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The Backs of Leaves

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THE BACKS OF LEAVES

By

Shelby Colburn

B.A. University of Maine, 2016

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

August 2019

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THE BACKS OF LEAVES

By Shelby Colburn

Thesis Advisor: Dr. David Kress

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)

August 2019

This thesis is a novella that explores themes of emotional abuse, grief, toxic masculinity, sexuality, and gay violence. The author deploys a frame narrative that encompasses short stories that are tied by a narrator in the novella. The narrator's stories create a continuity between "real," realistic, and surrealist fictions. These explorations of fiction create a conversation between the frame narrator's "real" life and that of her stories. As the novella's plot progresses, the frame narrator's sanity deteriorates, which allows her to become increasingly grotesque. The grotesque situates how macabre the frame plot is, creating a connective tissue between the "real" and the "surreal."

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WRITING GETS HER OUT OF THE WALLPAPER: A CRITICAL

INTRODUCTION

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.

“The Yellow Wallpaper”- Charlotte Perkins Gilman

As I wrote *The Backs of Leaves*, I often envisioned my narrator Leona as the woman from Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Gilman’s female narrator is locked in a bedroom by her husband in order to “cure” her insanity. However, the room that the narrator finds herself in becomes the cause of her mental deterioration. In the final moments of the short story, the narrator rips the wallpaper off the walls, believing a woman has become trapped behind the gaudy print. In my narrator’s ongoing attempt to write about herself and her dead husband, Leona slowly becomes insane from the solitude and sleep deprivation she inflicts on herself. Leona—unlike Gilman’s narrator—can choose to exit the room in which she inhabits, but I forced my narrator to stay in her bed so that she could enact the power and agency she held within her. Like Gilman’s woman, Leona’s insanity allows her to free the being that has been buried inside her. Leona’s continuous writing breaks the hold that her husband and his actions left on her.

In Chapter Five, Leona directly quotes from “The Yellow Wallpaper:” “I can feel the wallpaper looking back at you. *There are things in that paper which nobody knows but me, or ever will*” (Colburn, 64). Leona’s observation serves to explore how her mind has begun to shift towards insane notions of personified objects, where the room represents Leona’s conscious awareness of who her husband really was to her. Although Leona’s stories are not “real,” they

still access a part of her husband that only she can understand. Readers are first made aware of the husband after he is already dead—his story has already ended, his name not important anymore, which leaves Leona behind with her grief. For *The Backs of Leaves*, I wanted to explore how a woman might process the death of a husband that has treated her with little respect; how might this woman express her true feelings for him—still loving him after all he has done—without the pressure of others interfering with her thoughts?

This novella tries to answer this question by pulling in the role of identities; specifically, the duality of the identities we encompass. For Leona, she is a woman who loved her husband, despite his lack of love for her. Additionally, Leona is now a widow who cannot process immediately what has happened to her. She is both a wife and widow at the same time, her husband still alive in her mind, but dead beside her. We also see how the duality of identity exists within the husband: he is a repressed gay man who—according to Leona, has hurt the people in his life. He is both a lover and an abuser traumatized by his repression. *The Backs of Leaves* offers a glimpse at how our identities can conflict with each other despite what we assume happens. In fact, the title of my novella offers the same examination. The phrase comes from my grandmother who taught me we can predict the weather by watching leaves blow in the wind. She told me that if I ever saw the backs of leaves, it meant a storm was coming. For her, if the leaves were rapidly fluttering on branches you could see the side of the leaf that doesn't absorb the sun. Somehow, this translates to clouds rolling in, blocking out the sun, but the metaphor works. Every time I see the backs of leaves, a storm has always hit.

The ability of seeing both sides of the leaf means we see two identities forming one being—the side that takes in light, and the side that doesn't. I used the image to create the characters of the novella: Caleb is also Dante; Eric is Rocker when on the job; Charese is rich but

thrives in poverty; Candace is Leona's alter ego; Mike is the lover and the abuser; and the Ghost is the consciousness of readers. These identities serve as Leona's comprehension of her husband's death: if he can be two beings at once, so can others.

Writing *The Backs of Leaves* was challenging because I had to be conscious of my awareness on how I was going to address the husband's multiple identities. Coming from a position of privilege, writing the dead husband's repression was time consuming because I wanted to make sure I wasn't tone deaf of his portrayal. I wanted to write him as flawed, but also sympathetic. This man has been hurt by a society that has rejected his sexuality, and in turn, he enters a relationship unable to process his emotions because of what that same society has taught him. He ignores Leona, degrades her emotionally, and refuses to acknowledge her feelings and concerns. As Johnson writes,

In the simplest sense, masculinity and femininity are cultural ideas about who men and women are and who they're supposed to be. Typically, they are expressed in terms of personality traits that portray women and men as 'opposite sexes.' According to patriarchal culture, for example, men are aggressive, daring, rational, emotionally inexpressive, strong, cool headed, in control of themselves...So long as everyone buys into the split, whether or not it actually describes them, all can have a relatively clear and stable sense of who they are and what's what. The problem, though, is that femininity and masculinity *don't* describe most people as they actually are (Johnson, 86).

Johnson's articulation of the pressures of societal indoctrination of masculinity and femininity reveals that there are issues when binaries are placed on individuals that restrict the true identities that work within us. "Masculinity and femininity tell us relatively little about who we

are, then, in part because we are complicated beings who reveal ourselves differently from one situation to another. We are not self-contained and autonomous ‘personalities’ but relational beings whose feelings and behavior are shaped in an ongoing way through our interactions with other people in particular social environments” (86). Leona’s husband suffers as both victim and aggressor because he is an example of how patriarchal societies dictate the emotions expressed by men and women, and how heterosexuality is representative of masculine prowess. As such, when men exemplify behavior that conflicts with society’s perception of masculinity, or if men come out as gay, they are punished by others who enforce the social code of gender binaries. As such, men will police behavior “unbecoming” of masculinity, referring to violators of masculine roles as “fags.” As Pascoe writes,

The relationship between adolescent masculinity and sexuality is embedded in the specter of the faggot. Faggots represent a penetrated masculinity in which ‘to be penetrated is to abdicate power’ (Bersani, 1987: 212). Penetrated men symbolize a masculinity devoid of power, which, in its contradiction, threatens both psychic and social chaos (Pascoe, 70).

Leona envisions her husband as a man taught systemically to repress his emotions and feelings because men who are gay are considered “feminine” or ‘fags.’ “Where the Water Cannot Bring You Back” explores how men are often vilified by their peers when they exit the societal norms that regulate what masculinity is. When Denton is outed as gay, the people of his town ostracize him, despite knowing him all his life. Worse, Mike, Denton’s lover and representation of Leona’s husband, violently attacks Denton out of fear that he will be discovered.

The attack on Denton by Mike represents a systemic fear of being discovered as less-than-masculine. Mike’s fear of being discovered as Denton’s lover comes from his fear of being

treated exactly how he treats Denton. His violence at Denton is the violence he fears from the townspeople of Bonlis, thus, he enacts his rage towards Denton as a cover for his identity as a gay man. Even Denton notes that he would do the same action, were the positions switched: “Denton could feel blood dripping down in his throat. ‘I would do it too,’ he said. He coughed, his chest feeling concaved. “But I won’t tell” (Colburn, 80). Mike’s behavior towards Denton is an all too real example of what toxic masculinity makes men do. According to Pascoe,

But becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity. This fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police most of their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it (71).

By writing Mike as Leona’s husband, she finds a way to explain his behavior towards her and the man she caught him with. In “When the Night Has No Moon,” the John breaks down in front of Eric/Rocker because of the guilt he has for hiding his identity through violence: “The man began to cry, large tears falling on his face. ‘Gary could never love me, not like this,’ the John sobbed, taking his large hands to cover his face. ‘The things I have done, to men like me...like him.’” (Colburn, 29) In this aspect, Leona decides to characterize her husband as deeply flawed, but flawed because of the society they live in. Leona tries to create the version of her husband she wants to forgive because she wants to understand why he emotionally abused her. He did not emotionally abuse her because he was gay—he did so because he was told he shouldn’t be, and that he had to hide his true feelings from everyone. That suppression of emotion was redirected

and channeled at Leona, who we find out would have accepted her husband. She wonders that if he had been able to open up, would they both be free from the suffering inflicted on them by toxic masculinity norms.

I chose to have Leona write this because I have witnessed how violence against gay men suppresses how other men handle their emotions. Growing up in a semi-rural area, men in my town were absolutely scared to share their emotions, and worse, feared men who were open about their sexuality. Men in my town would harass open men, while also perpetrating violence against those that did not conform to masculine gender roles. Although before my birth, Charlie Howard's death in 1984 largely influenced how men behaved with one another in the Bangor area (Harrison). The reference in Chapter Five to "Chuck-a-Fag Bridge" is an actual colloquial name for the bridge where Charlie Howard was violently attacked and thrown to his death. Gay men of my town are still threatened by others who wish to police gender and sexuality expectations. Openly gay individuals are still threatened with the risk of being thrown into the Kenduskeag Stream by homophobic members of the community.

The brutal name for the bridge and current treatment of gay men in my area is why I wanted to provide a voice for them in my novella. Using my privileged position as a non-gay man, I wanted to write stories that commented on the harmful effects toxic masculinity inflicts on individuals. Although Leona's stories are largely fictional, my goal was to show that she was aware of the societal pressures that may have been inflicted on her husband, and in turn, were inflicted on her. My hope is that my intended author and narrator do shed light on how violence committed against LGBTQIA+ individuals perpetuates the stigmas associated with stepping outside of gender norms and regulations.

In order to distort binaries and boundaries, I decided to work with grotesque and macabre elements. While my novella works to give voices to underrepresented individuals, I added the grotesque element to show how Leona has been affected by her very own situation. Her deteriorating sanity allows Leona the ability to speak freely of what she feels, sees, hears, and experiences—before and after her husband’s death. The grotesque breaks the line between the “real” and the “fantastic” that Leona uses in her work. Ultimately, my novella deploys this fictional aspect because of how my project is created. The frame narrative represents the “real,” the stories of Leona represent the “realistic,” and the use of supernatural elements uses the “surreal.” In order for the surrealist elements in my fiction to work, I added macabre elements to shift perspectives in how Leona handles her grief, her rationalization of the dead husband’s treatment of her, and how she comes to find herself.

I was largely influenced by Shelley Jackson’s novel, *The Melancholy of Anatomy* when I first started writing *The Backs of Leaves* because of how Jackson deploys the use of the grotesque and the macabre. Jackson extracts parts and fluids from the body to create individual stories that focuses on unique worlds that encompass the organ or limb that she chooses. Jackson writes in her story, “Sperm:”

My favorite recipe is this: lay the sperm directly on the burner. As the skin crackles and spits, releasing the liquors, turn the sperm. When it is entirely relaxed, remove and cool. Peel off the bitter skin with a fork, and discard. Under it you will find a layer of translucent fat. Cut this off, press it through clean muslin and reduce it to the consistency of gruel over a low flame. Run the skinned sperm under a broiler to brown, garnish with orange slices, and top with the reduced liquors (Jackson, 40).

Jackson's ability to explore parts of a whole inspired me to explore parts of the dead husband that Leona thought was his whole. He was secretive, emotionally abusive, and largely unavailable for Leona; thus, she wanted to discover who her husband was and how that discovery might lead her to move on from him. As such, the grotesque and macabre elements add a level of intensity that comes from Leona's frustrations with her husband, herself, and of the life she existed in. Her anger, her sadness, and her own self-doubt needed to be explored by these fictional elements because the grotesque and macabre allow her to say the words she was never confident in saying. Her writing is a way of expressing herself, an action she was constantly denied.

Like Gilman, my fiction is an attempt to provide voices for those who are often silenced or who are abused by those they think they can count on. Leona's frame narrative provides her the opportunity to free the woman stuck inside the wallpaper—to find herself while her husband lies beside her. Her framed stories express how the world shapes Leona and her husband's relationship with each other and as individuals. Holistically, *The Backs of Leaves* provide a narrative on how the repressed can find their freedom or voice in a world full of violence, where the identities we inhabit are free to interact with each other through fictional elements that break boundaries and expectations.

CHAPTER ONE

I became conscious, engrossed in the silence of our bedroom. When the light filtered past the blinds and through my eyelids, I was jolted into knowing; into feeling your body lay next to me, cold and motionless. *I never wake up before you*, I thought to myself, scrubbing the dry skin from the corner of my eyes. My vision blurred and broken, I saw the dim light shining through the cracked opening of our shades. The gleaming rays fell upon your dull, unusually-pale skin.

You were—are not—moving, breathing. Your closed eyes are tinted with a pale brown-blue color, looking almost sunken in the sockets. When I reached over to investigate, to touch you—something you never allow me to do—your skin bit at me with a cold lash. I did not feel your blood pulse against the skin of my fingers.

The silence of the room fell upon me, and I turned away from you.

The cats are by the furnace, watching me type away at these words, watching you as I watch the screen in front of me. I didn't know what to do in that moment, when I knew you were...sleeping. I cannot say the word that pops into my head, because I don't believe it can be true. How can it be? We are still young. Young-ish. You were fine when we entered into the bed last night, the tension between us palpable, but normal. You slipped under the covers and dozed off, while I lay on my back staring at the ceiling, counting the cracks until my consciousness closed. It was the regular schedule of events. How did your change occur, and why?

I feel...uneasy. No: curious. Is that the word that I want to use?

There is a silence coming from your body that reminds me of the quietness between us. I am listening to the rhythm between the keys underneath my taps that syncs with the firmness of your position. I don't know why, but I am comforted by this chance to finally see you, up close;

you as still as ever as I inch forward to mark the details of your face. You are about to be mapped out, between the time it takes for me to glance at you and the time it takes for the words to ink itself on the page. Is ink the right word?

Your blond hair is folded behind you as the pillow meets the curvature of your head. There is a mole stationed behind the crook of your ear, and I am now beginning to see little crow's feet spread near the corners of your eyes. How come I never noticed those before? I remember your eyes are hazel. That, I most certainly remember. I used to stare into those eyes pulsing back at me with a hidden rage subdued by your inability to share those deep emotions you kept locked up. Yes, I can remember those eyes...but why can't I remember that you were dusted with the tell-tale signs of middle-age?

Almost instinctually, if there really is such a thing, I wanted to pull your eyelids open with my fingernails to check to see if your eye color has changed. But I am afraid of what lies behind the two curtains, I am worried that a confirmation will stare back at me with the same empty glare I have gotten used to. If I stare back into that eye, then I will be forced to put down this laptop and do something about you...sleeping...next to me. To maybe admit that you are...

No, you are sleeping.

To say anything else is to admit that I am conscious about what I am going to do. To admit that I find satisfaction by the lack of breath escaping from your throat. That I can feel the pit of grimness forming at the base of my sternum, in which I keep pushing the feeling down below into the recesses of my willingness to know you more. To admit that as you stay quiet for me, I can finally write about you.

I want to take this time—however long that may be—and figure out why you did those things you did to me. I don't need to say them here, right now. I want to take my time, get the

chance to find reason behind the actions. I am feeling something boil inside of me, and I am not sure how I can subdue that bubbling rumble at my core. Or, if I want to subdue it at all. I...I don't know what to say right now, which I think is typical of me. Oddly enough, I recognize this, and sense that what I am about to write will be me finally saying something to you. Actually talking to you about how you made me feel, how you—

How you didn't let me get to know you. Us. We. I guess I am unsure as to go about this. Sure, I could pick up the phone now and shove this all under the rug. But...where would that leave me? Empty than what I already am.

I am going to start voicing the questions that I have always wanted to ask you. About the life you never told me about, about the people you kept from me. That you thought you kept from me. I can ask these questions, and find the answers at the same time. I can speculate, but I can find the truth; write it. Can I fully say it's the truth...no, but also yes. Because this is mine, not yours. These are my creations of who you are, how you appeared to me in the moments where I saw you with others, without me even though I stood beside you, arm in arm. Where my vocal questions to you were met with derision, even fear. I knew, I saw. But I didn't say anything. Until now.

There are moments upon your face that I can see, now as the look of slumber spreads over your solemn shape. My knowledge of you is being written, unlocked as I stop for a few moments to look at the man who slept next to me; to the man I always knew that I didn't know.

This is me, Leona, finding some truth between us, and in turn, me. Of the woman who stayed with a man with no written story. A woman who lingered behind ruffled sheets spread between bodies that barely touched or moved together.

But how do I start? How do I begin shaping my thoughts of you towards something concrete? Where do I turn from here, looking back at the words before this very sentence. Believing that I should go back, delete them all, and pick up the phone to call for help.

If I go back, this all ends. The knowing submerged with your body. I can't let that happen. I can't move away, file my thoughts into a different sphere of willing ignorance. I need to do this. I need to use this silence between us to fix what has become of you; of us. You can no longer build walls that hide me from what you were.

But since this is not truth, how can I explore the speculations of who I think you used to be? Perhaps...perhaps I can create you as another. I cannot write about you as you are now. But I can explore you through the actions of both you and those who you could have been. You can become a character. If I don't write about *you*, then I can use your character to explore what I think happened. Because if I talk about *you*, then I am afraid I cannot say what I thought—or think—happened. But that's the point. To find out...

And if you wake up, by chance, then I will let you decide who is you, and who is not you. Are you the character, or the characterization of who I think you are.

I want to find out.

I Know Who You Are

Norman's cold coffee sits by his right hand as he taps his pen on the wooden table. He watches as readers flip through their pages, noses crammed into the spines of borrowed books and cheap magazines. He watches them, bored with how vibrant they seem to be. Wanderers looking for a place to read was Norman's idea of a burning hell.

Then again, Norman was boring as hell.

He clipped his hair preciously the same way every time he visited his regular barber. He cycled through his weekday shirts with vigorous regularity: three piece suit Monday and Thursdays, while a simple two piece ensemble would do well for the days left. Yes, Norman had no right to judge those who he looked upon, there with his coffee sitting untouched by the curve of his pinky. But he did judge others because that was who he was. Judgmental down to the very core. He was boring in the sense that on the outside he was stereotypical—the rather okay-looking man who waits sitting down in a bookstore. He judges the patrons around him, feeling his normality, his inexperience with color and diversity; how his average life somehow makes him the authority on what was right and wrong.

Even though he was just another man who had committed an affair.

Yes, Norman glared at the people around him, those miniscule lives seemingly happy in their own worlds; worlds he could never understand. Didn't want to understand. Or did understand because he secretly wanted to be a part of those worlds. Norman, the regular, judgmental man, yearned for abnormality because he wasn't able to do it himself. Even when he cheated on his wife, he wasn't being abnormal. Good ol' boys cheat every day. His actions were not new, or inventive. He got caught, yes, but so do others. Norman was just a percentage, and he knew, and as suspected, secretly hated it.

Norman pushed back a stray piece of blond hair past his hazel eyes, and looked at the cold mug sitting just a few centimeters away from him. Average.

The door to bookstore jingled, the sound pinging off the edges of Norman's ear drums. He turned around, and noticed his "friend," Caleb, stomp over to his location. Caleb scooted past the old classics shelf, following the carpeted path to the bookstore café. Caleb was Norman's partner at the law firm. The word friend could fit the description of the relationship between the two men, but that would be a lie in itself. While Norman was predictable in every sense of the matter, Caleb was perplexing. His eyes were a shade of blue that engulfed the miniscule pupil that lay in the center of his eyes. They popped against the darkness of his skin, a deep and Cheshire-like smile occasioning the bottom of his mouth during opportune moments of rare humor. Compared to Norman, Caleb was leagues beyond the likes of the man. He was a mystery, unbeknownst to...well, this very writer.

"Hey," Norman said rising to shake Caleb's hand as the man pulled the chair from the table. Caleb smirked, and took the motion with a repressed arm.

