

2016

Lost Women, Recently Found

Maya Moverman
Bard College

Recommended Citation

Moverman, Maya, "Lost Women, Recently Found" (2016). *Senior Projects Spring 2016*. Paper 323.
http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2016/323

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2016 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Lost Women, Recently Found

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

by
Maya Moverman

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2016

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my board and to all my teachers and mentors, from who I've been privileged to learn.

Thanks to my friends, who inspire me and laugh with me every day.

Thanks to my family for teaching me to have perspective and compassion, always.

Table of Contents

Ziplock // 1

Isla, Waiting // 11

High School // 28

The N Train // 34

Immersion Therapy // 43

Gemma and Chloe // 48

Chucky // 62

Upstate // 68

Jabotinsky Street // 76

Blooming Nail Salon // 88

Honor in Hunger // 101

Lost Women, Recently Found // 110

Ziplock

The mourning bumblebee was driving because, at age twenty-five, I still didn't have my license. In her lap sat her miniature Italian greyhound. It had been a gift from her son from a previous marriage. It was intended to replace her husband.

Her husband was my father and he had just died. He had married her when I was still young. Her name was Laurie, and they had met in her homeland of Israel. Her accent was fierce. She looked like a gourd. I have never seen her wear a color besides black or yellow. Her presence bears the threat of a sting.

We were driving to Big Sur, where my father had asked that his ashes be spread. My father had always asked for too much, but on this subject he had only one request. So there we were, winding down Highway 1 to satisfy the man who now sat in my purse.

He had always said that I didn't need a driver's license. "You've lived in New York City your whole life. You don't have any plans to move anywhere else. Why would you want to? This is where you belong, and no one drives here. You can walk. Or take the subway. Or hop in a cab." But what if I wanted to travel? "A plane. A bus. A train. The world is your oyster and you sure as hell don't need a driver's license to shuck it."

It was an argument that spanned seven years. I always thought I would rebel once I went off to college, but I didn't. Since he had died, I didn't want a license.

Right now, though, I wished that I had just done the damn thing. Laurie was hysterical.

"Laurie, please stop kissing the dog and watch the road."

"His name is Rufus."

"Okay. Laurie, please stop kissing Rufus and watch the road."

"I am watching the road."

“You’re not. We’re so close to the edge.”

“Don’t get metaphorical on me—if you want to talk about our relationship then be direct, get right to the point.”

“I’m not talking about our relationship. I’m not being metaphorical. I’m talking about the fact that you’re a terrible driver, you’re not paying attention to the road, and we’re going to fly over the edge of the cliff and into the ocean.”

She glanced out of my window, wistful. “It’s a beautiful ocean. That would be the most beautiful way to join Mark. Oh, Mark. Don’t you long to join him?”

No. I didn’t long to die.

“I don’t want to join him today, if you don’t mind.”

Her face contorted. I decided to change tactics.

“But yeah, the ocean is beautiful. And it gets even more special than this. You remember. Please, get us there. We can’t appreciate it if we’re dead.”

She sighed too loudly.

“I really want to spread his ashes, like he asked us to.”

She sighed again. I turned on the radio.

* * *

An hour later, Rufus pissed in Laurie’s lap.

She had refused to stop for coffee in San Francisco: “I won’t allow you to delay this trip, *his* trip, for your selfish caffeine habit. You really disappointed your father. He didn’t want an addict for a daughter.”

“Laurie, my dad drank two cups of coffee every day.”

“That’s bullshit. When he proposed to me, I accepted on condition that he quit caffeine. I’m stimulation enough.”

It was true. She really had made that ultimatum. She really did believe that if my dad was married to her, he didn’t need coffee to rouse him.

“He drank two grande Americanos a day. I’d go with him sometimes.”

She didn’t believe me, but I wasn’t lying.

“That’s not true. He wouldn’t deceive me.”

It felt wrong to tell her that he had been anyone but who she imagined him to be. It might alter her memory of him, and for his sake, I didn’t want to do that. But I couldn’t help myself. I needed to defend the legitimacy of my relationship with my dad. So I did.

“It was his secret. We shared secrets. We were close.”

She snorted. “Not as close as us.”

Laurie. Laurie, aged five, the queen of the playground, a hissy fit imminent as her tiara flies off her head.

“We’re both adults. I’m not about to compete with you about who was closer to my dad.”

She huffed. Her eyes were on the road, and she didn’t deign to grace me with her glance.

Because there were no drinks in the car, I knew that the wet stain on her dress was Rufus’s doing. It hadn’t been there an hour ago, and it was growing. But Laurie kept her chin held high. She refused to acknowledge the stain. She was a proud woman from a proud land.

*

*

*

I had been disappointed by my first trip to Big Sur. I must have been seven or eight years old. Everyone had said it would be majestic. The views were “breathtaking,” the nature “wonderful,” “mystical,” the hikes “spectacular,” someone had even told me to make sure to “absorb the weepingly beautiful vistas.” I remember because I had asked what a vista was.

We took this same drive. My parents were still together, and in later years my father told me that this had been a reconciliatory trip for them. It had been a trip to try and make the marriage work.

It hadn’t been successful. My parents divorced a year later. My dad bought the house we had rented, and from then on, it was just my dad and I who would go to our Big Sur home every summer. We would fly from JFK to San Francisco International Airport, rent a car, and drive all the way down Highway 1, listening to mixed CDs that I had prepared. I learned to appreciate the place. The way the clouds hung so close, like silent shrouds. The vibrant constellations. The absence of internet, of communication. The shimmering creeks. And when I discovered and devoured Henry Miller, the place became that much more special.

Even Laurie couldn’t ruin Big Sur. That’s how I finally knew that it was a sacred place. That’s when the vistas triggered my tears.

* * *

“Lucas, wake up. You’ve been asleep this entire ride. Talk to us.”

Laurie had once been married to Lars and together they had Lucas. I hate when families alliterate themselves.

Lucas was five years older than me. He was convinced that he was revolutionary. He devised a mathematical formula, according to which he would fill enormous canvases with cataclysms. He had written a manifesto, which anyone could access by clicking the link ‘MANIFESTO’ on his website. And while he counted down the days until the curators and artists and gallerists and art students and donors and art dealers all recognized the value of his ideas and his skill and his oeuvre and his person, he worked at the Apple store.

When he whimpered, he sounded like Rufus. He was sprawled across the backseat, and had been sleeping since San Francisco.

Even though he was awake now, he remained silent as Laurie tried to make conversation.

“How was your nap?”

Nothing.

“Isn’t this so beautiful? Isn’t this amazing?”

Nothing.

“Don’t you like it?”

Still nothing.

I didn’t like Lucas, and I didn’t like seeing him ignore Laurie. She was so earnest, trying to connect with him. It was painful.

She tried one more time. “Do you want to plug in your iPod?” She kept glancing at the mirror, hoping to catch his eye. He refused to look in her direction. This was a thirty-year-old man.

I had to intervene: “I brought some old CDs that we can listen to if you’re bored of the radio.”

Laurie didn’t bother to look at me. She was heartbroken.

I picked a CD at random from the large stack that was by my feet. ‘CD Number 5!’ went in and the pedal steel guitar came out. That opening melody was ironic: it was Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, singing ‘Teach Your Children.’

Laurie didn’t appreciate it.

“Turn it off. I didn’t ask you to put on any music.”

“I wasn’t doing it for you,” I lied, “I did it for myself.”

“You’re making fun of us. Of me.”

“I’m not. None of the CDs are labeled. It was an accident, an act of God.”

“You’re lying. Turn that song off right now. You don’t believe in God. We do.”

Laurie goes to synagogue once every few months. Although she likes to preach to whoever will listen, she is not God-fearing.

“My dad loved this song.”

“Don’t you dare take advantage of Mark’s death. Don’t use him as an excuse to belittle me.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Mark loved me. If you want to honor him, then you can honor him by loving me.”

It’s a short song. It ended before I decided how to handle the situation.

* * *

Lucas had brought a hunting rifle. I could feel him eyeing it like a long lost friend. I was calm.

* * *

The silence was not the comfortable silence of friends. It was hostile and sharp. I wanted to be driving with my dad. I wanted his sense of humor. I wanted to listen to our music, I wanted to see his grip on the steering wheel. I wanted to hear his whistle.

The beast moaned in the backseat.

“Do you need something, sweetheart? Are you uncomfortable?”

“I’ve gotta take a leak.”

“You can’t,” I said, “there aren’t any rest stops till we get there.”

“Are we almost there?”

“Yes, honey, don’t worry, we’ll be there soon.”

“I can’t wait that long. Do either of you have an empty bottle?”

“Ew, no way.”

“Eleanor, be respectful. Sorry, Lucas, honey, I don’t have one.”

“Follow Rufus’s lead—just go for it.”

I could have restrained myself and said something productive; I should have made my comment sharper, meaner. I should have said, “Follow Rufus’s lead—pee on your mom’s dress.”

Laurie gave me the reaction I wanted. Lucas began to shuffle around in the back. Then we heard his zipper.

“Are you kidding? That’s so gross, put it away.”

“Lucas honey, please put your pants back on.”

I heard him roll his eyes. He zipped his pants.

“Would you have actually peed in the car?”

“Yeah, why not? Rufus did it, and we have to sit here and smell his piss, so doesn’t matter if I do it too.”

“It definitely matters. You’re a human being. You can control yourself.”

“Piss is piss. If we gotta smell his then might as well throw mine into the mix.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“It’s natural.”

Lucas held his bladder tight. I held my mouth shut.

* * *

We pulled into the driveway. Rufus took a piss. Lucas ran inside to take his. I was relieved to be out of the car. It was a cool day, but I could taste the humidity in the air. I was nostalgic.

From the outside, it didn’t seem that the house was doing too well. It had once been white. Now it blended into the ashen afternoon sky. There was a wasps’ nest on the roof of the front porch that was dangerously close to the door. The garden was a catastrophe. I liked that though, it felt right.

Inside, the house looked the same as always. Laurie had plopped onto the couch, Rufus in her arms. She was trying to figure out her new iPhone.

I paced through the kitchen. It smelled of stale air and sautéed garlic. That was familiar.

The large window was sealed shut and there was a dead wasp in the bottom ridge of the window frame. My dad’s pen lay next to a note pad where he had scribbled some reminders:

“Lock windows. Turn down heat. Clean fridge.” The countertop was littered with leaves from dead flowers. I didn’t clean them off. I didn’t touch anything, I observed.

Big Sur was my father’s symbolic graveyard. This house was his coffin. It was dirty on the outside but the inside was preserved. Corroding yet stagnant. His body had eroded and his bones were everywhere.

I hated the imagery and left the kitchen. My body moved me upstairs and into my bedroom. I realized I was still holding my purse. My grip was tight but I forced it open, and placed the bag down.

I found myself in a fetal position on the bed. The sky came into focus through the window. How much time had passed since that sun drenched drive down Highway 1? I had forgotten about the grayness of Big Sur.

I took my shoes off and began to make the bed. My movements were deliberate. The clock read 5:47 and I wasn’t sure if that was right but decided it was.

As I began to crawl under the covers, I thought of the purse. It had been a birthday gift from my mother the year she had died. I opened it to turn my phone off, though that wasn’t really why I needed to search through the bag.

First I took out my wallet. Then my phone. Then Dad. He was in a Ziplock bag because Laurie had made me take care of everything. I hadn’t bought a nice container. I should have, but I didn’t.

Still holding the Ziplock bag, I sat down on the bed. I remembered the colors of his face. The soft, fine hair on the back of his neck. His plump cheeks. The electricity of his laugh. The wisdom of his logic. The unreliability of his stories. The way he looked at my mom when they

fought. The way he held my mom when she was dying. Everything had been reduced to grey sand.

My mom had asked to be buried, so I had never held someone's ashes before. When I opened the bag, I didn't smell him. I sunk my thumb and first two fingers into the bag. I was surprised by how much texture there was, how many pieces of his bones. I think I expected it to be more cathartic, but it was like I was on the beach, running my fingers through the sand. There was nothing of my father in here, and yet this was him. This was his very being.

Once I closed the bag, the ashes were still on my fingers. I considered tasting them; that's something he would have done. But I'm not him. I wiped my fingers on my pants, put the Ziploc back in my purse, and went to sleep.

* * *

A dream ebbed, and I felt unsettled. I didn't try to grasp onto the details as they slid away from me. I didn't want to impose symbolic significance on anything that seemed potent. That had been a dream. Now I was awake.

Downstairs, Lucas was at the kitchen table, on his computer, and Laurie was nowhere in sight. My "good morning" was met with a grunt. His eyes were moored to the screen.

Outside, a single bird chirped. Somewhere behind the thick mist, the sun tried to shine. It was my dad's favorite kind of day.

My stomach gurgled, but the fridge and the cabinets were bare. There were two boxes of my least favorite cereal, and they were five months past expiration. The freezer was stocked with strawberry ice cream.

Lucas didn't look up when I groaned. "Why don't we have anything to eat?"

He shrugged. "You should go pick us up some stuff."

"I can't. I don't know how to drive. Can you go?"

"I don't know either."

"You don't?"

"No one who lives in New York City *needs* to know how to drive."

I took out two pints and two spoons, handing him one of each. He was reluctant.

"Can we take an Uber?"

"There's no Uber out here."

He rolled his eyes. "This is supposed to be the digital age. And there's no Uber in Big Sur? That's some bullshit."

"I like it. It's a time capsule."

He didn't want anything to do with me anymore. "Whatever."

I went to the living room to eat my ice cream.

* * *

We bought muffins and breakfast burritos at the Big Sur Deli. We ate in the car. I had to break off pieces of the corn muffin and hand them to Laurie so she could eat as she drove. Rufus kept eating the crumbs as they fell into her lap.

We drove through the clouds in silence. Laurie would hold out her hand when she finished chewing and wanted another piece of her muffin.

As she pulled to a stop at Pfeiffer Beach, Laurie opened the car door to let Rufus out. He had left a wet splotch on her dress yet again. I was tempted to say something because I needed her to know that I had noticed. But I didn't. I didn't want discord today.

Lucas emerged from the car with his rifle in hand. I wanted to ask why it was necessary. I needed him to know that I had noticed. Instead I took deep breaths and said nothing. In single file, we walked down the path to the beach. Laurie led the way. She kept tripping over her gown. It was black with panels of yellow lace.

We must have been quite a procession. The mourning bumblebee was in the lead. The brooding rifleman was in the rear. I was in the middle. The pup ran around our feet, pissing sporadically. The beach was nearly empty, which was a relief. I didn't want an audience. Only a young husband and wife laughed with their son as he splashed around in the surf.

Laurie marched straight up to the water. She let out a dramatic sigh. As though we were still in the car and she was ready for her next bite of muffin, she held out her hand to me. She demanded, "I'm ready. Pass him to me."

There was no love in her voice, and I resented her. I should have come alone.

I said quietly, "Laurie, we should move a little further away from this family."

"Why," she announced too loudly. "This is an act of love and grief, and these people should respect that."

"We look like a grim reaper family. Maybe that kid doesn't need to be exposed to people like us just yet."

An eye roll accompanied her snort. She moved about three feet to the right. I accepted the small victory and took out the Ziplock bag.

As soon as I did, Laurie began to sob uncontrollably. Instinctually, I went to comfort her. I put the bag away and I moved toward her. I rubbed her back and tried to soothe her.

She glared at me, irate. Her make-up was running wild. “I am grieving and don’t you dare try to calm me down.”

I removed my hands from her. The poster family was packing up to move further down the beach. I couldn’t find words and she continued sobbing.

I looked at Lucas. He was staring at Rufus, who was playing in the surf. He was gripping the rifle, stroking it with his thumb. I wondered if he planned to shoot him.

“Eleanor, give me the ashes.”

She was holding her hand out towards me while looking in the opposite direction, towards the ocean.

“No.”

She whipped around to face me.

“Give them.”

I looked at her but said nothing.

She took a step towards me, her hand still outstretched. I stayed still. Lucas didn’t react, and for all I knew Rufus might have drowned by now.

“Eleanor. Give them to me.”

“I won’t. You’re wrong about everything. He did love my mother, I know he did.”

She tried to interrupt but I kept going. I could be strong.

“I’m his kid and he loved me. He was proud of me. If I could have, I would have taken this trip alone. There’s no way he would stand for how you treat me. You’re only here because I

can't drive. I didn't want you to be part of the family. Now that he's gone, I don't have to call you my family."

I took out the Ziploc. She lunged for it and missed, tripping over her gown and landing on her stomach in the sand.

Laurie. Laurie, aged seven, a tantrum rumbling in her sandy tummy full of a Big Sur Deli corn muffin.

Lucas was immobile and mute. He didn't help his mother and he didn't look at me. He stared at the sand.

I stepped over Laurie and moved towards the ocean. I heard her yell at Lucas. She needed help getting up. I opened the Ziplock and was overcome with the smell of my father. In large handfuls, I released him.

Lucas was behind Laurie, laughing.

Laurie was behind me, screaming. Laurie, the dethroned queen, a hissy fit in full force as her tiara flew into the air and then the ocean.

The Ziploc was empty. Nothing remained of my dad but the majesty of Big Sur. I licked my fingers.

