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## We're Having A Moment

Sophia Pelosi

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# *we're having a moment*

*A collection of essays*

*Sophia Pelosi  
Spring 2019  
Colby College*

*For my Maine girls, for my family, for Sydney, for Andy.*

*For anyone I've ever spied on, for my sixth grade English teacher, for the love I hold for this place.*

*Special thanks to Sarah Braunstein, for your patience and kindness, to Laurie Osborne for your warmth and wisdom and chocolate, and to Michael Burke, advisor extraordinaire, for being so generous with your time - couldn't have and wouldn't have done it without you.*

## *Prologue*

Hi.

Thank you for being here, for reading this. Given that you're here, I assume that you are a close friend, or a thesis advisor, or a relative, or maybe some nosy peer who just happened upon it, and found themselves curious. No judgement. I get it. I'd probably do the same to you, if it were your thesis, your heart, your soul, your memories on the page.

I wrote this because I wanted to. I wrote this because I knew it would be special for me, to get to unabashedly care about my writing and want to make it good, to produce something that would immutably hold my voice and mindset during a tumultuous and joyous and strange time. I knew that even if I never wrote again, I would always have this, and would always know that I'd finished something, that I saw something through. Maybe that's depressing, and sad, that I needed an excuse, a grade, a product, to feel like I deserved to indulge in my writing, and reflecting, and loving as I have done here - but it's the truth, at least in part.

I wrote this additionally, because I needed to. Had to. Writing has been the greatest gift during my last semester here, throughout my life really. It makes me feel grounded, and seen, and heard, and the pages that lie beyond this page have been no exception. Writing this has meant considering, truly, what I've become, and the experiences I've had that helped me get here.

Writing this helped me make peace with my impending absence from this campus, with the impending absence of some of the purest, kindest, brightest souls I've ever met from my life, or at least their physical absences - soon they won't be living next door to me, or downstairs from me, or just up a street and over a bridge.

This project has helped me consider what my time here has meant, and how I can take what I've learned forward with me, and leave what needs some shedding behind.

I hope you like it.

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## *On Eavesdropping*

You can do it really well if you keep your headphones in. That's the mistake people make I bet, although I've never told anyone how often I do it or how good I am at it, haven't exactly discussed it at length, so I can only assume that's the mistake people are making. If you keep your headphones in but quiet, don't let them see that you've paused your music or your podcast or the rain sounds you were playing to drone out what had initially been the irritating volume of their conversation, they speak freely. They speak to their friend or loved one or whoever it is they're sitting across from or chatting on the phone with, like they would if no one were listening, and in this way I get to know perfect strangers as though they're my close personal friends or favorite uncles I never get to see, or long lost camping buddies I'm finally meeting for a drink.

I mostly do it in cafes. Bars aren't a good idea because if you're like me you're usually with someone in a bar, and they'll want in on the fun but won't be as smooth as they think they're being. Once I tried to get my friend to listen in on a fight the couple behind us was having and she got so invested that she turned around and stared at them while she listened, one party of the party of two noticing her almost instantaneously, and then they got up and left, one girl glaring at us as she crossed her arms and marched out into the street, her girlfriend sighing and slapping cash on the table and tossing us a glare of her own. No, bars are no good, too messy, too many extraneous factors, too big a margin for error.

Deep in the depths of my iCloud are a series of conversations I've recorded. I recognize that this is a little strange. These are not the conversations of strangers but rather, conversations with loved ones. People I care deeply, truly, unapologetically for. I hit record unbeknownst to

those loved ones, capture them in an audio file, and store it away. Call it entitled, or perverse, or invasive; I think they're lovely.

Some of these tapes are drunken, that I've taken while out and about, in a moment of quiet nostalgia, me wanting to remember the moment I'm sitting in as it's passing me by. Others are more wholesome; the sounds of my parents singing together in the car on a drive home from a dinner party, my aunt bickering with her ex-girlfriend while she drives us upstate and out of the heat of the city and Friday afternoon traffic, backed so far up the FDR we're still in Yonkers an hour and a half later.

There's one from playing cards with my summer roommate and her Tinder date, she and I asking thinly veiled questions while we tell him to pick up a card or put one down, both trying to decide if he's a creep or not, sort of scoping him out while he tries to keep up with the ever-changing rules of a game I still don't understand, something our other roommate, Ben, learned at summer camp a decade ago. I think he makes up the rules.

There's one from a birthday party; two boy twins I'm friends with, who I grew up with, one of whom I dated briefly in high school. We're all sitting on my patio at home, the summer after our first years of college and they were turning twenty. You can hear the gurgle of a bong and Ali whining that she's the only one hitting it and then everyone starting to declare that they've quit weed, that they don't think they ever really liked it, and then after a little more whining from her, she goes quiet, presumably having melted into the lawn chair she was perched on; I deduce this from her silence alone because I can't say I really remember it now; all I know is that she's not often silent and so something must've happened, she must've been feeling it, for her to have shut up.

When I listen to these recordings I can feel the warmth of the late May night and see the glow of my friends' faces under the string lights my parents hang in the backyard, and see the experimental facial hair on the twins' faces and how short Gracie's hair was then; she'd shaved her head two months before, her long curly locks traded in for stubble that suited her warm face and kind eyes and big smile. I can see it all and feel it all and I share the tapes with no one.

These secret tapes, they're great, because sometimes I don't remember that I have them, or that the moment they stand for ever occurred, and I can listen to them and be brought right back in, swept up again, giggling at the same jokes I hear my past self giggling to on tape, cringing at the sound of my own voice now and then.

I recorded these things without the consent of any of the parties' involved. They are almost certainly unsound from a legal standpoint; no consent was involved in the making of these tapes. In fact, I could probably get in some sort of trouble for them, in particular, the one I got at a frat party long ago. It's some story about taking shots with Lindsay Lohan in Greece, her friends waving to the tape's speaker from the VIP section telling him to not let her drink, to stop her, then after she had finished five of the ten shots she bought for the two of them, her friends waving from the same section, telling him not to let her have any more - yes, I can imagine Lindsay lawyering up, suing me and this poor frat boy for slander and all that we're worth if she knew I were writing this, if she knew I had it, if she knew this frat boy tossed her name around and this story around any and every chance he got.

I can't use the two little British ladies sitting next to me in a café either, the one just down my street the semester I was abroad. It was above a consignment shop, you had to walk through the shop below to get up to the café bit - it was clearly someone's house. The bathroom was huge



and spacious and had a bathtub in it, which seemed weird for a public restroom, but then again the place itself didn't feel so public. Maybe that's why I felt okay to record them, these two little ladies, while they talked about Jeremy Corbyn and Brexit and Eurostar, because it felt like someone's home and not like a café, like I was welcome there and thus allowed to record and do as I pleased.

There are many forms of eavesdropping. There's the kind you do with strangers in passing, fleeting moments in which you share the same place, the kind you do on your parents from the first floor landing of your home when they are fighting in the living room about nothing, the kind you do on your friend's phone calls home; and then there's this secondary kind, this retroactive sort that I've come to practice. It's the kind you do for yourself, and with yourself, to remember moments you've shared with people you love or people you don't but like well enough, maybe even with people you think nothing of, but would like to remember, to consider later on.

These tapes are a time capsule, and every time I remember where they are buried, deep in my iCloud library, there's a small, unearthing celebration for me and me alone, one that lets me lie back in my own psyche and not just remember these moments, the ones I've buried, but to feel them again, know what they meant, and what they mean now.

## *My Father's Favorite Waitress*

I imagine that when she wakes up in the morning she sits up slowly, stretches with her arms above her head, and her hands in fists, the way people do in the movies. She's probably the sort of woman who has fuzzy cheap slippers that are worn from use but still functional, that were once a bright pastel pink but have faded and are always a little dirty, a little grey. And she slips those on, plus maybe her husband's plaid robe, and walks to the bathroom, closing the door before turning on the light so as not to wake him up.

I picture her vanity with those great big white bulbs for lights, the kind you see in theatre dressing rooms, but hers are a tinge yellow because they've not been changed for a while. She's quite pretty but she looks as though she's lived a long life filled with long summer nights but many brutal, winter days; she's not quite hardened but is obviously a little tense, a little tired.

She wears almost no makeup, a quick swipe of mascara and some pats of a light purple eyeshadow, one that makes her green eyes a little greener - I imagine there's a small divot in the middle of this eye shadow's casing, a sign of its use; you can see the metal of the exterior, a silver island set in a sea of light shimmery purple. She probably brushes her teeth, her dyed blonde hair, gives herself a small nod of satisfaction and shuts the lights.

The diner uniform is green, a dark forest green, a golf shirt with a collar and a black apron and over on the right chest there's a little logo, the diner itself in cartoon form, *Red Hook "Historic" Diner*. It's so pleasantly hometowny, the quotes around the word historic, there for no reason except for someone finding it amusing (it being quite obvious that the diner is not all that historic, the air quotes letting visitors and passersby in on the joke). She usually wears black jeans with her top and, sometimes, little silver hoops.

When she comes to the table she looks you in the eyes. She brings coffee over from the start; you sit down, she approaches, you have coffee. She holds the pot daintily with a firm and strong wrist, a wrist that has a tattoo, a remembrance tattoo; someone has died. Maybe that is the waitress's magic, that while you are drinking coffee in this "historic" diner she suddenly confronts you with your own mortality. She reminds you that this moment, on a sunny spring Sunday, one you've chosen, selected, set aside to finally sit down with your daughter and son, this moment you spend watching them color with crayons (although they are basically grown) on the backs of paper placemats, the fronts of which hold hosts of adverts for local businesses, some with the names of their friends' parents on them (Johnson Family Towing, Janelli Security Systems, Hardeman' Orchards); this moment is passing you by as you sit in it, it is a brief and fleeting moment of your life, and the waitress serves this fact to you as simply and swiftly and as matter-of-factly with her firm but dainty wrist with a remembrance tattoo, as she does your coffee.

I think my father likes her in part because she remembers our orders. For my brother: two eggs, sunny side up, side of bacon, extra orange slice, buttered white toast, hash browns. For me: Belgian waffles, with whipped cream piled high and those high-fructose strawberries, soupy and gloppy and delicious, oozing red dye no. 3. Or that's what it was, before I knew what calories were, before I wanted to disappear into my skeleton, take up less space. That's what it was before all that mess started, this girlhood-then-womanhood business; now it's more like my brother's, or an egg-white omelet, with vegetables, with extra cheese. She always winks at me when she takes my order, always, just a slight little wink, like she and I share some womanly intel that the men I am related to do not. My father's order has changed over the years. I can't

remember what he ordered when we were young. Now it varies, changes; he's here so often that it has to.

These mornings are so different from the ones I spent in Spain, very far away from my father's favorite waitress, very far away from any "historic" diner, from my father. The mornings in Spain were the moments I liked the best. The way the sun would come in through my host mother's lace curtains, sienna-yellow light streaming in, refracting and reflecting off the sandstone buildings outside, landing on the cafe con leche she'd set out for me (whose calorie count I tried not to think of, for it was likely cream that made it so thick and lovely and roll on my tongue, and cream was something I never allowed myself because I was scared of the way it might stick to my arteries and my insides and keep my life both sweet and short).