"Why am I here, Norm?" Caleb said, setting his jacket on the back of the chair. He lowered his body to the seat, marking the coffee by Norman's fingers. He unhooked his blazer's button, and folded out his tie. The letter "D" was engraved in the tie clip that rested under the base of his chest.

Norman cleared his throat, tipping his weight back to stretch his body. Caleb watched him, rolling his eyes. Caleb couldn't stand normality, but dealt with Norman because of the partnership. He knew Norman could be the face, while Caleb did the hard, grueling work of keeping the system in order. Even Norman knew the mysterious power Caleb had within and

without the company. Norman was jealous, but what could he do: Caleb ran the system, while Norman played along.

“This about Wendy?” Caleb said, before Norman could answer him. “Again?”

Norman shrugged his shoulders, and cleared his throat once more. “I don’t know how I feel about it.”

“What, the divorce?” Caleb said, a sly look beginning to spread across his face, “Jesus, man, get over it.”

Norman clacked his teeth together three times, the sound loud enough for the two men to hear alone. Caleb raised his eyebrows and tilted his head at the movement of Norman’s jaw.

“I’m a divorced man.”

“So, what?” Caleb said, “A lot of men are divorced. You’re no exception.”

“That’s the point,” Norman said, leaning forward, his face churning with a mixture of panic and relief. “Everyone has secrets, and I don’t.” Norman fumbled his fingers together, his face beginning to turn red. “It makes me sick.”

Caleb let out a snort, and touched his fingers to his nose, wiping away invisible snot from the arch of his nostrils. He leaned forward, meeting the gaze of the man in front of him.

“You’re pissed because you have everything out in the open?” Caleb leaned back once more, and scrunched his mouth into a pout. “Poor Norman. Stumped again.”

Norman huffed, and watched as the barista in the café poured some white cream into a customer’s small latte.

“You thinking about coffee girl over there?” Caleb said, changing the topic out of boredom. He huffed out a snicker. Norman whipped his head back around, and gave Caleb a glaring eye.

“No.”

“Nothing wrong with looking,” said Caleb, “You’re no stranger to that. I bet I can hook you two up. ”

Norman puffed out his chest, his tie forming an arch against the white backdrop of cotton. He shook his head, almost with violence, and threw his middle finger up at Caleb. Caleb’s face turned serious, his fingers motioning Norman to lean in closer towards the middle of the table. He let out a puff of air from his nose, almost as if a warning for Norman to choose his next action carefully.

“You told me you didn’t care if Wendy found out. That’s why I got you and Charese together.” Caleb said, his head cocking to the side. “You want to blame someone for your fuck ups, don’t look at me. If you wanted to keep secrets, you should have cleaned up after yourself.” Caleb paused, his eyebrows beginning to furrow. “If your fetish is having secrets, you better start learning how to keep them.”

Norman put both hands up and apologized under his breath. Caleb remained leaning over the table, his fingers continuing to tap against the plastic tile. For a second, Norman thought Caleb’s nails were black, but when he blinked his eyes, the polished, white sheen of Caleb’s fingers glared under the bookstore’s light. Norman closed his eyes, and began talking once more in a hushed voice.

“Why did she take it well? Why? That wasn’t part of my fantasy.”

Caleb squinted his eyes. “We’ve been over this before, Norman—”

“It was weird.” Norman said, his eyes opening. “At first, she said if I could do it, she should too. And that...that’s weird right? Who does that?”

Caleb rolled his eyes once more, and stopped tapping his nails on the table. “Norman, will you shut up. We’ve been over this. You got freaked out, and booked it. Stupid asshole.” Caleb reached out, and grabbed Norman’s tie, pulling him forward so that they were nose-to-nose. Norman’s eyes grew wide, watching as Caleb’s smile served as a warning. “You had a woman willing to have an open relationship, and you fucking got intimidated by that. You wanted excitement, something different. To be more than normal. She got on board, and that freaks you out? You’re your own worse problem, Norm. I think your one oddity is that you like not liking being normal.”

Norman grabbed his tie back from Caleb, noticing that the barista was eying the two with worried eyes. Caleb turned his head, and winked at the woman, his smile still masking his entire face. The barista turned away, looking disturbed, yet intrigued by Caleb’s actions. When she was completely turned away from them, Caleb rolled his eyes once more, unimpressed by everything around him.

Norman saw Caleb’s gestures, and thought to himself that he needed to relax. Caleb may have been his partner, but something about him screamed *err on the side of caution*.

“She didn’t even want anything,” Norman said, changing the subject to draw Caleb’s apparent frustration away. “When I told her I didn’t want us to be open, that I still wanted to be with Charese without—without Wendy moving on—she wanted us to be legally done,” He chewed on his lip, and began picking the skin from his nails. “She didn’t fight. Just said fine.”

Caleb cocked his head, unimpressed with the new direction of the conversation. “And that bothers you...why?”

“I saw her at the final hearing today. She was with someone else.”

Caleb burst out laughing, rocking his body back and forth, hand over chest with every forced exhale from his body. “You fucking prick,” he said. He stopped laughing, and began looking Norman square in the eyes, “You telling me you’re more upset that your ex-wife—who you cheated on—moved on with someone else. A rationally, and healthy move to do.” Caleb let out one last laugh, “And people say I’m controlling.”

Norman was surprised by the change in tone from Caleb’s voice. He tried pushing his chair away from Caleb, but was met with a pointed finger, forcing him to stay in place.

“You are some sick fuck, you know that,” Caleb said, “Your wife loved you, and you fucked some other girl. And you want to complain that she was living on without you? That she moved on, because you wanted to keep screwing the side chick?”

“It’s not that,” Norman said, “It’s the fact she was ready to move on.”

Caleb bumped his fist on the table, alerting some of the readers around them. He hissed through his clenched teeth, his finger starting to curl from Norman, back into his hand. With one, fast swoop of his arm, he gathered his coat, already standing up.

“Where you going?” Norman said, wondering about Caleb’s sudden burst of speed.

Caleb shook his head, and gave Norman a perplexed look. “So you’re not even bothered that she’s with someone else. Only that she didn’t stay stuck under your thumb?”

Norman scrunched his face, and shrugged his shoulders.

“And that right there is your problem,” Caleb began, “You’re so fucking useless, you don’t even know how you feel,” Caleb got up, and slung his coat over his shoulders. “Do you ever feel for anybody but yourself?”

“You’re the one that introduced me to Charese!” Norman said, rising from his own chair. Caleb walked over to Norman, his larger height eclipsing the man altogether.

“But you’re the one who did her,” Caleb smiled, his large teeth showing once more.

“Next time, at least order me a *warm* drink before wasting my time.”

Caleb walked away from Norman, his coat swinging behind him. Norman lunged back down in his seat, the mug of coffee shaking across the surface.

And Norman thought. He thought about how Caleb was wrong. About how he could be right. No, wrong. Slightly right, but not much. About the impossibility of Wendy moving on from him.

He was her everything, after all.

How could she be free of him? Norman grabbed the edge of his chin with his right hand, knocking the coffee mug just enough for it to fall on the ground. The joe splattered over worn carpet.

He was everything. She was lucky to have him, yeah, that’s it. Norman thought, and thought. But the tiny voice that he never listened to uttered the most important whisper:

You can’t comprehend freedom.



CHAPTER TWO

That was not my best effort. Not in a long shot. What I have just written can't possibly explain how or who you are. I am full of rust, and when I try to shake you off of me, little pieces of metal fly in suspension as it trails to the ground. You are still a part of me, and I can't handle it right now. I can't handle...this. There has to be more for me to write. There has to be a way for me to remove the crust of you.

That's why I had to take my cursor and circle, "freedom." It's what I need the most.

I have to change my focus. I can't keep talking about Norman, or his monotonous existence. Because you weren't hum-drum, sitting there moping into a cold cup of java. We both know I never confronted you about Charese. We both know that if I had suggested an open relationship—and when you would have said no—that I would still stay. Because I did stay. Because I let you keep doing what you had done. To Charese, and to the male sex worker.

Yeah, I knew about him too.

To create you as Norman would be to leave behind a void that couldn't suck you out of my very bones. No. My writing can't recreate you. I can't keep clinging onto the rust that drapes over my arms and clutches my face like a mask. I have to find you—us—through the others. Through the people you kept from me.

I can't spend the time you never gave me.

The people...yes, the people. The man who gave you glances down the boulevard, or the woman who "come hithered" with her fingers moving towards the curve of her lips. They—they know your truth. They know what lies behind the façade of endearing husbandry and late night-

sneaking-past the tucked-in quilt beside my awakened body. They would know the truth behind the painful glimpses of guilt you would let show in moments of pity. They. Always they.

I still don't understand you. Even now as the sun dips below the crest of the sill, spiking orange and yellow strands of light upon your body. Has it really taken me this long? To get the words onto the page? To finally confront you when your eyes are closed and chest motionless between the cover of blankets that have begun to fall onto the floor? To open my own eyes and search for the traces of their flesh upon the curve of your figure?

When did I know about them? Is that the question you are asking me, arms inert and spilling over the side of the mattress? Don't you remember? I saw him. You. Each other. And I know you saw me too.

Everywhere I looked there was someone there watching you, waiting. Me, or someone else, it didn't matter. We didn't hunger for anything else but you. I know, because it was the same look you never gave me. You refused to feed me with any affection, any sort of reassurance that it was going to be okay for us. But you knew I wondered every day when you would finally let me in. And you dangled that in front of me. The torture wasn't physical, no. It was the awareness that I knew everything, that you knew I wouldn't confront you, so you kept doing it.

And yet, I couldn't leave you. Because there was hope. There was the possibility that you would tell me everything. Everybody. That you would sit me down and confess the secrets you held onto so dearly. I had hope that you would find my eyes meeting with yours, begging to know about all of them. To just say it out loud, bring me to understand how you could have taken the time to hide a part of you that I had an awareness of. It was the hope that kept me

emotionally drained. You used that hope, willingly and mercilessly. You knew what you were doing. Did I know? Do I know now?

I stopped typing for a minute. I don't know if you can tell, but I did. I had to rub away some tears before I could come back and finish the thoughts running through my head. These tears felt different to me. I know I cried almost every night, but those tears were different. They were...how do I describe them? Sad? Empty? Nothingness? But these tears, the ones I just shed...how can I ever describe them? Stronger nothingness? Does that even make sense?

No. Because you always said I never made sense.

Wait, that's not it. It's because it's been fifteen hours since I woke up this morning. I...I can't believe it's night already.

The darkness reminds me of the void between us. Sounds dramatic, right? But it's true. It also reminds me of the night where that man found his way over to us, his blue cardigan swaying in the breeze and his eyes locked onto yours. And I saw it, the longing that trailed on your tongue and through your fingers that ached to touch his shoulders. The linger between want and danger, desire and structure. He turned away, shy and meek against the backdrop of brick and hanging wind chimes placed against the frame of the shop store. As the wind knocked the metal tubes against wooden stones, the music trailing in the night air, I could see what I see now: the look of your face that was eager for an awakening spell that moved you from me.

I desperately wanted to be that man. To hold that lingering longing in the few seconds shared between apparent strangers lurking under the chimes of night. To perhaps feel the heartbeat underneath your chest aching for my touch. To be the man that turned your eye to me.

The next night, I followed you. He waited along a line of men, almost as if he knew you couldn't resist the temptation of being with him. I didn't know that people could still go downtown and get love from the streets. I thought the internet had wiped that out. Guess I was wrong. I wish I had known that long ago.

I wish I could have been that man. I wish I could felt that longing you gave him when he got into our car.

I will now be that man, waiting on corner steps searching for the familiar embrace of your cold, spellbound fingers.

When the Night Has No Moon

The night was cold, and he could see his cigarette smoke mingling with his exhaled breath. Three of his regulars had already seen Eric's Rucker, the man behind the character of the night.

The air bashed against his exposed skin, his blue cardigan floating behind him with every step. He could smell the scent of men upon his skin, mixing with the fumes of his burning tobacco. Eric took one last draw from his Marlboro, his mind wandering to the night ahead of him. He had serviced only two customers tonight, the third decided to bail. *Dante will be pissed*, he thought.

As Eric walked towards the line of men waiting for him, he noticed the dim glow of the mill behind him, spurting out pink and orange smog into the air above. A glow cast over his body as the shimmering light from the tower blinked with every puff of noxious, mildewed haze. Eric looked up, watching as the black night became engulfed in the light of human consumption.

Nearing the wall of men, Eric dropped the butte of his cigarette, scuffing out the orange glow with his Converse. He shifted into position, and pushed his back against the desolate building.

"Rucker," a voice said, sharp and savvy. Eric turned his head, placing his folds of cash into his soft cardigan. He noticed Dante standing away from the men, his eyes settled on his products. Eric crept next to him, and reached into his pockets to grab another cigarette.

"How much tonight?" Dante asked, flicking his long black fingernails. Eric's boss loomed over the men, his thin, muscular body gracefully giving the air a layer of menace amidst the mill's nebula. Dante's hair was straightened into a long black Mohawk at the center of his

head. As the ends of his hair met the curve of his bare back, an orange dress hugged his skin down to the middle of his thighs. His black stilettos coursed up to the top of his leg, the points of the toes marking Dante's next step. His face was painted with crimson lips, and gold draped his eyelids that sparkled with greed. A pin with the letter "D" glimmered at his collarbone.

"Hundred," Eric said, pulling a few bills from his pocket. Dante stretched his hand out, waiting for the drop in his palm. Eric gave him the percentage, and lit his cigarette. Dante brought the cash to his peering eyes, and counted the money with care. After his calculations, he tucked the money into his chest.

"Not much," Dante said, making *tsk tsk* sounds with his tongue, "Care to tell me why?"

Eric took a drag, and puffed out into the air. *What a dragon*, he thought, imagining himself transforming into a large, black-scaled beast. His purple wings would glimmer with specks of silver, flying over the mill with a large gust of flames. He would pillage the plains with fire and gust, raking gold from the inhabitants below.

Beats doing a handy every twenty minutes.

"Two didn't want the whole thing," Eric said, his mind still wandering and focused on his imaginations, "The third had a guilty conscious."

Dante huffed beside him, breaking Eric from the dragon's trance. Eric knew it was the huff that meant the man was pissed.

"How long have you been doing this?" Dante said, "Remind me."

Eric leaned against the wall with one leg, the hair coiling in the blistering wind.

"Few years," Eric said, a drop of ash falling from his fingers.

“Then you should know by now that customers pay for the goods that look appetizing,” Dante said, “Maybe if you kept up with your appearance, your men would be willing to do more with you.”

Eric lowered his head and took a large breath. He knew he had let himself go a bit, more than what workers usually did when they slipped. But he was tired of the appearance he had to keep. Tired of watching what he ate, what he drank, and how he kept his hair. He took up smoking for the edge of it, just to feel some sort of worth; shaved his head just to see what it would look like on him. But Dante was right—customers held back when their “regular” changes an ingredient. His experiments would need to stop if he wanted Dante’s protection.

Dante clicked his teeth with his tongue, drawing close to Eric. “You have potential, Rocker. You shouldn’t be this low. Shouldn’t look this bad.”

Eric forced a lump down his throat. He watched Dante’s eyes fill with flames, wondering if they would consume him. “I only had two regulars tonight,” he said in an attempt to excuse the loss of profits, “I turned down a few other men. They seemed...rough. I’ll try harder.”

Dante’s face scrunched up, the ticking noise from his tongue grew sharper.

“Pity,” he said, taking a pause to glance Eric up and down, “Still afraid of rough men, huh? You should work for me...really work for me. Full time. Not only would you get a wider range of clients, but no one would dare rough you up, honey.”

Eric scrunched his face, snorting back a glob of snot from his nostrils to the back of his throat. *Dante’s not the man to run around for. Get him mad, you go missing.* He smiled, and touched his head with shaking hand. “No, I’m good,” he began, “I don’t mind selling my body to random Johns on the street. I don’t think I could do cyber stuff.”

Dante turned his head away, his hair whipping behind him. He tapped his fingers rhythmically against the stone building. Eric knew he had displeased the man, but didn't want to poke him any longer.

"I got into this business to give intimacy to men," Eric said, "I don't know much about this new internet thing. If I work for you I need to think about it a little more."

Dante turned around, his Cheshire-like smile radiating. "I suggest you do your thinking quickly. I got clients who would love a little more tenderness." Dante wiggled his fingers, signaling for Eric to move to another part of the wall. Eric didn't pause and wait for another reaction. To ignore the simple gesture of Dante's hand would put all the men at risk. Dante was a dangerous man, with limited temperament. Only a few knew him outside his night persona, but what they all recognized was that his real self was loaded with connections. Not even cops would roll past the street with Dante on the lookout. His reach was long and wide, which meant Dante had the means to silence anyone that displeased him. Whoever Dante was during the day puzzled the workers on the wall, but all knew not to ask. You never ask a pro their real lives anyway—not unless you trust them. You could only trust Dante so far. Whoever he really was, he had many people that owed him favors.

Eric may have ticked the vivacious man off, but he knew better than to join the ranks of Dante's inner circle.

Eric, walking away from the time bomb behind him, placed himself in the middle of the waiting men. Archer, Eric's closest friend, leaned over and jabbed lightly at Eric's ribs.

"What the fuck happened there?" Archer asked, pushing back his red hair behind his ears. His green eyes squinted towards Dante, who had begun to pace in place.

“Wanted me in his crew,” Eric said, “No way was I getting in that mess. I decide who I work on, not Dante.”

Archer scoffed and cracked his knuckles under his black coat. “Even though you still pay the man for protection?”

He knew Archer was right, remembering his time as a worker without Dante’s protection. For a small percentage, Dante’s influence entitled that insecure John’s wouldn’t work their suppressed aggression out on the men who gave them relief. Eric had first-hand experience with men who thought they needed to prove something.

Eric heard Archer sniff, watching as the man raised his hands closer to his mouth for warmth. “Dante’s got a hand in every jar,” Archer said.

Eric nodded, taking another cigarette from his pocket. He brought a silver lighter to the stick, and set it ablaze. His lungs tightened, holding the smoke in every crevice of his brain.

“He even has it in the internet. I can’t understand why,” Eric said, his voice hoarse from the long draw, “I don’t think the web will be a big deal. But you know Dante.”

Archer shrugged his shoulders and coughed from the gust of smoke coming from Eric’s puffs. He smiled, and mocked Dante’s voice, “*Every invention is created for the purpose of sex.*”

Eric laughed, his hand rising to his chest. The other men close by, overhearing their conversation, joined in stifled cackles. A moment of holistic understanding between the men under Dante.

“Enough,” Dante’s voice boomed. The men looked down the line towards Dante’s position. He was pointing his arm out, focused towards a beam of light appearing from down the street. The rumbling of a motor sounded from the air. The men hushed their laughter, and stood with legs stretched out.

Eric breathed through his nose and sighed with his mouth, calming down for the new arrival. He watched as a new Lincoln Town car slowed down at their intersection, stopping by the group of men.

“Is this Candyville?” the driver whispered, rolling down his window, approaching the line of men leaning against the hard, brick wall. Dante approached the vehicle, flashing his thigh behind the long fur coat draped below his orange dress.

“It is, baby. What do you need?” Dante said, his teeth shining in the headlight of the car.

“Him.” The stranger nodded at a younger man that had bags under his eyes. Dante looked back, his intense glare demanding the boy to step closer. With a silent trace, he approached the car, his eyes blinking rapidly.

“Come here, baby,” Dante said, luring the boy from the wall.

“How much this week?” The driver asked, placing his car in park. The rest of the men on the wall stiffened, watching the scene.

“Ricky, you know the drill,” Dante answered, his smile disappearing from his face. “You ask the same question every week, and I tell you the same damn thing. So what do you want, dumbass?”

The man in the car smiled, and winked. Eric rolled his eyes. *I'm glad I never voted for that slime ball.*

“Ah, come on, Dante!” the man said, “Can't I have a little fun?”