Isla, Waiting

Isla sat at the head of the table, foot tapping, arms crossed, waiting. It was 12:30pm, and her kids were half an hour late. She had begun preparing at 10am. That was too early, and she knew it, but she had been restless. Isla had learned that restlessness is best combated with meditative preparation. She had arranged the bagels, lox, cream cheese, tofu spread, and mimosas on the kitchen table while maintaining a steady breath.

Isla despised tofu spread, but it was the considerate purchase to make. She didn't know if Margot was still vegan. Hopefully she was. If not, Isla would have to throw out the tofu spread.

"30-40% of the food supply is wasted," she had told the cashier at the supermarket. The woman nodded. She barely spoke English "That's more than twenty pounds of food per person every month. Or something like that. I don't remember exactly. There's an article about it."

Isla couldn't be a part of the problem.

Her mother had always been frugal, and it made Isla angry. As a defiant young woman, Isla was wasteful. But she had grown since then. Now she was mature.

Isla hadn't seen her kids in two years. That was her fault. She had left them to go find herself.

A week after she returned, she had called Zev on a Sunday morning. Was she too early, had she woken him up? There was a silence as he registered the weight of the call. He cursed her out. He called her vapid and selfish. She was manipulative, she was inconsiderate. He didn't want to see her again. Then he hung up.

Isla was somewhat surprised by his anger. It wasn't unfounded, but she hadn't expected it. She took a deep breath—in through the nose, breathing into the space of the belly, out through the ears, sending the fullness of her vitality out around her. She would be okay.

Margot was distant but more receptive. She had been relieved to hear from her mother, to know that she was alive. Without much prodding, Margot had agreed to meet for brunch. She had also agreed to talk to Zev, and would persuade him to join. Margot had always been a good daughter.

Thirty minutes later, Margot texted. “He’ll come.” This was good news. Isla called Zev. He picked up at the last ring.

“I’m glad you’re coming to lunch.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

“Okay.”

Now it was Saturday, it was 12:35, everything was in order, and silence reigned. Isla checked her phone. They hadn’t called. Were they making a statement?

They weren’t the type of kids that made those types of statements. Margot had only done it once. Isla had been packing for a trip. Her suitcase was on her bed and her clothes and toiletries and journals and books were all over the floor. The air was dense with the perfume of incense. Margot stood in the doorway and watched.

“Wait, so where are you going?”

“The Omega Institute. It’s upstate, in Rhinebeck.”

“And why are you going?”

“For a workshop, ‘Our Female Journey.’ It’s all about figuring out our true worth and individual purpose through meditation, role play, journaling...”

“Don’t you have to work?”

“I’ve told you, I work for myself. It’s not a vacation—it’s a respite. I need it.”

“But weren’t you complaining that you have three deadlines coming up?”

“I’m on top of it. I make my hours.”

“Yeah, you make your own hours, but you don’t make time for us.”

This was big for Margot. She had always been quietly agreeable. Isla stared after her as she walked out of the bedroom. Subsequently, Isla closed the door, lit lavender incense, and listened to meditative music.

No, they probably weren’t making a statement. They were probably just late.

Isla’s gaze fell onto the orchids in the center of the table. They were tall and healthy and fuchsia. Upon returning from India, she had found her vial and spoon in the dresser. There was still some cocaine left. Isla didn’t want to have anything to do with drugs because she was now clean; she didn’t want to sully her body, which she had come to think of as the divine temple that housed her soul. But to throw out the cocaine seemed such a waste. She didn’t have anyone to give it to because she didn’t get back in touch with old, so-called friends. Isla sat on the couch, holding her phone, uncertain. That uncertainty grew into desperation. Then it settled into apathy. Isla had poured the cocaine into the soil from which her orchids hung, shriveled. Within a week, they were flourishing.

In high school, Zev had done a lot of cocaine. One night, after partying in Williamsburg, he had come home very high and very drunk. Isla was sitting in this same living room, watching a reality show on *E!* while reading a magazine and painting her nails pink and listening to meditation music. Zev came barreling in.

“Have a good night?” she asked, taking in his rowdy energy.

“Yeah, great,” he said, too loudly.

“Are you fucked up?”

He shook his head as he kicked off his shoes. They flew across the room. She laughed.

“What’s so funny?” He was slurring and practically yelling.

“What’re you on?”

“What?”

“I’m just curious. But you don’t have to tell me.”

He paused. Then, “coke.”

“First time?”

He probably would have had a hard time reading her, even if he wasn’t high. She was playful, not stern. Should she have been stern?

“Nah. I’ve done it plenty.”

She smiled, amused. “You like it?”

“Yeah. It’s fun.” He was trying to be casual.

Reaching into the pocket of her sweatshirt, Isla coyly pulled out a small bag of cocaine.

“What the fuck, mom,” he laughed.

She shrugged. He sat down next to her on the couch. She grinned.

He did a bump, she did a line, he kissed her goodnight, and she finished painting her nails. The next morning, she felt closer to him than ever. He wouldn’t talk to her.

Now, in retrospect, she couldn’t recognize that Isla. At the time, she hadn’t realized that she had done something wrong. Zev’s behavior could be explained by his adolescence. Isla let him take time for himself. In those days, she had taken a lot of time for herself.

But now her kids were taking too much time for themselves. They were taking family time away from her. They had failed to communicate with her. It was 12:47, and Isla had rearranged the brunch spread three times. There were two mimosas on the table, one for Margot

and one for Zev. Isla took a sip. There was more champagne in the fridge and she could easily make more. She took another sip, a longer one this time. Why hadn't they called or texted? Isla walked over to the CD player. She looked through a pile of discs, trying to find one to fill the space where her children should have been by now.

In India, Isla's Spiritual Guide had told her that she needed to free herself from material possessions. After describing the many burdens of the worldly, and leading her through Series B of the Purification Chants, he sold her his CD. His was at the top of the pile. Underneath were *The Very Best of Enya*, Steven Halpern's *Deja-Blues*, Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*, The Beatles' *I*, and meditation music. The harmonium soothed the energy of the space. The ominous gong resonated within her chest. Her heartbeat slowed. She was grounded, she was present. Isla no longer felt inclined to rearrange the brunch spread.

She was, however, inclined to check her phone again. There was still no word. Isla finished her first mimosa. Absentmindedly, she began to drink the second. Maybe it was better if they didn't show up. Was she ready to face them? In India, she had spent hours sitting, listening, reflecting, feeling, chanting, and cleansing. She had learned to tune into the power of Introspection. By looking within herself, she had discovered that she hadn't been a good mother. She hadn't been kind to her children because she was too busy being kind to herself, but she wasn't very kind to herself either.

When Margot had told her that she wanted a Bat Mitzvah, Isla told her that it was a misdirection of her spirituality.

"What's the point of a Bat Mitzvah? It's a waste of time and energy. There are more powerful ways to celebrate your new womanhood."

Only her father was Jewish. He was long gone.

Instead, Isla took Margot on a weeklong Mothers & Daughters retreat. Margot had stood out. She didn't like sharing her Relationship Vision Board with the rest of the group. Her participation in the Nurturing Unity rituals, meant to facilitate receptivity and connection through contact improvisation, was awkward. While all the Women Warriors chanted jubilantly, Margot hummed quietly. She didn't get along with the other girls, who threw themselves into the activities with passion.

Isla should have listened to her daughter. She should have let Margot have a Bat Mitzvah. And she shouldn't have been taking Xanax and snorting OxyContin throughout the workshop. Even though Margot didn't know about that, it was wrong. Disrespectful.

No, she hadn't been a good mother. But that was her past, and that was part of her path, and there was no use in regret. There is learning on the path. There is purpose in the path. There is redemption.

* * *

Her first husband had been a cult leader. They got married when Isla was twenty-three, just after she had received her degree in ceramics.

"Orion. It means 'rising in the sky,' or 'dawning.' He was a hunter, and a son of Poseidon."

"Poseidon?"

"The mercurial god of the sea. A brother of Zeus."

"Oh."

She hadn't known much about Greek mythology. He had a lot to teach her, if she wanted to learn.

They were at a bar in New York City. Isla had moved back home after graduation, and she had been lonely. She was lucky to meet someone so handsome. And so beguiling. Isla told him that she wanted to learn.

Isla would come over in the evenings, and they would talk for hours. Orion really did have a lot to teach her. They read and analyzed the Holy Texts that he had translated from ancient Greek. He taught her about the trance-inducing techniques that were used during chemognosis ceremonies. The ceremonies provided a space of ecstasy and equality for the marginalized. And he taught her how to sleep with women.

Two months passed in this way. Orion had to go back home to Arizona—he had been staying at his friend's apartment downtown, and his friend was coming back. He asked Isla if she wanted to come with him. She had nothing to lose. And she was in love. Her parents were skeptical but she was an independent young woman.

For the next four years, Isla and Orion had a typical Dionysian cult romance. Isla gave birth to both Margot and Zev. The women of The Family of the Black Goat Skin all raised them together. Margot had been Mneme, meaning 'memory.' Two years later, Zev was born as Zenobios, meaning 'life of Zeus.' Isla had been Io—the name's meaning is unknown.

And then one day, she woke up and she knew she needed to get out. Isla knew where Orion kept his money, which was cashed from checks her parents had made out to her. She took as much as would fit in her pockets. It ended up being enough.

Isla ran away as soon as the sun rose. Mneme was three years old, and Zenobios was a year old. They walked about a mile before she managed to hitch a ride to the airport. Her escape

meant the demise of the cult; Io's parents had, unknowingly, been its primary benefactors. She didn't have contact with Orion until eight years later, at which point things got messy. He tracked her down. Having lost everything, he was a leader without a following, and he wanted the money Isla had stolen from him. He was charming until he was angry. He was rational until he wasn't.

But that first break had been a clean one. Io became Isla again when she met Ray on the flight from Arizona to New York City. He had a kind voice. He helped keep the kids busy at the airport. They played a non-obtrusive, TSA approved game of charades. Isla was moved by his good nature. There was something trustworthy about him. He was tall, and different from her own father.

At the end of the flight, Ray invited her over. It might have seemed crazy, but there was a real connection there. Isla had nowhere else to go. She didn't want to explain to her parents what had happened in Arizona, and there was nothing left of Orion's money after purchasing the plane tickets. So Isla, Zev, and Margot followed Ray to his house. They stayed the night, and that was the beginning of their new life together in Astoria, Queens. They never left.

He was an artist and she became his muse. His primary medium was wood, because woodwork was the quintessence of masculinity. There was always sawdust in his hair. He was, somehow, both stoic and wild.

Ray paid for nearly everything. When he was high, he became violent and broke many things, including Isla's ring finger. Once the splint had come off, they got married. Though it took Isla almost a year to tell her parents that she had returned to New York, they came to the wedding. Their check was very generous.

Zev had needed a father. Ray was kind to him, for he saw the boy's potential for virility. Ray spent hours building things with Zev and answering his questions about girls. He had a lot to teach him, if he wanted to learn.

During a bad fight, Ray had stormed out. After, the house stayed quiet for an hour. When it became clear that Ray wouldn't return, Zev had been furious. He was eleven, and Ray had taught him the efficacy of force. Zev broke a lot of things in Ray's honor. Isla watched him. When tears broke his anger, she gave him a bowl of ice cream. She went to her room and locked herself in.

Isla had smoked away what was left of Ray's weed and taken the remainder of his Xanax and OxyContin. Then she lay in bed and masturbated while watching the ceiling fan spin. She wondered what the kids were doing in the other room. Margot was probably stroking Zev's hair—she knew how to be his protector. She was probably cradling his head in her arms and saying loving things. That he was strong, and a good person, and that it wasn't his fault Ray had left. Ray and Mom were having problems, but that didn't mean that Ray loved Zev any less. That he would be okay, and they would all be okay.

When Zev had calmed down, Margot gave him more ice cream and got a bowl for herself. She turned the TV on. *The Birdcage* was playing. When Isla opened the door and came out of her room, still high, she didn't say anything. There was a bowl of ice cream waiting for her. She sat down next to her kids on the couch and watched as well.

*

*

*

They probably were making a statement, and they probably wouldn't show up, but Isla had already decided that she forgave them. She finished her third mimosa and considered another refill.

For the past several years, Isla had often left without warning for one retreat or another. When Zev and Margot had come back home for winter break and found an empty house, they weren't concerned. These retreats rarely lasted more than two weeks.

Three weeks went by without a returned call, text, or email. Isla had missed both Christmas and New Years. By age twenty-one, Margot had grown accustomed to taking care of Isla; she was concerned, much as a mother would be for her own child. She emailed a few of Isla's friends, but they hadn't even known that she had left. She called her grandparents—Isla's parents—but, as usual, they didn't know anything. It became clear that Isla hadn't told anyone that she was leaving. Isla's parents were outraged by her parenting skills and ashamed of their own. They gave the kids big checks. Isla had assumed that they would.

Still at the table, Isla decided to have another mimosa, and refilled her glass. Her disappearance must have scared her children. Poor Zev and Margot must have been worried sick—their mother had left without a word, a note, or a footprint. Zev was probably still in shock when he had said those mean things to her on the phone. Anger was his defense mechanism. And Margot had likely seemed distant because there had been great physical distance between them for the past two years.

Isla now recognized that her kids had missed her. They had felt alone. Margot was twenty-three. Had Isla missed her graduation? How was she managing? Where was she living? Zev would be in his senior year of college, but had he dropped out? Were her parents paying his tuition? What was he doing now?

They had managed without her because they hadn't had another option. Now that she was back, they would want things from her. They would expect things from her. Things like money, and help finding a job, and advice. Now that she was back, they would probably expect her to be a better mother. To have more time for them. To make smarter decisions. To offer wisdom.

They were simply late. They would show up. She was sure.

Isla took a long sip. Was the doorbell working? It hadn't been used in a while. Maybe she should check.

She opened the door and rang the bell twice. It echoed through the apartment. It was working.

She stood there, hand on the knob, inhaling the stale hallway air. In through the nose, out through the ears. It was hard; the air was dense. The entrance to the building was below her. There was just one flight of steps. She heard the key in the lock, and a neighbor entered the building, bringing in a gust of wind. It filled her chest. She needed to go outside, she needed to drink in more of that sweet air. She would stand at the building's entrance, breathing. She would meet Margot and Zev there when they arrived.

Isla reentered the apartment and closed the door. She finished her mimosa, and grabbed her phone and purse. She slipped into a pair of shoes and slipped out of the apartment. She just needed some air.

Her children rang the doorbell three times, but nobody answered. Zev used his key. When they entered the apartment, only a brunch spread, two empty glasses, and Isla's meditation music greeted them. Why had she bought both cream cheese and tofu spread? That seemed gratuitous. Both Zev and Margot despised tofu spread. Isla was so wasteful.

"Maybe she ran out to grab something."

Zev sat down. Margot sat down, too. They waited.

High School

They were standing side by side as though they didn't know each other. They were smoking.

"Have you ever thought of life as just the thing that happens between cigarette breaks?"

She didn't turn her head to respond.

"That's retarded."

He turned to face her. She instinctively did the same, and regretted it. They really looked at each other, now, for the first time all day. She tried to read him without allowing him to read her. He attempted a similar feat.

"That's politically incorrect."

"I know."

He released a loud exhale. It was dramatic.

"I was kidding."

"I know that too."

He turned away from her. She was unbearable.

"Should we talk?"

She shook her head and laughed softly. "Why?"

"Because I want to deal with this tension."

"There will always be tension."

He didn't understand why.

"Because you're dating my best friend."

"You and I broke up a month ago. And you're into girls now, so what does it matter to you?"

High school is hard.

“You’re ridiculous.”

She began walking away. He yelled after her. She was being immature—why didn’t she want to talk so they could both move on? She couldn’t run away from her problems.

“I’m not running, I’m walking.”

“Not every guy is gonna tolerate your sarcastic shit. You were lucky to be with me. Fuck you.”

She smiled. It felt good to break him.

* * *

It was early spring. Rayna decided to walk home. She would make her way through the Lower East Side, maybe even stopping in Tompkins Square Park to read.

She didn’t want to think about Brian, but she couldn’t help it.

Why would her sexuality negate her anger? She wasn’t even sure that she really was attracted to women, but she wanted to be. To hurt him, to make him feel insecure. She was in her second semester of freshmen year, and she no longer had a boyfriend or a best friend. She had a right to be mad.

The man outside the Chinese deli whistled. “Damn, girl.”

Rayna may have dated two guys before, but she was not yet at the age where she understood the significance of a man commenting on a woman’s body. In a few years, she would feel anger—anger at men for judging her appearance, for commenting on it, for thinking that their words and whistles validated her. And she would be upset with herself, because she would

want their attention. When she didn't get it, Rayna knew there was something wrong with her. She knew that her hips were wrong, that her arms were fat.

But those feelings would arise in later years, and this was today, and today Rayna felt good because the man across the street had told her she looked good. Fuck Brian. Fuck Emma. Rayna was confident. She snaked her way up the avenue, gazing absentmindedly at the mannequins in the windows.