Breakfast in Spain would be two pieces of bread, cut thick and toasted, with homemade jam or marmalade spread an inch thick across its surface. My host mother would also set out a strawberry yogurt, and some fruit, and some cheese, and a smorgasbord of other things I wouldn't touch because no one can eat that much and she knew this but wanted me to know that I had options, that whatever she had was mine too, and that is why I loved her so very very much. She would sit with me while I ate, with her hair in rollers and her makeup setting and she'd be in her house clothes, usually leggings and a t-shirt but sometimes a kaftan or, once, a negligee, which was satiny and of a maroonish red, that matched the color her hair had been dyed at the time.

She would sit with me and pat my hand and adjust her glasses and tell me all about her sister Milli who was not doing well because she smoked too much and had been wild in her youth and when she'd say this she'd cast her hand in a swift backward motion as if to say "I

fucking told her,” and wiggle in her seat with only the slightest tinge of satisfaction because Maria Jose loved to be right.

Once she sat me down, about two weeks in, when my Spanish was still blooming and broken and hardened by my tongue’s desperation to flick and roll in the way the words asked of it; I imagined it was like my tongue was on some sort of exercise kick, like it was finally going to lose those last ten pounds, so it would get up and do its running and squatting and lifting and stretching but it would do it with a shaky hesitation, wary it might fail, so it sometimes got tired and botched the exercises and the conversing and the rolling and the flicking altogether; but it got up the next day and tried again, had to - there was no choice. No, it wasn’t like an exercise kick my tongue was performing, it was more like a Sisyphean punishment, like no matter how many times I did my tongue squats and lifts and stretches I had still said the word “cabbage” instead of “curtain,” and I couldn’t tell which was which even after realizing I’d confused them.

She sat me down one morning and broke my heart. She was a very lonely woman (in my whole semester there she left the house only once, for a friend’s birthday party, but truly that was it, and for this I thought she must be lonely, in spite of the husband, Nordin, who showered her with attention, with heart, with unconditional devotion.) She liked having me around, I think, because there was more noise in the house, more chatter to have, an opportunity to tell old stories once again, to pull them from her mind’s library, dust them off and share them like new again. She would chatter and chatter at me, and I loved it, it helped me learn, so I let her, and we became very close. The morning she broke my heart she said to me, in slow slow Spanish, *No entiendes los dulces nombres que te llamo, esto es lo que significas para mí*; you don’t understand the sweet names I give you, here is what you mean to me.

She took out her phone then, and a translating app she'd downloaded. She plugged in the various names she'd come to call me, *mi niña, mi vida, chiquitita, mi corazón*. She'd plug each one in, then show me the screen, the English translation (*my daughter, my life, sweet little girl, my heart*), with a smile, with a squeeze of my hand. I tried to tell her I did understand, that those pet names were some of the only words I was sure I could understand, but I didn't. I wanted to tell her that I understood and that I loved her too, for all her strangeness, for all her wildness, for the love she gave me; but I couldn't find the words in her language, and she knew none in mine, so I let her tell me in this way, and tried to tell her I felt it back (*a mi tambien, a mi tambien.*) Afterward, we hugged, and she teared a little, and so did I, and that night she let me help her cook for the first time that semester.

My father's favorite waitress has never left the country, although most people haven't in this small town. When she swings by our table again, this time with our food, she is smiling, but not with her eyes; she's been chatting with all the regulars at the counter, who sit with their papers and cups of coffee and house special platters, and ask her for her thoughts on what they're reading, ask her how her family is, ask her if they're treating her alright here, ask for another serving of pie.

I wonder about these men a lot. I figure they must be retired, have to be if they're able to spend all morning, most mornings, posted up at this counter. I wonder if they have wives or partners or children or grandchildren or if it's just her, just my father's favorite waitress, their sole *chiquitita*, a beacon of light and warmth and human connection, a mythical creature, who appears at the counter and brings tidings of listening and warm coffee to all those who call upon

her. You can tell yourself she gets something from it too, from this counter-banter, something other than tips, something she doesn't get elsewhere. You can tell yourself this.

Once, in high school, I arrived at a house party, and upon some snooping, upon some peering into framed photographs on my way to the bathroom, I discovered I was in my father's favorite waitress's home. The house became a warped distortion of itself, some alternate universe, a parallel reality. The walls were lined with taxidermied animals, with guns, with baby pictures of her children. In the garage, where they'd set up the pong table, there was a big hook at the ceiling and a great big drain at the bottom. I asked Nate, the boy who lived there, her step-son, why that was, and he blushed, his fair skin turning nearly as red as his hair, and said it was for draining deer.

I backtracked, quickly. I remember feeling as though I'd overstepped, because Nate looked embarrassed and I rarely ever saw him that way. So I smiled, said that was cool, and excused myself, quickly, saying I just wanted another beer. I'll admit I was rattled by the tidbit; I didn't like knowing that Cindy regularly watched blood seep down and out of a corpse and into a hole in her floor, that it happened often enough to merit having a designated space in her home for it. It felt too real, too mortal, too something.

The next day, hungover, feeling bleak at the kitchen counter, I told my father I had been at Cindy's house, Cindy from the diner. I tried to tell him about the wooden hallways and dark shag carpets, the deer-blood drain - but he said he didn't know any Cindy from the diner. He looked at me blankly, squinting his eyes, trying to think. And suddenly I was angry, suddenly hurt for Cindy; all those smiles, all that remembering, all that kindness, all that connection, and she becomes background noise. For my father, she was a tertiary character, an extra in the movie

of *his* life, serving *him* breakfast on a quiet morning with *his* kids. My father did not remember Cindy, the way she smacks her gum and winks, the way she used to pat my brother on the head, the morning she stopped (suddenly he was too tall to pat on the head). If he doesn't remember Cindy, doesn't remember these things, I wonder if he remembers the quiet mornings at all, if they are as sacred to him as they are to me.

And if that's the case for my father, who is she to the counter-men? Who is she to them, but the nameless force in the room bringing your lonely heart some comfort, that extra spice that makes the diner food taste better than it does anywhere else, the inaudible chatter that lets you know you can relax, that you're in a home of sorts, that you are safe. She becomes a symbol; to them, she is less than human. She is a stand-in, she is a pretty face to flirt at, she is your servant.

I suppose I am no better, really; in fact my Cindy musings may be even worse - I'm more flippant, less engaged. I'm turned off by her deer drain, I doubt she's left the country, I embarrass her step-children at their own party. I muse on her morning routine, her slippers, her mood. I wonder whether or not her marriage is happy, how she likes her step-kids. I think about what she does on her days off, if she knows any Spanish, if she knows I've been to her home. I'm just trying to entertain myself, to ground this quiet morning in some external place, while my father reads the paper, while my brother doodles on his paper placemat, while we wait for our eggs.



## *Cool Girl*

He's maniacal while he does it, while he plays, flicking the little plastic controller this way and that, firing shots off at civilians and yanking a little animated woman who has bangs like my mother out from her Honda Escalade. Another *click click click* and his avatar is punching her, sweat pooling on his on-screen wife beater as he does it. The boys around me cheer; the animated people on the street look appalled. At least someone feels as I do.

"Watch this," he says to our friends, glancing at me, knowing how pissed I'm getting, eager to make it worse. He hits a series of buttons, a quick exchange of ABAB or some shit like that and suddenly his little avatar is lighting this woman with bangs like my mother's on fire. And I am fuming at this point and feeling sort of nauseous and they're all high fiving and laughing at me, saying I should lighten up, saying it's just a joke, saying I'd like it if I tried it. I give a little smile and say I'm going to bed. It's quiet while I rise to walk out of the room but in that way that a room gets quiet when you know all the people in the room will be talking about you the minute the door shuts.

The dorm hallway is quiet, thank god. The nausea is worse now even though I'm not inside. I'm scared one of them will walk out and see me like this so I try to hurry up the stairs. My palms start to sweat and my head starts to spin and I'm feeling pins and needles all over, worst on my lips and fingertips and chest, just above my heart. I make it upstairs and pour myself a glass of water and sit, with the lights off, for a while, my breath slowing after ten minutes or so.

Later, I get a text from the control-clicker himself: *Sorry for the violence.*



It's Tuesday. I'm sitting opposite a peer of mine at lunch. It's a working lunch. She's writing a paper on the "cool girl" trope, in reference to that all too familiar, recurring female character you see in movies and on TV. The Cool Girl is the sort of woman who drinks craft beer instead white wine or vodka sodas, who is fun and energetic and likes whatever sports you do, who is stunning and wild and can eat a whole plate of chicken wings and crush a large cheese pizza in one sitting, all while maintaining a dress size of two. She is messy and funny and is immovably, consistently, necessarily, *not like other girls*.

Exhausting.

She's interviewing me for said paper (I volunteered, she did not elect me as the Perfect Candidate for this, nor am I the only person she's interviewing), asking me questions that are quite frankly, hard. She argues that while no one is the cool girl, everyone has tried to be. The Cool Girl is a myth, but the myth itself is real, having been swallowed hook line and sinker by men and women alike as some ideal standard. The hype surrounding the myth is real, the people striving to embody the myth or the people who would like to find and befriend and then marry a cool girl are real and thus, attempting to be the cool girl is real. Some of her questions are leading. I'm nervous. I feel as though I'm going to misspeak, say something I don't mean, something I'll regret.

*Are you able to confide in your close male friends?*

I consider this. I guesstimate. Out of ten men I am pretty close with, as in would be able to sit in a car and drive for several hours with without it being awkward or all that quiet, there are probably three who I can talk to as I do my female friends.

*Do you think they know this? The male friends you can't confide in?*

No, and quite frankly, I don't think they'd care if they did.

*What sets the relationships you have with those three men apart from the other seven?*

They listen - and remember. They ask if I am okay after they tell me how they are.

*Do you place yourself in competition with other women for male attention?*

Not intentionally. Almost definitely.

*Do you value male emotion over female emotion?*

Do I what?



I've only seen my father cry twice. Once at his father's funeral, and once when my grandmother (my mother's mother) was in the hospital, with a stroke, and she'd gone non-verbal, and he and I couldn't make it to the hospital in Buffalo for whatever reason, so my mother pressed the phone against my nana's ear and we took turns saying goodbye, and I don't think it was until I heard my father's voice break and saw the tears rolling down his cheeks that I understood the gravity of the call, the reality of it all.

My mother and I cry all the time. We cry for joy every time we see each other, get teary every time we hug for longer than ten seconds, and weep every time we say good-bye. Not only do I see my mother cry more often, more often than not we are crying together.



The lunchroom is getting louder. It's getting harder to hear her questions, but I don't know what she meant anyway, what it is that she's getting at, wondering if I value male emotion over female. It feels loaded. It feels like a landmine. I'm not sure (which is another way of

saying, I think I know my answer, but *I'm not sure* I like it). So she clarifies: *How do you take it when a female friend cries versus when a male friend does?*

Ah. She's got me.



