seems like a waste of tissues to you, but maybe she doesn't need them anyway. Maybe she never cries.

"Is the fire bothering you?" she says.

She's looking over her shoulder at you and you realize with a jolt that you've been caught staring. But her expression looks more attentive than angry.

You rush to say "Not at all" and "I'm so sorry for interrupting" all at once, realizing how you must look from her perspective.

She tilts her head to one side, considering you for a moment before holding out a fresh tissue to you like an offering.

“Want to try?” she says.

You just look back at her blankly, so she elaborates,

“You light it and you make a wish.” A self-amused smile comes across her face. “Like ‘flying wish paper.’”

You readjust your grip on the laundry basket. “I’m okay. I don’t need anything.”

“All right,” she says. She sets the tissue aflame and releases it.

“Then, I wish for you to definitely find an available washing machine downstairs,” she says, smiling at you.

You manage to smile back as you walk past her, continuing down the stairs.

A couple flights down, you stop to look back upwards and watch the burning paper float down from above. It can’t really be “flying wish paper” if all it does is fall, but it seems better than waiting for the stars to fall out of the sky.

At work the next day, you turn into the DVDs and Blu-rays aisle for restocking and you come face to face with her again. You each stand there a moment as you recognize each other.

The nametag pinned to her shirt says: “Kara.”

She says, “Oh, hello again.”

And then she says, “I guess that makes sense. The commute’s pretty decent after all.”

After a couple of hours of retail’s usual fare, Kara takes you aside and asks,

“Hey. Any tips on how to get on Shannon’s good side? I’m getting the feeling that she wants to kill me.”

This is understandable. You think Shannon probably wants to kill everyone, including you. You have no idea if she even has a good side, so you just smile, shaking your head.

“Come one,” Kara wheedles. “I’m seriously worried she’s going to fire me for just breathing wrong or something.”

This startles a laugh out of you.

“Don’t laugh,” she says, putting on a playfully indignant tone. “I’m being serious.”

“No, I understand,” you say. “I get fired all the time.”

“Really?” she says, looking surprised. “I wouldn’t have guessed that. You don’t look like much of a trouble maker.”

You shrug your shoulders.

“I always mess up.”

Like with that restaurant and that convenience store and the gas station. You just could never do anything right.

Your job as a delivery driver was the only exception. You never screwed that one up. It was just that Adam didn’t like the work hours. He said that he didn’t like you being out so late.

About half an hour later it’s five minutes to the hour again, so as always you pull out your phone, smiling carefully into the camera, and you take a picture of yourself with a clear view of the store around you.

Kara makes a questioning noise, equal parts amused and bemused. Your face flushes a little and you duck your head, focusing intently on your phone as you send the photo to Adam.

“It’s not anything interesting,” you say as you try to think of a reassuring text message to follow it up with, in case he’s having a bad day at work. “My boyfriend just likes to have proof that I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

“Oh,” Kara says. Something in her voice sounds off. “That’s-.”

Her brow is furrowed and she’s looking you over very carefully.

You realize what that might have sounded like. So you add, “He has some severe anxiety.” And, “It’s not any trouble. So I don’t mind it at all.” With a casual smile to finish.

She still looks like she wants to say something else. But then Shannon yells over the radio that someone needs to go over to the TV section to deal with a technical problem and you’re more than happy to end the conversation there.

It’s been over an hour now and Adam still hasn’t come to get you.

You’re standing out in front of the store, like you’re supposed to. He usually comes to pick you up right away. The very moment you get out of work. Your shift ended over an hour ago. There is a distant feeling of panic rising up in your lungs.

You send him a third text message asking him about where he is. None of your calls are getting through.

“Still not here?” Kara says from behind you.

You turn around, trying to force your face to do something that looks more normal so that it doesn’t crumple. She looks at you with a combination of concern and pity so you know that you’ve failed.

“You could catch a ride with me,” she says.

You want to say yes.

She adds, “We’re going to the same place, so. It wouldn’t be any trouble.”

You bite your lip, looking down at your phone.

You send a fourth text, explaining Kara’s offer and asking for permission to accept. But you know you can’t wait for a response. You can’t ask Kara to wait for you. You just want Adam to call you back and tell you what you should do.

You think that it should probably be okay to accept the offer, because you wouldn’t be inconveniencing Kara. And, maybe it would even be a relief to Adam, if the reason he hasn’t been able to come get you yet is that he got tied up at work and is too busy right now.

You text him one more time to tell him that you’ve accepted the offer and that you’ll see him at home.

She asks you if you’d be okay with her smoking, even though it’s her car. You tell her that of course it’s fine, she’s already doing you this favor.

She lights the cigarette with a lighter you recognize as the one she was using to burn the tissues in the stairwell. She takes a drag from the cigarette, dropping the lighter into the one of the cup holders near the gear shift.

You feel the urge to ask, “What kinds of things do you wish for?”

She glances at you, exhaling a plume of smoke. It makes her look like she could start breathing fire. She hums thoughtfully.

“You know, the usual,” she says. “Nothing special.”

“It looked like you made a lot of them.”

She laughs. It’s gentle and quiet, barely more than a puff of breath and a smile. There is something very soothing about it.

“There are lot of things to wish for,” she says.

When Kara finally pulls up to your apartment building, she hesitates for a moment. She looks like she wants to say something to you, but she stops.

Then she smiles at you instead and says, “Have a good night.”

You open the door to the empty apartment.

The chrysanthemums are there waiting for you. They still look terrible. You check the pot’s soil and gently pour a little bit more water in, for all the good it does. You don’t really like flowers in general, but you’ve grown to hate these chrysanthemums. All they do is wither.

You sit down on the couch, keeping an eye on the clock.

And you wait for Adam.

After almost another full hour, the door opens.

You stand up to welcome him back, but your voice dies in your throat when you see the look on his face.

He slams the door behind him.

You think you might be shaking.

“It’s funny,” he says. “I got to the store and you weren’t fucking there.”

You try to tell him that you’re so sorry, that you didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t answering his phone-.

“My battery was dead,” he snarls. “Don’t fucking try and turn this around on me. This is your fault.”

Everything is coming out wrong.

“And you know what your manager said? She told me you’d already left. With some woman.”

“Adam-.”

“Are you fucking her too?”

“No I-.”

“*Stop lying to me.*”

He snatches the flower pot up and smashes it on the floor in front of you.

You flinch as shards of terra cotta and dirt explode around your feet, scattering everywhere. But you stay rooted to the floor.

Next is the mug of water you’d left sitting beside it. One, two, three, four, five of the picture frames. The kitchen blender. The bowl you made from that pottery class you took together.

Until finally he just stops, breathing hard. He sinks to the floor, his head in his hands.

You stand there, watching him for what feels like an eternity. Eventually, your body returns to being flesh and blood instead of stone and you’re able to go over to him, stepping carefully through the glass and porcelain debris all across the floor.

You kneel down at his side. You want to reach out, to rest a hand on his shoulder, but you’re unsure if you’re allowed to touch him right now. So you just sit there with him, listening to him breathe.

Eventually he says in a hoarse voice, “It’s not like I don’t want to trust you. Do you have any idea how hard this is for me? I have to worry about anyone-, *everyone* you meet.”

And all you can whisper is, “I’m sorry.”



There is a knocking on the door that makes you flinch. You look up at the door. You look back at Adam. The knocking continues, but he doesn't show any signs of moving.

So you pull yourself up off the floor and go to answer it.

You find Kara is standing there, staring back at you with wide eyes. Her expression is many things at once that you can't quite identify.

"Sorry, I live in the apartment just below this one and I heard-," she says. It sounds like something is caught in her throat. "There was a crashing sound. And I was worried something might have happened?"

She is looking at you very carefully.

You wish she would stop.

"Everything is fine," you say. "I'm very sorry about the noise. Have a good night."

You shut the door.

Adam's voice comes from behind you, barely a croak, "Who was that?"

"No one," you say. "Just a neighbor."

"Okay," he says. He staggers to his feet. Then he shuffles to the bedroom without another word.

You hear the door close behind him as you stay standing there, surveying the damages dully.

The last time this happened, he broke all the dishware, so you bought only plastic replacements. Most of what you have now is plastic. But Adam always ends up coming across the fragile things in his blind rage.

You look at the remains of the flowerpot, the mess of dirt and foliage on the kitchen floor. For a moment you think about just sweeping the whole mess of a plant up and dumping it

into the trash. Because, in many ways, you just don't really think there's any point anymore. A waste of time and energy.

But you still collect the chrysanthemums back up as carefully as you can, trying not to harm them any more than they already have.

You don't have another flower pot so you use an old plastic takeout container, cutting some slits in the bottom for drainage and placing the chrysanthemums inside, along with as much of the dirt that you can save from the floor. Still, even when you have everything settled again, the flowers still look mangled.

You wonder if they're going to die now. You've read about how repotting things can turn out badly. This worries you. You might hate them, but they don't deserve to die.

The next day at work, Kara still won't stop looking at you.

Her gaze feels like an interrogation, a judgement. You feel the urge to correct her, because she doesn't understand anything at all.

You think about telling her about how, when your parents found out you were bisexual, they effectively disowned you and stopped answering your calls. You called and called and they never answered even once.

You think about telling her how Adam wrapped his arms around you and welcomed you into his life even though you had nothing to offer him in return. Even though you're nothing but a burden. He lets you stay with him. He's your home now. There are no rules for what love is supposed to look like.

But you don't really feel like explaining yourself. So you avoid her gaze and you avoid her and you wait for the day to end.

When your shift ends, he's already waiting there for you, exactly on time.

In the passenger seat is a brand new flower pot for you.

"To replace the one I broke," he says.

He doesn't say anything else, but it feels like an "I'm sorry" and an "I love you" all wrapped into one.

And you feel like your heart could burst.

You met Adam in college, in a class on pop culture and digital media. You were in the same group as him for the group project assignment. He hated every second of the experience and everyone there, except for you. He took a liking to you. Maybe it was vanity, but there was something truly wonderful about being liked by someone that hated everyone else. It made you feel more cherished than anything in the world.

You're on a ladder, restocking some of the higher shelves, when your phone falls out of your pocket and shatters on the floor.

You realize several things at once.

You won't be able to send Adam any updates and you can't make personal calls with the phone in the office. Kara isn't here for you to consider asking her to borrow her phone, and even if she were, Adam would not react well to receiving messages from you through someone else's phone.

