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English 499D

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Ruta Sepetys and the Awareness of Others

I think that whoever came up with the idiom “two sides to every story” must have never heard the rumors that floated around a high school cafeteria. Either that, or they must have been a pathological liar that would have given the boy who cried wolf a run for his money. Whatever the case may be, that person certainly didn’t account to the strange and wild imaginations of individuals in the twenty first century.

Whether it be in the sensationalized celebrity gossip articles to workplace rumors, for better or for worse, there is often one narrative that overpowers the other. Like most people, I am both intrigued and annoyed whenever I hear rumors, but a rumor that particularly sticks out to me is one I heard during my junior year of high school. While Hollywood script writers and producers might be shocked to discover that a large majority of people don’t have the high school experience that is often depicted in movies and T.V. shows, I think one thing they got right was how absurd rumors in high school really could be.

It was during my junior year of high school, a time when I, like everyone else, was both simultaneously immune and vulnerable to the malicious and strange whispers that plagued the halls every day. Except, this time was different. I remember semi paying attention to my morning classes before heading to have lunch in the cafeteria, a sense of dread building up in my stomach. Within seconds, a friend rushed up to me, face flushed with a glee that comes from knowing something that someone else doesn’t.

“Did you hear?” When I returned her amused expression with my confused one, she leaned in conspiracy, “There’s a rumor going around that one of guys on the basketball team likes to eat moldy bread.”

If the scene was being written by Hollywood writers, I’m sure they would have inserted some dramatic music and directed the camera to dramatically zoom in on my face before panning the camera around the cafeteria, as other students listened with rapt attention as the rumor spread. However, in true high school fashion, people cared for a second and then they were on to the next rumor. Like the rest of the school, I moved on and eventually forgot about the strange rumor within the next few days. Back then, I had assumed that it was just the way things went, one day something or someone would be all anyone could talk about and then the very next day, it would seem as if no one could care to mention what they had spoken about yesterday. From my perspective, we lived in a touch and go world, a kind of blink and you miss it mentality that seemed to force everyone to constantly update and refresh their feeds due to the deeply ingrained fear of missing out on the next big tragedy.

But what if constantly refreshing and micro-focusing on a singular narrative resulted in some tragedies being forgotten?

Even though it had been repeatedly stressed to me over and over the importance of expanding my interests during high school, I wasn’t really involved in many extracurricular activities until my junior year. The president of book club, who was also a friend of mine, suggested I attend their next meeting and gave me a copy of the group book, *Salt to the Sea* by Ruta Sepetys. The historical fiction is based off of the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, a German cruise liner that was supposed to ferry wartime personnel and refugees to safety. Though it was the single greatest known tragedy in maritime history, very few people know about the

disaster when compared to the sinking of the Titanic and the Lusitania. Previously, I had mostly read books with a single perspective, and if they were historical fiction, the book centered around a widely known event.

In Sepetys novel, she explores the perspectives of the four main characters as readers discover how they got onto the Wilhelm Gustloff and their thoughts as it becomes clear that the ship is going to sink. Through the use of multiple perspectives, Sepetys is able to explore and analyze various mentalities of individuals who experienced WWII and were aboard the ship as it was about to sink. During and after I had finished reading this book, I was amazed and awed at Sepety's ability to balance and intertwine the narratives of multiple characters together while maintaining each character's personality throughout the book.

The chapters are generally short but it's more than enough to feel connected to the character. Joana is a young Lithuanian nurse who moved back to Nazi Germany with her family to escape capture from the Soviet Russian forces. Florian is a Prussian apprentice, who stole a valuable item from the Amber Room after he realized his company had hidden motives. Emilia is a fifteen-year-old Polish girl, who got caught in the middle of the war while hiding a big secret. Lastly, Alfred is a sailor who supports Hitler's propaganda and has enough self-confidence for the entire world.

It is completely due to Ruta Sepetys' skills as a writer that each of these characters felt real, and once I was finished with the book, I had a better understanding of what happened to the Wilhelm Gustloff and the passengers aboard. Since I thoroughly enjoyed *Salt to the Sea*, I decided to read her one of her other books, *The Fountains of Silence*, which is another historical novel. I quickly realized that Sepetys' focuses and writes mainly on historical events that aren't widely known by the majority of individuals and centers her stories on the tragedies of

individuals who for one reason or another, are forced to remain in the country that is committing widely publicized atrocities.

I think that reading *Salt to the Sea*, at any time in my life would have had a significant impact on my view on the importance of perspective, but I think that reading the book in high school made the experience more impactful. Up until that point, most of the books I had been reading focused on a singular narrative, and the history lessons covered in class were mainly centered on one narrative. However, when I finished reading Ruta Sepetys' work, I began to realize how dangerous being consumed by one side of an argument truly is and not only that, but it can lead to being willingly ignorant as well.

While I'm not someone who normally reads the author's note at the end of a book, I haven't been able to forget how powerful Sepetys' ending words were:

"Every nation has hidden history, countless stories preserved only by those who experienced them. Stories of war are often read and discussed worldwide by readers whose nations stood on opposite sides during battle. History divided us, but through reading we can be united in story, study, and remembrance. Books join us together as a global reading community, but more important, a global human community striving to learn from the past" (Sepetys 383).

I think that as a writer, it's easy to mimic writing about what is highly publicized in the media, and for a long time, what I consumed was what I produced in my writing.

I know that it's an overdone cliché, but everyone really does have their own story, and I think every story deserves to be told. The Wilhelm Gustloff was sunk on January 30, 1945 by a Soviet submarine and resulted in more than 9,000 people losing their lives. Yet, because

Germany was seen as the world's greatest enemy at the time, the tragedy went unpublicized which ultimately led to thousands of individuals being forgotten by history.

I'm not sure if my journey as a writer will lead me to report on a forgotten tragedy like Ruta Sepetys is known for doing, but after reading her work, I have a better understanding on how important it is to keep an open mind, and how writing from the perspectives of someone else can truly be beneficial in creating a better story and ultimately a better world for everyone.

Paper Planes

Owen was not in the mood for games.

In fact, it should be noted that he had never really been into any games. Even during his high school and college careers, Owen played hockey not so much because he enjoyed the sport but simply because he was good at it. Similar to the way some people had a gift for learning multiple languages or were naturally good at solving mathematical equations, Owen Williams was born a talented hockey player. Even with his lack of personal investment in the sport, his strong sense of dedication and ambition drove him to show up at every team meeting and practice, pour every ounce of blood and a fucking lot of sweat into hockey simply because it was what he did well and that was all.

However, that was all to say, that there were some things Owen could not and would not tolerate. One of those things or people in this case was a figure who had just walked into the cheerfully lit café wearing a blue striped button up shirt with bright yellow pants.

“Have you been listening to a single word I’ve been saying? Owen? *Owen*.” He felt a sharp pinch on his left forearm and looked up in dismay at the honey haired young woman whose ruby painted lips were twisted in a disapproving scowl. He didn’t miss the glint of satisfaction in her stormy eyes either as she folded her arms across her chest, as she watched him rub the red mark that had slowly appeared on his pale skin.

“*Ellie*. What the fuck?” He grounded out as he examined his arm. He’s about to say more when she cuts him off.

“So, I’ll take that as a no then. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, you’ve always been one of the most egotistical people I know.” She said this in her *you’re-a-lost-cause* voice as she idly examines her nails, which makes the diamond on her ring finger shine mockingly at him under

the café lighting. He pushed back the familiar feeling of resentment before reaching for his cup of barely lukewarm coffee.

After taking a sip to appear indifferent, he asked “So why did you ask to meet with me if you think I’m so egotistical?” He spotted yellow pants walking towards the register and curled his hand into a fist but forced himself to shift his attention back to Ellie. It’s easier than he thinks, though he shouldn’t be surprised. For better or worse, she’s always had his attention.

Ellie scoffed in a way that Owen couldn’t help but find adorable, before he mentally kicked himself for thinking that. *Stop*, he reprimanded himself sharply, *it’s over between you two*.

“I don’t *think* you’re egotistical, I *know* you are. But unlike you, I’m not a heartless asshole. I invited you here to celebrate your belated twenty sixth birthday. Which is *quite* generous of me since I didn’t get an invitation to your party.” She said. Ellie didn’t have to mention that this was the first time they had seen each other since their breakup, two years ago, when she had returned to their old apartment only to see Owen clutching his phone with tears streaming down his face.

Owen raised both eyebrows at her comment. “You’re joking. Elle, you’re pregnant. My party was the last place you should’ve gone to.” He would never admit it out loud, but it was nice that she was teasing him again. After their breakup, they had spent the first year ignoring each other up until the beginning of this year. He made a mental note to ask what had possessed her to send that good morning text that somehow seemed as if it was in ‘font: hesitantly reaching out to my ex.’ After that, something had reawakened in him. Shortly after, they had begun texting again and in mid-November, Ellie had asked to meet him at the old café they had their first date, he found himself unable to decline her invitation.

At his response, she subconsciously placed a gentle hand on her stomach. It was barely a baby bump and most people wouldn't have noticed, but Owen wasn't most people. In typical Ellie fashion, she refused to acknowledge that he had a point, and instead took a sip of her smoothie, and muttered around the thick straw, "I still would have liked to receive an invitation."