“Senator, you already fuck my men on a discounted price, with special, *secret*, client privileges,” Dante said, tapping his nails on his arm. The man in the car stopped smiling, his eyes growing like a doe in his headlights.

Eric watched as the young pro snuck into the passenger seat, ready for his weekly interaction. The driver turned to him, and, Eric assumed, placed his hand on the inner thigh.

I wonder if he is a top or bottom, Rocker thought, smiling behind the puff of his cigarette. He imagined the worker slamming the senator from behind, while the man practiced his speeches. Eric hid his laughter behind his oversized cardigan. Archer looked at him with a strange glance, alerting Eric that he was making too much of a scene.

“You think that piece of shit likes it rough?” Eric whispered. Archer chuckled, trying to hide his own amusement. Down the line, Dante collected the money from the driver, as another pair of lights emerged from the smoke of the looming tower. The Town Car rolled away as Eric and Archer leaned into each other, holding their emotions in as they prepared for the new, incoming vehicle. A black truck barreled down the street.

“Candyland?” The man said, rolling down his window.

The men turned their faces away, perking their ears towards Dante’s reaction.

“Think this is some game center?” Dante said, shooing the man away.

The man in the truck furrowed his eyebrows, and looked up at the roof of his car.

“Won’t find a candy cane here, sir,” Dante said, continuing to motion his hand down the street. He used a deeper voice, alerting the workers that the customer was bogus. They all relaxed, hiding their legs back against the wall. The man in the truck leaned out more, a look of desperation spreading across his face.

“Candyville?” the man asked, staring at a younger man that Eric knew was fresh from failing out of his freshman year of college.

“So you do have the name down,” Dante said, “What do you want?” his voice annoyed by the man’s lack of attention.

“I asked the boy.” The driver said, his grip tightening around the wheel. He ignored Dante’s inquisitive look, prompting the hot-tempered boss to grab the man’s tie that was hanging out the window.

“I own him. I give the prices.” Dante said, walking in front of the man’s gaze, pulling the tie harder. His heels clicked steadily on the pavement, the tone in his voice lowered into a growl. “Do you want him, or not?”

The man’s nostrils flared, looking Dante up and down. Dante glared back, puffing his chest out and flexing his muscles. Dante had the surprising ability to lengthen and broaden himself at his command, a physical representation of the power he controlled. The line of men figured he liked to slump into his fur coat, a tactic that surprised the rougher clientele whenever they confronted Dante up close.

“I want to be full,” the John finally responded. Dante smiled, and pushed the boy closer to him.

“Five hundred. Younger is juicier and fresher.”

The driver scoffed, his breath heaving in the air. “Fuck that, no pro is worth that much!”

“Mine are,” Dante replied, nodding for the young worker to go back to the wall. “You can’t have excellence this good for miles around. Trust me, my inventory is stock full of good choices.”

The driver bit his lip, an anxious look spreading on his face. “Fine,” he said, his voice rough but quiet against the sound of his vehicle.

“No, baby,” Dante said, a smirk spreading across his face, “I just realized, Ajax here has been reserved for a later client” Dante paused, canvassing the line of men with a fake look of complexity. He stopped his scope over the direction that Archer and Eric were huddling. “But he

will do,” Dante said, pointing to Eric. Eric turned his eyes to the truck, watching as the John’s face turned sour. The driver shifted in his seat, his upper lip beginning to sweat, and his hairy knuckles clenching the steering wheel with a firm grip.

“Hey,” Dante said, snapping his fingers, “Are you buying?”

The man looked up at Dante, and gave a disgusted look.

“He’s ugly to me. I want the young one.” The man said. Eric backed away into the shadows, aware of the impending doom.

“What the hell did you just say?” Dante snapped, taking a step back from the vehicle. The man flinched in his car, his pupils becoming dilated. Dante stomped to the front of the car, and slammed his hand on the hood, the sound echoing. The men on the wall grew stiff.

“He doesn’t look like—”

Dante hit the car again, his fur coat beginning to look like a bear upon his shoulders.

“You come to my corner, and insult my men?” Dante shouted from the headlights, “Who the fuck do you think you are? You come rolling up here thinking you’re better than us, but I can smell the cheap cologne coming off you.” Dante clenched his teeth in anger. “I bet you can’t even afford any of my products, weak little man. Take this car of yours, and drive back to the wife before I ruin you.”

The man’s face grew red, the stubble on his face pointing out like quills. The threat awakened something inside of him. He leaned further out his window, his upper torso completely out of the truck.

“Give me the man. I can afford anything you give me.”

He had been put in place.

Dante lowered his eyes, watching as the man opened his wallet out the window.

“Why should I give you the chance to take one of my fine boys?” Dante said, once the time had ticked away long enough for his dramatics. He neared the window once more, his heels beating like drums on the pavement. “Why should I trust you? How do I know you’re not a cop, Candyland?” Dante asked.

Eric watched as the driver bit down on his lip. *Go away*, Eric thought, revolted at the thought of being with such a man.

“I heard cops won’t even come here.” The man said, leaning towards Dante further. Dante smiled, and nodded his head in agreement.

“You’re damn right. Keep that in mind,” Dante said, turning around and pointing at Eric. “Rocker,” Dante began, “Over here.”

Eric jerked his head up, his attention at full alert. He walked over to Dante, and pulled close to him.

“Go with him. I want his money.” Dante said, his harsh breath running across Eric’s nostrils.

“I’m not doing him,” Eric said, “Guy like him would probably kill me after he’s done.”

“You’ll do as I say,” Dante said, scowling and drawing his forefinger in front of Eric’s eyes, “Fucker wants a good time, and you’re the most experienced.”

“I said no—“ Eric started, but was met with Dante’s hand across the cheek. The action was firm, giving a soft blush to Eric’s skin, but the sound was silent enough not to arouse the attention of the driver. The other men on the wall, however, turned their heads away with swift force.

“Let’s not forget you said you wanted to think about working for me full time.”

Eric stared at the man, watching as his blue eyes became black. He shuddered, and opened his mouth carefully. "I'll pay the whole price on the next guy, Dante. You'll have the whole percentage."

"You do him, or I double the percentage you owe me for every client," Dante said, "You know I am good on getting people to pay, one way or another." Dante laughed in Eric's ear, the smell of sulfur mixing with his visible breath against the cold air. "Come on, baby. You know what the right choice is."

Eric saw rage in the pupils, like a burning fire awaiting to be unleashed. Eric nodded his head.

Dante smiled, "Good. Get me my cash."

Eric—Rocker—swayed over to the car, pushing away from Dante's icy grip. "Do you really want the whole deal?"

"Not with you," the man said, a condescending tone floating from his tongue, "Only a blow I guess."

"100, times two if you finish in my mouth." Rocker replied, feeling Dante draw closer.

"Fine." The man said, showing his wallet to Dante, who shook his head, and pointed to Rocker.

"Pay to him. He'll know what to do."

The man moved his jaw, and motioned for Rocker to sit in the front seat with him. Dante nodded his head, and returned to the wall.

Rocker, with heavy feet, walked over to the passenger side. He gripped the hard door handle, and sunk into the soft seat.

The inside of the car was warm, but the atmosphere chilled Rocker's skin. The cloth fabric of the upholstery felt rough against his bare thighs; the light from the dash created a harsh shadow on the driver's face. As soon as Rocker closed the door, the man sped off, sending his back flat against the seat.

"I'll call you Gary, and that's it," the driver began, taking a left turn away from the origin, "I know your real name isn't Rocker, so you'll be Gary for me."

Rocker closed his mouth hard, hiding his frustration from the strange man. He watched as the hairy knuckles turned sharply around the corner.

"I want you to do as I say. I paid for you, despite..." He paused, looking at Rocker meticulously. "Not looking like I wanted."

Rocker turned his head, and rolled his eyes. He took in a deep breath, and returned his face towards the driver.

"As you wish." Rocker said, forcing out the words. His training kicked in, willing to serve the customer who now had control over him. The driver huffed.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way. Gary was supposed to be you."

Rocker's face twisted, but he knew better than to respond.

The street lights faded away from view as the river drew close. The smog from the mill enveloped the truck, painting the metal in pink and orange mist.

"Answer me when I talk to you." the John demanded, turning the vehicle onto the river's sand. Rocker flinched, and felt his fear begin to rise from his chest into his throat. He suppressed his nerves by griping his client's hand.

"I'll do whatever you want."

“That’s right.” The man said, pulling his hand away. He turned the engine off, flinging his seatbelt off his waist. He flashed his wallet once more, pulling a load of cash from the crevice.

“Thank you, baby,” Rucker said. He took the wallet, and placed it on the dash. “I can’t have my fun if I think you’ll pay me and then cart me off to jail.”

The man grumbled, but leaned back into his seat.

Rucker threw him a fake smile, and reached down towards Gary’s pants. Hairy knuckles pushed him away, making Rucker flinch.

“Beg for it.” He demanded, not leaving a pause.

“What?”

“Beg for it. I want you to beg to have my cock in your mouth.” Gary said, leaning back in his seat. “I couldn’t get what I want tonight, so I want you to beg for what only I can give to you, Gary.”

Rucker swallowed a hard gulp and breathed out of his mouth. The unfamiliar name sent chills up his spine. He knew not to question the man’s motives, or the change in title. Rucker knew that men didn’t like to get angry; especially with their dicks hard from the anticipation of being sucked off.

Rucker leaned closer to the John. He searched his brain for any words that could save him.

“I want you so bad,” he said. The driver relaxed, and moved his head to the side to gaze at his passenger.

Rocker's heart seemed to stop beating. He felt the disassociation forming over his body. He resorted to his taught customs. The right things to say to longing customers. "I need to feel you inside me."

The man grabbed Rocker's hand and shoved it over his pants. Rocker felt the movement against his fingers. He floated away to the back of his mind

"You want this?" The man asked.

"Yes, baby."

The man yelled, pushing Rocker away from him once more. Rocker felt a bruise begin to form on his shoulder. The disassociation faded away, and Rocker was rushed back into reality.

Survive, a voice rang.

The man began to cry, large tears falling on his face. "Gary could never love me, not like this," the John sobbed, taking his large hands to cover his face. "The things I have done, to men like me...to him." Rocker—Eric—reached up, and grabbed onto the man's shaking head.

"Come here," he said, shushing and cooing the man to his chest. He held on with tight arms, feeling the warmth from the John reach through his clothes. He felt the man's tears trail down his own cheek, the salt carrying a burden that couldn't be expressed.

"You don't love me," the man said, the words coming out between gulps of air, "You can't love me. How can you? I've hurt you." Eric reached out, and caressed the man's face close to his lips. Without touching, Eric placed a soothing energy into the man's mouth, breathing his warmth into him

"I will love you the way you want to be loved," Eric said, lowering his voice to show the tenderness he believed he felt, "But you got to let go for me. Let go of whatever you are holding. Tell me everything you want to say. Don't hold back. Let me love you, and let you love me."

The John shook his hands and stared deep into Eric's eyes. The hazel tint glimmered in the blinking lights of the mill.

"Love me," the man said, pulling Eric closer to him.

"Tell me what you want."

The man's chest heaved with the slow cascades of his final tears. He traced his fingers over Eric's arms, and kissed his shoulder. "Can you tell me what you would have done to me had I not cried?"

"What do you mean, love?" Eric said, his voice confused but still concerned.

"If I had loved you enough to let you do more to me, what would you have done?"

Eric felt his stomach sink, knowing that the man didn't want the love from him, but from another. The fantasy couldn't work because Eric was the actor, not the real thing. He became Rocker once more, reaching into his mind for the right words to say.

"Well," Rocker said, "I would kiss the tip, feeling a moisture trace upon my lips."

"Okay," the John said, "Then what?"

Rocker rolled his eyes in the dark, but cuddled closer to the driver. He took his hand, and interlocked his fingers with the John. "I would draw closer with my wet mouth."

"What would I do?" The man said, another tear falling down.

"Um, you would...embrace me fully," Rocker said, "You would let out a gasp, and shudder. All of you would be in me."

"You're good at this," The driver said, "Keep going."

This can't be happening, Rocker thought to himself, feeling how surreal it all felt to him. *The driver isn't even excited anymore, but still wants me to keep writing the fantasy?* "I would

trace my tongue across all of it at once. I open my mouth further, sucking to insure a quiet pop upon the head.”

“That sounds nice,” the driver said. He smiled down at Rocker. “Can I still call you Gary?”

“Yes, my love,” Rocker said, “Shall I finish?”

“Oh, no,” the driver said, “keep going.”

Rocker pulled out a fake laugh from his voice. “Okay, baby. Well, I would grab your testicles, and I would wet my mouth, continuing to draw your head up and down my throat.”

“And then?”

“I would feel you quake with every movement.” Rocker said. *I can't believe this is actually happening. This is fucking ridiculous.* “You would moan and grip my head with force.”

“No, Gary, I would be gentle,” the driver said, his eyes concerned, “I wouldn't want to hurt you. Never.”

“Of course,” Rocker said, “Shall I keep going?”

“Yes, please.”

Rocker bit his lip, thinking of the next action. “I would move faster, my mouth working in short movements while my tongue helped.” Rocker considered adding something ridiculous, but decided it wouldn't be best. If the man was serious enough to pull this stunt, than he would be dangerous enough to enact his pent up rage.

Rocker knew he had to feel nothing. Know nothing. Just like with his other customers. All he had to do was see his goal, and hope it would soon be over.

“I would move faster and faster, moving my hand up and down with my mouth. Suddenly, liquid would move in the veins of your cock, flowing its way up to me. You

gasp—”

“Describe what it tastes like.” The driver said, his ‘old’ self returning. Rocker nodded his head.

“It tastes bitter, incredibly salty. It burns my tonsils, chocking the breath from my throat. But, it flows back, grinding against my taste buds with a sharp rake.”

The driver was nodding his head, squinting his eyes as he pictured the image in his brain. Rocker pulled away feeling the energy change in the car. The man suddenly smiled, his teeth bared like an animal. His eyes were filled with darkness.

“You clean me,” He said, catching his breath as if he had done the hard work.

Rocker smiled back. “With what, baby?”

“This” Gary pulled out a handkerchief. It had blue peacocks sewn in a selective pattern; the blue and green mixing with every stitch.

Rocker delicately took the item from the man, and laid it down on the driver’s pants, almost as if the job was actually done. Rocker felt disbelief, thinking, *What the fuck just happened?* But he kept smiling, watching as the driver sucked on his bottom lip.

The man coughed, turning around to grip his seatbelt. He redeveloped an angry look aimed at Rocker. “We’re done,” he said, “I’m going to take you back now.”

“Remember the price of finish,” Rocker said, his voice going numb from routine. The driver looked at him with curious eyes. Rocker—Eric—grabbed the wallet from the dash and gripped the green pieces of paper in his hand, beginning to check the bills for authenticity.

CHAPTER THREE

I feel the pull of sleep on my lids, but I don't want to succumb to the endless chatter of silence. There is something more mesmerizing as I feel the haze fall over me as I stare at my screen. I am awake in this shadow over me, the writing keeping me aware. To fall asleep next to you would mean to stop writing. To stop writing, I would see you as who you are now, not what you have always been. Writing is the only way I can see you. See you as who you are.

It's been 30 hours since I woke up. As if you couldn't already tell.

I feel stronger, more in tune with the shape of the space around me. I can see the cats glowing from the floor, their bodies spread out and purring. They are like stars plastered in the solar system of red oak; sunshine rising from the ground. I can hear their automatic food dish turn gears and grimace with each passing hour, their rotations keeping up with time and space. There are wings and things in the wall.

I think I should tell you that the water by your side of the bed tastes like skin. I keep leaning over you to take sips to parch my dry throat, to keep myself going. But I don't want to drown, so I keep the large glass on your side of the bed. My dryness allows me to think, to know about every part of you that seems to spring up from my memories of you. I keep saying this word you. You. You. It's driving me crazy.

Everything was always about *him*. Who am I talking to? The walls are listening with keen ears, but they are not active. They don't want to talk back to me, tell me about the fifth wall they want to break in half. The chair with all our laundry smells like a faint scent of softener and dryer sheets. They don't have ears, just pockets. I'm rambling.

The skin water has minerals that float from being too warm. It hits the back of my throat hard, almost as if the water turned solid the moment it hit my lips. It satisfies me. That's all I could ever want. To feel something happening within me. To feel wanted like Eric without the need to hide like Roker. Being with the Johnny boy got things mixed up, huh? That's how I felt, floating back and forth, making sure you saw the right person depending on your moods.

You could have told me, you know... I like both too. We had something in common. Why didn't you want to talk to me? I want to talk now. Please?

The pit of my stomach rumbles every once and while, but I don't want to move. I want to keep writing. My bed-side journal looked appetizing, so I ripped a few pieces of paper to snack on. It fills good to eat my coherent ramblings. The pages feel grainy and dissolves at the touch of my tongue. On the pages that I wrote, the ink tasted more bland than the paper. Is that even a thing? What I am trying to say is, my writing sucks. It ain't good enough to eat. Do you get it? I would say I taste the words as I taste myself, you know: desperate, reaching out for someone to listen to me. But I don't write so I can have people read my work. I write because I don't want to be lonely.

But my words are dead now and I am still alive. And you are lying next to me with a pool of brown and green seeping from your backside.

What would Charese think?

I told you I knew about her, didn't I? It's her turn now, if you haven't already guessed. Yeah, I knew her. I mean, I wish I *knew* her. I only know about her. The color of lipstick she smeared on her lip, and how it stuck to the note I found in your pocket. The sweet smell of musk and pomegranate that was sewn into her own words marked with red. The legal pad of paper turned from yellow to orange underneath the ink she splayed across letters and dotted line

splurges. The curve of her S's, the point of the A—Charese toyed with me more than she did you. I know this. I could see it in her Y's.

I know you did it on purpose. Why else would you leave the note in your pocket? You toyed with me. You knew I wasn't going to fight for myself. But I wonder: did you know that I wouldn't have cared that you saw her? I mean, in my mind, she looked gorgeous, ethereal even. I would have told you it was okay if you saw her. It would mean that I could see others, but still come home to you. But you didn't want me home in the first place. Were you like Norman? Did you want me suffering on purpose while you had your flings? Did you feel as if I couldn't have anyone, even you?

Yeah. You know the answer.

I respect Charese for putting up with you. Who knows what you were like with her, but I'm sure it can't be too different than what I see now. Something about her lettering told me she was my sister of the sheets. That she was writing to me, not you. We had more than you in common, after all, what with the kiss mark etched in between the straight lines on the paper. I studied those cracks of her lips, the arch at the top of her mouth. I could see why you chose her. Why I wanted to choose her. We could have been a family if you had only told me.

But here we are. Lonely, silent and suffering.

I want to know more about her. Why did you keep her from me? She was the one person I wanted to meet of yours. You were selfish keeping her from me. I didn't want you to myself—I wanted your life all for me.

Do you remember what the note said? The one that caught my attention for years? Do you remember how her lipstick stain replaced the period at the end of her sentence? Did you see me eat her words just now, ripped out of my journal? That's right, I kept her note inside my

journal. And now, I have consumed her delicious words, engulfing her as I write. Yes, I will be Charese now. I now write the words that she jotted down:

Find me at Harpies' Way

And the Shadows Cannot Hide You

I smeared a bright lavender shade over my pouted lips, smacking them apart in the mirror. The marble sink glimmered with specks of glitter that sprung from my case of highlighter, which had been smeared over my high cheek bones. I smiled, giving my reflection a little wink. I swung my black hair from my lower back into a high bun, feeling the tension tighten as I pull the strands higher and higher. With a flick of my fingers, the elastic band was on. Next, I pulled a wig from the bathroom draw, bright pink with strands of silver thrown into the frenzy of frizz. I settled the fake hair on my head, and with a final glance at myself, licked a glob of purple clay from my front teeth.