The first time I felt like I was in a real, adult relationship, the first time I felt like I understood what it meant to support your partner, was when my ex cried in front of me. And granted, he was drunk when it happened, but he cried nonetheless, and for good reason; his father was having open-heart surgery, it was an eight-hour operation, no guarantees. I held him and he shook, and wept, and cried, and I was so proud of him that he could let his fears and sorrows out, and let them out with me, and to me, that he felt he could share this with me. I was so moved I cried too. For his dad, in part, for how sad he was, in part; but mostly because I was in love, and I was glad he loved me too.

None of my girlfriends have ever really had something like that happen - thankfully. God blessedly. But we weep all the time. At movies. About boys. About girls. About our bodies. About how much we love each other. We are together in our weepiness. There's no shame in it, it's just that it all starts to blur together, these releases, this openness. I don't know that I value one over the other - it's just that one is a rarer breed.

You don't often stop to take in the beauty of the stars you can see from your front lawn every night; but a comet? That only comes round every fifteen years? Every twenty? That you stop for. That you get out the binoculars for.



Even the *click clacks* of her typing sound judgey - she doesn't really respond to the answers I give to her questions and I think that's what's unnerving me. She just types down my responses and moves on. Sometimes, the questions seem like she's crafted them based on my answer; she pushes on some sentiment I've revealed, asking me to explain, and those I jump on. I think I know what I meant. I can explain.

Other times, the questions have nothing to do with my answers. She's just moving down her list. I wonder what other people are saying. I wonder if I'm a shitty feminist.

*Have you ever suppressed your own emotions for the sake of your male friends? Have you pretended not to be mad, or hurt, or upset, when you really were?*



We're in the boys' room again, this time before the bar. It's two weeks later, we're drinking and one of them jeers and asks if I want to play GTA again, and the rest of them sort of giggle and the girls who are with me but weren't there that night look sort of confused, and I say nothing and flip him off and go back to the conversation I was having, hoping he doesn't turn it on. I'm mad. I say nothing. The pre-game goes on around us. I make some excuse to run back upstairs to my room, say I need another drink or want to change my shoes.

When I get to my bedroom I shut the door, and sit on the edge of my unmade bed for a minute. I do change my shoes, and while I bend to tie the laces I can see my male friend's faces, lit up with glee at the sight of a woman burning alive, at the sight of people getting gunned down on sidewalks and inside of subway stations and outside of hospitals, the way they laughed as they gurgled their cheap beers and smoked their e-cigarettes and told me to calm down.

I stand, and take a pull of the flask on my desk, that I filled last weekend but never finished. I'm annoyed by how anxious I've suddenly become. But still I can't get over their faces, all twisted up in perverse delight.

I wonder how many hours of that shitty stupid game the kid who shot up Stoneman Douglas played before deciding to do it, wonder how they could laugh at watching pedestrians get mowed down by cars driving up the sidewalk when just weeks ago they were getting CNN notifications about the same sort of attack in Munich, or London, or Nice.

I just can't understand bonding over such violence, such cruelty, such pain. But it's just a game, right? They're only fucking with me because they like me, right? Because I can hang? Because boys will be boys?

I turn my bedroom light out, head back downstairs. I smile. Gloss over my absence. Ask if we're ready to leave. I suppress. I am unfeeling. I'm chill, I'm chilling. I'm not like other girls, *I'm a cool girl.*

## *Bug*

I was twenty and it was January and I was sipping mint tea in my twin XL bed, in my chilly little dorm room, my lap warm from my computer's whirring as I watched hour after hour of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and wondered if I actually loved you, or even liked spending time with you. To be fair, I was a little pissed at you. I was actually often pissed at you, thus the wonderings. I had the stomach flu that day - once the unpleasantnesses pass stomach flu days are a sort of perverse pleasure in that you can flop around and not worry about when you'll eat or who you'll eat with or if you should go to the gym or if you should finally get coffee with that person you've been bailing on or do some homework or what have you. Stomach flu days mean knowing you're not going to school and your dad putting a blanket over you while you watch infomercials on the couch because you're up too early for anything to be on cable but there's a certain joy in that, in watching the morning sky be dark but not black, a kind of deep navy blue with the promise of a sunrise.

That day in January I'd skipped my geology lecture. I remember emailing the professor, a nice burly older gentleman with a shock-white beard and beer belly who looked exactly like what a geologist should look like. I remember writing that I had the bug, and his sweet little reply, *Something I definitely do not want to share with you...rest up!*

My roommate was gone somewhere. I don't remember where now, but she was gone for the day, and as much as I adore her I was so glad, for sometimes when you're sick you just want to wallow, and be ill, and not have to worry about asking how someone's day was and whether or not your sniffing is bothering them on the other side of the room.

It had hit me late at night. I remember lying on the floor of the dorm bathroom, knowing how dirty it probably was and wondering about the additional microbes I was adding to the violently-ill-stew my body was cooking up but being unable to do much else. I remember being cold and sad that I hadn't brought my blanket or a sweatshirt or something warm into the bathroom with me. I remember wanting my mother, or my father, or anyone really, any adult figure who could be there to make me chicken soup from scratch with the little star pasta, *pastinas*, to remind me that it will pass, to rub my back.

I thought about seeing you earlier that evening. I had thought the queasiness I was feeling all night was a manifestation of my nerves over being at your house, with your cool older friends and their significant others and a dog; it felt so adult, so old. I was only nineteen. I was a sophomore and you were a senior. You were the fourth person I'd slept with.

When you said you'd pick me up from campus to bring me over I'd refused, claiming that was too much, saying you shouldn't have to leave twice, that I'd drive myself. You'd refused right back, insisting that you come to get me and you did; but now I don't think the offer was so gentlemanly, so courteous. I think you just knew I was a flight risk, that if I had my car there it would become a getaway car soon after dinner was over. Part of me enjoyed that you knew that about me, that you cared enough to learn that about me. A larger part of me resented it, resented you wouldn't let that part of me be.

That part of me was, is, rooted in fear. I know now, that fearing your partner, in any capacity, is a red flag. I see that now. I didn't then.



It's not like you hit me or anything. Not like you made me feel unsafe. I was just scared of you, scared of your wildness, of your love for me. I was scared that this was what love felt like, and I was terrified that I didn't like the feeling.

That night on the bathroom floor, I worried you'd be mad, mad I had gotten you sick. It's funny to think that now, knowing you better - you don't get angry easily. You're good at laughing things off, letting life smack you in the face and then forgiving it while you ice the sting. I admire you for it, even now.

You were difficult, to say the least. Hard to navigate, hard to predict, unruly in your every move. You'd be on rooftops in spandex calling for others to join you, teeny tiny sunglasses made for children teetering on the bridge of your nose while you jumped around the student center, while you swung your hips around and kissed your friends on the mouth. I can still hear the sound of the wheels of your skateboard on asphalt, your maniacal laugh, the sharp inhales you take when you're about to cry.

It was strange to be up at night, alone, knowing you'd be feeling this way soon, knowing it was coming for you - I remember texting you to tell you how sorry I was, how I guess it had been a good thing that I didn't sleep over after all, even though you wanted me to. I made you drive me home that night like you'd promised you would when you offered to pick me up, even though you drank three beers in front of me, slowly, pointedly, while we watched a movie with your roommates; you wanted me to say you didn't have to take me home, that I'd stay over, sleep over. I made you anyway, and you moped the whole way back to campus, didn't kiss me goodnight when we pulled up to my dorm's front door. You could be such a baby.

The storm has passed for me, I'm four hours into this *Buffy* marathon and there's no end in sight. For you, however, the storm, the harrowing, the party - has just begun. Before I've even opened the Snapchat, the little yellow banner that's flashed across my lock screen with your name in tiny black letters, before I've swiped it open I know what it is, know what it will say, and sure enough: it's you, you looking sweaty and pale, slumped, alone on your bathroom floor. A black bar cuts the picture in two, where you've written the caption: *Send help Soph!!!*

I reply, a picture of my computer, of Buffy mid-kick, stake in hand, a grimace on her face, a Vampire or Demon or some other Creature of the Night on his way to the ground - all that and my cup of mint tea. *The only cure*, I write, in my own black caption bar.

You open it. You don't respond.

## *Before the World Was Big*

The restaurant we stand in is busy and her arm is tight around my shoulders as she pulls me away from the hostess stand, back to a bench on a yellow wall where coats are hanging. It's early spring, so these are lighter coats than we've seen for months but they're still coats, bright scarves hung atop their collars here and there. Her mother continues to talk to a waitress (not the hostess, or anyone who could change our fate likely, but Tanya doesn't give a fuck and never has, and just needs someone to channel her passive aggressive energy toward). She asks a mousey-looking brunette woman who is about seven inches shorter and fifteen years younger than she is how much longer we'll be waiting and how absolutely ridiculous this has all been, but Vita and I aren't listening or even really aware because she is telling me secrets, divulging sacred words to me with an urgency that both frightens and excites me.

"I've found this place, with Melanie," she says, her pale blue eyes bright. "It's magic. It's literally magic."

At first, my heart sinks; Melanie is Vita's other best friend. Vita is my only best friend. And I don't know yet that life is long and winding and that you meet other people and that the people you know at ten are not the only people you will ever know - I don't know this yet, so this discovery Vita's made with someone else is a blow to my ego and to the sacredness of our us-ness but while I am mulling this over in my mind I realize I'm missing the description of this magical place that she's found with that curly haired weirdo so I interrupt her, ask her to repeat herself.

“Girls!” Tanya calls; she’s passively-aggressed the poor mousey brunette into submission, waving us to a table that’s ‘not too close to the window, not too close to the heater’. Vita rises, tells me she’ll finish later.

For a moment it’s just me, left squished among the spring coats and the bright scarves, a little heartbroken while I watch her blonde ponytail swish to back to her mother; Vita turns, gestures for me to follow. I do.



“I haven’t talked to her in forever,” I say, almost smugly, to Ali. We are older now; three years out of high school and into college. Ali is a mutual friend. She knows Vita as well as I do. There was a time we were all thick as thieves; well thick as thieves who talked unbelievable amounts of shit about each other, thick as thieves who fought all the time, who felt so betrayed by each other so much of the time.

There were six of us once. I was never as close with the others, but they were fun enough (at least one of them is a Republican now, the other is well on her way to being married to one). It was always Ali and Vita that I was closest with, always stitched up tight to.

It’s the middle of the summer. We’re all about to be seniors in college and Ali is over at my parents’ house, scrolling through Vita’s Instagram, digging with fervor for a specific photo, one I “have” to see. That used to be Ali’s Tumblr URL back in the day: “fer-vor.” Dumb. It was all so dumb.

She’s clutching her white wine and balancing it in between her chest and chin, sort of rocking the lip of the glass across the underside of her own bottom one. She’s always had this

way of sitting that is simultaneously graceful and poised but utterly relaxed; her fingernails are always perfect little almonds, her hair is always sleek, her green eyes are always piercing.