It was a glorious afternoon. Arriving at Tompkins Square Park, Rayna made sure to pick a seat that wasn't near the crack heads' domain. She crossed her legs, pulled her book out of her backpack, and tried to read. It was hard, though; the park was full of life. Children and tattooed locals were enjoying the weather. Beyond the park's boundaries, traffic was screaming. Rayna couldn't concentrate.

A man sat down next to her. It was an empty bench and he sat close. She noticed this because all women notice this. Even fifteen-year-old girls sitting in the park on a spring day have learned to notice this. Rayna crossed her legs tighter and tried to really read. If she seemed busy, then he wouldn't talk to her.

"Beautiful day, huh?"

Though she hadn't meant to, Rayna looked up. She met his gaze. He smiled, his brows thick and his jaw line strong. He was robust. She nodded and looked back down at her book.

Rayna could sense his interest, and she wanted Brian to see it. She wanted Brian to be jealous, the way she had felt when she saw him lead Emma into Isabel Brightmann's parents' bedroom at that party. And only a week after he had broken up with Rayna.

"What are you reading?"

“*The Bluest Eye*,” she said, this time without looking up. She forced herself to be engrossed by the book. While she may have wanted Brian’s jealousy, she wanted nothing to do with this guy. “Oh, wow. Toni Morrison. She’s great.”

Rayna nodded, still looking down.

“Wasn’t that her first novel? Crazy that it won the Nobel Prize.”

“Yeah, crazy.”

She felt him angle his body towards her. “Look, am I bothering you?”

Yes. Yes he was. Brian wasn’t here, so she had nothing to gain from this interaction. She knew better than to talk to men she didn’t know.

When Rayna looked at him, she was overcome with guilt. He was probably just lonely, or bored. She knew not to be rude.

“It’s fine.”

“Okay. Just checking. You’re so beautiful that it’s hard to keep myself from talking to you.”

Rayna wanted to leave, but she couldn’t be impolite. She ignored the comment. The man tried again.

“How is it possible that someone so gorgeous can be so modest?”

Rayna was done. She wasn’t reading. The park had been ruined. Pulling her phone from her pocket, she pretended to be alarmed. “Oops, I’ve gotta go. Have a good day.”

As she walked away, Rayna was pleased by his persistence. While she had been discernibly uninterested in this man and his conversation, he had continued to talk to her. Rayna must have looked good. Today she was desirable.

* * *

Life was just the thing that happened between cigarette breaks? It was a dumb sentence; it was the type of thing he would have used in one of his poems. Life is just / The thing that / Happens between / Cigarette / Breaks. Mundane thoughts don't make good poetry.

It was an unimaginative thing to say. He had probably been uncomfortable. She had been too, and she had kept her cool. For that, Rayna was proud.

She continued her walk up Fifth Avenue. She was almost home. The day felt endless in that early-spring way. Maybe she would try on some skirts at American Apparel; she needed something to wear to Will Levitsky's birthday party on Saturday.

"Excuse me."

She knew better than to talk to men on the street. She kept walking, appearing unperturbed, poised. Would Brian be at the party? She would have to check the Facebook event.

From behind her, Rayna heard, "Okay. That's pretty rude. I just wanted to ask you a question."

She stopped short. Maybe he was lost. Maybe he was a tourist who wanted to get to Union Square. He was right, she was being rude.

She turned around and met the man where he stood. He smiled. He had paired his grey hair with a pink button-down and New Balance sneakers.

"Hi. Thanks for stopping."

Rayna nodded.

"Do you model?"

Before she could respond, he continued. “I’m a photographer, and I have a studio down in Soho. I’d love to photograph you. You have a great look. You’re really something.”

Rayna was flattered, but should she show it? Should she smile? She had never been in a situation like this. This man wanted to put her on magazine covers, on billboards. He saw her potential. This was the beginning of a business relationship. Still, she should remain self-possessed. Business-like.

“Thanks. I would have to ask my parents, though.”

It was true. She discussed everything with her parents. Rayna still asked them for advice and, sometimes, permission. It was that kind of relationship.

He was visibly confused, and laughed. “Ask your parents? What, how old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

His blue eyes grew large. He looked her up and down, unabashedly, not quite believing her. It made her feel good.

“Fifteen?”

“Yeah.”

Rayna didn’t know how to look for it, but there was a momentary glimmer of conflict in his eyes. He didn’t know whether to pounce or retreat. And then, seconds later, he knew.

“Oh, wow, oh my god. Okay. I’m so sorry.”

He scrambled away, suddenly in a rush.

But what a compliment! She could model. The older man had asked her to model for him. He had told her that she had a great look, that she was really something. Rayna wasn’t even thinking about Brian anymore. She had bigger things on her horizons. As she continued her walk home, Rayna paused to look at her reflection in the window of a café. She didn’t care that the

people inside could see her. Her hair hung at her shoulders. Her dress flirted with the breeze. She had a great look. She was really something.

The N Train

It's about eight in the evening, and the N is headed towards Brooklyn. Jade watches the identical twin girls sitting across from her. Each child is dressed monochromatically. Their colors are purple and blue. Scooters sit by their feet, and their legs swing back and forth. Sometimes the movements match up, but only for a moment.

Jade doesn't care much for kids. She doesn't know what to do with them, how to talk to them. She blames her parents; they could have given her a younger sibling.

She looks up at the twins' father, who holds onto the pole with a tight grip. He's not focusing on his daughters, who are now simultaneously humming two different songs. He is consumed by an ad for a plastic surgery clinic.

"It smells like water here."

"No it doesn't, it smells like coffee."

It just smells like the subway.

"No, you're wrong. Daddy, tell her she's wrong. It smells like water."

"I'm not wrong. Daddy, I'm not wrong. It smells like coffee."

He looks at them. Their eyes are eager for victory.

"You're both right. It smells like watered-down coffee."

They beam at each other. They are characters in a sitcom.

* * *

The train arrives at Times Square, 42nd Street. Usually, it's an overwhelming station. Jade will fixate on a spot on the ground and try to breathe. She won't look up until she hears the doors

have closed, and until she can feel that the passengers have settled.

Tonight, the train is quiet. To Jade's left are two men who have just boarded. One sits and one stands. They're dressed in black and wear sunglasses, even though it's dark out and they're indoors. A duffle bag on the floor is conspicuous in its distance from their feet.

Jade turns away. She doesn't want them to think she's staring. She observes the twins as they try to braid each others' hair. It's a physically impossible task.

Their father has finally turned away from the plastic surgery ad. He's watching the men. He looks from the duffle bag to their posture, from the duffle bag to their clothes, from the duffle bag to their black. Jade watches as he readjusts his body. He moves to shield his daughters.

"Daddy, what are we having for dinner tonight?"

"Can we have mac n cheese?"

"I don't want that. I want grilled cheese."

"But I want mac n cheese."

"Daddy can we have both?"

He's busy. Jade watches him search the duffle bag with his eyes. He's finding drugs. He's finding guns. He's finding money—stolen money. And stolen virginites.

"Daddy?"

He stops searching. He turns his attention to his daughters.

Jade looks back at the two criminals. She wonders if they can hear the father's assumptions as loudly as she can. And then she wonders what it would be like to have a protective father. Or at least one that looked out for her.

* * *

When her parents divorced, Jade moved with her mother to the Upper West Side. Her father stayed in Levittown, Long Island. He even stayed in the same house.

When Jade asked him about moving, he was expressionless. “Things are nice here. They’re easy. I have my reasons.”

“What are your reasons?”

“You’ll understand when you’re older.”

With each weekend visit, Jade felt further from understanding. She became annoyed by the uniformity. She was bored by the absence of culture, of sound, of vibration, of conversation, of movement. Why would anyone choose attic space over the spirit of a cramped apartment?

She brought the question to Abby. Abby was a childhood friend.

“I don’t know. My parents chose this place, so it’s where I live.”

“Would you move back here after college?”

“No way.”

“What about when you’re older?”

“I mean, maybe once I’m married.”

“Right—but then why move back here instead of somewhere else?”

Abby shrugged as she rolled a joint.

“I don’t know. It’s comfortable. It’d be a good place to raise a kid, and my parents would be close by.”

“But you’re a kid, and you hate it.”

“I’m not a kid. When I was, I loved it.”

Jade wanted to probe further.

“Are you done interviewing me?”

Jade hugged her knees to her chest. Her yellow flip flops fell to the grass.

“Fine.”

Later that night, once Abbie had gone home and the weed had worn off, Jade tried her dad again.

“In American history, we’ve been learning about suburbanization after World War II. The Levitt’s didn’t sell homes to any minorities. They were really racist. Even after Brown v. Board of Ed, Levittown was still segregated.”

He was looking through the fridge, trying to figure out if he could make something out of nothing.

“Dad, sixty-five years ago, you wouldn’t have even been allowed to live here. And if you had tried, like the Myers did, you would have been harassed, threatened, and violated. For so long, this place refused us. Why would you want to live in a place with that kind of history? Why would you want to support that?”

He closed the fridge door. They would have to order something. It had been a long day at the DMV. He wasn’t in the mood to have this conversation; Jade always put him in a position where he had to defend his choices. She took after her mother.

“That’s America, honey.”

He always deflected. Jade rolled her eyes.

“My living here doesn’t support a history of discrimination. I don’t know of a single place in America that doesn’t have that kind of history. The past is the past.”

“But don’t you feel that history at all?”

“You’re making this more political than it is.”

“Everything is political.”

“You sound like your mom. Did she put you up to this?”

“Dad.”

“Sorry.”

“It really doesn’t bother you that everyone here is white?”

“Not everyone.”

“Okay, but you know what I mean.”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

Jade had led the argument to a dead end.

“Does it bother you?”

“Yeah.”

He pulled the pizza menu off the fridge and crossed his limbs. He nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

Sorry never felt like enough, but it was all he could ever give. Jade wished he would want to have a conversation with her. That he would want to engage her, to listen, to make her feel safe, and maybe even happy.

Why couldn’t he be more like her mother? Immediately, she regretted the comparison.

Maybe she was getting confused. Was she upset by the neighborhood’s racial history, or the fractured familial history the neighborhood represented? This house had been her family’s home. Now when the evening light peaked through the curtains, it illuminated something hollow.

This was her own problem. It wasn’t about race, it was about being a child of divorce.

“Should we order?”

He nodded.

* * *

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this is an important message from the New York City Police Department. Keep your belongings in sight at all times. Protect yourself. If you see a suspicious package or activity on the platform or train, do not keep it to yourself. Tell a Police Officer or an MTA employee. Remain alert, and have a safe day.”

The train is stuck somewhere between 42nd and 34th street. Jade looks at the suspicious package. She looks at the two men. They are stoic. The father hasn’t been able to look away.

The train darts forward, though only for a moment. It stops again. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are being held momentarily by the train’s dispatcher. Please be patient.”

Above her, hundreds of feet away, someone is setting the table. Someone is buying takeout food, someone is begging. Someone is saying goodbye and someone is considering a juice cleanse and someone is holding a door open for tenants and their guests. None of them are thinking about the Brooklyn-bound N train. None of them are thinking about her, just as she hasn’t given any thought to the people on the Brooklyn-bound R train. They might also be stuck.

There’s no way out. Helplessness is a feeling she knows.

* * *

“I mean, you’re not really black. Not like that.”

They had been sitting in Jade’s backyard. She was in Levittown for the weekend. They were gossiping about some friends from elementary school. Jade should have known that was a bad sign—they were in high school; they should have had something else to talk about.

“What do you mean, ‘not like that?’”

“You know,” she said, smoking a cigarette like the delicate French actress she wasn’t, “you remember Kiara. Or Shawna. You’re not like them. You’re not ghetto-black.”

Jade didn’t know how to respond. She identified her feelings and she saw her friend and she felt all the things that were wrong, but she couldn’t find the language. So she said, “that’s fucked up.”

Abby was offended. “How is that fucked up? I’m trying to say that I don’t really think of you as black. I mean it as a good thing.”

“Because there’s something wrong with being black?”

“What? No, that’s not what I’m saying at all.”

“It’s what you’re implying.”

“You’re taking my words out of context. We’ve known each other forever. You know I’m not a racist.”

Jade was quiet.

“Jade, listen. Don’t get mad. I mean, I’m half-Jewish. I know what it’s like to be oppressed. I’m not the enemy here.”

Jade stared at her. Abby’s being half-Jewish didn’t mean she could relate to the experience of being black, or even to that of being discriminated against. This was, after all, Long Island. Here, her people were plentiful.

But Jade wasn’t sure how to proceed, or where. You’re not like them. Ghetto-black. Not like them.

Where was Abby coming from? Could Jade rationalize it? Maybe she was projecting her own insecurities onto Abby.

“I’m sorry if I upset you. I really didn’t mean to.”

Jade took the cigarette from her and finished it.

* * *

That night, when she came back from Levittown, Jade told her mother about her conversation with Abby. Her mother was, at the time, a sociology professor at Brooklyn College. As Jade spoke, her mother had stopped eating, rested her chin in her hand, and given her full attention. Jade always liked when her mother had time to do that.

“Abby thinks she’s progressive; good for her. But she is in no position to tell you that she’s not a racist. Her whiteness, her privilege, is programmed into her. She can’t help it. That doesn’t absolve her, obviously. But you have to know and remember: this is not a post-racial society. You have to acknowledge it. You can’t fight or argue against it if you can’t even recognize it.”

She stood up and began to clear the table. Jade followed her to the kitchen.

“And you need to read. Maybe the only perk of having an identity determined by your skin color is that there’s already literature out there about who your skin color says you are. Get to work.”

* * *

The train finally begins to move again. Her eyes drift to other passengers. No one else cares about the men with the duffle bag. They’re absorbed in books and phones and music and thought. This is comforting.

The father turns his body. He’s still blocking his daughters from the men in black, but now

he's looking at Jade. When their eyes meet, she wants to turn away. It's instinct—New Yorkers don't maintain eye contact.

But this is different. She looks back at him. The stakes are higher. She hasn't yet figured out what they are, but Jade knows she can't look away. She's found the words she would have said to Abby that day. She knows how to challenge her father into conversation, and she knows how to bulldozer through dead ends. She has opinions and they sometimes differ from her mother's, but they're grounded in literature and statistics and sometimes also emotion. She won't look away.

He does.

When the train arrives at 34th street, the father takes his daughters off the train.

"But Daddy, this isn't our stop."

"Daddy, you said we were getting off at 8th street."

He has his reasons.

Jade feels triumphant in a way she can't articulate. She looks at the men with the duffle bag. She wants to make eye contact, but their sunglasses make it an impossible task. Kinship is a feeling from which Jade feels estranged. She follows the twins with her eyes until they disappear from sight. The train begins to move.

Immersion Therapy

Jun was trying to roll a joint in Prospect Park. She had strayed from the path and walked through the parting of the trees to sit on her log, which was damp from last night's rain. It was a shady, wooded area. Jun tried to harmonize with the birds. It was difficult.

She ran her hand along the bark. She didn't like how moist the moss felt under her fingers, so she pressed them deeper. "Changes don't happen in your comfort zone," a peer had posted on Facebook last week. Suddenly overcome by something confusing, Jun withdrew her hand. Change takes time.

Jun took her phone out from her pocket and set it on her lap. As she emptied the contents of her grinder into the rolling paper, she recalled the sound of his voice. The resonance of his laugh. If he had been there, he could have harmonized with the birds.

His sideburns, the taste of his fingers, the t-shirt he flung at her as he pulled his pants on. "You can wipe your face with this, if you want."

Jun shook her head to force the voice out. It had once given her hope. Each word held weight; the rhythm and tone of each sentence, both real and imagined, had offered insight. "The stories we tell ourselves about other people are usually better than the people themselves," the same Facebook peer had written in a different status.

Jun's stories were fantastic. They had driven cross-country together. They had gone gallery hopping on a Thursday night in pursuit of free wine. They had made hot chocolate and watched *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. They had taken long walks by the river and had talked for hours without checking their phones. They had toked and listened to The Strokes. He had given her his favorite book and read to her until she fell asleep. She had helped him walk when he sprained his ankle. She had made him a pie when he was having a tough day. They had celebrated Easter

together at his family's home upstate. They had walked through Prospect Park at midday with a large brown paper bag filled with baguette, cheese, and wine.

The flowers were beginning to bloom. The quietude of this sanctuary had shifted. Jun looked through the seven articles she had opened on her phone earlier that week. These articles were her path that would lead her to a field of understanding.

Jun owed everything to the Internet—where would she have been without it? Jun would have been doomed to her parents' ignorance. She never would have found empowerment.

She had needed to read countless articles in order to diagnose herself. She was in the 'processing' phase. It could last a lifetime. Jun didn't have an extra lifetime to give.

She set the phone aside, and resumed working on the joint. Her hands, trembling, made it a difficult task. The weed was spilling out. Some rested on the fabric of her dress, but most of it slid off her thighs. She whispered, "Please."

The paper was mostly empty by the time she managed to roll an ugly joint.

"Fucking hell."

She crumpled it up and threw it on the ground. Jun gathered the weed from her dress in the palm of her hand, which she pulled into a tight fist. She imagined him running his fingers up her neck, delicately. And then, before she could stop it, she felt his grip on her throat again. She felt his fingers in her mouth, and then pulling her nipples, and then wrenching her hair, causing her head to hit against the log with each thrust. And then she forced herself to remember his palm, cradling her head.

