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THE SWALLOW DANCE

By

Kristyn Gerow

B.A. English 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 2018

Advisory Committee:

David C. Kress, Associate Professor of English, Advisor

Steven Evans, Associate Professor of English

Naomi Jacobs, Associate Professor of English

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THE SWALLOW DANCE

By Kristyn Gerow

Thesis Advisor: David C. Kress

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts
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August 2018

The Swallow Dance is a novella which examines the chronically ill body in a moment of crisis. The narrative draws on trauma theory to dissect the main character's reactions to an ill body. Eve, the novella's narrator, is thrust into this space where her mind and body are at a discord because of a chronic illness. As part of her treatment, Eve cannot eat or drink. This destabilizes her from her traumatized body. The farther Eve disassociates from her condition, the more she feels like something is watching her. Then, she is contacted by a messenger from a different place. He persuades her to visit Tortureland as an escape from her hospital room. In Tortureland, Eve can eat, drink, and do whatever she would like, but she must pay a price. Her guest pass to the park has a time limit, and she must choose between the hospital and Tortureland. Eventually, she rejects the "realness" of her hospitalization and trauma in favor of the slightly less traumatizing place. She joins The Tortured and finds her wings for her great escape.

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NAVIGATING THE CHRONICALLY ILL BODY AS A TORTURE-LAND: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

“If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet.

“Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History” –Cathy Caruth

A jarring frame for my fiction occurred after an event in 2011, where I was held hostage by my own body. Diagnosed with Crohn’s Disease some years before, and in the hospital for that reason, I reached the pinnacle moment of my short existence. I was forced into a disturbing intervention while lying on the thin hospital sheets; I realized I had no control over my body and my body had full control over me. We all assume to have a distinct, in tune, and singular identity formed through the marriage between mind and body, but after one month of not being allowed to eat and my life depending on hospital equipment and drugs, I came face-to-face with an *other*, distinct entity. This entity was inflamed, irate, and refused to be reasoned with. Bodies are more than the things that we own and manipulate in everyday life. Bodies are a form of technology, and like the most sophisticated technologies, are primed for malfunction. The body as technology, however, has certain caveats because of the consciousness residing inside of it. Our bodies are not cold, processing machines that help us write papers and text our mothers. Our bodies have desires, appetites, and motives separate than what the self envisions.

From my hospital experience, the idea for my thesis grew. I wanted to narrate the trauma I had encountered partly because the events were primed for fiction, and partly because fiction is primed for cathartic moments. As I discovered, long hospitalizations transform you in both good

and bad ways. I felt like I was a more confident, more appreciative person post-hospitalization, but at the expense of my sanity and twenty pounds. I started researching how to discuss trauma and I came across Debra Jackson's *Answering the Call: Crisis Intervention and Rape Survivor Advocacy as Witnessing Trauma*. While Jackson's article focuses on rape survivors and ways to support them, she details how traumatic experiences are negotiated by the individual:

Psychological trauma is a normal response to acute or ongoing dangerous and/or life-threatening events. Whereas ordinary experiences are easily integrated into one's experiential landscape, traumatic experiences are not. Instead, they are experienced in fragmentary ways. The disaster or violence overwhelms the person's ability to understand and cope with the events. Helpless in the face of death or serious bodily injury, one's ordinary adaptive human responses to danger are insufficient, stretched, overwhelmed, disorganized. A person experiences traumatic events not in a direct, unmediated manner, but indirectly, through its subsequent aftershocks. (206)

Eve, the main character, experiences many of the coping mechanisms that Jackson describes. Her body has a nerve triggering tingle that starts when she is uncomfortable. She also spaces out in the middle of conversations to literally avoid what's going on, and she loses her conception of time.

She also undergoes a splitting of herself, much like Jackson discovered after speaking with rape victims and victims of attempted murder. One of the women Jackson talked to described her identity after experiencing her trauma "as simultaneously an 'official' self and

‘scarecrow’ self: one bright, independent, confident, and ambitious, the other ‘an unacknowledged, angry, aggrieved shadow...’ (208). Eve’s trauma mostly surrounds her chronic illness, Crohn’s Disease, and the ways she is treated for the disease. Her main course of treatment revolves around her not being able to eat or drink anything. The longer she is hospitalized, the more the treatment affects her. Her treatment also includes a five A.M. check where the nurses do their rounds to all the patients, giving out medicines and checking patient statistics/wellbeing. This time of day becomes very stressful for Eve, and she starts feeling a presence in her room around five every morning. *The Swallow Dance* opens with her waiting for the creature to come:

Most of the time, I feel the manifestation of five a.m. before it shadows the clock. My body will be resting when a magnetic tongue licks my face. Goosebumps form on the trail where it’s saliva greases my skin. My body, more accurately described as the meat suit that holds me captive, breaks out in hives. I’ve been conditioned to the dawn-creatures touch. It wants me awake. It wants me to be sweaty, salty, and ready. (1)

The creature doubles as her anxiety about her rapid deterioration, both mentally and physically. Throughout the piece, she feels the presence of the creature lurking near her in the hospital and in Tortureland, but she never actually sees it. The creature reinforces Jackson’s findings because the shadow character, the creature in Eve’s case, further fragments the traumatized individual from the actual events taking place, even so far as damaging her sense of personhood (208).

Some other large elements I had to grapple with in my thesis were: what kind of a place was Tortureland, and, why might Eve choose to stay in Tortureland over the real world? I went about solving this question by setting up a dichotomy between the hospital and Tortureland. The hospital functions as a constraining place, where most of Eve's agency has been stripped away. Originally, I envisioned Tortureland as the lost garden of Eden, because it had the feel of a very old and forgotten place that was full of knowledge for those who knew how to find it. Tortureland became a place where most earthly desires could be fulfilled quickly and easily, whereas the hospital was a place of waiting and suffering. Rules that bind people in the real world were not applicable to them in Tortureland. For example, hospitalized Eve is restricted to a no food diet (called NPO) and has to depend on vitamins intravenously. When she crosses over into Tortureland, however, she enjoys a buffet of food without bodily consequences.

Another endeavor I had while crafting my thesis was to build the physical landscape of Tortureland. I came across a chapter from Joseph E. Duncan's *Milton's Earthly Paradise* which helped assemble the skeleton of Tortureland. Duncan details that the concept of Eden existed in many mythic traditions predating the Christian view, therefore subjecting it to many revisions before Milton's telling (9). The early Hebrews, for example, envisioned Eden "as a disc arising from the waters. Paradise itself was an enclosed garden, or at best a park. And, most important, there is no original righteousness, no original sin, and no Satan" (13). This description became influential when I thought of the mechanics of the world. From Duncan's description, I liberally interpreted 'park' to mean an amusement park like I visited in my youth. Something of a Disney World or Busch Gardens. Tortureland has three main destinations (Oceanworld, Tortureland Proper, and Boneworld) each filled with rides, shows, and shops. Visitors, called 'patrons' in the

piece, need a ticket in order to enter. Tortureland was a utopian vision mixed with agency: if you want it, you can have it in Tortureland.

John Milton's descriptions of Eden from *Paradise Lost* also factored into Tortureland's as a setting. Tortureland has its own combination of beautiful trees and greenery, ripe fruits, and a blue sky. Milton's Eden has one gate guarded by angels. Tortureland is bordered by a wall that has three entrance gates: one at Boneworld, Tortureland Proper, and Oceanworld respectively (in the novella we do not see the Oceanworld gate). Originally, Tortureland acted much like Milton's conceptualizations of Eden as a paradise:

Witness this new-made world, another Heaven
 From Heaven-gate not far, founded in view
 On the clear hyaline, the glassy sea;
 Of amplitude almost immense, with stars
 Numerous, and every star perhaps a world
 Of destined habitation; but thou knowest
 Their seasons: among these the seat of Men,
 Earth, with her nether ocean circumfused,
 Their pleasant dwelling-place" (Book 7, 617-625).

In the early drafts, Eve was completely complicit and happy when she is lead into Tortureland. She didn't question the world and how it was connected to her world, which became a problem. I realized that these Miltonian elements were all well and good, but a perfect world, Eden-like version of Tortureland, did not introduce conflict to the piece. If I had kept

Tortureland as is was, a place where every happiness was available to the patrons, the question of Eve choosing to stay in the hospital or choosing to stay in Tortureland would be simple: she would choose Tortureland. But, that was too obvious of a storyline, so I made Tortureland have a underbelly. Yes, most whims could be fulfilled in Tortureland, but it was only a temporary place. Returning to the three gates, I wanted to make the ability to enter Tortureland exclusive, dependent on having a ticket or being given a guess pass.

In my fiction, my character's identities encounter a nuanced positioning of the body as alien, distinct, and disjunctive in a variety of ways. For Eve, this positioning occurs when her hospitalization traumatizes her sense of self. *The Swallow Dance* places Eve into this space where mind and body are at a discord which forces her to reject the "realness" of her traumatized body, in favor of another place called *Tortureland*, which could arguably isn't any better. *The Swallow Dance* provides me the catharsis as the author and as a chronically ill people person, but, in Eve's case, a partial catharsis is achieved at the expense of a fully cathartic moment, but I'll let you read to find out how that plays out.

CHAPTER 1

Most of the time, I feel the manifestation of five a.m. before it shadows the clock. My body will be resting when a magnetic tongue licks my face. Goosebumps form on the trail where it's saliva greases my skin. My body, more accurately described as the meat suit that holds me captive, breaks out in hives. I've been conditioned to the dawn-creatures touch. It wants me awake. It wants me to be sweaty, salty, and ready. I think one day it will consume me if I'm not awake when it comes; if I'm not on high alert, it may take an arm off. I sigh, turning over on the gurney. I know I will have another sleepless night followed by another unavoidable daybreak séance, summoning the creature. My eyes search the darkness for its apparition, but it's hard to keep them open.

White lie ward, I think, succumbing to the weight of my eye lids. I read somewhere that in WWI or WWII, the hospital ward that held the dying patients was called the white lie ward. Soldiers whose injuries were too grave for saving were sent there. They received loving treatment, the "sweeties" and the "dears" and drugs, from a pretty nurse, before they died in the night, or on the surgeons table. I've gathered by now—it's been a week and a half since my admission— that it will not be my illness that ushers me into death, but, more likely, it will be the creature. I've also gathered that the nurses know better than to call the ward by it's true name.

CHAPTER 2

I add a motion with my hands to further illustrate what I'm saying. Staring at shoulder level, I sweep them downward like I'm brushing something off my shirt. "My shits are like a flash flood."

"*Chiquita!*" My mother only uses her native tongue only for pet names or when she's mad. This time I think it means both. She pushes her purse strap higher up on her shoulder and tightens her lips. I'd asked her to wait in the lobby while I had my preliminary evaluation, but she wouldn't have it. Her foot taps out a record of her nervousness. I reminded her that I was an adult, capable of being in charge of my own medical needs. She replied that I would always be her *little bird* before positioning herself in the chair closest to the hospital gurney.

The doctor—whose name I've already forgotten—looks uneasy, but smiles. Since he'd entered the screening room that my mother and I had been told to wait in, his eyes won't stay open. They shut each time he has to answer one of my mother's thousand questions. Maybe he was one of those types that couldn't think while making eye contact. Maybe it was my mother's tears that she hastily dabs at with tissues

While the doctor fields my mother's questions, a tiny fist waves around a letter opening in my innards. It lacerates my colonies of villi as it travels from my navel to my pelvis. I can't help moaning. I am fairly certain I didn't, but did I swallow a razor blade this morning? How am I going to explain this?

"It's quite alright, Mrs. Gaspard," he addresses my mother and not me, handing her a box of tissues. He swivels in his exam stool to reach the hand sanitizer on the counter.

"I—um, is there a gastroenterologist I can talk to?" I ask, another slash is happening underneath my bellybutton. If I said 'my shits are like a flash flood' to a gastroenterologist they

would think it's poetry. They love that shit. The more description the better. I could tell them how the floods aren't confined to the wet spring months, but occur at random and violently during all seasons. The deluges decimate the colon flora that constantly try to resettle their home. This Emergency Room doctor doesn't seem like he wants the rest of the imagery, but the ache is now a pain. I wish a flood would strike. The flora would be sacrificed, their shanty town demolished, but I'd have some measure of relief. I started to carry around maxi pads for when I thought a flood might breach my sphincter.

I slip one of my hands underneath my shirt. My stomach is hot. I apply light pressure to the smarting area. Pain radiates from my touch, which helps me focus on feeling the pain, but not showing it. As my fingers press deeper into my gut, I relax my eyebrows. Unclench my jaw. I've become very good at this: feeling the pain but not showing it. I call it my glass face.

I want nothing more than to crawl in my bed at home, sip a cup of chamomile tea, and waiting for it all to pass. But I'd complained too much to my mother tonight. She insisted I be seen right away.

"There won't be any gastros until the morning," he says. His eyes notice my hand under my shirt. Both him and my mother stay silent, giving me the chance to speak.

"Well, like I said before, things usually just...flow, but I haven't been able *to go* in two days." My hand grips the pocket of fat surrounding my bellybutton. I'm no longer in pain. I'm in agony. There is some kind of buildup underneath my bellybutton. The flora must be revolting. Perhaps, they built a dam in my duodenum. I feel my brow start to sweat.

"Let's just have a feel," he says.

I don't want to but I lay back on the crinkly, protective gurney paper. He starts by listening to my lungs. He comments that my heart is beating fast. Asks if I'm in pain. I lie and

say *not too bad, just a dull ache*. Then he asks to lift up my shirt to palpate my stomach. I look at my mother. She's mouthing *Padre Nuestro* with one hand threaded in her afro.

The snap of the doctor's gloves startles me. He begins massaging the soft areas between my ribs, moving downward. I want to snap one of the gloves against his crinkled face because he is making my façade crack. I lick at the sweat mustache that must be visible to his eyes now.

"Everything feel alright here? And here?"

I nod my head, but I thinking about decking him.

He keeps moving downward. I shut my eyes partially so I don't have to watch his condescending nods, but mostly because I'm in excruciating pain. He kneads the area around my bellybutton. I hold on for as long as I can. My hand connects with his face.

CHAPTER 3

The white lie ward wakes up precisely at five a.m. Not that it ever falls asleep. A multitude of patients have to be tapped into at night. A few worker drones must be present at all times to monitor the machines. They slip into my room when my eyes are shut, but I'm not sleeping. They buzz around my IV pole, flicking and adjusting my dosages before departing. They have to hold their more invasive, daily inspections until morning. Until five a.m.

Just before five a.m., I walk the halls, trying to escape the hour. The nurses tell me I need to walk at least once a day so I don't get blood clots in my legs. I think it's an excuse to search my room for sharp objects. Today, I wake at quarter to five and throw on my blue robe and treaded socks. My skin had started to pickle in anticipation of the creature anyways. The creature that paws and pins me like I'm a broken-winged swallow, holding me captive for enjoyment. Occasionally it lets me beat a functional wing, but it does not bite my neck to end my struggling. Irritated that I have to leave my bed-gurney to avoid the creature, I pull my charging IV's plug from the wall to ready it for a walk.

The ward is laid out in a *T*. The main hallway has the nurses station in the exact middle, and off to its side is the second hallway. My walking circuit is down each corridor once and a loop back. I use my IV pole as a walking stick. A shield. A half dozen bags of poison and sustenance hang from the top. As I tiptoe, their plastic ports and drip chambers bump and clink, making more noise than I intend. My eyes shift around the swinging bags, looking for other eyes.

Usually I avoid walking around when it's noisy because people like to talk to me. People whose opinions or comments I don't want, but they volunteer them anyways. It must make them feel better, or in an effort to have better karma, to tell a sick girl to *Pep up* or *Feel better soon*. I pull the thin hospital robe tighter around me. I keep my eyes on the walls.

The walls are a lime green color that burns my retinas. I wonder who decides the color to paint hospital walls and what their issue is. It reminds me of the stomach bile I puke up every few hours. The florescent lights that remain on in the hallways 24/7 vivify the color. I start to feel nauseous. I question why I left my bed. I remember that it's almost five a.m. I lower my eyes.

I hear the nurse's station before I see it. The beeping of the med room's pin pad and hushed voices reverberate off the lime walls.

"Well look who it is!" An exuberant, apple-faced nurse calls out. I know her name is Kathy but I pretend I don't hear her. Another nurse working at the station looks up. It's Monica.

"Sweetie, you are looking good this morning!"

My lips press into a scowl as I scuttle along.

"Get that blood pumping, girl. You got this!"