Your blood feels frozen with dread.

Adam is screaming your name. You feel his voice just as much as you hear it, a flash of cold electricity in your skin and in your bones. You're hit with the sudden impulse to hide. But there is nowhere to hide. So you go out to meet him.

His face is set like a mask. Your voice dies inside your chest cavity.

He says, "We're going home. Now."

Then he grabs you by the wrist and drags you out of the store like a rag doll.

He's pacing around the apartment like a caged animal. His breathing is harsh as he clenches and unclenches his hands.

You're crying and that just makes you panic more as you see his face twist in annoyance.

"Stop crying. I know you're just doing that to try and make me feel guilty."

He says, "You get that job at the store just so you could, what, fuck that bitch in the backroom during break time?"

You try to tell him what happened. You try to show him your phone.

None of it works.

"Stop. Crying," he shouts. Shaking you. You try, but you can't. You just keep sobbing out apologies over and over again.

He wraps his hands around your throat.

You don't know if you're crying still. You can't tell. Your blood is burning all throughout your skin, like all of it wants to come bursting out through your face. None of it is left in your hands that try to reach up towards Adam's wrists and can't even grip onto them.

Your legs are too heavy for you to kick out.

And then he lets go.

Air strains through your throat, rushing to make its way into your chest as it expands out. A sob rips out of you before you clamp a hand over your mouth in terror to muffle the sound. Your body shakes. You can't do anything more than just lie there on the floor.

Adam is standing over you, looking over his shoulder.

The roaring in your ears peters out and your hearing returns enough to register that someone is knocking on the door.

Adam looks down at you. You look into his eyes. His jaw clenches. He breathes out through his nose. Then he goes down the hall.

You hear him open the door and say, "Good evening officers, how can I help you?"

You hear an unfamiliar male voice say, "We received a call from one of your neighbors expressing some concern about the noise."

Adam responds with a surprised laugh tempered with just the right amount of embarrassment. You can imagine him hunching his shoulders just a little, smiling sheepishly.

"I'm so sorry, sir. My girlfriend and I were having a huge fight." He pitches his voice a bit lower, not quite a whisper. "It's that time of the month, you know?"

This draws out sympathetic noises from the two policemen.

Adam adds, "I swear, it's like dating a werewolf sometimes, you know?" Which draws out some chuckling.

You listen to the three men laughing together, your blood quieting down, breath filtering in and out of you.

You come to the quiet realization that Adam really is going to kill you.

The TV is talking to you.

You've been lying on the couch for hours since you've been fired yet again and have nowhere better to be. You think you'd like to turn the TV off but can't seem to make yourself move.

The TV is telling you a story about a little girl that had a violent drunk for a father and a meek shrinking violet for a mother that could barely raise a hand to defend herself, let alone the little girl. This is understandable; flowers are not equipped to protect anyone.

The TV is saying something about how amazing it is that this little girl was able to persevere, how she is a true example of "the strength of the human spirit," how "she lived through hell" but still made it through because: "There was a fire inside of her heart that just wouldn't go out."

You have no idea what any of that means. All you have inside your heart is blood.

You wonder if maybe when Adam does kill you, he'll regret it. Maybe he'll remember you forever, grieving you, missing you. Maybe that would be enough because the very thought of that makes you feel something similar to being loved and cherished.

Then you think about how your family react. You picture your parents being slowly destroyed by the guilt eating away at their insides. You think about ways in which your brother's life might go spiraling out of control as he replays the last conversation he ever had with you in his mind, over and over, when you called him and he said, "Mom and Dad never want to see you again," and he refused to put either of them on the line no matter how much you begged and cried. You imagine them all never being happy ever again, with your death hanging over them like a wounded specter.

Something about that feels extremely vindicating.

The flowers are dead.

You've lost all concept of time and can't remember when you last watered them and now they're just a shriveled pile of dry leaves.

Your eyes are burning.

You crush the pot to your chest, holding it tight. The leaves crinkle like newspaper.

You are suddenly very aware of how the air all around you has gone stagnant.

Unbearable. You need to be outside.

Roof access should be restricted, technically, but the rusty door lock is broken and has never been fixed. You push through, out into the open. Then you walk to the edge of the roof.

You set the flowerpot down first, balancing it carefully so that it doesn't tip over and fall. The harsh brick scrapes at the skin of your hands as you lift your body up onto the ledge beside it, swinging your legs over. Your feet dangle over the empty air below as you settle yourself down, sitting comfortably as you look out. Still breathing.

The shining glass and metal city is far away. The world spread out before you here is smaller, the rooftops of more apartment buildings, rectangles of varying dull shades, interspersed with clusters of trees strategically positioned to make the space look alive and not like a concrete tomb.

The autumn colors the leaves in shades of orange and yellow. It makes it look like the city is on fire.

The view doesn't make you feel anything in particular.

You kick your legs back and forth, toying with the feeling of gravity pulling hungrily on your feet.

“So,” you hear Kara’s voice say from behind you. “I haven’t seen you around much lately.”

You look over your shoulder and see her standing there, just a couple feet away. She’s staring at you like you might disappear if she blinks.

“Got fired again,” you say, before looking back at the skyline.

“I’m sorry.”

You shrug. “It was always going to happen.”

She’s quiet for a long moment.

“Did you lie to the police too?” she says softly.

Your throat feels tight.

You say, “You don’t understand anything at all.”

She goes quiet again.

Then she says, “You’d be surprised.”

Something in her voice makes you turn again to look back at her.

She’s smiling, but you can see something raw and broken in it.

She says,

“Please.”

Then her face seems to crumple.

She says, “You deserve better.”

Her hand reaches out towards you, hovering. Like she wants to comfort you somehow. Like she wants to grab hold of you and not let you go. But she doesn’t close the distance, as if she’s afraid you might break if she touches you.



You stay in this moment of standstill, just watching her. She looks like she's about to see the world end.

You say, "May I borrow your lighter?"

She looks up at you without any comprehension. But she moves closer, taking the lighter out of her pocket and offering it to you.

You take it from her and then you take one of the dead flowers from the flowerpot beside you. You feed it into the flame, before dropping it down over the edge of the roof.

You say, "I wish for my old delivery job back."

You light another one.

"I wish for my parents to call and tell me they're sorry."

The dead leaves and flower petals blacken and crumbles into ash as they falls.

"I wish for an affordable apartment in a building with an elevator that actually works."

And the confused look on Kara's face gives way to the most beautiful smile you've ever seen.

*Even robots can cry*

There is a constant buzzing in his head. Like a dying fluorescent light.

According to his roommate, Simon is a robot.

Specifically, he says:

“What are you, a robot? Don’t you ever fucking sleep?”

Simon finds Zach’s description apt.

“Park, come on.” Zach’s voice is muffled. He probably has his pillow crushed over his face. “It’s two in the morning. We have lab lecture in *six hours*.”

Simon sits at his desk, meticulously re-transcribing his Bio lecture notes with better color-coding and added diagrams. He doesn’t bother to answer him or even look up from his work.

“Just go to the library. Or anywhere else. Please.”

The library isn’t open anymore. If it were open 24/7, Simon would go there all the time but it just isn’t practical to set up a study space inside of a building that will eventually kick him out while he’s trying to be productive.

The desk light isn’t even that bright. Zach should be able to sleep with it still on.

(And really, Zach should be awake and studying for Bio too if the question he asked their professor yesterday, “Do we have to know it to that extent for the exam,” is anything to go by.)

Their next Bio exam is next Tuesday, at 3:00 PM. Eight days from now. And Simon has an essay for his freshman writing seminar due in three days as well as a problem set for Chem due in four. He knows not to waste any of his time.

After a long enough stretch of time with Simon just not answering, Zach lets out a frustrated growling noise as he shifts around in his bed, savagely hitting his pillow a couple of times against the wall as he rearranges his blankets and mutters angrily in Japanese.

Simon doesn't pay him any mind. He uses a ruler to carefully draw out a precise and properly proportioned graph.

He thinks being a robot would make everything so much easier. Streamlined data retrieval, able to recharge whilst remaining operational. Not needing sleep would be a wonderful reallocation of time.

"So," his father says, his voice like a crackle and a hiss through the phone. "Have you picked an extracurricular yet?"

Simon says, "Not yet."

He went to the club fair at the beginning of the semester and couldn't process anything as he was yelled at from all sides by what felt like hundreds of people. He ended up signing up for at least a dozen email lists.

"I'm still trying to decide."

His inbox is constantly inundated with emails for various activities and club meetings. The amount of time it takes him to sort them into categories and properly label all of them is less than ideal.

"Well, it's getting late into the semester. You should decide soon," his father says. "You'll need more than just grounding in the sciences to be attractive to med schools. I've told you, they want their applicants to be well-rounded. You can't just do what everyone else is

doing otherwise you won't stand out. Student EMT services would be a good place to start. Or maybe something cultural to balance out your application."

Simon finds himself nodding out of habit. The phone feels warm and uncomfortable, pressed up against his face.

Between Molecular Biology and General Chemistry and each of their corresponding lab sections, the mandatory freshman writing seminar course, and the introductory Psychology course (which he is taking solely because the subject is now included on the MCAT), he doesn't have *time* to do any of that. And he won't have time during the semesters to come either.

He's been able to figure out that, between all the general university requirements and for the premed track, he's going to need to take about four and a half credits every semester. And labs only counting as half-credit isn't an accurate reflection of how much work they require.

He has already spent at least ten hours on this essay that is due in two days. He hasn't even started his problem set that is due the day after. The Bio exam is in exactly a week.

He thinks that he might want to start screaming. But that would be impractical.

"You're right," he says. "I'll choose something soon."

"Well," his father says. "Keep me updated. My flight will be boarding shortly so I'll talk to you later."

And then he hangs up.

A robot would be fine because robots do not have feelings, needs, or preferences. They do what is required of them without any problems at all.

His pulse is a monotone, repeating blip and he is going to be a doctor.

The four years ahead of him look excruciatingly long. And then there are at least seven more after that.

At the fifteen hour mark of work spent on his essay, Simon opens up his email.

Instead of reading through his unread messages, (six of them), he starts typing.

*Dear Sunny,*

He deletes the line and starts over.

*Dear Sun-Hee,*

*It's been a while. How have you been lately?*

He stares blankly at the screen for several minutes, struggling for something to say.