She has always been beautiful; when we were young (too young for high school boys to be giving her as much attention as they did) she was known for her looks. One group of degenerates even named a beer pong formation after her - *The Sagerman*, they called it, almost like a cross, or a compass rose - four cups, one in each direction, meant to symbolize her pussy - we were in the eighth grade, and senior boys were fantasizing about sinking their balls into this yonic-cup formation. Pigs. She was a little flattered but mostly grossed out, I was full-on disgusted, and Vita was seethingly jealous.

“GOT IT!” Ali shout-speaks; some quack-doctor told her she has a voice that operates at a decibel that reverberates at a higher frequency than most people’s voices, so that it’s easier to hear her than most people when she speaks (which seems to me like a nice way of medically diagnosing someone with being shrill).

We rearrange ourselves on my parent’s patio furniture so we can both peer at her phone’s screen and I take a big gulp of my wine. Ali brought it from her parent’s house. She didn’t steal it, doesn’t really ever steal it anymore, not the way we all used to - now practically shove whatever bottle’s been kicking around the fridge for a few months from some friend-of-a-friend (who wanted to make a nice gesture and bring a \$6.00 bottle of wine to a party they weren’t technically invited to) into our young adult hands as we leave the house. No more bulky sleepover bags with water bottles filled with vodka or triple sec or whatever was at the back of the liquor cabinet, wrapped up in sweatpants in case of a bag check - no one ever checked. They knew what was up, we weren’t that slick.

“This is it, here look.”

It’s Vita, crammed in a square frame with several other blonde women, probably girls in her sorority. She’s wearing a shirt that says “Heady Vibes” in acid-trip lettering and smoking a joint and looking much too skinny and very, very dead in the eyes. I zoom in on her face - she looks so fucked up. So fucked up I can’t believe that she’d post this on the internet in any capacity fucked up, blasted and completely removed from the girl I once knew.

“She doesn’t really seem okay,” Ali says, her brow furrowed.

I nod in agreement. I say nothing.



It was that damn pair of Hello Kitty scissors, the ones my mother had bought me from the Japanese grocery store or somewhere else just before we’d moved out of the city. Those scissors became the emblem of Vita and my first meeting, the symbol of the story of her and her wide blue eyes coming to my pink sparkly pencil box that was slightly transparent so she could see the things inside and gesturing that I should open it so she could see them, and then cutting a piece of paper on my desk to test them out (a piece of paper which wound up being my nametag, and I wound up in trouble, but she told the teacher it had been her, so then we were both in trouble, and that was the first of many moments we would be in trouble together but it was delicious).

That story, our juvenile tango with trouble: it became legend, mythic for us; a part of what would later be a well-choreographed dance when we were old enough to drink and go to parties and meet boys from other schools; “How’d you two meet?” they’d ask, and we’d smile and laugh and tell the story and it was all very sweet and charming and worked as a good veneer to hide what was quickly becoming the shitty sour aftertaste of a dying friendship.

I remember our classroom well, our teacher well: Ms. Derieux. My father hadn't liked that she had a French name, that it was sort of foofy for a first grade teacher in a farming town, and I remember my mother swatting him in the arm at Open House when he told her so, and me swatting him after her because I liked Ms. Derieux very much, with her long brown hair and the flowy clothes she wore and the way she knelt and quietly and kindly reminded us all to settle down, rather than screaming and going red in the face and terrifying us into docility; she was the antithesis of Ms. Jones down the hall.

I remember the school, Mill Road Elementary, just as well. It always smelled like graham crackers and dirt. The librarian was one of my classmate's mothers, Mrs. Shoemaker - I remember her daughter Reagan would always cry before library because she didn't want the rest of us to make fun of her, and I remember sort of hating her for hating that her mother taught at school, thinking how cool that would be, how much I'd like that; Reagan and I handled a lot of things differently and this became apparent as we grew up together and apart but side by side in our little town. We took different routes to the same place; we both attend small liberal arts colleges in rural areas, took the same IB classes - but what happened along the way for her, I couldn't say. I have no idea what she's like now, or where she is, or what she's up to. We rarely ever spoke even when we were in the same place, I don't know why we would now. All I know for sure is the year I actively began super-caring about what size jeans I was wearing, Reagan had pink hair and dropped out of gymnastics. I guess we were all going through it.

Outside the library where Reagan's mother worked there was a grey stone statue of a little girl who had died and it terrified me. I think it was really the first time I understood that there was no guarantee of growing up; that some of us are doomed or destined or whatever you

want to think of it to be frozen in time, full of questions that will go unanswered. The thing, the statue, was made in her likeness but not life-size, so she was a miniature six year old. She was always smaller than us, always stuck outside the library, even on snowy days, even on rainy days, even over summer vacation; stuck outside our elementary school in our little town and that was it for her, that was all she'd ever know.

The rumors I heard from older kids as they chatted on the back of the bus, their voices somersaulting into my little ears upfront, said that she'd been hit by a bus while crossing the street, that her parents had seen the whole thing, that the driver may have been a little drunk and that's how it happened, and that the little sanctuary in the forest at the edge of the playground, that you could get to by crossing a stream, was for her, that it was made by her father, and that it gave everyone the creeps. I don't know if any of it is true. It could be a steaming pile of bullshit, straight from the mouth of not babes, but Chloe Morañez, who always seemed to know everything about everything but perhaps, in retrospect, was just a really good liar.

I remember kids going to visit that little girl's sanctuary all the time. It was tricky business; you had to evade the careful eyes of the recess monitors because technically, students weren't allowed past the treeline. But if you made it you were essentially home free; you could hide behind trunks and scare other kids who had escaped, you could spy, you could write love letters in your head, you could look for worms. A little further in off the path was a circular clearing, and a bench, and an altar with glass baubles and figurines and I think some windchimes, although I don't quite remember now.



I never stayed long, or went alone, or sat on the bench; I was afraid of the ghost of that little girl. I realize now it wasn't so much her I feared, or her imminent spirit, but rather what she represented: a dead kid.



The first week I met Vita (soon after the scissors) I told her I was from Hawaii. I am not. I sang her the *Lilo and Stitch* theme song under lofty maple trees at recess to prove it. She says she never believed me but let me go on, like an idiot, pretending to hula dance.

Even at my lowest points with Vita, I was grateful she let me dance for her like that. I think it's telling of who she was, who we were, when we were good. There was a moment in time when she liked that my head was always in the clouds, that I was constantly fibbing and making up stories. She let me dance and pretend, pretend I was someone else, pretend we were somewhere else.

When my turn came, my turn to pretend for her, I couldn't deliver; couldn't pretend that nothing changed, that we never hurt each other, that we never grew up. I think that's where some of my guilt comes from now, the knowledge she'd do it for me, that I simply can't.



We were fifteen when she fell from her parents' good graces. When they threatened her with boarding school and with locked wifi passwords and groundings. But she was strong throughout; Vita couldn't be moved or swayed. She was going to revolt, and that was that.

I have the opposite relationship with my parents and I think she hated me for that. I tell my mother everything; I tell her every time I have my heart broken, told her when I'd been assaulted, told her that I'd stopped smoking. I even told her about the time Vita's parents walked

in on her blowing her boyfriend, after carrying hot cocoa up the stairs for as a special treat because they hadn't let her come over to "my house" that afternoon, so she could study. Apparently, Vita had no idea they were home, and her parents didn't know her boyfriend was over, or that she even had a boyfriend, and when they opened the door to her now hot pink room all parties cried out with a shock so bright and true that her father (Nate, who always wore tight spandex cycling shorts in the mornings, and would stand in the kitchen at the island sipping his OJ like a dad from a too-cheesy-to-be-funny sitcom might) let go of the tray and the hot cocoa sprayed all over a white carpet and left a vaguely beige stain that no amount of OxiClean could truly eradicate. My mom didn't think it was that funny. She said "poor baby," a few times, giggled a little, stopped herself, then left the room.

Sometimes I'd stare at that stain and giggle to myself too because come on, it's a little funny - but Vita would just get a far off look in her eye that I'm sure I would too, had it been my carpet and my parents and my boyfriend's dick.



The spring in upstate New York, before it gets lush and green and flowery, is nasty. It's muddy and the snow takes forever to melt altogether so it just stays clumpy and scattered about brown dead grass and it gets too warm to wear your outer coat but not warm enough for a dress so you have to play a guessing game of hot or cold and be likely miserable no matter what you choose and its ugly and it smells like manure and there's nothing to do. I think about this as the barren snowless trees whip by us on our way home from dinner with your mother, which has been generally excruciating because your mother is excruciating. I am eleven years old but I

know, from knowing your mother, what an excruciating person is like and how to speak with them: softly, apologetically, quickly.

Tanya is not very kind to Vita. She scares the shit out of me. A year from now, I'll get my period in her car. My third ever period. Three sounds like enough times to have gotten the hang of something but no, it really wasn't, not in this case at least. I didn't realize I had gotten it, so I bled through my jeans and onto her mother's white leather seats (the car was dark, I didn't know when I got up, I only knew because Vita told me later that week that her mother had spent Sunday in their garage, scrubbing the seats and cursing), and to this day, to this present day after the rise and fall of the Vita-Sophia Empire, Tanya has never raised that Sunday Bloody Sunday to me and for that reason she is all the more terrifying. She knows I know she knows. Whether she is protecting us both from what would undoubtedly be a terribly awkward conversation, or if she simply likes having something to hold over my head, or if she genuinely did not want to embarrass me, I can't be sure. But I do know, that Vita had no problem ringing me to tell me what I'd done, with a kind of ruthless glee.

But now we are eleven, and we're in Vita's room, which at this age is a teal so abhorrent it truly makes me nauseous and makes our skin look pale when the light reflects off it; she's told me before that she's gotten out of going to school this way more than once, because Tanya sees how pale she looks (even paler in this teal glow) and doesn't question the forehead Vita makes warm with a heating pad moments before she walked in.

I think that's the coolest thing I've ever heard.

I'm dying to know more about the magic place and Vita knows it so she's milking it for all it's worth, tantalizing me with promises of *when my parents go to sleep*, telling me *literally no one can know about this*.

Vita says literally a lot. My dad mentioned it once, off-handedly in the car; he said, "don't go saying literally the way she does; it's not correct, she sounds stupid."

My dad doesn't like Vita. Even at this age, my dad doesn't like her.

"Tomorrow, we'll go tomorrow."

She falls asleep. I stay awake; I hate the smell of her house.



She spends her summers in Maine working at JAX laboratory giving tumors to mice and then trying to heal them. She's done this since the summer between our junior and senior year of high school; this will be the fourth time she's gone. The lab is up in Bar Harbor so when she invites me up for the weekend, because I'm living in Portland, and for the first time in three summers we'll be in the same state, it doesn't feel like an optional visit or one for pleasure. This is for business, for the sake of the relationship we've built over eleven, twelve, however many years.

I don't *not* want to go - I convince myself it will be good to get out of the tiny attic apartment I'm sharing with three feuding roommates, two of whom are dating, the third who resents that they are dating. The four of us spent last weekend giving the latter a stick-n-poke tattoo on the floor of our kitchen, which is blue and cramped and always host to a hoard of recycling we've forgotten to take out but that is ours, and peers from school who are also in Maine for the warm months and casually swing by now and then and overstay their welcomes.