In the distance my phone rang, the sound annoying and persistent. I rolled my eyes, plopping my bare feet into the bright living room. I curled my toes into the soft fur of my Safavieh shag, letting the fluff dance in the valleys of my feet. I picked up the rotary phone, my assistant already spouting off.

“This is Charese,” I said, purposely interrupting him. I rested the corded receiver on my shoulder as I picked at the caked foundation left under my long red nails. “Yeah,” I paused, listening to the ridiculous panic in his voice, “No, have the shipment come in on Thursday, no exceptions. If they can’t do it, fire them all,” pause, “Get it done, or the board will have a fit.”

I slammed the tan phone down, giving out a puff of air through my lungs. I brought my thumb to my mouth and began biting the skin away from the shellac polish. Trust me, it’s not a

nervous habit. I don't get nervous. I just like the way my chunks of skin feel between my incisors. Textured satisfaction, with the hint of mineral from my makeup powder.

I looked over at my fireplace and glanced at my reflection caught in the frame of a photograph taken at one of my companies' jerk-fests. I fucking hate that shit. But, appearances, as usual. I was the CEO after all, no matter what I did in my spare time. But why did they have to flash the cameras? Why take pictures at all? Why do people glamorize pictures of CEO's holding nothing but a gold trophy in their hands? It's just an element shaped to represent some achievement. But by whom, I ask? I got to where I am because I was born into money. Perhaps the award should go to the ancestor who scraped out of the mud with four legs instead of two.

But that's existential thinking, and I don't need to be doing that. I got work to do.

I walk over to the fireplace mantel, grabbing a pair of black stilettos from the leather couch. My fake smile is staring back at me, so I smack the frame down on its face and walk away.

Home, I think as I take my set of faded, gilded keys from my jean purse and shove them into the rusty lock. It's jammed again, which is perfection to me. I slam the door open with my shoulder, feeling a bruise tingle as soon as I stumble through the hallway. My shoes litter the entrance of the door, piling so high I have to reach out with my foot to kick the clutter away before I can fully enter. Just as it should be. An apartment cannot be home without a little chaos. I look up and notice the crack forming in the ceiling. There are water marks rippling through the plaster. I won't call someone to fix it. I'll take joy in letting the roof crumble on me.

"Charese, that you?" my roommate's voice shouted from a distance. I hummed a tune in my throat to let her know that it was me, our little inside joke we made to hide the fact that

anyone could barge through here. I want to see if my purse can take some pressure, so I swing it back and forth into the air. It doesn't rip. Shit.

Entering into the tiny kitchen, I fling my bag like a fox-tail onto the countertop. I near closer to the room and see that Violet has her supper out for us to share. The plate of Easy-Cheese and crackers smells like we are officially out of groceries, and I love what that means. We are scraping by again; the rush, the sense of impending doom. It's marvelous.

"This was your supper again?" I say, taking one and popping it into my mouth. I can't let on to Violet that I am relishing in our squander. She turns around from the sink, a dish towel hanging off her shoulder. Her fake eyelashes have round bubbles at the tip. She needs to replace them. Maybe she'll give them to me. I would treasure them even after the last lash had fallen off. But I don't want to ask just yet, so I grab a stool and feel the bars of wood cracking between the legs.

"Yeah," Violet said, reaching down and grabbing her own offering of can cheese and crackers, "Figured I needed something to eat before I worked." I pop another cracker in my mouth, chewing with soft bites as if this would be my last meal for the month. Violet stared at me with pitiful eyes. I love that look. It means she going to ask poor little me if we have any money.

"Do you have enough to pay your half of the rent this month?" she said. I know this question will lead into another, so I swallow and paint the muscles on my face to show desperation. She shakes her head, blinking slowly between movements. I think she's deciding if she should cry or not. Should I? Oh, I love theatrics.

"I'm not sure," I say, my voice weak and unsure, "If tonight's a good night, I'll have just enough... Why?" I let my voice tremble between sadness and desperation. Cheese and crackers

won't be the only thing that Violet will be eating up. In fact, she's already coming over and gripping my shoulder in such a loving embrace. I let us sit in silence, letting this woman's energy move between us. As usual, she shows me more than pity—she shows she truly cares about my apparent predicament.

“I just thought if you had enough, maybe I wouldn't have to chip in again so we could get more food,” Violet said. Man, I'm eating this up too, “But if you can't make it tonight, I'll cover us again. I can grab more clients tonight if I have to.”

I felt my friend's face scrunch against my cheek, her breath holding back tears. I relish in the words I am going to say next.

“Violet,” I say, a sigh escaping with the name. God, I'm good, “What would I do without you?” I pat my roommate's hands and grip her tight. She looks at me, then to the plate of food resting on the counter top. I reach forward, taking the last cracker to hide my devious smile. Violet nods her head, most likely thinking I need the food more than she does. Her grip loosens, so I let her go back to the sink to finish the built-up dishes. I grab my purse and open up the clasp. I push the hundred-dollar bills crunched in between my business cards and condoms to grab a stick of gum.

“If only we were rich.” Violet said while she fingered a plastic cup with her dish clothe. I popped the gum in my mouth, smacking loud and wet with my chews. I keep digging through my purse, the charade about to end in a crescendo of applauses.

“Violet,” I say, pulling out my only twenty, “Will this be enough?”

She turns around, eyes bright and full of hope. “Charese, no! I can't! You are saving for your half of the rent!”

“Violet, I’ll pick up the extra clients tonight,” I should have gotten award for this performance, “I’ll get by somehow.”

If only she knew I owned this building.

Today, I am typing away on my desktop, the word processor roaring with every minute passing by. It’s so annoying having a well-paying job. Where’s the thrill? The chase of survival? The hunt for the next meal. *Sigh.*

I grab my calculator and punch in the numbers on my screen, the paper unraveling like a receipt as I press the “equal” button. I’m not going to lie, I love that sound. It’s the music of the mundane, the only thing that gets me by in this business. I don’t like boring, but the mundane? I feed off that energy.

In the hall, I can hear my employees code on their black and green screens, talking with soft voices about the new updated system that should be put in place. I won’t update it until the very last second. It’s fun watching them huff and puff when the screen goes blank for no reason. I don’t know what it is, but these humans just don’t know a good thing when they see it. When I was first briefed about them—their history and what not—we learned that the first set of humans had mundane (oh, that word) tools to help them survive. Now look at them, slowly losing that thrill of nothingness in the palm of their hands because they keep losing the feeling at their fingertips. My, how humanity has fallen.

Cars honked below my office window as the afternoon clouds drifted over the cooled pavement. I looked over, wondering if anyone got hit. No? Pity.

“Available?” a deep voice said, followed by heavy footsteps. I turned my eyes and watched as Caleb stood there in my office. He closed the door, unseen by the bustling workers behind him.

“I thought we agreed not to see each other during the daylight?” I said, leaning back in my leather chair. My business blazer ruffled showing the bottom of my pink striped shirt underneath. I won’t bother fixing it.

“You agreed, but I have the power for renegotiations.” Caleb said, his long strides taking him to the window. His large smile spread from ear to ear, his “D” pin shining as usual. I grit my teeth and turn my body to face him. Caleb cracked his knuckles, taking the individual fingers and pulling on them until he heard the *snap*. “You have the new assignment, correct?”

I pull open my desk and take out a plain manila folder. I open it, taking out a blank piece of paper from its insides. Caleb turned around, his eyebrows raised, fingers forking together by his chest.

“Another rendezvous with Norman,” I say, reading the blank page, my voice disappointed and exasperated. I crumple up the blank paper and throw it in my metal basket. Unfortunately, I make the shot.

“Did you read the instructions?” Caleb said walking to the waste basket, his fingers separating and inserting themselves into his pockets. He leaned back making a curved shape with his back.

“Didn’t think I needed to,” I said, “It’s the same old shit with him. Fuck him, get the cash.” I rose from my chair, letting my jacket stay crumpled. I cross my arms and pout. “Why this guy, Dante? He’s a boring prick.” Caleb moves his jaw back and forth, breathing in a few gulps of air. He hates when I call him that during the day. Something about keeping his identities

separate and secure. Pish posh. I don't care if anyone knows who I fully am. Let them try and come at me.

He reaches into my basket and pulls out the crumpled paper. He points at it, his face still looking at me. "It's a favor I'm granting. Call it of personal interest. You should know."

I roll my eyes and walk over to the window. Rain begins to dribble past, hitting the glass with pointed thuds. "Isn't he your partner at the firm?" I say, turning around watching as Caleb draws a joint from his pocket square. In a snap of a finger the end is lit.

"Semantics." Caleb says, breathing in the smoke. Ashes fell into the waste basket sending up little wisps. In another puff, the entire joint is gone, leaving the room hot boxed with the smoke of an already forgotten object. "My connections are large and many, but they don't mean shit if I can find better ones." I let that thought seep in my mind, twirling the message in my head. What a mystery we all are, yes?

Caleb smiles once more, stretching his ears back towards his head. I clear my throat, knowing this is his sign he is done fooling around with me. "Understood," I say, following the orders. Caleb/Dante is cautious, but he could still roast me with a single *snap*.

Caleb winked, turning his way towards the door. "You're my second," he began, "You earned that title. It's why I let you keep playing the game of rich woman/poor pal up here. But drop the attitude. Don't earn my right to take it away from you."

I nod, receiving the orders loud and clear.

"Oh, and Charese," Caleb says, "Stop fucking around with the readers. Keep the same tense for once and stop it with all the mundane shit. You're a contradiction, not an artist."

I watch as he leaves the room, the blank piece of paper ironing itself on my desk.

I'll switch the perspective here, following myself through third person. I—sorry—she—is the woman with the lavender lips that draws men down to their knees. She loves the double-life, that little demon birdy from the underworld. What happens when you let a caged bird free from its only home? It acts out so it can go back in, of course. It's too drab living in that kitschy and cozy first-world apartment. Too...expected. Sure, the life of an executive is full of riches, but where's the fun in that? Where's the power? It's expected that a CEO dominates. But she wants to break down walls, not reinforce them.

She only answers to Dante. She doesn't answer to anyone else. Especially you, Norman. Not anymore. When you figure out who Dante is, you'll understand.

But now, Charese is on the hunt for you. Wings prepped, talons sharpened.

She led you down a tragic path, huh? Don't worry, you're not alone...every man she is assigned to has the same fate.

Hear the sound of wings flapping? Pay no attention to that.

Charese smeared her lavender lipstick on her mouth, pouting in the broken mirror of the broken and neglected apartment. She leaned forward and kissed the large crack escaping down the middle. She smiled and spritzed her perfume in warm places on her body.

She was ready for the chase.

Dante had ordered Charese to end Normans hunt. While there's a thrill in torturing Dante's targets, the real pleasure was actually getting them to run from her. The hunt is about the stalking, the lying in wait until the right time to pounce. It's when the prey decides to flee: that's when the fun begins.

Flirting, caressing, stripping down to the bare essentials. That's nothing. Their attempt to escape from the talon's grasp? That was Charese's climactic moment. In their obsession with her, Dante's targets would bathe her with the vain objects of human consumption. Those were not the proper sacrifices. To Charese, the gift that kept her happy was a job well done disposing of the discarded. The more pain she tastes, the more they seem to want to give her. They never catch on, no matter how long it takes. They always hear the flapping.

The sound of wings sets the pace of her stiletto steps. Charese doesn't bother to hide her name as she lingers with pink hair at the motel, waiting for Norman to approach her. She likes when the syllables linger on tongues as the final gasp of air leaves lungs.

He's upon her, taking off his clothes as they open to door their room. He's the same every time they meet. Shirt first, then her blouse. Her skirt thrown to the side, his belt flying open. He'll snap her underwear off as they make it to the bed, his pants thrown over the table lap.

This time it's different. She'll get on top of him.

She digs her talons into his back while she kisses her lavender lips at the base of his neck. Her eyes are not focused on him. They are focused on something that sees and reads her. She knows who watches her, waiting for the next set of directions, dialogues. Waiting to see if you are prey or sister.

Norman hears the flapping of wings as he tastes Charese. He begins to foam at the mouth.

Norman's running down the long, dark cave, frantically feeling the sides for guidance. He is out of breath, his naked feet scrapped and tattered as the rock tear at his sole. He hears her flapping behind him, her caws shaking the cavern. His heart is pounding, adrenaline pulsing and turning within him. Where to turn, he wonders. Are there turns to make?

He runs straight into a wall. Grasping for an escape, he hears the wings draw closer to him. He jumps blindly around, feeling for another way out.

Flap...flap...flap...

CHAPTER FOUR

It is 47:00 am. That is what the clock says. Or, at least, that is what I see the clock saying; hearing. Speaking to me. There is a smell in the air that rings forty-five times. *His. Hers.* The colors run underneath you, bloated and perfumed with the odor of your armpits.

I have made a few deposits in the trash can. All I do is lay my laptop on the bed, pull down my panties, and sit over the bag. I remember you had lined the metal waste bin before tucking yourself into bed those nights ago. Thank you. It makes it easier to wipe myself when I am done. I keep squirting out water. I bet it tastes like skin. I like using the word deposits instead of shit. Shitting. Defecating. Those are of the body instead of the mind. When I make deposits, I feel like I am delivering an important package. I am the mail man wandering on the street, pulling her pants down with a fresh brown UPS package.

Sometimes I refer to my deposits as logs. Did you know this state was filled with trees and loggers eager to cut down the trunks, slash open the rings just to count the age of the mighty pine? I wonder what it's like to skin a tree. How many ways are there to skin a tree? How many licks to the center of a tootsie-pine? One? Two? Three? Crunch? Where is the owl when you need him? When will he tell me to shut the fuck up? When will you tell me to shut up?

The clock has struck 48:00. *Him. Her.* Yes, it takes me an hour to write these many words. Give me a break, will you? I bet the darkened caverns of the sea holds better secrets than you. Why did you cheat on me, anyway? I never did ask you. I didn't even confront you about it. I left it alone. I can't explain why. I practiced the conversations in my head, but I think a part of me thought that you weren't fucking around on me. I mean, I saw the note, but did it mean anything? Were my assumptions correct? Did the connotations match with the intentions? The

fuck if I know, right? But I know in my gut that you did it. That there were names that echoed off the roof of your mouth as you lost yourself in their sheets. But why did you do it? Was it for the number? The sense of completing inside as many people as you could before giving out? Was I not small enough for you?

Were you with someone who was older than us? Uglier than me? It could have been to discover yourself. But that's a load of bullshit. You can't discover yourself because we are already here. We look down and we see the fleshy body that holds us all in for one blink of time. We aren't hidden somewhere under rocks or beneath the shade of a birch tree. We are undiscoverable because we know that we exist in some capacity. You couldn't have been finding yourself because you were never lost.

I think the truth of it all, the inevitable theory that boils down to your intentions was because you were happy. Happy with me, and that scared you. You didn't know how to enjoy it, enjoy me. Take me in and breathe the life that coexisted between the two of us. You were happy and didn't know how to be. So you wanted to destroy it. But I couldn't be destroyed because that would mean you would have gotten what you wanted. I can't let you have what you want. To confront you means that your happiness did truly fade away.

But that made me unhappy. I drowned myself saving you just to make you fucking happy. Happy with me and happy with them. But I'm angry. You don't get to run away any more. No. You get to feel sorrow this time around. You get to feel like a part of you was ripped off and thrown into the abyss.

Not even a cup of coffee could get me to fall asleep now. I am too pissed off to even lay my head on the pillow behind me. In fact, I just slung it across our fucking room. It was poking into my back, and I already have you taking up too much space here. I feel like pushing you off

the side, but I don't want to get your sludge all over me. I got to start thinking about myself now for a change. There is a satiation that needs to be filled, and thankfully, I got someone else to think about here. Nope, not you. Thought you were the only one, huh? She's been here all along, and you didn't even notice her. 10 years, and her name was engraved on the wedding band as well. I think I'll be cremated with her one day. Gonna have to, since she is inextricably tied to me, down to the very last root. I lost her a while ago, but she was there. Always there. You tried snuffing her out, but she lingered like smoke over a blown-out candle. I am not able to see her in the mirror now, but that's because I don't keep a vanity in here.

I owe it to myself to talk about who I think I am. But I am not me right now. I am a version of me, stuck in a space with your funk wafting around, and my flesh mold continuously trying to make sense of what happened to us; me; you. But I was there, the true me. Down in shackles, tied around the base of my spine, screaming to be let out. I was there, and you didn't see. But I didn't see her me either. I'm sorry about that her me.

What would I be like if I had stood up to you? If I had rejected the criticisms, the gaze of your eye when I had done something you couldn't control; if I had stopped crying myself to sleep; if I had just left, or even stood up to you when you called me names: do I think I would have found happiness?

Possible. But what is happiness, I wonder? It's been so long since I have seen what that looks like. I thought I had found it when we first got together, or even after the few years we were married. We were so naïve, weren't we? We aren't even that old yet, but I feel like I have crumbled into wrinkles and clogged out joints—I feel like I have been stoned with a constant barrage of pebbles. I figure you can kill a woman with more than just a few large stones. It might take longer, but an endless stream of miniscule rocks can chip out the layers of skin just as easily

as a boulder can crush the temple. I don't think I am making sense right now—but I know what I am talking about. And I think that matters now. I think I left the lottery.

If I have a slight memory of happiness, I might be able to do it. Create someone who I should have been. Who I could have been, had I found the strength to confront you. I would have told you that I was okay with an open relationship, so long as I could walk out the door too. To explain to you how small you made me feel with your words. To tell you that your recoiled hands meant that you were chucking another grain of sand at me. I can't tell you these things anymore, but I sure as hell am going to show you. I had to stop loving myself for me to love you. And the saddest part: I still love you.

You might have drained but one last possible drop of magic from me, but I am going to use that up to recreate myself. I know my writing isn't great—that's what you told me, at least—but I am going to drip my fluids onto the keyboard. You can take a break in the attention for a while. It's my turn. So, step away from the self-doubt that you inflicted on me. To keep this log of who I think I could have been on the record.

If it wasn't for that self-doubt, I would have left you. But that goddamned sense of hope I had... Why did I—or you—fool me into thinking there was hope? I thought you would change one day. I thought you would come to love me like I loved you. That maybe if I had your love, I could love myself too. But that was foolish, wasn't it? I don't think I can ever love myself because I believed every word you said. I believed I wasn't good enough for anybody, let alone you. That I would never amount to anything. That I would fail because I was too big, too stupid, too focused on what others thought about me. And I believe you. I have this knowing deep within me that I really am not good enough for anybody. That no matter who I care about, they will never care for me. To other people, I am just here as a prop—a means for a good laugh or a

moment of sincerity. But I will never be good enough for real human compassion and companionship. You told me I could only be here for one purpose: to support other people's stories. I am nothing but a background to you, our friends, our family. I am not the hero or even the anti-hero: I am the character that is known, but not needed. This is my true reality, and I accept that. I don't want to accept it, but I must because I believe you. I believe that I am truly nothing.

In a way, I can't be angry at you anymore, because you told me the truth that no one wanted to say. There are people in this world that are something, and then there are those who will be forgotten. I guess you told me, yes? So, what do I have left?

Maybe that magic drop is already gone. Self-doubt again. I see it. I feel it. I don't know if I should listen to it or forget about it. Jesus, I can't even sleep because I am too busy typing on this damn thing. Look what you made me do. Or did I do this? I don't even know anymore. Is there anyone really responsible?

I got to keep going. I got to write about me now. I have to. This is my moment of sanity in a whirlpool of monsters. This is my one chance to get me right. The one chance to show that I could have been a real person.