It could last a lifetime. She didn't have an extra lifetime to give.

Jun pulled out another rolling paper and tried again.

Most websites recommended therapy during the processing stage to help speed up recovery. Jun didn't have time to work more hours in order to save up enough money. And she knew her parents couldn't afford therapy, so she didn't tell them about what had happened. She didn't know how to explain it in Japanese. They wouldn't have understood in English. And Jun didn't have that kind of relationship with them.

Jun had considered telling one of her older brothers. Both would have had the linguistic and cultural understanding to talk about it, but she didn't feel comfortable.

She had many friends, but they were all friends with him too. They all knew that she liked him. Hadn't she gotten what she wanted? She was making a big deal out of nothing. Jun had already worked hard to construct a likable persona for her peers, and she wasn't ready to risk it.

Jun's thumbs were shuddering, which had never been an issue before. Could this be a symptom of an injury she had sustained? Did she have brain damage?

It was lucky that she had read about immersion therapy on Wikipedia. She had never heard of it before, but it seemed logical. And manageable for someone without a degree in psychology. It was worth a try.

First, she would create a fear-hierarchy. She would identify the objects of her fears and rank them according to their anticipated fear reaction.

The scene of the incident was at the bottom of the hierarchy. Miles was at the top. She wasn't sure where else to place him, with his tiny teeth and bony nose. 'Fear' didn't quite express the feelings he elicited. She had been avoiding him. On Mondays and Wednesdays, they had classes on the same floors, and he would start walking to the 2nd Avenue stop on Houston around 3:20 most days, so she would take different staircases and arrive early and leave late and

walk through the projects instead. But she wanted to feel his attention, his laughter, his kisses. His palm on the back of her head. His fingers stifling her words.

Jun was finally in control of her own fingers again. She licked the edge of the paper and rolled the joint upward.

“Yes.”

She was triumphant.

The next step in her therapy would be to learn a relaxation technique. Some websites recommended meditation: Imagine your fear as a dark area, and picture an orb of light, glowing with the healing power of relaxation. Guide the light toward the the darkness. Watch the light of the orb flood out the darkness of the fear. Instead, Jun would smoke weed. It was the easiest way for her to calm down.

Next, she would expose herself to the object of her fear and perform her relaxation technique until she felt comfortable in the face of that fear. She would repeat this method as she climbed up the hierarchy, until ultimately she would confront the fear directly, sideburns and all.

The method seemed simple but effective. Recovery didn't have to last a lifetime, and therapy wasn't the only answer. The Internet enabled her to take care of herself.

Jun stood up. She moved to the left of the log. This was where they had stood, gazing over the tops of the trees in the hazy morning light. This was where she had kissed him. She rarely initiated an action, let alone a romantic or sexual one, and she had been proud of herself.

Would things have unfolded the way they did if she hadn't kissed him first? Was that kiss a gesture of agency? Or resignation? She reminded herself that it wasn't her fault. And yet, she was the one who had chosen to ignore her curfew, to walk through Prospect Park with him alone

at daybreak, to take a detour and bring him here—she, who had taken a class on women’s rights. Wasn’t she at fault for putting herself into the situation?

Jun lit her joint. With each inhale, she felt calmer. She was facing her fears. With the internet as her guide, she would not be completely alone. Jun would be okay.

Gemma and Chloe

Gemma was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee as she scrolled through photos of lizards. Her son wanted a pet gecko. Her husband sat across from her, watching a sitcom on his laptop.

“I don’t think I could ever love a gecko.”

“You don’t have to love it. It’d be Billy’s pet.”

“Yeah, but we’d be the ones taking care of it. I think it’d be more fun if I loved it. Or maybe just less annoying.”

He considered it. “You wouldn’t have to take it for walks or anything.”

“So what do you do with it?”

“You play with it.”

“How do you play with it?”

“I don’t know. Once Billy loses it, you can play hide and go seek.”

“I mean it. I don’t think I know how to play anymore.”

He let out a yawn that ended in a chuckle. “That’s pretty sad.”

“Well, do other adults play? Is there something wrong with me? Should I be doing it?”

He became earnest. He considered his past week; had he played?

“I don’t know...I don’t play. Who has time? I feel lucky when I get to go to the gym. Does that count as playing?”

“I think playing is when you use your imagination.”

“I think about things when I’m at the gym.”

“Right, but when you play, your body and your mind are only focused on playing. When you’re working out, your body is doing one thing and your mind is doing something else. I think. I don’t know anymore.”

“Aren’t our bodies and our minds usually doing different things?”

“Maybe. But working out isn’t playing. You have to make time to go to the gym. You set out with intentions and goals. Meanwhile, Billy plays when he wants to, and simply because he wants to.”

“He doesn’t have an agenda.”

“Exactly.”

Julian was thinking hard. He didn’t like pausing TV shows, but he was mildly intrigued by Gemma’s questions. And he might as well indulge her now. Brownie points.

“What about my poker nights? Do those count? Maybe those are like play dates.”

“That’s an organized game with rules. It’s different.”

Gemma was leaning on the counter, coffee in hand. She was going somewhere else. Looking up and to her right, it seemed that she was trying to physically access the space of her mind.

“I’m trying to remember the last time I played.”

Gemma looked directly at Julian now. She appeared lighthearted, but the levity was forced. Though Julian wasn’t very sensitive, he knew his wife well. He heard her twinge.

Gemma laughed it off. It was fine. She was fine. “I guess that’s just what we do. We become adults. We stop playing. That’s life.”

Julian laughed too. Everything was alright. “So what do you say, gecko or no gecko?”

* * *

Two weeks had passed, and a leopard gecko named Bart now resided in the living room. It was a Friday night. Billy was sleeping over at his friend Max's house. Gemma and Julian had just had sex, and their limbs were intertwined. The room was silent.

"Do you think that having sex is play?"

"No. Why?"

"I don't know. Just thinking."

Julian didn't want to keep talking; he was deep in thought about work. It was surprising that she had asked. "I thought you let that one go."

Gemma turned to face him. "I did. But the question came to mind, and I wanted your opinion."

"When you reduce sex to play, you trivialize it."

She raised her voice. She was not convinced. "Trivialize it?"

"Why do you sound mad?"

She knew that she didn't have a good reason to be angry, but she was. It felt good.

"Saying that sex is adult play doesn't trivialize sex."

"But doesn't playing involve acting things out?"

"Sex can involve that, too, but you don't like role play."

"So are you saying that I'm not creative enough in bed?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all. You're not even listening to me; this isn't about you."

"Why are you being combative?"

"Why are you turning this on me? You're the one who freaked out first."

Julian's eyes grew large. "Do you hear yourself? You're acting like a child."

Gemma turned away from her husband. She turned off the bedside lamp.

Julian threw the blanket off and stormed to the bathroom.

* * *

On Saturday morning, Gemma woke up first. Never being one to lounge in bed, she went to make breakfast. As she scrambled four eggs, she hummed.

When Julian emerged an hour later, still dazed with sleep, Gemma had finished her breakfast and was reading the paper. She was drinking tea. He kissed her head.

"I'm sorry about last night...I overreacted. I love you."

Gemma swallowed and looked up at him.

"You were acting like there was something wrong with me."

Julian sat down, restraining a sigh. He liked clean finishes.

"I'm sorry if it seemed that way."

"Thanks. It's alright."

"You're entitled to think about whatever you want and to ask about whatever you want."

"Of course I am."

Her tone was accusatory—clearly he had said something wrong, but he wasn't sure what. He didn't know how to address it, so he didn't.

"Can I have some tea?"

She nodded absentmindedly.

"I'm sorry about last night too, I was being ridiculous."

He shook his head as he drank her tea. She wasn't being ridiculous.

"I talked to my mom yesterday. She said that I played with my Barbies until I was fifteen. I think I must've blocked that out. It sounds like I had OCD or something."

"How so?"

"I would make up these elaborate situations and play them out extensively. Nothing else mattered. I would become so consumed, and would shake the Barbies so hard with excitement that their heads all fell off—I'm serious.

"My mom wanted me to go to therapy. I was fifteen and still playing with Barbies almost every day. I had to hide them whenever my friends came over...I knew it was weird. My favorite was Rhett."

"Was he a Ken?"

"Rhett? Oh my god, no. Rhett was a Barbie, she was a girl. I liked how the name was kind of androgynous."

He kissed her on the forehead.

* * *

Billy was exuberant. He had had the best sleepover of his entire life.

"What did you guys get up to?"

"Well first Max showed me his new bearded dragon. Its name is Joey and he does this thing called 'head bobbing,' it's so cool. So we played with Joey for a while and then we made a pillow fort in Max's room and we watched a movie on his iPad in there and then Max's dad

made us brownies and they were so good, they had a peanut butter swirl on top, and we ate them in our fort and...”

“Hold on a second, sweetie, did you say that Max has an iPad?”

“Yeah, we watched...”

“Wait, do you mean it’s his or his dad’s?”

“No, it’s his, isn’t that cool? We...”

“He has his own iPad? He’s too young for that.”

Billy shrugged. He didn’t care. He started describing the movie they had watched.

A sleepover was meant for interacting with a friend—time for giggling and goofing off. Pillow forts and brownies were all fine, but why hadn’t they been more imaginative? Why did a child need an iPad?

“Mom, where are we going?”

Gemma had forgotten that Billy was still there. She put her arm around his shoulder and kissed his head.

“We need to go to buy groceries, pick up some paint from the hardware store, and find you a shirt for Aunt Lila’s wedding.”

“But Mommy, I don’t want to go shopping. Shopping is for girls.”

“Who told you that?”

“No one had to tell me, everyone knows it.”

Was she raising a misogynist?

“It’s not true. Men go shopping, too.”

“I’ve never seen one.”

“You have. You’ve gone shopping with men before.”

“But that’s like, grandpa. He’s old, it’s different.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are different rules for old people, just like there are different rules for girls and boys.”

“That’s actually not true.”

“Yeah it is. Everyone knows it.”

“These ‘rules’ you’re talking about are called ‘gender roles.’ They’re problematic, and you shouldn’t play into them.”

“What’s a gender role?”

“Do you know what gender is?”

“Yeah.”

“So basically a gender role is the way society tells you to act based on your gender. It’s the idea that a man should act a certain way because he’s a man, and a woman should act a certain way because she’s a woman.”

“I don’t get it.”

“What don’t you get?”

“Why is that bad?”

“It’s inherently sexist.”

“What does ‘inherently sexist’ mean?”

The kid was trying. He meant well, and she was proud that he was engaging with a difficult subject. But Gemma felt a wave of anxiety—how would she manage to raise a boy that wasn’t a chauvinist?

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. These are confusing things that I’m talking about—you’re a smart cookie. Just remember, don’t assume that someone can or can’t do something because of their gender, or their race, or their age, or their sexual orientation, or their religion.”

“What’s ‘sexual orientation?’”

* * *

They had picked up the groceries and the paint. They would paint Billy’s room a bright teal color, and then they would carve pumpkins and bake pumpkin bread while the paint dried.

As they walked to the car from the paint store, the sun shone brightly. Until that moment, it had been a bright grey day. Leaves were dancing in the sharp breeze. The romanticism of autumn was in full bloom.

“Mommy, do we have to go to Gap right now? Can we go later? I wanna start painting!”

“You’ll never want to go, sweetheart. We should go now.”

“Can you go without me? I can stay at home with Daddy.”

“Dad is working right now, he’s not home. And anyway, I need you to come with me so you can try some shirts on.”

“But why is Daddy working on a Saturday?”

“He’s got a big presentation coming up this week.”

“Mom, I’m hungry.”

Gemma was hungry too. Usually, she would have had more patience, would have been more sympathetic. But today she didn’t. Why couldn’t Billy see that she didn’t want to shop either, but that this was something they had to do?

“We have to go to Gap; there’s no way around it. We’ll do it as fast as we can. It’s just something that we have to get done today, because there’s no other day that I can take you.”

“But mommyyyyyy....”

He was whining. Gemma couldn’t deal with whining. Bribery was her only option.

“Please don’t whine. We’ll buy you a shirt for the wedding, and then we’ll go to the toy store. But please, please, no more whining.”

His face brightened. “Can I get a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle? Max has the coolest ones.”

* * *

The aisles of Toys ‘R’ Us are endless. The lighting is harsh. It’s not an aesthetically pleasing store, and it doesn’t pretend to be. A place with that many toys doesn’t need to be attractive.

Billy led her down an aisle stocked with board games. He was running with excitement. As Gemma walked behind him, she saw the games of her childhood—Clue, Mancala, Candy Land, Monopoly. There were chessboards and dominoes. There were also many that Gemma had never heard of; Korner’d, Zingo, Fitz It, Telestrations After Dark. She was so out of touch.

Gemma followed Billy through hundreds of boxes depicting Lego’s interpretation of civilization. Billy’s sneakers screeched to a halt on the linoleum. He grabbed the box off the shelf and showed it to Gemma. It was Ninjago Dojo Showdown.

When he grinned, she could see the space where his canine tooth had been. “Mom, look at how cool this is. It has a fight platform! And a fire prison—whoa, what if he fell off the fight

platform and into the fire prison...Mom, can you hold this just in case there aren't any cool Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? Please?"

"Sure honey."

She knew this tactic. She had used it before, as had many children.

He beamed. "Thanks!"

Now they walked together through the aisles. Billy was leading, though he wasn't sure exactly where to go.

In the next aisle, Barbies lined the walls. Their legs were long, their skin unblemished. They had cars and airplanes and mansions. Some were doctors, some were princesses, some were rock stars, some were business professionals, some were lifeguards. Most were white. Some weren't.

Gemma stopped. A chef with blonde hair and purple eyes was staring at her. She was wearing a pink shirt, a red checkered apron, and purple leggings. Her white chef's hat was charming. She held out a plate of cookies. All the cookies were in the shape of the letter B, but Gemma thought they looked like cartoon penises. If she were younger, she wouldn't have known.

"Mom? Can we keep going? We still haven't found the Turtles."

Gemma wanted to be a good mom. She wanted to be selfless; she knew she should say, 'Of course, sweetheart. Let's go find your Turtles.' But Gemma wanted to stay and look at the Barbies. She didn't know why, and she didn't think about it. Toys 'R' Us is a place for kids; one aisle over from her, her child would be safe. He was lucky to be a boy.

"Why don't you go into the next aisle? Maybe they're there. I'm gonna stay and keep looking through these for a little while."

Billy's face scrunched up. "Why do you want to look at Barbies?"

Why was the kid so judgmental? What was so weird about an adult woman looking at Barbies?

"My friend Kelly, from work, has a daughter. Do you remember Lucy? Well, anyway, she has a birthday coming up. I want to get her a Barbie."

The lie came easily. Gemma didn't question its motives.

Billy shrugged and ran off.

"Just don't leave that aisle, Billy."

"They're here! I found them!"

Left to herself, Gemma took the Barbie off the rack. There was a hole purposely cut out of the cardboard box, so Gemma ran her finger along the doll's cheek. She was so lifeless.

But what if she wasn't in the box? If she were in Gemma's hand, would she still be lackluster?

"Mom! Come look at all of these, they're so cool! How many can I get?"

Gemma took the Barbie. She went to her son.

*

*

*

They had completed the errands. Gemma was painting Billy's bedroom, while Billy lay on the floor of the living room playing with his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. The pumpkin bread was in the oven. The kitchen was growing fragrant, but Gemma could only smell the toxicity of the paint.

The timer went off on her phone. She dropped her paintbrush and ran to the oven. The top of the bread had sunken in. She usually cared about those sorts of things. Today she didn't.

"Mommy can I have a piece? It smells so good."

"Not yet, sweetie, it needs to cool down and set first."

Billy reacted as though this was the most devastating news of his life. Maybe it was; his life was comfortable. Not excessively privileged, but not deprived.

Gemma saw the face but ignored it. She didn't have time for that. She needed to finish painting the room; she had other things to do with her day.

"Mom, can I have another play date with Max?"

"Sure, yeah."

"I love play dates."

"That's great, honey."

"Do you have play dates, Mom?"

A beat. Then, "No, I don't."

"Do other adults have play dates?"

He wasn't even looking at her. Billy was admiring his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

"I don't think so. No. No, I don't think so."

"Maybe they do, but they just don't invite you to their play dates. Like when Charlie didn't invite me to his play date with Ben, even though he said he would."

That couldn't be true. Adults didn't have play dates. Billy was a kid, he wouldn't know.

Gemma went back to painting. What if he was right? What if her friends didn't want to play with her? Maybe they didn't like the way she played. Maybe they didn't want her at their play dates.

She sat down on the floor and placed the paintbrush on newspaper. Reaching for her purse, she pulled out the Barbie. Gemma looked toward the door to make sure it was closed. It wasn't.

Was it weird that she, an adult woman, had bought a Barbie? She didn't think so, but she also didn't want Billy or Julian to know.

She ripped the chef out of the box and gripped her legs. This was a beautiful specimen. Gemma felt her heart beat faster. Her eyes were shining. Her hands were quivering. How does one begin to play?