One of us is technically squatting since it was listed as a three bedroom apartment and we signed the lease with three people; my air mattress is in the living room, which is also my room. We have to hide from our landlord sometimes. One of us has to park a block away. We pretend one half of the couple just sleeps over a lot. So far it's worked. So far it's been heaven.

So I tell her yes, I will come to see you, see this place I know means a lot to you since you've been doing it so regularly, every summer, every year. I stop in Waterville on my way up, to visit my college campus and the friends who are working there for the few warm months Maine sees. I only stop for one night (where I wind up shoeless and careless and happy with Cathy on the library steps, staring up at the sky, feeling warm). I go the rest of the way in the morning although I want to stay put, maybe go to the lake, maybe go for a hike - I don't. I know she'll be pissed. In my blue Subaru, I wind and weave to this mountain-adjacent tourist town and meet Vita after work.

She looks thin. Really thin.

I feel jealous. Then I hate myself for feeling jealous.

She's been given this house by the housing department at the lab, and it's fit for twelve but is living alone in it - it's a nice house, spacious with good decor. They'd assigned her to a basement room that smelled like mold and looked like a straight up bunker from the red scare days, and when she shows it to me it's with a cackle that is rude and sharp and pointed, but unbelievably well executed. She tosses her hair which she's curled (and I feel annoyed that she's curled her hair just to see me; it's like she's always dressing up to prove she can) and she rolls her eyes and says *can you believe?*

I give Vita a half smile, tell her it seems okay - but when she leads me upstairs to the

master bedroom she's broken into and moved into I understand her incredulity at being handed the keys to the basement room over this one, as if she'd stay in that when a room like this is just upstairs. It's like the hall of mirrors, it's palatial - the entire left wall is gilded and shiny like it was a dance studio someone put a bed into. And the right wall is a wallpaper of pastel pink, with crimson flowers and gold stemming that is so inexplicably Vita that for an instant I wonder if she brought it here if she put it up herself. There's a pink bathroom (her favorite color, how perfect, how right) and the bedspread she's had since we were juniors in high school is here too, one we've had many a long and teary talk on; there are a bunch of those super soft blankets that were always around her house that my mother would never buy us because they were "flammable." There's a painting I made her last year, slouched by the radiator along with a bunch of other posters she's yet to hang and I am flattered she brought it here - I always wonder if that's why I give my friends my art, really, to see if they'll hang it up.

She plops on the bed and hits her Juul hard and long and, even though it's only three pm, asks if I want a drink - and gladly I say yes because for whatever reason, somehow, even though Vita is my oldest friend, the person who I have been at my worst and best and in-betweens with, who I have really and truly done it all with - I have nothing to say to her.



Ali has somehow, some way, become our go-between and I feel so sorry for her that she has to suffer what is undoubtedly incredibly dull ranting from both ends. She's adamant that we should talk, that we should bury the hatchet - "what even is the hatchet?" she asks me.

I can't quite answer. I tell her that I'm writing about it, about Vita. She tells me that that's probably for the best, that it might help me work some things out, might help me heal - "maybe she can read it!" she suggests, sweetly, lovingly.

"She really misses you," she says, sadly.

I can tell she wants me to say that I miss her too. And sometimes I do.



Vita promised to bring me to this magic place, and today is the day she delivers.

"It's over there, right over that creek." Vita points and gives me a smile but the excitement she had when she first told me about this place, about Candor, is gone. We're in Melanie's backyard. She's behind Vita, arguing with her twin brother over a stick.

Her brother's name is Jack. He's one of the kindest people I've ever met, still, even today, but I resent calling him that or telling people I think that of him because I dislike when people say very ill people are kind because it's a sort of lazy way of implying your pity.

He had Lyme disease when we were in the third grade. Before, he'd been an incredibly adventurous kid, always flinging his body around, falling off of trees and rooftops and scraping his bare feet while he waded into a creek, with his Old Navy jeans rolled up just above the knee, hopping through the water with a frenzy I could never conjure up myself. When he got sick, his migraines made it impossible to stand for too long; he would stay in bed, with the curtains drawn, writhing in pain - before they knew it was Lyme, they had no idea what it was. He missed a year of school. One of the meaner boys said, at recess once, that he'd be the next statue outside of the library, soon, in a matter of time. I'm pretty sure Melanie socked him for it; I think that was the most I'd ever liked Melanie.

He's stronger today, doing much better, but I'm a little afraid of him because I don't know what it means to be that sick and I can sense he's been through something I can't and don't understand yet. Jack's illness hit Vita hard. She was so worried about him; she'd go over after school to check on him, or invite Melanie over for hours so she wouldn't have to hear him writhing in pain. No wonder the two of them, Vita and Melanie, spent so much time in the woods; no wonder she found this magical place.

Vita grabs my hand.

"It's just past this clearing," she says, tugging on me, smiling. I smile back.

To be clear, I am expecting giants and fairies and fucking ponies. I am expecting the most, the full most - so when we make our way around a fat trunk and to the place Vita has promised me, and all I see is a litter of leaves and clumps of melting snow and sunlight, beaming sunlight - my heart sinks.

"Can't you see it?" she asks. I can tell by the way she asks that she knows I can't. That she knows she's bullshitting, that she knows I know too. Her smile falters slightly, but only slightly, when she sees my face. She says nothing, cocks her head, waiting for an answer; she's sticking to her story. She wants me to too.

"Yeah, wow," I say.

In the car home that day, when my mother asks if we had fun, I'll say we did, while blinking back hot angry tears.



When snakes get older they shed old skin. It's not a choice really. It's a bodily instinct, something bound to happen whether you're ready or not.



I imagine that skin, when it's time, feels like being stuck stuffed into your favorite pair of pants from the sixth grade. In a sense you're attached to this thing you're stuck in; you've seen good times in these jeans - maybe your audition for the class play went well in them, maybe you had your first kiss in them, maybe every time you put them on you felt invincible so at first, it isn't so bad to be stuck.

But somewhere around grade eleven your circulation starts to get cut off. Your toes become purple, and bloated, then worse white. You can hardly walk anymore, your atrophying muscles are too exhausted to move as they used to, until finally, you say FUCK IT, I want to run again. So you take a pair of Hello Kitty scissors and, like you're cutting wrapping paper, glide those little scissors down the side seam of those old favorite jeans, not caring in this moment about the successful audition or the first kiss or feeling invincible, just caring truly and deeply about getting out and away and free of them.

Sometimes you have to cut and run. It's not a choice really. It's bodily instinct.



It's 4 pm and Vita and I are drunk in Bar Harbor. The last time I was here I was with my friends from college, my roommates, and we'd just finished a hike at Beehive and a few other Acadia spots, and we'd been camping (my first time camping), and we'd sung underneath the stars and made mac and cheese and drank good IPAs that we'd splurged on and we were tired and happy and in love with Maine and each other. And now I'm here with Vita, and we haven't earned our drunkenness but we are enjoying it nonetheless.

It's as though we are drinking until we can't hear the silence between us. We go into the shops that separate the bars - we try on hats in one. We buy sweatshirts in another because it's

colder than we realized it would be. We reminisce about a party we threw at her house. Her parents still don't know; it is not easy to pull the wool over Tyra's eyes or Nate's biker shorts but I truly believe we did it.

It was magic. We'd rolled up all the rugs, hidden all the china; we even moved Vita's pet parakeet to her parent's bathroom to avoid his being jostled. It was tropics themed. People wore bathing suit tops and daisy dukes and Hawaiian shirts and slept in cars and in the morning, when everyone was gone, the six of us had mopped and unrolled and re-china'd and re-parakeeted until four, but it was just as fun as the party had been, somehow.

We can laugh at that night, at the frantic cleaning that morning. We still have that. That feels good. That feels normal.

It feels like I've blinked and our night in Bar Harbor has gone. I don't know where the time went. The gray afternoon turned into a gray-blue evening, no sunset to speak of, no sun. The clouds look dark, heavy. I can't see any stars.

When we sneak into a resort's pool we decide to skinny-dip; it's not nearly late enough to skinny-dip, but no one catches us, miraculously. Suddenly it's pouring, and our phones are wet and we are already wet and we're putting our wet clothes and new wet sweatshirts on, like that will help, and we're running through the street sloshing in puddles, so soaked I can't remember what it was like to be dry, for a minute I can't remember if I've ever been dry, and then suddenly we're in a pizza shop. And I'm hungry because I haven't eaten lunch and I tell her so but Vita only wants to split a single piece of pizza; and when I order one for me and then another for her, and tell her not to worry, that I'll pay for it, she gets so angry she starts to cry, and she leaves, says she's going to buy cigarettes. And then it's me, standing in the rain, in clothes as wet as the

skin underneath them, shoeless for the second night in a row but this time without so much joy about it, holding two pieces of pizza on two soggy paper dishes, angry, sad.



The last time we spoke I sent Vita a song that reminded me of her and I told her so. I can't tell you why I did it, or why after almost a year of her asking our friends why I didn't talk to her anymore or why I didn't come to things I knew she'd be at I felt moved to do it on a Sunday, while cleaning my room (deep in the icy grips of a hangover that was making it very difficult to bend over to pick clothes up from off the floor then stand up straight again to fold them, so I had sunk to the floor to fold the clothes all at once so there'd be less movement altogether, or at least that's what I told myself - it wound up being me being completely horizontal on the floor, listening to an old playlist and scrolling through Instagram).

That song always reminded me of Vita - when it came on I wondered why I had never told her that before. It's not a mean song it's just a sad one; a yearning melody with two lady voices harmonizing in a sort of charming off-key way: *I just miss how it felt standing next to you, wearing matching dresses before the world was big.*

She wrote back, quickly: *I love that song.*

Then a second text: *reminds me of you too <3.*

## *Mothers, Brothers*

The Hudson Valley is often covered with snow, or, if the season is right, fields of corn, or else cow manure or the growling of wheels on asphalt as truckers speed by little houses nestled amid gardens and pools and trees and swing sets, and in the heart of the Hudson Valley lies my family home, lies the homes of both my aunts, lies the hospice room my grandfather died in, lies my sweetest memories.

Alongside my sweetest memories is a back road I love, rolling and winding and when I'm home, around holidays, when I can be, my mother and I drive it, early in the morning, with coffee and nothing else in our stomachs, watching the sunrise over wheat fields and purple Catskills off in the distance and snow that is both pink and blue and green and speckled with black from the poorly paved roads that get worn down easily by the sixteen wheelers, who roll down those roads to unknown locations. And it's in the car my mother tells me the most about herself, when she becomes more than my mother and more a person, a person who was once my age, on the metaphorical edge of the metaphorical cliff of graduating college.

It's in the car, when we take these rides, that I want to ask her everything about herself at my age. Some of this, she does without my asking. She tells me about the odd jobs she had after college, how she'd been a pizza girl (sexually harassed), a yacht worker (sexually harassed), a secretary (do I have to say it?).

The pizza girl story is the worst I think. Well, the yacht one is pretty bad but I think the pizza girl one could've gone the most south. She was working in Montauk at the time. Or maybe it was Newport. My mother loves a good seaside WASPy town and sometimes I feel sorry for her that we didn't wind up in one; but maybe she wanted it this way, maybe she'd had enough of

the sea-soaked air and the tourists and the harassment. Maybe she liked our sleepy country town, the one that so closely resembled her own upstate.