He pinched the bridge of his nose before leaning forward, his hands folded together. "Ellie, you can't be serious-" he started but cut off when yellow pants took a seat at one of the booths across from where he and Ellie were sitting. "You've got to be fucking kidding me." He spat out as his blue eyes narrowed in agitation.

"What? What's wrong?" She asked before swiftly turning around in her seat. She scanned the room and it didn't take long for her to spot the source of his anger. He saw her stiffen before carefully turning back to him. The expression on her face reminded him of the look most people would have when faced with a hungry grizzly bear.

"Is that-" She asked hesitantly.

"Don't say his fucking name." Owen responded in a flat tone as he began to stand up, his chair emitting an agonizing screech as the legs were dragged across the stone floor. Ellie quickly moved to grab both of his hands in hers, effectively preventing him from leaving.

"Don't go Owen." she pleaded and just when he's about to respond she continued, "If you do, you're letting him win. You're letting the past control you. You'll be letting down..." Ellie trailed off and a streak of fear ran down her spine. The unspoken name hung heavily between them, but she decided to push her luck. Besides, she had already ventured into risky territory, she would be damned if she didn't make it to the end. "Sit down." She said in a voice, that could have ended the bloodiest war or persuaded a toddler to give up his or her most treasured toy.

They stared at each other for what felt like a million years. Memories, trust, love, hate, desire, and repulsion took up the space between their eyes, between their souls, and for a brief moment there was no one else in the room. Just Ellie and Owen. Owen and Ellie. The moment ended just as quickly as it began, but it was enough. Owen sat back down.

Ethan was absolutely convinced he had lost whatever remained of his sanity as he pushed the clear glass doors open, letting the smell of freshly brewed coffee invade his senses. He knew he was asking for trouble, but his legs didn't appear to care as they lead him towards the marble counter, where the barista looked bored out of his mind. The café offered an extensive range of drinks and food, ranging from items most people would expect to find at a traditional coffee shop to the café's unique concoctions. If Ethan hadn't been so nervous, he would have tried one of the house's unique specialties, but he was certain that the events that were scheduled to occur today would be all the excitement he could stand.

He ordered the first thing he saw on the menu in a voice so shaky it was a miracle the barista had understood him. Or at least, Ethan hoped he did. After he grabbed his drink, he walked towards one of the high tables but stopped abruptly. Every seat at the high tables except one was occupied by a group of men around their mid-twenties. However, that wasn't what had thrown Ethan off guard. It was the fact that most of the guys were wearing shirts with the United States Air Force logo printed on them. Without any warning, Ethan was overcome by a sea of long forgotten conversations that had somehow floated back to the top of his consciousness and was accompanied by the undeniable image of a confidently smirking blue eyed boy, who Ethan knew would never leave his memory.

He sucked in a sharp breath and walked over to the nearest table he could find, one hand tightly gripped his drink and the other subconsciously moved to lightly touch his crooked nose. He sat down heavily on the plush chair and gently set his drink down.

He caught a glance at himself reflected in the large windows of the cafe and took in his disheveled appearance. It had been an entire week since Gemma had texted him saying Laila had agreed to meet with them at their old favorite café. Dread mixed with guilt flooded over him as he remembered the last time the three of them had been together. Well technically, there had been four back then but...

Ethan knew it was all in his head, but a sharp, unforgiving pain erupted in his nose, forced him to cup two hands over it. He got a few weird glances from a family sitting nearby, he could care less. Just like that, he was eighteen again and all he could see is the saturated fury in his best friend's blue eyes before a powerful fist slammed into his nose and knocked him to the ground. Six years later and the pain from the initial punch seemed only to multiply rather than fade.

He risked a quick glance over to see the group of men sitting at the high tables laughing loudly with one another. The one empty seat seemed to glare menacingly at Ethan and his ears vibrated with the angry shouts his friend had aimed his way while Ethan stood clutching his bloodied nose. Back then, Ethan had been angry too, though more at himself for hurting Laila and disappointing someone he had considered a brother. Even now, Ethan still considered Drew to be his brother and his guilt flared up again.

Stop. You'll have plenty of time to think about that later. There won't be much of a choice. Ethan chided himself just as his phone buzzed. It was a text from Gemma telling him that

she would be there in five minutes, which in Ethan's opinion wasn't enough time for two people who hadn't spoken in years to figure out a way to deliver life changing news.

He leaned back in his seat as he struggled to hold back an exasperated groan. There was nothing left to do but wait.

"I fucking hate plums." Owen blatantly stated as he and Ellie watched a girl with deep purple hair walk confidently across the café, before seating herself on the chair across from yellow pants as if she was sitting on a throne.

Across from him, Ellie grinned as she watched the pair awkwardly attempt to greet each other, first by attempting to hug before settling for a stiff, business-like handshake. "I almost didn't recognize Gemma, she looks so... monochromatic." Ellie finished simply.

Owen rolled his eyes, "Well I guess everyone knew there would come a day when she could no longer incorporate every color in the rainbow into a single outfit. They look like a pair of fucking fruit." He said as he nodded towards Ethan's bright yellow pants, and Gemma's all purple attire. Even her nails were painted a pale shade of lilac.

"At least they're choosing to represent healthy foods." Ellie joked and smiled in satisfaction when the corners of Owen's mouth tugged slightly upward.

"Why are you dressed as a banana?" Gemma asked as she takes a dainty sip of her iced caramel macchiato, which had more caramel in it than anything else. Setting her drink down, she idly twirled her amethyst ring around her finger as she calmly regarded the man sitting across from her.

“You’re dressed in every shade of purple known to humankind, actually I think there are some unclassified shades in your outfit. So, good job I guess.” Ethan responded; his voice sharp with irritation.

Gemma felt heat rising inside of her and even though every part of her knew she should stop the words from escaping her mouth, she doesn't. “I’ll have you know that I have dressed in a monochromatic outfit before. You should remember, that was the day everyone wore the same color.”

Ethan looked at her like she just slapped him, and in a way, she did. Unable to help herself, Gemma continues, “Well I guess, black technically is the combination of every single color, so even then, my outfit was colorful.”

A heavy silence fell between them.

“I see you’re still the bitch you always were when we were in school.” Ethan said, looking at her with a blank expression.

Gemma flinched internally, but she was not about to back down without a fight. “I see your nose is still as crooked as the day Drew Williams punched his fist into your face. What happened to being best buddies or brothers or whatever the fuck you guys called it?”

Ethan scoffed, the anger bubbling in his chest was a welcome substitute for the guilt he had felt earlier. *Leave it to good old Gemma to bring out the worst in him*, he thought. “Don’t even try to place the blame on me. You weren’t exactly a good friend to Laila.” He grounded out.

“Oh, that’s rich, given how you treated her.” She flipped a strand of deep purple hair out of her face, examining the ends before she turned back to look at him. “So, how are we going to do this?”

She didn't have to elaborate what she was talking about, and Ethan reluctantly let go of his anger. Right now, they both had bigger things to worry about.

"Are you sure Laila doesn't know?" Ethan asked after a moment. Though the look on Gemma's face made him wish he hadn't spoken at all.

"She mentioned wanting to catch up with him when we last spoke. Besides, who would have told her." Gemma took another sip of her coffee and quickly glanced at her nails. She could feel Ethan's annoyance from across the table, but she refused to look at him. If she did, she had a feeling regret would render her speechless, and Gemma needed as many words as she can get. "Anyways... it's not like Laila had spoken to me at all these past few years, and I *know* for a fact that you and her haven't spoken either."

Ethan ran a frustrated hand through his hair, "Well... it looks like we're in for a fun conversation." Sarcasm dripped off every single word, but Gemma could tell he was nervous. She had always been able to read him like a book, and her seemingly instinctive knowledge of his thoughts and emotions were what lead to Ethan's broken nose along with severed friendships.

Gemma was about to make a comment about the fact that conversations with Ethan were never fun, when a new voice caused her to freeze.

"Hi Gemma, hi Ethan, it's been a while hasn't it?" Gemma snapped out of her shock and whipped her head towards the sound. Her green eyes collided with Laila Train's dark brown ones. Across from her, Ethan stared dumbly up at Laila, a flurry of various emotions present on his face.

"What the fuck is going on?!" Ellie whisper shouted as she stared in horror as Laila moved to sit next to Gemma. Owen didn't say a word as he took in the reunion occurring across

the café. Judging from Ethan and Gemma's expressions, it was clear that Laila was invited but they hadn't noticed her entering the shop. Owen, for one, had been too engrossed in his conversation with Ellie to have noticed either. He vaguely recognized that Ellie was rapidly looking from Laila to him and then back to Laila again, but his thoughts were preoccupied.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

"Ellie. I don't think Laila knew what happened and I think those two idiots are about to tell her." Owen said as if he's speculating the upcoming events, but deep down, he was certain that was exactly what was about to take place.

"Now? Here?!" Ellie asked incredulously but he could tell that she is beginning to connect the dots.