*I have been doing well*

Delete.

*Mom and Dad miss you*

Delete.

*Do you think you're ever coming back?*

He deletes the whole email.

Seven days until the next Bio exam. But he supposes technically it's down to six now, since it's 3:42 AM.

He remembers shouting.

He couldn't make out the words because his ears were covered by his hands, palms pressed tightly to the sides of his head. He only registered the fact that there was shouting and screaming. The bellowing roar of his father and the quieter but still insistent raised voice of his

mother. He didn't pay any attention to the words—or maybe he just decided to forget what he heard them saying.

Footsteps came pounding down the hall, and then his door swung open.

Sun-Hee stood there, breathing unevenly, hands clutching the strap of her duffel bag. Her eyes were wet.

He took his hands away from his ears. He waited, watching her.

But Sun-Hee just looked at him. Simon has no idea what the look on his sister's face meant, but it seemed important somehow. Right up to the moment when she turned away and walked down the hall, down the stairs, and out the front door.

Simon wishes he could ask her what she was thinking, in that moment. She looked like she was going to say something.

His computer has stopped working.

He presses the power button again, as if that might make a difference. The display screen remains a black void.

This essay is due tomorrow *he doesn't have time for this-*.

The woman working at the tech help desk in the library smiles at him and tells him that his laptop's battery has been burnt out and can no longer hold a charge.

She says that this is just something that happens over time and tries to explain something about proper battery cycling to extend the lifespan of a battery but he isn't really listening to her. Mostly he's just fixated on the word "dead."

"Is there any way to get it repaired?" he asks.

She smiles again, in that carefully patient way.

“No, it’s pretty much too late for this one. You’re going to need a replacement.

Honestly, you’re probably better off just replacing the whole laptop.”

He stands up, reaching out to take his computer away from her.

“That’s fine thank you I have it under control,” he says.

Sun-Hee decided, after she graduated from college, that she didn’t want to go to med school after all. Just out of the blue.

She said, “I don’t want to be a doctor.”

Their parents asked her, “Then what *do* you want to be?”

And she said, “I want to go into theater.”

They said that they wouldn’t help her pay for any more schooling that wasn’t med school.

She said “Fine.”

They said that she couldn’t continue to live in their house like a freeloader if she wasn’t going to honor her commitment to become a doctor. They said that if she was really serious about this, she better pack her bags and find somewhere else to live.

So she packed her things and left.

And it was like their parents turned to Simon and said, “Now it’s your turn.”

They had him take on everything that she shrugged off and left behind. As if they had always intended for him to be the “backup plan.” The potential replacement.

He doesn't need a new laptop. His computer works fine the way that it is. Even if it is rundown and its processing speed is barely adequate. It can run the applications he needs it to. It still gets the work done.

He turns in his essay after spending over twenty hours on it. He is positive that it is structured exactly according to the rubric and guidelines that the professor assigned. It is 1:57 PM. He has twenty one hours and three minutes before his problem set for Chem is due. He has slept four hours in the last forty eight. The Bio exam is in five days.

He doesn't actually want to be a doctor either. Not even a little bit. But unlike Sun-Hee, he can never say that. Because if he did, they would just say,

“Then what *do* you want to be?”

And he wouldn't have an answer. Because there isn't anything in particular that he wants to be. It all looks the same to him. He has no argument to make for himself, so he might as well go along with what they want.

Not wanting to do something is not a legitimate reason to not do it. He can do it, and that's all that matters. That's how society is able to keep turning and good upstanding citizens are able to go to their nine to five jobs every day.

Life isn't about doing what you want or getting what you want. Only children and stupid people believe that.

It is Sunday night. The Bio exam is in two days.



Zach is hunched over his desk, reviewing with a desperate fervor, muttering aloud constantly.

“...so if it’s two times the number of cycles, then the amount of DNA is...”

Simon tilts his head to one side, listening. Zach is getting it wrong. PCR gives exponential growth to DNA. The number of strands you end up with is 2 to the power of however many cycles you’ve done.  $2^N$ , not  $2N$ .

But Simon doesn’t say anything.

They’re in the same class. It would be better for Zach to be one of the lower values on the grading curve.

Simon has overheard some of the other students in passing, as they chatter in the hallways leading to class. They complain about how “All the Asian students are fucking up the curve and making it hell for the rest of us”.

Just like how they talk about how “All the Korean students are *always* in the library,” as if that’s a bad thing. And it’s not even accurate-

But it isn’t worth it to try and say anything. He knows this. Because he isn’t allowed to complain. He’s the one with the good grades, after all. So he has to let them say whatever they want.

It doesn’t matter if people think he doesn’t deserve his GPA, as if he hasn’t broken his back working hard to earn every single point and decimal point of it. All that matters is that his score numbers stay as high as they need to and his performance evaluations are always favorable.

It’s Monday. The Bio exam is tomorrow.

He is holding his first essay from the mandatory freshman writing seminar, graded and with comments.

On the last very page, in red ink, is an “A” that has been crossed out. Underneath it is a “B+.”

He is not sure what he is looking at.

“It’s really a shame,” the English professor says. “It was a good essay. I just saw that you didn’t have a title, so I had to zap you.”

Just breathe, there is no point in not breathing, that will not solve anything. Not breathing is impractical.

“Now you’ll know to always title your papers,” the professor says. “Better luck next time.”

He sits at his desk, holding the packet of paper opened to the page that has the very first “B+” he has ever received in his life scrawled at the top.

He can’t even make out what the professor’s written comments are. The handwriting is barely legible and he can’t seem to focus on anything in particular.

His head feels like it’s going to crack like an egg.

He presses his hands against either side of it, as if he might be able to hold it together with just his hands.

He breathes in through his nose, his jaw clenched, teeth grinding together inside his mouth. He breathes out.

“Hey, are you okay?” Zach asks from somewhere behind him.

He doesn’t say anything. He just keeps breathing.

He has to think about it practically. There is nothing he can do about this “B+” now. There is nothing he can do to change it. He can still finish the class with an “A” if he gets better grades on the rest of the assignments. He just has to concentrate and do better next time. That’s the practical approach. Just move on from the “B+.” He can deal with this problem. Everything is fine. The Bio exam is tomorrow. He still needs to review his notes.

It’s like something in his head has become jammed.

Computational neuroscientists have estimated that the data storage capacity of the human brain to be anywhere from 1 terabyte to 2.5 petabytes. Even 1 terabyte should be enough to handle this amount of studying. That’s 1,000 gigabytes. That would be the equivalent to about 2,400 1 hour and 20 minute long lecture video recordings. 3,200 hours of class material.

But he just. Can’t.

All he is physically capable of right now is sitting in his desk chair and staring blankly ahead. Like a dead machine. Gears grinding uselessly together.

But broken things get thrown away. So he can’t break. Under any circumstances. He has to keep working. He can’t afford to not be working. He needs to be able to prove that he can still do this. There are more exams to study for. More written assignments to complete. And he has to perform well in classes to earn the approval of the professors so he can try to get involved with a good lab as soon as possible.

And yet.

It’s as if there’s a lag between his brain, his conscious mind, and his physical body. Like all outgoing and incoming neural signals have slowed to a crawl. Thought processes lag, stutter to halt, and drop away, yielding no productive results.

He reminds himself of his computer, with its increasingly sluggish processing speed. He's been relying on things like disk defragmentation and hard drive cleaning programs to try to re-optimize his computer, to make it still useable.

But he doesn't have a hard drive or an operating system. He's just a disgusting rotting flesh carcass of a human that can't handle even the simplest applications.

He slams his forehead into his desk. Various things on his desk rattle in place from the force of it. He lifts his head back up and slams it down again. And again.

A hand grabs him by the shoulder, pulling him back in his chair with a suddenness that strains his neck. He looks up to see Zach staring at him, wide eyed.

"Um," he says. He let's go of Simon's shoulder but his hand still is hovering a little, as if preparing to grab him again. "Don't do that."

"Why?" Simon asks.

"Because brain damage is bad?"

Of course. It's impractical. He'll need to use his brain tomorrow during the exam. He needs to use his brain *now*.

"Okay." Simon turns back to his desk and returns to not-reading his textbook.

In his "Introduction to Psychology" textbook, there is a chapter on the humanistic approach to psychology. One of the major humanist psychologists, Carl Rogers, talks about something called "unconditional positive regard."

Simon thought the concept sounded nice, when he read it. But he knew that it couldn't possibly be a real thing. Everything is conditional. He watched as Sun-Hee learned that the hard way. He knows what will happen if he makes the same mistakes.

The conditions of their parents' love have been made clear to him. The result of not meeting these conditions any longer also been made clear to him through demonstration.

If he isn't careful, there will be no one in the world that loves him.

It is 4:00 AM. The Bio exam is in eleven hours.

He types:

*Sunny,*

*Why did you leave me here alone with them?*

*It's because of you I have to do all this.*

*I feel like I'm dying.*

*I can't breathe.*

*You're the one that should have to be doing this, not me. I hate you.*

*I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you*

He keeps repeating that last line, those three words over and over typing, rapidly punching the same keys until his fingers get tangled together like the keys of an old fashioned typewriter and then he's incapable of spelling those three words correctly anymore.

He deletes the message.

He remembers how he was standing there, that night, watching her turn her back on him and walk away, down the hall, out of sight. Her footsteps fading until the door slammed shut behind her.

He remembers wanting to run after her. Wishing for his feet to free themselves from where they had become rooted into the floorboards.

He wanted to beg her to stay, just as much as he wanted her to take him with her. It all got tangled up in his throat, conflicted thoughts and emotions that never made it out into the air. The words all suffocated inside of him, trapped behind the prison of his gritted teeth.

He wanted to scream “Come back, come back, come back” at the door that closed behind her but he couldn’t even manage to get out a whisper.

There just wasn’t enough fight left in him for any of that.

It’s morning. He’s still lying in bed. The clock reads “8:47AM.” Bio lab lecture is in thirteen minutes. The Bio exam is in six hours and thirteen minutes. Zach has already started walking over. But Simon still hasn’t moved.

He has to get up. He’s supposed to get up. So he tries.

He really, really tries.

But either it’s too hard or he’s just not trying hard enough. So he lies there.

He watches 3:00 PM come and go on his clock.

And lies there. And lies there.

At 7:05 PM it sinks in.