I Have Found Your Secrets, There as You Lie Still

My thighs touch together when I sit cross-legged in my den. There is a mirror that hangs on the door on Velcro stickers where I can see the top of my hair stick out. My Siamese cat is folded in the chair, her tail covering her wet pink nose. She peers out of one eye, keeping the other closed to prepare for her fifth nap of the day. My tabby is lying on her back, her favorite ribbon draped over her rotund belly. She cocks her head, watching as I fold my legs over my purple yoga. She reaches out a paw, rotating so she is on her side, and places a sandy print on the foam. They both are here because of the magic.

My grandmother used to tell me that we all have a little magic in us. Whether we know it or not, magic looms at the base of our core. Her particular magic was baking and cooking the perfect dishes. Without looking at a recipe, she could measure out each ingredient with a fine detail that pleased any guest that came to taste her meals. This was her craft, and she was proud of it. She was honored to know her personal touch of magic and pleased to share her knowledge with others. She told me that most people didn't know what their magic was—or that they even had magic. My mother was one of them. No matter how much my grandmother pleaded, she couldn't convince my mother that her ability to change the channel before the commercials came on was her craft. Miniscule as it was, the action was still magic. But my mother wouldn't hear of it. She didn't believe in nonsense.

I am particularly gifted with magic. My base craft is knowing what each tarot card means and how the interpretation works with any given question. However, I also had a propensity in sparking a flame with the snap of my finger.

When my grandmother died, I had no one to talk to. She was the last of her coven, which meant I was alone in a world that believed magic was fiction. I felt a part of me was missing

when I lost her. Hard as I tried, I couldn't find another witch who knew magic was everywhere. I figured I was the last person with knowledge of the many crafts of magic; I was the last witch.

Until I met Walden. He was another witch with an incredible power like I did.

I discovered Walden's craft when I moved in with him. He took me by the hand, showing me his apartment as if I had never seen it before. He led me to the bedroom, smiling with those hazel eyes of his. The candles littered around the room were unlit, so I snapped my fingers, igniting the wicks simultaneously. Walden kissed my neck, asking me if I wanted to see his magic. I nodded my head, and he drifted closer to my mouth. He took his lips, parting mine, his tongue licking the edge of my teeth. He sat me down on the bed, his mouth opening wider, and a few grains of sand fell from the back of his throat down mine.

Swallow it, he said, watching as I chewed the minerals between my teeth. When I gulped his gift, I felt the sand move through my body, twisting past my organs, through the veins of my legs, settling at the tip of my pinky toe. *I can fill that void you have*, he said, *the one that your grandmother left*. I thanked him for helping me, and we made love while flames crackled above our heads.

As promised, everyday Walden would open my mouth with his lips and drop two or three grains of sand down my throat. They traveled through my body, and rested at the base of my toes. Two grains, three grains, a teaspoon: Walden would increase his gifts to me, filling me more with sand. Soon, my feet were filled with dirt, and I felt ten pounds heavier. Walden told me not to worry; the soil would fill the void I had within me.

I had worked for a newspaper in our small town as an editor for the sports section. I loved my job, and I knew that the weight starting to build by my ankles would make my strides stronger; I would build muscle resistance that would help me walk faster when the sand had time

to fill my void. Athletes wear ankle weights all the time, especially pitchers. Walden promised me the sand would find the void soon, so I was excited for the possible day when I would have strong days again.

When I woke up in the morning, sometimes Walden had already begun to pour sand down my mouth. Like before, just a few grains, but soon he started to add teaspoons.

My coworkers noticed I was walking slower, my breathing a little more heavy. *You okay today, Candace?* I told them I was on a new training schedule. They didn't need to know about the sand reaching its way up into my shins.

About a year after moving in with Walden, the sand had reached the bottom of my knee, and I could feel the grains begin to seep into my veins. *Stop overthinking it*, Walden would say, after I asked him once again when his sand would fill my void, *You think too much sometimes*.

It was getting harder for me to get out of bed, but I kept going to work with the hope that one day, I would walk in with tight and toned calves. Walden had begun to dump cups into my throat, so it had to be soon.

Candace, do you want to talk about anything? My coworkers kept asking. They were intrusive, asking me how I felt, or commenting that I looked different. I told them I was fine, that they should mind their own business. They couldn't see the sand, so they didn't need to know. The sand was Walden's and mine's little secret. They wouldn't understand the magic we shared with each other, the way his sand was going to fill the emptiness inside left by my grandmother's death. He was making me better, his love filling me up every morning and every night. Sometimes, he would come into my work to visit me, pull me into my office, and dump a

handful of sand from his mouth to mine. My insides were full of sand, his love. So long as they didn't see it, I didn't feel the need to share it.

By the second year, Walden had filled my torso with sand.

It was harder for me to move around, yes, but I knew any day could be the day when Walden's sand would help me. His love was so powerful, so caring, that even when I didn't want sand, he would force my mouth open with his lips and pour two cups down my throat. As I knawed on the wet dirt stuck between the gaps of my teeth, Walden would apologize and tell me it was for my own good. *I love you too much. You need my sand. It will help you, I promise.*

I thanked him, and told him I loved him.

Half-way through the second year, I realized I had stopped communicating with my cards. It took energy for me to lift my arms, now that the sand had begun to creep towards my chest. Feeling like my cards were feeling forgotten, I took my tarot from my alter and clicked open the metal lock. When I peered down at the yellow handkerchief that encircled my cards, a few pinches of dirt fell from my open mouth, a cough escaping through my lungs. The handkerchief reminded me of the sun, something I had begun to fear because my insides burned when it was too hot out. I reached down to touch the silk, but discovered the dirt had already soiled the cloth. It turned cold against my skin, and I felt the energy drain from the protective barrier.

I took out the cards and shuffled them in between my fingers. I let the sound ripple, imagining that my question seeped into every picture. I had only one, and I knew I needed to ask my deck this now: *Why do I feel the way I feel?* I cut the deck in three, pushing them altogether into one, holistic deck. A picture flashed in my mind: my cards were sad that we had spent so much time apart. Gray. Empty. They wanted sunlight.

The Problem. The Suggestion. The Answer. That was the spread I decided on. I placed the cards down on the carpet and thought about what the cards would be. I imagined the lovers for the Answer, the man and woman underneath an angel standing on a cloud; the snake intertwined on an apple tree behind the woman; a mountain to the man's right. Yes, the Answer must be the lovers. After all, Walden was there to help me, right?

I flipped over the first card. The Problem. The Chariot lay flat against the pale blue carpet. A blond man stood behind a grey platform with two sphinxes crouching before him. The male sphinx, black with a face of imprudence; the white, breasted sphinx with a jaded look. A castle stood behind the chariot, gray with red tops, the sky a mustard yellow. The man holds a scepter in his right hand, the side of the black sphinx.

I blocked the tarot's meaning from my consciousness. I didn't want to see the words flash in my mind. The cards collectively frowned at me.

I pulled the second card. The Suggestion. The Six of Pentacles showed a red-caped man holding scales in his left hand, while gifting a man on his left with gold. Another man, underneath the scales, stretched out his hand, waiting for his own offering. A castle, far in the background, was painted over a gray sky, but behind a wall. I had never drawn this card before, but I nonetheless stopped myself from seeing the interpretation. I needed to know the last card.

The Answer: The Fool, decked in flowery clothing, followed by a white dog as he nears the edge of a cliff. There are snowy mountains traced against a yellow sky, and the Fool carries with him a traveler's sack. A white flower is clutched in his left hand, blissfully unaware of the impending danger that lies before him if he takes one more step. The sun shines in the right-hand corner.

I shut out this interpretation too. I didn't want to listen to my cards. They must have been wrong. I shoved them all away, back into the box and into the darkness of a bedside drawer. I didn't feel my tarot cards should be on my alter.

When Walden's sand filled my breasts, I needed help getting around. The dirt had made its way into every organ, every crevice of my nerves. When I went to the bathroom, tiny flakes of sand would sink to the bottom of the bowl. When Walden pulled out of me, sand stuck to the lubricant and scratched me. But I knew his sand came from his love for me. He just wanted to fill that void I had.

Every month, I would get the temptation to bring out my cards. I flicked through them, carefully answering the same question over and over again. I cut, shuffled, rearranged. The Problem. The Suggestion. The Answer.

The Chariot. The Six of Pentacles. The Fool.

Stuffed into the box, my cards would go. I could hear them crying beneath the layer of dirt I coughed up.

The sand had begun to pool at my elbow when I had to quit my job. I could barely move to shift my position as I slept, so going into work wasn't possible for me anymore. They told me Walden shouldn't have to help me around the office all the time. Walden said they didn't understand him. *Us. I can take care of you*, Walden said when I asked him what I should do, *I'll always take care of you*. He had me light the candles in our room once more. It took me ten tries because the sand made my fingers tired.

Walden made sure I didn't need to eat anymore—the sand had filled the cavity of my stomach and absorbed all my acid. After a while, I didn't need to get up to go to the bathroom—the sand had blocked any liquid from getting through. I stayed in my bed, the curtains drawn so

the sun didn't warm my insides. I didn't want to be seen anymore anyway. Walden's gift was leveled at my shoulders. It took all my strength to lift my arms.

I couldn't pet my cats anymore. It took too much to sweep my hand over their soft backs. They also didn't like when sand crept out of my fingertips onto their coats. They avoided me when possible.

The Chariot. The Six of Pentacles. The Fool.

I was over 300 pounds when I decided to look at my tarot deck one last time. Walden had to force my mouth open now with his hands because the sand had filled my jaw. That morning, he vomited a pound of dirt down my throat, which carried to the top of my head. I could feel grains leak out my ear drums, my eyes beginning to turn dark with wet sand. By this time, I had Walden take down all the mirrors in the apartment because I couldn't bear to see what I had become. When he led me around his apartment, I didn't want to see the sand pouring from my nose, or how bloated I looked. *But you look better this way*, he said, *Better than when I first met you*.

He had stopped telling me his sand would fill my void because I stopped asking. It took dirt pushing itself out of my scalp for me to see that Walden's answer was empty...empty like I was.

On that last day, I forced myself to open my drawer. I clutched the box with bloated fingers, and sat it down next to me. I unclicked the lock, taking out the faded, now brown-yellow handkerchief. It was no longer silk, but a thin sheet of fabric. The cards were silent, the energy low and unmoving. Once, the deck would dance on my fingertips; but the magic was just a drop. They were afraid to look at me. Tears began to fall down my face because I had forgotten what their magic felt like to me.

I decided to burn them. To take them out of their misery. I snapped my finger close to the handkerchief. Nothing. No spark, no flame. I snapped again. A pop slipped into the air, but no light. I turned around and saw a candle sitting next to my bed. I reached out my arms and snapped my fingers once more. Nothing. The wick stayed white. Snap. Snap. Snap.

I rolled onto the floor and began to sob, my tarot card spilling around me. I kept snapping my fingers, over and over, until the skin turned raw. I wanted to burn myself, to feel something touch me for once. To feel warmth. To feel consumed in a moment of emotion because I had felt like nothing. I dropped my cards at my feet and covered my eyes with the blooded thumb and middle finger. I tried my left hand until it too turned pink and red from the friction. Through the haze of dirtied tears, three images looked up at me, the only cards facing up on the floor.

The Chariot. The Six of Pentacles. The Fool.

And I let the meanings come to me.

The Problem: The Chariot. Control over feeling and thoughts; being pulled in two directions; mental and physical journeys. Doubt of self, someone standing over you with an ego. The person of the chariot means business. There are conflicting interests in life. Time to stand up to your own beliefs and make decisions based off what you want—not what others want for you. Relationships need evaluating. Someone is controlling you. You are being hampered down by someone who won't let you take the reins.

The Suggestion: The Six of Pentacles. Loss and gain; shift in power; domination or submission; seeking the approval of the self. The power to decide who should receive or shouldn't. Wielding power. Are you in the receiving end or giving end of power? Who wields the power? Love and hate are not mutually exclusive. Gain can be loss; those who play martyr can be omnipotent via their weaknesses. Dig a little deeper into your desires and apparent needs.

Time to lift the veil of illusion you have cast around qualities and see there is also much of ourselves we lose—in our losses there is much to gain.

The Answer: The Fool. Ready to leap into anything; taking on adventures. Spontaneous and carefree. Personal quests. New beginnings and childlike enthusiasm for life. Part of yourself that comes to life when you find love in yourself. Unafraid of the unknown. Time to let go of worries and self-doubt, rather than fear making a choice. Time to believe in yourself and trust your heart. New beginning or change of direction. A new lover. Represents sexuality—erotic vitality. Exuberant enjoyment of life.

The cards spoke to me as they once did, embracing me with arms that spoke in sudden but direct statements. Altogether, the cards told me what I had already known. What I had always known but didn't want to face. I grabbed these three cards and sobbed onto them with my tears. The two cats waited by the door, their tails flicking back and forth. The tabby had brought a shoestring and sat it by her side. I thanked my cards over and over again, rocking back and forth, hitting the side of my bed with the side of my arm.

I looked up, and a pair of tweezers hung on the edge of my dresser. I rolled over, knocking into the furniture. The piece of metal dropped and landed in my bloated hand. I puffed up, my upper body straining to reach my toes, my breath heaving, lungs about to burst. I was a stress ball, overfilled and squeezed. But I began to pick at my toe nail. *Pick Pick Pick*. I pulled, tearing with my might, digging into the skin at the base of my nail. I screamed in pain as the metal dug through dirtied nerves and clogged clumps of clay.

It still wasn't working. The *Picks* weren't large enough. I reached over and snuck the tweezers underneath my big toe nail. With one swoop of my leg, I bashed my toe against the end of the bed.

The pain roared through my body, squeezing every fiber of me like a shockwave. The tweezers were half-way into my toe, blood dripping down to the base. With my last ounce of energy, I tugged the tool from my toe. A river of sand began to pour from the wound.

I blacked out, coming to with my leg feeling lighter. With weakness pouring through my body, I looked down and saw that my whole leg had been emptied, the sand a mound hill by my bleeding tow. I rolled onto my right side, and felt my left leg begin to empty out through the hole. Relief overwhelmed the pain, and I began to cry once more. Happiness coursed through me, and I shook my limbs for what seemed like the first time. I jiggled my body on the floor, the sand coursing its way out of my veins, limbs and crannies. I could sit up without gasping for breath. My arms were air, my head free of the burden of carrying so much weight. By the time I emptied myself, tears meeting with sand, dirt billowing out from my toe; my bed was floating on sea water, a tiny beach in the bedroom.

My two cats stared at me with forgiving eyes, their bodies sitting on the bed. The tabby's ribbon floated by me.

With soft hands, I wrapped my cards in the handkerchief, feeling the soft silk once again on my fingertips. I stood up, dripping ocean water. The wounds on my toe and fingers had begun to heal from sea. The void had been carried off.

I saw the candle by my bed. I snapped my fingers once more.

Spark. But that was it. The flame wasn't strong yet.

With my tarot underneath my arm, I packed my cats in their carry cases, and walked out the front door. I left the ocean for Walden to clean up.

My tabby has moved to the front of my face, the ribbon in her mouth and paws on by breasts. I grab the pink string from her mouth and dance it on the floor. She spins in circles, and watches as the ribbon slides over her face before she can catch it. I ball up her toy and send it flying over to my other child, who has fallen asleep with both eyes closed.

The tabby thuds across the floor, attacking the ribbon with soft bites from her mouth. I can hear her purring over music playing from the neighbor's barbeque. I snap my fingers, and the incense beside me flares up. The red dragon-blood coating smokes and emits a smell that reminds me of the earth meeting air for the first time after a long winter. I take my yellow handkerchief and dangle it over the incense. I place it on the yoga matt, the tabby watching it with interest. The shuffling of the deck doesn't need a question. The cards are stronger, and I feel them twirling in my hands. They are laughing, happy to be free once more.

The card of the day. The Ten of Cups. A rainbow marked with ten chalices lights up a blue sky, a picturesque landscape lays on the horizon. A river and a farmland are welcomed by a family of four on untapped soil. The two taller figures are connected, their free hand outstretched towards the sky. Two children dance hand in hand to their right.

The cards begin to talk to me.

The Ten of Cups. Family happiness; joy; peace; harmony; promise of more to come; safe haven; feeling one with the world; emotional fulfillment and sexual commitment; loves ideal attainable. The joy you seek is within reach. Prepare for the good times. There is a sense of harmony inside you as well as without, which will rub off on others. Key to happiness is in front of you; your nearest loved ones are there to support you. Balance and emotional fulfillment is restored.

I thank the cards and cleanse them with sage. They purr softly, ready to rest until the next reading. We are one together once more.

The tabby and the Siamese are batting playfully at each other, the ribbon between them. The Siamese looks over at me, and slowly closes her eyes. I follow suit, letting the moment seep between us. The tabby rushes to the door, which means the clicking of the lock will follow. Sure enough, the doorknob moves, and an excited, loving cheer enters our beautiful home.

I stand up, and kiss Wendy hello.

CHAPTER FIVE

Your body still hasn't moved. You are stiff, elongated on crusted sheets woven with my sweat and your leaks. I am now beginning to wonder if you will ever wake up from this continuous slumber. 71:00 AM chimes out. The sound is dull to me now. *Hiiiiiiiiim. Heeeeeer.* There is something sunken about the look of your face that I just cannot place. I wonder if there is a vacuum under your skin, sucking the dirt from your insides. Did you get a maid without telling me?

Then again, you never did tell me a lot. That's why we are here, right now. That is why I am typing this sentence, feeling the keys move under my fingertips as your body lies there with your secrets. Candace found her freedom, but Leona still hasn't. I don't know what is wrong with me still. I thought I would be better after that story. Guess not. I still can't move on from you. It also doesn't help that you are still sweating fluids all over our new duvet.

I decided to pull back your lids...did you feel it? There is something remarkable about that glazed look in your eye when I pulled the crusted skin from the bottom part of your lashes. Your once hazel eyes now match the pattern of our sheets. It's like you transformed milky gelatin behind those fleshy doors. I would put your lids back, but your blank stare gives me a rare comfort.

I can feel the wallpaper looking back at you. *There are things in that paper which nobody knows but me, or ever will.*

I don't think I am mad at you anymore. If you never knew me, than how I could I have known you? In all honesty, I don't even think I have one memory of us where we were both completely happy. And that's sad. We were together for some time now, and not once did we

ever have just have one moment of complete bliss. Yeah, we had a good few dates, but those were full of butterflies. I am talking about the kind of bliss that makes you think there must be someone watching us—whether that be through a screen, a book, or through some tinted eye—and wonder if our pairing was made like two wholes out of one. Never in my time that we laugh together did I think, *Yes, he's the one*. It was just, *He's funny*.

Why did we get married, then? Was it because there was no one else we could think of? We got stuck in a routine?

I'm trying to think of a time before we were together where that happiness filled me up. My last moment before I met you was when I adopted the two cats. I was alone, and the two sisters filled something inside of me that let me know they were what I needed. I was what they needed. I would love to relive that moment, that emotion again. I can't say that about us.

The last memory of us that showed just an ounce of happiness was when we used to walk downtown, side-by-side, not arm-in-arm. We passed a tiny bagel shop where...yes, the smell of buttered rolls came wafting down the street. We were young back then, I was fresh and full of hope. You used to smile. I miss that smile.

There was stone bowl near the bagel joint, and I remember you used to pluck the yellow, overflowing flowers and pin the green stem in my hair. I wondered if ants would crawl through the petals and latch themselves in the thick texture of my roots. You would laugh at my fear, and take the flower from my hair, placing it behind yours. I always thought you loved tiny legs scrambling upon your scalp, dancing in the dandruff of the blond forest.