A part of Owen wanted to walk out of the café and never look back, but another part of him, a bigger part of him, forced himself to remain in his seat as the scene unfolded. Afterall, he was well aware that there was something he could have done to prevent what was about to happen from occurring, if only he hadn't been such a self-absorbed prick. Now, all he could do was fold his hands together and watch the scene unfold.

Laila tried her best to keep a pleasant smile on her face but a large part of her worried that it might have resembled a grimace instead. It had been an entire five minutes since she had awkwardly stood in front of Gemma and Ethan's table, and watched as they bickered back and forth like an old married couple, and a few seconds since she had announced her presence before quietly sliding into the empty next to Gemma.

She was not entirely sure why she agreed to meet up with Gemma after all these years, and she *definitely* didn't know Ethan was back in Boston until she had read Gemma's text last

night. *I didn't know she was planning a big, happy reunion*, Laila thought, sarcasm thick and heavy in her mind.

She risked a glance at Ethan who hadn't looked up from his coffee cup since he had originally greeted her. Judging from his intensity, she wouldn't have been surprised if he was looking for the winning numbers of the lottery ticket. Meanwhile, Gemma hadn't stopped staring at her reflection in the window, while idly twirling her drink in her hand since Laila had sat down.

Laila sighed and said in what she hoped was a cheerful tone "So, what have you two been up to lately?"

Ethan and Gemma whipped their heads towards her in total synchronicity, and Gemma slightly startled, but it was enough for the drink in her hand to splash onto the smooth table. In unison, Ethan and Gemma rushed to grab a napkin and their hands brushed for a quick moment, before they pulled away. They looked repulsed as if they had just touched a poisonous snake or gum from under a desk. Both of them stiffened and Laila unwillingly remembered the image of Ethan and Gemma tangled between Ethan's sheets and the red stain that had stubbornly clung to Ethan's t-shirt for weeks as she ignored all of his and Gemma's texts.

She shook the past away just as Gemma whispered a soft "good" while Ethan simply nodded.

Heavy silence once again fell as the trio searched for things to say to each other. Laila was about to make up an excuse about needing to run an errand when Gemma spoke, "So how was London? You haven't been back in the States since high school graduation."

Ethan was still looking down at his hands, but Laila responded “I love it there. I thought I would move back to Boston after finishing up my degree at Oxford, but it just felt like home there, you know?”

Gemma shot her a halfhearted small smile, but anyone with eyes could tell there was no emotion behind it. Laila felt a sharp stab of guilt blossom in her chest. Clearly, Gemma was trying to do her best to reconnect, and Laila had a feeling that she hadn’t been the warmest person since her arrival. Taking a deep breath, she forced a smile onto her face, surprised at how there was some happiness behind it.

“I’m guessing this is your idea of a reunion but aren’t we missing someone? Where’s Drew?” She asked cheerfully. She and Drew had been best friends since high school, but despite her best attempts to keep up with him, her being across the world and him being in the Air Force had made it especially difficult for them to find time to catch up with one another.

Ethan stiffened and Gemma looked down at her hands. Dread boiled in her stomach as she noticed both of them were actively avoiding eye contact with her.

“What is it? What’s happened?” She asked in a whisper.

Gemma grabbed her hand and squeezed tightly, just as Ethan slammed his eyes shut as if he was in physical pain. Perhaps he was, but Laila couldn’t bring herself to care right now.

The words pierced through the air and Laila’s mind went completely blank.

“Do my eyes deceive me or is Laila Tran, the class president and all-around Miss Perfect skipping class?” A deep voice said in mock horror, as the speaker dramatically placed a hand over his mouth in a comedic fashion.

Laila playfully whacked Drew's shoulder before taking a seat next to him. It was mid-May and the breeze that washed over them from their spot on the beach felt ridiculously refreshing. The sun was high above them and Laila watched as the sun rays illuminated Drew's dirty blonde hair. He had braced his arms behind him, and his legs were spread out in front of him. He looked like the model image of relaxed, but she knew him better than that.

"You haven't been in school for a few days. I was worried." She said, shooting him a disapproving look.

He ran a rough hand through his hair and Laila didn't miss the bruises on his knuckles as he responded, "Fuck school. It's May, we're seniors, and this hell is almost over."

His bluntness forced a smile out of her, the first genuine one in days, and she reached into her bag to pull two sheets of plain white paper out.

"Believe me, no one's more eager to put high school behind than me. Look, I brought us something to celebrate the end of our prison sentence." She handed him one of the sheets.

"A piece of paper? This is the best present ever." Drew said in a dry tone which earned him another whack on the shoulder. He let out a loud laugh.

"Shut up with jerk. You know what these are for." Laila stated, pretending to be annoyed while he held up his hands in mock surrender. He grabbed the sheet and began folding.

A comfortable silence enveloped them as they focus on folding the paper in precise, deliberate motions. Drew's creation took him only a few seconds and even though Laila's was more complex, years of folding had made her an expert, and she quickly finished her creation.

Drew glanced at her and she knew what he was about to ask, "Have you spoken to Gemma?"

She flinched at her best friend, well *former* best friend's name, before shaking her head.

“Have you spoken to Ethan?” She asked in response.

Drew let out a bark of laughter, tossing his head back and almost crumbled the paper plane in his hand, “Do you really think *I* want to talk to him?” He held up his bruised hand to emphasize his meaning.

She tried to make herself look busy as she pinched the crease to create her paper crane's beak. “What happened to us? The four of us used to be so close.”

Drew looked at her thoughtfully and stated in a resigned tone “Life.”

“Sucks.” She added and he grinned.

He was about to say something, but her words came out in a rush, “I'll miss you; you know. A lot. I wish you weren't leaving.”

He gave her a surprised look, “Leaving? I'm joining the Air Force, but I'll still be living in America. You're the one moving to the U.K.”

She looked down at her paper crane, feeling slightly embarrassed by her outbreak of emotion. “I know, it's just... I wish things weren't going to change between us.”

Drew looked at Laila for a long moment before he turned his gaze to the calm waves. “Laila,” He said in a voice that could make anyone want to listen to what he was about to say. Drew always had that special quality about him. “I think it's awfully silly to be scared of change when you've just done it,” He paused, gesturing to the paper crane in her hands. “You just took a two-dimensional object and changed it into a three-dimensional object. More importantly, you're giving that piece of paper the ability to fly.”

By the time Drew was done speaking, Laila was trying her best to blink away her tears, though whether they were from his speech or the cumulation of emotions she had been feeling

these past few days, it was hard to tell. “Wow, who knew a hobby you and I started to stay awake during freshman year math class would end up being such great material for a speech.” She joked which earns her a smile.

“Ready?” Drew asked as he raised his paper airplane. She nodded as she held up her paper crane. Laila knew her piece of origami wouldn’t go nearly as far as Drew’s paper plane, but she could care less. On the count of three, they both gently tossed their creations into the air just as the wind picked up. To Laila’s surprise, her paper crane went much further than she anticipated and a smile crept onto her lips as she watched both her crane and Drew’s paper plane dance together in the wind, before disappearing into the clear, blue waves.

“She’ll be okay.” Ellie’s soothing voice broke through his thoughts as he watched Laila cover her face in her hands to muffle a sob. Owen was still reeling from the knowledge that Laila hadn’t known about Drew’s death to fully comprehend what she was saying. He watched as her lips moved but it felt like he was underwater.

“I should have told her. It’s just... I thought she knew given how close the two of them were. I mean, he was fucking in love with her for god’s sake.” He was frantically running both hands through his hair and trying to make sense of everything that has just happened.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, it’s going to be okay.” Ellie said as she reached over to grab both of his hands in hers. Her eyes were wide and concerned as they looked into his, and after a few moments, Owen began to feel his heart beat slow down.

He was about to say more when she stopped him, “None of this is your fault. I don’t know why Laila didn’t know, but that has nothing to do with you. You were dealing with the

grief of losing your brother, you had enough to deal with.” She said in a tone that suggested it would be best (and safest) for him, if he didn't argue with her.

“I should have been there for him more.” The words filled the air and for the first time since Drew’s death, Owen didn’t feel the unbearable weight of guilt on his shoulders. “I... I wasn't the best brother to him.”

Ellie stared at him for a long moment, “Maybe not. That didn't stop him from loving you anyway, and he knew you loved him. I know he did.” She paused before reaching over to grab his hand and squeezed it, “Owen, you can’t change the past. The most any of us can do is make the most of the time we have left, with the people we care most about.” A million unspoken words lingered between them but in that moment, the only thing that mattered was that after a moment, Owen squeezed Ellie’s hand back.

She smiled just as tears flowed down her face and it took him a moment to realize he was crying too. They both ended up laughing while hastily wiping their eyes, only to continue laughing.

“I have to go now, I’m late for an appointment.” She said as she prepared to stand up. Owen stood as well and helped her clear the drinks that had long gone cold during their meeting.

“I’ll walk out with you.” He said as he pushed the chairs back in place. She shot him a grateful smile and together they walked out of the cafe.

Once they made it to her car in the parking lot, she turned to him, “I hope you had a good birthday and that you enjoyed my attempt to celebrate it with you.” She said with a hesitant and shy smile on her face as she began to unlock her car door.