All at once he lurches upright in bed and he stares at the clock and it’s like every sinew and ligament in his body is carrying all of the energy to send him rocketing out of the room and out to the classroom to his exam, all the energy he needed over four hours ago.

Now it just stays trapped inside of him and it has nowhere to go.

He carries it in his back and he hunches his shoulders, wraps his arms around his knees. Not enough. He lashes out one hand, slamming his elbow into the wall behind him. Pain lances

through, from the point of his elbow to the tips of his fingers. His arm falls uselessly by his side. He thinks that he might try screaming, just this once, because fuck being practical he just got a “0” on an exam because he couldn’t be bothered to fucking show up.

He needs to find an out because he cannot carry this mistake inside him—his body is physically rejecting it. Violently and all at once.

He has often wondered about what his parents will do if he fails. His parents don’t have another child to replace him with.

Maybe they’ll just get an actual robot.

A robot would be able to do everything that they wanted without any of these nonsensical difficulties.

A robot would just follow its programming and not waste time thinking about screaming at the top of its lungs and never stopping, because it wouldn’t have lungs and it probably wouldn’t even have a voice.

He has an email open, addressed to his Biology professor.

It begins with:

*Dear Professor Katz,*

And then it is completely blank.

He has nothing to say for himself.

It would be nice if there were something really wrong with him. A real excuse for not making it to the exam.

He wants to laugh at himself for thinking that, but he doesn't have it in him. It's pathetic. There's nothing "wrong." He's just making excuses for himself now.

He could have overcome all of this if he'd just tried hard enough. He's always been able to make himself tackle his work with everything that he has; maximum energy output, holding nothing back.

There was no reason for him to not have done that this time.

Tiredness isn't a reason to not do work.

If he'd been hit by a car—broken legs, ruptured femoral artery, severe head trauma—then he'd be able to say "I couldn't make it." And he could prove it with x-rays and sutures.

But he doesn't have any of that.

He can't throw himself in front of a car and say that he was in an accident on Tuesday retroactively.

He starts a new email.

*Sunny,*

*I messed up and now I don't know what to do. I got a B+ on an essay and then I got a 0 on an exam I don't know what to do. Please help m*

The door opens.

He can hear the rustling and jingling noises of Zach moving around, closing the door behind him, pocketing his keys, and then he hears him go completely still.

He turns and sees Zach just standing there in the doorway, looking at him.

"Hey," Zach says. "I," he stops for a moment. As if he's thinking very hard about what he is going to say. "I didn't see you at the exam today."

Simon feels his fingers twitch.



“Are you...okay?”

Simon opens his mouth to form a reply but all that comes out is a strange distorted sobbing noise and then all of a sudden his face splits open and salt water comes pouring out.

He wishes that Zack hadn't asked him that. He's always okay, as long as no one actually *asks* him.

He tries to cover the hole in his face with his hands, but the overflow won't stop.

Total systems failure.

Zach has taken on a look of unadulterated panic, which is understandable since all he did was ask a simple question and now Simon is just wailing like a child that's been abandoned in a parking lot.

For a moment, he thinks that Zach is going to leave. To just turn right back around and walk out the door and not deal with any of this.

Instead, Zach sits down at the foot of his bed, facing away from him, hands braced on his knees. His shoulders are hunched. Awkwardness painfully visible in his posture.

But he doesn't leave.

Simon's whole body aches and shudders. He doesn't really know what's happening right now. He's not even that upset. He tries to tell Zack that, but he isn't sure it's coming out very well. He's having trouble managing the inhale-exhale process of breathing while also trying to form words. He wraps his arms around himself and squeezes as hard as he can.

This lasts for about five minutes.

And then it just, ends.

Respiratory processes back online. Stuttering gasps evening out into a gentle inhale-exhale and the unbearable trembling in his bones drains away. His whole body goes quiet again. He settles back into the equilibrium.

“Um,” Zach’s voice sounds coarse in the quiet. “Are you,” but he trails off.

Simon feels like a dull battery. He blinks, but the haze in his eyes doesn’t seem to be going away.

Then Zach says, “You hungry?”

Simon simultaneously processes but fails to comprehend the words. He looks at Zach, trying to get the usual whirr and click of his brain to take effect and engage with the new information. Nothing happens.

Zach seems to take this as a response in and of itself.

“Come on,” he says. He leans over, catching the edge of Simon’s sleeve and tugging at it gently. “I know you haven’t eaten anything for at least 24 hours.”

Simon is still trying to figure out what to say even as his body complies with the direction and gets up off the bed. His feet shuffle awkwardly as he follows Zach, led by the hand like a child.

Eventually his brain catches up and he mumbles,

“I thought you hated me.”

Zach makes a muffled noise, his hand tightens its grip on Simon’s sleeve.

“Um,” Zach says.

He clears his throat.

“No, I really don’t,” he says.

When they get back, instead of typing “*Dear Sunny*” for what might be the umpteenth time, Simon pulls out of his phone and calls her.

As he waits, the dial tone singing out, and the ringing going on and on, he thinks about what he’ll say. It’s been so long. Are you happy where you are right now? What was the last thing you laughed about? Tell me about every little thing.

The ringing stops.

“Hello?” she says from the other end of the line. “This is Sun-Hee.”

He takes a deep breath.

## *How to Have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*

The sign on your door reads:

“Please take off your shoes before entering.”

It was decided, when you all moved into this apartment together, that people would wear shoes around the common space/kitchen/bathroom/their rooms indiscriminately because that’s just what everyone else was already in the habit of doing.

This is fine.

This just means that:

1. The inside of the apartment is “outside.”

People wear their outdoor shoes that have been on every bit of ground that they have ever walked on outside and then they come inside the apartment and walk all over the apartment floor. So the apartment floor is “Contaminated.”

2. Your room is the only “inside.”

You have a pair of slip-on shoes that are easy to put on and take off every time you need to leave your room which is more convenient than lacing up your sneakers. You also put the sign on your door.

Sometimes people forget, or they don’t read the sign, and they take one or two steps into your room wearing their shoes before you can stop them.

This is fine.

3. Any Contaminated spots must be disinfected with Lysol.

In addition, sometimes people walk around, without their shoes on, in the common-space/kitchen/bathroom/their rooms where they have worn their outdoor shoes. Because they are not wearing shoes, they think that they can come inside your room.

4. Bare feet that have been on the “outside” floor have also been Contaminated.

You add a second sign to your door that reads:

“If you are already walking around the apartment without your shoes on, please don’t come inside.”

Things you have figured out:

1. You need to do certain things and avoid doing certain other things.
2. This has absolutely nothing to do with being afraid of getting sick because you’re not.
3. You have no idea what it’s actually about.

This is what happens to the skin on your hands when it is time for fall and winter:

Stage 1: Your skin becomes chalky. Like white powder that peels away in flakes. This is just your skin dying.

Stage 2: Your skin becomes like leather, inflexible. This is when you start to feel it go tight, whenever you try to use your hands.

Stage 3: Your skin becomes like sandpaper, like scales. This is when your skin becomes just as hard and sharp as your fingernails.

Stage 4: Your skin splits open and bleeds.

People will say to you: “Why don’t you just stop washing your hands so much?”

And you will say: “Of course, that’s a good idea.”

On the topic of hand lotion:

1. It is advisable that you use lotion that does not have alcohol in it.
  - a. Otherwise it will feel like fire as it gets into the cracks in your skin. You will feel compelled to wash your hands to get it to stop. This is counterproductive.
2. You can only apply it to the backs of your hands.
  - a. If there is lotion on your palms and fingers you will feel like there is an oily film clinging to you. This will feel like they are Contaminated. You will feel compelled to wash your hands to get it to stop. This is counterproductive.

Either way:

1. Yes, you are using hand lotion.
2. It is not enough.

### *Therapy Session #1*

You try going to therapy because the internet has told you that is what you are supposed to do.

The therapist will ask, “So, why are you here?”

And you will say, “I don’t know.”

While you think about what would happen if you asked, “Please fix me.”

While you are walking across campus, you come across a woman who is walking her dog and you have to stop for a moment.

The dog is a Shiba Inu puppy, not a tiny baby, but still quite small. Her coat is a light honey color at its darkest, lightening all the way to a snowy white. She is beautiful and she is perfect. She peers around curiously at her surroundings and looks in your direction for a moment.

You want to ask to pet her. You want to stop and sit down on the ground and just hold her in your arms for a moment.

If you stop and hug this puppy, afterwards you will have to:

1. Go back to your room, throw all of the clothes you are currently wearing into your dirty laundry basket.
2. Take a shower.
3. Change into clean clothes.

If you stop and only pet her:

1. You will have to touch her only with your hands.
  - a. If any of your clothes touch her they will be Contaminated.
    - i. Refer to step 1 of “If you stop and hug this puppy.”
2. You will have to go to the nearest bathroom to wash your hands.

You cannot do any of these things because you have to go to class. Instead, you make quiet cooing noises in her direction as she and her owner walk past you.

When you were younger, you were friends with a boy named Jake who had a big black Labrador retriever named Henry.

Whenever you went to hang out at Jake’s house, he would practice skateboarding tricks in the driveway and you would sit on the sidelines with Henry snuggled up next to you.

Sometimes Henry would just sigh and flop his big heavy head onto your lap. He never minded when you played with his ears. They were velvety soft and he would make happy snuffling noises when you scratched underneath his collar for him.

That was “Before.”

You don’t remember where “Before” ended and “Now” began.

Definition of “**Clean**”

*adjective*

Has been washed/disinfected and has not come in contact with any surface that was not washed/disinfected beforehand.

Definition of “**clean**”

*adjective*

Has been washed/disinfected but has come in contact with a surface that was not washed/disinfected beforehand.

You do a Google search for “OCD treatment.”

At the top of the search results is a summary panel, already toggled to the section on “treatment.”

The first thing it says, in bold, is:

“**Can’t be cured.**”

Since as long as you can remember, you have wanted to have a dog. Big or small. Any kind. A warm and soft friend that would always love you back no matter what.

But no matter how much you love them, dogs are “Unclean.”

They get into dirty things, they make messes.

A dog wouldn’t be able to understand something like “I love you but you Contaminate everything you touch.”

You would be a horrible pet owner.



*Therapy Session #8*

What you have is not the same as what you've read about. It doesn't fit into the neat little categories that are laid out in your Abnormal Psychology textbook.