I try not to frown, but I can't fucking stand their cheerleader voices. They don't use those same tones when they are sedating me, so I know it's all fake. Aren't they concerned they are going to wake up everyone else? Well, it's almost five a.m., so they probably don't care. I hide from their comments behind my bags and IV pole as I pass in front of the nurse's station and turn down the first corridor. I hate that I'll have to pass the nurse's station again to complete my circuit.

CHAPTER 4

Weight: 121
Blood Pressure: 122/84
Temperature: 97.9°F
Pulse: 81

I'm not interested in my stats but the morning nurse is perfectly on time, a crisp five a.m., to take them. Always taking. They don't even ask anymore. This will be the twenty-first day, give or take a few days, of five a.m. wake ups. It's also my seventh day without real food. The gastrologist assigned to me called this a restriction. Apparently, patients can have dietary restrictions that range from no sugar for the diabetics, or patients with allergies have those foods as a restriction. My restriction, however, was called NPO. *Nil per os*. Nothing by mouth. My damsel gut needed a break from the food-dragon wasn't exactly how it was explained to me, but I like to think of it like this. In this telling, it leaves room for a savior. Or escape. For one day, I was allowed a veggie broth to cushion the shock. The broth, more like a tablespoon of salt in a bowl of hot water, was brought to me three times; my last breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Then I was on *full rest*, NPO.

Let me be clear, there is nothing restful about being NPO. By the third or fourth day without any nutrition, I couldn't sleep. Or maybe it's that I don't want to sleep because I dream of ice-cream mountains, lobster roll swing sets, and skyscraper sticks of butter being cut by a knife the size of a car. My body also reminds me I'm not eating. A survival instinct has been triggered like I stumbled over a trip wire. And, if I don't eat, a grenade will go off. My ears hear oven-timers dinging when cellphones ping. My stomach war-cries when meal carts roll by. Objects in my room have started to resemble food. I even put the t.v. remote in my mouth the other day. For a second, it was a corndog. The next second, a piece of plastic.

They don't let me completely starve. The food substitute comes in a bag prepped for the IV. My first day NPO, a new bag was added to my other IV medicines. They call it TPN but don't explain what TPN stands for. It's a milky white color that the nurse who hung the bag called 'a liquefied big mac' for your vein. If she'd been closer to me when she said it, I probably would have slapped her. Even with TPN, however, I was told low blood sugar is expected. That I would feel woozy from time to time, maybe even hallucinate. I thought that was nonsense until the remote thing. I mean, they can't let totally starve.

The nurse types my stats results into her electronic charting system before pulling a syringe from her breast pocket. I flinch when her fleshy, tenderloin fingers make contact with my inner arm. She feels around my breadstick for a vein.

"Time for a quick draw, dear." She says.

She misses the long bean on her first attempt. I try not to tense up but I'm upset. I can see the long, greenish-blue legume under my skin clear as day. She feels around for another spot to prick. After two more attempts, she gets a return. She grunts as my Bordeaux climbs up the chamber of the needle. I wish that I could drink it. Return the liquid back to my body even though it wouldn't help my hunger. She puts it in a take-out bag labeled BIOHAZARD in bright orange.

"How are you feeling today, my dear?" she asks.

"Like escargot."

CHAPTER 5

It all started with garlic. And oregano. Basil. Parsley. Thyme. A pinch of nutmeg.

The aroma floats in the air while I'm out walking with my IV. I normally try to avoid walks during the lunch hour because something funny has happened to my senses. I haven't eaten in I cannot recall how long. In the meantime, my nose has been in hyper drive.

Transplanted with a bloodhound's. Even with the door to my room closed, I pick up the minute traces of smells. The latex of precautions gowns. The body odor of the janitor who avoids eye contact with me as he mops around my hospital bed. My mother's perfume a full two minutes before she enters my room.

But today it's pasta sauce almost similar to what my mother would make. I could never remember the recipe even though she taught me it multiple times. But now I can recall the ingredients with an acute sharpness: tomato paste, garlic, tomatoes, onion, basil, oregano, salt, pepper, and a pinch of sugar.

I watch—with my IV pole tucked closely by my side—from behind a corner as a dietitian pushes around a lunch cart to the other rooms on the floor. My bristled nose leads me. She hasn't noticed me ducking and weaving in the hallways, following the cart's scent like an unattended BBQ grill. I stalk her until there are only two dinner trays left on her cart. We are now in my wing. Only three doors from my room. I have to wipe at my jowls when she opens a cloche, revealing the meat sauce, pasta, dinner roll, sprig of parsley, and a golden packet of butter. My black eyes fix on the Land O'Lakes. I'd always had a fondness for butter. The little packet gleams like a gold brick. She checks over the meal before taking it into the room.

When she's out of sight, I make my move. I try not to squeal as I burst from the empty doorway where I've been lurking. My treaded socks mute my advance. I pounce on the cart in a

few fevered steps. I don't check my surroundings. I don't care who sees. I toss the cloche to the side. The steam wafts in my face. It smells like heaven. A little, orgasmic moan threatens my stealth mission. I shift my IV pole to my left hand so I can pick up the plate with my right. I walk as quick as I can, as delicately as a power walk will allow, balancing the spaghetti plate and my IV.

The shouting starts right as I'm about to enter my room. I ignore the high pitched cries. I use my foot to kick open my door and again to slam it behind me. I set the plate down on my nightstand. For a half second I think about utensils. Propriety and whatnot. Then I mumble *fuck it* before digging in with my hands.

And it's good. Better than good. I shovel the pasta into my mouth faster than I can chew. Some of it misses and slaps sauce on my cheeks and neck. I don't care. I'm laughing hysterically while chewing. I'm surprised I haven't choked yet. The sauce is nirvana. The pasta, little wriggles of ecstasy. I eat the parsley garnish even though it's only for looks. I tear open the butter packet and lick out the contents. It's the best two licks of my life. I force my tongue into the tight corners of the container before throwing it over my shoulder. Next, I rip into the roll. It's a little dry, but I'm not complaining. I two-finger some sauce into an empty pocket of my cheek to moisten it.

"Put that down now!"

In the doorway is the charge nurse. I think her name is Carol. She's a big breasted, behemoth of a woman. She has a syringe in her hand. Next to her is a security guard. I can tell he is trying not to laugh at the strands of spaghetti hanging from my lips, but he's big, too. Taller than Carol and probably stronger.

I deliberate for a second. What could they really do if I kept going? I think. They must understand what I'm going through? We all wait for the other to move. My eyes flick from Carol to the security guard. Then, I take a handful another handful of pasta and shove it in my mouth.

“Sedate her.”

As they approach, I try to cram as much of the meal in the direction of my mouth. I the strong arms of the security guard wrap around me, suppressing my efforts. I manage to turn around in his grasp and spit some spaghetti in his face. He's not smiling now.

“Hold her good!” Carol says.

I feel the needle enter my buttocks then I'm being forced into my bed. The drowsiness starts to weigh my limbs down. I think briefly that the only good part of this scenario is that my mother isn't here. She'd have a heart attack if she saw the wild animal that had replaced her daughter.

I resist falling asleep, but my eyes shut. I grab onto either Carol's or the guard's arm. All of my strength concentrates on squeezing the arm. I want them to know it was worth it. That I took something for myself.

The pressure is answered by a sympathetic hushing.

My hand loses strength. The flimsy bed sheet is pulled to my chin. Hands stuff the sheet under my legs and arms, making me into a sedated burrito.

I sigh against the weight of the drugs. I mumble-slur *fuck you* until I pass out.

CHAPTER 6

It must be five a.m. because I'm being woken up. It's a hard transition from the relative darkness of sleep to focusing on something. All the lights are off except the one over the door. It casts the fuzzy blob approaching me into silhouette.

I shut my eyes again. I can hear the squeaking tires of the stats machine as it's being rolled toward me. I pull an arm from underneath my blanket cocoon. It will be needed for inspection. The pressure cuff is slipped on but doesn't fill. I open my eyes to see what the delay is because the sooner she is done the more sleep I can get before my mother's daily, morning visit.

Yesterday, while brushing my hair, she asked me what I did when she wasn't there. I tried to think of something but couldn't. Not really. I didn't turn on the TV anymore because it had too many McDonalds and Taco Bell commercials. Anything I tried to read I didn't absorb. My mom brought me magazines with my favorite celebs, , but shortly after reading I would find myself staring off at the wall. My walks were the most exciting thing I did each day, but I either hid behind my IV pole or went late at night to avoid people. Instead, I told her things I that made impressions on me but that I couldn't fully place where I'd seen or heard them: spotlights, chipped teacups, the sound of jiffy pop, laughing voices.

The nurse, who I do not recognize, grunts. The pressure cuff fits almost twice around my arm. Velcro rips as she replaces the adult size with the child-size cuff. Perfect fit. While it fills with air, she motions for me to open my mouth. My lips are stuck together and the bottom lip cracks as I release them. I lick at the blood before she places the thermometer under my tongue. My blood doesn't have a metallic taste like it should. Or how books describe blood tasking.

Oddly, it tastes like diluted pomegranate juice. My tongue maneuvers around the thermometer to taste the substance again.

The stats machine catches my attention as it beeps and flashes my statistics.

Blood Pressure: 119/80

Temperature: 97.6°F

Pulse: 73

She writes them down on a sticky note and turns the bed scale on. I can't see what it says so I ask her. I guess she forgot that I know how to speak because she startles a bit.

“Oh, uh, you've lost a few pounds. But you know these scales are plus or minus a few in accuracy.”

I don't push her for the number. The last time I looked in a mirror only my eyes were familiar. Sharp lines replaced my full cheeks, chin, and nose. I don't think today is a good day to know how much of myself I've lost.

She fishes a syringe from her pocket, then scrubs a bruised patch of skin with alcohol. Thankfully, she lucks out with one try.

CHAPTER 7

Time functions as a series of clicks especially before five a.m. The clicks sound different to every person, but everyone has one. Sometimes it's the plain ole metronome rocking back and forth. Sometimes it's the taunting beep of the microwave that heats up a coworker's beef chow mien.

Some people don't hear their clicks. These are lucky people. Because after a while of noticing your clicks, something happens. In between those clicks—those tiny fragments of sectioned space—stuff starts filling up. Pushing the click to the limit. Making you uncomfortable. You realize this isn't what you wanted to cram that click with, stretching it till it bursts.

But now that click is gone and another ones coming.

I walk to the elevator and think about escape.

It's not five a.m. but I'm awake. I'm always awake now. I'm the test rat with radioactive piss. They measure anything that comes out of my body, or they force it out. My piss. My blood. My spit.

They monitor what goes in too. Still, nothing by mouth. Not anymore. Not in the foreseeable future. Occasionally, a swig of water when my mouth is especially dry. The hard itch which makes the itching worse.

CHAPTER 8

An elusive, knock-kneed, but definitely measurable amount of time goes by. I stare at my hands but can't see them. Five a.m. must be approaching. I wiggle them to see if I'm looking at the right place.

I'm surprised my limbs still communicate with my brain. The brain. The center of everyone's nervous system, but it's not where my nerves are. Most of the time they are stored in my IV pole, bags of sugar water, antipsychotics, my treaded socks, but when five a.m. claims it's hour, I awaken with tiny sparks in my limbs which combine into a sub-dermis tingle. I feel it in my toes, in my fingers, my arms, my throat. The spark wants me to do something. At first I thought it was in response to the five a.m. monster, but the sensation comes at all hours now. I clench my teeth and cross my arms over my chest. I ignore the sensation the best I can.

My body parts are arranged like stacked kindling in the dark. No fat reserves, just kindling with skin stretched across bone waiting to be set on fire, a fire that could warm me up or provide some light. It wouldn't be a big fire. Not really. My reserves have shriveled away during this undetermined time. I'm cold-blooded now, relying on two quilts my mother bought for warmth, and somehow I missed my own transition into an amphibian. Maybe I could find something to eat. I checked the hall...well, I checked some time ago for the food cart, but the nurses are much better about giving me a bump of antipsychotic for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I sniff the air of my room. Nothing expect plastic and metal.

Its dark. I can't tell if my eyes have been open this whole time or have I been staring at the back of my eyelids. I'm not rested so I guess I've been staring. Every few seconds my IV pole beeps, reporting that its running on schedule. Its sound like the tiny ping that you hear when getting on an elevator, perhaps more annoying like the headset ping of a fast food worker when

someone pulls up to the drive-thru. But this pinging never stops. It's my ping now. It overlaps with my heartbeat. It reminds me that everything outside my carcass is working smoothly. I wonder if I knocked the IV pole over would it stop? I'm about to push the machinery to the ground but spot my cathetered hand. It reminds me that I'm connected to the damn thing. That the damn thing was keeping me alive.

"Fine," I mutter aloud, conceding back into my quilts. I need to remember to request ear buds from my mother.

I crush my finger and thumb into my eye sockets. This style of circular motions is supposed to be a massage. It's a pressure point technique someone told me about but I've definitely forgotten the steps. I've forgotten how to be gentle. I force the stress back into the technique. Little explosions, maybe fireworks, burst in my brain. Too much pressure applied by my fingertips...bursting like balls of Dippin Dots rainbow ice cream.

I use my other hand to stop the rubbing one from scooping my eyes out. My fingers have a mind of their own. It's the weirdest reality. In a place with no time and a body that does not work, it makes sense. So many things have stopped making sense that everything makes sense. Things that were possible, now impossible. The impossible, now possible. As I become weaker, my body becomes more independent of me. Why shouldn't that make sense? My body wants to survive even if I have given up. What is *sense*?

My index finger jerks in the dark, trying to converse with me. *Touch, sight, smell, taste, hearing.*

Yeah, okay, but I can't see in this darkness or taste with a dry tongue. My throat, a cobwebbed column which no amount of spit keeps lubricated. I feel tingling in my fingers, but as

I touch other things, I only feel vibrations. The tingling in chorus with my IV dinging and, alerting me to my vortex of unmeasurable time. Sense means nothing.

Well, maybe sense means a feeling that something is the case. In that case, how did I become a cold-blooded-skeleton-girl afraid of an hour on the clock?

Well, that's simple, my finger contracts.

How did I lose my ability to speak?

You don't need to speak.

Why do I no longer have a name?

Science experiments and machines don't have real names. Just charts and code names like Sweetie II, Dear 5.0.

How come I no longer use trivial human habits to organize my life?

You don't need that garbage.

Why does life seem less like life and more like hell?

At least hell has temperature control.

The tingling in my fingers intensifies and I press them back into my sockets. Laying my head back the patterns continue...

...but I can hear something. Murmuring.

Tiny vibrating dots speckle the darkness They shift and rearrange in the space between my eyes and lids. Maybe this is happening in my brain. I know that's not quite right. While I can't see where I'm going, the dots dichotomizing into orange and black, my body sways,

moving one foot and then the next. The murmuring gets louder as my vision lightens. For a second I'm blinded by a strobe of light, but then it flicks away casting light on other...people?

A crowd surrounds me. A crowd rushes by me. They're all wearing black. Black top hats and shawls with black fringe or dark jackets. Black hand bags are grasped by black gloves. To my surprise, I am still in my geometrically patterned hospital Johnny. If this were a dream, the bleached smock would be the first thing I would wish away. The white of the garment stands out amongst the black and I try to make the garment change by squeezing my eyes shut. When I open them, the Johnny remains. The people remain.

I try to look at their faces, desperate to ask someone where I am, but they turn away from me. I tap a trench coat on the shoulder and I am shoved away before it turns around. I weave through the crowd, trying to glimpse anyone's face. I'm not sure they have faces, or maybe my eyesight is still fuzzy. Instead of faces, I see blurs. Peoples features bleed into each other like a bad watercolor portrait. I can't confirm this because, the crowd, a flock of swallows, maneuvers away, one fluid body. Every time I lunge at one of them, they create a space for me to fall, then, they reclaim the space that my body just vacated. I lunge. My feet kick up orange dust. I lunge again. Why won't they stop moving? Why won't they help me?

I'm afraid they will sweep me up in their tide. I put my hands on my knees to catch my breath. The mass congeals tighter around me, their bodies creating a human wall with no escape routes. As they slow, they all look in the same direction. East?

CHAPTER 9

The crowd is pulsing. Each person a vibrating atom energized from the heat of chafing jackets. As far as I can tell, I have struggled farther into the mass. It's hot here. Little air. Dusty. And the people definitely don't have faces. I want to scream, but that would attract attention. I want to wake up, but pinching my arm isn't breaking the dream.