She arrived at a seedy seaside motel with a pizza in hand, climbed up the steps, rang the room that had ordered. When the door swung open there were twelve sailors, Navy men, cheering. *We had to order like ten pizzas to get you here!*, one had slurred. She'd looked around. Boxes from "Big Al's Pizzeria" littered the room. As did many empty beer bottles. She left without the money, rushing down the stairs, back to the car. She quit shortly after.

I remember that when I heard her tell that story for the first time, I'd been in awe; I wondered if I'd ever get attention like that from men. I'm ashamed I reacted that way but I couldn't have known then that my mother was likely telling me that story as a warning. Or if not a warning, as some loaded nod to womanhood; a passing of the shit baton, a kind of *this is what I've seen and, someday, you'll have a story like this for your daughter too*.

On these car rides, I want to ask my mother how she knew anything at my age. I want to ask her how she decided to marry my father, how she decided where to live, what to do, who to be. I want to ask her if she's alright with how any of it wound up, but for whatever reason, I don't. It's not so much that I'm afraid of her answers; I think I'm more afraid for the veil to be lifted further, for her to be more human, for her to be more person-who-is-not-just-my-mother.

Every year, she makes at least a dozen, maybe closer to two dozen, maybe closer to three, advent calendars, like her mother before her. She makes them for friends and family and strangers and my college roommates. She starts in September, starts gathering gifts and tea bags and positive affirmations, and then September to November she's boxing, she's writing, she's

licking envelopes and stuffing bits in them and sending them out to all corners of the world and the universe.

Once I helped her mail all the boxes out. We juggled them in our arms, the ones for friends with kids in boxes much larger than those for her single friends, or the one for her mother's sorority sister and her wife, who live out in Colorado; those are thinner, stuffed with tea and inspirational quotes and photos of them all together (and a few weed gummies). The woman behind the counter couldn't have cared less. She was indifferent to our giggling and smiling, maybe even a little annoyed. My mother thwarted her with probe after probe; *any plans for the holidays? Or ooph, that one's heavy isn't it?*

The woman behind the counter just stamped and weighed, stamped and weighed, giving us short smiles, sighing a little - undazzled. When we left, linking arms, off for more coffee, on a dreary November morning she said to me, "I hope that woman has a good day."



When my mother was my age, fresh out of school, fresh into the world, her brother got very sick. My Uncle Dave. He had been in the Peace Corps, and he was by all accounts heroic and infallible, and he lived in New York City in the 1980s and died of AIDS in New York City in the 1980s. Her brother Mark, my Uncle Mark, took it very hard, takes it very hard; I don't see Uncle Mark very often but I remember once when I went to visit him, and my cousins, and his sweet wife Tammy, that he took me for a ride around their town near Buffalo, and we sort of wound our way around backroads, just as I do with my mother, listening to the tapes Dave had sent home from the Peace Corps. Uncle Mark said, *I just realized you've never heard his voice.*

And I'd just nodded, as though that were very obvious to me, having never met him, but I could tell it upset him, so I said, *Now I have, thank you.*

Sometimes, when I look at my mother's side of the family, I think about how hard it must have been to lose a son to something so unfathomable; to watch a life that had once been so full of zest, of an excitement and hunger to see and understand and communicate with the world and all who lived in it (Dave had a knack for languages that no one else inherited), to watch someone who lived life like that that become emaciated, weak, and then suddenly, gone.

I wonder so often about my mother at my age, at this time. Wonder what that must have been like, to lose someone to something so insidious, so unknown; a modern plague. I don't know who I would be without my little brother, without his kitchen concoctions, without the promise of our continuing to grow up together, indefinitely, forever (for as long as these lives last anyway) - I don't know what sort of person I'd be if I lost him, or if I didn't have the chance to care for him in those final days, can't imagine how that might harden me, how my mother might've taken it.

I'm certain, when it happened, that it was hard. That it hurt. I'm certain that my mother cried for days. But somehow, in spite of that certainty, I still can't imagine it. I've only seen the product of that pain, the selflessness that came with it.

When Dave died, my mother became a major advocate for LGBTQ rights, a social worker, a yoga teacher, a professor, a therapist. She started at Gay Men's Health crisis. She devoted her life to people like Dave, to lessening sorrow, to healing the world around her.

My mother did not let it harden her. She became softer, more her selfless self.



Sometimes, the car rides I take with my mother to Hudson, from Red Hook, on the long and winding road that is beautiful and in the spring, speckled with apple blossoms and green and slanted sunlight, sometimes those car rides mean fights. In spite of the selfless, and beautiful, and generous person that she is, she still pisses me off sometimes. And when she does, I am not the daughter a person as selfless, as beautiful, or as generous as she deserves. Instead, I'm some petulant, sniveling little bitch, who is angry she's had the audacity to ask what I'd like to be when I grow up, what my post-grad plans are, who I want to be.

I just hope I land on my feet. I hope I take whatever pain, whatever sorrow, whatever suffering, whatever creepy Navy men in cheap seaside hotel rooms that the universe throws at me as well as she did, as well as she has. I hope I handle my shit as well as my mom has handled hers.



## *Twelve*

### 1.

I'm taking a class on the *Divine Comedy*. It's slogging and entails a ton of reading but it's as interesting as I thought it would be, and it means having a class with Andy, who I've never had a class with before, so I like it enough. My professor is lovely, and interested in us, and wants us to be interested in the material, and that makes it good. He's talking about the problem of writing from memory, of writing on the past; he's saying that reflection means ordering, that we have to order our pasts in such a way that our present in turn will seem inevitable, like we could not have arrived anywhere else but at this particular moment because of x and y and z. He says we have to consider the way our lives have unfolded, the choices we've made, the events that we've witnessed, the events that happen *to* us, so on and so forth - we have to be able to make sense of them in a way that makes the present seem true, seem like a natural occurrence. I consider this while I doodle something in the margins of my paper, wondering if that will be true of me, if someday I'll be sitting somewhere, remembering things conveniently.

### 2.

An acquaintance is walking towards me on a path on our shared campus. I am coming from the library, he's just exiting the student center. He's as cold as I am, and I can tell - by the way he hunches into his hood, digs his hands into his pockets and breathes, hard and long into the air, like that will help, like pushing some of it away and out from him will be good. Our eyes lock when we are an appropriate distance away - you always know who is coming toward you from much further away but unless it's a good friend it's strange to say hello too early, or so I tell myself, although I've never wondered why I do.

I think about the world outside and off of this campus, away from these rules that I've constructed for myself or that have been mutually and naturally constructed by me and my peers; and beyond the rules, all the little bits, the little parts of the day that are uniquely ours on this campus, in this place. How long you should take when putting food on your plate in a dining hall, where to sit in the library if you really don't want anyone to fucking talk to you, the name of the man who hands you your packages (Joe) or who makes your coffee (Nikki), where all the single stall bathrooms on campus are, where the back staircases in all the big buildings are (good for when you're avoiding someone, when you've just broken up with someone, for when you've skipped class and are worried the professor might be lurking around some corner).

It'll all be useless, so soon. My head will be full of irrelevant tidbits, so soon. I'll have to learn new rules, new secrets, new names, in a much bigger world, in a much bigger space. But right now, it's just cold, and the rules of the game still apply, and I will make the most of the game while I can still play.

When he's near enough I say "Hi!", brightly, happily, because I haven't seen him in a long time, because he's been in season, skiing slopes and winning races and generally out of whatever it is my loop is made of. We usually have classes together, once two in a semester, but not this time, not this last one. The thought of it makes me a little sad. I can remember his eyes before our African American History final two semesters past: bloodshot and crazed and over-caffeinated, he'd leaned over to me from across the dining hall table we were studying at, clicking through slides of portraits and daguerreotypes and paintings and photos, desperately trying to remember names and dates and meanings. It would be a test made of four timed essays and some multiple choice questions and the slides would only last so long so you really had to

know your shit, it was imperative, which seemed so old school and cruel but was also sort of exhilarating. Anyway he'd leaned over to me, took his calloused and dry and cracked hand and sort of placed it/slammed it on the page of slide-correspondent-notes I was busy pouring over and, with an urgency I'd never seen from him before, asked me if I thought we'd have to identify anything from the modern period. A little panicked myself, a little over caffeinated and a little annoyed at the sudden intrusion I told him probably yes (shortly, curtly). He shuddered.

He looks like a different person now, today - being well rested and less greasy suits him. He smiles to greet me and, just as his mouth which is a sort of purpley-blue from the cold moves to respond to my hi, to form the 'h' in "hello", a gust of wind that can only really come from the depths of the heart of the coldest, most heart-broken wind god, maybe barrelling all the way down from Mount Olympus to punish us for our youth and this moment, a gust of wind comes barreling towards us, blowing my hair up and around my face and into my mouth and nose and his hood flies straight off his head, his black hair suddenly exposed, standing alert at the top of his scalp, making us both shriek in surprise. We stop in our tracks. Our eyes widen. Another gust blows, against my back and I have to shuffle forward a bit to keep my balance; he stumbles back a bit as it hits him too. We start to laugh, loud, hard, maybe harder than the moment really merited, while the wind stays blowing. We don't say anything to each other, just keep laughing, waving, widening our eyes, hunkering into the cold.

### 3.

I peel into my local liquor store and linger in the warmth of the car for a minute because I'm taking orders. This parking lot is small, and the cars in it often have little kids in carseats or the underage friends of my peers sitting with their hoods up or dogs awaiting their masters or

wives in the passenger seats on their phones, waiting in the safety of the warmth of a car just as I am now, while their loved one heads inside, to buy a different warmth. I like to look at them, the waiters, and think on what they'll do later tonight.

Once I'm certain one roommate wants red and another white I go in myself. The wines are to the left of the front entrance, the cheapest along the outermost perimeter; they get more expensive as you go in, a labyrinth of sorts. I stick to the edges, past Yellowtail and Bota Boxes and Barefoot to Dark Horse, which is the mid-range cheap stuff we treat ourselves with. As I head to the counter a bearded man who I'd noticed when I'd entered, whom I had eyes on all the while I was selecting my wine for I could feel his eyes on me, he steps close behind me and tells me my smile is pretty. There are other people around us; a man in the tequila aisle turns and looks at us but says nothing and quickly turns back. Two boys on the hockey team, whom I recognize but don't know, are in the far back, picking up racks; too far to know this is going on, not that I know enough about them to think they'd intervene.

I freeze when he says it, *your smile is pretty*, and my heart quickens because I can smell the liquor on his breath. I'm a little scared, and stay scared every second he does not move back a little bit. I'm worried he'll touch me. I know it will be okay if he does, that someone will step in then, but I'm in the first of the moments between this situation beginning and ending, and right now it's sort of anyone's game, anyone's guess as to how this will play out.