Stories. She had to come up with a story. But the doll needed a name first. What would her name be? Louisa. No, that wasn't right. Gemma liked the name Mary-Ann, but that was too old fashioned. This Barbie was a modern woman. She was a chef. She needed a modern name.

Gemma considered Jennifer, Arianna, Lila, Natalie, Lauren, and Hannah before settling on Chloe. Chloe felt right.

What would the story be? Gemma was lost. She didn't know how to play, she was a boring adult now. No one would ever invite her to a play date because she wasn't fun.

The perpetual smile, the empty purple eyes, the perfect blonde hair, the long arms and the endless legs; it was too much. She hated the doll.

Gemma grabbed her paintbrush and wiped it across Chloe's face. Now she was an ugly goblin. No one likes to play with ugly goblins.

But her eyes still shown through. They were challenging Gemma. "You don't know how to play. My face might be teal, but I'm still perfect. You're not. You don't even know what to do with me."

Gemma didn't want to see those eyes ever again. She was an adult, she was in control of this situation. Though this situation never would have happened if she was an adult who played and was fun and was invited to play dates.

Angry at Chloe and angry at herself, Gemma stood up and threw Chloe out the window. She finished painting the wall.

Chloe landed in a bush. Seven years later, when Julian had moved out and Billy was becoming a man and Bart the gecko had died and been replaced by a dog named Ziggy, Chloe resurfaced. Ziggy had found her. He chewed her head off until he was bored.

Chucky

The man at the end of the subway car was masturbating. You couldn't see his penis and you didn't have to.

Most people had moved away before he had even started. That corner of the car was his home. It had an unshakable odor that offended the Brooklyn couples on their way to Halloween parties. It was the Manhattan-bound L train on Friday, October 30th. Halloween used to be a one-night affair, but now it lasts for an entire weekend.

There were a few stray passengers who were still in their work clothes. They looked worn down. It had been a tough week.

Everyone else was in costume. A tough week is fuel for a wild weekend.

The man was looking through a dirty magazine. Someone had thrown it to him a few days earlier. The girls were amazing.

He started masturbating when the train was stuck between Lorimer and Bedford. His moaning was soft at first, but a mother heard it. She was the only one who had her child with her. First she was bewildered—surely that couldn't be what she thought it was. Then she was horrified. Then she was angry.

She had received a call from her daughter's school two days before, informing her that her six-year-old child had said, "fuck you, you piece of shit" to her classmate. When she called her ex-husband to ask him where the child might have been exposed to that kind of language, he sighed. "These kids are sponges. This city is one filthy sink." She had rolled her eyes. Sponges were supposed to clean up messes, not soak up grime. Her ex-husband always insisted on using metaphors.

This man, this masturbating man, he was the grime soiling the purity of her daughter. The child was talking loudly. Her imagination overpowered her senses, and she didn't notice him. She was dressed as a rag doll. Rag dolls don't know anything about masturbation. Rag dolls are pure.

The Breakfast Club was sitting nearby, but they hadn't noticed anything. They were drunk.

Across from the Breakfast Club sat three teenage boys. They heard the man's groans, but pretended that they didn't. When it became impossible to ignore him, they laughed awkwardly to themselves. They couldn't bring themselves to say anything about it. They didn't yet know how to talk to each other about perversion.

A man in a suit changed cars. A princess followed suit. Then, minutes later, a grim reaper.

The ladies of Abba couldn't look away. They were disgusted, but they were also impressed by his audacity. How did someone achieve that state of shamelessness? Or was it pride? Desperation?

He opened his eyes. Perhaps he had felt their stares. He turned to them. "You ladies wanna get in on the action?"

Abba had been caught in the act. The man then noticed—all while continuing to jerk himself off—that the two women were holding hands. He laughed, a throaty chortle.

"Ooo, okay, I see how it is. Y'all are lady lovers! Lezzies unite! Hehe, okay, alright lezzies, you do you."

He closed his eyes and returned to his business. His business was becoming everyone's. Two football players changed cars. The mother watched them go. She wanted to change cars as well, but was worried that her daughter would notice the man if she moved her.

The train lurched forward. The Bedford station platform was packed. As soon as the doors opened, the mother pulled her daughter off the train. She intended to inform an MTA officer of what had happened, but she got distracted. Children are a handful.

Abba got off the train, as did The Breakfast Club, two cats, Sonny & Cher, and one woman without a costume. A swarm of characters approached the doors. As they began to file in, they were hit with the stench. The leaders of the swarm turned around. They would find seats in a different car. Several others followed them without even knowing why.

The drunks didn't care. They were young and wild and free. As soon as she boarded, Sexy Chucky started singing The Monster Mash. She was grinding up on Waldo, but she didn't realize that Waldo was interested in Oscar the Grouch.

She didn't know Waldo or Oscar. In fact, she didn't know anyone on that train. She had lost her friends when transferring from the M to the L at Myrtle-Wyckoff Avenues. Chucky didn't realize that they had intentionally abandoned her. She also didn't know that they might have slipped something into her drink. Her friends didn't like her. Even when she was sober, she wasn't perceptive.

Oscar was in a bad mood. He didn't want to go to the party at Alana's; he hated Halloween. The city put on a mask he didn't like. Chucky was annoying him, as was Waldo.

Waldo couldn't tell if Oscar's frown signified misery or dedication to the character. Was he jealous that Waldo was dancing with Chucky?

They were approaching the 1st Avenue station. As the train slowed down, Waldo moved away from Chucky, who lost her balance. He didn't care. He grabbed Oscar's hand and pulled him away.

Chucky was in front of the doors when they opened. People were shoving their way out and forcing their way in. She needed to move.

She stumbled over to the far end of the car, which was surprisingly empty. There was only one man in the corner. He was surrounded by dirty bags. She closed her eyes as she leaned onto a pole. It was cold against the warmth of her drunk.

The train lurched forward, and Chucky opened her eyes as she lost her balance. The man opened his eyes as well. He looked at her and laughed.

“What's so funny?”

He ignored her, turning his head and closing his eyes. He was getting close.

Chucky staggered over to the man, falling into the seat across from him. She hadn't realized what he was doing. Then she did, and her eyes grew large. She leaned forward and ran her fingers through her red wig. She put on her sexiest voice.

“Hey, want some help?”

His eyes remained closed, and his breathing was too heavy for him to respond, but he managed to shake his head. No.

“Open your eyes.”

He did. Chucky was ready. She threw her ax down on the floor. Her dress was cut low, and she pulled her breasts out. She squeezed them. He jerked harder.

A few people began to film the interaction. Later, a YouTube video would go viral. Chucky and the man were oblivious. Passengers continued to file out of the car.

The train was stuck again. Chucky found the stability to stand. As she strutted over to the pole, the man's eyes followed her. She began humping it. Then she swung herself around. She was sexy. She was helping the man. Everyone deserves to get off.

It was clumsy, but it did the trick. The man came right as the train began to move again. Satisfied, Chucky sat back down across from him. She pulled her dress back up over her breasts. The train pulled into the 3rd Avenue station. Everyone got off.

The man was breathing heavily. His eyes were closed, and he couldn't see Chucky staring at him.

She was proud. Her sense of accomplishment would never fade. When the man zipped up his pants, picked up his bags, and left at Union Square, she was confused.

"Wait, where are you going?"

He didn't stop walking. The smell lingered. In a few days, though, no one would know that a homeless man had lived there. Businesswomen in pencil skirts would be grateful for the seat.

Chucky picked up her ax. She grabbed the pole, using it to pull herself to stand. The train was approaching the Sixth Avenue station. That wasn't the right stop, but she couldn't remember where it was that she had been going.

But things were becoming more lucid. When the train arrived and the doors opened, Chucky walked with intent.

Her wig felt heavy against the wind. She pulled it off and threw it out. Immediately, she felt small. Chucky walked by a bar and saw men checking out a group of sexy cats. They were all laughing at something; they seemed like a fun group. She was so busy watching them that she smacked into a pimp.

“Watch it.”

Head high, he walked off, hand in hand with Ant Man.

Chucky was uneasy. The street was teeming. No one else was alone.

Hadn't she been with people earlier that night? Where were her friends? Sexy Chucky didn't feel sexy anymore. It was cold. She reached into her purse, but her phone wasn't there. When had she lost it?

“Yoooooooo!”

A man ran to her, his hand held up for a high five. He, too, was dressed as Chucky. They embraced.

They stood on the corner of 15th and 6th. Chucky had a cop take their photo. They shook with laughter at this stroke of serendipity. They held each other close. The universe takes care of its Chuckys.

Upstate

They had arrived at night, and they hadn't expected so many statues. Monks lined the hallways and lurked in corners. Neither Alicia nor Francesca cared for the aesthetic, but it wasn't unpleasant.

Post-it Notes were placed throughout the house. Please turn off the lights when leaving. Please do not remove cups from kitchen. Please take shoes off here. Please close the door so the chi doesn't escape.

They placed their bags by the kitchen. Since they would only be here for a weekend, they had packed light. Alicia sat by the wood stove and began building a fire. The floor was cold beneath her. Francesca unloaded groceries into the fridge and cupboards. She boiled water for tea. They didn't speak. Aside from their movements, the house was still.

* * *

An hour later, they had both showered—separately—and they were in bed, reading. The blanket hid the lack of intertwining limbs. Their therapist had suggested this trip as an opportunity to reassess, reconsider, recommit, rekindle. Seven years is a long time to give up on.

Alicia was bored of her book. Shifting her gaze around the room, she was impressed by the size of the windows.

"I bet this house gets beautiful light."

Francesca nodded.

"It's very spiritual space. So serene."

Francesca looked up.

“Yeah.”

She returned to her book. This was Francesca’s breed of condescension. Alicia was used to it, but was striving to believe that she deserved better. She recalled their therapist’s template.

“When you only respond with single word answers, it makes me feel patronized. It makes me feel like you don’t have time for what I have to say.”

Francesca put her book down. She recognized the formula.

“I hear you, and I’m sorry that I made you feel patronized. I was reading.”

Francesca looked at Alicia, expectant.

“Thank you. I hear you.”

Francesca returned to her book.

“But when you say ‘I was reading,’ in that way, it also sounds patronizing. Like you have better things to do than talk to me.”

Francesca put her book down.

“I hear you, and I’m sorry.”

This formula could lead them in circles forever. It enabled Francesca to stay emotionally detached. They both knew she didn’t mean her apology.

She picked her book back up again.

“I feel like I’m the only one trying. You haven’t talked to me since we got here. This is like the beach trip all over again.”

“Don’t make this about that.”

“I’m not.”

Francesca exhaled dramatically. Alicia rolled her eyes.

“Forget it.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. But I thought we were waiting until tomorrow to start this.”

“I don’t want to postpone. I can’t stand this. Can’t we try now?”

“Obviously we’re going to work on our problems; that’s why we’re here. But what’s the rush? Can’t we wait until we’ve had a good night’s sleep?”

Alicia wasn’t convinced. “Maybe I should sleep in the living room tonight.”

“No.” She grabbed Alicia’s hand. Both Francesca and Alicia hoped the gesture was sincere.

* * *

Alicia awoke first. She put on a sweater and went to make tea. Downstairs, as she had predicted, light poured in through the windows. It graced the kitchen table. The statues became holy.

She put the kettle to boil and wore her winter things: boots, jacket, scarf, hat, no gloves. The Air BnB ad had said the house was on a 500-acre plot of land. Alicia wanted to take a short walk. The work of marriage would be best approached with a clear head.

Francesca awoke to the screaming kettle. Alicia was absentminded in the kitchen. As Francesca went downstairs to turn the stove off, she reminded herself that Alicia hadn’t always been this way. Once, she would make them grand dinners. In between shoots, she would come home to craft a marinade, to check on her slow-roasting lamb, to knead the rosemary focaccia dough after it had risen, to prepare the sweet potatoes for a soufflé. She had been a meticulous amateur of a chef. Vigilant and passionate.

Francesca took the kettle off the heat and the house turned quiet. Pouring herself a cup of

tea, she sat at the table and closed her eyes. Now, when Alicia cooked, she was clumsy. She couldn't keep track of anything. And she no longer ate anything that used to be alive.

Francesca vacantly wondered if their relationship was still worth the work. She assumed this question had never occurred to Alicia, and she didn't understand why. Isn't it courageous to admit that the machine is broken beyond repair?

But Alicia didn't see good relationships as well-oiled machines. She saw them as organisms. Breaths and heartbeats.

Francesca opened her eyes and went to build a fire.

* * *

Alicia had gotten lost. She came back feeling heavy with cold. Everything hurt. She sat on the floor in front of the wood stove. What time was it? Where was Francesca?

A bathroom door opened, and Francesca walked into the room.

"Hey. Are you okay?"

"I got lost."

"Do you need anything?"

"No thanks. I just need to get warm."

Francesca sat down next to Alicia.

"I'm ready when you are."

"I think I need some time."

"Okay."

They sat there, staring into the fire.

“Well, when you’re ready, the materials Martha gave us are on the table.”

“Okay.”

Francesca stood up. She had been ready to begin. Now she felt aimless.

“I’ll make you some tea.”

“Thanks.”

* * *

When Alicia was warm, she went upstairs and found Francesca reading in bed. Francesca made a point of looking up at Alicia when she asked, “How are you?”

Alicia recognized that Francesca was trying. It was only vaguely satisfying, for something had shifted within her. Alicia wanted Francesca to meet the wall that she had been forced to accept.

“I’m okay. Finally warm again.”

“Good. Take your time, and let me know when you’re ready.”

“I think I’ll take a bath. And then I’ll be ready.”

“Okay. Enjoy.”

Francesca breathed deeply. She sensed Alicia’s resistance, but wasn’t sure what she could do about it. Hadn’t the roles been reversed—hadn’t Alicia been persistent and Francesca resistant? Maybe monk statues really were profound. Or maybe Alicia was exhausted. She probably needed time.

* * *

The living room was lined with too much art. Some was beautiful; the ancient Chinese paintings and statues leant an air of stability. But most was sad; mediocre studies of fruit and flowers. And then there was the work that filled in the gaps. Those pieces were perfectly fine.

On the coffee table was a Post-It note. Please use a coaster. Alicia had spent time selecting the coasters she wanted to use. One depicted a sun, smiling; the other, an ornate evil eye. The steam from the rooibos tea danced above.

Francesca and Alicia sat across from each other on the couch. The binder that their therapist had given them sat between them. It was filled with conversation topics, activities to help stimulate and regulate discussion, among other things. Alicia took the binder and flipped through it.

“This is infantilizing.”

Francesca was tentative.

“Maybe we need this kind of structure to get us started.”

“Aren’t we better than this?”

“We need to try something new. If we want to make this work.”

Alicia nodded.

“Okay. You’re right.”

Alicia passed the binder to Francesca. She flipped through it, trying to find a mild activity. There didn’t seem to be any.

“Do you want to go for a drive?”

Alicia nodded.

They left the binder on the couch.

* * *

It had been an hour long drive. They were now back in the living room. The binder still rested between them. On the coffee table, the tea was cold. Two new coasters hosted two new mugs of hot tea.

“Maybe we’re lucky.”

Alicia was doubtful. “How?”

“One truly bad thing happened to us. But otherwise, we’ve had a good marriage. We never cheated. We never deliberately hurt each other.”

Francesca tried to read Alicia, but Alicia wouldn’t let her. She peered down at the binder.

“I don’t think that’s a bad track record.”

“You don’t feel like you’ve hurt me?”

“I’m sure I have. But never deliberately.”

“Do you think I’ve ever meant to hurt you?”

“No. Have you?”

“No.”

Francesca smiled tentatively. “Look at us. Who needs the binder?”

“Why were you talking in past tense? As though our marriage is over?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

They sat in silence.

“We’re never going to be like we were. I don’t know where that leaves us.”

They sat with that thought. They sat with memory and change.

“I think that’s my fault.”

“It’s not. We’re both in this relationship.”

“I’ve given up on myself.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Alicia shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

A beat.

“I don’t think that’s our map,” Alicia said, nodding to the binder.

“Maybe not.”

“Do you want to go for a drive?”

They left the binder on the couch for the second time that day. In the house, the tea grew cold. They drove.

Jabotinsky Street

She awoke, and so another day began. It wouldn't be any different from the one before.

Pulling the In Style magazine from her nightstand into the bed, Lola flipped to the page that she had found the night before. It was an article on the importance of morning rituals. By taking a moment to feel gratitude, "you set yourself up for a grounded, productive day."

Sliding off her bed and onto the cold floor, Lola tried to recall what she was grateful for. She tried to feel grounded, but she just felt heavy.

Giving up, she slipped into a kimono and went to make coffee. Lola lived alone, but she had a large French press that could make coffee for four.

It was a grey Sunday, the kind of Sunday when people her age would make pancakes and binge watch *The Office* and post cozy photos on Instagram and show off their happiness. She didn't like pancakes—it took a lot of effort to make them—but maybe she would watch something later.