The crowd stares at a makeshift platform. The wood looks rickety and worn. Constructed a thousand times, in a thousand different places. A black curtain shields what's behind the platform. It's braced by a chain link fence that towers over the scene. Now that I've noticed it, the chain link fence is the only thing keeping the crowd from bursting past the platform. It must be ten feet tall.

Members of the crowd start making noises. A whistle. A shout. More shouting. Kids voices. Men and women's voices growing louder. From behind the black curtain, a man steps out. He's dressed like everyone else—black top hat, black slacks, black jacket—but he has a white button down underneath his jacket. His collar is popped, the first two buttons unfastened revealing his tufted chest. A thin coating of orange dust colors his shoulders. The brim of his hat shadows his eyes. His lips, however, are painted red. They meld into a smile. I squint to see him better. To make sure he has a real face and not a smudged one. With my eyes narrowed, I can see the features of his face clearly. His smile is actually a grimace.

“Welcome, ladies and gents, to the experience of your lives where confronted with the obscene and sensual, alarming yet beautiful, we find out who we really are.” His voice sounds like he's smoked a pack a day for ten years.

He grabs a rope dangling on the side of the curtain. “This is...” he pulls theatrically on the cord, jumping up and then falling to one knee, “TORTURELAND!”

I can hear the creaking of the gates being opened, but the crowd obstructs my view. They push forward, taking me with them. I fight against the momentum, my heels digging into the dirt. I am part of the crowd by accident. I couldn't even recall how I'd arrived at this place. What is this place? Questions dart around my brain just as much as my hands flail to find a static object. The black river courses forward. None of this makes sense. Where am I?

The crowd's momentum slows as they file through the gate. I'm able to stand still while the others continue in. Butter melting on toast. But I can hear the platform man yelling "settle, settle! There is room for everyone."

For a time, faceless people rush past me.

Only an October-colored dust is left of the crowd. I wade in it. Finally, I can see a pop-up booth with a painted "tickets" sign everyone was rushing towards under the platform. With most of the people through to the other side of the gate, I walk towards it, not fearing the crush of faceless bodies.

I rest my hands on the booth's counter. No one is inside. I realize that I don't have any money anyways...but I've grown more curious about what's beyond the gates. I knock.

"Can I help you?"

I take a step around the booth. The announcer from the platform stands on the other side of the gate. His face dissected by the chain links. As I get closer his wrinkles and scars become more apparent. His brown eyes scrutinize me. A pronounced wrinkle between the brows.

"I said can I help you?"

I find it hard to speak. It's something about the dust, but something else too. The pause that keeps me from yelling...the silence imposed on me...I wonder if the creature will be showing up soon. If this is a dream I could wish the creature away, but my johnny, now coated in dust, reminds me that this can't be a dream. Or at least, this isn't a dream I can control. This must be real. The creature, and its attacks on my sanity, feels real, and this place does too. The dirt. The shoving hands. The grimacing announcer. I try to remember if all my dreams were so uncontrollable.

He clicks his tongue.

"Yes, I was trying to get in..." I croak. The effort to speak creates fissures in my throat. I confine the pain to my throat, like I've perfected in my years of practice. I cannot let the man know how disoriented I am.

He scratches his dusty face. "Do you have a ticket?"

His eyes scale my body. I become self-conscious even though he isn't being invasive. But I can't help but think about what *he* is thinking. Does he see something I don't? Something the others don't? Does he know the pain I'm hiding in my throat? I glance at my tooth pick legs that poke out from my johnny. I concede that the combination of the johnny and my emaciated limbs telegraphs "sick girl" loud and clear.

"I don't have any more admission tickets today. We are at capacity." He grunts. "Besides, this place isn't for you."

My brow wrinkles. "Why can't I purchase a ticket?" Rejection drops me like a dose of night-night-juice from the charge nurse. My fear had turned to curiosity and how was it that out of the entire crowd, there wasn't room for one more person?

He turns and starts to walk away from the gate. “You don’t have the guts, kid.” He says over his shoulder. “Really. You don’t have the guts.”

Minutes before five a.m., I wake up covered in dust and laying on my gurney. I hear the nurses *sweetie-ing* in the room adjacent and I hop out of bed. Like a whirlwind, I put on a fresh johnny and socks, throwing the dirty clothing into the hamper, then, I scrub my orange dusted hands with soap. Hands still wet, I pull the covers over me and shut my eyes.

The nurses buy that I’m asleep. They don’t notice the dirty clothes I’ve just discarded. I let them think that they are taking stats on a sleeping patient.

Weight: 107
Blood Pressure: 118/80
Temperature: 97.9°F
Pulse: 110

“Poor dear,” one of them says. “Look at her pulse. She must be having a nightmare.”

The other one clucks in agreement.

The stats machine is being rolled away from me. I press my lips together so I don’t smile. I hear them opening my door, I’m home free!

“Wait,”

I tense.

“Did you give her the cocktail?”

Shuffling feet come closer.

My mind blanks when I realize I haven’t been hooked to my IV, that I wasn’t hooked to my IV in the dream. IV ports clink as the nurse tries to find the port that feeds into my hand catheter.

The nurse lets out an incredulous noise, a laugh ended with scoff. “We need to talk to the doc about upping her Haldol.”

CHAPTER 10

Just before five a.m., I'm almost to end of the corridor before my leg muscles tighten up and spasm. I've noticed that not eating or drinking for a substantial amount of time has made my stamina turn to shit. Using both hands, I hold the IV pole out in front of me for balance. My mind focuses on reaching the small seating area by the elevators at the end of the hall, but my legs shake and slip like I'm on an ice rink for the first time. I want to cry out, but crying causes too much of a scene. If someone saw me slipping, if even a dietician were to hop of the elevator right now, I'd get busted. Given a sleep cocktail. Monitored for more signs of agitation.

I rely on my treaded socks to keep me up. For a half second I think about yelling down the hall. The nurses would abandon their yogurts and charts and fly around the corner. They'd ask me what's wrong, but the syringe of night-night-juice would be in hand. I know that calling to them would be the easy way out. At least I wouldn't be awake when the five a.m. came around.

But, I decide to struggle. My knees and muscles feel detached from each other. Maybe this is how newborn calves feel when their instincts drive them to stand up. Except, I'm fighting not to fall down. I have to think about walking. I can see the plastic-dipped armchairs opposite the elevator doors, and I steady my eyes on them. My hands are sweaty, making it hard to use the IV pole for balance. I'm close enough that I can see the worn butt marks on the chairs. Just push. Just push. Just...

The pressure of something on my side.

"Whoa, little lady, let me help you out."

I twitch awake. My legs twitch separate from my upper body: the tired muscles tingling as blood re-oxygenates them. I see the large, metal doors of the elevators beyond my IV pole. It pings while it descends to the lower floors. This is my moment, I think. *Escape!* I move my legs. *Escape!* But, my legs won't move. Instead, the bone has been taken out of them. Boneless, I am left with shivering egg noodles.

“You went a lil’ gray for a second.”

My body's twitches coordinate into one violent shudder. I'd been slouched on my side in the extra wide arm chair, with my head and one hip on the seat and my legs straight out. I have to lift my head above the chair arm to see who spoke.

A man sits there, smiling. He has no arms.

I gasp and duck my head out sight. I realize it's rude right after I do it. I know I have to apologize, which seems weird. I haven't had to apologize in a while. Everyone always apologizes to me. Maybe I should say, *I'm sorry I gasped. I'm sorry your lack of arms startled me.* These both seem wrong.

He must think I'm certifiably crazy. I use my IV-free arm to right myself. I adjust my Johnny and robe before looking at him, trying to assemble some dignity. I take him in with my eyes. He's got dark hair that is tossed about his head. His nose is a little too long, a little too round at the point. A flat topped hat rests on his knee. He isn't wearing a blue volunteer's vest, only black slacks, a white tee, and a black blazer with the sleeves almost entirely cut off. He's staring at me with a wide toothed smile, waiting. He tilts his head.

“I'm sor-“

“Hey, hey, no need to thank me. How ye feeling?” His eyes crinkle at the edges like he’s going to laugh. Like they have a joke in them that he’s not telling. Maybe he’s a shrink or a case worker.

“Do you work here?” I ask defensively.

“Does that matter?” He has a slight accent that I can’t place. Somewhere between Clint Eastwood and cowboy.

I try to keep my emotions from my face, but I narrow my eyes. He’s goofy looking in an off-brand, Willy Wonka way. He doesn’t have a white jacket on, or a name badge, so he can’t be a doctor or lab tech. I need to know his affiliations before I can say anything else. I watch his eyebrows for signs that he might dash to the nurse’s station.

We sit staring at each other for a bizarre moment.

“I’m a volunteer of sorts,” he says giving in. “Is that good enough?”

“A volunteer?”

“Of sorts.”

He seems too young to care about volunteering at a hospital. Most of the volunteers I’ve come into contact with are bored Grandmas who like to corner you and talk about their bazillion grandchildren. This whole situation—me staring an armless man who won’t tell me who he is—seems dubious. Me, shivering. Him, staring. It’s more awkward than an CNA taking an anal temp, and I decide I would rather be back in my quiet, dark room. I try to stand again. I get a few inches off the cushion before my legs give out.

“Oh, hey, hold up! I told you that you went gray for a second. I had to kick your fainting body into that there chair—”

A sore spot on my side pangs, adding credibility to his story. I look down at his feet. He's wearing makeshift shoes that are mostly a sole with a two tattered straps on the top. Bulging veins circumnavigate around his large, bouldered toe knuckles. Some of the protruding joints have callouses stacked on top, adding to their bulk. His toes are dirty. Covered in an orange dust that makes them look like Cheetos snacks. His nails, however, are clean and short. The roughness of his feet's appearance doesn't surprise me. I guess they are appendages of double duty—or every duty. While he speaks, his toes animate. They tap against the leather soles, doing a little Cheetos dance, spreading and contracting back together. I think about how some people talk with their hands.

“Have you been listening?”

I twitch. It's the second time he's caught me looking like an ass. My face gets hot.

He shifts in his seat. “I asked if ye wanted to see something.” He juts his chin toward the elevator.

Escape!

“Um,” his azurite eyes are locked on mine, waiting. My mind flicks through the possible consequences. Nurses. Explanations. Reports. Lockdown.

“Sure—“

His feet tap a little beat before one foot slips out of his shoes to take the hat off his knee. He bends forward at the waist to meet his foot. Precisely as the top of his head lines up with his hat, his toe knuckles release.

“Excellent!” His leg flicks back underneath him and he jumps up from his chair. I watch as he strides over to the elevator and smacks the down arrow with a sole. He walks a little strangely: leading with his hips—

“You’ve got to quit giving me those boss eyes,” he laughs and I notice that his shoulders roll too. “Let’s go!” he says.

I use my IV pole as leverage to get to my feet. The cold metal of my IV reminds me I’ve got a plus one appendage. I start to feel anxious. I look over my shoulder.

“If you’re worried about appearances, we can pop off and get you some different clothes first.” He says.

I nod my head but I’m not worried about my Johnny. If anything, the hospital garment would make me invisible a little while longer as I navigate an escape route out of the hospital. But, I’m unsure of where he is taking me. Then, it occurs to me that I might have to overpower him to make my escape. His plans might be to lead me to his friend who abducts me, then later dumps my body in a back alley devoid of its kidneys. Could I, in my diminished state, overpower an armless man?

The elevator pings. He walks in and turns around. I start to cross the threshold, pushing my IV in first, and stop. I turn my head to scout the hallway once more. I couldn’t be connected to my IV if I wanted to attempt escape. Mimicking the numerous times I’d seen the nurses disconnect me from my IV to change the tubing, I press the “pause” button and cinch the clamps on the extension tubing. A ten-inch tail of the catheter dangles. I loosely wind the tubing around my hand so it doesn’t dangle.

I move a little quicker. I pull my IV pole over to a fake tree in the corner. Using both hands, I pull the tree from its position, place my IV pole as far in the corner as I can, and scoot the tree in front of it. I give it a fluff before making a bee line into the elevator.

“Ballsy,” he moves his leg from blocking the door. “You never mentioned your name. I’m Music Man, but my friends call me Muse.” The door closes.

CHAPTER 11

I can feel my neck twist to look at him. What have I done? This man is *crazy*. He cannot possibly be a volunteer. *Music Man*? No way. I instantly regret unhooking from my pole, leaving the ward. I can't possibly tell him my real name. I'm not convinced he isn't affiliated with the hospital. A fake name would do for the short duration that we were in the elevator. I try to think of something. My mind flicks back to a crucifix that I saw hanging on a wall.

"Eve," I hear myself blurt. "You can call me Eve."

The elevator comes to a halt. It opens to the lobby. From the elevator, I can see the front doors. I can see the darkness outside giving way to dawn. The yellow-orange chasing the receding night. The front desk cuts off a direct path to the outside, but I don't see any security. A white haired granny twists in her office chair, flipping through a copy of Readers Digest. She wears a blue volunteer's vest. I don't think she hears us because she doesn't look up. Unlike *Music Man*, I'm confident that I could overpower her.

Escape!

Both fists clenched, my extension tubing pulls on the taped catheter embedded in my hand.

"Well," he swings a leg waist high and sweeps it around so his toes point to the front door. "That's a great way to get transferred to Bedlam, but it's your decision."

He walks out of the elevator and around to the left.

My heart pommels my ribcage. I want to scream. I want to scream and run outside into the crisp, non-hospital air. I could make it if I wanted. The old bird at the front desk wouldn't be able to catch me. I could tear out of this prison and into the sun. The volunteer past her prime wouldn't be able to catch me in her beak. Hopefully I could find someone to give me a ride

outside. But that person could be a murderer... with a real name. With actual arms. And how does *Music Man* know that where he's taking me won't result in a non-refundable ticket to the crazy house anyway?

I sigh and turn to the left. He's already half-way down the hall. I walk as fast as I'm able to catch up with him.

"Where are we going?" I ask. We are walking directly towards a set of doors marked *employees only*.

He doesn't answer but kicks one open. I almost run into him when he stops in front of me. Next to us is the small volunteer's office. He looks left and right before walking into it. I wait where I am till he reemerges. On his shoulder is an orange sweatshirt embossed with a middle school logo and a pair of boy's gym shorts.

"Here," he two-steps closer to me, dips his left side, and shimmies the clothes off his shoulder. I struggle to catch them. A funky smell permeates the articles. "These look like they'll fit."

I must have made a noise because he lowers his face to mine.

"Not going to work?" he asks.

I make sure I harrumph before walking into the volunteer office and shutting the door. While I'm not impressed with his selection, I take off my robe and Johnny and put on the sweatshirt and shorts. I spy the lost-and-found box where he got the clothes from. I look for other pants, but everything else in the box seems bigger than what I've got on, and has the same funky smell. While rummaging, I forget to keep my extension tubing wound around my palm. I pull my cathetered hand from the forgotten clothing items. The end of the extension is awkward and pulls something up with it. It's a child's, knit, red mitten with sparkling fibers woven in. The mitten

could keep my extension tubing from being caught by something and tugged. I rewind the tubing around my palm and slip on the covering.

Music Man leans against the opposite wall when I come out. He was humming but stops when he sees my mitten. I wait for a comment. He doesn't say anything. Instead, he pushes off from the wall and for a slow, few steps, I could swear he was moon walking before twisting forward. I scowl at his back.

He stops short in front of the boiler room. I'm confused. Why the *boiler room*? Was this the place where *Music Man's* was told to lead me? Was his friend waiting inside with a steak knife, ready to the dirty work? Part of me wants to run back to my dark room, but part of me thinks death would be easier. The blank nothingness more attractive than the pain meds and nurses and parents and doctors and not eating and the mood stabilizing cocktails.

I think about the different ways an armless man could murder me. His legs are long and a swift kick could do me in: a Chuck Norris roundhouse-style to the temple for the take down, and then a quick stomp to my face. Or maybe he will body slam me against the boiler, breaking my fragile frame, before taking my head in between his Cheetos toes to break my neck.

He swears and turns to me, the door unopened.

I know what he wants. If he wants my consent to kill me, he'll need to ask first.

"Could you..." he taps the door knob with a toe.

Just to be an ass, I jiggle the knob a few times before pushing the door open. He thanks me under his breath and enters the dark room. He didn't tell me to follow, so I wait outside not wanting to be completely complicit in my own murder. His humming fades into the distance.

"Wait!" I whisper-yell in fear of the granny-volunteer hearing. "I thought you were going to murder me?"