The mist of the morning, rising from the stream below, danced upon our skin as we neared the bridge. The dew drops from the flowers melted off the petals into the deep, brown soil of the pot. The earthy smell reminded me of worms. I said I wanted to cross the bridge and look

down below. That's when you stiffened, became rigid in your sport, unable to move. *No*. You said, a look of fear upon your face. I laughed, thinking you were maybe afraid of heights. I continued on without you, reaching the top curve of the ledge. I neared the side, and looked down below. There was an energy that rippled in the waters. Like something—or someone—had been forgotten. I grew sad watching as litter from the nearby shops drifted past me, circling and dipping below the black surface.

A man stopped next to me on the bridge, crossing his arms over the stone masonry. He was a little older than you, a few wrinkles caressed the side of his cheeks. I looked back to see if you had followed me, but you stayed cold in your spot, a look of terror flashing in your eyes. I turned around, the man staring from me to you, a faint, pitiful smile spreading across his face.

Hi! I said, hoping to build a connection between this man who I felt knew you. I felt you stomp over, finally free from whatever hold had been keeping you away from the stream's cross.

The energy between the three of us shifted. You pushed me away from the man, his piercing green eyes watching your every move. He stepped back from you, and I thought I saw his shoulders tremble. You kept your hand on me, and tugged me to the other side of the bridge. Your breath was heavy, your grip hard on my elbow.

What's wrong? I said, looking back at the man behind us. His soft face was staring at the stream below. *Did you know that man? Who is he?*

That place is called 'Chuck-a-fag-bridge', you told me, not taking a breath between each word. *I am never coming back here again.*

You were hurting my arm, so I shoved away from you. *What did you say this place was?* I let the anger roll off my tongue.

Never talk about this again. Sadness had filled your voice and I tried grabbing your shoulder with soft fingers. You shook your head, and pushed me away for the first time. You turned away from me, and left me at the edge of the bridge.

I have to talk about this. I think this set you off, long ago. I think running into that man changed you, and I want to know why. What lies hiding underneath that bridge?

Where the Water Cannot Bring You Back

There is a faint calm that rushes through his veins as the choking waves rock back and forth in the crevices of his lungs. Broken bottles float past his frenzied fingertips, breaking through the surface of downtown streams and cracked shadows from the bridge. He is gasping for air, reaching for the break of the moon's light hitting the arch of weathered stone and pavement. Eyelids are drooping, petechiae eyes fluttering to find the quick release of air through a gapping mouth. His heart is slowing, inching towards the final beats of exacerbated desperation to find the last breath before sinking into oblivion. He is chucked into a pool of the forgotten; the used; the abused.

Denton sat at the bar, drinking his beer with slow movements. The froth trailed down his throat, the bitter taste of the cheap liquid staying at the base of his tongue. Forgetting his troubles through sips of quiet solitude, he breathes in the cold atmosphere of the bar and the lonely patrons hovering from his presence. He feels threatened in the tainted aura of the squandered and ignorant; the arrogant shuffles of footsteps away from his bar stool sends goosebumps up his alert skin. He feels eyes on him, prickling his every movement as he raises his beer up to his mouth. Denton swings his head around, but finds the intrusive stares turn away from his gaze.

They know of my secrets, he thinks, tipping back a final gulp, feeling the lump of hops and barley dance bitterly through the folds of his esophagus. Denton places his glass down on the dark wood, watching the internal flashes of images pass through his memory. *Passionate kisses shared on bare shoulders, a faint smell of musk mingling with sweat trailing down his outstretched arms. Laughter shared with fumbling fingers through loops in shed clothes. There is music from the park dancing past the open screen of the window. A soft breeze melts through the*

heat of a summer dusk onto Denton's chest. The man smiles up at him, moving a trembling hair from his eyes. Hazel eyes stare back into Denton's--

A cough blasted through the images, awaking Denton from his memory. He looked up, watching as an orange rag flicked past his gaze. Lisa, *The Drowning Mermaid's* owner stared at him as she wiped shot glasses with rigorous twists of her wrists. Denton smiled, raising his eyebrows towards her direction. Lisa softened her eyes and nodded her head. She opened her mouth to say something, but turned away instead.

She's confused, he thought, remembering her sparkling blue eyes as they were in high school, before the flecks of crow's feet reached past her curled eye lashes. *They snuck out with the sounds of crickets and peepers trailing behind them, a stash of her father's pot hidden in the lace of her dress. She looked at him with those eyes as they smoked with the moon above them. The stars watching as Lisa touched him with faint pink nails, her joint's ashes falling past onto the white of his shirt. She leaned towards his mouth, the smell of floral and citrus painted on the softness of her skin. He turned away from her, Lisa's kiss planting on his cheek, wet and eager; licked with disappointment and failed expectations. They laid in the thick of the field, awkward and secluded. Denton had felt her tense up and move away from him in confusion. He didn't know what to say, high and conflicted with the feelings growing inside his young body. His heart raced with fear, the ecstasy of anticipation disappearing at the thought of her kiss. She drew another drag, thinking as fireflies buzzed past. They were friends, lovers only connected by similarities rather than interests; he craved a different taste of love, but she could never know. No one could. He cuddled next to her, reaching for an embrace he didn't want to give. She faced him once more, lips pouted.*

Denton watched as Lisa pushed the cleaned glasses back in place on the shelf. *Maybe I should talk to her*, he thought, imagining the conversation flip over in his mind. They never talked about that night, Denton refusing to continue their friendship. Lisa had held back tears when he told her it was him—that it could never be her—but it had hurt her all the same. Lisa was an attractive woman, and he a handsome young man, but his eyes did not wander over her curves or reminisce about how she looked under that moon without that dress on. But Denton could not tell her that. He didn't know how to tell himself either.

The men in the bar shifted, watching as Lisa poured an order of tall beers. They huddled in herds, one eye pointed at Lisa, the other at Denton's back. He could hear their whispers creeping in the air towards pointed ears. *Did you see the video?* One man said, his hand covering his mouth but the voice carrying past the calloused palm. *Who was the other guy? Who took it?*

Denton rolled his eyes, watching as the men straddled close together. Denton pondered the insignificance of it all, of them. How they could huddle together in public in bar booths but not in between the sheets of a private home. Denton wondered how he used to be one of them, hidden in plain view as a man with a secret, a cover for the truth that was awake inside of him. How he himself could hover between men in the shadow of a booth, drinking and whispering about the people of Bonlis, accepted by the masculine powers that be.

Before he had been outed by a hidden camera nestled between the stack of two books in the town library.

Lisa reached for the remote and clicked off the hovering television over the cases of whiskey and scotch. She stared at Denton, placing her hands upon her hips as the dirty orange rag tapped her outer thigh. *She's putting on a tough front*, Denton thought, remembering the rumors that were spread about Lisa after that night in the field.

Did you hear about Lisa in the field with Denton? Heard she wanted it real bad.

How far did that whore go?

Denton's the man!

Denton had only told one person about his night years ago. But that was all it took. It was the reason why he mentioned anything in the first place. Once word got out, no one could question Denton's prowess as a man. At least, that's what he thought.

The patrons in the bar peered at Denton sitting upon the ragged stool, their eyes fixed on what he would do. Denton smiled at Lisa again, twirling his fingers on the rim of the beer glass. The atmosphere changed, charging the patrons of the drinking hole. Denton could feel gazes rake coals over his hunched back. He felt a burning at the side of his cheeks, the temperature suddenly rising in the bar. He removed his finger from the rim of the glass, and tipped his head to the side. His peripheries caught Mr. Pantusky's eyes squinting through the haze of alcoholism. Denton wondered if his old principal would have his typical Monday headache meltdown in his office. Would he lean with anger at his young secretary, threaten her with his personal forms of punishment against women, unpunished by the townspeople who cried that men will be men?

Denton reached into his pocket and pulled his wallet out, feeling for a bill inside the fold. Lisa crept forward, slapping the rag down by his half-full glass.

"It's ten." She said, her voice hovering over Denton's sitting body. He could smell her floral perfume mix with the aromas of Jack and Jameson.

"Ten?" Denton said, "I bought cheap beer."

"Which you'll pay ten for," Lisa said, her mouth turning into a scowl. She leaned in closer, her voice hushed. "Just pay it and go, Denton," Lisa said, "They're planning something over there, so get."

“What do you mean?”

“Get out of here, Denton.” Lisa said, her eyes flashing a look of concern. Denton, puzzled, turned around. Earl, the mechanic from down the street, began to rise, his darkened, grease-lined nails digging into his table. Earl was a staunch man, meticulous in his pursuit of the othered: those who did not resemble him.

Denton plucked his last ten from his wallet onto the counter, feeling the bodies of the bar settle back into their butt-shaped seats. Earl sat back down, throwing a heavy arm around Mr. Pantusky’s shoulders. He whispered close to the principal’s ear, the men shaking their heads as their eyes pointed towards Denton’s direction. They both lifted their beer glasses to their mouths in unison, reminding Denton of a circus act between pathetic clowns.

Denton huffed, motioning his body up from his stool, grabbing his black wind-breaker from the back rest. The shifting fabric glided over the synthetic, red leather, moving through the air onto his shoulders. He watched as Lisa grabbed his ten dollars from her counter, turning her back towards Denton as she reached for the cash register.

Denton turned around, the men in the bar shifting their eyes into their shots of cheap tequilas and rum and cokes. Earl and Mr. Pantusky kept their eager eyes on Denton’s moving figure. *At least they have the balls to be straight to my face*, Denton thought.

Denton stomped out of the bar, the bell ringing from the frame as he made his exit. He looked back through the glass top of the metal door, and watched as the men of the drinking hole shift back towards Lisa’s countertop. Mr. Pantusky and Earl stumbled forward, their drunken arms hanging off each other’s shoulders in their dash for more liquid courage. Denton breathed out of his mouth, his voice exhaling a puff of mist from his throat.

Walking away from the bar, Denton shifted his light weight onto his feet, kicking the pebbles away from him. He plodded down the stretch of road, lit by the Christmas lights that had remained on the metal posts for two years straight. Denton's shadow followed his movements upon the pavement, dancing in the twinkling sparkle of dull LEDs. He smelled the air around him, feeling the moisture of the mist fall onto his skin and the pavement below. The petrichor landscaped the evening air as the sun dipped below the horizon, and the dark of night dipped its brush against the hue of pink and orange tones. He smiled, tilting his chin down to watch his boots scuff the old road. There was peace when the streets weren't crowded with the town's inquisitive and intrusive inhabitants. Denton felt he was most accepted when there were no bodies pressing him against the bricks of rundown shops and forgotten potted flowers.

Denton continued his pace, walking towards the downtown bridge that looped up towards the inner-town court house. He could hear the stream rush below, trickling past rocks and brambles strewn between disintegrated napkins and smoothed beer bottles. A cool breeze trailed through Denton's dark hair, brushing against his scalp with prickled fingertips. He stopped, letting the air embrace him. Off in the distance, he could hear the faint bell toll from *The Drowning Mermaid*.

Drunken laughter filled the street, and Denton could hear the padding of wobbled footsteps hit the bricked-paved sidewalk. The wind pushed their smell towards Denton; a faint breath of mixed vomit and gin waved past his nostrils. The smell of the petrichor left the new night air and the mist felt hard against his coat. Denton could hear the men's familiar laughter trailing up the street, their olive-zested smell reeking the surrounding area. Denton watched as the men approached him, staggering with each step towards the bridge's location. He turned

around, walking away from the men. He could feel their eyes on him, hazed and sloppy, marking him with a courage fueled by liquid.

“Look at this fag, thinking he’s all shit.” A man said, his voice closing in closer behind Denton’s back. Denton could hear their steps pound on the pavement, rushing up to meet him with an eager need. Denton stopped, turning around to face the men behind him. He watched as a drop of drool slid down one of the man’s mouth. A tootsie roll banged against the man’s crooked teeth, sucking chocolate and alcohol from his taste buds.

“Go home, Derek,” Denton said, his body tensing up. The man in front of him chomped down on his candy, the teeth coming down hard with slobber.

The other man stepped forward, his eyes glazed over and his breath reeking of Captain Morgan. “Fuck you, dick-lover.”

Denton stared at the two men, looking at the staggering bodies begin to laugh in unison. He reached into his pocket to feel his keys pressed between the thin jean fabric. “Funny,” he said, “come up with that jab on your own?” The two men staggered closer to him, their knuckles beginning to turn white.

“Lisa let you get this drunk, Jim? You should be chopping onions, not slurping them down with vodka behind the stove.” Denton said, cocking his head to the side. Jim spat on the ground, Grey Goose bubbles mixed with loogey.

“Don’t talk about Liza, fuck face,” Jim said, “After what you did to her.”

“Funny, that’s not what you said 10 years ago.” Denton said, turning away. *I really don’t want to deal with this*, he thought, keeping a hold on his keys.

“Come back, cock-sucker!” Derek said, following close behind. Denton heard the tootsie roll fall to the ground in pieces as the man slurred his mouth behind him. Derek stopped his feet, while Jim inched closer to Denton’s ear.

“Did you see the video I made?” Jim said, a scowl spreading across his face. “I thought I would catch some young tits, but I guess I found something else, huh?”

Denton clenched his left hand into a fist, but knew he couldn’t throw it. Sheriff Donnelly wouldn’t side with him. Not after the video. Not anymore. Denton knew no one would, no matter how vile Jim was, would take his side in the matter. He was the new outsider, the new target of Bonlis’ anger at otherness. *They were standing up for our morals*, Denton thought, echoing the voices of the townspeople, *We are lucky Jim stuck that camera in the stacks*.

Were they also lucky that young lovers had to find another place to sneak around? The field was gone, and now the library. Where else could these good ol’ kids go? *I ruin every make-out spot, I guess*, Denton thought to himself.

A faint ringing echoed, followed by another pair of steps. They were smooth, calculated, sober. Denton unclenched his fists as he watched Mike exit the bar. He still had his bar apron on, a pen sticking out from the side pocket. His boots hit the brick pavement in loud scuffs, making Denton’s hair on the back of his neck stiffen. The familiar smell of Mike’s cologne wafted in the men’s direction.

“Derek, Jim,” Mike said, moving beside the men, “What do we have here?”

“Fucking pervert, that’s what we got,” Jim said, hollering. Denton gripped the keys in his pocket tighter as Derek started to move behind him. The stench of their beverages mixing with the sweetness of the third man’s cologne wanted to make Denton gag. He turned to walk away,

but a hard hand pressed on his shoulder made him turn around. Mike stared at Denton with bright hazel eyes.

"Let go, Mike," Denton said, his voice and tone rising. Derek and Jim stopped wobbling, their fists clenching at their sides. The air moved around the group as the dusk light faded into dark. The street lights flicked on and off, the rhythm inconsistent and unpredictable. Denton pulled his keys out from his side, and placed the largest piece of metal in between the gap of his index and middle finger. He felt the copper slide easily into the folds of his hand, his fingers gripping tighter around the edge. Mike saw the motion, and smiled, gripping Denton's shoulder with more strength.

"Don't do this," Denton whispered, aware that Jim and Derek could hear the plea pass between the two men. A light flickered in Mike's eyes. Denton saw hesitation, fear. The threat of being discovered. Denton knew he had made a mistake.

"Don't whisper in my ear, fag!" Mike said, punching Denton in the stomach. Denton hunched over, his lungs empty, diaphragm sore. He threw his keyed arm up, socking Mike in the shoulder with a light thud. Jim and Derek grabbed Denton's arms, tearing the loosened keys from his weakened grip. Mike grabbed his shoulder, feeling a trickle of blood soak through his cotton work shirt.

The air around the men grew cold. Silence fell from the sky.

Mike walked away, clutching his shoulder with his right left hand. Denton struggled in Jim and Derek's arms, the ache suppressing and challenging his motion upwards. He could feel a bruise shape underneath his ribcage.

Denton struggled free from Derek's grip, swinging his arm to land a blow at Jim's lower jaw. He fell onto the pavement, feeling the weight of one of the men fall on him, punching him

in the sides. Denton kicked, feeling his foot contact a large, gelatinous stomach. The three men toppled on the ground, Derek and Jim gaining the upper hand on Denton's adrenaline-fueled body.

“Stop,” Mike said, lowering his bloodied hand to his side. Derek and Jim held onto Denton, their knees pressing into his arms, their fists held in midair by a drunken force. Their glazed eyes switched back and forth between Mike and Denton. Denton puffed painful air into his lungs, struggling underneath the weight of the inebriated men. He could feel his heart racing, his eyes alert, his sides in pain. Mike walked over him, leaning carefully over his sprawled body. A few drops of blood fell on Denton's jeans. Mike's pupils were wide, looking deeply down at Denton.

“What do you want, Mike?” Denton asked, realizing his lip had begun to bleed. He was unaware that he had been hit in the face. He couldn't remember sustaining a fist to the lip; all he could do was feel the rage pour out from inside of him.

Mike scowled, his lips pursing, nose scrunched. The two men shared a glance.

“Mike, let's go,” Derek said, inching closer to Mike, “Denton here probably wants to go back and fuck the man in the video.”

Jim laughed, snorting back a thick glob of snot to his throat. He spat on Denton, the smell of onions stinging Denton's face. “Who was the man,” Jim asked, “Who were you fucking? We want a taste of him too.”

“Yeah, Mike,” Denton said, his last attempt at pity, “Who?”

Mike lunged forward, pushing past Derek and Jim onto Denton's body. Denton pushed his fists towards Mike's face, but the rabid man pulled his knees up to lay on Denton's flailing arms. Mike punched down, hitting Denton's face and chest with furious forces.

Derek and Jim looked at each other, a drunk confusion mixing on their faces. But Derek and Jim were dumber than a bag of bricks even when they weren't drunk, so they shrugged, and joined Mike, their drunken minds lost to self-control. The three men laughed in between punches and kicks; their hollering covering the sound of Denton's gasping breath.

Blood began to pour from Denton's mouth.

Denton, through swollen eyes, saw one of the men shift, and begin kicking his lower half. He felt like puking, his groin bashed in with the steel toe. His stomach lunged inside of his body, wrapping itself around his throat. He felt his intestines shimmy and turn straight with every blow.

Red liquid poured into the street.

Denton felt blackness fall around him. The blows that fell upon his body—the boots hitting skin, breaking apart the fibers of his nerves—disappeared. He lost his sense of time, being, and purpose. He was awake, but not conscious. He knew, and didn't know; his body was being dragged, mutilated. The silence of the town echoed in his mind.

No thought. No saying. Nothing.

In a snap of a moment, he was not on the ground anymore. He found himself perched on the bridge, the rushing water trickling down below him. He was being suspended by Derek and Jim, his arms flailing over the edge. He could smell the dirt and debris floating in the stream. He could see the trash of the town float past jagged rapids, swirling before sinking into the deep.

Denton lifted his body to see Mike screaming, the sound dull in his ears. A sharp piercing sound rang in Denton's ear, the sound fading away with every movement of Mike's mouth. He could feel Jim and Derek lift him up more, setting him just above the ledge of the bridge. Mike

motioned them away, gripping the edge of Denton's dyed shirt of blood and dirt. Mike leaned his head in closer, his voice an octave above silence.

"No one can know."

Denton spat out blood, spraying Mike's face.

"Derek, Jim..." Mike said, pausing as he wiped the liquid from his face, marking the color in streaks down his cheek; a smile running across his face. "Let's chuck this asshole over."

The two men behind him shook their heads, blood dripping down their own chins. Mike laughed, clutching Denton by the neck of his shirt.

"Pussies," Mike said, growling and gritting his teeth. Derek and Jim stayed back, watching Denton and Mike from afar.

"Don't," Denton said, his voice soft between broken teeth. He could see the shadow of Mike's body, hands trembling with the cotton, red-stained shirt.

"I have to," Mike said, leaning in closer, "They'll never suspect it was me."

Bodies tumble past books, into the darkness of the stacks. Mike and Denton are laughing, pulling their shirts off each other between hot kisses and shared smiles. Their fingers are trailing up each other's spines, slipping past buttons and zippers. Mike is dusted in darkness, away from the soft blinking red light that is hidden behind long forgotten books. His hand reaches up and covers Denton's mouth with a soft touch.