You feel the need to communicate as much to the therapist, to make sure she doesn't get the wrong idea. It's not that you're afraid of getting sick

"Then what is it?" she asks.

You don't know. You just know that you have to do things a certain way. If you don't do it properly, right away, it will only get worse and will be harder to do later because the Contamination will have spread.

"And if you don't do anything, what will happen?" she asks.

Nothing, really. It isn't logical or rational. You just know that you have to do it this way.

It's less of a "mental illness" and more of a "mental blockade" and you wonder if that means you have something other than "OCD." Because "OCD" is supposed to be related to anxiety. You don't really think you deal with very much of that.

"What do you think anxiety is then?" the therapist asks.

You've seen someone having a panic attack, a full, bodily seizure of the senses and mental faculties. Terror and a total loss of control.

This is not what you are like. You are always in control. Meticulously, securely, in control. As long as you do things in a certain way.

The most important thing that you have figured out is that you need to have a “home base” that is Clean. Even if the rest of the entire world is Contaminated, if you have that one Clean place, everything is Fine.

This Clean place is your bed.

How to make/keep your bed Clean:

1. Make sure your bedsheets and nightclothes are Clean.
  - a. This is accomplished by doing laundry in a certain way.

How to do laundry (when you are at home):

1. Load the dirty laundry into the washer.
  - a. Do not let the dirty laundry touch any other surface.
  - b. If it touches any other surface, you must disinfect it.
  - c. If it touches you/your clothes, this is okay.
    - i. See step 7.
2. Go to the nearest sink and wash your hands.
3. Go back to the washing machine and add the detergent.
  - a. You will inevitably get some of the liquid detergent on your hands.
4. Go to the nearest sink and wash your hands.
5. Go back to the washing machine, take off the clothes you are wearing and load them as well.
6. Start the wash cycle.
7. Go shower.
8. Get dressed in clean clothes.
9. When the wash cycle is complete, go back to the washing machine and transfer the wet clean laundry into the dryer.
  - a. Do not let the wet clean laundry touch anything.
  - b. A garment that touches any other surface must be washed again.
10. Start the dry cycle.
11. When the dry cycle is complete, go back to the dryer and transfer the Clean laundry into the Clean laundry basket.
  - a. This laundry basket must under no circumstances ever come into contact with dirty laundry.
12. Go to the nearest sink and wash your hands.
13. Fold the clean laundry very carefully.
  - a. Do not let the Clean laundry touch anything, including you, except for your hands.
14. Transfer Clean folded laundry into the Clean clothing drawers in your room.

How to do laundry (when you are at school):

It is not possible to do laundry at school.

Take your laundry home and refer to previous list through step 13 and then continue with the following instructions on transport.

14. Get a fresh garbage bag
15. Disinfect the inside of it with Lysol.
16. Pack your Clean clothes and Clean sheets, inside it.
17. Transfer the garbage bag to the car.
  - a. Do not let this bag rip.
18. Drive back to school.

One Sunday, during the winter, while you were carrying back a massively heavy load of clean laundry from your father's house, you slipped on some ice and fell down some stairs outside.

After a moment of lying on the ground in a jumbled mess of limbs and confusion, you determined that you were in a non-zero amount of pain. Specifically your lower back.

You decided that you'd bruised yourself and made yourself get the rest of the way up, pulling yourself into a standing position, hauling your bag back over your shoulder.

You managed to limp the rest of the way back to your apartment. It took you a while, but you did it. After which point you immediately went into your room to lie down on the floor, since you couldn't do something like lie on your bed.

You weren't able to get up again for two days. Not for anything.

On the third day, one of your apartment mates barged in to check on you, after hearing you crying.

He was still wearing his shoes, so you had to make him leave.

After he left the room, you had to make yourself stand up again, just to disinfect the spots of floor that he'd Contaminated.

Later, you ended up having to go to the hospital. It turned out, as the x-rays revealed, that you weren't just bruised, you'd fractured bone.

How to make/keep your bed Clean:

2. Make sure that you are Clean before you touch the bed.
  - a. This is accomplished by showering in a specific way.

How to shower (when you are at school) continued:

1. ...  
(This necessitates a 39 step process.)

If you are too tired to deal with these lists, you can bypass them by either sleeping in your desk chair or sleeping on the floor instead of trying to sleep in your bed.

This way, you do not have to muster up the energy to go through the proper procedures to make yourself Clean. You can just go to sleep, no matter how Contaminated you are.

In this way, you are still in control.

You have slept in your bed maybe ten times in the last two years.

When you did your Google search for "OCD treatment," the first thing the results told you was "Can't be cured."

The second thing was:

**"But treatment may help."**

All you registered of that was the word "may." It *may* help. Meaning it may not.

Meaning there is no guarantee.

And in that moment you felt profoundly aware of the likelihood that treatment probably wouldn't help you one fucking bit.

Because this isn't an infection that your body needs to overcome. This is just *you*, making conscious decisions every single day, to do specific things in specific ways. There's no prescription drug in the world that will make you stop being you.

*But maybe-*

There was a summer during high school where your parents sent you to a month-long language immersion summer camp.

The program packed around 200 hours of instruction into the four week period, qualifying for a full year of high school language credit.

You unfortunately encountered some problems:

1. Campers were subject to a strict and heavily structured scheduling system.

Most importantly, you were ruled by a showering schedule. This made it impossible for you to shower before you went to sleep, which made it impossible for you to maintain any level of cleanliness, "Clean" or "clean" for your bed.

2. The bathroom was Contaminated

The air was always damp, warm, and smelled fetid, like fecal matter was in the very air. The floor was perpetually wet, becoming a kind of petri dish for any kind of germ populations.

3. You lost eight pounds during that month.

You stopped being able to eat. It was as if your stomach had decided that it was no longer capable of digesting food.

One of your apartment mates says to you, "God, I'm so OCD. I go crazy if my room is messy."

You laugh.

Your mother sometimes asks you if you'd ever consider having children.

And you tell her, "Never."

Because if you know that you would be a terrible pet owner, you know that you would be a terrible parent.

Because a child, much like a dog, would not understand your world of rules about "Contamination" and the differences between "clean" and "Clean."

Because you never want to raise someone to be like you.

Things that you already know:

1. There are more germs in the human body than there are cells.
2. Anti-bacterial soap and hand sanitizer can result in anti-biotic resistant bacteria.
3. Anti-bacterial soap is extremely bad for your skin.
4. There are, in fact, germs on every single surface all around.
5. Your obsession with "controlling Contamination levels" is completely pointless.
6. You are not solving any of your problems by being this way.

*Therapy Session #14*

She says, "So because this is my last week here, I wanted to ask you about what your plans were for the future."

You watch her, unsure of what you are expected to say

She continues, “I’d like to refer you to the Center for Anxiety Related Disorders at BU. They have an excellent program there that I would recommend. They work with exposure therapy and have very goal oriented approaches.”

You nod your head. However, your facial muscles refuse to do anything at all.

Because you know that you aren’t going to do it. You know it at your very core. You will never do exposure therapy. Because that would mean going against the rules. It would mean being forced to learn how to go against every single thing that you know that you have to do.

And that is Unacceptable. Impossible. Unthinkable.

Maybe other people like you can do that, because they want it badly enough. They want a better life for themselves.

But you aren’t like that. You don’t want it badly enough.

So, you realize, that you’ll be this way forever. And there’s really nothing that you can do about it. Because you’re doing it by choice.

It’s within your control to stop being this way.

But you won’t do it.

*But maybe-*

You still take the business card she offers you and you slip it into your pocket. Just in case.

Because.

Maybe one day.

*A crown of weeds*

“Like I said before, she’s fine,” my mother says. “I’m taking care of it.”

I watch her pace through the kitchen in my peripheral vision. She pushes the not-yet-touched bowl of cauliflower closer towards me as she passes the table. I continue to poke at my cod fillet. Marigold reaches out and takes a floret of cauliflower from the bowl, but instead of eating it she just shreds it apart.

“Lisa recommended a clinician in the area. I’m-.” My mother stops at the other end of the table. “Lisa. My co-worker?” Her mouth twists. “I think I’ll take her word over yours, considering she’s a *doctor*.” She lets out a sharp noise that sounds more like a bark than a laugh. “How about you buy her another cellphone then? I’m sure that’ll make a *huge* difference this time.”

Marigold snickers. I shift in my seat, twisting my fork in my hand.

“You know what? Fine. Do what you want.” She hangs up. Then she turns to me, a smile quickly forming on her face. “So, Casey.”

Her eyes are neutral. I concentrate on trying to read the rest of her face with little success. Marigold lounges beside me, drumming her fingers on the table.

“I’m going to take you to see someone, later on this month, okay?” my mother says. “His name is Dr. Reynolds. He’s a psychiatrist.”

Marigold goes still.

“Why?” I say.

My mother’s smile creases at the edges.

“Just because,” she says. “I worry about you. You never-.” She stops. “You spend all your time alone.”



Marigold leans closer to me and whispers into my ear, so quietly even I strain to hear her, “And whose fault is that?”

My mother checks her watch. She breathes in, and then out. Then her smile returns, the corners of her eyes creasing now too. It looks uncomfortable.

“I’m going to get some sleep before my shift starts. Finish your vegetables and put all the food away in the fridge for me, okay?”

“Okay,” I say. “Good night.”

I watch her as she goes up the stairs. Once she’s out of sight, I listen to the sound of her footsteps going up, down the hall. Her bedroom door closes.

Marigold exhales.

I eat five florets of cauliflower, which seems like enough.

I lie awake in my bed and listen as my mother’s door opens again. I focus on the sounds of her leaving: the creaking of old floor boards as she walks past, the crinkle of the protein bars she packs into her bag, the front door shutting behind her, the car pulling out of the driveway as she drives away to the hospital. The sound of the engine fades away. Then there is just the silent house all around me.

Marigold looks at me from her side of the pillow, our knees touching. Breathing in time with one another. I imagine that even our heartbeats are synchronized.

“I don’t want to see a psychiatrist,” I say.

Marigold shifts closer. So that our noses are nearly touching.

“Then I guess you’re going to have to get better at lying,” she says.

I wake up. Marigold makes me breakfast and packs my lunch while I stumble around, barely awake. At 7:30AM I head out the door and Marigold is there to send me off.

“Good luck with school,” she says. Because ‘have a good day’ would sound like a lie. Marigold never lies to me.