His laughter floats back but he doesn't return. I can't say why, but I move to the entrance of the room and feel around the walls for a light switch. Nothing. I take timid steps into the room. I can smell a musty basement scent, but there's something *buttery* about it. I close the door behind me so I don't leave a trace. I take a few more steps. Definitely butter. A few more steps. *Popcorn?* I take a few more steps, this time with my arms outstretched. I expect to run into some pipes or hear the hissing of a boiler. I hear shouting instead. Not panicked screaming, but the kind of shouting you'd hear at the State Fair.

"Hey!" I call out. I try to orient myself by finding a wall or something I might be able to identify with my hands.

"Cold," Music Man says.

I step to the left.

"Colder."

I step to the right.

"Coldest."

If I ever live to see that man again, I'm going to stomp on his toes. Make sure a few digits are broken before walking away.

I stop moving all together.

"Dead ahead."

I lunge forward, hopefully to tackle him, but I push through another door.

CHAPTER 12

I'm blinded by brightness. I start rubbing my eyes, trying to scrub the light fluctuation into my corneas. Popcorn scent invades my nostrils.

"You've arrived perfectly on time." A voice that sounds familiar says, but it's not *Music Man's*. "Welcome to Tortureland."

My eyes try to adjust. The bright light transitions to butter yellow. I can see a tiny bit more when I squint. Two shapes stand in front of a structure that shades them. The air tastes butter yellow too. Pockets of drool form the corners of my mouth.

I approach them with my mitten hand shielding my eyes. The butter yellow lightens into a pastel. As I get closer, I recognize Music Man's shape. I also notice that they are standing in front of a large ticket booths. A ten foot, white, solid gate connects to either of the outside booths, blocking me from seeing much. It reminds me of the theme park entrance where I had my eleventh birthday celebration with my mother, except something was off. I was walking on concrete now, not the speckled hospital tile.

Questions race through my mind. How can this place be connected to the hospital? Am I officially crazy? or did *Music Man* somehow etherize me? How did I get to this place? *Music Man* and this other guy are going to kill me? Will this person only use their feet too? I try to keep my emotions from my face like I do when I'm in pain. I will help if they don't know how afraid I am. It also helps that they only have one pair of thumbs between the two of them.

My vision clear, the men are in front of one of four booths. Colored light bulbs and trims decorate the cubicles, but I can see the cracks in the paint. The plastic signage for acts and prices is peeling and unreadable. I try to read some writing but can only make out the words

amusement, paradise, and blood. More than a few light bulbs flicker like they are about to go out.

Almost to them, my eyes vivisect the person next to Music Man. It's another man, but he has a large handlebar mustache and a top hat. His lips are tinted with red lipstick that's been chewed off except the outer line of his mouth. I cannot help staring. He looks uncannily familiar. The expression on his face says that he recognizes me too. His eyes narrow like he's trying to place me. A flock of jackets and orange dust flit through my brain.

It wasn't a dream? This man, the same from before, proof that my nightmare of faceless people was not a hallucination. Should I tell him that I remember him. That he wouldn't allow me in last time. My gaze shifts from the handlebar-mustache Houdini to the dark-horse Willy Wonka. Why had Music Man brought me here? Why had he brought me to this man? I decide not to announce my previous encounters with the other man. Instead, I cross my hands over my chest to appear sure of myself.

"What is this place? A sex dungeon?" I ask.

Both men laugh. The man with the mustache removes his hat, revealing his stretch of a comb over. "This ain't no *daddy's* Tortureland," he says, his arm motioning behind him. "This is a place of obscene refinements, alarming beauties, and sensual snacks. A place to find out what you're made of." Music Man nods his head in agreement. "I'm the curator, Mr. Ballyhoo, or as my friends call me, Mr. Bally, or Mr. Hoo. Or B.H., or Mr. Daylight—"

More carnival screams. I peep around the men to see where the screaming originates from. In the distance I can see a Ferris wheel, concession stands, other strange buildings and rides. I can hear what sounds like a rushing of a water in between the shrieks. The road behind them forks in three directions. There is also a dimly lit directional sign just past the booths that

looks better maintained than the front gate signage. I can't make it what it says from outside the gate. A butter popcorn scent rolls on a light breeze.

"I thought you were going to murder me." I say with my focus on the sign. I walk closer to the entrance, temporarily forgetting that these men might still go after my kidneys.

Music Man moves out of my way so I can walk past him. "Like I said earlier, a place to get away for a while. But I don't think you were listening to me when I said it."

I'm almost through the shaded booths to the other side, when my upper arm is grabbed. I jerk violently. The only human contact for however long I'd been hospitalized had been 'medical professionals' with their latex hands and needle fingers. It's Mr. Ballyhoo. His mouth is open, yellowed teeth bared, but his lips stretch back into his cheeks. The same pseudo smile from the platform. The expression looks painful. From this distance, I can also see that his eye wrinkles have grease in them. Perhaps it's leftover stage paint, but it makes him look much older. More sinister. His mustache is greased too. This time it's definitely purposeful. The ends twisted into curls.

"You have to have a ticket," he says releasing my arm. His voice is friendly, but low like a warning.

I frisk myself like I am searching for a wallet, forgetting my lost-and-found get-up was the only thing I brought with me. I think about offering my mitten, but then I think about my IV tubing under my mitten and decide that's not a good idea. I start to laugh. This is all too much. The mitten. Mr. Bally or Mr. Hoo. Music Man. *Tortureland*. I also laugh because I have no desire to be back where I was before this. In my dark hospital room, a sentinel for the creature every morning. I laugh so hard my dry throat feels like it's peeling. I cough-laugh.

Music Man looks disturbed, but turns to Mr. Ballyhoo. “What about a guest pass, B.H.? I haven’t given one out in a while. I think she deserves one.” His shoulders wiggle slightly like he has more to say.

Mr. Ballyhoo’s eyes stay on me but his head twists in Music Man’s direction. I’m afraid his neck might snap. At the last second, the rest of him rotates to meet his head. He mutters ‘guest pass, guest pass’ while opening the side of the closest booth. I can hear him rummaging for something. He emerges with his hands behind his back. I notice Music Man take a step closer to me like he might act as a human shield. Aren’t they on the same page about my kidneys?

Mr. Ballyhoo approaches, hand behind his back. Maybe this is the end.

“How ‘bout this?” I flinch a little as he presents his hand. Inside is a ticket and tape measure. The tape measure catches my eye. It’s not the metal kind carpenters use, but a flexible seamstress one. I recognize it because my mother used a similar one to make my power ranger, witch, unicorn, and pumpkin Halloween costumes.

I look at Music Man in confusion. His face is sullen. It’s the first time I’ve seen him without his foolish grin.

“How is that a guest pass?” I ask.

Mr. Ballyhoo stops an arms-length away from me and holds out the ticket. “This’ll get you around,” I grab the ticket and put it in my shorts pocket. “But I want to see what you’re made of.” His eyes rake over me. I want to know what he is looking for. He shrugs his shoulders. “You in?”

In my periphery, I see Music Man’s shimmying shoulders, but he is silent. I reach out to take the offered measuring tape. Mr. Ballyhoo pulls his hand back.

“Allow me.” He directs me to lift my arms out to my sides. Skillfully he wraps the tape around my waist, my hips, my butt – what’s left of them—and calls out the measurements. I flinch a little as he measures my bust. Again, when his hand accidentally bumps my mitten. The contact reminds me that the nurses must be in a tizzy now. I went for a walk just before my five a.m. check and hadn’t returned to my room. I imagine them flustered, quietly searching each room for me not wanting to alarm other sick patients. At this point security would’ve been called. My mother was probably called as well. My heart picks up tempo.

When Mr. Ballyhoo is finished, he steps back.

“I think we’ve got it.” He lifts his hat and places the tape underneath. “Welcome, again—”

“Eve,” Music Man says.

“Eve. A beautiful name.” Mr. Ballyhoo takes my non-gloved hand and kisses it. Flecks of red remain on my skin when he pulls away.

“Thanks, I guess.”

I look from Mr. Ballyhoo to Music Man. Out of the two men, I’m not sure I want to be left alone with either of them. I look behind me for the boiler room door. It’s no longer there. I feel relieved first, which is surprising. As much as I hate everything to do with my captivity, I’m not sure these randos are better company.

CHAPTER 13

“Well, Muse, you’re in charge of her then. Show her the sights” Mr. Ballyhoo claps Music Man on the shoulder, effectively stopping Music Man’s shimming collar, before walking away from us. He chooses the path to the left. In the far distance, I can see what looks like a wild west shanty town emerging from an orange cloud.

“Try to reject the romance of it all—” he laughs over his shoulder.

I turn to my somber faced guide. He watches Mr. Ballyhoo walk away. I wonder if what Mr. Ballyhoo said was code. *Try to reject the romance of it all?* Was he saying that to Music Man, or to me? I don’t think romance is possible in this run down place. It’s far from any setting I’ve seen in a rom-com. The only thing turning me on in this place is the popcorn butter breeze. I watch his face change from somber to remembering I’m there.

“What were you thinking about?” I ask.

He doesn’t respond, his goofy smile returning to his face. There’s something off still. He’s looking at me but his eyes are unfocused. His expression is eerie. A little too stiff. Too forced. He reminds me of a marionette doll.

I decide to let Music Man have a moment and I walk over to the sign where the road forks. TORTURELAND is painted in a red arch across the top. The background of the board is slightly alarming. It’s a weird mixture of a tropical beach and an evergreen forest scene. A stack of body parts is arranged by the lip of the evergreen and palm tree forest, and an orange rust creeps up from the bottom corners of the sign. I touch the rust with my mitten-less hand, expecting to feel grittiness. This substance, however, is smooth. I think its paint. I take a step back confused. This wasn’t right, the rust-paint. It reminded me that being here, off the ward, that wasn’t right either.

Underneath TORTURELAND reads OCEANWORLD in blue, BONEWORLD in black,
and TORTURELAND PROPER in white.

“What you want to do?” Music Man asks.

My stomach growls for the first time in forever.

CHAPTER 14

The street teems with faceless people. Muse doesn't seem phased by this, his hips languidly turning. After climbing up a small hill, the path into Tortureland Proper is lined with painted white shops and black-clad peoples. The others don't react to us. I want to see other bewildered eyes among the pallid street to match my confusion, why can't I see anyone's face? But, they ignore us. Like the first time I entered what I now know as Tortureland, I can't see the others' faces. If I focus on a nose, it is blurry but still in the general shape of a nose. I blink my eyes to clear the smudging. I try discerning the features of a few different faces. They stay blurred. The patrons ignore us or at least they don't look Music Man or me in the eyes. Instead they stare into store windows and carry around shopping bags. Clusters of them huddle together talking so I assume they can see each other. A girl child form in black overalls and a blurred face runs between Music Man and me. I watch her disappear into the onyx ocean.

Each pearled building sells some kind of enigma that pile up as half formed questions in my brain. One store advertised the freshest kidneys money couldn't buy—I watch Music Man out of the corner of my eye—and a cream boutique with white-washed windows had a crimson *Martyred Phantasies* painted across the glass. Another milky structure named *Memorabilia Corpus*, displayed strands of teeth necklaces and signet rings.

I don't have a chance to formulate my thoughts because Music Man peppers me with questions instead. I answer mindlessly, my eyes absorbing the environment. *22. Only child. Dogs over cats.* The last question, however, breaks through my kaleidoscope vision.

“What is your dream job?”

I haven't really ever thought of that. I could tell him how to case restaurants for restrooms. How to make pain into something productive. How to have a face of glass. But, my

thoughts always fluctuate around my disease, around hiding my disease. What *did* I want to do after the hospital? Would I be able to do anything after the hospital? I thought of my ward: the white lie ward.

“Don’t think,” Music Man sway-walks beside me. As we pass in front of a cauliflower-colored pub called *Adieu*, his hip starts to knock into me with every-other-step.

“Dancer!” I blurt to stop him from bashing my side. It was a half-baked response. I’m shocked it came out of me. I hated dancing, well, I hate classical dance. My mother had a second job for a few years so I could take lessons. But jazz dance was too fast, too many coordinated hand movements. In tap, it was easy to hear that I was the one off beat. Ballet, too pointy. I didn’t even attempt hip hop. After it became apparent that the other girls in my classes were advancing while I developed two, strongly left feet, I asked my mother to quit. I couldn’t take the embarrassment of being placed in the back of performances any longer

I expect a follow up question. Music Man is quiet.

“Why can I not see the faces of everyone else?” I ask. He steps in front of me and walks backwards to keep eye contact.

“Would you like it if you were going about your life and everyone was staring at *you*?” He emphasizes the last word before shrugging then shimmying his shoulders. “Hm?”

I feel my face get hot. My mind goes back to the shift of at least thirty or so nurses, doctors, surgeons, CNAs, and my mother, all of which have become intimately acquainted with the inside of my body. All of those people like additional tubing embedded in my skin. I look at the mitten holding my wrapped extension tubing.

“I-I guess not.”

“Then stop trying to see the faces of the patrons. They are here to enjoy themselves and they won’t bother you. You’ll have a better time if you don’t care that people are watching you.”

He stops short. Unlike before, I’m quicker and do not run into him. The tip of my nose nearly touches his sternum. Reflexively, my nose inhales. His smell, a mixture between musk and cedar, reminds me of the patch of forest beside my childhood condo. I take a step back. I scan his face to see if he realized what I just did. He stares at the building next to us.

A sign hanging from the bleached stone reads *Boricua’s Street Meats*.

CHAPTER 15

“Besos!” A short, brown woman waddles over to Music Man and embraces him. My eyes assess her face, but switch to the way Music Man’s jacket collapses where she places her arms. I assume they are good friends if he allows her to hug him around the waist. Or at least, I wouldn’t want people touching my upper half if I was missing essential components.

Then she notices me. Her deep brown eyes pause on my mittened hand. My oversized boys-wear outfit. She doesn’t say anything. I watch her while she watches me. Her hair is two-toned with the roots a silver-white and the ends walnut. Her lips pull back and reveal the settled wrinkles in her face. She has skinny arms and legs with a fuller midsection. She wears a stained white apron over a black, patterned mumu.

I clear my throat so I can introduce myself but she says “*abrazame*,” pulling me into her arms. I go stiff. I will my body to relax. It doesn’t.

“This girl calls herself Eve,” Music Man informs the woman as she releases me. “Eve this is Boricua, the best chef in all of Tortureland.” Boricua smiles, revealing that she is missing all of her teeth except the top-front four. I know I’m staring much like when I realized Music Man had no arms.

Would you like it if you were going about your life and everyone was staring at you? Music Man’s voice resounds in my head. I force myself to look at something else. *Boricua’s Street Meat’s* interior is larger it appears from the outside. And a lot more colorful. The walls are striped orange and green with various golden memorabilia tacked to the walls. Vined plants reach down from the ceilings and brush my checks. I count ten tables in the front section of the restaurant—all dressed in white table cloths and full with patrons—then, there’s a cleared black-

and-white tiled area in the center of the restaurant with no tables followed by roughly ten more tables in the back of the restaurant by the open kitchen.

Music Man and Boricua start having a conversation in Spanish while walking table next to the tiled space. My ears pick up on every other word or so. *Atracción. Bailadora. Tiempo. Novio. Enfermos.* They end their conversation with Boricua laughing and pulling out two chairs. He doesn't seem as diverted as she. His wide toothed grin is locked behind pursed lips. I sit in the offered chair.

"Muse" Boricua says to me, but it sounds more like 'moose,' "*decirme que tu want dance?*" She points to the black and white tiled space. The tiles are worn but clear of any debris or dust. It clicks that it is a dancefloor.

I understand enough of what Boricua said to know that Music Man told her I was a dancer. I feel embarrassed. I was a backrow dancer. Why did Music Man have to ask me that question? I didn't want to be a dancer. I wasn't putting on a show for these people. If anything, they should be putting on a show for me. I was the guest.

My skin puckers into gooseflesh. Was the creature near? I scan the corners of the room. Was it Music Man's pet? Did he lure me into Tortureland to sacrifice me the creature? Did Mr. Ballyhoo measure me to gage how much of a meal my flank and short ribs would be? Could I find my way back to the hospital before I became a sacrificial lamb? The tingling that would normally alert me to the creature, floods my extremities, channeling to my throat. It forces its way out.

"I did not tell Music Man that I wanted to dance! I merely answered his question about something I would consider an interesting career. I can't dance, which I would have explained to him if he let me get in a word edgewise. So far, I've been dragged around Tortureland by Mr.