The water was rising to a slow boil. She became conscious of the sounds of the city. Delancey was waking up below her, stretching its achy limbs. The neighborhood children were fooling around in the schoolyard, screaming profanities, laughing, feeling mature. Across the street, the older couple was arranging the fruit in front of their deli. Mangoes and papayas and strawberries were November's bounty. Next-door, outside the new cupcake shop, strong men unloaded buckets of flour and sugar from a truck. Several doors down, a homeless man stood next to the pharmacy, hunched over. With a Dunkin Donuts cup in hand, he tried to look everyone in the eye. No one returned his gaze. Lola could see his mouth moving, and she had heard his whispers before: "spare some change? Can ya please spare some change? Change?" A young girl met his gaze and stopped in front of him. Her mother continued ahead; she didn't

notice the absence of her daughter. She was reading an email. Without breaking eye contact, the girl reached into her pocket. She seemed to fumble around for some quarters. The mother, now realizing she had lost her daughter, stormed back over to the young girl, grabbed her hand, and pulled her away. The interaction between the girl and the homeless man had been tender. Lola was sad to see it end.

Lola knew what it was like to have a bad mother. She hadn't spoken to her own in about three weeks.

She had arrived at her mother's house, exhausted from writing and buying furniture. They were waiting for Eliza, Lola's older sister, to arrive with her wife Susan and their daughter. The Bourden's gathered on Fridays for Shabbat dinner. They weren't Jewish, but Susan was, and so they all adopted the ritual. This was a family that thrived on appropriated traditions.

They had been sitting quietly in the living room. Lola had been scrolling through her phone while her mother thumbed through a magazine that she had taken from a nail salon. Every few minutes, her mother would ask a question or make a comment.

"You know, a new gym is opening on 79th and Madison. It looks really nice. You should join—I'll pay the monthly membership fee for you. My treat."

Not lifting her gaze, Lola had said, "No thanks, I'm fine." Her mother put down her magazine; this was a cause that she believed in. "You've put on a good eight pounds, I'd say. I hadn't noticed before, but now I can really see that extra weight on you."

Lola still didn't look up from her phone. "Yeah, but I don't really care."

"Don't you want to live a long and healthy life, and have people admire your figure?"

"I don't need anyone to admire my figure."

"You don't want to become a statistic, Lola."

Later, in long and unanswered text messages, her mother would claim that she had been trying to do a nice thing. After all, she was only looking out for her daughter's health. Shouldn't Lola be grateful?

Lola sneered. "That's so fucked up."

Her mother took in a deep, strained breath. Was she holding back tears?

"I just want you to be beautiful and admired. I just want you to be desirable. I don't even recognize your body anymore. Please, Lola, join a gym. I'll pay for it. Is that too much to ask?"

Later, Lola would wish she had remained emotionally detached from the conversation. Instead, she had exploded.

"You have no right to tell me what to do with my body, or what's right with it or what's wrong with it. It's not yours, it's mine, so back off."

"I have every right to comment on your body, because without me, you wouldn't have one. I created you. Your body is just as much mine as it is yours."

It got uglier, and it happened quickly. The scene came to a close when Lola remembered that she was an adult. She had walked out as Eliza walked in. Standing in the hallway, collecting herself before stepping back out into the city, she had heard her mother sobbing. "She doesn't love me. She doesn't accept my love."

Yes, Lola knew what it was like to have a bad mother. But what about this girl? The young and charitable girl on Delancey, with the mean mother and the pocket full of quarters? Did she have a good role model? Did she, like Lola, have a supportive father?

Lola knew that she needed to talk to this girl. To tell her that it would be okay; even with a mother like that, she could have a decent life. As she ran to put on her shoes, she remembered her coffee. It wasn't ready yet.

Chasing down this little girl to tell her to stay hopeful suddenly seemed strange, and maybe even creepy. She wouldn't do it. When the water had finished boiling, she poured it into the French press filled with ground coffee beans. It would have been silly to follow that girl; could Lola have even told her something useful?

A few minutes later, Lola walked back over to the window, breathing in the steam of her coffee. In peering at the street below, it occurred to her that she was very far removed. The sixth floor wasn't an extraordinary height, but what a strange thing to be so far from the sidewalk. Perhaps she would feel grounded if she were actually on the ground. If her feet were connected to the earth of the pavement.

She laced up her boots and wore a heavy trench coat over her kimono. Throwing her phone into her purse, she was off—down the stairs, through the dusty foyer, and out into the bright street. Now that she was out, a part of the scene, who was watching her? Feeling exposed with no desire to recede into spectatorship, Lola began to walk.

Where was she going? She didn't know, and it didn't matter. She was aimless and bored, as often happens to the children of wealthy parents.

Her father had been born into a fantastically Waspy family. He had furthered his riches as an art dealer. Her mother had been a model until she became a high-end fashion designer. Now she attended galas and hosted fundraisers, and criticized her daughters with incision.

Once, Lola hadn't wanted to live off of her family's wealth. She had fallen for the idea of hard work and independence. She had found a couple of retail jobs and an apartment in Chinatown. After work, Lola would come home and try to write instead of party. She wanted to feel satisfied, but she became bored. It was a mundane way to live. Now her parents paid the rent, and she frequented the retailers that had once employed her.

Lola was on Ludlow by a vintage store she liked. She stood out front, studying the dresses in the window display. They weren't anything special.

Unsure of what to do with herself, Lola pulled out a cigarette. Did she want something stronger? It seemed too early for a drink. Pot had been making her anxious recently. And since a bad molly trip at Coachella, Lola was wary of harder substances. Besides, she had tried just about everything in high school, and most drugs had lost their appeal. A cigarette would do.

The wind blew harsh against her face, wiping out the lighter's flame. She tried and failed again. A powerful gust brought the warm smell of fried food and za'atar. It was the Israeli place at the corner. Lola had been once, and she knew that was exactly where she should be right now.

It was cheap and the décor was unmemorable, but the hummus was stunning. The lighting was as harsh as the Israeli accents.

Lola ordered the platter two combo with a side of Israeli salad. She paid and sat down at a booth. The television in the corner blared a Will Ferrell movie, and the two men in the kitchen spoke loudly in Hebrew. East Village Falafel sounded like a lively, happening restaurant. It was empty.

A man emerged from the kitchen with Lola's tray of food. There was falafel, hummus, tahini, pita bread, Israeli salad, tabouli, and chicken shish kebab. Though not in any particular rush, Lola ate quickly. She wiped the hummus up with her pita until the plate shone bright.

"You eat like an Israeli, you know?"

The man behind the counter was speaking to her, and she turned around to face him.

"What do you mean?"

"The way you eat your hummus. You clean the plate with the pita. This is very Israeli."

"I'm honored."

She didn't prompt him, but he continued to talk and she was grateful for it.

"I miss Israel. It is a great country. The food is super. The history is rich. The nightlife is fun. There is good culture. Good shopping, too. Are you Jewish?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not anything, really."

He was baffled.

"I mean, my sister-in-law is Jewish, so we celebrate Shabbat. But that's it. I wasn't raised Jewish."

The man looked unsettled.

"Anyway, no matter, it is a fun place. You will like it. Jabotinsky Street is where I lived. It is special. But you will not find any better Israeli food than at this restaurant, you understand?"

She smiled, he smiled. She appreciated his company.

"Understood. What's your name?"

"Amos."

"Amos. Nice to meet you. I'm Lola. Thanks for the food, it was great. I'll be back."

"Okay, Lola."

Back on Ludlow, Lola successfully lit her cigarette. She pulled out her phone and saw that she had a voicemail from her dad.

"Hey Lola, really last minute but I skipped town...I've got some big meetings that just came up...I'm in LA. I don't have a ticket back, gonna take it as it comes, you know? I'll try and be in touch...Good luck with your mom, you can handle her...see you later."

Lola was alone. Since her fight with her mother, Lola's father had been providing her with emotional support. He had been the only one there for her—Eliza had been absent—and he relieved some of Lola's anxieties. He explained her mother's traumas and insecurities. He

provided Lola with perspective. And he was teaching Lola how she could have a relationship with her mom again, but on her own terms. A healthier relationship. It involved compassion.

Now he had left, and he hadn't invited her along. He hadn't even told her that he was leaving, simply that he was gone. Is this how her mom felt when he had left her? Now she had to figure things out on her own.

Returning to the vintage store that she had passed earlier, Lola stared at the dress in the window. It really wasn't anything special—she needed to do something with herself, and thought that maybe she should go inside, but she couldn't be bothered to try it on. It wouldn't look good, anyway. It would be tight, and she was too full of food, and she had gained too much weight to look good in that style. She could already feel it squeezing at her sides. Bunching up the skin of her armpits. Hugging her hips too tightly. Pressing into her. Restraining her ribs. Shrinking. An empty cab was approaching. She was confined by the tightness of the dress she wasn't wearing. It was choking her and she needed to move away. Lola hailed the cab.

“Hi. Can you please start driving?”

The driver grunted.

“Where you going?”

“I don't know yet, but I really need you to go.”

“I cannot go unless you tell me where.”

“Straight. Please. Anywhere.”

“Ma'am. You must tell me a place.”

It was closing in on her, tighter and tighter. She had nowhere to go. Lola desperately reached into her bag, because phones always hold answers, and pulled out her passport instead. It was there from her vacation in Tulum.

“JFK. I’m going to JFK.”

Now he was really angry.

“Why you no call a car company?”

“This is a car company. It’s TLC. You’re a yellow cab. You have to take me.”

“Why you no call a cab? Call Carmel. 212-666-6666.”

“Sir, you’re legally obligated to drive me. There’s a fixed rate, and I’ll pay it, and I’ll tip you.”

A beat. A string of foreign curses, whispered. And then, “No luggage?”

“No. No luggage.”

He began to drive, and Lola settled back into her seat. She tried to breathe as she scrolled through Facebook. She was okay. She was moving, she was breathing. She was going to JFK. Lola ran through a few Google searches. Did she really want to do this? Maybe he didn’t want her there. What would she even do in L.A.?

The cab zoomed by East Village Falafel. Again, something clicked. Lola ran through a few more Google searches, bought a ticket, and then closed her eyes. As often happens to those who do nothing, she was exhausted, and fell asleep.

*

*

*

“Ma’am? What airline? What terminal? Ma’am?”

Lola opened her eyes and saw that they were getting close. She checked her phone.

“Terminal four. Thanks.”

The driver stopped directly in front of the entrance. A young couple—a man and a woman, probably around Lola’s age—was kissing goodbye. The woman was wearing her IDF uniform. She had covered her suitcases with stickers of the Israeli flag, as a child might have done with Cinderella stickers.

Seeing those small, repeating flags made Lola feel proud. She was doing something. She was creating an invigorating experience for herself. This was a shrill scream to puncture the hum of passivity. She was being assertive. Soon she would be in Israel, a place that would provide her with fun and solace and, perhaps, a transformation.

Lola paid her driver, tipping him generously. By now he was almost friendly.

She moved through the whole airport process rather quickly. She had lived the dream of the Orthodox woman who tries to keep her seven sons in order while her husband checks in their luggage.

Lola had encountered only one problem; she was not affiliated with Israel, had no luggage, and had bought a last minute ticket. She had been thoroughly interrogated about her travel intentions and the absence of her “stuff.” When it had become clear that she was not a terrorist, but rather a young, wealthy, white girl without plans or foresight, the security guards rolled their eyes. She was not a threat. A young woman did a body search, found nothing, and let Lola go.

At one of the many Hudson News Stands, Lola bought a copy of People magazine and a bottle of water. She was walking towards the first class lounge when two children caught her attention. They both wore yarmulkes, and they were fighting with imaginary swords and yelling until one boy broke character.

“Can you be the Arab now? I’m bored. I don’t wanna lose anymore.”

Before the other boy could respond, an older relative stepped in and made them sit down.

Lola sat down, as well. She would eventually go to the first class lounge, but she wanted to see if the boys would resume their game. It was scary to watch young boys entertain themselves with violence. It made her feel helpless. It was a sharp feeling, and she liked it.

It became clear that these boys had no intention of restarting their game when “the Arab” pulled a toy car out of his pocket. Now they were young Jewish boys who played with cars and said “vroom vroom” like it was the rallying call of their generation.

Lola wasn’t ready to leave. She didn’t want to sit in the lounge. The interesting characters were out here, and she wondered about their travel intentions. Maybe the young couple across from her was honeymooning. They had gotten married in upstate New York, at a ranch veiled in snow. It had been romantic, but now they were ready for warmth. The man next to them was on his phone, speaking in Hebrew. He was dressed fashionably. Maybe he was a prominent Israeli start-up guy, pitching a new project to his partner. The woman next to him was taking selfies. She was trying to get a good one for Facebook, hoping her date from last week would see it, remember her, and message her.

Behind this woman, two Orthodox men were facing the window in prayer. A pale, blond man was watching them. He held a travel book on Israel. His features were harsh; he was probably a Scandinavian intrigued by the land of brown hair and imperfect noses.

Lola wouldn’t go to the lounge. She could easily afford her first class ticket, but that didn’t mean she had to be an elitist. She was as normal as any of these other travelers. Lola would sit with them.

Pulling out her magazine, she shifted her attention to the people of People until the gate attendant announced that boarding would begin in just a few minutes.

Across from Gate 86, Gate 87 was bustling. It was full of people and stories and a destination that wasn't her own. Lola knew that was where she should be. She stood up, took her purse, and left.

The travelers of Gate 87 were bound for New Orleans. A crowd of sorority girls was ready to party. They would strut along Bourbon street, stumbling from bar to bar with their drinks in hand, flirting with strangers in the streets, dancing. A family had reunited; all fifteen members were wearing pink t-shirts: "The Rogers Family Reunion 2k15—Games 'n Grillin 'n Good Family Fun."

A young boy sat with his parents, who were each reading their respective newspapers. "Papi, why can't we have a family reunion?" Papi smiled somewhat sardonically. "Why don't you ask Daddy? His family has been trying to organize a reunion, but he doesn't want to go."

The boy turned to Daddy. "Daddy, why don't you want to have a reunion? It'd be fun!"

Daddy glared at Papi. "Really, Mateo? Really?"

Papi snickered.

Lola smiled. She would have liked to have had two fathers; fathers were reliable in a way that mothers could never be. Yes, hers had left for Los Angeles without warning; he was human, and humans make mistakes. Lola had already forgiven him.

The travelers at Gate 87 were beginning to board. Lola was getting hungry. She stood and went to see what bounty JFK had to offer.

Ten minutes later, Lola was holding a sandwich, but she couldn't find a good place to sit. Though there were plenty of tables in the middle of the terminal, she didn't want to be so central. Lola wanted to sit on the peripheries, where she could watch without feeling watched.

Sauntering through the airport, Lola found herself at her original gate: Gate 86. Her flight had already left. There were a few people sitting there, though; these were passengers who had arrived too early for their flight to Berlin.

Lola sat down and unwrapped her food: salmon, avocado, grilled vegetables, and pesto between two slices of thick, seedy bread. It was a great sandwich, and Lola was content. She was somewhere between Delancey and Jabotinsky, in a port of movement, and she was grounded.

Blooming Nail Salon

It's Friday afternoon, and a blizzard is imminent. It will be the first big storm of the year. Blooming Nail Salon is filling up.

"How are you doing, Neelu?"

"Good. How are you?"

"I'm alright. Busy. My friend is meeting me here, so can we get pedicures next to each other?"

"Yes. Pick a color."

Neelu gets to work on her client's flaky, crusty feet. Aditi works next to her on a supple pair. The clients chat.

"Have you seen *Trainwreck*?"

"No, not yet. Have you?"

"Yeah. It was so disappointing. I was expecting a powerful feminist movie, but it was a classic rom-com."

"Wayward girl needs a man to complete her?"

"Exactly."

"I thought Amy Schumer was supposed to be subversive."

"She is. And the fact that it's her movie almost makes it worse; it's as if she consciously chose to perpetuate misogyny."

"That's too bad. It seemed like it had a lot of potential."

"I thought so too."

Once the old polish is removed and the toenails clipped and filed, Aditi and Neelu place their clients' feet in the water for a soak. It is warm, scented with opulent chemicals.

“Has Alanna seen the film?”

“Yeah. She hated it. When she came over for brunch last week, she asked why women who enjoy sex and partying have to be reformed.”

“It’s a good question.”

“Yeah, but unsettling to hear from my own daughter.”

“It doesn’t mean she’s reckless or unsafe. Oh, Neelu, I forgot to ask, can I add on a ten-minute foot massage?”

Neelu nods. “Okay.”

“How’s your daughter doing?”

“Good. We going to Nepal soon.”

“Oh, that’s fun. You’re going for vacation?”

Neelu looks to Aditi, and Aditi explains, “She’s going to drop her daughter off with her sister-in-law.”

“For how long?”

Neelu shrugs. “Few years.”

Aditi adds, “Until she’s ready to go to elementary school.”

Both clients gasp.

“But why?”

“Her sister-in-law isn’t doing nothing.”

The outdated Jason Mraz song suddenly seems loud.

“I can’t imagine leaving my baby in a different country.”

Aditi chuckles softly.

“Are you upset?”

Neelu looks to Aditi, confused. Aditi translates the question into Nepali. Neelu shakes her head in response.

“No.”

The clients look at each other, uneasy. Then, trying to bridge the silence, the client asks Neelu, “So, have you seen *Trainwreck*?”