Then, in the second and third and fourth moments between the beginning and ending, I find I'm annoyed; more than annoyed I'm mad, mad that I'm scared even though it is 4pm, even though there are at least ten people in the store behind me, and that the woman at the counter is locking eyes with me, her forehead knotted with concern, her eyes are telling me she sees me and

to say if I need her. I'm mad and sad but most of all, skeeved out. Creeped out. I say nothing to the man, just scoot myself from anywhere near him, put my bottles on the counter. She smiles at me as she takes my ID, I smile back, put cash down on the counter, and exit, swiftly.

I lock the car door when I get in, then drive away.

4.

We are sitting in a classroom and we are mostly strangers or at least acquaintances and we've been tasked with writing a paragraph about our respective "civic identities." And my teacher who is young and likes to tell us that he hasn't lived in a place for more than two years since his twenties (he wears this fact like a badge of honor and I can't decide if I'm annoyed by it or if I'm enthralled by it or if I should just mind my own fucking business), jokes that he doesn't really know what a civic identity is either, and that when he looked it up all he could find were dense, seventeen page academic essays on morality and civil ethics and what it means to be a good human. And then the room is pregnant with that familiar feeling of camaraderie and *oh fuck we're going to have to read a seventeen page essay that's dense as shit*, but this youngish teacher shuts it down as quickly as it's swept over us with a curt and sweet *don't worry I won't make you all do that* and we all relax a little and settle. He tells us to write down what we think it could mean, define it for ourselves.

Later when class is over and after we've all bullshat our way through sharing our answers, a series of awkward stumbling explanations for a term we didn't coin or need or want, really, I find myself alone with this professor rearranging the classroom. It's a little awkward. We have nothing to say to each other really; so I ask about his dog, the one he and his wife (who live in my building, who sometimes have cookies outside their door, who like scrabble and

hiking and each other very much) are fostering for the month, a rescue, an ancient-looking wolf-like behemoth with the sweetest disposition, the kindest blue eyes.

He lights up. He starts talking about the dog, Pogo, and how she's sweet and has to pee all the time but is so gentle, and how she's really warmed to them, and how they've really warmed to her. And I ask when they'll give her back and that really sets him off - he starts rambling, about how the longer they have her, the more they get to know her, the less his concerns about having a giant dog in a tiny apartment, or of what having a dog might mean for his career, or his ability to move as frequently or as widely as he always has, and what that might mean about any number of things; the less those concerns seem to matter. The better he gets to know Pogo more he wants, they want, to keep her.

He tells me she was abandoned twice, once in Alabama, two towns over from where he went to undergrad; he tells me it feels fated that they've found each other, that they came from Alabama, and found themselves in Maine, in Waterville, Maine.

Later when I'm passing through the stairwell I can see him outside, walking Pogo over snow mounds made by the snow that's been shoveled off of the sidewalks, dirty with asphalt and splotches of dog piss and crushed beer cans, waiting in the cold for her to shit.

## 5.

Faculty members of the English department are interviewing for a new fiction writing professor. One has just given a presentation; she's a comic and a fiction writer and has a Fulbright and is lovely.

A professor two of my friends had their freshmen year, who they always talk about, who always smiles as I pass her in the halls, who is a lot shorter than I pictured her before I could put

a face to the name; she suggests a book to the candidate and the room. Something about psychology and dual minds and assigning meaning to things. And when she says the title I watch every one of her colleagues, every one of the women sitting around her, pull out a pen, or uncap the pen they had ready at the top of their notebooks, or open a new note in their phones, and write down the name, some with a small smile to themselves, and others with a furrowed brow, like they're furiously trying to commit it to memory as they write it, like they're telling themselves this will be the first book they read for themselves in months and that they'll really do it this time, when they get home from their offices and have papers to read and put on a pot of tea or open a bottle of wine, that they'll read a few pages before bed and that they're promising themselves this. And it scares me. I think, *this is what adulting is like, this is what having to carve out time and space for yourself is like.*

6.

I am civically engaging, and finding that the way I civically engage has not changed since my class's discussion on civic identity. I haven't seen the fourth grader I mentor in a month; he gives me a side hug when I see him. He's a little shyer, a little plumper; it's strange to see him now, like this, so clearly changed from the first grader I met three years ago. He looks like a different kid, he looks prepubescent in the way I remember boys in fourth grade looking when I was in fourth grade, full cheeks and dewy skin and round bellies. They're like springs, or slinkies, or something of the sort, hunkering down and out before bounding up - soon they'll all be towering over me, over their teacher with the bad back who likes my mentee very much and gives him the extra attention he needs.

She's the first teacher he's had to really get him, to really like him; when she was gone for surgery last week he apparently hit the substitute, kicked her, tried to bite her. I was shocked and so was his bad-backed teacher; around her and around me he's all dimples, all sass, all seeing how much he can annoy you, seeing how long it'll take him to get you to crack a smile.

I tell him I'm staying for an extra hour today and his shyness softens a little and he asks me if I want to see his new pencil case and I say yes. We're working on his research project, a paper on Washington State; when I ask him why he chose Washington he shrugs but later he tells me it's because his mother is from there. He's never really spoken about his mother and I want to press him on it but don't, because I'm leaving soon, our extra hour is almost up and I don't want to upset him and then have to go. I'll regret that later. I'll wish I had asked later; when someone you care about leaves you a trail of emotional breadcrumbs you should always try to follow it, if you can muster it, if you can tell they need it.

A voice crackles over the PA system and announces that the high school's basketball team will be running through the halls to greet the students. They're heading to states, they're hometown heroes. Excited chatter bursts through the quiet of reading time and the lovely teacher with the bad back is as giddy as the kids are and she tells me she's sorry she didn't warn me, that she'd forgotten herself; I help line the kids up.

One of his classmates tells me she remembers me from their old school, that they'd both switched after third grade. And I smile and say I remember her too (though I don't). I wonder if she knows about their other classmate, Pete, my friend Sarah's mentee. Pete passed away this summer. He and Jeff were friends. They played on the swings and on monkey bars together while Sarah and I watched, or pushed them, walking after them when they ran away because we



hadn't worn playground appropriate shoes, or because they didn't always want to talk to us so we would just speak with each other. Sarah had loved Pete. It wrecked her when he died, so suddenly, so out of the blue; he was a sweet, gentle kid, really funny, really kind.

Jeff never mentioned his passing so I didn't either, I didn't want to be the one to explain that to a kid let alone someone else's kid; I knew that if he knew he would bring it up, that's the sort of child he is, he'd want to talk about it. It feels strange to know something he doesn't, maybe won't ever know. Years will pass and he'll maybe hear about that poor boy who shot himself, accidentally, with his father's handgun that he found in a shoebox in the closet, the hot summer day long and boring and droning enough to move him to poke around the house, in his parents room; maybe it'll become some urban myth or legend, details will get skewed, he and the kids his age will sit around when they're older saying yeah, I think I remember him, I sort of kind of do - maybe he won't remember that he ever knew him, that they ever crossed paths, that they were ever friends, but I will. I'll be gone but I'll remember, I'll know.

## 7.

My friend and I are attached for the night, bound together by plastic zip ties that we've put around our wrists like makeshift handcuffs; we've put them there for fun. We, like all the other zip-tied-up partners, are tasked with a quantity to drink. It's a bottle of champagne and three beers. The first partners to finish all the alcohol and the dares that are written on the wall we face will win - win what?

You are not supposed to pregame these sorts of events. It can get hairy pretty quickly if you've pregame. Consider this foreshadowing.

I love this boy. He is my best friend's boyfriend and also one of my best friends. He has a laugh that makes me laugh too because it is infectious and bright and the kind of laugh I'd like my son to have. He can make anything funny. He can make anyone smile. He plays in a band with some of my other friends and does a little dance with his guitar that can be described as nothing else but a happy happy wiggle. He's kinda happy wiggling now. We are both wearing floor length skirts - well his is a dress. He feels free he says, like there's nothing between him and the air and I tell him that he's right, and to close his legs.

We are good at engaging in debauchery together. We once went to a focus group for friends of ours and talked about our mental health and in the car on the way home, he told me three stories, the details of which are hazy to me now but felt hilarious and important and resonant at the time. Once we went to Home Depot and bought two planks of wood, for fun, carried them over our shoulders onto the elevator, with our grocery bags slung across them. We put them across the couch and ate off of them like a table. We split cigarettes on our front porch when we lived in Portland and took out the recycling together when we remembered; sometimes we'd eat lunch together on the floor of my bedroom, watching TV, sitting in silence, silence broken only by the cacophony of our forks hitting our bowls, our joint laughter shaking our shitty attic apartment. He does not believe that I can sometimes see ghosts, or that I sometimes know what is best for him, or that we will always be friends. I don't care.

The handcuff has just begun. We are not drunk yet. But we are trying to be. With his eyes bright and shining, he says to me: *let's shotgun these beers, it'll be a head start.* And I say *great*, I say *let's do it*, for I believe we deserve a head start.

So we start, and I'll confess half of mine runs down my shirt, and his arm, but he finishes his, and then mine (although I didn't ask him to, I was sort of limply holding it in my hand while I dealt with the sudden wetness of my aforementioned shirt), he finishes his then mine then moments later, sooner than I or anyone could have anticipated, he looks me in the eyes. And when he does it, it is not with the bright fervor they had before we elected to chug. He looks at my brown eyes with his greenish brown, which now are not so bright and shining, he looks at me and simply says, *okay*. He says *okay* - and before I can say a thing he is dragging me to the bathroom, me trying to finish the conversation I had just been in with another zip-tie-bound couple about how remarkably quickly he'd been chugging, him pulling me away and me sort of resisting and him pulling me and me not understanding and then all of a sudden, understanding perfectly, all too well really, what was going on and screeching a loud and long *oh nooo* while he tells me to look away, while he kneels in front of the toilet and tells me not to look at him, and I start to laugh in disbelief and say a few more *oh noooo*'s and he tells me again *not to loo* -, and then it's the sound of his dinner hitting not porcelain, but whatever material our dorm regulation toilet is made of, and it's loud and splotchy and unpleasant.

Then he stands. He rinses his mouth. His greenish brown eyes, which are now watery and red but once again bright meet my brown and we start to laugh, hard, the way we've always managed to with each other, the way we did on the bedroom floor in our attic apartment, the way I hope to always laugh with him, later on, down the road, wherever and however we wind up. We head back outside, ready to play.

*Could you put a pot of tea on for me? I'm waiting for the shuttle to come, it's starting to snow and it's so fucking cold.*

It's a text from my roommate, one of the Cath's. She's been sick this week, overwhelmed with work; every morning I wake up to find her already sitting in the kitchen, pouring over a reading with the other Cath (who is from Minnesota and a major source of sanity and love and support for me and has been since I met her in January of our freshmen year and she limboed under my arm and introduced herself for the fourth time that January because she was drinking a lot in those days and the previous introductions were fuzzy). Cath will be sitting out in our kitchen with the Cath from Minnesota, who is pouring over her thesis and worrying about her next advisor meeting (an advisor who, frankly, I wouldn't mind slapping around a bit for how he's been putting her down, for how he belittles the hours she spends calling and writing and graphing and reading) and Cath who isn't from Minnesota (who wants a cup of tea) looks miserable and exhausted and sad.