In Math class, I sit with my head down, shoulders hunched over my desk. Mrs. Felton draws numbers and equations in chalk on the board while I draw pictures in my notebook.

Something bounces off my head. It’s light and crinkles on impact, probably a ball of paper. I don’t look up, concentrating instead on sketching anything that comes to mind.

Marigold told me once, ‘Ignore them. They aren’t worth it’.

There is a girl that sits a couple of rows ahead of me with orange hair. It started out red as a fire hydrant and has since faded out into varying shades of reddish and yellowish orange.

I start drawing cartoon style flames, stark outlines of wispy tongues aimlessly spreading out across my notebook page like a blooming flower. A second paper ball bounces off my head. Then a third. I make a mistake, a crooked line. Frustrated, I start coloring the flames in to conceal the error. A fourth ball of paper. The fire is solid black and looks like a cluster of rotten leaves.

Mrs. Felton is busy writing on the board, with her back to the class. Perhaps the noisy scraping of the chalk covers up the sound of their muffled snickering.

I abandon the fire drawing. I start fresh lower on the page and draw fragments of facial expressions; vacant eyes, a pair of lips curled into a sneer, and a set of gritted teeth.

1:00 PM is 'Physical Education', a class that has taught me that a day can always get worse.

Today, for whatever reason, Mr. McNamara has us play dodgeball.

Barely ten minutes into the game, a ball comes straight at me, too fast for me to react. The world goes dark for a moment as my eyes reflexively squeeze shut and there is a loud 'smack' that I feel more than hear and then I smell blood. The ball rebounds off of my face, bouncing away on the floor.

Just like the paper balls from Math.

I double over, hands cupped around my nose. Mr. McNamara is blowing his whistle and shouting at people in the background but I'm not all that interested in what he has to say. Like: 'Everyone stop what you're doing', and 'Someone take her to the nurse's office'.

I try to catch my breath. My eyes are watering, more out of surprise than anything because it doesn't hurt too much. Blood leaks through the cracks between my fingers and drips onto the shiny wooden floor, missing my sneakers by a narrow margin. I hear students shuffling all around me. Probably trying to get a better look at the blood. Like I'm some traffic accident.

Marigold wouldn't let them just stare. She would call them out. Make them feel sorry for gawking at me. I just want to go home.

"I'll take her," a girl says from somewhere ahead of me.

I look up through the fringe of my hair, not moving my head too much in order to avoid getting any blood on my shirt if I haven't already.

It's the girl with the orange hair from Math. She has her hand raised, volunteering.

Mr. McNamara flaps his hand at her, agitated. "Go on then," he says.

He's acting like he's upset, which is odd since he isn't the one that got hit in the face with a ball—maybe he's worried he'll get in trouble for having an 'incident' happen on his watch. I'm mostly just worried that my face might bruise. If it does, my mother will definitely notice, no matter how tired she is when she gets back from work today.

'Get better at lying' Marigold said, because Mother is getting upset.

"And someone go get some paper towels to clean this mess up-. Kevin and Laurel, go. And get back here in five. And call the janitor," Mr. McNamara snaps.

There is some more shuffling, murmuring, and several pairs of footsteps take off at a jogging pace out the door of the gym and echo away down the hall.

I see the girl reach towards me with a tentative hand. I don't know what she's trying to do with that. Obviously I can't take it, unless she wants a handful of blood.

"Uh, Mr. McNamara?" the girl says.

"What?" He sounds like he's annoyed that we're not already gone.

"Do you think we could have some paper towels too? Otherwise she's going to bleed all over the hallway."

I am the source of all inconveniences to everyone today.

Mr. McNamara makes a frustrated noise. "Here, give her this," he says.

I watch him give the girl the towel he had slung over his shoulder. I wrinkle my nose, wondering whether he's washed it recently, but I take it when she hands it over to me and hold it carefully over my nose. I can't smell anything but blood anyways.

Both my sneakers and the girl's sneakers are old, so they don't squeak much as we walk down the quiet hall together. I'm not sure why she's going with me—I know the way to the nurse's very well.

“So,” she says. One hand is shoved into her gym shorts pocket, the other scratches at the back of her neck. “I bet you'll get to go home early then.”

I make a negative noise.

“You don't think so?” she sounds confused. “There's no way they can keep you here. You look like a crime scene.”

I breathe in slowly through my mouth, in and out.

“Mom's busy,” I say. “Can't get picked up.”

“Oh.”

We lapse into silence again, which I vastly prefer.

“What was it this time?” Ms. Park says to me. She already sounds tired as she sits me down on a stool before going over to the first aid cabinet.

I just shrug, my head still bowed. Everyone acts like they're the most troubled by me being injured, but at the very least I understand Ms. Park. She's a nurse, just like my mother, and nurses are always tired. Some of the blood has begun to coagulate in my nose; the rest has nowhere to go but down my throat. I swallow it.

“Um, dodgeball,” the girl says, still lingering in the doorway.

Ms. Park makes a disgusted noise, “Of course.” She cracks the cold pack on her knee and shakes it. “McNamara. At it again.” She presses the cold pack to the back of my neck; even though I'm expecting it I still flinch a little. “Someone should ban that game,” Ms. Park

mutters. Then, she says over her shoulder at the girl. “If you’re going to stick around, be useful and hold this here for me for a moment.”

More shuffling noises. I concentrate on breathing and looking at the tops of my shoes as the girl comes over to stand behind me. I tense up as her hands press on the back of my neck.

“Sorry,” the girl says.

I shrug, adjusting the towel over my nose and wishing for more personal space. I feel like I can hear her breathing behind me.

Ms. Park brings over a garbage can, a fresh box of tissues, and a canister of moist towelettes. She sets the garbage can in front of me and I lean over it, pulling the towel away from my face. I relish being able to breathe again even as fresh blood starts trickling out of my nose. I lick my lips and make the executive decision to drop the pretty much ruined towel into the trash because I doubt Mr. McNamara will want it back. Even if he does, I don’t really care.

Ms. Park helps me clean up my hands before giving me a fresh wad of tissues. I use it to carefully plug up my nose again with one hand. With my free hand, I reach towards the ice pack the girl is still holding to my neck for me.

“I can do it now,” I say.

“Oh, right,” the girl says.

My fingers brush hers as I get a decent grip on the ice pack before she lets go entirely.

Ms. Park rubs at my face with a fresh towelette. “Thanks for your help,” she says to the girl. “You can head back to class now.”

The girl shifts behind me. I can hear her shoes scuffing the floor.

“Right,” she says, but she sounds reluctant. Stalling to get out of more class time I guess. The door swings shut and I know she’s gone.

Ms. Park, apparently satisfied with my less bloodied appearance, goes back over to her desk. I sit and wait while she makes the calls to get me excused from my next class and I settle into the knowledge that I will be sitting in the nurse's office for the next couple of hours.

Then I remember that today is Thursday.

"Ms. Park, may I still go to Art class today?"

She just looks at me for a moment. Then she just sighs, "If you've stopped bleeding by then, you can go."

I open the door to Mrs. Morin's class five minutes late because Ms. Park didn't believe me when I insisted that I was definitely okay. There's no visible bruising on my face at all, for which I'm very grateful.

The other students look up at the sound of me entering. I try not to cringe at the weight of all their eyes on me; they don't really care, they're just eager for the distraction, but it still feels like being stared at by an audience.

But then I see Ms. Morin. Her hair is braided back and her hands are already splattered with paint.

"Casey," she says, with genuine happiness. "So you were able to make it after all." She smiles, with her eyes, with her entire face, and I smile back.

There are no paper balls here.

"I'm having us all pair up and do portraits of one another," Ms. Morin tells me. "We're using any materials we want today."

I nod my head and go to get a box of vine charcoal. Arriving late was almost lucky; this way everyone paired up while I wasn't here and I can work by myself. I settle into my seat. I

flip to a fresh page in my sketchpad and start setting up basic light and dark foundations on my paper for a portrait of Marigold.

I hear some people messing around and laughing, some noises of frustration. A stool scrapes across the floor as someone gets up. I outline the blank spot on my paper that will be the lighter tones of Marigold's face, using my eraser to shape it more neatly.

"Hey, want to pair up?" a familiar voice says over my shoulder. The stick of willow charcoal snaps in my hand. I look up.

It's the girl with the orange hair again. She's standing right in front of me, holding her sketch pad. I stare at her face for a moment. She just looks awkward. I don't know why she's doing this if it makes her uncomfortable, she could easily not do this and leave me alone.

"Oh that's a great idea," Ms. Morin says. She sounds pleased. "We had an odd number before, so Elizabeth was on her own too. Would you be okay with that, Casey?"

I want to say 'No'. I sigh. Then I scoot my stool over a little.

The girl takes the seat beside me, setting down her sketchpad.

"Hey again," she says.

I glance up at her, at her hair, and then look back down at my charcoal. I frown, setting it aside before I go to grab some acrylic paint.

When I get back, the girl is sitting beside her open sketchpad, fiddling with a pencil. I sit down and waste a couple of moments trying to think of something to say to her. Then I just start working without saying anything at all.

I get the basic figure down. Then I paint her head like the head of a matchstick, engulfed in flame from the neck up. A faint hint of blue around the base, bright yellow orange flame



blending into a darker orange at the edges. It's not really a portrait of her, the flames conceal her face entirely.

"Huh," she says over my shoulder.

My spine stiffens but my arm stays still by force of habit, too much experience of ruining paintings by being skittish.

Then she laughs, but the noise isn't harsh at all. Her voice sounds like she's smiling.

"Cool. I love it."

I relax my shoulders a little. Then I peer over at her sketchpad. She sees me trying to look and quickly covers the paper with her hands.

"Um, I don't," she trails off, wincing. "I'm sorry. I'm really, *really* bad at drawing."

I tilt my head to one side, still trying to see it.

She hesitates for a moment longer, but then she sighs as she moves her hands away. She looks a little pained. "I promise this isn't what I think you actually look like."

Her drawing is done entirely in one pencil lead grade that's a bit too ambitiously dark. My portrait-self is a gangly humanoid that's hunched over in a way that looks unhealthy. The hands are a mess in general but the fingers in particular look like spider legs. The whole face is asymmetrical and lopsided, with one eye bigger than the other. The nose is a triangle shape. The mouth is just a line.

Still, I can see how many times she's erased, drawn and redrawn the lines. The paper is a little smudged in some places where the pencil lead just wouldn't come out anymore.