“I did.” She smiled but he wasn’t finished, “Ellie. Thank you... for all of this.” He gestured around him, worried that he was confusing her but pushed on, “I’m really happy for you. You deserve every good thing this world can give you.”

“Thanks Owen, it means a lot.” She got in the car, but yelled out the window before pulling away, “I’ll make sure to invite you to the wedding! And the baby shower!”

Owen laughed as he watched her pull away, “You better.” He whispered underneath his breath.

As he made his way over to his own car, he heard the sound of an airplane flying overhead. Owen knew he would look stupid but at that moment, he didn’t care. He raised one hand in greeting as the plane flew over him and disappeared into the clouds. With a hand over his chest, where his brother’s initials were tattooed and Owen smiled, “I miss you too, baby brother.”

With one last look at the sky, he got into his car and drove home.

The Mourning Gem

She didn't want to be here.

Gemma was never someone who paid much attention to the morals in fables. As far as she was concerned, they were just another way for adults to force children into following society's bland potato salad ass standard of living. She found the lessons on morality and righteousness so boringly tear inducing that after her first-grade teacher announced that they would be reading Aesop's fables, she launched her pink sparkly Velcro sneakers violently across the classroom. It had landed her a trip to the principal's office and her classmates had called her "shoes" for the rest of the year, but Gemma had no regrets. She fucking hated hearing about morals just as much as she hated morally righteous people.

She guessed that her overall vehemence regarding the concept of being good was why she found herself, almost twenty years later, sitting in the back pew of the church, cursing the kindest person Gemma had ever known for being the reason she was there in the first place. Gemma did her best to remain unnoticed as she surveyed the room, every once in a while, recognizing a familiar face, though she had no interest to greet anyone. It seemed as if all the attendees had decided to wear the most lavish yet funeral appropriate outfits as she spotted women wearing Tiffany & co. diamond earrings with a matching necklace, while dabbing their eyes using their husband's Louis Vuitton handkerchiefs. Meanwhile, the men appeared as if they had just stepped out of a People's Sexiest Man of the Year photoshoot, dressed in designer suits with approximately 32oz (give or take) of gel applied to their hair.

As the room began to gradually fill up with more arrivals, the smell of white roses competed with Viktor & Rolf's signature flower bomb perfume and Bleu De Chanel cologne. The combination of odors was as repulsive as the fact that everyone here was clearly treating

Drew's funeral as a social gathering to see who had become the wealthiest after graduating high school. Of course, none of them could claim that they earned their money through hard work. Half of them were trust fund babies while the other had married rich. The entire room was the epitome of a stereotype that it took everything Gemma had to not hurl both her heels at the couple merrily recounting the details of their "unbelievable" honeymoon in the Bahamas before storming out the room.

The only thing that kept her from flipping everyone off was the knowledge that if Drew was still here, he probably would have betted on her acting out and she just couldn't have him be right about another thing. Taking a deep breath, Gemma leaned back as she felt the cold back of the pew through her black dress. The service wouldn't start for another forty minutes and she was cursing herself for not waiting in her car like she had originally intended to do. Without a doubt, Gemma must have experienced a moment of delirium earlier when she somehow managed to convince herself that she would possibly converse with some of her old classmates. Which was an especially unusual thought considering the fact that she hadn't spoken to most of these people when they were in school together which was almost ten years ago.

She felt the sign of an incoming headache as she closed her eyes and slowly started to count to ten. It was something Gemma had remembered seeing her mother do as a child whenever her father would begin talking about anything closely related to hockey. He had had a long, but mediocre NHL career playing defense for about six different teams. She was about five when her dad was traded for the first time from Colorado Avalanche to the New York Islanders. The memory of her dad's energetic voice promising adventure and new opportunities echoed throughout the car as the three of them drove through the area, trying to familiarize themselves with that would be their new home for the duration of her father's three-year contract. From her

spot in the backseat, Gemma saw her mother wearily close her eyes for a few moments before turning to her father with a defeated smile, before quietly murmuring “That’s great honey.”

Her mother had been born and raised in Denver, CO and was understandably, taking the move the hardest. At the time, the sight of her father returning home earlier than usual and offering to cook dinner had filled both Gemma and her mother with happiness. He had picked her up and spun her around before gently placing her on the kitchen countertop as he began listing a number of dinner options to her mother. Gemma giggled wildly as he pulled various vegetables from the fridge and began juggling them, much to her mother’s dismay though there was a big smile on her face as her father continued his antics. However, like all good things, the family’s happy mood came to a tragic end. When her father had broken the news to them, her mother had given him a brief smile before ushering Gemma into the car and driving straight to her parents’ house. She had been deposited in front of the T.V. while her mother spoke in hushed voices to her grandparents in the kitchen.

“I don’t want to leave... I’ve built my entire life here.” Gemma had heard her mother say as a new episode of Sesame Street started.

Her attention was quickly diverted from the conversation as Elmo appeared on her grandparent’s T.V. screen, but her grandfather’s angry baritone voice disrupted any focus she had had on the red, friendly creature.

“Then don’t. I told you from the very beginning that he wasn’t good for you. That man-child barely contributes to the team, it’s about time they’re getting rid of him. And now he thinks he can take you and my granddaughter across the country, just so he can continue to be a worthless player? That son-of-a” Gemma startled when a gentle arm wrapped around her, and effectively prevented her from hearing the rest of the conversation.

She had turned abruptly and was met with her grandmother's sorrow filled brown eyes. Gemma didn't notice that she had subconsciously twisted her tiny body, so she was facing the closed kitchen doors, her knees pressed to the soft cushions. Her grandmother gently pulled Gemma into her arms while gently stroking her hair.

"I worried that you'd be just as inquisitive as your mother, and I was right. That will only lead you to trouble and heartbreak, my little treasure." Her grandmother had said and there was a hint of finality in her voice. A resignation that said the older woman knew her granddaughter would inevitably find and abandon trouble, the way some people found and left behind spare change.

At that moment, Gemma had no clue what "inquisitive" meant but she knew she loved the sound of her grandmother's soothing voice. So much so, that within minutes Gemma was fast asleep, thoughts of her grandfather's harsh words long forgotten. A few weeks later, her parents packed up their belongings and moved to New York.

Gemma had slowly counted to ten about fifty times before she opened her eyes again. More people had arrived, but no one had acknowledged her so far. *Thank god*, she thought, before turning her attention to the front of the room. A variety of white flowers had joined the roses from earlier as they crowded around Drew's picture. She felt a familiar tug in her heart at the sight of the smiling young man. *How old was he in the picture?* She wondered. The picture must have been taken after he graduated high school but there was an aged look in his eyes that suggested the picture was taken a few months before he died. If Gemma was a romantic, she would have swooned over the symbolism and foreshadowing of it all, but she fucking hated fate.

She muttered a string of curses under the breath which caught the attention of a few people lingering nearby, though no one approached her. Gemma didn't doubt that she probably resembled a seething rabid dog right now, but *this just couldn't be happening*.

There must have been some mistake. The medical examiners must have made some mistake they were trying to identify the body. This was just some morbid prank to lure everyone back to Boston. There was no way the boy who could easily captivate an entire room just by breathing was laying stone cold in the mahogany coffin. It just couldn't be Drew; she wouldn't believe it.

And yet, a sinking feeling in her heart told Gemma that he was really gone. She felt herself unraveling as the cold realization seeped into her bones. Any thread of hope that she would wake up from this nightmare pulled away from her, just like the loose threads on the sweater she was wearing on the first day she met Drew.

"This is the last time we're moving." Her mother's voice broke the thick tension in car. For once, it wasn't Gemma's fault that her mother was gripping the steering wheel so tightly that her knuckles were bone white. In fact, this was the first time she had been alone with her mother since they had arrived in Boston three days ago. After messily throwing her things into unorganized drawers, Gemma spent most of her time wondering around downtown, trying to scout good locations for when she felt like skipping school. Though, if her mother had known about that, she would be just as irate.

That morning, her mother's anger was directed at their father, who was currently at practice with the Boston Bruins. This was his fifth and final (though they didn't know it then) time being traded to a different team. The family was so used to moving by now, that they didn't

bother unpacking most of their belongings anymore. However, each move came with a plate shattering, door slamming argument between her parents over whether or not it was time for her father to retire.

Gemma, who had witnessed her parents having this argument one too many times before, calming grabbed her backpack and waited patiently in her mother's car. Fifteen minutes later, her mother emerged from the house, red faced but miraculously with not a hair out of place as she jammed the keys in and started the car.

"Mom, I'm already late." Gemma had responded as she scrolled through Instagram. She liked some of her old friend's pictures as she ignored the familiar feeling of envy creeping into her mind. She had grown accustomed to transferring schools ever since she was young, but something about high school felt different. It would have been much easier if she was starting freshman year somewhere new, but this was her sophomore year. Everyone probably already had their friend groups and schedules figured out, but there wasn't anything she could do about that now. If worse came to worst, she would just skip class and hang out at the café where the cute college guy worked.

"If he ever tells me we're moving again, I'm going to smack him with divorce papers." Her mother continued, completely ignoring Gemma's comment. She sighed quietly as they pulled up to the school, thirty minutes late. Gemma barely had time to grab her bag and shut the door before her mother was already halfway down the street.