“No.”

“What about *Inside Out*?”

“No.”

“You should see it this weekend. It’s fantastic.”

“Okay. Thank you. Is water too hot?”

* * *

Blooming Nail Salon is across the street from Grand Central, which is optimal real estate. There is a constant stream of customers. On weekdays, time is of the essence; these women have places to be. Unwinding is a stressful affair. Primping happens on a tight schedule.

Friday afternoons are different. The tension eases. Unfaltering faces begin to soften. Cell phones remain in purses and pockets. Blooming Nail Salon becomes something of a social scene.

Four women are getting manicures side-by-side. They had come in separately, but are conversing as though they became acquainted at a colleague’s dinner party. This would have been an uncommon occurrence on any day except Friday.

“I think it’s a big step forward for all transgender people. I mean, when I was growing up, Bruce Jenner was a symbol of masculinity. So to have him come out and say that he’s really a woman—that’s incredible.

“The Vanity Fair cover is so progressive.”

“I disagree. The cover doesn’t really change anything for trans people. It doesn’t protect them from losing their jobs.”

The client looks down at her nails. “Oh, could you do rounded squares?”

Aditi goes to get a hot towel. Her client begins to speak with her hands.

“Being a woman is about so much more than just having long hair, wearing makeup and dresses, and getting your nails done.”

“Men think that they can easily become women by doing stereotypically female things. It’s so trivializing.”

Neelu stifles a yawn as she goes to retrieve warm lotion, wondering when the storm will hit. Wondering whether she and Aditi will be able to get home.

“I doubt that Bruce Jenner ever thought he could ‘easily’ become a woman.”

“But don’t you think he’s reinforcing an outdated notion of what it means to be a woman?”

“Not necessarily. What if Miley Cyrus grew her hair out long, wore a frilly dress, lots of makeup, and nail polish? Would you say that she was promoting an outdated image of what it means to be a woman? I don’t see why Caitlyn shouldn’t be able to express herself however she wants.”

Aditi begins to massage her client’s hands, so the client speaks with her chin.

“Because it’s a man defining what it means to be a woman.”

“So actually your issue is that Caitlyn Jenner isn’t a real woman.”

Conversations at Blooming Nail Salon are rarely so confrontational. The clients rise to the occasion, drowning out the discomfort with fervent chitchat.

Without moving her eyes from the top coat she is applying, Neelu whispers to Aditi in Nepali, “Who are they talking about?”

“The transgender person on the cover of Vanity Fair.”

“She’s transgender?”

“Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t have known.”

“She’s a big deal.”

“Do you understand what they’re talking about?”

“Mostly. Don’t you?”

“Only a little bit.”

“You should start taking English lessons again. You need to learn.”

“I want to, but I don’t have the money right now. I spent so much on the emergency tent for my family.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re so lucky your parents got you lessons when you were young. I think I’m too old to learn.”

“Maybe I can teach you some stuff on the bus home.”

Across the room, the boss hisses to catch their attention. Then, he shushes them.

Neelu is finished. She gathers her client’s belongings, and walks her over to the drying table.

“How’s your daughter doing?”

“Good. See pictures?”

The client smiles and nods. Neelu pulls her phone out and places it on the drying table.

“She’s so precious! How old is she?”

“Two.”

“Amazing. Enjoy it. They grow up so fast.”

“Thank you.”

Aditi, who has been listening, gives Neelu a knowing look. Neelu rolls her eyes.

* * *

Neelu sits on the toilet and continues to scroll through the photos on her phone. There are photos of Jhumpa in her father’s lap. Photos of Jhumpa hugging the doll that her grandma had made and sent from Nepal. Photos of Jhumpa in the sands of Coney Island that summer. Photos of Jhumpa in the bath with Aditi’s nephew, Bidur. Jhumpa’s ripe cheeks, her eyes when she giggles, her squeal when she finds a dead cockroach. Her howl when she is sick. The warmth in Jhumpa’s palm, small and sticky, when she presses it to Neelu’s cheek.

What would Jhumpa look like here, on the floor of the bathroom? What noises would she make, what smells would she emit? When would her eyes light up?

What would the apartment feel like without her? What sounds would be missing? What smells?

There is a gentle knock on the bathroom door.

“Neelu, hurry up. Hoon is getting annoyed.”

* * *

The break room at Blooming Nail Salon is simple and unadorned, but a nice amenity. Neelu and Aditi bring packed lunches and eat there daily with their coworkers. The social divide runs along national lines. The Nepali women sit at the table by the bathroom, while the Korean women sit near the window. There is never any crossover.

All of the women at the Nepal table know that the Korean employees are better paid. Thanks to the New York Times salon exposé, many clients have guessed it, too. In whispers, when Hoon would disappear into the bathroom or break room, regulars would ask, “I saw the New York Times article. Do they treat you well here?”

The ladies would nod for fear of a Korean coworker overhearing. Then, in an even quieter whisper, the clients would ask, “Is your boss Korean?”

The ladies would nod again, and the clients would understand. Tips grew larger.

Neelu knows the clients don’t really care about her wellbeing; they simply don’t want the burden of guilt. That doesn’t bother her. It bothers Aditi.

Today they sit alone in the break room and count the tips they have accumulated so far on this lively Friday. The radio hums; they are waiting for the weather forecast.

“Sanyah got a job in Astoria. She says that they treat her well. Everyone is paid the same wage.”

“What’s the wage?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“I’m sure there’s a catch.”

“It doesn’t seem like it. She really likes it there.”

“There’s always a catch.”

Ji-Sun enters the room. She leans against the wall, pops her hip, and tilts her chin.

“Your break is over.”

Aditi feels Neelu tense up, so she takes the reigns and reverts to English. “We need to hear the weather report to know if the MTA will shut down.”

“You need to get back to work.”

“They’ll report it in two minutes, can we wait?”

“You can wait, but I’ll have to tell Hoon.”

Later, Aditi and Neelu will talk about how Ji-Sun is a caricature of herself. They will roll their eyes. They will laugh, but they will know their laughter is empty.

They stand, tuck in their chairs, and exit the break room. They switch back to Nepali.

“When is your flight?”

“Not until Tuesday.”

“Oh, so the snow should be fine by then.”

“Yeah, but I want to have as much time with Jhumpa as I can before she goes.”

“You know she doesn’t have to go.”

Neelu becomes stern.

“Of course she does.”

*

*

*

Neelu is making a mental list of all of Jhumpa’s belongings that she must pack. It’s a long flight; she’ll need to have some toys and food in her carry-on.

“I started running.”

“Good for you. How’s it going?”

“I hate it. It feels like God is scraping out my lungs with a cold metal spoon.”

“Yikes.”

When will the storm hit? If only Neelu could check her phone. She should take more photos of Jhumpa tonight. Maybe a few of them together—she doesn’t have any. Maybe they’ll both wear their matching “I Heart New York” shirts. Maybe in the early morning they’ll take photos together in the snow.

“But it’s my New Year’s Resolution. I wanted an excuse to buy cute workout clothes.”

“Mine is to quit smoking.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah, but I’m already gaining weight. And I’m miserable. I think I have to give up on giving up.”

“Don’t.”

“No one will hire me if I gain any more weight. I need to keep smoking for the sake of my career.”

“Well, the good news is that when you get lung cancer, you’ll lose a ton of weight.”

This will be Jhumpa’s first blizzard. Neelu can see her expression as she touches snow for the first time. She can hear Jhumpa’s squeal and she can feel the quiet thump of her fall. She can see her very first snow angel.

“That’s fucked up.”

“And kind of funny.”

“No, not at all.”

Neelu has been coloring outside the lines, and she hasn't noticed until now. Her hands won't stop quivering. Luckily, the client hasn't noticed either.

She cleans up the excess polish around her client's nails. She paints the topcoat on, brings her to the drying table, and heads to the bathroom. Has her boss turned up the heat? She's sweating profusely as the storm begins. She washes her face and then scrolls through the photos on her phone.

* * *

The snow is accumulating quickly. The stream of customers has dried up. As the last remaining client leaves, the ladies of Blooming Nails all turn to look at Hoon. He turns to look at the clock behind him. There are still four hours left until closing.

He points at his employees and spits out instructions. Clean the foot baths. Unload the dryer and fold the hand towels. Mop and sweep. The nail polish display must be organized. The nail clippers, cuticle scissors, nail buffers, and emery boards all must be cleaned. Someone must refill the dispensers with nail polish remover, and someone must restock the drawers with disposable tools. Wipe down the nail drying station. Then empty today's dirty towels into the laundry machine and start the load. Restock the bathrooms with toilet paper, soap, lotion, and hand towels. And someone must man the reception desk in case any clients come in.

Everyone disembarks to begin her own respective task. As soon as Blooming Nail Salon is clean, the ladies can go home, hopefully before the MTA shuts down.

Aditi's job is to restock the bathroom. It's the quickest job, one that usually goes to a Korean employee. As soon as she's done, she helps Neelu with cleaning the foot baths. Someone has turned the music up, so the two find themselves with some privacy. They revert to Nepali.

"As soon as we get out of here, you can finally pack Jhumpa's bag."

Neelu turns to Aditi, bewildered. "What do you mean 'finally?'"

"You've been so excited."

"That's not true. It's just a thing on my to-do list."

"You've talked about it every day since Monday."

"That doesn't mean I'm excited."

Aditi stares at Neelu, trying to have a moment. "You know you don't have to do this."

Neelu keeps scrubbing. "Of course I do."

"She's your daughter."

"Exactly."

"But why?"

"You know the reasons."

The sponge squeaks against the side of the foot bath. The smell of chemicals is potent, overwhelming to the unaccustomed. Aditi and Neelu hardly notice.

"Your reasons are silly."

"You know they're not my reasons."

"She was born here. Sending her back home won't make her less American."

"But that way she'll be raised like me."

The next footbath is caked with residue from a Spa Pedicure. The radio is blaring.

"What do you prefer? That she's raised like you or by you?"

“Why are we having this conversation? Either way, you know I don’t have the money.”

“We’ll find a salon that pays us better.”

Neelu shakes her head. She seems composed, but her face is growing red. What would Jhumpa look like here, in her seat at the base of the foot bath? In the client’s seat?

What would Jhumpa look like in four years?

“Don’t be upset with me. I’m trying to help you.”

“Then don’t try to convince me to do things I can’t do.”

“You *can* do this—you can keep her here.”

“You’re naïve.”

“So?”

Someone changes the radio station.

“Governor Andrew Cuomo has just announced a road travel ban, which will take effect beginning at 2pm local time, with trains due to stop running at 5pm on Metro North and Long Island Rail Road lines. Only authorized emergency vehicles will be permitted on closed roads.

“He said earlier that plows were no longer able to keep up with the rate of snowfall, and has warned that trains were being left stranded by ice over rails.

“This blizzard is expected to be ‘one of the worst in the City’s history,’ with official estimates expecting up to thirty inches of snow to fall in parts of New York, which has already seen significant downfalls in the extreme weather battering the east coast of the US.”

Blooming Nail Salon explodes. Every employee lives at least two trains and a long bus ride away. They’re scrubbing and sweeping and disinfecting and wiping and restocking faster than they knew was possible.

Neelu is frozen. How long will it take her to get home? How many more hours will she spend away from her daughter? If the storm is set to last all weekend, how will she get to work so she can make extra money to buy Jhumpa her going away gifts?

Aditi puts her hand on Neelu's shoulder.

"You can raise her here."

Neelu pushes her away. She shoves through the mess of employees. How could she expect Aditi to understand the responsibility of motherhood? To understand the burden of nationality? Aditi, who speaks English fluently and studies at an American institution, whose nephew will never learn his family's native tongue. Aditi, who believes in the American dream and gets to live it.

But Neelu knows that is not her own destiny, and it is not Jhumpa's. As she takes her purse from the break room and dons her green winter coat, Neelu reminds herself that she is wiser than Aditi. And she will raise Jhumpa to be wiser than the both of them.

"Are you ready?"

Aditi stands at the doorway, her puffy coat obscuring her face. Neelu nods. They head out into the storm and begin their long journey home.

Honor in Hunger

The Lopez's didn't used to eat as a family. Every person would tend to oneself, or fend for oneself. It wasn't a decision, that was just the way things unfolded.

The dinner routine changed because of Sofia. She had seen a commercial while watching Project Runway. She learned that regular family dinners are linked with lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, depression, and higher grade-point averages and self-esteem.

The facts were important and the imagery effective. A child lets himself into an empty home, microwaves a pizza, and eats it alone at the table. He follows this routine daily. Soon, drugs replace food. Then he's not at the table.

It was a familiar scene—Sofia, too, would let herself in to her empty home, warm her food up in the microwave, and eat at the table in front of her laptop—but she hadn't known that it was a dismal one.

When she asked her parents if they could have family dinners, they were supportive but hesitant. It was a great idea but wouldn't work for these reasons. She showed them the commercial. They looked at each other and nodded—they would try to make it work.

They didn't tell Sofia what they had done to make it work. And she was too young to notice that money became tight. Soon after the conversation, the Lopez's were having weekly dinners every Friday night. Sometimes it was Chinese food and sometimes it was chicken nuggets. Sofia was happy. Her parents were, too.

Within a month, they were dining together three to four nights a week. This was big news. Sofia was pleased that her idea had been successful. She enjoyed having time with her parents.

That was eight years ago. Now, Sofia sits at the table with her family, and she can't make herself eat. Since the school day ended, she has spent two hours doing online research on micronutrients, GMOs, and gluten. She has decided that she cannot eat gluten and will only consume organic produce. She has also spent an hour and a half on the treadmill, during which she burned 1050 calories. Her homework remains untouched.

Sofia's bowl is filled with peas, corn, and spinach. She's taken two bites, and her parents are nearly done with their meals.

"Do we have anything else?"

"Sorry, this is it. I haven't had a chance to go shopping this week."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no, it's good. It just feels like a lot of carbs. And I'm trying to stay away from gluten, so I can't eat the pasta."

"But what about the vegetables? Peas, corn, spinach...those are all healthy."

"Yeah, but the peas and corn are so starchy. Corn barely has nutritional value, and most of it is genetically modified. Peas have some value, but not much. Spinach is healthy, but it needs to be consumed with citrus in order to absorb the iron. And there's no protein here."

Her mother puts her fork down. "I'm sorry you're unsatisfied. I'll buy more groceries tomorrow."

"I don't feel good when I eat so many starches. I get a stomach ache."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's not good for me."

"I didn't know that."

"Me neither."

“I’ve been noticing over the past several months that my body does best when I eat lighter foods—like salads. Steamed vegetables are fine, but I really should only eat them paired with grains; otherwise, I get a stomach ache.”

“And when did you stop eating gluten?”

“About two weeks ago.”

Sofia knows her parents won’t question a habit that has already been established.

“I noticed that you weren’t eating the pasta, but I didn’t think anything of it.”

“You should tell us. That way we can prepare food that you’ll eat.”

“Sorry.”

“So now you’re vegan. And you’re gluten-free.”

“Yeah.”

“Anything else?”

“No. That’s it.”

“And why are you doing this to yourself?”

“It’s not something I’m doing to myself. It’s what I have to do in order for my body to function and feel good.”

“But you’re not lactose intolerant, or gluten intolerant.”

“I haven’t been tested, so we don’t know that. And even if I’m not intolerant, I know that they’re toxic to my body, so they don’t make me feel good.”

“That never bothered you before.”

“I never knew it.”

“How did you learn it?”

“I watched *Food, Inc.* It’s crazy. Animals are raised in awful conditions. They’re pumped full of steroids and overfed so that they get fat and meaty, they live on top of each other, they’re fed the nastiest, genetically modified food, I mean the list goes on. But basically, you can’t trust any of the labels on a package of chicken, or on a carton of eggs, or on a block of cheese. ‘Natural’ doesn’t mean anything. So who knows what I’m really putting in my body when I eat a dairy product.”

A beat.

“Are you asking us to stop eating meat, dairy, and gluten, too?”

“No. I’m not asking you guys to do anything. I’m answering your questions.”

“This sounds like an expensive lifestyle you’re leading.”

“It doesn’t have to be. It could actually be cheaper. I eat rice, quinoa, beans, tofu, tempeh, nuts, some fruit, and vegetables. I drink soy milk, almond milk, coconut water, and green juice. The only expensive thing is the green juice, and I pay for that myself.”

“Well what about gluten-free bread, or pasta, or cookies? Don’t you want any of those things?”

“No, because they’re too processed. That stuff makes me feel sick, too.”

“Okay. I’ll buy you some stuff tomorrow. In the meantime, you need to eat something.”

Sofia pushes the food around in her bowl. If this hadn’t been a family dinner, she could have thrown the food away, or put it back in the fridge for someone else. She would have eaten a box of seaweed snacks for dinner. She would have taken small bites and chewed each one seventy-five times. It would have taken her an hour.

Family dinners are preventing her from reaching her ideal weight. Family dinners are her fault. She has doomed herself. How can she ever be the healthiest, thinnest version of herself if

her parents always monitor what she eats? If they force her to eat impure foods with no nutritional value?