I realize that I'm expected to say something about it now, since I insisted she show it to me. I think about just nodding and leaving it at that.

Then I notice that she's twisting her pencil in her hands, glancing between her drawing and me, fidgeting in her seat and looking embarrassed and somewhat miserable. I think about how she volunteered to walk me to the nurse's office during gym class. Even if it was probably just a convenient way of getting out of the rest of gym class.

"I can tell you tried very hard," I say, because it's true.

The girl's eyebrows go up in surprise, and then they go back down as her brow furrows. Confusion maybe, or suspicion. She might think I'm joking, making fun of her. I would never do that. Not about art. I remind myself to make eye contact with her, and make sure to smile a little bit.

This seems to be enough. She relaxes, a self-conscious smile coming across her lips as she ducks her head. "It's still kind of terrible though."

I agree, but I say nothing of the sort and manage to keep my face carefully neutral.

"So your name's Elizabeth," I say instead.

She makes a face, "Liz, please."

I nod in understanding. I would hate to have such a long name.

"And your name's Casey," 'Liz' says.

I nod again, starting to feel a little ridiculous. I hope this conversation ends soon.

"There's, um," Liz says slowly, looking at me. "Still a bit of blood. On your chin." She points at a spot on her own face to demonstrate.

My face grows warm. I scrub at the spot with my sleeve.

Then the bell rings like a savior.

The whole class all at once becomes devoted to getting out of the classroom as fast as possible. I can hear Ms. Morin behind us, reminding people to collect and put away their art supplies before leaving. I stay seated, waiting for the chaos to die down.

A hand pats me on the arm.

I look up, expecting to see Ms. Morin, but it's Liz. She hasn't moved from her seat yet either.

"Sorry," she says, retracting her hand. "I was just-. See you tomorrow?"

She pitches it like a question. It's very loud in here. I can barely concentrate on anything at all so I just nod at her one more time. She waves at me as she goes to join the crowded procession of students shuffling out the door.

I open the front door to an empty house.

For a moment, I stand in the doorway wondering why. I shouldn't have to wonder. It's always the same.

The cellphone my father bought me last year has 'One new message'.

*From: Mom*

*Working overtime today. Leftovers in the fridge. Don't wait up.*

All of the texts from her are like this, with the same wording every time. Over and over again.

At least Marigold is here.

"Welcome home," she says. She touches her hand to the side of my face, rubbing her thumb over my chin. I must not have succeeded in rubbing all of the dried blood away. "Good job surviving the day."

The walls of my room are plastered with my best drawings. There isn't much space since my room is pretty small; new additions crowd out the old, papers overlapping.

Marigold was the one to encourage me to start putting them up. She enjoys looking at them. Since a lot of them are portraits of her, I playfully called her vain. It's only natural though. Since the very beginning, she would always sit for me and let me practice drawing her for hours and hours. Now I can draw her from memory.

I'm sitting on my bedroom floor, sketchbook in my lap, my entire collection of colored pencils, pens, and markers spread out all around me as I experiment, drawing her in various color palettes. My newest experiment is entirely in shades of red, orange, and yellow.

"A lot of schools have already banned dodgeball you know," Marigold says, lying on my bed where she is lazily twisting dandelions together by their stems, loose petals scattered across the bedspread. "I bet we could get Mr. McNamara in *so* much trouble."

I let out of a huff of laughter even as I shake my head.

"He'd deserve it. For all the things he lets them get away with."

I make a humming noise as I examine my picture. The colors are vibrant, but it looks unbalanced.

"But *they're* the ones that really deserve it," she says. "They hurt you all the time, just to feel better about themselves. And no one ever stops them. No one even cares."

I shrug my shoulders, trying to see if darkening some of the contours will help the drawing. It doesn't.

Marigold laughs. "And then there's that girl. Where does she get off pretending to be a good person *now*? She's been there all along, in Math, gym, and art. It's not like she's never seen this happen to you before."

I crush the picture up into a ball and throw it across the room towards the trash can. It bounces off the rim and lands on the floor. I sigh, tossing my reds and oranges aside. I should have known that wouldn't work.

"Hey," she says.

I look up at her.

There is a crown of dandelions resting in her hair. She reaches out and gently places a matching crown on top of my head.

"We'll be the rulers of the world. Not needing anyone. And no one will be able to bother us ever again."

The soft petals tickle my forehead.

"Never forget that," she says. "One day, they'll all be sorry."

I smile. It reminds me of the day we first met.

The front door opens and my mother calls out, "I'm home."

I go down to greet her and suggest we eat dinner together because I waited for her anyway even though she said not to. As usual. So we sit down at the table with more fish and cauliflower and my mother says,

"How was school today?"

I say, "It was fine." Because looking at my face in the bathroom mirror, cleaned of all traces of blood, it really looks like nothing happened at all.

My mother sets her utensils down on her plate with a 'clink'.

I realize I've made a mistake.

“The school called me,” she says, with her face that is suddenly made of stone. “They told me about what happened during gym.”

I duck my head. Then I shrug my shoulders.

“Just an accident,” I say to my plate of eviscerated fish and cauliflower. “Just a bloody nose. I get those all the time.”

She takes a deep breath, and then lets it out slowly. It reminds me of a leaking oxygen tank.

“That’s not the point.”

Everything about her looks calm and composed, in that way I’ve learned to recognize as fake. She leans forward, elbows planted on the table, hands clasped together.

“The point is that you’re supposed to tell me when things like this happen, so I can *help* you,” she says.

Marigold’s chin rests on my shoulder as she whispers into my ear, “But we don’t *want* her help.”

Instead, I say, “I’m okay though. Really.”

“Maybe you’ll tell a psychiatrist, if you won’t tell me,” my mother says.

“She’s just going to ruin everything,” Marigold says.

“Mom-.”

Marigold says, “The girl from today. Use her.”

And I say, “I actually made a friend today. Because of it.”

I caught my mother mid-sentence. Now she stops short, looking astonished. More importantly she looks pleased. Eyes wide, lips parted. Hopeful.

“Really?” she says.

“Yeah. Her name’s Elizabeth but she prefers Liz. She helped me get to the nurse’s office after the gym accident,” I say all at once now that I have the momentum. “She’s terrible at drawing but she liked the painting I did today in art class.”

My mother’s face softens, and she lets out a breath.

“You made a friend,” she repeats.

Marigold says, “Keep going.”

“I was going to invite her over,” I say. “You could meet her. Would that be okay?”

My mother nods vigorously as she rushes to say, “Of course! That would be wonderful. Please invite her.”

Marigold laughs beside me.

I spend all of Math class trying to write out what I’m going to say. The sentences keep trailing off, devolving into squiggly lines, like the words just melt away.

By the time class is over I still have nothing.

I go up to her anyway, just as she is standing up from her desk, standing out like a bonfire in the middle of the classroom. She looks up at me as I approach.

“Oh, hey-.”

“You,” I say even as I realize I’ve interrupted her. But the words come out all at once.

“You should come over to my house. After school.”

She seems taken aback. Of course. I’ve gone about it all wrong.

But then she nods. “Okay.”

Now I’m the one that’s surprised. And confused. She has no reason to agree to do this.

“Um,” she says. “I’ll just call my mom and let her know we’re hanging out?”

I find myself nodding my head. It doesn't matter anyway. I just need my mother to meet her.

She sits right next to me on the bus. The seat bench feels crowded and I try not to think about feeling trapped. I spend the whole ride home trying and failing to think of a conversation topic while also trying not to look at her.

She doesn't say anything either, which feels louder than the clamor of all the other students around us.

At 4:30 PM, I open the door to an empty house.

I don't know why this has to happen for the second time in a row, and on today in particular.

I dig my phone out of my bag, aware of Liz in my periphery as she looks around. I have no idea what especially she could be looking at. I wonder if she finds my house strange in some way.

*From: Mom*

*Sorry. Mike called in sick. Have to take over for him. Have fun today!*

"Great," Marigold says. "Then what's the point of her being here?"

Liz asks, "Is no one home?"

"Mom's at work still." I keep staring at my phone's screen even though I'm already finished reading the text.



I have no idea what to do now. I've never invited someone over to my house. I don't know what I'm supposed to say. And there isn't even any point now. My mom won't be back for hours. But I also need to be able to convince Liz to come back again

I look at Marigold over my shoulder—waiting for a suggestion. But she just looks back at me silently.

“Um. Do you want something to drink?” I gesture at the fridge. I am acutely aware of the scattered coffee grounds on the countertop and the pile of dishes and pots in the sink.

“No, I'm fine,” Liz says.

My stomach is starting to hurt.

“Then, let's go up to my room,” I say.

Marigold's eyes bore a hole in my back.

Liz's first reaction to my room is: “Wow. You, really like to do...portraits.”

The pain in my stomach still hasn't gone away. If anything it's intensified as I watch her look around at the walls. I feel very strongly that this whole thing was a mistake.

Marigold is standing in the doorway of my bedroom, watching us.

“Do you,” I say. “Would you mind if I drew you?” Because I don't know what else to do.

And Liz says, “Sure.” Maybe because she also doesn't know what to do.

So we sit in silence, with her in front of me looking uncomfortable and me basically staring at her.

“Well what did you think was going to happen?” Marigold asks.

Liz's mother comes to pick her up at 7:00 PM.

Just before she walks out the door, Liz turns to me and says, "Today was fun."

So she's a liar too.

For some reason I feel like I might start crying.

The door closes behind her.

Marigold says, "That was stupid."

I feel more aware of the emptiness of the house around me than usual.

My mother doesn't end up coming home that night.

This is also something to be expected. Sometimes she ends up sleeping in the break room at the hospital because she's too exhausted to make the drive back.

She texts me:

*How did it go?*

Marigold says it was pointless.

I say it was fine.

My mother says:

*I'm sorry I missed her.*

I make myself remember that it must have been very hard for her to get through so many additional hours of work and I tell her:

*It's okay.*

The phone rings.

My mother is still at the hospital. So I have to answer it.

“Hadley residence,” I say, trying to imitate the business-like tone that my mother always uses for calls.

“Hey!” Liz’s voice chimes from the other end of the line. “It’s Liz.”

My thoughts are either at a total standstill like the rest of me or racing too fast for me to keep up. I stand there in silence. I struggle for an answer.