She squared her shoulders as she pushed the doors open. She looked around nonchalantly, before making her way to the door labeled "Secretary." After withstanding the tortuous faux greeting from the school secretary and filling out some paperwork, Gemma found herself alternating between wandering through the brightly lit halls and longingly staring out the

window during her morning classes as she pulled at the loose threads of her favorite sweater. It had become something of a tradition for her to wear that sweater whenever she was starting school at a different place. By lunch time, she was strongly considering just grabbing her things and running out the front doors when a voice startled her.

“You know they sell grape juice in the cafeteria, right? You don’t have to make your own.” Gemma looked up to see a pair of amused brown eyes glancing down at her and the grapes she had subconsciously been squashing with her fork. Beside him stood a girl and a boy who looked like they were all around the same age.

“Well, maybe I prefer to make my own grape juice.” Gemma responded in a snarky tone, as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Damn, that was a pretty good comeback.” The other girl said, amusement clear in her voice. She set down her lunch tray which prompted the two boys to do the same.

“I’m Laila, and this is Drew. That loser over there is Ethan. Nice to meet you.” The girl, Laila had said as she pointed to her companions.

“How does pointing out the fact that she was furiously stabbing her grapes make me loser?” Ethan asked indignantly.

“I think Laila’s just referring to your entire existence as that of a loser.” The other boy, Drew said, humor evident in his eyes.

“Wow. Thanks Drew. I can always count on my best friend to take Laila’s side, can’t I” Ethan responded sarcastically.

“Of course, Drew’s going to take my side. He’s *my* best friend.” Laila said as she draped an arm around Drew’s shoulder. Before Ethan could respond, she turned her attention back to Gemma who was watching the trio with clear curiosity. “We’re sorry to bother you, but Ethan

couldn't stop talking about the grape massacre occurring over here and he insisted we interfere right away."

Drew gave her an apologetic look while Ethan glanced at her plate as if he was a detective who had just arrived on the scene of a gruesome murder. Three pairs of eyes turned to her expectantly.

"It's okay. I'm Gemma, I just moved here." She said, though she doubted they particularly cared. Laila and Drew gave her welcoming smiles while Ethan gave her a scrutinizing look.

"So, Gemma new-girl-slash-murderer-of-grapes, what grade are you in? Also, are you going to the football game this week?" Ethan asked, leaning forward as if he was interrogating her.

"That's a really long nickname." Drew muttered but Ethan ignored him, his eyes intently focused on Gemma.

"I'm a sophomore, and I didn't know there was a football game this week, but I don't see why I wouldn't go." She responded matching his stare.

"No way! The three of us are sophomores too!" Laila exclaimed. From that moment on, Laila bombarded Gemma with a medley of questions ranging from what classes she was taking, to asking about the previous schools she had attended to whether or not she thought celebrities got engaged way too soon. Drew continued to eat his lunch calmly, unaffected by Laila's barrage of questions while Ethan continued to stare at the pile of mashed grapes with a mixture of interest and concern.

After ten minutes of being interrogated about squashed grapes, whether or not she had ever committed murder, and just about every other aspect of her life by Ethan and Laila while

Drew looked on apologetically, Gemma began to think that perhaps she wouldn't be skipping as many days of school as she estimated this morning in her mother's car. And it was all due to the three people sitting at her table. Gemma knew the importance of first impressions, and she liked to think she was a good judge of character. For example, she had a feeling everyone at this high school completely adored Laila, and it wasn't hard to see why. Laila had a certain type of kindness about her that Gemma had only seen in a handful of other people. Ethan, on the other hand, no doubt had such an amazing ability to annoy people, that it wouldn't surprise Gemma if the deceased came back to life just to tell him to shut up. Given the analytical way he was *still* staring at her squished grapes, she had a feeling he would be talking about them for a long, long time.

And then there was Drew.

The very first word that came to mind when she met him was captivating. Sure, he was kind just like Laila, and she had no doubt that he could be as obnoxious as Ethan, but he was also intriguing as well. Even sitting at lunch, talking and laughing with them, Gemma had the sense that he was also somewhere very far away. As if his mind was somewhere his body could never hope to be. Or maybe, it was the other way around. Perhaps, with time, she would come to understand how he could be so present yet distant at the same time, but right now, he seemed as intangible as the wind.

Gemma was jolted from her thoughts when someone sit down heavily beside her. She barely had a chance to react when the person spoke, anger laced in each of his words, "I'm surprised you aren't wearing every color of the rainbow, bitch."

She turned and shot her new companion a ferocious glare, “It’s good to see you again, Ethan.”

Ethan, who looked as if he hadn’t aged a day since graduation, continued to scowl at her as fury danced behind his rum-colored eyes that were framed by a thick set of eyebrows. A faint memory of the first time she, Ethan, Laila, and Drew had gotten a little too drunk and somehow managed to convince Ethan to glue googly eyes on his eyebrows, resurfaced as the air between them hummed with barely hidden fury. Unable to help herself, Gemma let out a small chuckle under her breath that didn’t go unnoticed by Ethan.

“Only you could find a funeral funny.” He said, disgust coating every single word.

“Sometimes people don’t laugh when something is funny, laugh can often use to disguise various emotion... but you should know that, right? You were a criminal law major in college, weren’t you?” She was threading on a very thin line now, but she couldn’t stop herself. “How’s that degree working out for you?”

A medley of expressions flirted and battled across Ethan’s face as beautifully tragic as watching a firework show and knowing that that beauty could only be accomplished through destruction. She continued to watch as he tried and failed multiple times to collect himself, but instead of blowing up on her like she expected, he looked her dead in the eyes and spoke with deadly cold precision “How’s Laila?”

All of Gemma’s senses simultaneously abandoned her as the weight of Ethan’s words slammed into every cell in her body. Just as quick as they left, her senses came rushing back as blind white fury raced through her veins. She raised her hand, determined to slap the skin off his face when a sudden silence blanketed the room. All eyes turned towards the back of the room where a figure emerged.

“They could be twins.” Gemma said as she sat beside Laila, who was predictably scrolling through some practice SAT questions on her phone. It was the end of their first week of senior year and Drew had invited her, Laila, and Ethan to visit his older brother in New York. Ethan, who was still recovering from a particularly horrible sun burn, spoke up from Gemma’s other side “Tell me about it, it was so much worse when they were younger. Everyone always got them confused even though Owen’s three years older than Drew.”

Gemma hadn’t known the two brothers for as long as Laila and Ethan, but as she looked at them kicking the soccer ball back and forth, it wasn’t hard to see why people would often get them confused with one another. Just as that thought crossed her mind, someone shouted *heads up!* a moment too late as the soccer ball collided into her face.

After that, a variety of things occurred.

Ethan, who had turned just in time to see Gemma fall flat on her back, burst in laughter as he pointed comically at her shocked expression, while clutching his stomach.

Laila, predictably, was the only one who seemed concerned as she immediately rushed over to see if Gemma was okay.

“Shit! I’m so sorry.” Came a deep voice as Gemma felt herself being pulled into a sitting position. She ran her hands over her face a few times as the pain gradually began to decrease. Once she got a hold of her bearings, two thoughts instantly came to her mind. The first one was that Owen and Drew really were twins and they were just playing a prank on everyone else, and the second thought was that she was going to absolutely murder Ethan, who had been recording everything on this phone after he had (somewhat) stopped laughing.

“Gem! Are you okay?” This time it was Drew who spoke as he moved to kneel beside her. She offered him a small smile and nod before turning towards Ethan.

“Show’s over. You can stop recording now.” She said, venom laced in every word though Ethan appeared unfazed by her growing temper.

He shot her a wide, all teeth smile as he kept his phone focused straight at her “I wouldn’t be too sure about that Gem, I’m suddenly in the mood to play some soccer.” When her scowl deepened, Ethan added “C’mon turn that frown upside down. At least it wasn’t a hockey puck, that would’ve been absolutely devastating. Right Owen?”

Owen, who was attending Syracuse University on an athletic scholarship, easily sensed that Gemma was a few seconds away from turning Ethan into a human punching bag and quickly tried to dispel the tension. He cast Gemma another apologetic glance before speaking “I really am sorry, as you can probably tell, soccer isn’t exactly the sport that I excel at. However, if you come to tomorrow night’s hockey game, I promise I’ll do my best to shoot the puck at Ethan, but then again, there is a pretty strong sheet of glass that’s meant to protect fans from getting hit in the first place. How about I give you my hockey stick and you could smash his car?”

Everyone knew Owen was joking but that didn’t stop Ethan from bursting into a fit of panic. Gemma who was dying to get back at him began to smirk before offering her hand for Owen to shake. “You’re got yourself a deal.”