As she brings her bowl to the kitchen, she hears her mother whisper to her father, “I didn’t know she had such a sensitive stomach.”

Her father shrugs. Sofia throws her food away.

* * *

A week later, Sofia prepares her plate: string beans and spinach salad. She has eaten an apple for breakfast and twenty almonds for lunch. Her body feels clean.

“The string beans are really good.”

“Great, I’m glad. I tried out this new recipe I found in the paper.”

“How did you cook them?”

“I coated them in honey, and then sautéed them in olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and tossed in some pine nuts towards the end.”

Sofia feels the purity drain from her body.

“Dad, don’t you know that you’re not supposed to cook olive oil at a high heat?”

“Why?”

“Because olive oil has a low smoke point, and when it’s reached the oil breaks down and the antioxidants become free radicals, all the health benefits are lost, and the smoke is toxic. It’s been linked to cancer.”

“Oh, God, I didn’t know that. Shit.”

“You sautéed it, right sweetie? So it probably didn’t reach its smoke point.”

Sofia tries to swallow the string bean already in her mouth. She breathes in too much air and begins to cough uncontrollably. She feels her face turn bright red.

“Here, drink some water, honey.”

And what about the honey? Sofia is sure that her mother hadn’t bought a raw, organic honey. Her body can feel the processed gunk in her throat, in her stomach, stripped of its nutrients. High in fructose, it will spike her blood sugar, causing her to gain weight. She hates these string beans for bringing her body back to a state of contamination. Sofia has been working so hard to detoxify.

She finishes the glass of water and the coughing subsides.

“I’m going to wash my face.”

“Sure thing.”

In the bathroom, Sofia grips the edge of the sink and stares into the mirror. Her face is flushed and fleshy. It hurts to look at it, so she closes her eyes.

If only she wasn’t terrified of vomit. If only she had the willpower to starve herself. But no—that’s not a healthy or sustainable way to live. She must stay strong. If she drinks enough water, she can flush the string beans out of her system before they have a chance to do too much damage. In the future, she will be more careful.

Sofia rejoins her family at the table.

*

*

*

After dinner, Sofia lies on her bed staring at the ceiling. She is thinking about the string beans. Searching for salvation, she checks Google to find their nutritional benefits. They are high

in lutein, beta-carotene, vitamin C, and manganese. Still, Sofia feels dirty. She wants so badly to be wholesome.

She plans her meals for the next day. She must balance out the intake of the string beans and the carb-load of vegetables. Sofia will start the day with an hour-long jog on the treadmill. Then, she will eat an apple for breakfast, followed by three cups of green tea (she has already given up coffee because it's a toxic drug). For lunch, she will eat a small spinach salad with tomatoes and cucumbers, dressed with balsamic vinegar and olive oil. If she wants a snack, she can drink two cups of hot lemon water. If she is still hungry, she can drink half of a green juice. Before dinner, she will run at least another half hour on the treadmill. She must earn her food.

*

*

*

Two weeks have passed. The string beans are a distant memory, much like the veggie burger that had come the day before. Sofia sits on the toilet, writing in her food journal. She doesn't track calories eaten, because not all calories are created equal. She knows better. Instead, she simply catalogues the food she eats each day, including portion sizes. Then she logs exercise in a column on the right side of the journal, including calories burned, because that's a motivational practice.

At the end of each day, Sofia looks over her intake and output, and checks in with herself. How does she feel? Where did she slip? How can she atone for her failures tomorrow? What were her excessive consumptions? How can she improve?

As she glances over her day, Sofia notes the date. March 5th. She puts down her journal and wipes. This is the second period that she has missed in a row.

She has read online that often, an increase in physical activity leads to irregularities in the menstrual cycle. Since Sofia has improved her exercise habits, her period has been less consistent. This is not a terrible price to pay for fitness.

Sitting down at her desk, Sofia contemplates her homework. She can't concentrate. Her mind is everywhere. A thirty-minute run on the treadmill should help. She needs the endorphins and serotonin.

* * *

Sofia emerges from the shower after her run. She wipes the steam from her mirror. Her thighs are slimmer, her belly flatter, and she's proud. It's a testament to her health. She can see the glow she's gained from her diet of purity. The vitamins, minerals, and nutrients are shining bright.

How will she maintain this level of cleanliness? What more does she need to change in order to achieve a higher state of wellbeing? At second glance, her thighs are looking large. Since when has she had cellulite? Are those stretch marks from weight loss? The underside of her arms are flabbier than she initially thought. When did she get acne on her back? Isn't her skin supposed to mirror the quality of her diet?

Sofia throws a bathrobe on and runs to the kitchen, her mind pulsing. She is disgusting. She is a pig. She has no self-restraint. What's the point of it all? Nothing is working. She will never be healthy enough, never be thin enough, never be enough.

No one is home. She opens the snack drawer and finds a collection of nuts, seaweed, and vegan chocolate. She stuffs as many cashews into her mouth as will fit. She tastes nothing. She

folds a pile of seaweed in half and chews before she's swallowed the cashews. She eats half of the chocolate bar. Then the other half. Then another handful of cashews. Then another pile of seaweed. She chews. She doesn't stop.

Then she does. As if awakening from a coma, she looks at the wrappers in front of her. It takes a moment to register what has happened.

Sofia slides down to the floor and holds her head in her hands. She has failed herself. At the center of her being, she is a failure. A weak, unworthy failure. Dirty and pathetic. Shameful and repulsive. Fat.

She wants to strategize but she doesn't know where to begin. Her stomach is swelling with inflammation and her hips are growing wide. Every inch of her body is expanding while she fails to come up with a plan.

And then, she is in control. Sofia will get dressed, run another half hour on the treadmill, and fast for the rest of the day. She will drink endless cups of detoxifying lemon ginger tea. The following day, she will continue to fast. She must detox. If she gets hungry, she will not break down. There is honor in hunger.

Then, the day after tomorrow, she will begin a ten-day juice cleanse. That way, she will purge her body of toxins, give her digestive system a rest, lose the weight that she's gained from this episode, and expunge any residual desire for junk. Most juice cleansing programs will call for seven juices a day, but that's excessive. Sofia knows her body and doesn't need to follow a program. She can monitor herself. Exercise will be prioritized; she must spend at least two hours daily on the treadmill. She will sit with her family for dinner, and she will drink her juice. She is purer than them. Her self-restraint is admirable. She is in control.

Lost Women, Recently Found

My psychiatrist tells me too much.

“I see myself in you,” she said.

I had a feeling. She has a way of looking at me—slow and nostalgic. After I finish my thought, Dr. Krazinski will nod. Her eyes will squint, gently, her head will cock to her left, and she’ll wait. It seems endearing; she’s processing, deeply and carefully. Then it becomes triggering; she’s prodding me. I need to dig deeper, to tell her more. I have nothing more to say. It’s frustrating.

Now that I know she sees herself in me, I wonder if her looks signify something deeper. A longing, maybe, for my youth, which reminds her of her own.

“How so?”

I’m not sure why I indulge her.

“Well, there are factual similarities—we both studied creative writing, we both love literature, we were both raised by single mothers, we both had stomach problems when we were young...but there are more similarities. Deeper ones. How hard you are on yourself, your perfectionism, your frustration and obsession with your health, that it almost feels like a survival mechanism...these are struggles we share.”

Is she allowed to say this to me? Is she breaking some sort of rule?

She usually spends the last ten minutes of our session talking about herself. She goes overtime until she sees the clock. Finally, the session ends.

This feels different. By comparing herself to me, Dr. Krazinski has told me that she, too, is in the patient’s seat. I don’t like it. I need her to be distant and stable. I don’t care if we’re similar.

“Huh...yeah, I guess.”

* * *

I hadn't wanted to see a psychiatrist and I had refused to take anti-depressants. I had a philosophy: if I was having a problem, I should have been able to fix it myself. I also had a fear of medicating, my therapist said, because of my previous experience with epilepsy medication. It had disrupted the development of my motor skills. I wasn't going to outsource my wellbeing.

Apparently, that very conviction was one of my problems. I needed to learn to relinquish my obsession with control. It was okay to get help. I thought medicating meant I was giving up. My therapist offered a different perspective.

“It's not giving up. It's actually very assertive. It's a new approach to confronting your problems and dealing with them.”

I trusted my therapist. She wrote down Dr. Krazinski's phone number on a scrap of paper and gave it to me.

“Think about it. Making an appointment with her doesn't necessary entail medicating. She's fully supportive of alternative medicine, and she has a holistic approach.”

I took the paper, thanked her, and left. I made my way towards the subway, pushing my way through the dense August heat.

Why did I have to seek more help? My therapist was very good. We were making progress. I did yoga, and had just completed my teacher-training program. I was working at my favorite restaurant. I was doing things I loved and I was depressed.

Why was I, of all people, fortunate enough to be able to take depression seriously? I resented myself for that, and I felt like a solipsistic asshole. I didn't want to employ a team of professionals to hoist me out of this cavern. I also wasn't sure I had the strength to climb out myself.

* * *

My first impression of her was that she was quite round; rotund, even. Her glasses subsumed her face. She had a nasally way of speaking, and sounded as though she were talking through a persistent wheeze. Her hand was oily and wrinkled.

"You shouldn't be crying every night," Dr. Krazinski said. I promptly began to cry, and I hated it. My tears were a part of a business exchange, and Dr. Krazinski was concerned with diagnosing me. To sob helplessly while a psychiatrist watches you, cocking her head and taking notes, is pathetic. I cried harder.

She seemed cold. By the second hour of our session, she began to talk about herself.

"I, too, have dealt with a lot of health issues. I was...very sick...as a young woman. I was in bed, I couldn't do much of anything...that was when I found meditation. To breathe...to breathe was to bring life back into my body. When I first started, I couldn't sit...so I did meditation while lying down. Meditation healed me. I fully believe that."

I was moved that she had shared this with me; it was intimate. She understood what I was dealing with. I nodded and told her about my experience with yoga. When my stomach problems rendered me weak, I couldn't get on my mat.

“You always have the breath, though. You don’t need to move to find peace of mind, and you don’t need to move to find your life force.”

I told her I would try to cultivate a more regular meditation practice. She nodded, cocked her head to the side, prodding. Her eyes pushed me to tell her more, but I had nothing more to say.

* * *

Two days later, I was back in her office to get my prescription for anti-depressants. She listed the potential side effects: “nausea, constipation, insomnia, dizziness, drowsiness. Sometimes people experience dry mouth and dry eyes. Vivid dreaming is another potential side effect. You might not experience any of these, though. If you notice that you begin to have any suicidal thoughts, you need to let me know immediately.”

“Will it have any effect on my creativity?”

Dr. Krazinski shook her head. “You’ll still be yourself, with your whole range of emotions and thoughts. The medication shouldn’t blunt you—you should still feel sad sometimes.”

I told her that that had been a big concern of mine, and that it was a relief to hear that I would still be me. Not because I loved myself, simply because that’s who I was used to being.

“That’s a legitimate concern. I actually have a bachelor’s degree in creative writing too, so I can relate to that.”

She told me about a story that she was working on. She was concerned that it wasn’t emotional enough. I told her that it sounded interesting, and she should just keep going.

“I think you’re right...it’s important to keep moving forward. I think that’s true of a lot of things. But it can be hard to let go of the past like that and to push onward. This is actually my last day in this office. You’re my last appointment here...I’ve been in this space for ten years.”

“That must be really tough.”

“Yes...it really is. I’m going to bring a lot of this furniture with me. I think it will make the transition easier.”

Dr. Krazinski proceeded to give me an abbreviated history of every item of furniture in the room: the couch that was once in her grandmother’s house; the coffee table that she had found at a yard sale in Rhinebeck, New York; the desk on which she had studied for her medical exams; the painting that a friend gave her as a wedding gift (second marriage). Why was this happening? I didn’t care about where she got her desk chair. But I could see where she was coming from—ten years is a long time, and Dr. Krazinski needed to vent. I could listen.

* * *

Two days later, I decided to ask my therapist about Dr. Krazinski. I couldn’t stop thinking about our appointment. I wanted a professional opinion.

“I recommended Dr. Krazinski because she’s very qualified. She knows her stuff. It sounds like she really cares about you. I mean, it’s amazing that she told you that she was sick as a child. I didn’t even know that.”

“Yeah. It just feels like she’s being a little too personal.”

“Yeah, maybe she was. The thing is, psychiatrists are...quirky. All of them are. So I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

I was reassured. Dr. Krazinski was here to help. I needed to trust her.

* * *

Our next session was three weeks later. We had found my dosage. It was low—37.5 mg, which is, apparently, “nothing” —and I felt great. It was a relief.

She asked me what was going on in my life, and I told her that I had begun seeing someone.

“That’s an exciting time. The beginning of a relationship...everything seems hopeful. Bright. You feel good.”

I sensed something darker imminent.

“Hold onto that feeling. If you lose it, let him go. Is it a man?”

I nodded.

“Yeah. Men are tough. They’re complex creatures. What’s your boyfriend’s father like?”

“I haven’t met him yet. It’s still very casual.”

She nodded. “Does it seem like they have a good relationship?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“That’s important. My first husband had a terrible relationship with his dad. He fought so hard to be different from him. But there was always the memory of his dad, looming. He couldn’t escape, so he drank. And once he started drinking, he became his dad. I couldn’t handle it.”

Outside, a fire truck went by. A child passing by the window was crying. It was silent in the office, and I knew I had to say something. Dr. Krazinski was lost in thought.

“I’m so sorry...that sounds awful.”

“I’m telling you this for a reason, you know.”

I nodded. I had hoped she was.

“It’s hard to assess the mental health of someone you love. Be careful. You should meet his dad, as soon as possible. Learn about their relationship. That way, you’ll know what you’re getting yourself into before you’re in too deep.”

Lifting her gaze, she must have seen the clock behind me. “Let me know if anything comes up. If you experience any new side effects, I want to know. Otherwise, I’ll see you in three months.”

*

*

*

Three months later, I was out of town. I called her office four times, and I left two voicemails. It wasn’t unsettling that I never heard back because I didn’t want to see her. I was dreading it. I didn’t like that she had told me about her ex-husband, even if she meant well. It made me think about my own dad. My mother left him while pregnant with me. I don’t know him.

Had she meant to trigger me? She was a professional who had gone through years of training. Maybe this was a tactic. She was planting a seed, guiding my subconscious along a certain path. It had to have been part of a strategy.

I didn’t want to make an appointment. When I saw that I had only two day’s worth of pills left, and no refills, I decided to text her. I told her I had left a couple of voicemails at her

office but that I hadn't heard back. That I was out of town for the rest of the month, and I was running low on medication. I suggested we set up a phone appointment.

She responded, frazzled. "I don't have my receptionist anymore. What do you need? Are you in the city?"

It was clear that she hadn't read my message carefully, but I explained myself again.

"She may be psychomotor retarded from depression. Can she come in on Thursday?"

I told her that I thought she had the wrong number. She apologized, and we proceeded to schedule an appointment.

I hoped the girl suffering from psychomotor retardation was doing alright.

* * *

When we spoke on the phone, Dr. Krazinski seemed present. Her responses indicated that she was listening. Although we weren't sitting face to face, I could sense her nodding, cocking her head, prodding.

We were twenty minutes in, I was paying for a thirty-minute appointment, but I had nothing left to say. I was doing well.

"Let me know if you need anything. You can always text me. Text or email is best."

"Okay, great. Thanks so much, I appreciate it. I hope you have a good week, and..."

"Yes, I hope this week is better than the last few have been. My poor cat...he's been suffering. He's been dealing with the worst thing that a cat could go through—he basically had a stroke. I've spent the last couple of weeks nursing him; he really can't do anything for himself.

I've been so worried about him. I've been meditating with him, and that's been working wonders. It's amazing what breathing can do."

I hate cats. They're vain and entitled and they don't know how to love. They will eat your dead body after just two days.

I didn't see why I should care about the health of my doctor's cat. "I hope you have a good week" is a common social cue. It means, "let's wrap this up," and everyone knows that.

But if this wasn't important to her, she wouldn't be sharing it with me. It must have really been weighing on her. By listening, I could support her.

"I'm so sorry to hear that. I'm glad to hear that he's doing better."

"Thank you."

"Well, thanks again, and I..."

"Oh, you know, I didn't get a chance to see your mom's new movie. I really wanted to...I've heard great things."

She hit a soft spot. I love my mom. I always have patience to talk about her and anything she does. I told her it should be out on DVD soon.

"You know, I've been checking Netflix but it's still not on there."

I told her that I didn't know when it would be available. She pressed me to ask my mother. I agreed, knowing I wouldn't follow through.

"Thanks. You know, my brother is an Academy member, and he really loved the film."

"That's great."

"Alright, then. Be well."

*

*

*

My psychiatrist tells me too much. She's overbearing. She feels too comfortable with me, and I don't like that she sees herself in me. She's expensive. She takes advantage of me.

She is extremely knowledgeable, and therefore she is, technically, a good psychiatrist. That doesn't feel like enough, not anymore. I hate our sessions. I want to see a new psychiatrist, but I can't. It would devastate her—she told me so.

I drive people away when they need me most. She's the one who articulated that to me. I can't drive her away—I need to be different.