Tumnus, detained by an even greasier man, and now,” a waft of mandarin oranges and bacon forces the tingle back down my throat into the pit of my stomach. It answers in a growl loud enough for Music Man and Boricua to hear. I have to think about where my rant left off. “And now, he brings me to a restaurant when I clearly cannot eat!” I push up the sleeves of the borrowed sweatshirt to show them both my emaciated wrists and forearms as evidence.

Huffs of air filter through my gritted teeth. Music Man’s and Boricua’s expressions mimic the visitors’ and volunteers’ faces that see me walk the halls of the hospital. I can tell they are thinking, *poor girl. Poor child.* The hospital comes into sharp focus: the neon light on the wall that produces a spotlight for my bed; the gray, plastic meal carts; the other half of my tubing waiting abandoned behind a ficus.

I close my eyes as hard as I can.

When I open them, I’m still in Tortureland.

CHAPTER 16

After reassuming his goofy grin, muttering something about ‘hangriness,’ and placing an order with Boricua, Music Man and I sit alone. Sizzling grease sounds radiate from the kitchen where Boricua and another person cook.

Music Man’s shoulder’s shimmy in a way I’ve seen them do a few times already. I wonder if he’s moving to a song he is singing in his head or perhaps he doesn’t know he’s doing it. He looks like a broken wind-up-toy because of way his head is tilted with his teeth flashed and shimming body.

“What?” I ask.

At first he just sighs, which seems to let the shimmy out of his body. Almost like he was holding his breath.

“Why do you think your rules apply here?”

I’m confused. “What rules?”

My mittened hand is tapped under the table. I see his foot receding as I pull it to my chest.

“When I asked you if you wanted to see something, I didn’t mean you couldn’t *do* anything.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Why don’t you get up there? You want to dance. Dance!” His voice raises at the end and I glance at the other patrons hoping they didn’t hear him. “You keep acting like you have no say in anything we are doing here, but you are the guest. Do what you want.”

Apparently he didn’t hear me when I said I couldn’t dance. I open my mouth to explain—a little less agitated this time—that I cannot and will not be dancing on an open dancefloor, but

Boricua arrives with a tray. She sets out mounds of waffles, chicken livers, broccolini with bacon bits, arugula salads. Pizza slices topped with crab legs and grape jelly, and something she calls ‘The Muse Especial’ which looks like a sirloin with a Cheetos rub. Her kitchen attendant—a boy that looks like it could be Boricua’s son—brings another tray. I have to push the current plates to the far edge of the table to make way for the rest. A quiche with olives and crickets. Candied gizzards, au gratin potatoes, and razzleberry pie.

“*Para tí,*” Boricua says while placing a fork in front of me. I wait for her to do the same for Music Man. She doesn’t. He stands up.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” I ask.

“Nah, you go ahead.” He kisses Boricua cheeks. “I have someone I want you to meet, Eve. Me ol’ ball and chain. I think she will help you come out of your shell a little bit.” His cedar musk lingers as he walks away.

Something moves in my gut. Remnants of the tingle? No, it’s like fingers crawling from my colon into my stomach, up my throat to either grab hold of Music Man’s coat or a slice of cricket quiche. I watch him weave through the tables and out the front door. I want him back. Isn’t he supposed to be my guide? He probably went to get the creature. It was female, then? Introduce me to his *old lady*, more like feed me to his old lady. I was just getting used to his presence. The way his shoulders would shimmy. His crystal blue eyes.

“*Coma chica,*” Boricua commands.

The boy from the kitchen places a fork down in front of me.

“*Tú niño?*” I ask Boricua, unsure of my Spanish.

“*Sí, mi corazón. Chumo. Yo vivo y respirar por mis hijos.*”

I make a polite sound like I understand. Steam rolls from the food. The fingers from my colon tap on my tongue. I swallow a mouthful of saliva, my full attention on the smorgasbord.

CHAPTER 17

I'm all the way through the razzleberry pie, crab and grape jelly pizza, chicken livers; half way through an arugla salad, the waffles, and broccolini; and starting on the cricket and olive quiche, when all of the patrons stand up and clap. I jump at the noise. I try to see beyond their dark forms, but cannot. It must be the creature. Why else would they all stand at attention? I feel claws resting on my shoulder even before it emerges from the crowd. Its refusal to let me escape.

From the corner, Chumo drags out a chair and a foot rest to the tiled space. Strutting, with hips leading slightly, Music Man glides to the dancefloor. On his shoulder is a guitar strap. On his mouth, his goofy grin spiced with wickedness. He bows low to everyone, turning in a circle. As he rotates, I could swear one of his colossal eyes winks at me. Finishing, he lowers himself in the chair.

The food I ate becomes cement in my gut. He wouldn't make me dance, how could he? Still, my hands reach behind me for an escape route. There is only the wall. I try to become part of the wall, pressing my back hard against the structure, being as unmoving as possible. Isn't playing dead what animals do when they know they could soon be in the mouth of the beast? The rest of the patrons take their seats. I slide, rigid as a 2x4, into my chair so I don't stand out.

"Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, we are going to be graced with some spectacular performances." Music Man shrugs his shoulder the guitar strap falls off. Chumo, rushing out from the corner, lays the guitar strings-up on the bench. I'm not a music person, but the guitar is beautiful. The face, white with an opal sheen, is perfectly dustless like the dancefloor. I think they must hold their arts in high esteem, because everything else in this place had traces of the pervasive, orange, Tortureland dust. Music Man's flexes his toes and ankles. The sequence of

popping noises fills the silent room. Then, he brushes each set of toes on the opposite pant leg, leaving a trail of orange dust.

“Alright,” he sets on foot on the neck of the guitar and tests a few strings with the other. I’m mesmerized by his playing. I had heard of people learning to use their feet like hands from random internet articles, but seeing it, seeing Music Man produce such sound, made me momentarily see a life beyond the hospital. Could I, a chronically sick woman, learn to live without my guts?

“First,” Music Man’s voice breaks the spell. “The lady of this fine establishment wishes to perform. Please give a warm welcome to—Boricua!”

The audience erupts. I manage to release my hands from the grip they have on my seat to put them together a few times. Relief washes over me as Boricua takes the floor, but the front door catches my eye. I’m more convinced that Music Man did wink at me now that it’s memory, and I can only imagine what he wants me to do. From my seat, it would be exceedingly difficult to sneak out without him noticing. Maybe if I crawled on all floors?

Music Man begins to pluck some strings. Slowly, Boricua starts twisting her hips. Then, feet. Her arms next. She starts to move around the entire dancefloor, shuffling and hip rolling from one corner to the next. She is smiling and Music Man plays faster. She gathers some of her mumu to free her knees. When Music Man increases tempo again, she starts to hoot. The patrons clap out a beat for her to step to. I can’t tell if their blurred mouths are smiling, so I look away. She continues to hoot and yell. A strong sense urges me to flee Boricua’s. To never return to this place. But, by the time the music begins to slow, I have to keep the smile from touching my lips. The performers end with perfect timing; Boricua throws up her arms just as Music Man strums

his final cord. She bows to the applause, laughing heartily, before kissing Music Man's cheek and sitting down at my table.

"Next, we have a very, very, very special guest!" Music Man calls out.

"*Listo?*" Boricua says to me.

"What?" A tingling pools in my feet. I scan Boricua's face. Her eyes are alight. Her chest rises and falls, trying to catch her breath, but she leans over the table to put her hands on my arm. She helps me stand.

"Give a warm welcome to..." I summon daggers to my eyes, "Eve! The girl that always wanted to dance!"

CHAPTER 18

Before I know it, Boricua has lead me out on the dancefloor. Well, more like forced me to the dance floor because I went full dead body after Music Man's announcement. I recall her hands in my armpits, lifting me up. Her whispering in my ear to *feel the music. Feel Moose*. Why didn't I fight her? I could have attempted an escape if I hadn't tensed up.

I look at Music Man, Boricua and Chumo sit at a table. Everyone faces are lit with eagerness. Even the non-faces of the crowd are oriented in my direction, waiting.

Music Man's toes start strumming out some kind of Spanish guitar music, but I refuse to move. Instead, I stare Music Man down, hands on my hips. No amount of his playing would stir me enough to make a fool of myself.

It starts as one thud in the back of the room, but soon all of the patrons clap or pound on the tables, making a percussive warning. They want me to move. They were promised more than one performance from Music Man, and here I was, on the dancefloor. The tiles vibrate under my feet from the audience's impatience. I do not move.

I resolve to never tell Music Man any of my fantasies again. It was his fault that I ended up in front of all of these people. He must be thick in the head if my rant about an inability to dance didn't register in his brain. A tingling starts in my feet, however. It makes each toe feel itchy like they had fallen asleep. Without thinking about how immature I would look, I stomp a foot, trying to lessen the tingle while still scowling at the guitarist.

Music Man answers by playing a cord. The idiot still didn't get that I was furious and not trying to dance for him. I stomp one foot after the other. He plays two cords, flashes a patronizing smile. Closing the distance between us with large steps, I'm about to tip him out of his chair. He must sense my wrath because he begins a song.

Someone yelling from the crowd distracts me and I turn with my hand on my hips to face them. The movement must have seemed more deliberate than I intended, because the crowd cheers. I outstretch my hands, trying to urge them to stop. I can feel my face getting hot. Boricua hoots which causes me to jump. More cheering. Music Man yells something over the noise. I only catch the end: *don't limit yourself*.

I raise my arm to flip him off but that action coincides with the music. I stomp again. Then the other foot. The cheering quiets as I start to irritably shuffle across the black-and-white tiles. My feet stomp faster. I trail my mittened hand around my neck and belly. Every time I see Boricua or Music Man, I twirl so I don't have to see their smug, satisfied faces. They're probably smug because I'm not doing this right. I can hear my past dance teachers criticizing me for not pointing my toes when I *pirouette*. I try harder to reproduce dance moves from my youth.

Music Man increases the tempo, my nerves dissipating with every footfall. Soon, I am twisting, stomping, and gyrating to the music. The nerves that had gathered in my feet flow out of my flicking appendages, into the air. The air on the dancefloor is now charged with energy and possibilities. I use the entire space to shake out my apprehensions about where I was—and where I wasn't. I shake out the hospital. I shake out the TPN and NPO. I squat low, readying for a leap, and suddenly the florescent light above my hospital bed shines my eyes. Fully blinded by the memory, I jump with my appendages extended into the air as if to free myself from that horrible place. I land in a split, the patrons of Boricua's Street Meats coming back into view.

The crowd explodes into applause. Some patrons rise to their feet in an ovation. Boricua rushes over to help me up from the ground.

“Take a bow,” she says when I'm on two feet.

Although I cannot see their faces, I bow once to the audience, once to Boricua, and once to Music Man, whose smile matches my own.

Together, Music Man and I finish the remaining food Boricua had prepared for us. My stomach makes approving noises with every bite instead of the forsaken moaning that it usually makes. I wait for Music Man to bring the last bite of broccolini from the plate placed on the stool in front of him to his lips before speaking.

“So why can I see some of the people here, like you and Boricua? Chumo?”

He chews deliberately and I can tell he is thinking of something to say.

“Those are the permanent residents of Tortureland. The cooks, entertainers, ride workers, vendors... anyone whose face is visible to the guests’ eyes are permanent residents.”

“Okay,” I’m happy to get a straight answer from him. “But how did you become permanent residents? Do all the other *Torturelanders* work here? Where are your houses? Why do you—“

“*Torturelanders?*” Muse repeats. His face contorts so his brow dips into the path of his eyes. “We think of ourselves as *Tortured Artists* or sometimes just *The Tortured.*”

He ignores my other questions and stands. I help him with the strap of his guitar—Chumo had leaned it against the edge of the table after my performance.

“Where to now?” he asks.

I wanted to say that I’d be content with a few more rounds of Boricua’s specialties, but he was already out the door before I could suggest it. Once on the street, he says “There’s

Oceanworld and Boneworld that have a couple of shows going, or we could kick around Tortureland Props. for a little longer?”

He leads us in the direction from where we came; back towards the main gates. I have a feeling that he already has a plan for us. I skip to keep pace with him.

“As long as you aren’t delivering me back to the hospital...anywhere would be fine.”

We reach the front gate and turn right, to following a path. While I trail behind him, I can’t help looking back at the front gate. Maybe it’s to see if Mr. Ballyhoo will magically appear, or maybe it’s because there’s still no trace of the boiler room door that I fell through to get to Tortureland. It sparks a question in me.

“Music Man, how is it possible that a place like this exists?”

He doesn’t slow his pace, but inclines his head in my direction. “Call me Muse, please, and this space follows yours.” He rolls his shoulders. I’ve noticed that he does this when he thinks someone should understand some parallel meaning to what he says. I still don’t get it.

We come upon a large fountain. The copper scene in the middle catches my eye. It depicts a man sitting at a coffee table, holding a gun into his mouth. The metal man has detailed alloy tears.

He slips his feet out of his shoes, rolls his ankles, popping and cracking the multipurpose joints. “This is Tortureland,” he wriggles his left foot, each toe flicking independently. “This your world,” he moves his other foot. He then smacks them together so his souls are mirroring each other. “Our worlds rub against each other sometimes crossing, but mostly staying on their

respective sides. Your time here is only temporary,” his gaze locks on mine. He rolls his shoulders.

I dip my hand in the tortoise water to distract myself from exploding like I did about eating at Boricua’s or allowing Music Man to take me to this place. I scoop up a handful of the neon water and drink. Surprisingly, there is no chemical taste or aftertaste. It tastes better than purified water.

He looks expectantly at me while his toes spread the opening of his shoes.

“I—I don’t think that’s how this works.” I had to look away after disagreeing. “This is a dream that I’m having right now. I’m high on meds and my brain has sent me here” I nod my head with confidence. I am ready to fight this one. A repressed feeling itches to come to the surface. I’m not sure I can hold back the verbal burst this time, and I have no dancefloor to shake it out.

He gets to his feet, “if you say so” and squashes my opportunity to discharge.

As we continue walking. He explains that we are going to see a show called *The Sea Witches Triumph*. He skillfully walks and sings, but I have to keep my head down so I don’t step in a one of the many holes in the path. After the fountain, the path became less maintained, riddled with wells as deep as tide pools. Both palm and fir trees line the walkways, and florescent bulbs harass from the trees, blinking like paparazzi. Banks of overgrown hedges outgrow their styled forms: Shamu, Nessie the Loch Ness Monster, and another unintelligible shape. Their limbs reach towards us, obstructing the way. We pass food carts, gift shops, other dilapidated rides and disturbing fountains. Music Man doesn’t seem to notice. He continues to sing and two-step around the potholes.

A feeling of suspended disbelief wanes with every step. Where was the hospital? How could Tortureland exist? I hear Music Man's voice just like I was awake, but this had to be a dream. He sings full and steady. The tone an even sound. The way he exhales between words. And there's the fact he has no arms. Surely, an armless man and faceless people are prime subjects for a dreamworld. My eyes glance towards where his arms should be. The jacket is hacked near the shoulder and haphazardly sewed. I can't help but say something.

"Did you sew that yourself?" I point and grunt.

He breaks his song. "Well, I had a few volunteers come forward, but I always tailor my clothes."

I react to his answer by cringing and don't see the hole in my path. I fall knee deep into the hollow. I expect to roll my ankle, at least, but the bottom is filled with a mossy cushion. I should have figured that if he could play a guitar, he could probably sew his own clothes.

Muse straddles a pothole a few feet from me. He wears a Cheshire cat smile.

"I'd help you but..." he shrugs and expressively looks down at his sewing job, then starts singing again.

As I lift myself out of the hole, I reflect on his face. There *is* something pleasing about the way his nose comes to a rounded end. How his eyes close when he hits higher notes. My mother would always claim that a person singing out loud was expressing their happiness, and it was rude to hush them, but I think about asking him to stop.

We walk past nine graffitied tea cups ride, empty and swirling. I can't image these were once nice. The chipped, hyper-color paint and broken patterns look like they haven't been refinished in decades. The base they revolve on groans as it moves in a lethargic twirl. I want to ask Muse to stop so that I can ride one, but the threat of contracting tetanus seems high.

CHAPTER 19

A large arch, decorated with trash and seashells and lit with OCEANLAND announces we're near our destination. The scenery changes slightly. Lights radiate a blue tint which blankets everything. Fishing nets physically dangle from street posts, droop across benches, and drape from rooftops. And, I don't have to look down here as much. The potholes are filled with sand. Muse's hips don't have to swivel in as much of a choreographed dance anymore.

We walk into a courtyard where there are fish bones in the cement. A few avenues that branch from the main space. In front of us is a directional sign posted before a large fountain. The fountain spurts out alternating jets of clear and brown water. All choreographed to what sound like whale calls.