Laila and Drew continued to laugh at Ethan’s panicked state, and though Gemma was enjoying teasing him, she took a moment to observe Drew and Owen. After their brief interaction, which was the longest she had spoken to him aside from exchanging greetings when the four of them had arrived in New York, she could clearly see the similarities and differences between the two brothers. Aside from appearances, it was clear that they were both friendly guys

who shared a love for sports, though she made a mental note to stay far away from either of them when they were playing soccer. However, she couldn't deny that they had their differences as well. Of course, everyone was different, everyone *should* be different, but Gemma wasn't quite sure that to think when she met Owen and realized that he didn't have the same feeling of intangibility that seemed to radiate off of Drew. To her, Owen was as real and solid as the ground beneath her feet while Drew seemed like watching from inside a building as the wind rustled the leaves around. Even after two years of being around him almost every single day, he was more unknown to her than the future.

"I'm going to put this away and grab some things from my car. After, I'll take you guys to the best dining hall on campus." Owen had said, breaking her train of thoughts as he kicked the soccer ball a few times between his feet before launching it into the air, where Drew immediately caught it.

"Hey! No hands!" Ethan teased him.

"I would enjoy talking as much as possible if I were you, you've got a date with a hockey puck tomorrow night." Drew responded; amusement clear in his eyes before he turned and followed his brother to the car.

"Was the really necessary?" Drew asked Owen as soon as they were out of hearing distance.

"Hey, it almost worked." Owen said as he threw his head back in laughter, "It certainly got everyone's attention."

"For all the wrong reasons! You're lucky Gemma just met you, if that had been Ethan, he would have been dead twice already. And did you really have to hit her in the head?"

“Okay, that was a bad move on my part, but your kick was just *awful*. There was no way I would have been able to redirect it even if I tried.”

Owen continued to laugh as Drew shoved him to the side. When Owen had originally invited Drew to come visit him at college for the weekend, he wasn't expecting his kid brother to bring all his three friends. He knew Ethan well from all the times Drew had brought him to the hockey games, and Laila was a familiar face from the numerous times Owen had spoken to her throughout the years she had been friends with his brother. However, even if he had never met Laila before, Drew certainly would have made up for it given the seamlessly infinite amount of times he spoke about her. Owen could remember that numerous times he had rushed to the bathroom to check if his ears were bleeding after hearing his kid brother gush about Laila over the phone. In addition, Owen always added another sticky note to the growing pile of reminders that it would be beneficial for his hearing and overall health, if he just called their parents whenever he wanted to check on how their family dog, next time to ask about how their family dog, Rocky, was doing.

From the moment Drew arrived on campus with his friends, Owen had already devised a plan to finally get his embarrassingly shy brother to make some move on Laila, though it was painstakingly clear to him now that it was going to require a change in tactics and luckily for him, he knew exactly the person to call. Which solved one of his two problems.

“So, should I take Gemma's word that she really is fine, or should I be concerned about a possible revenge plan that she's currently working on?” Owen asked as he pulled out the keys to unlock his car.

“I wouldn't be too worried about. Historically, Gemma has to overreact whenever anything happens in order for it actually have happened.” Drew said in a tone that told Owen that

he had witnessed numerous outbursts from Gemma over the past few years. “And then, Ethan makes it his sacred duty to further annoy her. That’s just their dynamic I guess.”

“I’ve noticed.” Owen responded in a deadpan tone. He gestured for Drew to toss him the soccer ball which he easily caught with one hand. “Still, I stand by my earlier plan. If you had had a better kick than I could have *easily* directed the ball towards Laila.”

“And then what would happen? She wouldn’t freak out like Gemma, but your plan isn’t exactly foolproof-”

“Because you’re being fucking stubborn! I wouldn’t even need a plan if you would just tell her how you feel! Honestly, I should have just aimed that soccer ball right at your face, fucking knock some sense into you.” Owen mumbled as he locked his car.

“As if you’re one to talk. Have you managed to get Ellie to come to a hockey game yet? And don’t lie. Ellie’s the most stubborn person I’ve ever met, and that includes our mother.” Drew said as he watched Owen slightly flush before collecting himself.

“Look like we’re both hopeless when it comes to love.” He said as he dramatically placed a hand over his heart which earned him an eye roll from Drew.

“Come on, everyone’s waiting to go eat.” Drew said, effectively ending what would be the beginning of Owen lamenting over his and Drew’s romantic woes in an agonizing manner that would make reading Shakespeare seem like a kinder fate. Owen, who clearly knew what Drew was trying to do, pouted but reluctantly followed him as the duo headed back to where Ethan, Gemma, and Laila were waiting.

“You’re an idiot.”

Owen let out a groan as he collapsed face first onto the couch. He had just returned from having dinner with Drew, Ethan, Laila, and Gemma, and his stomach felt like it was about to explode at any given moment.

“I know, I know, don’t lecture me when I’m about to throw up.” He whined as he slowly turned to face Ellie, who was standing over him with her arms crossed over her chest and a disapproving look plastered firmly on her face.

“So, I take it you got the photos I sent you?” He asked, trying to change the subject.

The frown remained firmly on Ellie’s face when she responded, “I can’t believe you thought it would be a good idea, or that I would even *want* to see pics of food you and Ethan were about to competitively stuff your faces with.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time, and besides Ethan was the one who challenged me. You know I couldn’t let him embarrass me on my own campus.” Owen said as he draped an arm over his eyes.

“Too late for that,” Ellie muttered “I honestly expected something like this happening between you and Drew since you guys have that weird competitive thing being brothers, but not you and Ethan.”

Owen let out a gentle scoff, “Drew and I stopped being competitive around the time he turned ten. All of a sudden, he became all serious and mature though he’s always kind of been like that. Ethan, on the other hand, probably doesn’t know what mature means.”

“Which is probably why you get along so well with him.”

“You know, it really wouldn’t kill you to show some sympathy every once in a while.”

“Well, it’s hard to sympathize with a 6’3 college hockey player who gets into food eating contests with a high school senior.” Ellie responded, disapproval lacing each of her words. She

walked over and gently sat on the couch next to him. There was a barely concealed gleam of glee in her eyes as she took in Owen's bloated and miserable state. Ever since the day she had met him, he had been nothing but annoyingly in good shape, which made sense given the fact that he was one of the top players on the men's hockey team. But right now, he looked like someone who had just finished eating a Thanksgiving dinner.

"Please tell me that at the very least, you made some progress with Drew and Laila."

Ellie had briefly met Drew a few years ago on freshman move in day when he was helping Owen carry some things into his room and offered to help her as well. From their quick interactions throughout the years, she summarized that Drew was the type of person that possibly everyone in the entire world was hoping Owen would one day mature into. Though looking at him, sorrowfully rub his stomach, Ellie knew that there were some wishes that even the gods wouldn't be able to grant.

"I tried my best; it's not my fault Drew can't play soccer to save his life." Owen said and when he saw the dismay and confusion on Ellie's face, he began to recount to her what he considered to be a fool proof plan. Once he was done with his story, the look that she shot him could have withered an entire garden of flowers.

"You really are an idiot." She said as she watched the last tiny ray of hope that Owen might develop into a functioning member of society rapidly disappear.

"You wound me." He said, dramatically placing a hand over his heart, "After all this time, I thought we were building the foundation for a beautiful friendship." When he noticed that she was about to respond with what would undoubtedly be a scathing rebuttal, he quickly changed tactics. "However, there is a way that you could help me and mend our crumbling friendship."

“Owen. You’re the one who decided to drag your bloated self to my apartment, and might I add, I haven’t kicked you out yet. Are you really in a position to be asking for favors?”

He raised both hands in mock surrender, “Okay, okay, thank you for your hospitality and don’t consider this a favor to *me* but a favor to Drew. The guy’s been completely hopeless and lovesick for years now. I’ve done everything I can to help but now, we need a girl’s input and well... you’re a girl.”

He barely had enough time to dodge the pillow that was hurled towards him.

“Ellie! What the fuck!?”

“They really do need to add your name under the list of synonyms for idiot.” Ellie practically growled out as she grabbed another pillow, preparing to continue her assault while Owen tried to find something to shield himself with to no avail.

“Okay, okay! I’m sorry! But come on, you *have* to help. It’s for Drew, not me.” He said, knowing full well that Ellie had a soft spot for his younger brother.

Owen thanked whoever was looking out for him at that particular moment as Ellie slowly lowered the pillow and he allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wished that Drew attended this college instead of you.” Ellie said.

“Ouch. You continue to deliver merciless wounds on your defenseless friend. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to recover.” Owen knew he was playing up the theatrics but if that got him back into Ellie’s good graces, he was ready to put Shakespeare to shame. “Besides, Drew’s determined to go into the Air Force, so you’d be stuck with me no matter what.

“My misfortune continues then.” Ellie said as she let out a long, exhausted sigh.

“At this point, I should just lie down and let you kick me.”

“Sounds tempting, and with your strange and pointless plans out of the way, I might actually be able to help Drew.”

Owen shot up immediately, “So that means you’ll help?”

“I don’t think I have a choice, though I am curious as to why you’re so concerned with your brother’s love life. He seems pretty satisfied with the way things are. Even if it means that Laila will only ever consider him as a friend.” Ellie responded, for once interested in hearing what Owen’s mindset was.

“He’s my brother.” It was such a clear and simple response that Ellie felt all her frustration over his earlier actions quickly vanish. Regardless of how often he annoyed her, it was impossible to deny that Owen was someone who cared deeply for the people around him.