Shhh, it's our secret, Mike said, his deep voice eager and searching for Denton's mouth.

Denton lingers by the light of the window, the night air twirling around him as the music from below fills the streets of the town. They are alone, one shrouded in light, the other in shadows.

“Not...seen,” Denton said, a glob of red spit forming at the corner of his mouth. Mike breathed harder, leaning Denton’s body over the edge further.

“I can’t!” Mike whispered, his voice scared, mixing with adrenaline. His face was terrified. “They’ll get me too.”

Denton could feel blood dripping down in his throat. “I would do it too,” he said. He coughed, his chest feeling concaved. “But I won’t tell.”

Denton leaned down, dropping his pants to the floor. His entire body is masked in the light of the window. The camera can see him standing above the outline of the man. He smiles, and says three words before kneeling on the carpet.

“They’ll know,” Mike said, “The town always finds out.” He let go. Denton cried out, his body feeling the rush of gravity. The water splashed, and Denton began sinking in a current of swirling blackness.

Mike stood back from the ledge, and wiped the tears forming on his face. He turned around, red streaked against his eyes hiding the salt streams on his cheeks.

“I bet all the garbage from the city likes to find its way down into that stream,” Mike said, standing back from the ledge. Derek and Jim rushed to the side, watching the water bubble and gurgle. They puked their remaining contents of gin and whiskey to the stream below.

The water filled Denton’s lungs, bruised and broken from the world above. The bridge fades away as the water’s murk twinkles past swollen eyes. Denton sinks, weak and broken. A hand from below grabs him, and pulls him further into the abyss. Denton struggles, but the strength of the hand is too much for him to handle. As the last burst of breath escapes his mouth, he looks down and sees a large tail.

The scales are golden with polished flecks of silver that cleans the water around them. Dirt evaporates at the touch and trash explodes into bubbles. He looks around in the water and sees three more creatures following him below. They have teeth that tug on his shirt, pulling the blood from the clothe. They call out his name in a different language, their tongues rolling past the bubbling movement of their breath and their thick fins pull him up towards the air of the world below the water. Their pale lips pull him up, and he gasps for air.

He wakes up below the bridge, his body healed, insides no longer bruised. The creatures around him are standing on their tales, their bodies long and winding like ancient depictions of dragons. They have long snouts that sniff at Denton, the pupil of their eyes long and constricted. The golden-silver creature that saved Denton approaches him, and touches his scaled hand to his cheek.

He speaks in another language, but Denton's ear translates the message for him.

"Stay with us," the creature says, "We'll protect you until you are safe to go back." Its hands are warm against Denton's cold, wet cheek. They all look at him, their faces familiar, yet somehow long forgotten. Denton nods his head, and answers back in their own language.

He looks down, and his legs begin to turn to fins.

CHAPTER SIX

I am shaking, body morphing into a blender, wrapped in soiled sheets. Pour me into a glass, and drink up my insides. Let my nerves wriggle down your throat; they are frazzled, and get caught down the gullet. Gag as I exist in your throat, sucking out the life from you.

Oh, wait. You can't.

My eyes are heavy, clamped down with dried skin. Rheum is building up in my caruncle, and I use my fingernail to dig it out. It's grey, and stretches when pinched. I put it in my mouth.

The sandman comes to visit you, my mother would say. He sprinkles his essence in your eyes, let's you dream as he licks up your watery tears. I imagine him in blue with a wizard's hat. He has white eyes, no pupils, and keeps his sand in a fanny-pack by his crotch. He climbs up your face, unseen by human eyes. Gripping your pores, he ascends the slope of your nose, using blackheads to keep his foothold. He'll unzip his pouch, dig into the desert, and prick your eyes with his flourishing hand. When the lids close, and the eye moistens behind the lashes, he lifts the skin and leans forward. Using the tear duct as a fountain, he laps up the salt water, making a mess upon your skin.

I think the Sandman forgot to drink up my liquids. Maybe I grabbed him with my tongue before he could get his essence in my eye. I bet he tasted like the rheum.

Too bad. I guess he will never visit me again. Works for me: I still have stories to write. I need to tell you. Unravel who you are. Understand the secrets behind the molding skull.

My clock is ringing again, but I can't answer it. I must keep writing; moving forward with the text in front of me. To understand everything about you. It's only 98:30, you know, and I just learned that you pushed a guy off a bridge. Naughty, naughty!

The cats won't come in here anymore. They smell your musty odor, the chemicals shifting places in their nostrils to make sense of the dumpster smell emanating from your body. There are fecal spuds that float in the atmosphere. I can see them now. The cats can't, but I can. I know this. A voice has told me so. You wouldn't know them. The voice. The voice is plural.

I don't want to leave our bed. If the cats don't want to leave the kitchen, then I shouldn't have to leave our bed. Somehow, your shit keeps me comfort. I want to play in it, mush my hands in it like I was playing with mud. Feel the corn separate in my fingers. Maybe when I type, peas will sprout between the space of the letters. The "G" and H" will have a budding carrot poke its green top from beneath the motherboard.

Keep typing. Play in shit later, Leona.

Maybe I can start shitting in the bed too... Wouldn't that be fun?

I just noticed there is a fly buzzing around your fingertips. How did it get in here? Did it smell you and worm its way through the door and floor? Did it crawl in, on all sixes, and feel its way towards our bedroom?

I watch as the fly lands on your pale fingertips. It stretches its front legs out, and begins rubbing its tarsus together. The maniacal action tells me it's bathing before the devour. The sweeping motion over the compound eye gives me the impression of a clean sight—to see your flesh and blood sucked dry from your whitened skin. Implant some maggots, let it fester until you crack open wide, your insides a slippery slide for the children of the fly.

I have decided to name her Carrie.

Carrie shuttles her wings and rubs off parts of her shiny skin onto you.

Someone from my sixth-grade girl scout troop told me that flies poop when they land. Another corrected her by saying they poop when they take off.

Did Carrie just poop on your eye? She took off from your finger, and landed on your eyebrow. She is such a graceful beauty.

She's starting to talk to you. I can hear her voice.

Feed my children. Hear that? She whispered in your ear just now. The sound of her is not high pitched, small, or fragile. She is deep, sultry, sensual. I think she wants to fuck you. I bet you would let her if you woke up.

Will you fertilize her eggs? Make children with Carrie?

Your man maggots, squirming with your dark hair wet and tangled in the folds of your skin. They cry out for milk and blood, seeping out of your hairy areolas. When they latch on, they squirm into the brown skin on ropes of your hair, rippling to your chest cavity. They reach the heart, and destroy the dead-beat of red valves.

“Did someone say red?”

Carrie?

“No, bitch. Look up.”

I keep typing, but I shift my eyes forward. It's Dante. What's he doing here?

But I Have Made a Deal

“Good question.” He says, walking towards me. His red pumps are hitting my hard wood floors. Fierce, fabulous, on fire.

“Keep typing,” he says. “I like having my actions recorded for history.” Dante smirks, his eyes flickering in the luminescence of my lamp. I watch as they turn black, then flicker to a light shade of blue. His pupils are minuscule in the color. They look like contacts.

“Trust me, hon, they’re not.” He walks around the bed, and pokes you.

“How did you know I wrote that?” I say, slightly closing the lid of my laptop. My fingers are still pressing the keys underneath the shielding light. I feel them click with every touch, my knuckles grazing the glass of the almighty apple.

“Oh, honey, I know because I control you.” He says, pressing his right hand on his chest. His nails are long, and painted black. Painted? Or just black?

“You’re my character of Caleb—“

“Bitch, you’re my character.” He says. He bends his knees, and lowers his hands towards you. He makes a wiping motion near your crotch, and sits down. “Oh,” he says, a smile spreading on his rouged lips.

I blink slowly. Dante takes his right leg, and swings it over his left; hairless, effortless, toned. He is a specimen of pleasure, and I am aroused by his presence.

“You think you created...this?” He laughs, slapping his lifted knee with manicured claws. He wipes an invisible tear from his cheek, and sighs. I lean back against my body pillow, typing away as he leans closer to my face.

“I am the voice inside that crazed little head of yours. These words are mine.”

I frantically type his sentence on the screen.

“I don’t understand.” I say.

Dante pinches the space between his eyes. Wrinkleless, he puffs out his lips, and rolls them. I watch as his cat-lined eyes close. The gold sparkles on his lids, and his fake eyelashes trace the curve of his eyes.

“I own you, control you.” Dante says, opening his eyes slowly. “One could say I am you. Or, what’s left of your crazy little consciousness.” His pupils have grown into the full spheres of his eyes. The color of blue is gone, and I see into him. There are fingers scraping the inside of his corneas. The fingers are connected to arms bending and twisting in the lens, grasping in the watery bowl. If I could see their faces; if they crawled out of the black water and pressed their gaping mouths against the glass, they would be a Munchian painting, their mouths stretched wide and empty, screaming with no sound. One hand holds a cigarette.

I hear Dante laughing.

“Don’t be so melodramatic, deary,” He says, “You’ll turn back into Charese, and we know that chapter was your weakest.”

He blinks, and the arms crumble into the blackness. His eyelashes glitter against the black pupil, glimmering with a bespeckled trace of night.

“Who are you?” I ask, typing the line as Dante leans forward. Your body crumples towards me as his posture bends effortlessly. I see wrinkles form in your skin under Dante’s weight. They move with his thighs, pointing arrows to the space between his legs. Your skin is moving to the rhythm of his heart beat. I can see a vein in his thigh pound against your pale flesh.

“Honey, I am the being that keeps those little fingers breathing. I am the purpose.”

He places his hands upon my face, his black nails scraping against my pores. I can feel my traces sink under his hyponychium. His fingers touch the corners of my eyes. He pulls me closer, inching lip to lip. I want to put my tongue inside of him, feel his hot breath move past the gaps in his teeth into my hot, wet mouth. I want him to suck my saliva, make me dry. Gnaw on my tonsils with elongated teeth. Consume me through the inside.

He stops me before my lips can purse. I keep typing.

His eyes are flickering different ranges of black. They mingle and merge to form a dark rainbow—black of space, black of darkness; black of night—a spectrum of filters to show me more of his insides. A little boy crawls from the bowl, and stares at me. His blue eyes pierce through the flicker.

“You want to explore my story, don’t you?” he said, as if reading my mind. “You do realize the story wouldn’t be real. I’m you, and I can sense what you want to put down on the page.”

I keep typing away.

“Very well. Go and have your sleep-deprived, crazy episode.” Dante pulls me in closer, and with his deep voice says, “Know me.” He tightens his grip on my face.

Little boy fabulous, a voice rings in my head. Dante’s, inside my head, rattling around in heels. He flicks my hippocampus with the stiletto. In front of my eyes, his lips stay unmoved. I feel him lay upon my lobe, a memory foam forming around his curves.

I was this child. Tiny, miniscule, worthless. See how he looks at you...

The boy inside Dante’s eyes tilts his head. A teddy bear appears in his left hand, dragging across the floor of darkness. A tiny red bow is clipped against the light brown fur. The boy lifts

his right hand, and strokes the ribbon. His eyebrows furrow, and gazes through me. He opens his mouth, and giggles.

I hear it beat against my ear drums. Dante taps his heel upon my cortex.

Caleb wants to play, mommy. Come hold your child.

The black of his pupils widens, and a lean woman holds a cigarette in between her fingers. They are long, perfect. Her red polish shines in an unseen light. The cigarette flickers, and a plump of ash falls into the abyss. She moves her fingers close to her mouth, and takes a long draw. She holds the air, and puffs out a glare of grey. The smoke seeps through the eye, and runs up my nostrils. Nicotine, second hand. I turn black inside.

Mommy, why haven't we eaten? I'm hungry.

Mother can't cook, little boy fabulous. There is no food. No money. Go gnaw on the whiskers of Teddy. Dante's voice says, circling through the curves of my brain. He is racing through the sulcus, riding on the vibrations of his tongue.

The mother fades away into the black. Little Caleb drops the teddy bear, the object falling flat on its face. It rumbles, and morphs, pulsating against the rippling water of Dante's corneas. The teddy growls, his button eyes forming into ovals of brown. The stitches of its mouth rips and tears; the teeth are knives, serrated and edged. The teddy bear lunges, he devours the child. Teddy's red bow forms into a pair of lips, his fur forming long arms, twisted and knotted with lice bites and splintered skin. A slender, older boy pushes through the bear, eclipsed in a broken, molded apartment. Dirt rises from the floor. A gnarled and bitten stuffed animal lays on in a pile of rags.

The cotton is dry in your mouth, young fabulous Caleb. Doesn't the plastic feel like a vein against the cracked epidermis of your lips? Feel it between your teeth? It tears at your gums,

sucks on the blood. Falls into your stomach. It tastes like acid throwing itself against the slippery lining, crawling up the throat for a taste of the synthetic flesh.

He grows to suffer, Dante's heel tapped, the Morse code translated through my pale, mucus encased brain. He feels suffering. He is the act of suffering. His anger is hot. This is his warmth. His warmth is his anger.

The young Caleb walks to the rags, picking up a yellowed shirt in his palms. The mud-splattered fabric chaffs against his rough fingers. Goosebumps form on his arm. His tiny hairs wiggle in the draft of the abode.

Oh, young fabulous Caleb, Dante's voice says, Fuel the anger. Fuel the warmth.

The boy reaches out his arm into the abyss. His blue eyes search in the darkness; reaching, wanting. An orange dress is pulled from the wet walls of the eye.

He lies down on the rags, and uses the dress as a blanket. It smells of his mother's cigarettes, cool Virginia menthol. Her only dress for work, bathed in the sink every night with the dishes. A piece of hardened cheese is crusted at the collar.

Drape it over you, young fabulous Caleb. Mold grows on your body. The dress will be the barrier against decay.

The boy pulls the opening of the head onto his shoulders. The polyester fabric grows around his body. The young man sprouts lint like sparks from a flame.

Young fabulous Caleb, Dante's voice says, Feel that warmth? That is your anger seeping through the fabric. Feel it's power. Your mother's clean clothes are anger. They are your heat. They are the flame...

The figure in the eye wrapped his arms around his chest. The dress flowed around his body. He twisted his torso, feeling the dress encompass him. The threads of the fabric weaved

into his body, attaching their seams into his nook and crevices. He felt the dress become him. He likes the way the satin lining feels against the bare pores on his forearm. He wonders how his legs will feel in the touch of cotton. The young boy grows taller, his legs sprout hair that traces up towards his thighs. His face becomes chiseled and oblong.

Fabulous man, feel the dress empower you.

The young Dante shifts his neck, his lean body becoming an elegant extension of the outfit. His bare feet lift, placing the weight on his toes. They strain against the dark abyss, his calf muscles forming check marks, muscles toned and tightened. He clenches his fists to his sides.

Fabulous man, you have been transformed, Dante's voice said. Provide for yourself.

Become power.

Run.

The dingy apartment shifts, and an imposing forest circles Caleb. He is running on his toes, his calves moving him forward, yet stopped in motion. Sequoias loom over his escaping body, their roots reaching up at him, tearing the flesh from his legs. The roots curl up, twisting their wooden reach upwards. They thrust themselves at Caleb, gripping on to his ankles. But Caleb escapes their molestation in winded lunges. His lungs feel like cement poured from the mist of dew upon lichen and mushrooms. He keeps running. Running. Running.

Fabulous man, there is a gate.

A dark gate appears in a thicket of brambles and lightning-struck branches. Marked with gargoyles that are strangled with chains of fire, Caleb bashes his body against the metal barrier. He pounds his hands upon the latch. He is bleeding, sprouting bursts of himself with every force against the darkness.

Fabulous gate, open for the king.

The gate turns the handle with invisible keepers, the key pushed into the lock by Dante's will. Caleb slams through the portal. He is engulfed in colors unseen by human eyes. They are the colors of desperation, despair; madness, orgasm. Sin and saints; fallen angels and worshippers of the grail. Caleb is thrown in to the pit, his mind and body stretched through time and space, earth and air. He is transformed into fire and water. He becomes eternal.

He is pushed through a small tube, liquefied and metamorphosed into a being. He becomes experience.

With a burst of white, thick liquid, he emerges from you, dripping with wet glitter in his very own eye.

I feel warm liquid dropping from Dante's fingers upon my cheeks. It runs through the crinkles of crow's feet and down my laugh lines. It falls into my open mouth. The liquid is warm, bitter, full of salt and tiny wiggling tails. It falls to the back of my throat, awakening me from Dante's eye. I blink and focus my field of vision. Dante is dripping with you, the pale fluid trailing over his bare skin; stains of dried cum are forming on the base of his dress.

"Talk about a money shot." Dante says. He is laughing hard, slapping his knee with large hands. "What fun. Utter nonsense, but fun."

I clamp my jaw down, his hands moving away from my peripheries. I see his smile at my expression, his bared teeth inside his mouth forming into a V.

"What was that?" I say, the words falling out of my voice in bumpy waves. Dante meshes his hands together. Your semen dries on his skin, sizzling with steam. The smell of a chlorinated pool fills the air; there are scallops in the deep end.

Dante leans away from me, and places his hands upon his knees. “Where?” His waxed eyebrows shift. *Remember, I am you.* His voice is inside my head again. I clap my hands to my ears. I can hear my rapid heartbeat pound in the enclosure of my hand. The echo pounces off my palm, and strikes the drum.

Try again.

“Stop it!” I say, slapping my arms down on the keyboard once more. The words are pouring out of my fingers, the sentences moving across the screen. I can feel Dante’s strings moving my hands like a marionette. But the truth emanates from my dirty nails, the clipped cuticles shouting reality.

“What are you?” I ask him, typing his answer immediately after.

“Bitch, I am the personification of the last straw that broke your back.” He said, “Figure the rest out on your own.”

I feel the words move fast upon the keys. I am becoming aware of Dante’s presence inside of me. He is racking his long nails across my brain, scratching the cells from the deepest corners of my mind. I want to lick his fingers and taste thought.

“How long has it been?” I say, typing the words along with the speed of my voice.

Dante sniffs, his nostrils moving into his nose. I can hear his snot go down his throat. I wonder if he swallows fire. Does he expel smoke? Do his lungs create burning coal, fueled by snotty gasoline?

“Almost one hundred and fifteen hours,” Dante began, “I’m surprised you’re still able to type away like that.”

I keep writing, listening to his voice ride sound waves. He kicks their sides with Louis Vuitton, pulling the reins while pushing back his long, black hair.

“I can’t stop,” I say. I am pulled in by who he is. I want to know him, be controlled by his energy. “I want to know more about you.”

“You, him. Does it make a difference. Baby, have you looked at him lately?”

I look over at you and see Carrie is sleeping on your open right eye.

“No. I’m not done yet,” I say, “Why are you here? Why are you like this?”

“Such mortal questions.” Dante said, rolling his eyes. His pupils are changing rapidly between blue and black. He is toying with me, showing his strength. “The better question to ask is what can’t I become.”

I ponder his words, letting them seep into me. I need to know more...type more.

Dante shape shifts into a large vulture, then to the creatures from Denton’s story. Soon, he is Candace filled with sand, and then back to him.

“How...it can’t be.”

“Course not, but then again I’m not real.” He said, laughing with his whole body once more. My head begins to hurt, and I feel fire burning at my temples. There is a pounding of drums drilling by my ears.

“You done yet?” he said, “You are dramatic as fuck, you know that? Wrap this up will you?”

I scramble to type his words down. My fascination is heightening; I can feel the climax coming.

“Why you?” I ask, “Why not just write a doppleganger?”

Dante shifts away from your body, standing spread-legged on the soiled comforter. The tips of his heels are above your mess, walking over the sludge.

Freedom, I think. Dante smiles and nods.