A directional sign reads: OCEANLAND. Each of the possible directions are labeled either *Widow's Point*, *Siren's Grotto*, and *Dead Reef Theater*.

"Which one?" I ask.

Muse doesn't answer but strides down the *Dead Reef Theater* path.

We walk down a hill to a ticket counter. Behind the counter, muted noises emanate from a large building shaped like a conch shell. Lights dance inside the opening of the shell, refracting off the interior.

"Hey, Music! What's up?" a man behind the ticket counter calls out. Muse smiles, nods his head, and continues to walk by.

I stop at the counter unsure if I need to prove that I have a ticket of sorts. I try to remember where I put the ticket Mr. Ballyhoo gave me. My pocket, I think, my eyes nervously meeting his. I recognize that I could see the man's face, but I'm too embarrassed to talk. He was one of *The Tortured*, I gather.

“I-I’m here on a guest pass,” I produce the guess pass which is now crumbled from my dance.

The man’s skin is stretched like a canvas across his face: every vein visible and every muscle protruding. “Don’t worry, Miss” he signals that I should go in. “Any friend of Music’s is a friend without a fee.”

My lips slant into what’s supposed to be a smile.

Inside, the conch is tiered with lower seating and a balcony. In the center a main stage surrounded by a moat. I follow Muse up some stairs to the balcony. He mentions something about VIP seating and shows me where to sit down. I help Muse take off his guitar which I place in a seat next to him. A band plays of to the side of the stage, filling the structure with sound. Our entire section is full, but when I look at the crowd around us, they either don’t pay attention to us, avoid my gaze, or a convenient hat or hand moves to blocks their face.

“Ever seen a live show before?” I think his tone sounds a little half-hearted. Like he doesn’t want to make small talk, but I’m a guest.

“Um, yes.” I tell him about a few of the shows I’d seen at an amusement park a decade or so ago. He faces toward the main stage. His short but floppy hair touches the tips of his ears. His attention is transfixed on the stage. I get the feeling he picked this show for a specific reason, more of a reason than the fact that this might be an interesting show. He doesn’t make small talk or ask any of his strange questions. I decide to think of specialty orders I might request from Boricua if I ever see her again.

When the lights go down, Muse and I have already been quiet for some time. A spotlight touches down in the moat. The noise of the large crowd breathing at once sounds like TV static before the when the cable is out. Even Muse draws in a breath. From the water, a mermaid bursts

through the light. She flips up and into the air. Arches her back as she falls back into the water. Running lights flicker on in the tank so we can see her swimming in the turquoise Tortureland liquid. She swims underneath the band, around the back of the stage out of sight. A spotlight finds her as she flops on the main stage.

The crowd applauds.

From my vantage, I can gather only general impressions of her. Her gold tail begins mid torso and fans out in two translucent fins. She wears a strip of netting braided throughout seaweed- spaghetti hair. It slaps her back as she jumps from the platform into the water. I expect her to have breasts but instead she has a flat chest and scales covering her front and back, creeping up her neck. Her arms appear more normal than her skin, but she has fins on the backs of her elbows. She entertains the crowd with flips, splashes, and waves from her dorsal fin.

She amuses the crowd for a while. Each time her flips become less intricate. With less height. Belly flops take the place of acrobatics. She rips out her hair piece mid-stunt. Screams become part of the show. Loud dolphin squeaks that end in human syllables.

A loud drumming startles me. The lights go out. I start to feel uneasy. A tingling begins in my fingertips. My hand reaches out to grasp Music Man's but he doesn't have any.

CHAPTER 20

Under a spotlight illuminating the platform, the mermaid pulls herself from the water. Her face is pinched. Sorrowful. Her light-gleaming body sloths off the water. She opens her protrusible mouth.

An eerie laugh echoes in the room. Like a rattling hum that finishes in a hiss. The smell of gasoline and salt water permeates the air. A boat that reminds me of a navy destroyer emerges from the bottom of the tank. The water laps at the bands feet as their music becomes an imperial march. From below deck, a crew surfaces behind a highly decorated man. He has deep brown hair and a proud jaw. He moves to the nose of the ship.

“That’s the Captain,” he says the word, *captain*, like it’s a profanity.

Two spotlights appear. One on the Captain and one on the mermaid.

The mermaid’s face is no longer carefree. Her tail fidgets like a dogs wagging tail; her eyes fixed on the Captain. He doesn’t see her but acts as if he is ordering the crew about.

A strong wind picks up and starts whipping around the arena. Everyone in the crew returns below deck but the captain. A rain pelts down on the ship. The boat rocks back and forth. The Captain starts to look unsure in his footing. He white knuckles a nearby railing. His hat blows off and his face scrunches with effort.

The music reaches a pitch that makes me and everyone around me cover their ears. Well, except Music Man. His face is twisted. Eyes wide, mouth gaped, teeth flashing from open lips. Splashes distract me from Muse’s expression. The crowd gasps. The captain is no longer on the boat deck and the mermaid is not on her stage perch.

I have a notion that Muse has seen this show dozens of times. He’s staring at a specific corner of the pool. From that spot, Morana bursts out, the Captain’s body in her arms. She tries

to drag him back to the platform. But something was wrong. Her available arm reaching out but not moving them far. Scales glittering in the lights as they reach out from the black liquid. Her tail flops like she is caught in a net. Her movements can't keep their heads above water. The Captain's nonresponsive body keeps her from making much headway. Deadweight. Each attempt makes her more tired. The splashes smaller and smaller.

They stop.

Hysterical laughter starts. I have to look at Muse to make sure it isn't him.

"What's happening?"

Muse strokes his chin. His face unreadable. "I don't know the shows you've seen, but this is Tortureland."

The opaque water starts swirling. The thrashing water moves like a toilet flushing, a whirlpool emerges, everything funneling to the center. The unconscious bodies of the Captain and mermaid surface briefly before starting a revolution in the vortex. I hear shrieks and look where they are coming from. A few patrons point to the bottom of the tank. A large yellow eye winks and shuts its outer membrane. Supersized tentacles surface and continue to twist the water. Their whirling force pushes the heroine and Captain to the center.

I can't understand why I'm attracted to him. I think this while watching him from the corner of my eye. Before me, the evil Sea Witch has emerged. Her form is oppressive and tentacle-y, but Music Man's face is somber. I almost chalk it up the fact that he must have seen the show a few times, but his jaw is clenched.

My eyes strain from watching two things at once. I test turning my head a degree in his direction so I can watch him better. He doesn't seem to notice. His face his putting on a show just as exciting as watching the mermaid flip in and out of the water. His eyes flick away each time the mermaid is in the Sea Witches grasp or narrowly escapes execution. His lips purse, making them look fuller, defining his jaw. His blood fills them as they relax. It's a pomegranate-red tint. I have this felling like I want to bite them. Taste and see if they are sweet yet tart. He is engrossed with the show when the mermaid is not in immediate peril. I can hear the excited tapping of his toes. His shoulders shimmy and stop. But she doesn't stay out of harm's way for long intervals.

The attraction must be to his energy. To the fact that he could be armless and probably happier than I ever could be. I nod my head, affirming my own thoughts. This action breaks Music Man from his trance. He notices me watching him. I almost apologize and then smirk instead. I've apologized enough to him.

"You're going to miss the finale" he whispers.

The crowd has grown quiet around us, but my thoughts grow louder. The attraction *is* to his energy. It's something about the way his hipped dipped at Boricua's. The way he closed his eyes while strumming. His shimmying shoulders.

A scream tears me from my thoughts. The Sea Witch has the mermaid pinned against a rock. And for a second I'm terrified, but not for the mermaid. This has to be the final scene of the show. The grand resolution. It forces me to think about what my grand resolution will be? If Tortureland is a fragment of my broken mind or a side effect from the drugs, then where do I go after the show? Inside me, the grub from Boricua's bubbles in my gut. My organs happily produce gas as they break down their first sustenance in ages. My legs are tired from dancing,

but it's a good tired. Not a lethargic and depressed tired. I don't want to leave. Well, at least, not yet.

"Muse," I nudge him with my elbow. "I don't have to leave yet, right?"

Below the Sea Witch raises her scepter and drives it through the belly of the mermaid. Acapella screams vibrate through the conch theater. I have to nudge Muse again for him to look at me.

"Yes, your guest pass is good for as long as you need to stay," he whispers, "but you don't have to use it all in one trip. I have a feeling you will find your way back."

I want to contradict him. Tell him that I wasn't going back to the hospital yet. That he had more questions to answer. But, the visage of my mother's wringing her hands grounds me. She probably was worried sick about where I was. Guilt joins my bubbling guts.

The bands opening overture begins to play and the Sea Witch drags the body of her fair foe underwater. The crowd makes discomforted noises as the Captain appears at the edge of the stage, looking, calling out for her. A spotlight follows his concerned form off stage.

Muse and the rest of the crowd, clap disheartened as the main lights flick on. But, my hands create a loud sound. I can't help it. It's the happiest I've been in a while.

CHAPTER 21

The morning I was discovered wearing boy's gym shorts and a ratty sweatshirt, nothing happened. I thought the situation would be strange because I couldn't answer how my johnny was replaced with clothes that were obviously not mine, but that's not what happened. Maybe because nothing happened it made the situation strange. Carol, the nurse on duty, asked me where I got the clothes from, I said I wasn't sure, knowing that the truth would not be believed. She didn't press, but something about the way her eyes kept returning to my new garb as she pushed more steroids into my IV spoke for her. It was the same look the ER doctor that admitted me had. The same pulled together eyebrows and measured words. It was pity. I was pitiful. Better not upset the pitiful patient.

I expected new instructions would be added to my chart to complement the no eating, steroids, and mood stabilizers, but again, nothing happened. To my surprise, the only thing that pointed to a strangeness was when my mother brought me some of my old yoga clothes to wear instead of a hospital Johnny.

That same day, it was determined that I would need surgery in hopes that it would allow me to eat again. The team of two gastroenterologists, a surgeon specializing in abdominal surgery, and my primary care gastro didn't explain much about what would happen. They spared about ten minutes of baby talk and diagraming the procedure on a piece of paper as an explanation. I had some 'bad parts' which needed to be removed. They assured me this would take care of the problem. Allow me to ingest food again. Before disappearing completely, they said that they needed two days to finalize the game plan for the surgery and then I would be operated on, but they pulled my mother out in the hall for another half-hour. She returned dour faced and tight lipped. I asked my mother what other information they had given her. She

dodged the question. Told me that she was concerned for my well-being, her cheeks red. It looked like she had been scrubbing them intensely. Her eyes, also puffy, had no traces of her makeup. She sank into the arm chair stationed in my room for visitors, and was quiet. I didn't press. I figured she was upset that her baby needed to be opened up, which temporarily trumped my need for additional information.

The regret of not pressing her has sunk in now, as I wait twenty minutes that stretch like an elastic band. I almost snap around the fifteen-minute mark. I've got questions, but not about the surgery. I need to find Muse again. Find him and force him to answer them. I have questions about how Tortureland can be a real place. How it can simultaneously be nonexistent to everyone else except if someone from Tortureland seeks you out? How come some people get to stay while others are just tourists? I am determined to get real answers from him and not just songs and shows. Not that I minded the multiple entertainments Muse had brought me to. It was the first time in a long time I felt happy, or, at least, my mind wasn't fixated on the hospital. On my disease.

Exactly at minute twenty, I clamp the extensions that are embedded in my upper arm, then disconnect from the IV. The IV pole lets out a sustained beeping, demanding to be reconnected. *Treatment course incomplete* flashes on the digitized screen.

It is loud like a fire alarm. I break out in a sweat while tampering with the command screen. From watching the nurses, I know how to access the control functions and turn down the volume so it's less noticeable. It makes more of a high pitched hum now. I'm certain the noise will be stifled by the heavy, wooden hospital doors when I leave.

I take a second to stretch my arms over my head. I've waited exactly twenty minutes after a midnight check. Twenty minutes, more or less, is how long it takes the night-shift nurses to work through the other rooms on my corridor and go down the long hallway out of sight.

It wasn't difficult finding the entrance back into Tortureland. I use the same route Muse had shown me: down the elevators to the first floor, through to the 'employees only' side of the hospital, following the butter popcorn aroma through the mysterious boiler room.

But now I cannot find anyone I recognize.

Mr. Ballyhoo isn't waiting for me at the front gate. It seems suspicious to me that this entrance gate is not staffed. I call out for Mr. Ballyhoo. Muse. Boricua. I rush to the directional sign. I can't decide whether to turn left or right. Would Muse be in *Oceanland* visiting Morana? I register a pang of jealousy in my chest. Maybe he was playing at Boricua's? Maybe he would be busy somewhere I hadn't been.

I turn towards *Boneworld*. Off in the distance, shanty houses, like in old western ghost towns, rise from an orange haze. I remember that place. I remember the crush of phantoms figures. Black-bodied swallows swarming to an unattainable center. I can't quite describe why, but I know Muse is not in that place, or that I am not supposed to be in that place. The haze rises to the rooftops like a poisonous gas. I cannot remember how long ago it was that I was trapped, dazed in the place just beyond the gate. My body shudders as if the Muse-shimmy had gotten into me.

The popcorn breeze wafts past my right side in the direction of *Tortureland Proper*. I climb the small hill and look down upon the sea of black-clad patrons. They don't do the

swallow dance like the *Boneworld* patrons. These are the happy, consuming patrons toting around white bags full of merchandise decaled with *Matryed Phantasies* or *Sandman's Specialties*. I stop in front of the *Adieu* pub. I want to have time to wonder what is in the shops—I want to have time to investigate the opal-esque boutiques and walk around with little bags hanging from my arms. Muse could be with me when I do. I think I would prefer it that way. He wouldn't be able to carry anything, but I wouldn't mind carrying his purchases. He could take me to all the good spots. All of the secret spots. Thinking of him makes my feet quicken. I want to find my host.

I poke my head into *Boricua's*. Very few patrons are eating at this time. Only three tables contain bodies. I can hear noise coming from the kitchen. Once out back, I find Boricua. She's elbow deep in the sink, huddled over a pot with a brush.

“Boricua, I—“

I must startle her because she slings water into the air. Her soapy hand settles on her breast. “*Dios Mio, cara*, what is the problem?”

I feel a blush circulating to the surface of my cheeks, but I refuse to be embarrassed. I am still determined to have questions answered. Today.

“I'm looking for Muse. Do you know where I can find him?”

“*Moose?*” Her hard breathing lessons. “He's helping *con la construction del Kitsch Emporium.*”

I can't make out the last part of her sentence. Construction? Kitsch Emporium? Maybe checking here first was the wrong idea. I'm uncertain how much time I will have in Tortureland this trip and I don't want to waste any time. *Boricua's* was great last time but I need to find Muse.

“Pero,” she walks out the side door. “I can cook you something, yes? *Moose* come soon.”

The taste of raspberries and pickles and mango ice cream tango on my tongue.

“No. Where is he?”

CHAPTER 22

I follow Boricua's directions. On the walk, further into Tortureland Proper, I notice the flow of foot traffic decrease. Less and less black figures stroll in my direction. Most are headed back into the main part of Tortureland Proper. Towards the shops and refracting light of the white buildings. The diminishing figures unnerves me. The gate outside Boneworld was a crush of bodies and Tortureland Proper called for a slow pace to navigate the crowded streets. But now, deep into Tortureland Proper, the pathway has only a few, shadowy figures.

A couple walks hand-in-hand some feet in front of me, and I jog a to catch up with them. I can't really say why. Maybe I was used to Music Man leading me around, used to his cedar and musk, but I knew I didn't want walk the streets of Tortureland alone. While I hadn't seen it in this world, or the hospital, the creature could still be hiding in Boneworld or the Oceanworld. It probably crosses over to the hospital the same way Muse does. A tingle of adeneline runs done my spine.

I follow close behind the couple, not letting them get more than a few steps ahead of me, a few times, almost stepping on their heels. The light grows dimmer, the further away I get from the center of Tortureland Proper and things appear less run down. The shrubbery is trimmed. The trees aren't mangled and misshapen, but proud and full. Some even bear strange fruits that look like a cross between apples and pomegranates. The grass is cut evenly and the fences to keep people off the grass are maintained, painted white. Still, for some reason, I don't feel like I could walk alone here.