“Alright, I’ll help you.” His face immediately lit up, but Ellie quickly held up a hand of stop him “But we need to act quickly, aren’t they leaving after the game tomorrow?”

“Yeah they are... hold on. You know there’s a hockey game tomorrow? I thought you didn’t care about hockey or any sport for that matter.” And then Owen took a real dramatic pause.

They both knew what he was about to say next.

“You do care about me! I knew your ‘sports and athletes are a waste of time’ attitude was just an act! Ellie, you’ve changed which means you have to come to the game tomorrow!” If someone had looked at Owen’s expressions, they would have compared him to a kid on Christmas day. Which inevitably, meant that Ellie would be taking on the role of the Grinch, but it was almost two in the morning and she had withstood as much of Owen Williams as any sane person could.

“Alright, let’s get started.”

What was it a mercy or punishment to see someone at a funeral who looked exactly like the person who had just passed away?

Gemma stared at Owen Williams as he gradually made his way to the front of the room, every now and then stopping to greet some of the guests, who Gemma assumed were close family and friends.

She remembered meeting him so many years ago at Syracuse, back then, he and Drew could have passed as identical twins. From what she could see, time had continued to be kind to Owen in a way that Drew would never be able to experience. As she continued her assessment of the grieving older brother, she felt a deadly aura being aimed straight at her. With a deep feeling of unease, she hesitantly looked around only to make direct eye contact with Ellie Gong.

In that exact moment, Gemma knew what a deer caught in headlights must feel like as the blood slowly drained from her face. Ellie's glare only intensified as Gemma felt Ethan stiffen beside her, a clear sign that he had spotted her as well.

If they both made it out alive, it would be nothing short of a miracle.

There was a time and a place for everything, and while most people could agree that a funeral wasn't the ideal location for petty actions and behaviors to take occur, there were some people who chose to ignore the unspoken social rule. As the service neared its end, Gemma felt the claw of anguish gradually loosen its hold on her heart, though it didn't help ease the ache that had been her constant companion ever since she had heard about Drew's death.

Behind her, Gemma heard the all too familiar sounds of compact mirrors being opened and closed as people began checking their reflections, making sure that their mascara hadn't

smeared or that their lipstick still looked vibrant. She tried not to roll her eyes at everyone's theatrics as some people faked a few sniffs and dramatically wiped at their eyes, while others attempted to paint mournful expressions to cover up their indifference.

As the attendees slowly left their seats, Gemma was reminded of a scene in a nature documentary where a group of hyenas dejectedly abandoned a carcass that had been picked clean from earlier scavengers. There was something about the faux melancholy coated with the thin veil of relief that they could finally return to their self-centered lives grated on her nerves. She internally debated emailing Hollywood to suggest that they hold their auditions at funerals, where in her experience, people seemed to do their best acting. Before she could follow the others out, she felt a tap on her shoulder. Gemma turned to meet Ethan's annoyed stare, which meant that he had been trying to get her attention for a while, before he stiffly jerked his head towards the door.

"We need to talk." He said curtly before he stood up and left.

Gemma rolled her eyes at his tone and considered ignoring him, but her curiosity got the better of her as she slowly followed him outside.

"Are you going to say something or are you just going to stand there and brood?"

Gemma's agitated words sliced through the still air. The two of them were sitting in an empty soccer field a few blocks from where the funeral had taken place, and while Gemma understood the need for angst, today just wasn't the day for it.

"You haven't changed one bit, you know." Ethan kept his eyes firmly on the horizon as he responded.

"That's bad news for you, because it means you haven't either."

He let out a long sigh, “You’re right, I haven’t. And that’s the problem with us, isn’t it?”

A spark of annoyance shot through her as she spat out “What the fuck are you going on about? Enough with this pleasantries shit.”

Her temper must have sparked Ethan’s because in a split second, his amicable expression morphed into barely restrained frustration. “We just attended Drew’s funeral, and while I’ve had my doubts over the years as to whether or not there’s a brain in that pretty little head of yours, I think even you would have to admit that it’s time to put the past behind us.”

And because she was Gemma and because she really hadn’t changed that much over the years, she pretended she didn’t know what Ethan was talking about.

“Unfortunately for you, my pretty little head is completely empty. Why don’t you dumb it down for me?” She said in a mock confused tone, and just because she knew it would annoy him, she plastered on an exaggeration bewildered expression.

However, instead of yelling at her like she expected him to, the exact opposite happened. Gemma watched the irritation drain out of Ethan before it was replaced with a tired resignation of someone who had watched one too many olive branches burn.

“Sometimes I think we can go back to who we used to be, the way we used to be... but that’s impossible, isn’t it?” The uncharacteristic wistfulness in his tone almost made her hesitate, but because she was who she was, Gemma couldn’t stop herself from pouring acid over an open wound.

“Who you were back then would be a massive improvement over who you are now, but to state the obvious, no we can’t go back. For starters, I don’t even live in the same place anymore.”

She knew that it wasn't the heartfelt response he wanted, but she was also almost Ethan knew better than to expect her to offer him an olive branch.

A moment passed between them and then just like thin ice being broken, Ethan spoke "You're back in Colorado now, right?"

"How do you know that?" The shock was evident in her voice and at that moment, Ethan felt himself revert to his awkward, stuttering teenage years as she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Have you been checking up on me?" When he didn't respond, she continued "You're such a creep."

That comment struck a nerve in him, "Oh please, don't act like you haven't been stalking my social media. By the way, you really need to work on your LinkedIn account. You haven't been a high school senior in a few years."

Before she could deliver what would undoubtedly be a scathing insult, Ethan cut her off "How have you been, Gem. Honestly this time, I don't think it's easy for you to be staying in the same house you used to grow up in."

Ethan didn't have to say it, but it clear that his seemingly casual comment about her childhood home nestled a hidden meaning that wasn't lost on either of them. A cobwebbed covered memory of a time when the first crack in the foundation of Gemma's once picture-perfect life. The day that she was forced to admit that her family hadn't been a family in a very long time.

By the time thanksgiving week rolled around, the entire senior class buzzed with a luminescent energy as the knowledge that this would be their last rally ever. However, if there was one person who paid no attention to the festivities, it was Gemma. The angel blonde haired

girl mechanically placed one foot in front of another as the freshly fallen snow crunched under her boots. Gemma was late, but that wasn't anything new. No, the twist in this tale came in the form of the tears that serenely flowed down her face. Gemma hastily wiped at her eyes as she showed her student ID to the security standing at the entrance of the school.

Divorced.

Her parents were getting divorced.

The ugly word echoed in her mind as she tiredly sat down on one of the benches and replayed the events that unfolded that morning. She had gotten ready as usual and was about to head towards her car when her mother called from the door, "Your father will come by and pick up his things later today. If you're home when he's here, remember to tell him to leave the house key on the counter."

And that was that. Before she had managed to process the meaning of her mother's words, the door was slammed shut. Gemma must have stood numbly by her car for hours or days before she unlocked her car which simultaneously unleashed her tears as well. Her driver's ed teachers would have been horrified if they knew she was driven to school with twin rivers racing down her cheeks, but she didn't give a damn.

As she sat on the bench, it became clear that there were signs that foretold of her parent's divorce but like a NASCAR driver barreling down a residential neighborhood heedless to the stop signs, Gemma chose to ignore the warning signs until her entire world came crashing down. But now, her father's repeated absence at dinner and his missing car in the parking lot made a little too much sense.

"What's with the long face?"

And just like that, Gemma's day got worse.

“Leave me alone Ethan. Just go to the stupid fucking rally.”

“C’mon, don’t be like that.” He moved to sit obnoxiously close to her, the bench emitted a low creak in protest of the added weight. Gemma felt her irritation spike.

“Don’t be like what? A bitch?”

“Well... yes but you’ve always been a bitch and as you’re always saying, people can’t help what they are.”

“Fuck you.”

Ethan’s smirk grew, and just when Gemma was about to start screaming every swear word imaginable at him, a different set of words came pouring out of her.

“My parents are getting a divorce.”

The silence hung between the two of them like clothes on a drying rack. For once, it seemed as if something had managed to render Ethan speechless. However, like with all good things in life, it came to an end.

“Well, that sucks.” He said in a deadpanned tone.

“No shit.”

More silence followed.

She watched as he fiddled nervously with the chain around his neck before inhaling sharply. Unable to help herself, Gemma rolled her eyes. *Even in a tense situation, Ethan never stopped acting like he was in a Shakespeare play.*

“So,” He said, “What are you going to do?”

She thought for a minute. *What was she going to do?* From the start of senior year, she had known that college probably wasn’t something she would want to do, and yet, she wasn’t particularly good at or passionate about anything. She had considered staying in Boston for a

year or two to figure everything out, but now she couldn't imagine witnessing her parents argue and fight over every insignificant thing they could think of. And knowing how much her grandparents had always hated her father; she didn't doubt that they would find a way to influence her mother into taking as much of her dad's assets as possible.

"No fucking clue." She muttered as she wiped at the tears that had started to dry on her face.

Ethan sat quietly next to her, apparently experimenting with prolonged silence, before turning towards her "I suck at comforting people, but it'll be alright. At least, that's what I always hear people say."