“How did she get our number?” Marigold says, just as dumbfounded.

“I was just calling to ask,” Liz continues. “Would you want to hang out today? At my house this time.”

I have no idea what is going on.

“Um,” I say.

“No,” Marigold hisses.

“Okay,” I say.

“Great,” Liz she sounds happy. “We can go get her, right Mom?”

I can hear a soft and indistinct voice in the background.

“My mom says that’s fine,” Liz says cheerfully.

I text my mother to let her know that I’m ‘Going to hang out at my friend’s house’. Not asking for permission.

Marigold just stands there, watching me.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she says.

Liz’s mother has plain brown hair, which shouldn’t come as a surprise to me but it does, a little. Maybe because I thought I’d be able to see how different Liz’s mother was. From normal mothers like mine. But she looks about the same.

“Hello, Casey,” she says, with a smile that warms her eyes. “It’s wonderful to meet you.”

Like what my mother was supposed to say to Liz, yesterday.

Their neighborhood is all lush green lawns trimmed into neat rectangles. The houses all bleed together, looking exactly the same with only slight color differences. The only trees growing here are spread far apart, strategically planted. They look more like sticks. The whole space feels exposed and strange, like a movie set.

I stare up at their house, all three stories of it.

I look at the three car garage and think about how my mother’s car gets covered in tree pollen during the spring, leaves in the fall, and ice in the winter because we don’t have a garage at all.

I wonder what my mother would think of this place.

“Come on in,” Liz says. “Make yourself at home.”

I look at the white marble floor, the ceiling that is two stories up, and the actual crystal chandelier up above us. I didn’t know that real people actually had those in their homes. I try not to laugh at her.

Liz grabs me by the hand, pulling on me.

“C’mon, let’s go to my room,” she says.

I stumble a little as I follow along, looking back at her mother as I am dragged away.

She looks a little exasperated, but there is laughter in her voice as she says, “Just remember, dinner’s in an hour.”

“Got it,” Liz says. Then she turns to me. “You’re okay with spaghetti, right? I forgot to ask.”

I nod my head. I didn’t even know that I was staying for dinner. It’s difficult to keep up with everything right now.

She leads me through the house with an energetic impatience. My head keeps swiveling around; it’s my turn to look around at everything now. I’m beginning to understand, with a sinking feeling, why Liz found my house so fascinating.

I catch a glimpse of what looks like a second dining room on our way upstairs. I see paintings in gold picture frames hanging on the walls and I notice that the dining table has a sheet of glass on top of it, probably to protect the wood surface from damage. I wonder what the point is of having something so expensive if you can’t even touch it.

Liz’s room is on the top floor. She has a TV in her room with two different game consoles plugged into it, a large number of pillows scattered across the floor. She has bookshelves full of books, movies, video games and CDs. She has a giant bed with one of those fluffy blankets that makes the whole thing look like a marshmallow.

I stand there, bare feet sinking into the plush carpet. I feel something bubbling up from the bottom of my stomach. It feels like annoyance.

“Wanna play a game?” Liz asks. “You can pick anything.”

I’ve never played or owned a video game in my life. I have no idea what any of them are.

“All right, well, I think you might like this one.”

She pulls a colorful game case off of her shelf. I don't catch the title before she boots up one of her game consoles and slides the disk in. She flops onto one of the pillow piles. I sit down what I think is a polite distance away from her.

I don't know why she would think she knows me well enough to know what kind of video game I would like to play since even I don't know but it's probably pointless to ask. She shoves a controller into my hands and then the TV screen is lighting up.

I realize that she doesn't have a controller for herself.

"Aren't you going to play?" I ask her.

She shakes her head, hugging a pillow to her chest. "I've already played this one. I just want to show it to you."

I wonder how much I'm going to embarrass myself with this.

The game turns out to be a story about a wolf, or a goddess, whose powers are entirely based on painting. Different kinds of shapes cause different things to happen. The game graphics all look like they're right out of an ink painting.

It's...not a bad game. Liz just sits and watches me play, giving me hints and advice as I muddle my way through the controls.

After what feels like both a long while and also no time at all, I hear what sounds like a cross between a quacking noise and a meow.

I look up, startled.

There is a cat sitting in the doorway, tail curled around its feet. Staring at us.

"Hey Broccoli," Liz coos. "C'mere buttface." She scoots over, reaching out. Probably to scoop the cat up into a hug. Broccoli squirms away, meowing in a way that sounds very cranky.

Liz laughs.

“Come one, I’m not ignoring you, I promise. I just have a friend over today.”

The cat just continues to make displeased noises at her.

“I love you,” Liz coaxes.

The cat doesn’t seem to be appeased.

“Is something wrong?” I say.

Liz just laughs, still looking at her cat with a fond warmth. “Don’t mind him,” she says.

“He’s just a grumpy baby because he wants attention.”

“Really,” I say. “I thought cats were anti-social.”

She turns to me for a moment. A small sigh escapes her as she shakes her head. “People say that a lot. But cats are a lot like dogs. Even if they act like they don’t like people.”

Broccoli is coming towards us now. I watch as he climbs into her lap, settling himself there. His tail curls around her leg.

“They get really sad, if you leave them alone for too long,” she says.

“Why did you do that?” Marigold says. “There was no point to that at all.”

“I thought-.”

“You thought that it was better than being home alone,” she finishes. “With me.”

“Mom was happy,” I say.

She just keeps staring at me.

“She doesn’t actually like you, you know. You saw her house. She feels *sorry* for you. She’s being nice just so she can feel good about herself.”

She says, “You’re acting pathetic.”

On Monday, Marigold doesn't see me off to school for what feels like the first time.

There are no paper balls in Math this time. There is however, a note that's being passed around. And there is some snickering. I do not care what the note says.

I keep staring at the back of Liz's head. Maybe, if the note passes by her desk, she'll crush it in her hand, tear it to pieces, and then turn back and look at me to offer me a reassuring smile.

The note does not pass by her desk.

That's fine, I don't care.

I try to go up to her after class is over. But she's goes straight out into the hallway and I lose her in the rush of people.

At lunch, I wonder what it would be like to sit with her. I don't try to find out. Maybe another day.

At 4:30 PM, on my way to the bus stop, I hear footsteps behind me.

There are a lot of them, a whole group.

I don't react. I've learned that there is little point in running.

They snicker.

As far as I'm concerned, they don't have names, or faces, because I never look. I just keep my eyes on the ground. Marigold said to me a while ago, "They're not worth your time." I clench my fists.

All at once, their hands grab at me.



I shove at them, trying to push them away, and “Stop it” creaks in my throat but my jaw is locked shut by my gritted teeth.

They laugh at me. Maybe because they think the strangled sound I’m making is funny. They think everything I do is funny.

The hands encircle my wrists to stop my flailing. Then they yank at my bag. The bag’s strap pulls tight across my chest. I try to hold onto it, pressing my elbows closer to my sides. But then, the seam that holds the strap to the bag gives out and the bag falls off-kilter, right into a deep puddle in the mud.

There is a second or two where everyone is quiet as I watch the muddy water pour into the top of my bag.

Then the laughter breaks out. From all around, all at once.

I crouch down, reaching for my bag. Someone kicks me in the back. I fall forwards onto my hands and knees in the mud. Their laughter gets even louder. I imagine them choking on it.

I remember how, when I was still in kindergarten, some of my classmates dumped a bucket of sand over my head during recess. I remember just sitting there, unmoving, and I didn’t turn around to look at them while they laughed and laughed. My eyes burned. From the sand, I thought.

My eyes are burning now. Even though there is no sand. I don’t know why, for some reason, this has taken me by surprise. As if I thought that this wouldn’t happen again.

I stay there, and I wait.

Eventually, they walk away. Because I am not doing anything interesting anymore.

Only after I can’t hear them laughing anymore do I pick myself back up. There is no point in getting up when there are people around to shove you back onto the ground.

I retrieve my bag from the muddy puddle. It's sodden with dirty water and clumps of mud. Just like my hands and my jeans and my sneakers. I open the bag and pull out my sketchbook. It's soaked through, every page.

"Are you," that familiar voice says. "Are you okay?"

Slowly, I turn to look up at her. Like I'm weighted down, underwater.

Liz is standing there, hand half-extended towards me. As if she's offering to what, hold my hand? Help me up?

She looks so "concerned."

I feel my face twisting into something ugly.

"Don't touch me."

Her hand retracts.

There is fire in my bones, and it comes out of my throat.

"Just stop. Stop it. Stop pretending to be nice. Stop pretending to be my friend. You just feel sorry for me. You just think I'm pathetic."

She's backing away. Her eyes are wide. She looks like she might cry. It makes the fire worse.

"You think I'm that desperate for attention that I'd appreciate your pity? Like I'm some charity case I *hate* you I hate you I hate you-."

She's gone.

I just sit there for a while, gasping for air. Like I've been emptied. Scraped hollow.

I walk home instead of taking the bus. I can't even imagine being trapped in another confined space with the loud voices of people that I hate.

The house is empty again.

I stand in the doorway, covered in mud and I don't know if I would have preferred my mother to be there or not.

Marigold is there.

She holds out her arms. Wraps them around me in a feather light embrace.

I sit on the floor, leaning against my bed. The contents of my ruined sketchbook are sprawled out across my carpet. The paper has dried, but it's still warped and dirty.

Her fingers entwine in my hair, gently combing through it.

"Someday in the future," she says, "They'll all be dead. And who'll be laughing then?"

Normally that would make me smile instead of wanting to cry.

Marigold is laughing, lilted and sharp all at once. Like something poisonous.

"We're better off without her, you know."

Her fingernails scrape my scalp.

"We don't need her. We don't need anyone."

I pull away from her hands, turning around to face her. I look at her face. I look at the drawings spread out around me on the floor, on the walls. All her face. Her face that looks exactly the same as mine.

"I'm lonely," I say.

She just stares back.

"I'm tired."

She stays expressionless.

"I'm tired of being alone."

I took down every single one of the pictures on my walls, collecting them, laying them carefully into a box. I put the box underneath my bed. My walls are empty now.

I have the space now for other pictures.

The first one to go up is a portrait of my mother.

The second one is of Liz.

I stand there a moment, looking at them.

I try to think of ways to say I'm sorry.

I haven't told Dr. Reynolds about her yet. I don't think I ever will.

I'll still see her, every time I look into a mirror. But I also know that she's gone.