The layout of the hospital corridor flutters in my mind. Another place where being alone makes me uneasy, especially when I would make eye contact with nurses and visitors. I try to pretend that they aren't there, those eyes, their eyes, but I grind the wheels of my IV against the

wall, trying to distance myself from their stare. But, there is nowhere to exit. Nowhere to escape. The eyes come into my room whenever they want. The eyes make sure I'm not swallowing things. The eyes want to be acknowledged. Unashamed, they watch me scuttle down the corridor, my discomfort permanently ground into the baseboards of the ward. I can never hold out for long. I have to look up with my glass face. Smile and mean it. It's okay if it's a pathetic smile, but it has to feel meaningful. The eyes want a good show.

The smaller of the figures in front of me whispers something to the other one, bringing awareness back into my limbs. Their words slur, concealed like their faces. I never asked Muse if others could see my face, only why I couldn't see other's faces. I add it to my list of questions.

It takes about five-minutes past Street Meats to arrive at the Kitsch Emporium. The building is immense and stone. It's in much better shape than the peeling Tortureland Proper shops, but I see a group of people off to the side of the building with ladders and long planks of wood. I look at the roof. It looks like a small asteroid busted through the structure.

The couple I was trailing stay straight and enter the large, wooden, double doors of the building. I'm tempted to keep following so I don't look lost or alone, but I hear a familiar cadence of sounds off to the side of the building.

"A little higher. To your left! Left!"

I follow the voice around a large stack of wood. Music Man stands on one leg while the other, hip height, fans to the left. Two people are climbing a ladder with pieces of wood in their hands, another saws the longer boards into smaller pieces, and the last person is on the top of the building, hammering the pieces of wood to the roof. I recognize the man with the saw from the ticket booth in Oceanworld, but the others I don't know. As I get closer, I can see their faces, each person's distinct expressions and wrinkles, as they go about their work. Since I'd first come

to Tortureland, the only faces that I could see were Music Man's, Mr. Ballyhoo's, Boricua's, Chumo's, Morana's. These people must also be part of *the Tortured*. I feel more solid about this idea because they wear a mixture of white shirts and black slacks. Not head-to-toe black like the patrons.

In the middle of things, Music Man wears a construction hat. The yellow bucket covers his head and subtle, brown ringlets. I watch his face transition from business to casual to his tooth-and-gum smile splitting his face. I guess for safety reasons—but, if I think more on it, probably for vanity—he wears a matching yellow safety vest over a tee shirt. His shoulders shimmy.

I want to claim that shimmy as my own even if I can't out loud. I want to say 'I think you shimmy when you're excited, but I do not. Or I could say 'I think I make you shimmy. I think excite you,' but I don't. A smile breaks out on my face.

"Hellloooo there," his head tips back a little, like he's howling to the moon.

"Surprised?" I don't know why this is the first thing that comes out of my mouth. I place my hands on my hips. I own it.

"Not exactly." For a second, I could swear the edges of his mouth dip. Almost like he was about to frown, but corrected for it.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know." His whole body shivers.

"Listen, Muse, I didn't creep around the hospital for you to show me another dog and pony show. I have questions," my finger starts wagging "and I'm getting—"

"Sure, sure." Muse interrupts. "Let's take this inside. Away from these hard working folks."

“Okay?” My voice raises in my throat. I want to throw my arms around Muse to keep him still enough to answer any of my questions, but I can sense the crew’s eyes are on us. Even the worker on the roof has stopped pounding. I think Muse senses this too because he starts walking away.

“Why don’t we take a little tour of the ol’ *Kitchie*.”

“Wait!” I reach out and touch his shoulder. I expect to feel sparks, fireworks, at least some static cling...there’s nothing. I register that I’m disappointed, but I wear my glass face, and don’t show it. He turns around. His ultramarine eyes entrap mine. I see the things he won’t tell me in them, but I cannot understand the language. Or maybe it’s the colloquialisms and not the language. He tries to teach me his language without speaking. He transmits foreign expressions through his gaze. Instead of understanding, I feel liquid butter dripping down my throat, the kind that movie theaters dole out on top of already buttery popcorn. As he attempts to speak without speaking, I swallow more and more butter, the fat coating my throat.

As nice as the feeling is, I want to make it clear to Muse that this won’t be a repeat Alice in Wonderland jaunt; I refuse to be lead around aimlessly and coerced into absurd activities. If he wanted to play host, he better start answering my questions.

“Today, I ask the questions?” I hadn’t wanted my declaration to sound like a request, but his expression makes it hard to focus. He looks—it’s very hard to say definitively—amused with a touch of anticipation. His gapped teeth remain just barely behind his lips. His eyes still flash Morse Code between blinks. The thing he wants to say slides down his neck and radiates out of his shoulders. He shimmies.

“If ye say so,” he sweeps one leg out like he’s gesturing for me to walk ahead of him. I take the offer and pass through the wooden doors of the *Kitsch Emporium*.

Inside, the building stands in stunning re-repair. Multiple different wood colors are patched together to form the structure. It's like each addition has been sewn onto the main, entry room, the sutures apparent in the tonal wood changes. I count four stitched on hallways from the main building, each with etched placard above the doorway reading 'Showcase' and a roman numeral.

As I walk further into the main room, there are sparkling cases of glass protecting a strange array of objects. I walk up to the closest case. A pink, fleshy, jelly fish looking thing is stretched almost to tearing by tacks. I can't decide what it is, but it unsettles me. As I try and interpret it, I know that it cannot be a sea creature. I've never seen a jelly fish this color and jelly fish, to my knowledge, are usually translucent. This thing is opaque, the color of freshly harvested meat. Pink-tinged tubes bridge out from a main chunk whose shape resembles a chicken cutlet or roadkill intestines. Something was off. The thing, whatever it was, looked like it had be tormented. Vivisected for the world to see. I search for an identifying tag or plaque to tell me what this strange object is. On the last side of the case, I spot a small laminated tag.

Woman, age 16
To My Husband
 1813

I sigh because it's little to no help. Muse's reflection joins mine in the mirror of the case.

"What is this?" I ask. I briefly note that my expression looks eagerly at his reflection. I refocus on the case.

He lowers his eyes so they are level with the specimen.

"I thought it would be obvious," I catch a slight tremor of his collar. "It's a uterus."

“A what!” My voice raises and I remember where we are. Embarrassed because I’ve ruined the solemnity of the room, I look for other patrons that I might have disturbed, but see no one. There is just Muse and me.

“Why? To make sure he isn’t covering up the real answers, I watch his features arrange something to say. One of his eye brows darts up and back down which sends the energy to his cheeks that become rosy and his mouth starts to spread into his caricature grin.

“We don’t pretend that we are well here.”

“Here?”

A faraway, sudden panging reminds me of the work I witnessed from outside. Above us I can see the giant hole in the ceiling. The ambiguous, gray sky of Tortureland filters through. It produces a faint spotlight in the center of the room. How does a hole that large develop in a ceiling? It looked like a small meteor had crash landed. The floor underneath, the rows of glass cases, however, show no signs of destruction, spared by whatever gouged the ceiling.

A spark bursts in my gut. A shock that rushes from my colon to my toe tips. The hole, the exposure of the building to the elements triggers a fight-or-flight response in me. I’m afraid some patch-job beams may fall on my head. I fly to the nearest wall, retreating from the expanse. Once on the wall, my arms cross around my waist like they are protecting something. I’m not sure what good it would do me, especially since if something were to fall, it would most likely cave in my head, but they grip tight, the fabric of my shirt bunched in my fists.

“You allow people in here when you’re repairing?” I say with the woodgrain at my back. I keep my eyes trained on the hole. I’m wasn’t about to be a casualty of a tragic, repair accident.

“Like I said,” Muse hooks one of his feet behind my locked knees. “We don’t pretend we’re well or alright here.” His foot pulls on my knee, forcing me off balance. Forcing me away

from the wall. I crash against his chest, which I briefly note as being firm yet cushiony and pleasant—kind of like a chocolate éclair—before I’m being lead into *Showcase III*. Again, glass cases fill the room. This time, however, each one has a *gold* object in it. A Rolex. A golden rolodex. A man’s engagement ring. A string of keys.

I move from case to case. There’s no reason for these objects to be placed together except for them being gold. The exhibit—if that’s what this was—was named ‘Showcase III,’ which was no help either. The placards for these objects were as cryptic as the one in the main entrance: *Winner, winner, chicken, loser; Acquaintance is not enough; I need more time; If only you let me in.*

“What does this mean?”

Muse posts up in the doorframe that leads from *Showcase III* to *Showcase VII*.

“Things fall apart here. We mend them as best we can. It’s a fairly simple process as long as you know what you’re dealing with. There’s no need to pretend that we are okay in Tortureland. We just *are*.” He slips out of the doorframe into *Showcase VII*.

The numerical system labeling the rooms doesn’t make sense. I started in the main room, then I was lead into *Showcase III*. Now, we are in *Showcase VII* even though there were only two exits, or entrances, leading from *Showcase III*. Other museums I’d been to had some reason to lump the displayed objects together. Each room in the *Kitch Emporium*, however, doesn’t have a cohesive theme or region of origin, instead, similar to the gold room, a color seems to dominate the selected items. *Showcase VII* is blue and filled a battered mountain bike a tarp, a mounted blue fin tuna. A sapphire stone the size of a quarter is featured in the central case.

I walk around and view the objects. Muse trails a step behind me. I can hear his makeshift-shoes keeping pace with my movements. I feel some comfort knowing that I’m leading.

I stop to look at the sapphire.

“Can other’s see my face? The other patrons, I mean.”

“No, not really. you are a kind of patron too. *The Tortured* can see you for what you are. They can see your face.” He is so close I could slide into his side. Fill the space left by his arms.

This must be on his mind too because he comes close to me. His jacket brushes against my arm. The stone, refracting the overhead light in of its captivity, is almost the same color of his eyes. I align my body with his. I can feel his hip bone. His ribs. He rests his stump on my shoulder. His heart thumps on my upper arm, transferring some of his warmth.

“It’s pretty,” I say.

“I suppose.” His face contorts in the glass.

“Why do you make that face?”

“I just don’t think it’s pretty. I don’t think anything in here is pretty.”

“Why?”

Still attached side-by-side, like a moth with fledging wings or a partnered dance we’ve just invented, we walk together, steps in sync, to look at the navy mountain bike. In passing, I notice the tires have dirt in their rubber crevasses like it had just been used.

“All of these things remind me of sacrifice. Why would I think it’s pretty?”

Severing our connection, I turn back to the sapphire stone. It shimmers. It gleams. It looks like it could be a Cartier or Tiffany piece. I want it, but I don’t know why. I want Muse to give it to me mounted on some metal. My ring finger feels warm.

“I don’t follow” I say.

“People think their lives are an endless seduction. Endless gratifications that get you through the bad parts, but these are finite moments. Finite happiness,” I can hear a tapping noise

and look at the ceiling. We are nowhere near the gaping hole anymore. Instead, the source is Muse's toes. They flicker and tap vigorously. The sound grows louder. "No, life is miserable. Life is unforgiving. Eventually, the smart ones figure out life is unfair precisely so that you find your happiness only to struggle with the fact you cannot have it forever. The suffering you experience trying to be happy is what life is about. Your suffering makes *others* feel more real. It's essential for their happiness, but only the clever ones figure it out. Figure this out" a leg kicks towards the bike while his face twists, distorts like I've never seen it before. He doesn't look at me. He is transfixed on the muddy bike.

"If I told you that in striving to be happy, to find your happiness, you will find out that you are completely insatiable. You are miserable. You find out you will never be happy. You will realize you were suffering. I felt it in you that day by the elevators. It reached out to me, your suffering. It made me feel whole."

If he had a hand I would grab it. I settle with putting my hand on his shoulder, not asking for permission. I want him to stop saying such crazy things. I refuse to believe my wasting away made my mother happy. That it made anybody happy.

"Sometimes when you're this close," his voice is low and honeyed. His shoulder lifts under my hand, "I can feel my arms prickling, trying to reach out for you."

I want nothing more than to be part of him again. To feel his heart thumping on my flesh. To have his stump resting on me. To support his stump with my body. I try to slide back into his side. He doesn't let me. I feel like throwing a tantrum. I want to slap him and curse him. He made me feel this ache. An ache that for once doesn't emanate from my throat but from my gut. All of my insides seem to be separating like I'm on a g-force rollercoaster, revealing the empty spaces in between my viscera. I need to vomit and laugh.

He turns to me. I watch his eyes take in my face. My arms and torso. I imagine that they linger on my breasts before going lower. He steps back to take in the rest of me, or at least that's what I think he's doing. Suddenly, the fastest I've ever seen him move, he comes so close I can see the pores in his chin before his neck bows. I think he's going to kiss me. I want him to kiss me. I want this small happiness. I close my eyes.

But he doesn't.

He bends lower than my lips. A rough, wet pressure coats my throat with moisture. He licks from the divot in my collar all the way to the underside of my chin. He stands up.

The spit trail cools the skin underneath. I shiver. I know that I should think this is weird. I mean, I don't know him that well and he is kind of all over the place, but his touch, even if it is his tongue, doesn't feel like an examination. Air cools the spit trail, ground me. *This is not good*, I think while I also think, *this is too good*.

CHAPTER 23

It takes me a while to find my voice again. I wait until the saliva strip has dried under my chin before I speak. We enter Showcase XXI. It's a purple room.

"Tell me how Tortureland started." The rooms and objects are progressively obscure and undesirable things.

"This was an abandoned place. Rodolfo found it. Well, stumbled on it really." We take a seat on bench positioned to view the cases on the far wall. I scoot as close as he will let me. Not as close as when I was shrouded with his body. His jacket lapel tickles my cheek.

"It was a forest of nothing surrounded by orange dust. Forsaken dirt and green wilderness. She tried to build a shack on the sand moat, but when she left to find food, she returned to nothing. She built another hovel from the bracken and this time watched as it was devoured by the dust."

"Devoured?" I couldn't imagine the dusty place beyond the Tortureland walls had a mouth.

"She says it was like quick sand. The ground was solid-ish when she built the thing and then it disappeared while she stood next to it. Slow and greedy, she said. She tried numerous different kinds of shelters, hammocks, hovels, and teepees but the dust ate them all. It took her a while to figure out how to make one stick."

"How long ago was that? How did she figure out how to stay?"

"*Time* is one of those buzzwords we don't fool around with here." His shoulders roll. "Let's just say a long time ago. Anyway, when she finally got a caravan parked in the midst of the trees, she started to notice the *others*."

“The *others*?” I realize he glossed over my second question: *what did Rodolfo do in order to stay in Tortureland?* I decide to pose it again in a minute.

“Yeah. Beyond the forest and just beyond where the orange dust ends, things moved. Dark shapes circling like carrion. When they came close enough that she could spy on them from her caravan window, she saw that they were people with no faces.”

“The patrons?”

“Yes, but she didn’t know that at first. She built a wall around her site to keep them out. She did some renovations, built out her caravan into a house, but it attracted more of the others. Then Ballyhoo showed up and asked her if she would share her secret to staying in the forest. He told her he would fall asleep under trees at night, but in the morning he would be awake beyond the orange dust. It frightened him, the place where the sand ends, and even more so than how Rodolfo’s described how she was able to stay. So she showed him, and he showed others, who in turn expanded this world until what it is now—“

“So how do you stay?” I interject.

Not only do his shoulders start their signature shimmy, but his legs bounce. His jaw moves like he’s trying to say something, opening then closing with a snap. I think I’ve broken him because he reminds me of a talking baby doll I received for Christmas when I was younger. It was advertised to scream when it needed food and coo when it needed attention. I played with the toy endlessly and the talker had worn out by Easter. After that, the baby doll’s eyes would blink and its mouth would move with no sound to describe what it needed.

He doesn’t manage a word. His mouth still searches for syllables. I slip a foot out of a hospital sock and lay it on top of his exposed toes. His foot his hard, weathered, and tough. I can feel the gritty, orange dust that perpetually covers his feet cling to my skin. A clamminess forms

where our feet meet. His locked toe knuckles spread and relax under my sole. The mixture of our sweat and the dust creates a silty glue holding us together.

His legs tremors start to lessen.

“So how do you stay?” I repeat hoping he will not become practically catatonic again.

“It’s hard for me to say exactly.”

The retort *no shit, Sherlock*, pops into my head. I don’t say it.

“Why?”

“Because it’s different for everybody” his foot slides out from under mine. I put my sock back on. I can feel every fiber of the cotton as it covers my toes. The texture grounds me in my body somehow. Like a tether to another time. Another life.

When I’m done, I look up at him.

His lips are pursed in the first syllable of a question. They move only after I see the reflection of myself in his blue, moated pupils.