"You know they're all lying right?" She couldn't help the small smile that emerged from the corner of her lips.

"Yeah, but who isn't a liar these days." He shrugged indifferently, the model image of someone who simply accepted what life presented him with without any questions.

Liar, the word reverberated through her mind as a series of memories where her parents promised her, they would always stick together, regardless of how many times they had to move, flooded her mind, and filled her with a suffocating amount of melancholy.

It had been one big lie.

And just because she needed, wanted to feel something other than helpfulness, wanted to be *in control*, she turned to the insufferable boy beside her and pressed her lips against his.

Five seconds or five minutes might have passed but just like granite before the dynamite is lit, there was an exquisite silence that enveloped the pair. Then, the explosion came.

Ethan and Gemma pulled apart just in time to hear the band play the opening song that signaled the rally had begun. Ethan opened his mouth to say something, but she was already on

her feet, walking no sprinting down the hall and out the front doors where she had entered not that long ago.

Instead of getting into her car, she walked the entire way back to a house where all her father's things were gone. Back to a house where her father was gone.

The sound of traffic drew both out of their reminiscing and back into reality. As if she had just realized she was sitting too close to something dangerous, Gemma quickly sat up which caught Ethan's attention. She ran a harsh hand through her hair as the wind picked up around them, the crinkling of leaves scraping across the pavement.

"I have to go." She said quietly, each word saturated with a melancholy that had been present for many years.

Before Ethan could protest or wish her well or, and this was the most likely possible, curse her out, she was already halfway down the street. The moment was so similar to the time when she had left him on the bench outside of Mrs. Holt's class so many years ago, that Ethan couldn't help but admire the universes cruel sense of humor.

He wasn't sure how long he sat in the field, but it wasn't until the sun had gone down and the moon was out and ready for a lively night, did he finally decided that it was time to leave.

Ruminations While Waiting for the Sunrise

1. Ever since I was young, I didn't do well with many things, but out of those many things, two things stood out: changes and the dark. Weirdly enough, I was completely fine with the two happening in unison. There's something about not being able to see that changes your entire perspective. As a result, I developed an unrequited love for the sunrise.
2. Unrequited love might seem harsh, but there are worse things that could happen.
3. Change and the darkness are unavoidable, so I cling onto the sun's first kiss with tight hands and chase after the playful sun rays with a carefree heart.
4. Beginnings are much shyer than sunrises but bring a lighthearted comfort.
5. I wake twice every morning just to make sure I don't miss a single moment. Once at three and another at five, when the sun is still deciding if it should get out of bed too.
6. I think I am chronically early.
7. Once, I was in the bathroom and my friend had arrived to class before me. When I walked in she said, "I thought class was cancelled because I didn't see you sitting there."
8. Is the sky ever surprised to see the sun?
9. A professor asked if I set my watch two minutes ahead. I don't but my circadian rhythm is amazing insurance.
10. I met a boy at a club meeting who almost made me stop hating the darkness, but only almost. He was sitting in a lightless room, clear blue eyes shot up to meet my darker ones and I suddenly understood why the sun loves the sky so much.
11. I liked him even more because he seemed to be the early type like me. Not in the chronically early way, but in the way that means he can *control it*, which means he's not *always early*.
12. Due to my earliness, I spent a good amount of time debating whether I should ask him if it would be better if I left and came back when it isn't so early for me to be there anymore. I didn't and our forced conversation was worse than seeing the clouds block the sun but afterwards, I fell in love.
13. I'm still deciding if that was a good thing.
14. A sunrise is the moment when the upper limb of the Sun appears on the horizon in the morning.

15. Beginning, first, start, genesis, creation, origin, birth, emergence, and *hello*.
16. If you want to be precise, the sunrise lasts a lot shorter than people think, but the moments before and after are just so beautiful, that the term has been included for a longer duration. Life works the same way, the middle is glorious, but the beginning is beautiful. Now that I'm *really* thinking about it, the same could be said about endings.
17. The sun's rising point changes slightly every day. So does life but never more when I looked over the room and saw you sitting there. I saw it in your eyes, you recognized me. The earliest people always do. It was at that moment, in the overcrowded auditorium that I realized the sun had risen right in front of me
18. I don't think there is any competition between the sunrise and the sunset, they simply just want to be with the sky.
19. I think that's why I went to all those meetings; I didn't care about what was read or said, I just wanted to be with you.
20. Fairytale retellings are some of my favorite kinds of stories to read. *Heartless* by Marissa Meyer tells the story of the girl before she became known as the infamous Queen of Hearts. Her beginning like everyone else's began with a beautiful sunrise, just before everything turned blue. In Meyer's story, Catherine (Queen of Hearts) and her lover, Jest, (the court Joker) enters a place in between the red and white kingdoms. At the doorway to Chess, time proves it is similar to humankind imaginable, because it cannot make up its mind. A time in between the sunrise and sunset, a beginning and an end with no middle. Quite indecisive, true, but the world is at peace.
21. I like paintings where the sun is in the middle, that way it could be interpreted either as a sunrise or a sunset. Even the sky believes in creating a common ground.
22. In *Heartless*, Catherine's lover gets his head chopped off and she becomes the Queen. You permanently left in December, and I returned all alone in January. Which is worse?
23. People love sunsets and I blame them entirely for the reason people have commitment issues. Everyone is always obsessing over the vibrancy of endings that they forget goodbyes are always so sad. I think people forget goodbye and hello aren't on speaking terms.
24. I hate sunsets and I remember you saying that a racoon awake during the day was a trailblazer. In my opinion, that racoon must have been a sunrise fanatic.
25. I think that racoon and I might have more in common than originally believed.
26. If we ever see each other again, I have no doubt that we will be the first two in the room and the last to leave. Like the sun that is always there but not always seen, I'll hold onto you like the sky holds the sun, no strings attached but inevitably connected.

27. According to people much smarter than me, the tropical islands and the desert generally witness more beautiful sunrises because the air pollutant particles are minimal in these areas and the light doesn't scatter as much, appearing more intense and vibrant.
28. Life could be like that, if you take away all the bad things that turn our souls black from the past, we can get a much more beautiful beginning.
29. It's a damn shame that I've never been a fan of hot weather and large bodies of water. I guess I have a habit of ruining the best things for myself.
30. At dawn, a friend who I haven't spoken to in almost two years said over the phone, "There are things that cause shadows and things that hide them. Please make sure you choose wisely, because shadows never change their minds."
31. I heard you came back for a week in July. I bet you saw the most beautiful summer sunrises. I bet you were early. I hope you thought of me and that room on the eighth floor where we met, but most likely you didn't.
32. That's okay. I can never think about you before the sun rises either.

Ever

Frost kissed fingers etch ephemeral words to forge
a halfhearted peace out of bloodstained steel,
twenty-three hue blues for the shadowed emperor.
Stay in my mind to sharpen nerves and leave
the canyons between my fingers hungry.

I'm still trying to fall in love with indifference,
though murky memories harbor fresh tears
on the linoleum floor of the battlefield where we first met.
Somewhere the hounds, dotted with cuts and whispers of praise,
are bathing in the aromatic essence of you.

We have both been ravenous fools aiding in the escape
of our snake eyed hissing demons, a few high
from the fumes of burning olive branches,

(do you hear Athena crying?)

others red eyed and slurring out a sacred name.
Tell me, was there ever any possibility of this ending differently?

Namesake

I bet an absent heart and the grace of a soulful ocean
that the lifelines, semi-transparent under your wrists
where freedom has long wrestled to chain you,
mirrors the number of candles earnestly lit
just to be eclipsed by the dawn's cynical demeanor.

If you follow the drunken wind's path,
you'll learn that a breath is the explosion of a word,
prayer is the tree that curves and breaks for the
indigo winged prince, so beloved that his fate
lulled even lightning into being a muse for the night.

For once, let's not bring the stars and their unfinished
symphonies into this until it is too late, and
it already is. All hope is not lost, after all,
we still have yet to crack the aged ground that
is bloated with ashes and ashes, and still
I am not surprised by its unyielding kindness
pounded in with a stubborn hope that there is
still the need for rest.

spare me the beginning and ending,
honey, tonight Ares is proud.

December

What is there is say about the soldier, who lost
in his fervent despair, couldn't help but tear at the
gossamer silk draped over the piano, as lovely
and cruel as a lover kept waiting in the shadows
with nothing to hold on to except a sliver of moonlight,
and the ghost of a train barreling down the tracks.

I think I've gotten it all wrong.
Patience is not a kindhearted lover, rather
it is a shadowed memory staring at the scarred
back of a man, who is unbothered as a mountain,
just before the dynamite and broken promise
sent him flying into the unknown. Someone will be
relieved to know that he was quick and rash to
plant his feet firmly under the warm southern
sun, searing his unwanted love in a new home.

All and none of this is just to say that there is nothing
left between the space where the known and unknown sleep.
The sound that comes before and the sound the arrives
a second too late are in the middle of negotiating
a ceasefire as the last pin drops.

I want to dust off our sorrows in exchange
for a better view, but the lover hasn't been dead
nearly long enough for us to plea our innocence.

You have not changed, and that is how I know I haven't either.