“Among the wild, the free, you can be whoever you want. Sometimes, we don’t choose who our second selves are. But what we picture is how you wish to be. Think of it: dynamic and powerful during the day, desirable by night. You want to be a part of the outspoken—the apparent sinners—where there is no punishment. Only acceptance. Where there are chances to rise from the flames. No glass ceiling to bump your head on.”

He flashed another image in his eye. His back opens, releasing black wings from his spine. I felt the energy rise between my legs, and I wanted to be him completely, among the living. I wanted to grasp his soft wings, feel the vanes separate in my fingers, smoothing my imperfections into molded clay. Let the barbules prick my skin with Dante’s drug, fuel me into oblivion.

You sure are a crazy bitch.

“Why did you come now?” I type down. Dante squints his face, thinking of an answer. He won’t let me into his head—my head—ours. He is in control. I have accepted him into me.

“There are parts of you,” he said, “That want to punish those out here,” Dante looks at you, then back at me. “Crush them beneath my pointed toes.” He steps on your knee and pushes down. I hear a pop come from the joint, splayed bones unhinged and melted underneath the heat. “But the rest of you forgive him,” your knee popped back into place, “and that makes you more pissed.” He paused, and looked at me with soft blue eyes. “Let it go. Being angry ain’t gonna change what happened.”

“Why?” I say, shifting my eyes away from his stance, keeping them fixated upon the screen. I feel the urge of writing shift into hyper drive.

“My suffering only hurts me. Let it go, and you let me go.”

There is a pause between us, the only sound is the click of the keys beneath my touch. A beat between two beings. Mortal and divine animation. Dante's eye shifts again, and I see his mother. She is splayed across the floor, her hair seeping into the floor boards. She smells like you.

His royal fabulousness wanted more. Feed off the souls of living. Use their pain through ecstasy.

Dante's eyes close, shifting underneath his lids. With an audible *flick*, his eyes open, and the pale blue is seen once more. Smiling, Dante smooths out his dress, and leaps from our bed. I want to follow him, but I can't feel my legs. They are paralyzed, fuzzy with tingling and bloodlessness. I watch as Dante runs his fingers through your hair. I wonder what he will do with the flakes of scalp hiding between skin and nail.

"I didn't let her go," Dante says, pointing at his eye, "Now look at me. Stuck in your crazy little head of yours. But you...you still got a chance. Let him go. Move on. It ain't worth moping over. You keep this up, and you'll keep hurting yourself."

I blink my eyes, and Dante is gone.

I am alone once more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dante left me in the room with you. He was gone, just as soon as he had appeared.

I don't want to listen to him. Me.

I was once told not to mess with spirits. I didn't listen.

With Myself

She called me into the room, her screams feral. I was playing with the cats, lifting my fingers away from their grasp before they could grab me with their paws. It was fun watching them see me through their other-worldly eyes. Their pupils grew new moons in their yellow-green pools of vision. I could see my white specter glowing through the different fields.

But she needed me more. She was ready.

Drifting from the kitchen, I entered the hall, the two cats following close behind. With a flick of their whiskers they told me they were scared. Their mother was dying.

They stayed behind as I entered the doorway, smelling the stench of death in the air. The two cats behind me bolted towards the kitchen once more.

I found myself staring at the woman, her hair wild, moving with the twitching of her head between gasps of screams. She was still typing, creating these very words on the screen.

Did she make me? Or was she tapping into who I was?

“Who are you?”

I looked up, and found her staring at me with black eyes. I remembered they were once blue.

I levitated my body over her bed. I did not want my existence touching the soiled sheets and comforter. I felt the words move my body. I was the puppet. I was the puppeteer.

“I want him back.” She said, continuing to type. I noticed her eyes were not blinking, hauntingly staring at me. I floated towards her screen, the gaze she had on me following my every move. I read the words on her screen.

The Ghost said, “Gone.”

“Gone.” I floated away from her, and looked into the mirror. I watched as she motioned her body towards me, her fingers still flying on the keyboard. Her movement made the bed shift, and the body felt the force of gravity push him. His face smacked against her back.

His face smacked me in the back as I watched the ghost look at me through the mirror.

“Gone?” She said, reaching back to pat him on his hair. “No, he’s still here.”

It’s just you and me now, the ghost said.

I mimicked the words on the page. The woman shook her head violently.

“I see him! He’s not gone! Dante’s gone!” she said. I looked away at the mirror, and turned my eyes upon the bewildered woman. Her fingers kept typing.

“He’s gone. Far away. To a place I do not know.” I said. “Besides, you cannot leave. You are still alive...somewhat.”

“Who are you?” the woman said in a rushed voice.

“I own this house,” I said, walking around the edges of her bed. I felt my essence brush against the molecules of the sheets. They moved to my touch, and I felt my energy drain from my being.

“No, I do,” the woman said. She took a hand from the keyboard, and brushed away a knotted section of her hair from her face. She returned the hand to the computer, and continued to type these words.

“You came here long after my departure. But I let you stay, to watch over you.”

The woman named Leona gulped, and wrote three stars at the bottom of this sentence.

“I died with my blood splattered around my kitchen. I remember who killed me, and how that pain felt in the split second between life and death. My daughter was sleeping in her room,

napping quietly with her stuffed animals lined in a row by her side. My husband told me he was going outside to mow the lawn. It was a beautiful spring day for trimming my herbs for the week's meals. As I sheared some basil perched on my windowsill, I felt the knife slide through my back.

I never saw his face as I gasped my last breath. It wasn't until I was kneeling by myself, fingers clutching the air above me when I looked up and saw my husband's face. Drops of liquid fell from his chin into my body's hair. I knew him. I had loved him. But he had hurt me.

His face was strong, eyes dark and empty. Those eyes stared right through me, my spirit, and fell on my lifeless body. He wiped his chin with his sleeve, his knife falling to the floor.

'How could you do this to me?!' I said, my voice mixing with the air. I felt I was screaming, tearing at a void with my screams. The vibrations sounded like wind on a winter's day. It chilled my own existence but fell on deaf ears. I watched him lean down by my body, feeling the side of my neck. He sighed and covered my face with my hair. He didn't bother to shut my eyelids. I walked over, seeing past the strands of my once blonde hair. My eyes were glazed over.

He lunged for the sink, throwing the dirty dishes in all directions. He flung open the cabinets, broke my china and glass belongings. He littered my resting place with belongings of my past. The shattered glass cut my skin, but the blood had settled by then.

He took the knife, and stabbed his side. Dropping the dagger, he gripped the wound, and took a long breath.

He yelled, and ran outside our home.

The neighbors flew towards our fence. The town awoke in the afternoon sun. *An intruder, an intruder!* My husband cried, *He tried killing me. My wife...my wife!* The police came,

snapping large flashes of light at my body. I screamed out that it was my husband, that he had been the one to kill me. But they didn't listen. How could a loving husband and father hurt his wife and daughter's mother?

My daughter walked out of her room, rubbing the dust from her eyes. She saw me. Actually *me*. I reached over to her, trying to cover her eyes. But she could see through me. She could see my body lying in its own pool.

My husband scooped my daughter up, reassuring the toddler that the bad man was gone. As he walked out my house, my daughter crying out for me, they covered my body with a white sheet, the neighbors scrambling through the rooms, placing my things in their pockets.

The Ghost remained trapped in this house, never allowed to leave her resting space until she found peace. The husband left her behind for the coroner. The morgue. The gravestone. Her house was abandoned. He let the neighbors pillage their home because he didn't care. He just wanted his daughter. The wife was of no use to him anymore.

The 50s blurred into the 60s, the 70s into the 80s. The house began to crumble, no one willing to move into the house with the stained kitchen floor. Her spirit began to fade away into obscurity, into the wallpaper that began to peel from the moisture left by rock-smashed windows. She was alone. Forgotten. A myth.

She died twice.

I repeated the information to her, watching as she typed my words on her screen.

“How do you know this is a laptop?” Leona asked me.

“I’ve watched over you,” I said, “You moved into the house and fixed me up. You saved me.” I walked over to the window, looking out into the early morning air. Her phone rang once more.

The clock chimes at 13:30 in the morning, Leona wrote down. She’s beginning to mix up the hours and the time.

“Leona,” I say, “You need to stop this.”

“No,” she says. She begins typing on the keyboard once more. *The Ghost doesn’t know she isn’t real. She’s just another character.*

I’m real, I think to myself, knowing that in her haze of insomnia, she must believe deep down that I am not a hallucination. She is just typing the events I tell her—

The Ghost doesn’t believe she is a story.

I ignore the words, and stand on the other side of the room. I feel a question being typed onto the page.

Out of my intuition, not because I am a product of this crazy woman.

The Ghost must be my stupid side. If Dante is my wild side, and Charese my vengeful, she must be the—

“You don’t have a stupid side,” I say to her, “You just see me, that’s all!”

I ask her a question: “Why are you stuck in this house? Why not move on then?”

I stand above her, knowing I cannot reach out my hand to touch the side of her cheek.

“I am the energy that controlled my body. When I was killed, I was flung from my body by an extreme force, and got stuck here. Wood and stone harness energy when it gets flung too hard.” Leona writes my answer on the screen.

The Ghost—me—writes down the answer.

“Leona, you have got to stop this. You’ll be tethered here too if you don’t let go of him. You wrote what you could, now go get help.”

The Ghost pleaded that I needed to leave your side. I can’t let that happen. You must still be tethered here like she is. We will be back together again. I know this.

I pondered for a moment, thinking I could end the discussion by disappearing from the woman. However, I felt tied to her. If I gave her peace, would I be let free?

“No, Leona,” I said. I drew closer to her, watching as her fingers typed away at the laptop. Her unblinking eyes following my moves, “He’s not here. He wasn’t flung out his body like I was. Some people...sometimes they just go.”

The specter of The Ghost shimmered in the shadows of our room, her haunting eyes piercing my fingers as I uncovered her secrets. She moved her chest up and down, as if drawing breath once more.

“I died so violently, so viciously, that a part of a conscious me—or even all of me—stayed here. Those actions against me,” *The Ghost paused*, “Created energy; and energy cannot be exterminated. It has to go somewhere.”

The woman typed away, her eyes transfixed on my words. I turned away from her. Her name came to me.

“Leona,” I said, “His death did not leave an impression. His energy left. It wasn’t transformed. Stop trying to create him; there is nothing left to build from. He’s gone. Let go.”

I stopped typing. The Ghost looked at me with pitiful eyes. I saw a shimmer of green speckle through her existence.

“I don’t believe you. He told me I couldn’t make it without him. He must be here. If you’re real, then he’s got to be too.” She stopped typing and called out his name. “Where are you?” she yelled. “Come out and face me!”

I wanted to confront him. It was time for me to do it. I was ready. I would sit him down and tell him how worthless he made me feel. About how I still loved him. That I accepted him for all his flaws, that we could work something out together. That he and I could open our arms to Charese, to Eric, to Denton. To my freedom. I wanted him to love me as I loved him. I wanted him to love himself. That if we could sit down, he could explain to me why he felt it was okay to hurt me on the inside.

“Leona, listen to me!” I shouted at her. She kept typing away.

The Ghost tells me that, woman to woman, we have been through the same tragedy. We have been scarred by the men we loved; by the men that we thought loved us. Why they hurt us, we may never know. But sometimes, we have to let that hurt go. The closure doesn’t always lie when we confront the people who do the damage.

“That doesn’t make sense!” she said, typing away at the keyboard. “I have to hold onto this hurt. I have to let him know what it feels like. How can I let go of him if he doesn’t know how it feels?”

I crouch down by her side. There is a pounding at her door.

The walls have begun to beat their drums. He is coming. I can feel it.

“Leona!” I say, “This is not the way. He is dead! Say it with me! Say it! He is gone. There is nothing you can do now. You have to heal yourself. Leona!”

Leona turned her head at me, her fingers still typing away. The veins in her eyes were blotched and red.

“Look at yourself,” I said, “Look what you have become.

She stared down at herself, the words still marking the page.

I am sitting in a mixture of your filth and mine. There is dirt caked underneath my fingernails, and the stench of my unwashed body suddenly forces its way into my nose. The trashcan is full of my excrement, and I haven't seen my cats in days. I am as empty as ever.

She unleashes a howl from her throat that took me back. She began screaming once more.

She dropped the laptop, the screen revealing just these last twelve words.

I screamed, my voice vibrating at a high pitch in my throat. I dropped my laptop on the bed, and stood up upon the sheets. I clenched my fists and began to strike your body.

“How could you leave me? How could you do this to me?”

I saw The Ghost at the corner of my eye. She was my hallucination. She wanted to torture me with her existence.

“You were supposed to face me! You were supposed to wake up and admit that you hurt both of us! You killed us! You killed us!”

Leona took her fists and pounded on the dead man. Every touch that her fists made with his body, a smell drifted to my presence. She was crazed, her wild hair flashing in the air, knotted and mixing stronger with every movement. She was ravenous, desperate, and all alone.

We were all alone.

I was all alone.

You left me you son of a bitch! How could you die on me! How could you!

What am I supposed to do now? What can I do?

You fucking, piece of shit! How can you leave me like this?

How can you leave me with a ghost?

Why aren't you a ghost?

You didn't say goodbye to me?

You said you loved me!

We promised to go together!

We loved each other!

You left me here to die alone! I am not ready to be alone!

Come back!

Come back!

Tears were streaming down Leona's face, her words coming out in between beats of her fists. Snot glistened at her nostrils, and a fury had taken over her. Her lover had abandoned her.

She was alone in this world.

Knocks continued to pound at the door. I floated over to the crazed Leona. She saw me, and began screaming at me.

Leave me alone! Leave me alone! Bring him back!

Shouts came from outside my home. Many voices echoed from behind the door.

They smashed the door in.

They couldn't see me stand over her screaming wildness, but the intruders grabbed her flailing body from the man. Her shrills pierced what was once my ears.

“Leave me with him! Let me die!”

“Leona, he's dead.” One intruder said. She was in a hazmat suit, a stethoscope hung from her neck. The policemen filed in from the door, their hands covering their disgusted faces.

The two men were crying as they held the wild Leona. She tore at their arms, clawing at their bare skin.

The woman pulled a syringe from her pocket, and struck Leona's dirty thigh. She sunk in their grips, her wild eyes closing.

His body was carried out the door, covered by a black bag.

I disappeared into the wallpaper once more.

CHAPTER EIGHT:
TO FIND THE TRUTH OF ME

The air smelled of dirt and torn grass, gravel and etched stone. As I was lying on your grave, I could see the backs of the leaves above. *A storm is coming*, I thought, picturing my grandmother's words in my head. *If you see the backs of leaves it means a storm is coming*. But I didn't want to leave. I wanted to feel the thunder crash my body, the rain pelt through me as it trailed over my tired eyes. I wanted a strike of lightning to pierce my insides. I was close to the ground, on top of you. Maybe if the electricity was strong enough, it would pass my life to you.

But that would mean giving myself up again. I can't do that anymore. I won't.

There's something satisfying about feeling grass poke through your funeral tights. It flicks past your hair and stabs dry skin. An itch that can't be scratched, but scratches. I let your ground feel me, perhaps for the last time. I wanted the backs of the leaves to fall on me, keep me blanketed on your green bed. But I can only see the backs flutter above me, waving in the wind, pushing the clouds closer to the crest of the sky.

Your brothers were sitting in the processional transport, watching me through the tinted windows. I turned my head, feeling the back of my skull scrap against pebbles from the graveled road. I watched as your older brother Freddrick stare at me with pitiful eyes, beckoning for me to do something. But it was Zakary's eyes that I felt connected to. His eyes spoke the truth that no one wanted to voice. *You disgraced his death. You disgraced us.*

He's not lying. But I don't care anymore. Death is messy, and not all of us can handle it well.

I did nothing wrong.

Yes, any normal person would have done the sensible thing and called services to properly take care of you. But, of course, I was inspired. I broke out of that haze that separated me from you. There was an air about your lifeless body that I wanted to hold on to. It was my chance to truly figure out what happened to you. To me. We never shared moments like those we shared when your eyes turned a glazed rumination of colors. I could finally talk to you, about you. Dig into your mind by writing about your story. I never guessed. I knew. I let the words flow from my consciousness and onto the page. We were mingling finally. Caressing each other between the boundaries of the gone and the present. I could feel your hand press to my temple through the void of nothingness, into reality. You had finally embraced me.

But I'm sorry you had to die for that.

I just felt that I finally knew you, after all those years. All it took was for you to fall asleep, and never wake up. I sacrificed you to maggots and mold, detritivores and decay. I was freed. And I think, maybe you were too.

There is a serenity waiting for a storm to blow you away from a grave. The eyes of the headstones don't stare at you for too long, but they do watch. Their names are dotted with eyes and tongues, poking out to see what your offerings are. I wonder if they know what you know. Did they have secrets like you did? Were their loved ones interested in finding out themselves like I did? Did they become obsessed like me?

I know it wasn't right. None of it was. But...it happened. You can't change what happened to you. Sometimes, you just have to let go. The closure isn't always there, but holding on can kill you just as much as the people who have hurt you. I hope I didn't hurt you too much. No matter how badly you treated me, you didn't deserve what I did to you. I'm...sorry.

You were supposed to be cremated, I know. Sorry about that as well. But I was in the hospital...you know...getting better when your family decided on the funeral. You never wanted a parade through the shadowed streets of an overcast afternoon. There was never supposed to be a vision of hazard lights flashing through the busy roads stuffed with confused sedans and onlookers. Body wrapped underneath polyester stitched oak, lying still of a backseat; that was not meant for you. Not once did those dreams come from your mouth.

And yet, I had no choice. Your family wanted you buried in the family plot. I wasn't the next of kin anymore. Whoops. I was too busy being pricked by examiners while your family picked the flower arrangements.

I'm okay with that, honestly. I don't need to control your story anymore. Your grip on me is gone, and I can finally focus on who I actually am. The real me. The real Leona. I don't know what that means for me, but I'll find it. I promise.

That's why I am here now, staring at the screen waiting for the next word to form. I hate when final chapters are rushed, barely a few pages for the reader to feel closure. But now...I realize a writer just wants it over and done with. To stop feeling the weight of the project on their chests. To just end it, wrapped up and ready to go into the shredder.

Closure doesn't need to happen. Sometimes, the writer just wants it all to stop.

I wasn't sure if I should write this last chapter. This isn't my examination of one of your personal strangers. I know who I am writing about—the person in your life who this whole section is about. But I don't want to talk about her. I don't want to talk about how fucked up I became, sitting at her laptop waiting for the end to happen. Waiting to understand who you could possibly be as she laid next to you in bed when the room still had your smell and presence before your brothers came and cleaned everything out.

I think I am going to set this whole thing on fire. What's the point of keeping it? You're not really reading this, and you never will. If anyone is reading this, they'll only see me as some crazy bitch who didn't have the gall to understand who you were before falling asleep that night. They might see me as someone who could never understand what you went through. But then again, do they understand what I went through? Do they know the secrets that I still keep hidden from them?

In some way, I do care about the person reading this. If they did read this all the way through, it must have been for some reason, right? They don't have to like me, they don't have to dislike you. But if this kept them from becoming us...then I guess that's what matters. If there really is a matter to have anyway.

Either way, I'll have to decide what to do with this with this whole project. Do I share you, or keep you all to myself? Do I even have a choice? Frankly, I don't care anymore. I am free to do as I please.

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Shelby Colburn was born and raised in Eddington, Maine. In 2012 she graduated from Brewer High School with High Honors. She graduated from the University of Maine in 2016, Summa Cum Laude, with a B.A. in English with a minor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. As an undergraduate, Shelby was a member of Phi Sigma Pi, Sigma Tau Delta, and Phi Beta Kappa Honor Societies. She currently lives in Brewer, Maine with her fiancé and two cats. She is a candidate for the Master in Art degree in English from the University of Maine in August 2019.