So I tell her of course, tell her it'll be ready for her when she walks in the door. I fill the electric kettle (not the one I bought, the one Julia did. Mine is bright green but made of shoddy plastic). I listen to the water start to burble. It switches off, boiling. I have to turn it on again after ten minutes, when she's still not home, because I know it'll be cold when she arrives if I don't. But then she does, walks through the door with her pink nose and blue eyes and red cheeks.

She rushes to the pot. She pours a cup from the kettle I didn't bring. She opens a packet of chamomile and puts the bag in, then adds honey, and a little apple cider vinegar.

“How was your day?” I ask, glad to see her. She moves to the couch where I’m sitting, with her coat still on and her tea in hand and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“Bad. Thank you. I needed this.”

9.

I’m sitting next to my fourth grader the following week, helping him with his math homework (I’m embarrassed by how little I remember about fractions, how long its taking me to remember how they work, now that I’m older and rustier and the only time I really use them is for baking and cooking but even that doesn’t require much thinking, mostly filling pre-measured cups and spoons and dumping them into whatever I’m making). Luckily, Jeff doesn’t notice; he’s too busy thinking about anything else, begging me to ask his teacher if we can go for an adventure (that’s what we call roving around the halls of his school to “go to the bathroom” or “get a ball for recess.”) He loves showing off that he has a mentor; he’s a super performative kid, always yelling out things during lessons, cracking jokes, calling his friends “bruh” loudly.

“Guess what,” he says, looking at me slyly.

“What,” I say, a little impatient, wishing he’d focus.

“I’m moving to Tennessee!” he says, with feigned glee. He’s searching my face for an opinion. I can’t hide that I’m a little taken aback.

“To Tennessee! That’s awesome!” I say, feigning glee back. I ask him more questions. His seems unsure, a little wary, but excited. He tells me not all of his siblings are coming with him. Just his little sister, his new baby brother. They’re moving to be with his dad’s girlfriend, who is a lawyer, who is going to homeschool him.

I don't tell him this but at the word homeschool my heart sinks a little bit. Jeff is smart. He's capable. He just doesn't pay attention; he has trouble with reading, writing. I want to press him on his dad's girlfriend's qualifications, how much time she'll have to devote to running flashcards with him, whether or not he'll do state testing, how long he'll be homeschooled for but I don't get the chance to, because before I can ask anything else his teacher is popping her pretty, dyed-blond head into the room and telling us it's time for recess and he's gone in a flash, leaving me alone with unfinished fraction homework and a sadness.

He won't be here when I am gone. This place, this town, the faces I've come to recognize, the people I've come to know; time will not halt for them in my absence. This place will be changed, will change in my absence, and should I return sometime later, down the road, down the line, I might not recognize what I find here.

10.

My friend, Claire, is in a band called Free Chips. I think it's a truly stupid name, but it's not my band, so it's none of my business. They're an all-girl band, the only all-girl band on our campus, and they rock. This is the fourth show they've ever played; maybe third. I'm not sure. But my friend, she learned to play the drums just for this, for this slapped together band of cool girls because none of them could play the drums but they wanted to perform, wanted to get on stage like all the boybands on campus do, draw a crowd and have people shouting the words to their songs; so she stepped in and learned and she's amazing, and she has stick and poke tattoos she let our friend put on her body when she was drunk one night and has an eyebrow piercing and is crooning into the microphone that dangles over the drumset and her mom is here and

loving it and swaying to it, and my peers are loving it and swaying to it, some faces familiar others totally unknown, and I feel safe and glad that spaces like this exist.

He grabs me by the hand while we are swaying, while we're watching her and then by the face, not aggressively, sweetly, gingerly; cupping my face between his two hands and he kisses me and tell me *I like you so much* and I say *I like you so much* and we don't say anything after that for a minute, because we both know that we are thinking the same thing, that this is ending, certainly, at least for a little while. This ending is certain; graduation, moving on, being apart, that is certain. What comes after the end is the bigger question mark. What happens after the end? *There are good grad schools in Ohio*, he reminds me. I give him a weak smile. *There are great grad schools in New York*.

When we leave the show it's very late, or very early, depending on your perception of time. It's raining hard. I've accumulated a straw hat, someone put it on my head when we were leaving, but now I'm grateful for it, for it's blocking the rain from my face. He has on a rain jacket. He's always prepared.

He's much drunker than I am and keeps trying to put it on my shoulders, telling me that I need it although I keep assuring him I don't. He's getting angry, telling me I'm stubborn, to just *fucking take the jacket*, and I'm laughing at him and shaking my head and pushing it away.

I'm going to miss him, miss how easy this is, to have him a moment away, a text away, a flight of stairs away. I'll miss his smell, his eyes, how he always forgets his shoes in my apartment; but most of all I'll miss these small acts of kindness, his insistence on taking care of me.

I don't know what will happen, down the line. I don't know if we'll find our way back to each other, or if we'll hate each other tomorrow, or even if I'll be alive tomorrow. Nothing is given. It's terrifying. It's exhilarating.

*There are good grad schools in Ohio.*

11.

We're sitting in the study room on Sunday morning and feeling like our souls have fallen out of our asses. We are pale, our lips are chapped. We are shaky, we are anxious, we have mountains of homework, and yet we're giddy and we're laughing and we can't stop smiling at each other, snorting every time one meets the other's distant gaze, giggling at each other's checked out faces.

Eliza's hair is slick from grease because yesterday was a non-wash day and today's lost already so why shower, and we laugh at this because when she gets like this she looks like Olive Oil from Popeye and she hates when I say this and as I say it she asks if I'm writing that down for my thesis, if I'm recording this too and then they all start laughing at me and my sentimentality and tell me to read it aloud and when I refuse they yell, and tell me to be sure to write them well and likeable and good and I tell them I can't promise them anything; but they know that I'm lying, trying to rile them up. They know I could never do anything else.

I feel certain of who I am and my place on this earth when I am with these three. Julia's brow is furrowed while she stares at her phone and chews at her lip and at the rate her thumb is scrolling I assume she's either looking at bathing suits online or analyzing photos from the night before and I want to tell her how much I love her and how beautiful she looks even under fluorescent lights like these and how glad I am that she is here and that she's been my friend but



I know that if I do she'll give me a smirk and say thanks and continue on so it's better this way, just in my head or on this page.

Liv is not doing anything. She's on her phone and stirring her tea while a reading sits open and impatient. She turns to me to show me a video on her phone and I swat her arm as she does it and that sets her off again, and then me off again, and soon Eliza too and it's the kind of laughter that comes silently from deep in your belly and we are being an utter disruption and the boys from the room down the hall who are in here as much as we are look up at us in quiet annoyance for the disruption of whatever they're listening to on their airpods and that's when Julia tells us to shut up and we do because she's right, the hours are ticking by and tomorrow, despite all our giggling and our shakiness, is Monday.

This hangover is all I will worry about today.

12.

I'm saying good-bye to Jeff today. I'm sad, sadder than I thought I'd be. It's the annual barbecue, that the school puts on for the mentors and their mentees, with bouncy houses and ice cream and lawn games galore; it's a great photo op for the college. They get to plaster pictures of happy smiling kids with happy smiling older kids all over the website, pull them out and show them to donors when they ask what it is their money's going to. I'd be annoyed by the spectacle of it all if the kids didn't love it as much as they do, if Jeff didn't love it as much as he does. I think he asks me about it at least once every time I come to visit him at school - *when's the barbecue again? Will you take my picture on the rock wall again? Can we eat three ice creams again?*

We're here and it's chaotic and loud and smelly and it's easy to lose him in the crowd, he won't hold my hand while we go from station to station anymore. We play soccer together; he gets bored, runs to find his friends. I understand. I don't take it personally.

I watch him climb the rock wall, ring the bell, wave down at me, grinning ear to ear. I watch him eat three ice cream sandwiches. I watch him bounce on the bouncy house in socks with his name drawn on them in sharpie, the ink has bled a little in the wash, or maybe from sweat I'm not sure.

Then all at once, the day is over. His class is lining up for the bus home. I give him a hug, and tears are stinging my eyes, and I tell him *I'm so proud of you*, and he's quiet and hugging me back for once and I think *we are having a moment* - and then I feel him giggling, and I pull back a bit, and realize he's been making faces at his friend, rolling his eyes at me, and at first I'm annoyed, thinking *okay you little fuck*. But then I start to giggle too.

## *I Think I Will Haunt This Place*

I think I will haunt this apartment, this dorm room, this building, when I die. We, my roommates and I (of which there are six, total) are the first to live in it. It is brand spanking new, the college has just built it, and when we first moved in I consoled myself, saying that that was a good thing, that there couldn't possibly be ghosts here, because it was new. But now, I think I will haunt it myself, because it's a place I've been happy, a place I've been loved, a place I've known joy and seen it on the faces of loved ones; and who says you can only haunt the places you've known sadness, the places you've been screamed at in, the dorm rooms you've been hurt in, the places you've known pain?

Why can't I be some benevolent ghost, roaming the halls, billowing curtains to let in some blinding rays when the someone ten years from now is dangerously close to missing their 9am class. Why can't I be that unseen force, poking the shoulders of people whose friends are feeling alone, struggling, holing up behind closed doors; that gentle urge from who knows where that reminds them to check in with their aunts and uncles and cousins, telling them to pay attention, to lift their heads up?

Why can't I be the sort of ghost who goes around adding spices to simmering pots of something when no one is around, giving a dish that little extra oomph, doubling the recipe so there's enough for everyone to taste? Why can't I be the wind at someone's back when they make time for a morning run, or the voice of *you look fine, you are lovely, you are great* in the ear of the girl pinching at her fat in the bathroom mirror, hoping none of her roommates walk in to see her naked and vulnerable and sad, angry with the space her flesh takes up?

Why can't I be the voice of reason before the night starts, before you're thrown into the gladiator ring that is a gathering of your peers, the voice telling you that *they all can go fuck themselves*, they being the girls you know, who haven't eaten yet today, with piercing eyes who eye you up and down while they sip their vodka sodas and pretend to listen to what their friends are saying, the scathing tongues of boys who stare and whisper or worse, don't look at all.

Why can't I be that unseen benevolent force, who switches up the music queue, salvaging a dying get together, putting on that song that will get everyone moving, everyone roving and speaking with each other and feeling alive? Or the reminder to write a thank you note, or to clean your room and do your laundry, or to eat breakfast and stop smoking cigarettes?

When I look around my room, the photos I've put up, the wall I've painted on, the bed I've slept in, think of all the secrets I've divulged and the ones that have been divulged to me between these four walls, the number of times I've accidentally locked my bedroom door and, laughing, had to rise from bed to let someone who'd just jumped out for a pee back in, or the downward dogs I've done on that ugly carpet, or the cups of coffee I've spilled on it - when I think of all these things, all these moments, I find it hard to believe they'll be able to extract all of me, find it hard to believe that when it's all shellacked over and repaired and cleaned and then full of someone else's stuff, someone else's life and thoughts and laughs and sorrows, that I won't still be here too, in some way, echoing through time, through this place.