“Would you like to see Showcase X?”

CHAPTER 24

To get to Showcase X, we back track through Showcases XXI, VII, III, and the main entrance so that we could go into Showcase II, then XIII. I'm instantly snow-blind from the white objects collected here. Even the wood walls have been white washed. An impressive Pegasus with its winged extended is the most impressive object in the room. Muse walks us over to it.

I can't help feeling like the glassy eyes of the horse-bird look sorrowful. I rest my hand on the horse's snout when I'm close enough. Even though I know it's dead, I want to reassure it. I want to settle those tragic eyes. Muse let's me have a moment with the horse before jutting his chin to direct my eyes. On the wall just beyond the stuffed Pegasus' head, was a small marble plaque: Showcase X.

Muse has another broken smirk on his face, but I nod to him. I copy the way he navigates around the horse's outstretched wings. Some of the feather's graze my face as I duck under them. Behind the wings, and guarded by the horse's rump, is a small, nondescript door, painted the same color of the white room. Muse uses his shoulder to apply pressure on the entry and slips into the darkness.

I wait. The slice of black, the not seeing where I'm going, too familiar. It conjures the dark, popcorn scented boiler room. The haughty attitude with which I'd initially followed Muse through the darkness is tempered by doubt. I know something will be different this time, but I don't know what. The restless and watched air of the hospital filters into the white room. It convalesces against my back, leaving no escape. I put out my hand to the darkness knowing that Muse would not be reaching back. I push against the door and I let the darkness envelop me.

I immediately walk to the right wanting to orient myself with a wall. My fingers rest on a cool surface. It's glass. I figure this room must be full of cases too.

“Muse?”

Neon lights flick on revealing Muse's position in the darkness. He stands in front of a case, that broken, head cocked-to-the-side look transfixed on what's displayed. As I walk to him I feel like my guts are separating again. I can feel their positioning inside my body: my colon, and my kidneys, my small intestine, my stomach, my bladder. They keep moving further from each other. They press on the walls of my torso and my ribcage. They want to be free of my body. Free of my prison.

My arm— still outstretched—wraps around Muse's waist. I needed to feel his warm touch one more time before my organs discharge from my body. The deflated balloon of my stomach forces my heart to shift for a second as it floats up my throat in ascension. I want to tell Muse that I'm regurgitating my stomach, but a closed mouth is my last defense.

Finally, Muse's warmth on my side and my stomach still rising in my throat, I see what he's looking at.

CHAPTER 25

They explain to me that I haven't spoken in two weeks.

"We need to know how you're feeling," Dayna, a Twinkie-colored hair nurse, pleads. "It will help us know your pain level, if your steroids are still effective...any negative side effects or just how you are doing."

I could hear the genuine concern in her voice, the sad, low tones trying to reach out, but I can't help but sneer at the word *us*. Who is *us*? The doctors and nurses? Muse and me? There is no *us*. Only me. It's true. I stopped speaking after what I saw in Showcase X. How could I not? What I hadn't realized was that it had been two weeks. It seemed like only a few minutes had passed. To me, Showcase X now appeared before me and behind me. It teetered on my tongue, on each syllable I formed, and it already had worked its way into my future conversations.

Dayna pushes my daily Haldol cocktail into my IV.

"How are you feeling about your upcoming surgery?"

I startle and my non-catheter hand manacles on her arm.

"Honey, did I push that too fast?" She refers to the Haldol and my sudden movements. She peels back the remnants of my fingers from her arm with ease. I never realized that I had fat on my fingers until I had none. Now, my hands look like bird talons: dry, scaly, with emaciated digits and long, untrimmed nails. If there was one benefit to a TPN restriction, it would be that the vitamins they pump into me as a food substitute have made my nails and hair grow quick and strong. Surely I haven't had my nails or toenails cut since before Showcase X. I rub my toenails together under the blanket. A tapping noise feedbacks.

I let the hair on my mustache grow. And the hair on my legs. Anywhere hair on my body exists, I let it grow. I've had this guilt since Showcase X. I can't quite figure it out, but even the

thought of severing anything from my body made me feel more nauseous than I regularly felt. My mother asks why I won't shower. Why I won't use a razor. On one of my walks, I heard the nurses gossiping that I was *on watch*. I peered around a corner and saw three of them talking. They stare deeply into each other's eyes when they say it. They elongate the "wah" sound and the "ch" sound when they say it. So what if I've stopped bathing. My dirt is my dirt and I'll dispose of it when and where I want. I saw what Tortureland wants and I'm not sure I want to pay that price. One thing I knew for sure now that Showcase X had been revealed to me, was that I could no longer return to Tortureland as a guest.

At some point in my musings the nurses must have left my room.

I still have not spoken a word.

I couldn't stay holding him when I saw it. We stared at it, but didn't talk about it.

"Rodolfo, discovered what Tortureland wants. It doesn't care about any of us, but rather we have to care for it. Its natural state is decay. We feed it and provide it offerings."

I didn't quite understand what he was referring to at first. In the glass case, his reflection seemed blissed out but alarmed. His eyes open a hint too much: more terror than surprise. His eyes remained locked on the thing in the case. Well more like the things in the case.

This room didn't have a dominating color from what I could make out in the darkness. A spotlight lit us overhead as well as the things Muse stared at. In disbelief, I shifted away from Muse which triggered another spotlight. I left Muse in his frozen state and looked at the newly lit objects. Positioned in the beam of light are a pair of teeth—big enough to be front teeth—and a

tongue. My body began to move. As my movements activated other spotlights, more teeth and tongues. Some feet. Livers. Dicks. More uteruses. Lungs. All kinds of body parts, somehow all preserved as if just harvested. And there were other things bottled up in jars. Cloudy, glowing, astral fog things, unlike anything I'd ever seen.

I completed a fevered run around the entire room. Is this what Muse wanted to tell me? The thing that was always in his eye? His shaking shoulders? My first reaction was to run or maybe in my stress, I could molt oily, black wings to match my taloned fingers. My second reaction, to explain away the things I was seeing. He had tried to warn me in his way, but he was not stern enough. It was the curiosity. It was Muse! He was the reason I found out about Tortureland. He was at fault here. He could make speeches about my suffering drawing him to me, but I refuse to take any blame. Not me! I was just stupid. A girl that wanted to patch up a boy not realizing he unpatched himself in the first place. The things that had to have happened in order for that room to exist...I wanted no part in it.

“How are you today, sweetie?”

I wanted to leave Tortureland even if that meant I had to leave Muse behind too. That room... those things... Tortureland wanted something that I wasn't ready to provide.

One nurse takes down my information while the other one calls it out.

Weight: 92 lbs.
Blood Pressure: 122/82
Temperature: 97.8°F
Pulse: 100 b/m

I've been carrying around this guilt. Not really carrying it, but after my distended organs settled back into place, a guilt settled too. My mother begs every day to talk. She wants to know what's wrong, but I know she will report anything I say to the doctors.

"No, I will do more than that. I'll be your sustenance if you will be my arms." I can't remember if Muse or my mother says this. Does it matter? Do I believe them?

I'm sitting erect in my bed too tired to cry or blink. I'm on alert. I would guess that it's close to five a.m., but I cannot say for sure. Since Showcase X, I'm awake all hours of the day. I sit under the florescent spotlight of my bed, which doesn't help me navigate the time. I've even developed bed sores on each of my shoulders and my tailbone because my walks have become less frequent. And because my body has started to cannibalize my muscle. The quarter-sized sores grow every day. Will my entire back from my scapulae to my coccyx become a crusty scab? I wonder. The scabs itch and I try to resist.

And, at my own request, the blinds are always drawn in my room. Seeing the sun shining or rain cleansing the Earth depresses me. I have this feeling like I will never again feel the direct sunlight on my face. That I will never again be caught outside in a rainstorm. I have a strong urge to taste these things as well. Why didn't I open my mouth to catch the rain? Why didn't I lick a metal railing heated by the sun? Even though I would be voluntarily burning myself, it's better than never tasting the sun at all! Starfruit. Head Cheese. Sea Cucumber. Lox. Spam. Steak Tartar. All lost to me. Graduating undergrad. One night stands. A best friend. And finally managing to buy my mom's Christmas present in advance instead of last minute. All no longer

possibilities. All I am left with is dust. My throat lined with dust. My skin dusts off to make way for the growing bed sore.

I regret it. I regret all of it.

I open my mouth to let the air rush in. Chlorine and plastic settles on my tongue. My teeth start mashing. I eat giant gulps of air. I want it to be Crème Brulee or cherry hard candies. Even better, butter. Sticks of butter. Melted, viscous fat coating my dusty throat.

I don't realize that my eyes have been wide open, staring at my feet, until tears spill over on my cheeks. If someone were to walk in my room right now, perhaps they would describe my eyes as looking more terrified than surprised.

My mother arrives.

“What's wrong, baby?”

Showcase X, I think at her.

CHAPTER 26

Much like the first time I travelled to Tortureland, when the crowd of impatient patrons tossed me around, I can't remember how or when, but I'm back in the popcorn breeze. I breathe through an open mouth, sucking in as much butter air as possible. Instead of Muse and Mr. Ballyhoo waiting at the gate, a woman, a few inches shorter than my 5'3" with tendrils of black hair bound in two braids, waits. She sizes me up.

"So, you've come to a decision?"

This must be Rodolfo. She looks different than I imagined. I suppose my idea of her had been tainted by Esmerelda or maybe by the T.V. sensation American Gypsy Feuds which tracked feuding Romanichal families in Chicago. She's younger than I thought too. Maybe low twenties, but I think that age probably doesn't mean anything in Tortureland. She stands cool, poised: a seasoned professional.

"Muse showed you Showcase X?" Her voice a mixture of vocal fry and cotton.

"I wasn't expecting—" I'm unable to speak what I saw. "All that."

She shrugs. She's had this conversation before.

"What did you see?"

I haven't been able to say it or maybe I've just been avoiding saying it.

"Where's Muse," I need a familiar face. Rodolfo's tensed body emits irritation. I want to talk to Muse.

"What did you see?" She asks again.

The identifying white tag from the exhibit appears before my eyes. I read it out loud for her.

“Man, 28, severed while chasing the dragon.” It was coupled with a pair of appendages. They appeared strong with muscles prominent underneath the skin. Multitudes of tattoos were quilted together from deltoid to fingertip: Mermaids. A hamsteak. Batteries. A skull with a white guitar splitting the boney structure. A pair of Grilled Cheeses near the shoulder. I try to block the image of the fleshy tears at the top of arm from resurfacing too. Instead, I think on the hands. I had noticed the knuckle tattoos just before my flight around the rest of Showcase X. It was the knuckle tats that initiated my frenzy, the sudden realization of putting together the final pieces of a twisted puzzle. On each of the pinkies was a tiny quarter note, and spanning between the pinkies, a letter tatted on each knuckle was M-U-S-I-C-M-A-N.

“Muse’s arms.” I say it weakly. It comes out like a chirp followed with a cheep. The way Rodolfo nods her head, I think she understands my noises.

She grunts and narrows her eyes. “So why stay? Go home to your mother. You don’t want to volunteer.” Her foot starts tapping. Maybe she is late for another meeting. She crosses her arms. I have to think of something because I don’t think she will dole out another guest pass. The hard line of her lips confirms my ideas.

“Quality of life?” More twittered words pass through my lips.

“Quality of life?” She parrots back. The harshness of the syllables like she’s cursing. She turns away from me.

I’m propelled forward. I cannot let her get away. I reach out to stop her which cracks the scab of my left scapular bed sore. I drop my arm. Blood trickles to my waist.

“Shit, fine! Not life.” I rack my brain. Why was I doing this? My protective mitten glints, and my eyes track it. I rip it off. I flex my fingers and watch the tape over my IV port adjust to the movement of my skin. *Why was I doing this?* I think while ripping the tape off. Then, after

counting to three,, I pull the IV catheter from my vein and place a finger over the emerging blood pool. I toss the objects to the ground.

The happiness Muse alluded to, or, rather the suffering that Muse alluded to is now clear to me. It isn't Muse that I need in order to be happy. What I need is to know that I am not sick and will never be sick again. Of course, this notion creates other things to suffer over, but Tortureland offers a permanent solution. If I stay, I will never see my mother again. If I stay, I will no longer be who I was. Certain aspirations will be eliminated in favor the buttery air. In favor of Muse. In favor of not being sick.

“I'm miserable in that invasive place. I feel my suffering increase with each dose of pain medicine and each change of my IV kit. Every brush of the hospital linens against my skin gives me rug burn. Time is lost to me because it's not segmented by breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks... a prescribed starvation. Who does that? Who does that! Only people that have never had to starve.”

At first I hear my scabs cracking, the noise like a chick's milk tooth cracking through an egg. Then I feel it. I don my glass face and ignore the pain.

“Every nurse's pitiful look a weighted blanket threatening to suffocate me. My mother—is falling apart almost as fast as I am. I don't want to see her like that. I'm staying because...I'll be less miserable. I'll have a better quality of misery in Tortureland!” I come close to shouting.

This time her grunt sounds approving. She closes the distance between us while her hand rustles in her pocket. She holds out a ticket. Not a golden ticket from Boneworld, or a guest pass like Mr. Ballyhoo gave me, but a crimson ticket. I read the lettering: *The Swallow Dance. Admit one.*

“You better hurry” she points to the shows venue and start time.

Oceanworld. Now.

CHAPTER 27

I have to stop running half way to Oceanworld because all of my bed-sore scabs have cracked open. They weep a wet warmth that trails down my spine. The sensation distracts me from channeling my pain into my glass face, but I start running again. This time I do not have to force my way through the faceless people like outside of Boneworld, or navigate around the patrons on the Tortureland Proper path. For a second I note that as strange, but continue. Rodolfo didn't give me exact directions, but hinted that I'd know the venue when I saw it. I run faster.

I pass underneath the OCEANWORLD arch when something forces its way through my shoulder scabs. A strong tingle forces me to stop. It feels like a thousands of splinters are emerging from my skin. The splinters sprout through my skin with little popping noises. I screech, ripping off my Johnny and robe, not caring if anyone sees me naked. To my surprise, I'm not naked. Black down molts from my pores, covering my legs and arms with feathers. The protrusions burn as they pass through my skin and I watch the them grow to various lengths. They appear on every surface but by stomach area. My fissured back explodes into pain with a loud crunch. Reaching behind me, I run my hand over boney structures covered in long, silky plumes.

The whole process takes only a few minutes. The tingle subsides as the feathers reach their lengths, making the pain tolerable.

I stand, transformed.

I flex my new wings.

Rodolfo was right. I see the large nest perched on the ledge of the Siren's Grotto, and know that I should go in. Inside, a stadium seating opens to the perpetually cloudy, Tortureland sky. All of the seats, thousands of them scattered among the branch construction, are all full with the patrons. They turn their non-faces to me, waiting for me to do something. I walk down the central aisle without fear. I beat my wings to ready them for the show.

I walk down an aisle towards the stage in the middle of the nest. When I get closer to the front rows, I see familiar faces. Mr. Ballyhoo. Rodolfo. The ticket booth man. Morana—her long tail splayed out in front of her— and the Sea Captain. Members of the Tortureland Band.

Then, Muse.

He's smiling and shaking, eyes bugling from their sockets. He blinks Morse code at me and I finally understand what he says: *dance*, blink, blink. *This is your home now*. Blink. Blink. Blink. I wink at him and dip a wing. He winks back.

I climb the stairs, my feather rustling. I start to move, at first, just on the ground. My wings shield my face and to brush across my shoulder blades to a few elated whistles. Then, I jump, using my wings to propel me further into the air, splaying them when I feel gravity pulling me down. The display exposes my soft stomach which remains featherless. My down teases a glimpse at my breasts as I sky dance. Twisting my body, I float back to the ground.

When I land, I can hear the sharp intake of the patron's breath. This is what they came for. This is the attraction they were promised. They are enraptured with my form.

I use a taloned finger to cut myself from navel to pubic bone. Reaching inside my warm cavity, I pull out my guts to thunderous applause.

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BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR

Kristyn Gerow was born in Orlando, Florida, and received her High School diploma from John Bapst Memorial High School, in Bangor, Maine. In 2016, she received her Bachelor's Degree in English for the University of Maine, Orono. She was awarded the Grady Award in Creative Writing at the undergraduate level in 2015 for Fiction, and in the graduate level in 2018 for Poetry. In her Master's thesis, and in her other fiction as well, she focuses on the body as foreign and distinct, chronically ill bodies, and how illness and other outside factors interact with the body. She is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in August 2018.